

Balwyn Historical Society News October 5, 2020

Greetings,

Many apologies for this newsletter being rather late. The problem with our balwynhistory@gmail address slowed things down somewhat.

As you are all aware, we have been unable to conduct our regular face-to-face meetings since our last meeting in March this year. Given the COVID19 restrictions in Melbourne, it is highly unlikely that these meetings will resume in 2020. This brings us to a difficulty in that our AGM is usually held at our October meeting. Your committee felt it would be best to defer the AGM until such time when we can meet in person. This is a situation which has been adopted by many community groups. Hopefully, our AGM will be held at our first meeting in February, 2021. I will send the Treasurer's report and a short President's report later this week. As you know, there will be no charge our usual membership subscriptions this year. It is anticipated that subscriptions will be due in February 2021 for that calendar year.

I want to thank everyone who has communicated with me regarding the items sent for your perusal, amusement and entertainment. It has been great hearing from you. I also want to thank all those who have sent items to share with you all.

Stay safe, stay well and look forward to getting out and about more in warmer weather.

Your BHS Committee (Marilyn, Pat, Matthew, Barbara, Heather and Philip).

Memories of Growing up at 13 Elliott Avenue, Balwyn

By

Patricia O'Dwyer

A few more memories of growing up in Balwyn. These are based on my recollections and those of my sister, Christine.

The House

Our parents, Mavis and Edmond (Ted) O'Dwyer, moved from Whitehorse Road to Elliott Avenue early in 1942.

No. 13 was built c1929 -It had few modern conveniences. Rather than a proper kitchen, it had a shoebox-size alcove off the dining room. This kitchenette barely had space for a wood stove and gas stove along on one wall, a porcelain sink and wooden draining board under the window, and a small pantry cupboard on the third wall.

Heating was via a wood fire in the lounge, an area reserved exclusively for visitors. In the 40s and early 50s, the wood stove provided a tasty roast dinner of mutton or rabbit as well as

a source of warmth in winter. Because the kitchen was so small, we had to huddle around a minute pine table that straddled the opening between kitchenette and dining room.

We were lucky though. We did have hot water in the bathroom thanks to a wood chip heater perched over the bath. A half-hour or so before taking a bath you stoked the heater with small pieces of wood or twigs and lit it. With luck it would provide you with a couple of inches of hot water. As you needed more hot water you hopped up and fed it with more chips. More ash and slivers of wood soon joined the bubbles floating on top of the water.

Still we were better off than those neighbours who had to carry buckets of hot water from wash-house to the bath tub.

No indoor toilet for us – at night just the enamel chamber pot under the bed. When we first arrived, the ‘lav’ was the small wooden box at the far end of the garden with squares of newspaper, telephone book pages or tissue paper hanging on a nail on the wall. It took several moves before the toilet eventually joined the wash-house when the back was closed in.

The Backyard

The back yard was extensive – divided by a clothes-line with a wooden prop to keep the line from sagging and a privet hedge. A good-sized fibro-cement sleep-out served as a work shop and store room. Earlier residents used it as additional accommodation. The tool bench at the back was home to an iron three-footed shoe last, essential for repairing shoes. Half-empty phials of strong glue and jars of assorted steel plates for toes and heels stood at attention on a makeshift shelf. Shoes were regularly resoled with rubber or leather.

The sleepout also made a great wet weather play house with its tin trunks of old clothes including a fur coat ideal for dressing up. A second trunk was full of wonderful nineteenth century novels discarded by elderly aunts. Twice a year the sleepout also became a maternity ward and nursery for our cats when they gave birth to innumerable kittens. O’Dwyer kittens went to families far and wide, but only to “good homes”.

Beyond the privet hedge was a tall pine tree – a remnant of the cyprus hedge which had once separated two properties – It was climbed by most of the neighbourhood children. The view from the high branches was well worth the trouble caused by the tree’s sticky, resinous gum which came into its own at Christmas time as yet another limb was amputated to supply Christmas trees to several families.

Over the years our mother created our own market garden and mini orchard. Apples, quince, peach, pear, apricot, nectarine and lemon trees flourished along with a fine array of vegetables. Swapping fruit and vegetables with neighbours was a way of life – no need for farmers’ markets then.

Regular supplies of manure deposited on the road outside the front gate by the milk cart and bread cart horses on their daily rounds greatly increased the garden’s output. Much to our embarrassment, our mother was generally the first out with bucket and shovel to collect the prized droppings.

Summertime

Christmas holidays were jam making and preserving time. Excess beans were salted away for winter. Fruit was chopped, sugared, soaked and boiled in the preserving pan before being sealed into jars. As the gas copper held far more jars of peaches and pears than the Fowler's preserving outfit, it was called into use to bring the fruit to the required temperature. Steam filled the wash-house for days at a time. The spicy aroma of tomato sauce or chutney hit us well before we reached our gate on the way home from school. By the end of summer glass jars of preserves and jams, like those now only seen in gourmet food shops, lined the pantry shelves. Like most other families, we had an ice-chest to keep perishable food cool. Fortunately, we only had linoleum on the dining room floor, so that when the drip tray overflowed, which it did on a regular basis, the icy water was easily mopped up.

