

## Balwyn Historical Society News April 15, 2020

### Growing up in Balwyn in the 1940s and 1950s

#### Part 1

I was born at 19 Sir Garnet Road, Surrey Hills, right opposite Canterbury Cricket Ground, on February 8, 1942.

In 1949, when I was in Grade 3 at Chatham State School, we moved to 24 Parring Rd, Balwyn, phone WF1415, where I lived until I was 19, and we moved to Leeds St, East Doncaster.

My memories of Chatham State School, Number 4314, are significant for a couple of reasons.

In 1949, Australia was still very much a transplanted English Society, but about to change dramatically.

At School Assembly, on Monday mornings, after a formal ceremony to raise the Australian Flag, we would recite the "Oath of Allegiance": "I love God and my Country,

I honour the Flag, I serve the King,

And cheerfully obey my parents, teachers, and the Law".

Following Assembly, we would march from the quadrangle into the school to the tune of Colonel Bogey, played by a military band.

The boys had words for that tune, but, I can't record them in the presence of ladies! They began: "Hitler, had only one big...."!

Our "text books", the First, Second, Third etc Grade Readers, were very English, and contained such items as "The story of Grace Darling", an English heroine, "The Hole in the Road", set in London, and other such stories derived from our English heritage.

I don't remember in which year it was, but a "Miss Silletto" used to come and teach us "elocution". She dun good!!!!

Similarly, I'm not sure what year it was that we learned to write with a pen and ink, but with that achievement, came a much-sought-after role, that of "Ink-well Monitor". At the start of each day, the Ink-well Monitors, teachers' little helpers, came into the class-room ahead of the rest of the class, and re-filled the ink-wells with ink from a bottle. Ink-wells were small, white, ceramic pots, about 3cm in diameter and 4 cm deep, with a retaining lip about 0.5cm wide around the perimeter at the top. They sat neatly in holes about 3cm in diameter recessed into the fixed part at the front of the desk, and the Ink-well Monitor would remove the pot, re-fill it with ink, and replace it. For the life of me, 70 years or so on, I can't remember what it was about that task which made it so attractive to us children, but when we were asked by the teacher to "put up your hand if you haven't had a turn as Ink-well Monitor", every hand would shoot up, with arms waving backwards and forwards from the elbow, in a silent plea to the teacher "please choose me this time"!

Another favourite class-room related role was "Duster Monitor". "Dusters" were blocks about 15cm long x 8cm wide x 4cm deep made of felt strips, and they were used to "clean the board" ie wipe the chalk writing from the previous lesson off the blackboard. Again, there were always plenty of enthusiastic bids for this "privilege". Some teachers would throw dusters lightly across the classroom at children who were drifting in their attention, otherwise lacking in focus, or talking in class, in order to register their disapproval.

In their final year at Primary School, the girls would dance around the Maypole, a portable, 10 foot or so tall wooden pole stored in a store-room off the quadrangle, and carried out and erected by Grade 6 boys. About 8-10 girls would dance around the maypole holding ribbons which were attached at top of the pole, weaving in and out, under and over, until the pole was platted from top to bottom, and then reverse the process. The music was a typical English folk-dance, broadcast from an exterior speaker attached to the wall of the school.

"Nature Study", was on the curriculum early in our Primary School years, and although the Society was named after an English Ornithologist, in a

very Australian, indeed, Victorian, initiative, we were encouraged to join the Gould League of Bird Lovers, an organization whose aim was to protect bird-life, and we made vows not to collect birds' eggs, and nests. Although it still happened, with some children bringing blown eggs and nests to school to show their friends, the vast majority of children learned to love and protect birds of all kinds, including the humble little sparrow, not just the colourful natives. My love of all birds remains to this day.

To our collective benefit, we children were taught to "save up" our money, and in order to encourage us to do so, a representative of the State Bank of Victoria attended the school, weekly, I think, but it may have been at longer intervals, and we were all issued with "Bank Books". The books were about the size of the modern day Passport, and we experienced the pleasure of watching our balances grow as we made our deposits, albeit, sometimes as small as a florin [two shillings/two bob!] one shilling, or even sixpence, perhaps a mere threepence! I don't know about a penny-half-penny [penny-haypeny!], or a penny!

