

The Depression, War and Divorce

John (Jack) Skidmore 1905 - 1965
Valdis Muriel Rogers 1901 - 1975

English migrants

John (Jack) Skidmore was born on January 28th1905 at 372 Foleshill Rd. Coventry, England. He was the first child of **John William Skidmore** (1878-1934) a slater and tiler, and **Mary Amelia Smith** 1878-1952) a dressmaker. Both parents were originally from West Bromwich not far from Birmingham. The Skidmores had a second son Harold in 1907, who tragically died from measles at age 3, and a third son Leonard born January 1st1910.



John Skidmore in 1937 at his sister's wedding. Source: family collection

In 1911 Jack's father, under an assisted passage, migrated to Australia alone, hoping to establish a new home and better life for the family. They were to join him once this had been achieved. In the meantime, in England, Mary and the children moved in with her brother Edwin Smith and his wife Annie, at 63 Bilhay Street in West Bromwich. However, by 1912 Mary decided to borrow the money for the fare from her sister Emma Louisa Thomas, and join Emma and her family in migrating to Australia. In that year these two young families made the long sea voyage to Melbourne. Jack was aged 6 years and apparently very popular with the ship's crew who kept him supplied with extra goodies for the family.



Jack with youngest brother Arthur and their mother Mary c1946 at 28 Austin Street Oakleigh. Source: family collection

First years in Melbourne

They arrived in Melbourne where Jack's father was employed as a slater and tiler by the firm Wunderlich's. As he had not been able to establish a home for the family, the Skidmores had to share a house with the Thomas family. The two families rented number 72 Mary Street in the suburb of Richmond. However, on May 15th1913, when Jack's sister Maude was born, as well as a daughter to the Thomas family, the Skidmores knew they needed to move. By January 12th1915 they were living in Coburg at 9 Rodda Street when their last child Arthur was born. Over the next year they lived at 35 Carters Ave Toorak, where Jack attended the local primary school, and later to 151 Brighton Street Richmond.



Sydney Road Coburg, looking south from Bell Street c1915 when the Skidmores lived in the suburb. Source: Picture Victoria

Moving bayside

In 1916 the Skidmores were living in Florence Street in the beachside suburb Mentone. They rented a stable and converted it into a home. It had an earthen floor, hessian clad walls and the parents' room was in the loft. The family of six had their diet supplemented with duckling and duck eggs provided by a well-populated duck pond on the property. Mary Amelia took in ironing from the boarding house next door to help the family budget. They stayed there for three years and by 1921 they had moved to Point Nepean Road, Cheltenham where Jack's father had been able to establish his own tile-works, *J. Skidmore and Co.*



Mentone Beach c1920. Source: State Library Victoria

A good dancer

Jack attended school up to the age of 14 years and then joined his father as an apprentice slater and tiler. His brother Leonard worked at the family tile-works also. The Skidmores were experiencing good times and were able to purchase some quality furniture, a horse, cart, a Brougham (buggy), and a piano. However, this was not to last and in 1924 the Skidmores were bankrupt, losing all assets including a Phaeton, the horse and wagon, and the piano. By 1925 they were living in Beach Road, Black Rock.

Jack was 5'9" in height with fair hair and grey eyes. He was considered a fashionable dresser and good dancer. He loved cycling and had a reputation for being a good

cycling competitor. At a ball Jack met his first wife **Valdis Muriel Rogers** who was four years his senior, the sister of his close friend Carl Geoffry Rogers.



Valdis Rogers as Queen of Flowers at the Aspendale Queen Carnival, 1922.
Source: Ailsa Griffiths

'Miss Valdis Rogers has been crowned Queen of Flowers at Aspendale. As Scott says, "'twas beauty! 'twas enchantment all!'"
(*Frankston and Somerville Standard* March 16th1923)

'Queen of Flowers' and office skills

Valdis was an attractive and vivacious young woman from a relatively well-off family. Her parents were **Fanny Caroline Mulcahy** and **George Vining Rogers**, a grain broker, who lived in another beachside suburb, Edithvale, in Lochiel Avenue. Although not Roman Catholic, Valdis was sent to *Kilbreda* the Brigidine Convent in Mentone, for her education. Here she also learned piano and excelled in commercial studies. *The Moorabbin News* of January 6th1917 reported on the Prize List for 1916: Valdis was awarded prizes for bookkeeping, typing and shorthand in the Sub-Junior Division. After leaving school she was a typist in her father's office.

