

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY

2019

1911

Eliza Do-A-Lot

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Like a precursor to the war, a gun shot rang out through the Gayndah bush in 1913. Its sound echoed through Queensland's oldest town, given Brisbane and Ipswich are classified as cities.¹ The magistrate found John Patrick Denny's death to be accidental, despite rumours to the contrary.² This was not the last nor first of sorrows in the life of his long, dark haired daughter: Eliza Mena Denny.

Born in 1895,³ she lost her mother when she was just six years of age.⁴ During the following decade a grandfather, grandmother, sister, and niece also perished.⁵

'Time to leave,' her favourite brother, Richard, stood before her. 'I won't cut my hair until you come home.' Richard smiled down at her. Not long afterwards, he ran up the beaches of Gallipoli.⁶ *She never cut her hair.*⁷

Despite all these sorrows, she managed to pack her bags to Australia from New Zealand in 1916⁸ and married a bullocky named John Friedrich Zahl of German descent the next year.⁹

Bullockies drove teams of bullocks hauling enormous loaded wagons long distances from the outback to the coast.¹⁰ Bullock teams accessed areas horse teams could not because they were more robust in rough or undeveloped country.¹¹ This made them essential for delivering and exporting supplies to the remotest parts of Australia without good roads.¹²

John Zahl, known as Jack and renowned along the bullocky track, found work often took him away on long trips to the pioneering frontlines, leaving Eliza to run the farm and raise their burgeoning family alone.¹³

Things were happening fast in Eliza's life. Lose a father one year; WWI breaks out the next year; lose a brother the following year; come to Australia the next; married the next; and lose a second brother the next, Private Charles Benjamin Denny.¹⁴ By 1918 when her second brother died, she was increasingly alone in a strange, new, expansive land and only 23 years

¹ North Burnett Regional Council, 'Our Towns', <https://www.northburnett.qld.gov.au/our-towns/>, Accessed 7 December 2017.

² Death Certificate of John Patrick Denny, died 15 May 1913, Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages of Queensland, 1913/C406. Inquest of John Patrick Denny, No. 300/13, Gayndah Court House.

³ There are no civil registrations for the birth of Eliza Mena Denny, born 14 December 1895, or her siblings. Baptism of RaihaTini (Eliza Denny), baptised 4 April 1898, Anglican Church Parish Register, Awanui, Far North, Northland, New Zealand, unpaginated, unnumbered.

⁴ There is no civil registration for the death of Ere Ngaru, died 3 November 1902, family knowledge.

⁵ Helen Harman, interview with author, 28 May 2019.

⁶ Service Record of Richard John Denny, p. 185, Nominal Roll Vol. 1, Online Cenotaph.

⁷ Donald Pinwill, interview with author.

⁸ Diary of Eliza Zahl

⁹ Marriage Certificate of Eliza Mena Denny and John Friedrich Zahl, married 21 December 1917, Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages of Queensland, 1917/B20989.

¹⁰ <http://www.glenedenfamilyfarm.com.au/bullock-team-information/bullock-teams.php>, accessed 21 May 2019.

¹¹ Rohan Morris, interview with author, email, 24 May 2019, in author's possession.

¹² Rohan Morris, interview with author.

¹³ Donald Pinwill, interview with author, email, 27 May 2019, in author's possession.

¹⁴ Unit War Diaries, 4th Machine Gun Battalion, AWM4 24/4/2, June 1918, p. 73, AWM.

of age. New husband, new farm, new climate. She may not have felt she had much influence at that time, but rather felt alone and small in the Australian bush.

However, despite the odds, Eliza Zahl did become a highly influential woman running a successful farm, volunteering extensive community work, and contributing to the lives of her many children. Like pioneering legend Elizabeth Macarthur with whom she shares a first name, Eliza blossomed into an independent businesswoman of incredible strength. Mrs Macarthur also had an often-absent husband, and she is credited with establishing the Australian sheep industry.¹⁵ Both had large families and journeyed alone for business.¹⁶ Eliza started as a dairy farmer with three cows that grew to 85 head, which were all hand milked.¹⁷

Her midwifery skills served the community delivering ‘half of Gleneden,’ on the outskirts of Gayndah.¹⁸ The Gleneden population certainly needed a boost as before she arrived there were only eight families in 1912.¹⁹ When she wasn’t in labour herself, she was helping women who were.²⁰ The Country Women’s Association regularly called on her to assist women and children because they knew she was always reliable, capable and willing. She contributed to the growing district of Gayndah. One could draw comparisons to St Mary MacKillop: travelling alone on a horse, off to assist a woman in need.²¹ Since Gayndah is traditionally a citrus region,²² hosting The Orange Festival biannually to this day,²³ Eliza could be romantically pictured galloping through orange groves towards a lady in distress.

