

ENTERTAINMENT, THE FLICKS, & DANCES

Before television people joined together in groups for sports, dances, church socials, and going to the 'flicks'. The life centred around the local community. Residents near the waterways had activities there, others used whatever ingenious pastimes they could devise. Particularly memorable is the open-air theatres, which many of the interviewees went to as children and still had clear memories.

The calisthenics club was formed by Kitty Freeman (later Mrs Sturtevant) in 1900 at Holy Trinity in Thornbury. In 1933 the lass who was taking the classes was getting married so I took over from her. Right through the Depression we never had any money but we never closed the doors and we just paid when we could. The children had to pay threepence a lesson and the adults paid sixpence.

Edna Daniel

There were many dances that you could go to. Starting somewhere around 1932 I went to the Mother's Clubs dances in the assembly hall at Fairfield State School. My brother Reg formed a dance band with Reg on piano, myself on drums and guitar, Jack Varney (who later became well known with Graham Bell's in Dixie Days) as guitarist and two others on tenor sax and trumpet. We were the first band that played at Heidelberg Town Hall when it opened. The people who organised the dances regulated it so that the first Saturday night the dance would be say at the Soldiers Hall, the next Saturday would be at the Masonic Hall the third week somewhere else.

And there were picture theatres around which cost threepence to go to on Saturday 'arvo where you would have a gazette (or newsreel) then the main movie and after interval the serial. In the evening it was slightly dearer, nine pence in the stalls and a shilling in the back stalls.

Ron George

Northcote Theatre was opened in 1912 and a wonderful photo was taken on opening night. Most of the men still had their bowler hats on. We also had the old Thornbury Theatre, which later became a market, then a skating rink, then a dance hall - whatever grabbed the various generations that were coming along.

But when we were youngsters we all had our billycarts and we used to fly our kites, and of course go fishing. They were the activities that used to take up most of our time.

Alf Tierney

After church on Sundays we would go for a walk down High Street to the 'chicken run'. The girls in the church would do the same thing although we

never paired off. We'd probably have a talk down at the gardens on one of the seats and then go our various ways home.

Northcote was a very musical place. There was the Northcote Musical Society and later on the Northcote Choral Society which was very successful in competitions in Ballarat, Bendigo and Sydney. There was also the Northcote Symphony Orchestra formed by Basil Farrell who lived in Westgarth. And there was Freda Schwebbs who trained as a singer and whose father was a local councilor and who had a grocer's shop in Northcote. The people of Northcote sent her to England for further training and she was advised on her return to change her name. So she became Freda Northcote.

Alf Mundy

In those days (c1925) we used to go swimming in the Yarra. Both my mother and I learnt to swim at the Alphington Swimming Club. On the river they used to have beautiful carnivals with clowns, greasy poles, races, demonstrations by diving experts and water polo. There were lots of gay canoes with coloured cushions and sunshades.

Laura Phillips

At the end of Fairfield Park there was a kiosk where they used to sell afternoon tea. My husband's mother and her sister and friends would be visiting during the weekends and walk down there and partake of afternoon tea and enjoy the music wafting up the river provided by a small band.

On the block of land opposite the Grandview Hotel in Fairfield there used to be open-air pictures there. Going back to early part of this century they used to have them on Friday nights. A man used to stand at the side of the projector and turn it for the pictures to be shown. The people would be sitting on very rough forms (planks) and seats. My husband, Jack, said pictures were shown on fine nights, as there was no cover overhead.

Phyllis Mackernal

I remember the silent pictures. Before you went you had to do something at home that night. Clean up or do something. You'd get threepence and you were made. There was an open-air theatre under the bridge in High Street. There was a pianist there, by gee he was good! There'd be something sad, like a funeral and you'd hear the pianist play "rum dum dum dum" - very sad and then another one - perhaps the villain getting chased and the piano would be going for life!

Mr. Reilly

In High Street near the Post Office there was where the first open-air pictures were. My mother used to take us down there and half the time it was free, or sometimes you'd give the man a penny so we would go in. There was a big wide screen on the back fence. There was another open-air theatre at Northcote Football Ground too. The first Thornbury theatre was open-air too.

