

Growing Up In Riverstone in the 1940s

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I first commenced at Riverstone Public school in 1943. The large imposing building on the top of the hill, on the corner of Garfield Road and Piccadilly Street, still stands there to-day proudly announcing its formation in 1928. There were only a few other buildings around it, the Masonic Hall as it was known then and is now the Riverstone Museum, and on the opposite corner was Mrs Jarrett's house and a short run down the hill in Garfield Road was Mulford's Tuck shop. Where the Riverstone Swimming centre now stands, opposite the school, was vacant land with a small creek running through it where the girls played vigoro and the boys played football.

Two large weather sheds stood across the asphalt playground at the rear of the main building, its demarcation of 'Boys' and 'Girls' rigorously observed. Thirty years later when I was President of the Riverstone Infants School Mothers club I still felt a twinge of guilt when I walked up the steps of the 'Boys' weather shed. Remembering how strictly we were segregated in the 40s, this also carried over to the bubblers and toilets at the rear of the weather sheds.

Mr Millerd was the dominating figure in our school world in the 40s. Teachers were female - Mrs Webster, Mrs McCormack and Mrs Whyte are the few that I remember. However later as World War 11 gradually came to an end there was a trickle of male teachers coming back onto the staff. Mr Russell was the first returned serviceman to appear back on the all female staff.

School went in at 9.30am and came out at 3.30pm. There were no school uniforms, school buses or school fees in the 40s and all your exercise and text books were provided free of charge. In 5th and 6th classes we wrote with a pen and nib dipped into an inkwell inserted on your desk. Everybody walked to school and the majority of boys were bare-footed summer and winter. At lunchtime those who lived nearby ran home for their lunch. If you didn't go home at lunchtime your sandwich was wrapped in greaseproof paper and often smelt of leather as many of us carried our lunch and books in a leather satchel slung over the shoulder. Best of all was when our Mother let my sisters Nevis and Sue and I buy our lunch at the tuckshop - we ran down the hill at lunchtime to be first in line to pick up our order. I still remember walking home from school on a hot afternoon and being able to buy from the tuck shop a frozen orange which lasted for ages.

My friends at school in those days were Barbara Strachan, Diane McHenry, Nanette McGroder, Dawn Sullivan, Jeannie Wheeler, Phyllis Kingman, Ellen Crouch and Effie Hilton. The boys were Johnnie Waters, Leon Turner, Peter Bradley, Norm 'Steamer' Jennings, Mervyn Tracey, Phillip Rosa and Barry Fletcher. Ellen Crouch and Barry Fletcher were the clever ones, the rest of us were so-so and Johnnie Waters always sat up the straightest when it was time to go home.

School work was less interesting than to-day. 'Tables' dominated the morning sessions and we recited them in a sing-song voice in unison progressing from the 2 times tables in the lower classes up to the full gamut of 2x to 12x in 6th class. This was followed by Mental Arithmetic and Spelling and woe betide any student whose concentration was seen to be straying. The offender was quickly brought back to reality by a piece of flying chalk delivered by Mr Millerd. He could transverse the class room from a standing or sitting position at the front with unerring accuracy to the recipient in the back. History, geography, composition and reading rounded out our curriculum. When I look

back we were taught more about English history and the British Empire than ever we were about Australian and local history - not realising at the time that we were living it.

Corporal punishment was permissible in the 40s but usually only undertaken by Mr Millerd in extreme circumstances and later by Mr Russell his Deputy. Naughty girls were given a slap on the legs or hand with a ruler by a female teacher. The cane was reserved for the boys and the pronouncement of the caning brought stunned silence to the rest of us in the class room. The offender following Mr Millerd out to the hallway or his office to return a short time later red in the face stoically holding back any sign of tears and rubbing the injured palm on his rear end. Later in the playground, taking on the status quo of a hero for the rest of the day, he pronounced it was a 'sixer' and proudly displayed the reddened palm to all and sundry and boasted of the ruse he had used to lessen the pain.