Sometimes, on a hot summer's day, the ice melted before the iceman arrived. This meant pushing the pram around to the ice works in Metung Street - a job we never minded. There the iceman would heft a huge block of ice out of storage, pick off a section of it, wrap it in a hessian bag and deposit it into the pram. The bonus for us was the slithers of ice he gave us to lick on the way home.

We had few toys during our childhood years. Manufactured toys were virtually unattainable during the war. Marbles and swap cards were jealously hoarded, shown off, and sometimes, often reluctantly, swaps were made. Luckily some of us had fathers who could make toy cars or doll's house furniture. What we did have, rather than toys, was a great deal of freedom.

Freedom to wander across the paddocks to the Hilda Street swamp to fish for yabbies and tadpoles. Freedom to pack a lunch and ride our bikes across to the Yarra River at Burke Road bridge for a picnic. Freedom to take an hour to walk home from school, stopping to slide down the old Outer Circle embankments, collecting pussy-willow branches from the banks of the creek, visiting friends or playing on the swings in the Gordon Street park. You just had to be home by 4.30.

Street Games

Once home from school and at the weekends, there were plenty of friends to play with. With few cars in the street, the road was our playground. Football matches didn't need a commercial ball, just a wad of paper tied with string – any strong straight branch served as a cricket bat. Lumps of clay from the unmade section of the street provided an endless supply of pink, white and yellow chalk – great for drawing on the footpath or for marking out hopscotch squares. A length of rope made into a lasso was all that was needed for a game of cowboys and Indians. It was the girls who usually ended up tied to the lamp post. Those Saturday matinees with their helpless heroines have a lot to answer for.

Most of the children in the street built backyard cubby houses out of old timber and branches at one time or another. As trees grew in backyards, climbing them became a popular pastime. One favourite, a camphor-laurel tree, became the *Faraway Tree* - a place to sit and make up fantasy tales to rival Enid Blyton's stories. Pomegranate and loquat trees not only provided exotic fruit snacks, but the pips were great for spitting contests.

Special Treats

A visit to the city meant Sunday clothes – hats and gloves. However, lunch at Coles Cafeteria was worth the effort of dressing up – meat pies with Rosella tomato sauce and custard squares topped with jelly.

Visits to a pantomime show in a city theatre – *Cinderella* or *Sinbad the Sailor* - were a rare Christmas holiday treat. Perhaps it was those shows that inspired us to spend hours making up plays and dressing up.

Books were scarce – comics were cheap. *Mickey Mouse*, *Donald Duck*, *Superman* and *Batman* comics circulated from one child to another. If you were lucky you received a book for Christmas or birthday – *Milly Molly Mandy*, Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* or *Adventure* series. Once these were read, the only source of books for avid readers was the two small circulating libraries in Deepdene. When these closed we borrowed from a small library attached to the Balwyn Theatre. The choice of children's books was limited – the Billabong books, Ethel Turner's *Seven Little Australians* and a few British classics. What a joy when you were allowed to borrow from the adult section.

Twice a year it was bonfire night – Empire Day in May and Guy Fawkes Day in November. This was a time for neighbours to pile their rubbish on an empty block for a local bonfire, with the children bringing their crackers, Catherine wheels and rockets to let off as the fire blazed. If someone had an old tyre or two so much the better – green and yellow flames and black smoke added to the excitement. At the end of the evening, blackened potatoes roasted in the embers and liberally sprinkled with salt warmed us as we sat around the fire until it was safely put out.

Sometimes we walked up the hill to Beckett Park to join in the wider community's celebration of Empire Day. Hard rubbish collected from the neighbourhood - old beds, pieces of furniture, enormous branches of trees – was piled high to the sky. Here you could let off your own collection of jumping jacks, bungers and rockets and enjoy those brought along by dozens of others. Once lit, the fire appeared taller than a city building - the glow visible for miles. It really was a night to remember

Changes – 1950s to 1960s

Soon after the war the road was sealed down to Belmore Road. The winter quagmire disappeared. When catching the bus to Box Hill, you no longer wore old shoes down to the road, hid them under a bush and changed into good shoes before getting on the bus.

The 1950s brought more prosperity and new goods came onto the market. Many neighbours were now able to carpet their homes, replace their ice-chests with refrigerators, install a briquette or gas hot water service to pipe hot water through to kitchen and bathroom, replace open fires with gas heaters and make other improvements to their houses. This was a time when more back verandahs were closed in, sometimes with a section becoming an extra small bedroom for a growing family or an elderly relative. As aged parents joined households some families were able to build an additional room.

By the late 1950s, wirelesses were replaced with television sets and children at the 'top end' of the street of the street became teenagers who now ventured further afield for entertainment. Trips to the Kew Baths in summer, ice-skating at St Kilda's Saint Moritz rink in winter and the occasional visit to Luna Park now became part of our Saturday activities.

Patricia O'Dwyer August 2020