On an early "multi-cultural" note, during my time at Chatham State, we experienced the arrival of our first two post-war refugees from Europe: Horst, about 8 years-old, and his younger brother, Eudo, about 6 years-old, Kamphausen, had come from Germany, and initially presented in lederhosen. It was a long while ago, but I certainly don't remember any animosity towards them, and I think they just fitted in with all the other kids. Horst went on to Boxhill High School with me, and was a very good all-round athlete, and bloke.

During my time at Chatham State the Government introduced free milk for all school children, and at morning play-time we would all queue up outside the shelter sheds and be given a half-pint of milk, in the old silver-top bottles.

Corporal punishment, with "the strap", 3-6 "cuts", was still administered, but Primary School children in those years were generally quite loving and respectful of their teachers, and such harsh punishment

was rarely used. I was once given 6 cuts by the head-master for fighting with the school bully, "Brownie", who was similarly dealt with.

I had come across Brownie monsterring a friend, Gordon Scheinwald, a Jewish boy in a younger sister, Wendy's, grade, and told him to "p\*\*\* off", and "leave Gordon alone". Brownie's response was the Primary School declaration of physical superiority, ie that he could "get me down", a wrestling manoeuvre in which contestants put their arms around one another's necks, each attempting to force the other onto the ground. Well, Brownie couldn't "get me down", I "got him down", but we both lost, because we were dealt with in the shelter sheds by the Head-master, a sadist called Mr Holmes, who used to go red in the face as he swung the strap from the ground below his back, over his shoulder onto our extended hands. Yes, it did hurt, a lot, but made Brownie and I heroes, and Holmes a bigger object of the pupils' derision than he already was. Nobody troubled Gordon again, and our friendship remained into adulthood, when he became a dentist.

Far more serious than a harmless school-yard punch-up, was a Polio epidemic which hit Australia in 1951. There had been many such Polio, also known as "Infantile Paralysis", epidemics before, affecting every state and territory, and the lives of the children who were afflicted, many of whom carried significant physical disablement, including the wearing of leg irons, and crippling muscle wastage, for the rest of their lives. Many patients suffered breathing difficulties, due to muscle wastage, and had to be placed in mechanical respirators, popularly known as "Iron Lungs", a kind of metal cylinder, from which only their heads emerged, to enable them to breathe freely. This internment could last from weeks, to more than a year, after which the patients had to be taught to breathe spontaneously again. In 1951 there were around 5000 Polio cases, at a time when Australia's total population was less than 8,500,000. Schools were closed for a time, and strict rules put in place concerning who we played with. The abiding memory I have of the time was that we were advised to "pasteurize" milk, ie heat it up until it was nearly boiled, and rose in the saucepan; many, many times it went over the top, causing much disapprobation from mum or Nana. I continue to "pasteurize" the milk for my supper-time Ovaltine to this day!

Thankfully, while there were some other less severe Polio epidemics later in the early 1950s, with the introduction of the Salk Vaccine in Australia in 1956, the disease was effectively banished from Australia.

So, onwards and upwards:

In Year 6 we had a special treat: we were taken by bus to the McRobertson **Chocolate** Factory in Collingwood, where we were shown the production process of all forms of chocolate confectionary, and given a sample bag of the goodies upon departure.

More importantly, we were taken by tram to Kew Swimming Pool, and taught to swim, hopefully to at least the level of obtaining our “Herald Learn-to-Swim Certificate”. Some children went one better, obtaining their “Senior”, if they could swim the 50 yards length of the pool.

I enjoyed my years at Chatham State, and my sisters and I, having commenced our Primary Education there, were not transferred to Balwyn State School when we moved across Whitehorse Road into Balwyn.

To Be Continued.....

Mike Brettargh, April 2020