Valdis was a member of the Aspendale Tennis Club, and in December 1922 was crowned Queen of Flowers for the club's Queen Carnival. A detailed report in the *Frankston and Somerville Standard* on December 15th1922 stated Miss Rogers raised £81 and received 19,440 votes. Her dress was of 'white satin charmeuse, with pointed georgette over dress, trimmed with silver beads'. Her sisters Denna (Decima) and Zelma were among Valdis's train bearers. Valdis was also presented with a 'wristlet watch'.

Teenage husband

Jack and Valdis married at St. Agnes church, Black Rock on December 22nd1924 when Jack was 19 years old. After marriage Jack and Valdis lived with his parents at 9 Karakatta Street, Black Rock. Five months later a new generation of Skidmores began with the birth of their first child, John Kenneth, in May 1925.

Circumstances seemed to be looking up by 1926. The Skidmores moved to Elm Street, Brighton where Jack and Valdis's next child Renee Valdis was born there at home. Skidmore and Co. was operating again with Jack and brother Len continuing to work as tilers with their father. Jack was now able to rent his own house on the Nepean Highway. Fortune continued and both families were able to buy property in Robert Street Bentleigh. Jack and Valdis purchased property number 52, and with his father Jack built their house they called *St. Ives*. The parents purchased number 57 almost opposite. Whilst in Bentleigh, two more children were born, Brian Leonard on December 21st1928 and Corinne Shirley on March 13th1930* (Corinne was named after Jack's

favourite actress Corinne Griffiths). An earlier baby, Joan Ailsa born in 1927, died at 6 months of age and was buried in a public grave at Brighton Cemetery in April 1928.



St. Ives 52 Robert Street Bentleigh, built by Jack Skidmore and his father
Photo: Corinne Hurley 1980s.

The Depression hits

With the 1930s and the Depression, more difficult times were ahead. Jack was temporarily without a job and had lost ownership of his home. Fortunately, the agent allowed them to stay on rent-free for a year or so. By 1934 Jack was working again holding down two jobs, but his family had now grown to six children with the births of Ailsa in 1933 and Desmond in 1934. At this time they were living at 2 Erindale Street, Murrumbeena. Jack's main job was his own carrying business. He used a horse (kept in a paddock next to the house) and a cart with a leather canopy. He would go down to the docks where he had a contract to load goods to deliver to various factories in Melbourne. One factory was his sister-in-law's family business *Barker and Co.* in Richmond. Later he had a van with *J. Skidmore – Carrier* painted on the side. Quite often he would be given extra items of food from his deliveries so the family were treated to fruit and sweets.

War and separation



Jack's army portrait c1943.
Source: family collection

In 1942 Jack, Valdis and the children were living above a shop at 143 Glenferrie Road, Hawthorn. In January of that year at the age of 37, Jack decided to join the Citizens' Military Force in a non-combat capacity. The CMF was largely a Reservists' militia that served in Australia and New Guinea, later becoming part of the Australian Infantry Forces. It was in August 1943 that Jack formally enlisted in the AIF as a sapper in the Royal Australian Engineers. Most of his service was spent in Townsville, Queensland and in parts of Papua New Guinea working around the air bases at Torokina and Fall River, Milne Bay on Bougainville. He is listed firstly as a 'concreter' and later as an 'engine hand'. The family says he also grew vegetables for the troops.

During this time a fall from a tractor put him in hospital with severe back pain. His army record states that he suffered from fibrositis and malaria whilst away during 1943 and 1944. Meanwhile, Valdis and their youngest

three children were living at *Oak Rest*, the Esplanade, Portarlington on the Bellarine Peninsular near Geelong.



One of Jack's sketches he made whilst in the army. Source: family collection

Divorce and family break-up

An early rushed marriage, a large family, and the economic Depression put Jack and Valdis under a lot of pressure which their marriage could not withstand. In those days, in order to get a divorce, infidelity had to be proven. It was alleged that Valdis was seeing another man whilst Jack was away. There was also testimony given that Valdis was not looking after the children properly, that they were ill clothed and not attending school as often as they should (Valdis was fined at the Drysdale Court for Corinne's truancy). It seems that Valdis did not challenge the proceedings, but only expressed that she wanted to keep her youngest child, 10-year-old Desmond, with her. This was not granted as the court judged she was not fit to be a mother. Valdis did not see her children ever again.