Roy Keeble

SCHOOLS & SCHOOLING

Most of the people interviewed had specific school memories. Schools of the 1920s and 1930s were quite different places than they are today. Most students left school at the end of second or Intermediate (Years 8-10) and many did not progress beyond Year 6, the final year of primary school. Much of the below description is by Phoebe Townsend who began at Helen Street school just after she was four and half years (c1915). She later returned to this school as a junior teacher around 1928 after completing her high school. There were 1400 pupils at Helen Street then.

During the Depression the Fairfield State School Mother's Club used to provide the children at the school with cocoa every morning in the winter and it was pretty welcome, as there wasn't much in the way of heating. There was an open fire in each room but there was a limit on the amount of wood that was available and unfortunately for the students the teacher got most of the benefit.

Ron George

I studied the usual subjects when I began at Helen Street School: spelling, reading, arithmetic, writing and drawing. We also had quite a number of singing games and things like that. Once we got into the third grade we started to learn simple geography and history stories. The girls did needlework and the boys, I can't really remember very much what the boys did. I think they puddled around with platicine. Modeling they called it. As we went through the grades at Helen Street, singing was very important.

For drawing we only had grey-lead pencils and crayons, there were no coloured pencils or pastels. We had to do free-hand and line drawing, making patterns and things. I found it rather boring because I was never good at it. You always had to copy what was given and if it was not exactly right you weren't praised for it.

Punishments ranged from being kept back after school and the strap. Well, it was very rare for girls to be strapped, boys would get it more often. If a troublesome boy was sent to the headmaster, Mr Bromilow would get the strap out and say "Well, this is my doctor and if you can't be a good boy you will have to have a dose of his medicine." That was generally enough to stop them.

In those days (c1918) school began at 9:15 with playtime at about 11:00. Morning sessions finished at 12:15 and lunch went to 1:30. A great number of children, more than half of them and probably three-quarters went home for lunch. Afternoon playtime was from 2:45 to 3:00 and school finished at 4:00.

I wore my second best dress to school (first dress for church and special occasions) and this dress went down to my knees and socks came up almost

to the knees. Boys' trousers also came to their knees. They were called apple-catchers or knickerbockers.

One interesting day that sticks in my mind is November 11th, Armistice Day. There would be two minutes of silence at the end of play when the bell rang. Wherever you were, whatever you were doing, you stopped. I can remember one year when a group of us were playing a ball game and our ball just rolled down the yard. Nobody touched it, everybody stopped until Mr Bromilow blew his whistle after the two minutes had ended. Then we went after our ball. Nobody would dream of moving during that two minutes of silence. It was important. We were made to feel that if we didn't do what was expected of us we were letting ourselves down, and the school down.

We did all sorts of odd jobs around the school. The boys would pull the heavy rope for the bell and clean out inkbottles on Fridays. Girls emptied vases and the older ones washed up dishes in the teacher's lunchroom.

You wore a school bag and when you left on Friday you counted everything. Your slate, pencil box, primer or your first book. The slate had to be cleaned by a good scrubbing on Saturday morning, and of course if your mother insisted, it got done. There'd be a piece of rag tied on a string that was looped through a little hole in the wooden frame. Most people would have a little screwtop jar of water to keep their rag damp and you had a dry rag. (Ed: A slate pencil was used to write with. Children who did not have a jar of water would use spit to clean the slates!) Well some people never washed their damp rags. My memories of summer-time are of plasticine, smelly slate rags, sweaty hands, tennis shoes and chalk. By the time Friday came you were glad to go and breathe some fresh air in the back garden at home.

There were no school excursions, not even when I was teaching. Secondary schools didn't have anything like that. In any case of course teachers weren't used to going camping. The only people who went camping in those days were scouts and guides and very few others.

Phoebe Townsend

In an unbroken succession of forty years at Fairfield State School there has been a Waddell student. All passed through the hands of Miss Sachse, the well-known infant teacher. The two daughters of Mr & Mrs Waddell never missed a day's attendance from Infant to eighth grade.

Myrtle Waddell

From Westgarth School we were taken up to McDonnell Park to play football (before the swimming pool was built). In those days you were able to chase ducks across the Park, which was just one big swamp. It was more like water polo there was so much water laying around. And this is the way we children used to play our football.

