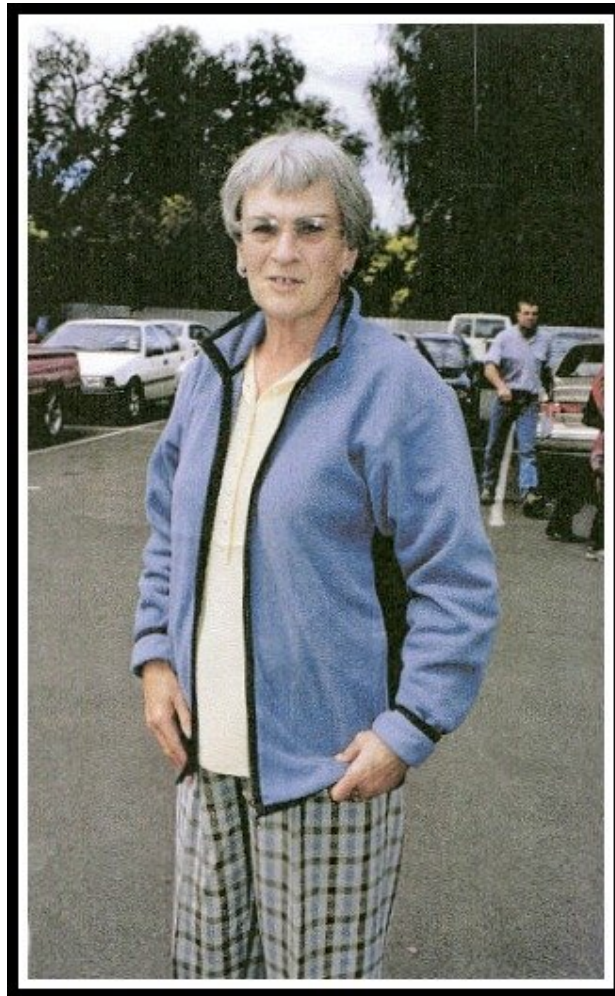


Edna Jones' baby: a story of shame, secrets and setting things right



Marilla Lenne, the daughter of Edna Jones, who was adopted out after her birth in 1940.
Image: supplied.

By Carol Altmann

Meet **Marilla Lenne**, the “secret” daughter of **Edna Jones**, one of the two “Jones Girls” who for decades owned and operated one of south-west Victoria’s most desirable grazing properties, The Union Station, at Woolsthorpe, and who left a legacy worth millions.

Until now, only a small group of people – among them some well-known names in our community – have known of Marilla's existence, with both Edna and her older sister, **Gwen Jones**, widely thought to have died unmarried and childless.

Indeed **The Gwen and Edna Jones Foundation** was established as a private charity to handle the sisters' multi-million dollar estate because, according to [its website](#), "neither sister (had) an heir to whom they could bequeath their considerable assets".

The Foundation, which in 2016 had assets worth more than \$15 million, was launched after Gwen's death in 2000.

It has since donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to local projects and made significant contributions to the Presbyterian Church, particularly in its support of Warrnambool's King's College and, most recently, its [purchase of several church buildings](#) in Warrnambool.

But Edna, who died in 1995, did have a child at the age of 30.

The baby was a girl, born in a Melbourne hospital on 28 October 1940 and given up immediately for private adoption.

The fact Edna had a baby may be a surprise, but the adoption less so. While the circumstances of Edna's pregnancy remain unknown, the moral standards of the time stood in harsh judgement of women and girls who had babies out of wedlock.

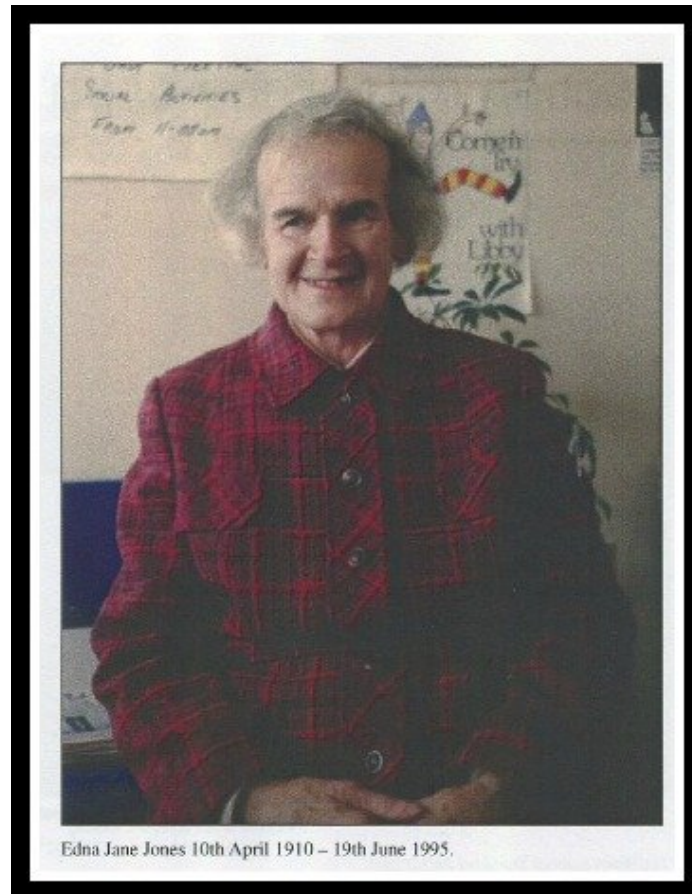
It is worth remembering that this was an era when family skeletons were tucked firmly into closets.

