

Balwyn Historical Society News April 24, 2020

Growing up in Balwyn in the 1940s and 1950s

Part 2

Our new home, Parring Road, led from Whitehorse Rd up to Beckett Park, which was then the highest point in the Melbourne Metropolitan Area, from memory, nearly 400 feet above sea-level, according to a sign at the foot of Parring Road. Our home at number 24 was three houses from the top of the street, and this elevation caused significant “water supply” problems during hot weather. On very hot days the water would gradually slow to a trickle, and finally stop all together, as our neighbours further down the street increased their water use. Mum would have prepared for this eventuality, and have filled bottles, saucepans, buckets etc. with water in the early morning. We children would be the first indicator of the decreasing water flow, since we were allowed to play “under the hose”, running in and out from under the sprinkler etc., on hot days, and gradually the height of the spray would lower until it finally ceased.

Parring Road was the home of Bignell’s Dairy, and we children were frequently charged with the task of going down to the dairy to obtain a billy of milk, which was dispensed with a ladle from a large cannister in the cool room. Subsequently, the dairy changed to 1-pint glass bottles, with thick lips, into which a waxed cardboard insert was machine-pressed. We kids would press the lid in enough to suck milk out of the top of the bottle, and this delinquency always brought dire retribution, and warnings of more, from our mother.

In our early years at Parring Road, milk was delivered to a billy left overnight on the front veranda, by the milkman, working from a horse and cart. Similarly, Mr. Dunn, the “bread-man”, brought the bread daily, and the ladies in the street would go out to the horse and cart to make their purchases. Mr. Dunn had followers: people, including my Nana,

would take out galvanized iron buckets, hoping to retrieve horse-manure for their gardens. And little kids, like my four sisters and me, would follow him around begging for free bread rolls. We must have scored occasionally, or we wouldn't have done it!

A third horse and cart featured in life in 1940s and 50s Parring Road: the garbage collector, with his horse-driven, open top dray, a large, two-wheeled cart with sides about 4 feet high, and a further flange about a foot wide protruding from the top of the sides, at an angle of about 20 degrees. The "rubbish man" would pick up the galvanized iron rubbish tins, which were about 60 litres capacity, and throw the rubbish over the top into the cart. Most people had at least two such rubbish tins. Today, it is hard to believe that the Balwyn Rubbish Tip at that time was at the bottom of Balwyn Road, north of Belmore road, land now occupied by Gordon Barnard Reserve. Even more amazingly, there was a beautiful, modern, 1930s-or-so-styled home in Tuxen street, about 300 metres away, on the rise above the tip, whose view to the south was directly over the tip!

While we are situated geographically in the descent down Balwyn Road from Belmore Road, I am reminded that that was the site of the Annual Balwyn Billy-cart Race, open to all-comers, a popular, well-attended event. Billy-carts on pram wheels always proved superior to those on ball-bearing wheels. I always competed in the latter!

But, back to Parring Road.....

Another regular visitor to the street was the "ice-man". Few people in Balwyn, then primarily a working-class suburb, had refrigerators, and the ice-man delivered blocks of ice, about 25cm wide x 30cm deep x 45cm long, with a hessian bag wrapped around them, and carried over his shoulder, into the house, where they would be deposited into the galvanized iron compartment of the ice-chest. The ice provider for Balwyn was Deepdene Ice-works, which was in a street on the right-hand side off Gordon Street, and occasionally we would visit it in the family car, when our ice ran out in exceptionally hot weather.

In later years, as refrigeration became more common, my father installed a Prescold Refrigeration Unit into the ice compartment of the ice-chest, and home-made ice-cream and ice-blocks slipped into our treats.

The provision of gas was by way of a “pay-as-you-go” gas meter, which was activated by inserting coins into a slot. When the coins ran out, so did the gas! Of course, not everybody always had the coins to restore the gas supply, so most homes kept a supply of appropriately sized metal washers which “did the trick”. But, “crunch time” always came, when the “gas-man” arrived to read the meter, and washers had to be replaced by real money!!!!

In an Australia very, very different to today, “neighborliness”, and “compassion”, were the order of the day at 24 Parring Road, and although we didn’t “love” all our neighbors, we knew them, and we all watched over one another. Even by the standards of the day, as a family, we didn’t have much, but when dad returned from the War, my parents used to send “Food for Britain” parcels to England. In return, from time-to-time, and to much excitement from us kids, we used to receive parcels containing “Beano” and “Dandy” comics from someone in the UK.

With us 5 children, and our Nana, our maternal grandmother, living in a 3 bedroom, plus sleep-out.... a walled-in part of the back verandah.....house, our home was full, but we still took in a refugee family from Holland, Mary and Otto Bergmann, a car mechanic, and their two children, who stayed with us for several months, until they were able to find housing in Pakenham, then a country town.

Another regular guest at Number 24 was Bobby Doherty, initially about 8 years-old, a resident of the Geelong Orphanage, who would live with us for a few weeks during the School Holidays.