Doug McDonald

HIGH STREET

With Smith Street in Collingwood, Chapel Street in Prahran and Sydney Road in Brunswick - High Street ranked as one of the busiest shopping strips around Melbourne. In an almost unbroken line there were places of trade from Westgarth to Thornbury.

I can still recall some of the storekeepers of the time when I was a kid (c1930s). One of the names that I've never forgotten is Tharratts. They were into clothing, mercenary and haberdashery. When we first came (1926), and for years after we had, of course, cable trams. They were not replaced until after the War had been going a couple of years and they brought the double decker buses on.

On the opposite side heading towards Separation Street from the (Northcote) Theatre there was Moa Cycles that was there for many, many years. On the other side of High Street next to the bluestone church was a little shop, a very small place, and this of course was a grocers. He went back into the last century, handed down in the family, the name was Cornish.

In the area around Separation and High Streets, well of course there was a row of broken down little hovel shops. They were really out of this world, Dickensian, I think you might use the word. I was quite young when they pulled them down but I went and had a look and they all had cellars underneath the shops.

Going further along we mustn't forget that we had the railway (that) used to cross High Street at the Beavers Road corner and that used to go around into the brickworks. That was the reason it was put down in the first place to give access to loading the bricks from the kilns straight into the trucks and then transported to their various destinations.

But I do think that right at that particular point the thing that fascinated me was Sharps. These are the people who sold lawn mowers and bicycles and Holden and Vauxhall motor parts. They got their start from a single fronted old wooden shop back in the last century as a boot repairer. And that's the way it went, it just took off from one thing to another until they got into safety bicycles as they called them. Then they went into motor cycles, particularly English ones. They were specialists in the BSA motor cycles and they moved into other things.

Harry Bostock's hay and corn store on the western side of High Street near Dennis Street, was a well known identity back in those days. Now this too was a business that went from father to son. The old hardware place directly opposite was Redman's Ironmongery - they never used the word hardware in those days.

Alf Tierney

High Street as I remember it in my childhood days (c1920s) - Fellows' Livery Stables, Coachworks and Horse Sales, and what have you, just up the corner of Dennis Street where Goulds were. Fellows were a member of an Israelitic Order, the only one in Australia. I can remember old Mr Fellows, his hair down past his shoulders - talk about the modern day youth. His sons all had long curls down their back and they never cut their hair and they never shaved. They didn't do any business between six on Friday evening and six on Saturday evening. That was their Sabbath.

Fellows' had horse drags. They used to hire them out, with a driver of course. I remember my father was in the Protestant Lions Friendly Society and they used to do a lot of visiting around the district. Wherever there would be a sister lodge, there'd be a social gathering, and the Northcote Lodge would hire one of those drags and away we'd go. Of course it took about two hours to get where you were going, but I suppose that's just part of the night out.

Alf Mundy

In 1922 I had a hairdressers and a library at 661 High Street. I employed a hairdresser. I used to look after the tobacco shop and the library of 1000 books and the hairdresser looked after the saloon. Five years later I moved to 669 High Street and was there for twenty years.

A haircut cost one and six. and it was ninepence for a neck-shave and sixpence for a shave. We used to open at eight o'clock in the morning and close at seven in the evening.

I put fancygoods in, but I had to divide the shop. I had to put two doors just inside. One into the tobacco shop and one into the fancygoods shop. We had to close the fancygoods shop at six o'clock otherwise the law would have made me close the barber at the same time.

It used to cost sixpence to change a book from the library. Well as soon as they'd read a book, they'd bring it back. There was no definite (lending) time. Of course you'd lose a few books, but if I lost them I'd just wipe them off. No good running after them. But I didn't lose many, I don't think. I used to get all the books that came along. Go into Town to warehouses and get them. Then put them in the library and the books used to pay very well. Used to pay a good dividend.

The grocer right opposite me was Vic Street on the corner of Martin Street. He started the SSW self-service. There was no self-service shops before then. The grocer had to run up the counter and get the pound of salt, or a pound of tea, or whatever it was and bring it down and put it on the counter. He had to do all the running about.