What is harder to understand more than 70 years later – in 2017 – is the apparent reluctance of the Gwen and Edna Jones Foundation to formally acknowledge Marilla's existence, despite some of its board members knowing about her for more

than 20 years.

Some members, including Foundation chairman and high-profile Warrnambool lawyer **James Tait**, have even met her personally.

To the Foundation board, Marilla is no longer a skeleton in the closet but, for some inexplicable reason, her place in the Jones family story has remained untold.



Edna Jones in her senior years,
taken from Janet Paisley's book,
The Jones Girls' Bounty.
Copyright: Janet M Paisley.

I first learned of Edna's baby through a casual remark in an email from a former foster carer, which I then repeated to another ex-Warrnambool friend, **Bruce Macrae**, who I knew was familiar with the history of the Jones' girls.

"Apparently Edna Jones had a child," I asked him. "Could that be true?"

“Oh yes,” Bruce said, “I have met her”.

“What!”

And so began my quest to find Marilla, and to talk to her myself.

Bruce pointed me in the direction of Barwon Heads author **Janet Paisley**, who is a cousin of the Jones’ girls and who was commissioned by the Foundation board to write the Jones’ story, *The Jones Girls’ Bounty*. Her book was published in 2005.

Talking to Janet revealed the full extent of an unresolved story about social class, loss and grief for Edna, but also the quiet determination of Marilla who, having confirmed her mother’s identity in 1995, set out to remove all the shadows of guilt and shame around her birth.

By the time Janet and Marilla connected, Janet was deep into the research for her book which, of course, provided the perfect opportunity to acknowledge Edna’s “secret” child.

To be part of the official family story would connect Marilla back to her birth family in a way that was both dignified and healing.

But the Foundation decided that there would be no mention of Marilla in the 2005 book and, instead, a chapter might be published in later editions as an epilogue.

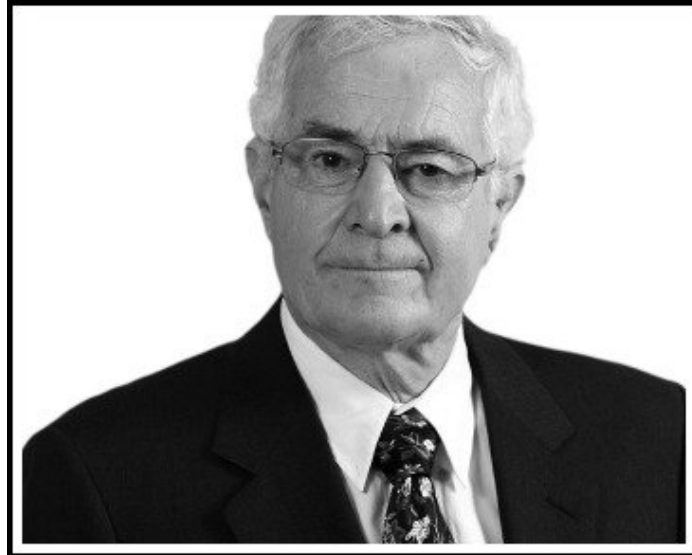
With this in mind, Janet interviewed Marilla and has since written an entire chapter about Edna’s baby.

But despite the book being printed 12 years ago and numerous follow-up inquiries by both Janet and Marilla since, they are still waiting for this missing chapter to be published.

As it stands, *The Jones Girls’ Bounty* contains just 22 words that refer to Edna being involved in “an incident” when she

was a young woman.

"I am the incident," Marilla, who is now in her 70s, tells me by phone, somewhat sardonically.



Gwen and Edna Foundation chairman and lawyer James Tait. Image: Tait's Legal, Warrnambool.

The stonewalling by the Foundation is one thing, but then there is this: an inexplicable sentence in the book's foreword, written by James Tait in February 2005:

"They (Gwen and Edna Jones) had **no one within a close degree of relationship,**" he writes (my emphasis).

When this was written, the board had known of Marilla for years and James had had several contacts with her, including sending her a catalogue for the auction of The Union Station and Gwen and Edna's possessions in late 2001.

(The Union was sold to Midfield Meats founder and racing identity, **Colin McKenna**, in November 2001 for more than \$7 million.)

Given the board knew of Marilla, why, in early 2005, would its chairman write such a sentence?

I asked James this, together with several other questions that relate to his role as Foundation chair, but have had no reply.

