

**RIDING
THROUGH
LIFE**

A JOURNEY FUELLED BY PASSION & SERVICE

**RIDING
THROUGH
LIFE**

NEVILLE WOODERSON

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JOHN NEVILLE WOODERSON QSM



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FOREWORD

Those who came of age during the 1930s and 1940s were shaped by hardship, resilience, and a quiet kind of courage. They carried with them a belief that humility was the mark of true character. Many from that era would say, *“I’d love to share my story, but I can’t imagine anyone would be interested.”*

Neville was one of those men – steady, self-effacing, and more comfortable doing the work than talking about it.

This book was never meant to glorify or embellish. It has been carefully stitched together from his diaries, letters, photographs, slides, voice memos, and the memories of those who knew him best – told as faithfully and simply as possible.

Its purpose is to preserve a life lived with quiet strength. A life defined not by grand declarations, but by consistent action, deep integrity, and an unspoken impact on everyone who crossed his path.

Neville’s story is more than a personal memoir; it’s a reflection of universal themes – perseverance through hardship, the power of service, the love of learning, and the spirit of adventure. Woven through his life are synchronicities and deeper messages for those willing to see them.

This book is our way of honouring his memory – not with fanfare, but with truth. So that his legacy might live on in the hearts of those who value substance over spotlight.

It’s been quite the journey...

**Joy Sheehan & Mark Robbins –
Neville & Helen’s youngest & oldest children**



CHAPTER 1.

HOME-GROWN & HARD-DRIVEN

1928–1952

From as far back as I can remember, I carried a restlessness – an energy that never seemed to sit still.

It wasn't only physical; it was a deep drive, a pull to make my life count for something. I wasn't chasing recognition; that was never the point. I wasn't trying to change the world either. For me, it was simple: roll up your sleeves, do what needs to be done, and leave things better than you found them. With steady hands, a bit of heart, and no fuss, I just liked to get on with it.

And so, my journey begins...

London Roots

My great-grandfather, Gordon Wooderson, established a menswear shop with his sons Llewellyn (my grandfather) and Robert under the name **L&R Wooderson**, situated behind St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Their reputation for craftsmanship in dress shirts, ties, cufflinks, leather gloves and every detail a gentleman required, grew so strong that they were awarded a royal warrant: the mark of official recognition, granting them the right to supply the royal household itself. To receive the words "By Appointment to the King" was no small feat; it was a badge of excellence few ever achieved.



*L & R Wooderson menswear shop.
Sketched by Vivien Hislop, London Evening News*



*My grandmother Alice with Kenneth, Llewellyn Jnr,
Lawrence, Malcolm (my father), and Llewellyn Snr*

Llewellyn stood six feet tall and carried himself with quiet elegance. His wife, Alice, was barely five feet tall and frail looking, but make no mistake, she had an iron will. They raised four sons, Llewellyn Jr, Lawrence, Malcolm (my father), and Kenneth.

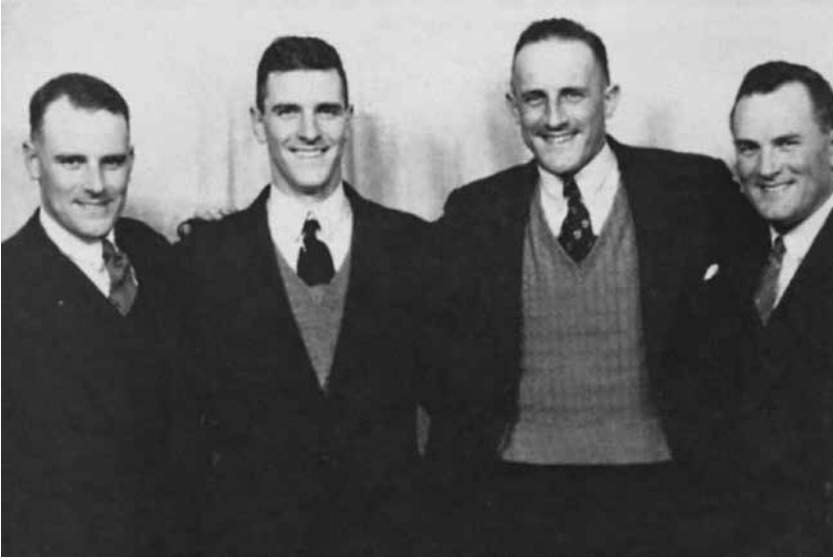
Although the family enjoyed a privileged life in London, with servants and a thriving shop, Alice *didn't* want her sons to spend their lives standing behind a counter. She believed New Zealand would offer them something more valuable – practical skills and self-reliance. The idea of immigrating was considered outrageous at the time, and her relatives strongly objected. After all, Alice herself had never worked, and her husband, whom she always referred to as “Father”, was completely impractical, having spent most of his life behind a shop counter and, unable to lift a hammer or drive a nail. Nevertheless, Alice was determined. Against strong opposition, she persuaded him to sell their half-share of the shop to his brother Robert for £500 – a considerable sum at the beginning of the 19th century and move the family halfway across the world in search of a different kind of future.