Every year or two mums used to get very anxious, when the landlord, Mr. Bertazon, took us to Court trying to have us evicted. As I found out in my late teens, when I worked as an Assistant Clerk of Courts, Mr.

Bertazon had no hope, because the tenancy had been created under the old "Landlord and Tenant Act of 1928", under which he had to prove "greater hardship"! In the end, mum and dad put together a deposit, received a War Service Loan, and in about 1961 built a home in Leeds Street, Doncaster East.

Notwithstanding some struggles, and while being nowhere near as stressful as our present global predicament, life in 1940s and 50s Balwyn was not without drama, and one evening in 1953 we stood on the front veranda at Number 24 looking at a massive glow in the sky over what we knew to be the city of Melbourne. There was no "instant news" at that time, but in the morning "The Sun" informed us that what we had witnessed was the destruction by fire of the wing of the Exhibition Buildings which housed the first Melbourne Aquarium.

Speaking of fires....

IN BLACK & WHITE

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Big flamin' fun

I was called a 'bunfire', but that doesn't convey the intensity of the burning inferno lit in Balwyn every year to mark Empire Day in the 1940s and '50s.

Eager volunteers, many of them children, worked for days to build a huge, multi-story stack of bushes and tree branches at Beckwith Park ready for the annual celebration.

Empire Day was held on May 24 — the birthday of Queen Victoria, who had died in 1901 — as a celebration of Australia's place in the British Empire. The event was often known as "cracker night" and celebrated with fireworks and bunfires in communities around Australia.

But the bunfire in Balwyn, in Melbourne's east, was known to be among the biggest and best, and photos often featured in the newspapers of the day, including *The Argus*.

Locals put in an extraordinary effort to build this bunfire (see picture) for Empire Day in 1945, with *The Argus* reporting it was expected to be lit by then Federal Opposition leader Robert Menzies, with a torch carried from the city by a relay of runners.

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Mike Brettargh is the boy at the top of the bonfire which was being built in the picture on the right.

Above all the many benefits of living in Parring Road was that our home, at number 24, was just a few hundred metres from the site of the Annual "Empire Day Bonfire", which was conducted on the nearest Saturday to May 24. That date originally celebrated Queen Victoria's Birthday, but, at her passing, it was changed to simply "Empire Day". While there had been large Empire Day bonfires conducted in Beckett Park before WW2, after the War, the Balwyn RSL, as a fund-raiser aimed at building a hall for itself, introduced the Annual Empire Day Bonfire, an event which attracted people from all over Melbourne. While the bonfire was the major event, Wittingslow Carnivals participated, with Merry-Go-Round, Flying Buckets and other rides, and food stalls, some

conducted by members of the RSL, and other vendors, provided sustenance for the huge crowds which attended.

“Bonfire Night” was also known as “Cracker Night”, and since most people attending the “Bonnie” brought with them copious supplies of “bungers” and skyrockets, a heavy smell of gunpowder tended to overwhelm the more pleasant smell of cooking food!

The bonfire itself, always claimed to be the “largest in the southern hemisphere”, was at least 10 metres square, and 15-20 metres high, made up of trees, shrubs and bushes [and car tyres] discarded by households throughout the nearby suburbs, and enclosed within a huge framework of gum logs harvested in Healesville by the local RSL men, weeks before the event. Not surprisingly, children from all around Beckett Park were attracted to the site, in the weeks during which the bonfire was being built, and it was quickly made a network of “huts” and “secret paths”. Incineration was not a problem: in the hours before it was lit, a Shell tanker would arrive, and spray it with an accelerant. Then, at 8 pm or so, up she would go!

The people who were privileged to actually light the bonfire ranged from local dignitaries, including the Prime Minister, Bob Menzies, to my older sister Beverly, who won a competition to do so, and to Her Majesty the Queen, who [allegedly!!!!] “remotely” did so by “pressing a button in London”, according to the story at the time.

The Empire Bonfire was no doubt Balwyn’s biggest ever event, and eventually funded the building of the Balwyn RSL Hall, a much-loved venue for a weekly dance, featuring Ernie Sigley, Heather Horwood and other great performers, in addition to its role as the spiritual home of the RSL men who built it, my father among them.

Before leaving Parring Road...

It will be interesting for some people close to the Administration of the Evergreen Centre to know that our near neighbor, at 28 Parring Road, was Una French, one of the instigators of the Evergreen Centre. The Evergreen Club itself existed long before the establishment of the Talbot Avenue facility. My maternal grandmother, Mary Ellen Shannon, Mrs.

Margaret Rattray, Mrs. Footit, and Mrs. Caldwell, mother of actress Zoe Caldwell, were some of the original members of the Evergreen Club who I can remember from my childhood. In the early 1950s the Club met weekly in the old building in Balwyn Road which stood on the site upon which the Balwyn RSL Hall was built. My older sister, Beverly, would go along to meetings of the Evergreen Club during school holidays, and Nana would be SO proud to show her off to her friends.

To be continued....

Mike Brettargh, April 2020