

## The Pea-Green Ute

As far as utes go, ours was nothing to write home about. Dad had bought it from a Holden dealer in Midland in 1960. Picking it up was an adventure in itself. Mum had to drive him into Merredin in our 1½-ton Austin truck so he could catch the train to Midland. From there he walked one and a half miles to the car dealer to collect it, then drove the new ute home.

It was an odd pea-green colour with a tan interior. The dash was painted the same colour as the outside, with a big chrome grille in the centre and a speedometer right in front of the driver. The gear shift was on the left side of the steering column. The ute didn't have any hubcaps or fancy chrome bits, which Dad said was sensible, as *"there's less stuff to fall off."* Dad told Mum he got a great deal on the price, but secretly we believed the dealer let it go cheap because he'd had it for months and just wanted it gone. It had the word *Special* written on the sides, and over the years we owned it, it certainly became special to us.

We lived on a wheat farm about five miles out of Hines Hill, a little farming town west of Merredin, W.A. Dad, Mum, and us three kids lived on 260 acres of sandy farmland. Mostly we grew wheat, but we also had forty head of sheep. It was a typical Wheatbelt farm with a house built mostly of corrugated iron, with wood floors and a big open veranda at the front. The large kitchen doubled as our dining room, with a wood stove and a big chimney made of old bricks. Mum created the most wonderful meals in that kitchen.

The house had been built as a small cottage by my grandparents and then extended a couple of times into a hodgepodge of bedrooms and closed-in verandas as the family grew. There was a big rainwater tank at one corner, which was all the water we had, and a thunderbox toilet out the back. We didn't have a bathroom; instead there was a bathtub and a big wood-burning water heater in the laundry.

Out the back was the machinery shed, which housed our Massey Ferguson tractor, the Austin truck, and a combine harvester we half-owned with Mr McLennan from the farm next door. It was also where our old single-cylinder Lister diesel generator was kept. My older brother Ivan had to walk up there every day and use a hand pump to

fill the little fuel tank above the generator so it was ready for Dad to start each night. None of us kids could start it, as it had very high compression and even Dad said it would kick like a mule if he didn't get it going straight away.

When Dad first came home with the new ute, us kids were so excited. Our old car was a 1945 Dodge half-ton tray-back that had seen better days. Grandpa had bought it at an army surplus auction years earlier, and though it had served us well, in the last couple of years it broke down often and cost too much in repairs. Dad said it was time for it to go.

The new pea-green Holden was all shiny and so nice to sit in that we all piled inside just to enjoy the soft padded seat, so different from the old Chev with its horsehair-stuffed bench. Dad told us to enjoy it while we could, as from that day on our place would be in the back! Of course, that was where we wanted to be anyway. Some of my best memories as a kid were of sitting in the back of the ute while Dad drove us along the country roads near our farm. He even let us ride there on our weekly trips to Merredin on Saturday mornings when we went shopping—except for my little sister Kath, who was only five and had to sit in the front with Mum.

The ute quickly became part of our everyday life and farm work. Dad would load it up with all sorts of things—shovels, wooden posts, rolls of wire for mending fences, packs of timber from the hardware in Merredin, even sheep for the stockyards. He once took us all to the Merredin drive-in to see Mickey Mouse and Pluto in a Christmas movie while we sat in the back.

Ivan and I used to walk down our drive to catch the school bus each morning, but if it was raining, Mum would take us to the gate in the ute. Once a month she'd drive into town with Kath beside her so she could buy us lunch from the tuck shop. The pea-green ute was as much a part of our family as we were.

We'd had it for a couple of years when Ivan turned fourteen. Dad decided he should learn to drive so he could help out with bigger jobs. There we were, Mum, Kath, and I standing out the front, watching Ivan bunny-hop and stall and occasionally actually drive down the driveway with an increasingly frustrated Dad beside him. Ivan had been driving the tractor for six months and Dad couldn't understand why he couldn't

figure out the clutch, but eventually he got the hang of it. From then on, Ivan became the next driver in the family.

Dad liked the idea because now Ivan could drive him to the Hines Hill pub on Saturday afternoons and then drive him home again after he'd had a few. This worked well until the police from Merredin set up in the parking bay opposite the pub. There had been complaints about truckies stopping at the roadside pub and then driving on to Perth after a few pints. Unfortunately, there weren't many trucks around that night, so the police pulled over Dad's ute. You can imagine their faces when they found a fourteen-year-old boy at the wheel and his drunken father in the passenger seat!