Whilst away at war, Jack had met and fell in love with Dorothy (Dot) Wood, aged 36 from Queensland who was also serving in the army. Before the army Dorothy had been employed as a linen-maid and had worked for *The Canberra Hotel* and *Lennon's Hotel* in Brisbane. Her family background is difficult to trace, so far there being no birth certificate available, but it was said that her father was a shearer in Queensland. In April 1945 Jack sent Dorothy a telegram asking her to marry him.

Jack's new marriage

Jack requested a discharge from the army in June 1945, stating his reason for needing to leave the service as gaining employment as a roof tiler with *Evan Bros.* of South Melbourne. His discharge was effective on June 13th 1945. Three and a half weeks later, on July 7th Jack and Valdis's divorce was granted, and on the same day, he and Dorothy Wood were married. Until Jack returned to Melbourne from his army service, his younger children Corinne, Ailsa and Des, were able to stay with Rogers and Skidmore relatives. But I am told that the youngest child Des, was sent to a boys' home for a while. The eldest three, Ken, Renee and Brian, were independent adults by this time.

After the war, Jack settled with his new wife and the younger children at 28 Austin Street Oakleigh. This was a house purchased at a low rate for returned military servicemen. He was subsequently employed by Whitelaw's Tiling Company and eventually became a supervisor at the firm. Dot wasn't used to having children around and I have been told that the youngest two children did not always stay there.



Jack and Dot on camping holidays with trailer and boat, and the Whitelaw's utility truck. Source: family collection

An Englishman at home

Jack Skidmore was proud of his English heritage and culture and enjoyed listening to his recordings of English brass bands. He also enjoyed a beer, a smoke, and barracking for England when they played Australia in the cricket, especially when his Australian born siblings would barrack for the home side. Like many of his generation his views and values were very conservative and narrow concerning race, religion and sex. He also strictly enforced very modest standards of dress for his younger daughters. But this did not mean he lacked a great sense of humour and fun. As a father he was remembered for being full of practical jokes and loved playing tricks on his children, grandchildren and friends. A favourite joke was placing his fake full beer glass amongst real full beer glasses on a tray to offer friends, and also turning off all the lights and placing his hairy hand on the light-switch for an unsuspecting child to discover in the dark.



Far left: Jack and Dot in their front yard at 28 Austin Street, Oakleigh, 1950s. Left: Jack on one of his seaside holidays. Source: family collection

Jack loved the outdoor life. The family had occasional picnics and holidays at places such as Rickett's Point, Hampton, Bunyip River and Port Welshpool. Jack loved the seaside, camping and boating and at one stage he owned a motorbike. He grew his own vegetables, and was a good carpenter making many items of furniture for his family, his garage being a well set up workshop. Years later, after the War, he designed and built a boat in his backyard. He had to bend the wooden boards in the bathtub to shape them.



Jack with the boat he built at home. With him are his son Brian and his niece Dianne. Source: family collection

Fatal illness

By the late 1950s, Jack became very ill with cancer. After suffering for seven years, he died in a hospital in East Malvern on January 5th 1965, at the age of 59 years. His ashes are buried at the Springvale Cemetery. His wife Dorothy never stopped grieving for him. She died 19 years later at the age of 77.

What happened to Valdis?



Valdis had an attractive personality, always appearing happy and cheerful. She was reported to have had beautiful legs, a lovely figure, and dressed tastefully. Her children remember her fox stole that they were allowed to drag around the house as a 'pet'. She showed she had a generous nature and a community consciousness. During the war when there was a shortage of teachers, she gave lessons to local child victims of polio. She also served coffee to soldiers as they left for service from the railway station. It seemed she was happier in these roles than dealing with the drudgery of housework.

Valdis in 1925. Source: Enid Skidmore

Valdis was also remembered for her playing and singing at the piano. A reluctant housewife, she did however make an effort to spruce up the house when visitors came and loved arranging vases of her home-grown flowers. She had to endure a lifestyle

that was tougher than what she was brought up to expect, and although times were hard, she never asked for, nor expected, any help from her extended family. She had to deal with being ostracised and excluded by many of her own family for having a rushed marriage, and the disapproval of her mother-in-law for not being the most efficient housekeeper. She then had to undergo the stress and social humiliation of a very unpleasant divorce (divorce not common in those days) and the tragedy of losing contact with all her children.