An example of her compassionate and generous contribution to the community sees her walking the Main Street of Gayndah. She noticed a woman crying and on asking what was the matter, the lady confided she was unable to breastfeed her newborn child who ‘would surely die.’²⁴ This was long before the days of formula milk which, while invented in the 1800s, wasn’t readily available until 1950s.²⁵ In a perpetual state of breastfeeding, Eliza never hesitated to offer herself.²⁶ She produced copious amounts of milk,²⁷ but with food scarce and so many physical demands upon her, it must have cost her to suckle an extra child.

Sorrow came again when her second youngest daughter, Lola, died in infancy.²⁸ Yet once again she carried on despite the pain. She’d give birth, and be out chopping wood the next day with her large capable wrists managing a ‘man’s job’ like a pro. Her long heavy hair causing strife in the heat while she got the wood done as there was no hot cup of tea or bread without it.²⁹

¹⁵ <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/macarthur-elizabeth-2387>, accessed 21 May 2019.

¹⁶ <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/macarthur-elizabeth-2387>, accessed 21 May 2019.

¹⁷ ‘Queenslander Revisits Old Home Town,’ *Northland Age*, June 1 1965, p. 5.

¹⁸ Donald Pinwill, interview with author.

¹⁹ ‘Queenslander Revisits Old Home Town,’ *Northland Age*, p. 5.

²⁰ Donald Pinwill, interview with author.

²¹ Lesley O’Brien, *Mary Mackillop Unveiled*, Sydney, Bolinda Publishing Pty Ltd, 2010.

²² <http://www.aussietowns.com.au/town/gayndah-qld>, accessed 22 May 2019.

²³ <https://www.orangefestival.com.au>, accessed 22 May 2019.

²⁴ Charles Pinwill, interview with author, Brisbane, 30 June 2010.

²⁵ <http://www.parentschoiceformula.com/articles/Infant-Formula-Timeline-What-Should-we-Fed-Baby.aspx>, accessed 21 May 2019.

²⁶ Charles Pinwill, interview with author.

²⁷ Charles Pinwill, interview with author.

²⁸ Death Certificate of Lola Jean Zahl, died 13 August 1942, Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages of Queensland, 1942/C2795.

²⁹ Donald Pinwill, interview with author; Charles Pinwill, interview with author.

She successfully raised 15 children to adulthood. Inspired by her determination, strength, perseverance, and extreme work ethic, they continued to give to the community, hence extending her legacy of influence. There are so many examples of all her offspring have achieved, but here are a few. Her grandson John Zahl is a current day councillor of Gayndah, after working as a Gayndah clerk and solicitor for most of his life.³⁰ Her son Colin who arrived with a bump following a car accident, went on to bump others well enough to become the local champion fighter.³¹

Her great-grandchildren grew up seeing her comb long, dark grey hair. In sacred tones, they were told of her promise to the fallen hero; and the imperative to always keep one's word.³² She respected loyalty and keeping promises. Eliza greatly influenced her children and grandchildren to be educated, hard-working, display moral values and become upstanding citizens in their communities.

She passed on 2 May of 1989 at Gayndah hospital aged 93. She was outlived by nearly 50 grandchildren, 70 great-grandchildren, and one great-great-grandchild. Her gravestone in the Gayndah Cemetery,³³ with her family choosing to be buried next to her generation after generation however far away they may at times have lived and died,³⁴ is a great testament to the woman who could truthfully sing like many pioneers the title words of the Starship pop song of 1985, 'We built this city' (albeit a town).

³⁰ <https://www.northburnett.qld.gov.au/councillors/>, accessed 21 May 2019.

³¹ Don Pinwill, interview with author.

³² Author's memory.

³³ <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/174177231/eliza-mena-zahl#view-photo=164949832>, accessed 21 May 2019.

³⁴ <https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/2306587/memorial-search?firstName=&lastName=Zahl&page=1#sr-186266089>, accessed 21 May 2019.