Life on the farm continued as the seasons came and went. During ploughing season, Mum would drive the ute out to the paddocks at night with Dad's dinner wrapped in a towel so he could eat there instead of coming home. The ute's tailgate made an impromptu table, and they'd chat about their day while he ate and drank tea from the thermos she brought.

That pea-green FE ute was the most reliable machine on the farm. Dad did almost all the servicing and repairs himself, and he used to say, "*I only need to service that old girl once a year and she never lets me down.*" He used it to pick up parts, fuel, and oil for the tractor, combine, or truck whenever they needed attention. But one day, the ute let us down in the most spectacular way.

Mum had driven to the Post Office in Hines Hill with Kath, now nine, beside her. On the way home she stopped at the railway crossing just before our drive, looked both ways, then let the clutch out to cross. A few seconds later the engine coughed, stuttered, and stopped—right across the railway lines. She turned the key a few times, pumping the accelerator, but the FE wouldn't start. Being a farmer's wife, Mum wasn't too bothered. She hopped out, told Kath to stay with the car, and set off up the road to fetch Dad with the truck to tow them home. If somebody came along, Kath was to explain where Mum had gone.

Not long after Mum left, Kath, sitting in the driver's seat pretending to drive, heard a low rumbling. She couldn't see anything on the road, but the sound grew louder. She

thought it might be a neighbour in a truck or tractor, but then came a long, low blast of a train horn.

Kath ran back to the ute and looked towards Merredin. A plume of hazy dark smoke rose into the sky above the trees. The horn sounded again, much louder. Just a hundred yards down the track was a bend, and the driver wouldn't see the ute until it was too late to stop.

Kath climbed back into the ute, turned the key like Mum had, and pumped the pedal madly. Nothing. The engine growled but refused to start. She looked again and saw the maroon-and-silver nose of a big mainline diesel coming around the bend, smoke streaming, horn blaring.

Scared now, Kath thought of jumping out and running, but she knew the ute would be lost. She tried once more. As she leaned forward to turn the key, she bumped the gearshift with her hand. The handle moved into reverse without her noticing. She pumped the pedal, turned the key, and suddenly the engine erupted into life.

The ute shot backwards off the crossing and down the road towards Hines Hill. Kath screeched, grabbed the steering wheel, and turned it to the right. The green Holden veered off the road, across a ditch, and into the fence of our bottom paddock. With a crash of wire and posts, they burst into the ploughed field. Kath, still with her foot down, now hurtled backwards toward the dam. Terrified, she did the only thing she could think of: she turned off the key.

The revving engine died, the ute slowed, then stopped. Dust billowed everywhere. The only sound was the receding rumble of the train and the click-clack of its wheels. The ute teetered like a seesaw, just short of sliding into the dam.

Just then Dad came running through the dust, grabbed the bonnet, and leaned on it with all his weight. The ute tipped back down. Seconds later Mum arrived, red-faced and puffing, but with fierce determination in her eyes. She pulled the tangled wire away from the driver's door and wrenched it open. Kath leapt into her arms. Dad stepped back and the pea-green ute slowly tipped up, rolling down into the dam with

a splash, a wave of water rippled out across the dam as the ute slowly slid under the surface.

Mum decided two things that day:

1. When Dad got the ute out, he'd have to find the ignition problem and fix it before she'd sit in it again.
2. Never again would she leave us kids in the car alone.

Dad and Ivan used the tractor to haul the ute from the dam. Dad drained the water from every part of the engine, changed the oil, spark plugs, and something he called the points. He set Ivan and me to cleaning the inside, while he and a man from town repaired the electrics. The pea-green ute would live again, but it took time before Mum or Kath would ride in it.

### **Ten Years Later**

Dad is retired now. Ivan joined the Army and moved to Queensland. Kath and I run the farm. She's seeing a nice bloke in Cunderdin, and I think they might marry soon, as she's talking about moving to his farm. Me, I haven't met anyone I liked yet.

Things have changed. We bought new machinery and even old man McLennan's farm when he couldn't run it anymore. Mum and Dad agreed to build a new house in front of the old one. I helped them design it and we've spoken to a builder in Northam.

We even bought a fancy new Toyota Landcruiser tray-back for the farm, but I wouldn't let Dad trade in the old FE. Our ute still sits in the machinery shed, still part of the family. One day I'll restore it, and we'll know again the excitement we felt when Dad first brought home our pea-green ute.