Emigrating to New Zealand (1910)

On 5 October 1910, Llewellyn, Alice, and their four sons departed London aboard the ship S.S. *Matatua*. The six-week journey wasn't without hardship – my father, Malcolm, only ten years old at the time, caught diphtheria enroute. When they arrived, the entire family was placed in isolation. The family settled in the King Country, purchased land, built a home, and Alice opened a tearoom for passing travellers. The boys rode on horseback to school in Te Kuiti, eleven kilometres away. It was a pioneering life far removed from London's polished streets.

Though they had once lived with comfort and privilege, they were now part of the New Zealand frontier, building from the ground up, learning by doing. The move demanded resilience, and they showed great fortitude as they faced the demanding conditions of their new life.

The four brothers all got on well and eventually went their own ways.



Kenneth, Lawrence, Malcolm, and Llewellyn Jnr

Malcolm bought a farm in Okauia, near Matamata, and married Wilhelmina Barlow (my mother). As it turned out, his brother Llewellyn bought the neighbouring farm and married her sister, Joyce.

My father (whom I called Pop) was a conservative man with high standards. He believed in doing a job properly, seeing things through, and never cutting corners. In his younger years, he had worked on farms across the Canterbury Plains, driving a team of horses to plough the land. He took great pride in turning out a straight furrow, a skill that took patience and precision. He'd fix his eye on a distant post and trust the horses to hold the line. It was tough, disciplined work, and perhaps he liked the challenge of that.



My Mum: Mina Barlow

The Barlow Family

My mother was the second of seven children. Her father, Beauchamp Barlow, married to Letitia Neville, was a farmer and served as postmaster in Blenheim. Mina worked alongside him in the post office.

Mina had five sisters, Joyce, Rangi, Phyllis, Gwen, and Ella, plus their brother Jack. They were all practical, hard-working, and resourceful. They ran the farm with quiet efficiency and remarkable teamwork, hand-milking cows each day and taking turns hitching up the horse and cart to deliver milk to the local dairy factory. With a large garden to tend and the daily demands of rural life, they rose to the occasion with grace and grit.

All the sisters were highly skilled with their hands, excelling in needlework, knitting, embroidery, and making their own clothes.

Despite the hard work, they always made time for fun. I heard many stories of their trips to dances in their horse and cart. Mother played the piano, often as part of a band, and was well known in the community for her down-to-earth nature and generous spirit.

The local boys were known for their pranks. On one occasion, they untied the horse from the fence and led it around to the other side, leaving the cart on one side and the horse on the other. I'm sure the girls had plenty to say about that.

My Early Years

I was born in Okauia, Waikato, New Zealand, on 22 October 1928 – the first of six children to Malcolm and Wilhelmina Wooderson, dairy farmers. My father named me John at birth, but over time he started calling me by my middle name, Neville. The name stuck, and that's what I've been known as ever since.

Mum and Pop raised six children. I was the oldest, followed by Dorothy, Allen, twins Rita and Joan, and Myra, six years my junior. We grew up during the Great Depression. There were no phones, no electricity, and we had no car.

The stock market crash of 1929 swept through New Zealand like a bushfire. Farmers abandoned land, jobs were scarce, and poverty was widespread.