Taits were the Jones' family lawyers for years, they documented the rules for the Foundation and prepared both Gwen and Edna's wills, and James has been chair of the Foundation since it began.

He joins other long-serving directors, retired accountant **John Hunt**, from Coffey Hunt and Co, who were the Jones' accountants, and retired bank manager and former Warrnambool Citizen of the Year **Eric Williams**. The fourth, and most recently appointed director is former head of the Warrnambool Racing Club, **Margaret Lucas**.

This is the group that, for reasons unknown, have so far refused to offer any public acknowledgment of Marilla.

"That recognition is really important to Marilla," Janet says, "it would offer a closure, of sorts, and it is what she has been waiting for, for many years".

It is not known if the Foundation directors have even read Janet's "missing" chapter about Edna's baby.

They did, however, send Marilla a complimentary copy of the book when it was published.



Gwen, left, and Edna Jones in the lounge and dining room of The Union Station, Woolsthorpe, circa 1975. Image: Copyright National Library of Australia. Object No: 147727624.

It is partly because of Marilla's quiet patience and good humour, no doubt, that the Foundation board has been able to continue its stonewalling.

Having spoken to her several times now, Marilla strikes me as someone who has enjoyed a simple, hard-working life (she pursued a nursing career) and is not interested in engaging lawyers, publicly challenging authority, or making a fuss.

She lost her partner early, to cancer, and never had children, so her retired life is one of community work, golf and travelling with friends.

As the years tick past, however, neither Marilla nor Janet, who is now in her 80s, can afford to show endless patience.

"Here we are, 22 years on from when all of this came to light, and we are no closer to a resolution, really," Marilla says.

"I am experiencing what a lot of adopted people experience when they find their birth parents...but what every adopted person really wants to know is that at least they were wanted".

As Janet's chapter outlines, Marilla was denied the opportunity to reconnect with Edna, even though she was alive when Marilla had confirmation that Edna was her birth mother.



Marilla Lenne pictured at a Legacy social lunch in 2015. Image: Merimbula News Weekly.

Shortly after tracking down her birth certificate in early 1995, Marilla wrote Edna a letter c/o The Union, Woolsthorpe.

Gwen Jones replied on her sister's behalf, saying it was best if Marilla did not see her mother, who by then was in the late stages of dementia, saying it would be upsetting. She enclosed an earlier photograph of Edna.

"I got the sense that Gwen did not want to have any involvement whatsoever," Marilla said.

Edna died in June 1995.

"If I had been able to see her, I would have just thanked her for my life and set her free," Marilla tells me.

Reading Janet's book about the Jones', there is a pervading sense that the fun-loving Edna got to make very few decisions about her life, but was instead guided by her older sister who promised their father, Robert, that she would always take care of her.

And so it makes sense that even though Edna may have gone along with the decision to give up her baby in 1940, she never forgot her.

As Edna developed dementia in the years before her death at the age of 85, those long-buried emotions around Marilla's birth were no longer constrained.

She was sometimes seen searching the shelves of Swinton's supermarket for "the baby", or would follow a mother pushing a young child in a supermarket trolley, or, as one woman told me, she would "come alive" when talking about babies or if a baby was brought into the room.

Despite these very public displays of grief and confusion, Edna's "baby" was thought by most people to be purely imaginary.

Even Janet, a relative of the family, didn't know the truth about Marilla until after Gwen's death in 2000.



The formerly “unknown” father of Marilla Lenne: his identity and the story behind how Marilla met his family is contained in Janet Paisley’s chapter. Image: Grasmere Presbyterian Church newsletter, supplied.

It is since Gwen’s death that Marilla has been given certain access into the Jones’ world, but still not a seat at the main table, so to speak.

In 2001, Marilla was invited by the Foundation to look over The Union before the sale of its contents which were, at the time, being sorted and packed by staff from Coffey Hunt in preparation for one of the most highly anticipated auctions in years.

A few small items that belonged to her mother have since been

passed on to Marilla – a cup, saucer and plate – and connections made to lost cousins.

Another particularly poignant moment came in 2011 when Marilla was invited to visit The Union for afternoon tea by Colin McKenna and his partner, Janice, who, Marilla says, “was delightful and very welcoming”. How strange it must have been, however, for Marilla to sit in the historic, blue-chip property that was once half-owned by her birth mother, but to which she had no claim.

In Australia, adopted children have no legal right to the estates of their birth parents, but for Marilla, it has never been about estates.

Instead, her gentle persistence has been driven by the desire to be recognised and have her story – and therefore Edna’s story – brought out of the shadows and into the light.

There was to be no more shame.

Until now, such a wish depended on the decisions of the Foundation, but both Janet and Marilla have now given me permission to publish the draft chapter here, **see the link at the end of this story.**

This “missing chapter” also reveals the identity of Marilla’s father and the incredible story about how she connected to his family in the south-west.

I thank Janet and Marilla for trusting me with their story and words.

[Marilla Lenne chapter](#)