Final days in South Australia

It is not known exactly where Valdis lived immediately after 1945. Some anecdotal evidence says she lived at Wangaratta and worked serving tea at the railway station, but no factual evidence of this has been found. However, by the early 1970s, Valdis came to South Australia, the reason is not known, maybe to look for relatives there (her elder sister, or some distant cousins). She lived in Brigalow Avenue, Blackwood, a pretty suburb in the foothills of Adelaide, with her partner Arthur Gotthold Pfeiffer who was a widower since 1969. It was at their home that Valdis suddenly died from a heart attack on April 17th 1975. She was 74 years old. Later Arthur remarried, but died in 1991.



The house in Blackwood, South Australia, where Valdis lived when she died in 1975. Source: Smallacombe Real Estate

'Widow of Mr Rogers'

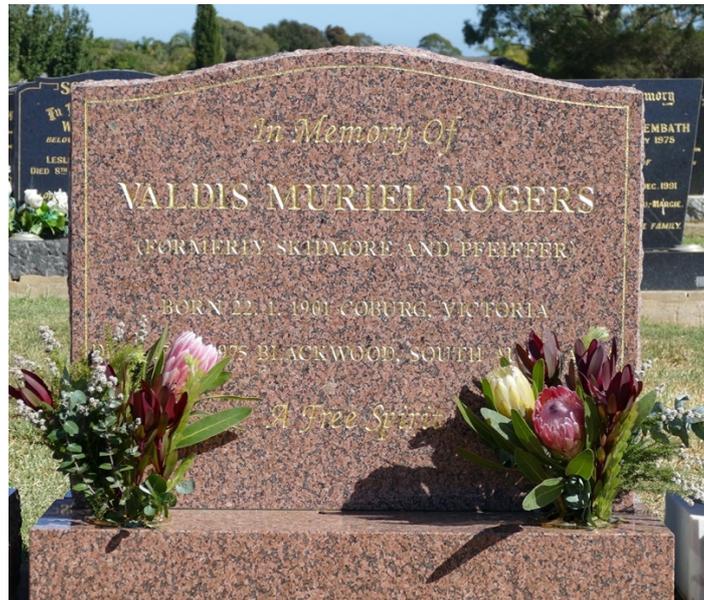
Valdis is buried at Centennial Park Cemetery in Adelaide, the burial being registered in her maiden name, Rogers. Arthur had paid for her burial but it seems he could not afford a headstone. Being a divorcee, and the stigma her generation attached to that, may explain why Valdis and Arthur did not marry. Her death certificate describes her occupation as 'widow of Mr Rogers'. To marry again Valdis would have to declare herself as a divorcee, which she clearly had kept secret.

Although Valdis was cut off from her family after the divorce, death notices in the *Adelaide Advertiser* indicate that when she died, she had a loving partner and good friends that would miss her.

PFEIFFER, Valdis Muriel
(formerly Rogers). — Of 9
Brigalow avenue, Blackwood.
On April 17, suddenly, the
dearly beloved wife of Arthur
Gotthold Pfeiffer. Aged 74,
years.

PFEIFFER, Valdis Muriel. —
Passed away, April 17. Good
friend gone to rest of Ella
McKinnon and Phil Lucieer.

My mother searched for Valdis, unsuccessfully, for many years. I discovered Valdis's final resting place, unfortunately after my mother's death in 2014. In 2016 I decided to install a headstone over Valdis's grave. It is certainly what my mother would have wanted.



Valdis Rogers' Grave at Centennial Park Adelaide. It reads:

'Valdis Muriel Rogers
(formerly Skidmore and Pfeiffer)
Born 22/1/1901 Coburg Victoria
Died 17/4/1975 Blackwood
South Australia
A free spirit'

Photo: Euan McGillivray 2017

Ann Hurley

2020

hurleyskidmorehistory.com.au

Notes:

* Corinne's birthday was always celebrated on March 13th because Jack insisted this was the correct birthdate. The birth certificate states the birth was March 6th and registered on March 12th.

Other resources:

Australian Electoral Rolls (Ancestry.com)

Birth Death and Marriage certificates - General Register Office England

Brighton Cemetery Vic.

Census of England and Wales (Ancestry.com)

Centennial Park Cemetery Adelaide

Cottman, Diane - Skidmore descendant

Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Jurisdiction - Supreme Court of Victoria

Foreman, Glenys - Rogers descendant

Hurley, Corinne (1930-2014) - Skidmore and Rogers descendant

McWilliam, Jan -Vic., Skidmore relation

Penny, Sandra - Skidmore descendant

Public Records Office Victoria - Immigration lists and shipping

South Australian death certificate

Springvale Botanical Cemetery Vic.

Trove (National Library of Australia)

Victorian birth, death and marriage certificates