Norman Outram

HOME LIFE

Meals were an important ritual and the family gatherings are remembered with great fondness, especially Sunday nights. Visiting friends was an important part of life, as most women did not work. It was generally frowned upon for women to work as it was considered that the man would not be fulfilling his duty by supporting the household. Raising a family was very much the female role and women were often steadfast in their acceptance of often extreme adversity.

The electricity was on but not the gas (c1918). I did my cooking on a wood stove. And the washing was done in a copper. I was lucky because I had a hand wringer. I had an electric iron and I had some flat irons too that belonged to mama. I could put the flat irons on the wood stove and save the electricity.

Sunday night was a very important night, as it was the gathering of families. You always made a special effort. Everything would be home made and it would be a cold tea. If it was winter there would be soup, but always cold meat and salad. Salads were very simple then, as I recall, lettuce and tomatoes, onions, celery and beetroot. The cold meat was mutton with lamb and poultry on very special occasions and beef.

It was two-tooth mutton, and cooked slowly in the open fire. It was lovely, and another very nice dish we used to have was pumped leg of mutton. After the meat and salad we would have three sorts of cakes, all home made. It was delicious.

You had a few girlfriends, close friends that you made. You always had your fortnightly visits and it was a very important occasion. You had them for lunch and everything would be polished up (including) cleaning the windows. My girlfriend used to live in Kew, so I used to push the pram there on visiting days, going over by the Outer Circle (Railway Bridge).

Most women had their babies in the home when I first came here. You always knew when a baby was about to arrive when Mrs Chitts (the midwife) arrived with her pony and jinker. I went to Maristowe Private Hospital in Station Street, run by a Sister Buchanan. I was in hospital for three weeks and you daren't put your foot out of bed for ten days. It was very hard on nurses then, because they had to pan patients when they were in bed for such a long time. When you came home with the baby a neighbour would come in to assist you. There was a Baby Health Centre but I can't remember any of the nurses coming to your home. The first time I remember taking my baby down was to the Rifle Hall in Wingrove Street, where there was a visiting nurse.

Hazel Christie

In those days all the girls had glory boxes. You didn't just meet a bloke and decide you were going to get married in two months' time. You might be

together five or six years before you get married. I don't mean living together, of course. I started my box in my teens. Each birthday or Christmas you would get some little thing to go into it. It might be a couple of pillow slips, things like that. I've got things at home that I had when I was very young. You would have lots of your own underwear that you would wear, not now, after - when you got married. Then, what you could spare you would buy and put them in. My husband when I first met him he used to give me money for my birthday. A lot of money at that time, because he used to give me five pounds (c1920s-30s).

Ella Dickson

When I was married my husband played the piano and I played the piano. My sister played the violin and my husband's best friend, a blind man; he played the violin too. We used to have lovely musical evenings at home.

My mother-in-law was the Midwife for Fairfield. She'd go into the home and stay there for two weeks after the baby was born. (She would) live-in and do the cooking and washing. She wouldn't do anything dirty like cleaning the wooden stove. She would keep her hands spotlessly clean for the patient and baby.

When I was carrying my children I never saw a doctor. Never saw one even when they were born. My mother-in-law was quite capable, a really lovely person. She had a keen sense of humour. But I couldn't say that her husband was a lovely fellow. He wasn't a nice man at all. I had seven children and my husband died when the youngest was only two or three.

The only thing I was afraid of, in those days was the gully-trap. Our toilet was at the back of the house; we didn't have toilets in the house then. We had to come out and go along the side past the bathroom/laundry, and then around the gully-trap to the toilet. I used to be scared to go around for fear I'd fall into the gully-trap.

Anonymous

(Alphington was) Huckleberry Finn country because when we came here (1947) you'd see lots of children coming down with their fishing rods and their togs and in summer time it was alive with children swimming and family parties in the (Yarra) river. The Esplanade only had three or four houses then. One thing we didn't appreciate was the fact that the place was sewered. We just accepted it, having come from an all sewered place. They say it must have cost the people that built the house almost as much to have the sewerage put in as it was to build the house.

Elsa Ford