Our family moved to a farm in Lichfield when I was five. It was a tough bit of land, overrun with ragwort (that tall, yellow-flowered weed that cattle won't touch because it's poisonous). The soil wasn't much better, low in cobalt, which the livestock needed to stay healthy. Without it, they got what we called "wasting disease". They'd stop growing, lose weight, and look tired no matter how much grass they ate.

We were like any other Kiwi farming family, making do with what we had, working hard, and relying on grit and ingenuity. From early on, I was expected to help in the cowshed. I soon realised I was both needed and useful, and my days quickly filled with chores.

At the break of dawn, I'd round up 65 cows from the paddocks in the dark, rope their legs, and prepare their teats for milking. The Anderson kerosene engine powered the milking machine, separating cream from milk, and could only be started with a crank handle. After milking, I'd fetch the horse to deliver the cream to the gate for the lorry to collect, then scramble to get to school on time. After school, it was straight back to the milking shed again. Just as well I had energy to burn.

My mother's strength of character and resilience left a deep impression on me. She cooked hearty meals, sewed all our clothes on her manual Singer sewing machine, and never complained. No matter how tough things got, she just got on with it. She made the most of what we had, stretched every



Me: John "Neville" Wooderson



Myra, Rita, Joan, Allen, Dorothy and me

penny, and kept the household running like clockwork. Looking back, I don't know how she did it. She held our family together during times when life was hard for everyone, not just at home, but across the country.

It was tough for young people to find work. I vividly recall Pop recounting stories of homeless men wandering from town to town, looking for shelter and a meal in exchange for a bit of work on the farms. We sometimes took them on to help us out, and Pop would provide them with basic clothing, boots, and dungarees in return for their help. A set of clothes cost about two shillings and sixpence back then. There was no government support in those days.

My Pop ran a tight ship and was a hard taskmaster. With a large family to provide for and the pressures of the times, he carried a lot of stress. Discipline and routine were everything to him, and as the eldest son, I was held to his highest expectations.

My brother Allen, only two years younger, was a close companion and confidant. We shared a sense of adventure and camaraderie that made farm life memorable. We often worked together feeding out turnips, hay, or silage and took turns driving the horse and cart, or sometimes we had a horse and

sledge of our own. Our friendly rivalry kept things lively. We'd race each other, push each other, and find ways to make chores more fun.

We used to ride the young heifers, which were hand-fed and friendly. One day I was told to retrieve a stray that had broken through the boundary fence, and I figured the quickest way home was to climb on her back and ride down the road. A neighbour spotted me and told my Mum, which landed me in hot water with Pop.

Mischief wasn't in short supply. I was usually the instigator, and Allen happily followed along. At around eight years old, I figured out how to sneak broody hens and a dozen eggs into a box until the chicks hatched. Since feeding the chooks was my job, I kept a close eye on them. Mum was baffled by the sudden influx of chickens: "I don't know where all the chooks are coming from!" When I got older, Mum put me in charge of preparing them for the pot. She hated the killing part. I didn't mind it. One day I tried using hedge clippers until Mum caught me in action; she was horrified.

As the eldest, I was probably a bit overprotective of my sisters, though in the early years it was very much boys versus girls – we argued, teased, and fought like any siblings do. Allen and I would sometimes take the wheels off their pushchair and use them as steering wheels. The girls would, of course, dob us in, and we'd end up in trouble. One of the most frustrating things I remember was not being able to get into the bathroom. With five sisters in the house, Allen and I were always left waiting outside for what felt like hours, wondering what on earth could take so long.

My sisters followed in Mum's footsteps; each of them inherited her talent for handiwork. We were a family that grew up working with our hands, whether on the land or with a sewing needle.

From a young age, Allen and I were expected to handle and harness horses, and we got pretty good at it. With a strong sense of adventure, we didn't always stick to the rules, especially when it came to the work horses. Despite Pop's warnings, we often rode them anyway. With three sturdy horses at our disposal, we'd load up hay, silage, or swedes onto sledges and race each other across the paddocks, our competitive streak growing as we did and sometimes pushing things a bit too far. I remember one horse in particular that was