

# Aunty May Rothwell and the Impact of the Spanish Flu

*Nell Moody*

Aunty May was born Mary Caroline Rothwell in the late 1890's.

When she was about twelve, her grandmother died. Grandmother had run the house and brought up the children, and little May, the eldest girl, then took over.

Intelligent, loving and always cheerful, she earned everybody's respect. Her brothers and sisters loved her all their days in gratitude for those good years.

May's life was changed completely by the 1919-1921 flu. Not because she caught the flu, she didn't. The Spanish flu took Her mind.

By 1919 she was working as a nurse at the Children's Hospital in Sydney. The hours were long, and frequently when she returned to Schofields, there were requests to help sick families in the district. I was told that one night, she came home and pulled her chair to face the wall, sat in it and refused to speak. When she did speak it was about dying children and little coffins.

Medical help was sought. She spent time in hospital where new treatments including electric shocks were tried. Over the years there were many visits to Medical Specialists but her condition did not improve.

She lived with her mother and her sister Pearl in a house not far from us. Her sister Pearl continued to care for her.

As I grew up Aunty May's conversations about dying babies and coffins never changed. We shared the back seat of the car when we went out for a drive, and to my eternal shame, I was ashamed of her and fervently hoped that we would not meet any of my school friends.

She lived a long life but her real life ended sixty years before 1985. She is buried in Riverstone Cemetery. The inscription on her headstone reads "A KIND AND LOVING PERSON".

**Editor's Note:** *Nell wrote this article because of her respect for her Aunty May's role as a carer for people and the toll it took on her. She hopes that people consider the impact that the current pandemic will be taking on health care workers and carers and wants people to know that help is more readily available than it was back in 1919.*

*A variety of support services are listed on the New South Wales Government web site. In their words, **There is never a wrong time to seek help.** The web site provides a series of contact numbers including: Beyond Blue 1800 51 23 48 and Lifeline Australia 13 11 14.*