Games were played with fierce determination. I don't recall playing much organised sport. Our sports ground was a dusty playground. No time was wasted during the breaks from lessons and a dusty playground was the ideal spot to draw circles for marbles, the owners 'taws' and 'alley' carefully guarded in a calico marble bag or a grubby handkerchief. The sticks for 'fly' could be set out in the dirt track paralleling Piccadilly Street. Hopscotch was better drawn with a piece of chalk on the asphalt but a passable game could be played in the dirt. Jacks were a great wet weather game as we could sit in the weather shed and play with a set of knuckle bones which were a plentiful commodity from the meatworks. If you were really brave you could participate in a game of 'brandings' or the more gentle 'O'Grady Says' or 'Statues'.

Special public occasions generated enormous excitement - when the circus came to town the large tent was erected in the vacant paddock beside Conway's Newsagency much to the annoyance of 'Jockey' Stevens who liked to sleep there in the summer under his cardboard boxes.

The act that captured the imagination of my sisters and I was always the beautiful girl in a tutu doing tricks on bare back horses and we envied the lucky local boy who was chosen from the crowd to participate. He was attached to a rope and with the horse cantering around the ring he would attempt to stand on its rump and was then sent soaring from the back of the cantering horse up into air much to the excitement of the watching crowd below. There were clowns, trapeze artists, tight rope walkers, elephants and a scary lion taming act which brought "oohs" and "aahs" from the audience in breathless anticipation. Everyone imagining what would happen if the lions refused to obey the order of the whip and chair or worse still ESCAPED!!!.

The Annual fancy dress ball was another highlight usually organised by the CWA or Ladies Auxiliary and held in the Masonic Hall and costumes were a jealously guarded secret until the night. Our Mother could not sew but our Aunt Perth Morgan invented all sorts of amazing outfits from the most unlikely sources. She fashioned circus girl outfits from old evening dresses, Indian and cow girl outfits from dyed hessian chaff bags and one year she dressed my sister Nevis and her friend Beverley Crouch as statues of a Shepherd and Shepherdess. They paraded in outfits made from white bed sheets, cotton wool wigs and smothered in make up of white talcum powder. Once the parade of costumes was over, prizes awarded and supper served children were expected to go outside and play but when dancing commenced for the adults we children loved to join in the Hoky Poky, the Palais Glide and the Lambeth Walk and during the intervals we dragged each other along on our haunches on the slippery floor or did spectacular glides the full length of the hall.

As children we loved nothing better than the excitement of a big flood. We could stand on the hotel verandah and watched excitedly as the water crept up from South Creek and across the meatworks paddocks heading towards the railway gates. Firstly Justice's and Hughes' houses disappeared and then the meatworks houses facing Garfield Road, the Ferguson's, the Millerd's and the Turner's until only their corrugated iron roofs could be seen. Then the 'dunny cans' would come bobbing along washed from the back yard lavatories, proving "yes", many houses across the creek had gone under the muddy floodwaters.

I couldn't finish my tale without paying tribute to Mr Murrell and our weekly visit to the Olympia picture theatre in Garfield Road. Each Saturday afternoon we queued up with our sixpence admission in our hand entering into a world of fantasy delivered via Hollywood; cartoons, newsreel, then the serial and quite often a "B" picture. At interval we went into Grainger's shop next door or raced down to the Wattle milk bar further down the street to spend our threepences on a carefully selected bag full of lollies or fourpence on a milkshake or ice cream soda.

Then back for the main picture. Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry and his horse Champion, Roy Rogers and Trigger were our favourites. My sister Nevis loved Maria Montez and Hedi Lamarr, also ice skating pictures starring Sonja Henie. Whistling, catcalling and foot stamping was kept under control by Mr Murrell and Mrs Harris. Ever vigilant, they patrolled the aisles with torches, flashing the light into the faces of any over active offender with the threat of removal if they didn't calm down. Our memories of the pictures were often carried over into scrapbooks where we cut out and collected pictures and stories of our favourite film stars and glued them into the pages which we compared and swapped with friends. America and Hollywood seemed so far away and could have been on another planet, for all we knew about this country was gleaned from the pictures.

To-day in 2004 we know these memories of growing up in Riverstone whether it was in the 20s, 30s, 40s or 50s are unique and special to us. Each time the Vice-President of Riverstone Historical Society, Clarrie Neal, organises a reunion of those who attended Riverstone Public school, the numbers continue to grow, proving to us all (at the risk of sounding sexist) "You can take the girl out of Rivo but you can't take Rivo out of the girl."