

My parents' courtship



My parents' Wedding Day, 1927

Nana was a very good violinist and fiddler; she died when she was ninety-four and was still playing when she was ninety-two years old. Mum inherited her musical passion and flair and Nana taught her the piano. During the First World War they provided the musical entertainment at farewells held for soldiers heading overseas, and at welcome home parties when they came back. Mum's first time playing on the piano was when she accompanied Nana on the fiddle, vamping away when she was just ten years old.

Mum continued her studies when she lived in Helensville. She caught the train to Auckland for piano lessons and eventually passed her London Trinity College of Music exams becoming a qualified piano teacher. Even into her teens and twenties she taught the piano. Mum admitted she didn't know how to do housework as Nana did that, along with all the cooking, while Mum taught piano. Later in her life she needed to phone Nana Malligan and ask what to do because she needed to learn how to cook, quickly! Once Mum admitted to me one of her early blues in cooking, but she was so proud. She found some boiled pork and roasted it! It didn't quite work.



When Mum was nearly twenty years old in the 1920s, the Malligan family moved to Matamata and sharemilked on a farm before they eventually bought their own farm of two hundred acres, three kilometres out of Matamata on Station Road towards the Peria Hills. The grand old house was like a Queenslander; a big homestead with a veranda all around, with a tennis court that became the social point of activity for the younger people. On a Sunday afternoon a whole swag of youngsters went out to play tennis and then afterwards, they'd all stand around the piano singing. Now the young lady, Sarah Malligan was an accomplished pianist; Mum at this stage played piano for the silent movies that were shown at the Matamata Picture Theatre and at many dances that were regularly held. What with the tennis, the music and the lovely young ladies, the Sunday tennis parties were quite a popular stamping ground for all the young (and not so young) lads of the district. There were a number of young swains (a male admirer or suitor), who were very keen to make a pitch for this glamorous, young, dark-haired, twenty-one-year-old woman who was very good on the piano.

When Dad (Thomas Cotter) was in his late twenties, he owned a broken-down trotting-horse named Scout, and many were the tales he told of how fast Scout was; he had a flash buggy to go with him. My interest in Mustang cars came from him, probably because Dad called Scout, 'The fastest Mustang in town!' Anyhow, the Sunday tennis parties were a natural attraction for Thomas Cotter, with his great voice and wit, reddish hair, and perhaps the fastest horse and buggy around town, and a sparkle in the eye for the girls. Tom Cotter was a thirty-one-year-old bachelor who bought his own farm in Te Poi and lived in a three-metre pole tent for eight years on his own. He used to do a bit of entertaining and he was part of the tennis crew.

My mother told the story of one of her 'bedazzled' swains, Archie Darragh, who was courting her at the same time as Dad. She admitted to me one day, "Archie Darragh was nearly your father you know." Well Archie thought he'd make a pitch and learn to play the piano from this glamorous young piano teacher, to get the edge over his other suitors, but as Mum said, he really didn't have a note in his head. When he was around one Saturday afternoon for his music lesson, he was struggling away when suddenly there was a loud Frummmmph. It was the sound of a fast horse and buggy flying over the little wooden bridge, over the creek at the bottom, just below the house. "Is that that Tom Cotter coming?" asked Archie. Well, it was, and Archie knew then that he was beaten.

My father swept Mum off her feet and on 8 June 1927, they were duly married at the Church of the Holy Angels in Matamata, by Reverend Father Daniel Vincent Silk.

Mum wore the height of fashion at the time, a silk, short, white, Charleston wedding dress. Her bridesmaids were Claire Carlson and Dulcie Egan, and her flower girl was Moira Delaney. Dad's best man was Gerry Fitzgerald and Mum's brother, Jack Malligan, stood as his groomsman.