

My Early Childhood Days in Riverstone

Ernest James Byrnes

I was born at home at what was then known as “Cockroach Alley” a row of houses near the Riverstone railway station. I started school at age five in kindergarten at the Riverstone Public School. During the early years we used a slate to write on. Later we mixed a powder with water to make our ink, school books were supplied.

While I was at this school I was very shy and small in build and was subject to bullying. However, one day after school I had a fight with another kid. There were plenty of kids crowded around, word soon got around the school when a fight was on and somehow the headmaster found out. Next day we were both called into his office and asked the reason for fighting. I can remember saying that it was only a friendly fight. He remarked, “Then I will give you both a friendly six cuts of the cane.”

A small creek ran through the paddock opposite the public school, I used to catch yabbies in this with cotton and a piece of meat.

Not a lot happened at school - we learnt, we played. Boys mostly played marbles. Big ring and three holes was common also throwing cards against the wall and calling heads or tails. The school photo day was a special event. Although most kids tried to look their best, most boys wore no shoes and what ever clothes they had, which was not much.

I can remember Mum going to the Masonic Hall to collect our rations during the great depression. Our family moved around, I guess it was to find cheaper rent. I was born into what was called “a poor family”, Mum used to make her own soap and shoe polish, she also did washing and ironing for boarders at the Royal Hotel. I used to help Mum carry the clean clothes down to the hotel in a big cane basket. Dad never drove or owned a motor car during his lifetime so we did not venture far from Riverstone.

Two things that come to mind are (1) the annual local show that was held near the Royal Hotel (2) the coming of Wirths Bros. circus that always had us kids scamper down to watch the tents erected and to see what animals they had. The elephants had large chains around their legs and onto a big peg in the ground, the lions were secure in cages. Most parents could not afford the cost of a ticket, so I and other kids would try to seize the opportunity and slip under the tent. The circus came by special train then would set up in the big open paddock next to Conway’s newsagent. Now Market-town occupies all this area.

I cannot forget to mention the “Cicadas”, those noisy winged creatures we always looked for around Christmas and the warm weather. Once we heard them we would go looking for them as they clung to the trees, always amused to watch them emerge from their cocoon and spread their wings to dry.

When I reached the age of 14 years and 9 months, the legal school leaving age, Mum gave me the choice to stay at school or leave, as her uncle who worked at the Clyde Engineering works had lined up a position of apprentice carpenter for me. Mum and I fronted up to the office for an interview at Clyde. My wage was to be one pound with sixpence tax leaving me with 19/6 pence. Being my first wage I was more than happy. During my stay at Clyde I witnessed the building and saw the now famous 3801 steam loco roll off the assembly line.

I came home one day and Dad asked if I wanted to start work in the Beef House at the meatworks. No need for second thoughts, I jumped at the opportunity. I had various jobs, first one was cleaning the floor picking up the cattle feet that the butchers had cut off, then throwing them down a chute. I worked my way up to operating the winch that pulled the killed cattle up to the dressing floor and skinning slinks [unborn calves]. I got sixpence each for doing them. You changed jobs according to the kill. Later I went on as an apprentice butcher however I was not a favourite of the foreman and at the end of my term I did not proceed but worked in other departments around the works.

We were now living at No.18 Castlereagh Street. War still on. I, like a lot of others, decided to dig an air-raid shelter for our family in our back yard. Mum took on making camouflage nets for the army. They supplied all the material, when one was finished it was collected and another lot of material left, I helped Mum with this task.

I built my own billycart and on weekends I would pull this out to Rumery's paddocks to collect stumps for Mum for firewood. Whilst on bilycarts, my mates and I would go to the top of the Catholic church hill in front of Danny Mason's place where we would set sail down Garfield Road as fast as possible and finish up down near the public school - our carts had no brakes, often there would be a tumble and a loss of skin.

I owned my own ferret and went after rabbits, this helped with the food problem. I made my own nets, these were made on the same principle as the camouflage nets. The humble rabbit saved many a family from going hungry. We were lucky, what with the fish in the creeks, the bunny and Dad working at the meat works.

During the construction of the Schofields air strip in 1941 my mates and I would push our bikes to what was called Bald Hill near Vineyard railway station where the gravel was collected to make the air strip. We would ask the truck drivers for a ride to Schoies and back. We always got our ride.

There was always the game of "Two up" in the corrugated iron shed where the Rivo show was held, also at other places. These games were on the quiet as they were illegal and the cops were always on the lookout, the game usually had what was called a "Cockatoo", someone on the lookout for the cops. This game moved places to avoid the cops, some games were raided. These sheds were also used by the local beer drinkers on weekends. Sunday I would get here early as sometimes quart beer bottles were left behind, take these to the pub and we would get sixpence each.

A favourite pastime was to walk up to the bush near Vineyard and trap finches, Double Bars, Red Heads, Zebras, Diamond Sparrows and Goldfinches, there were always plenty about. I had a double end trap, I would put a caller in the middle section and set both ends to catch them, I spent many enjoyable hours doing this, I would sell those that I did not want.

In my time we had to make our own entertainment, often I would jump on my trusty bike and with a shanghai (catapult) in my pocket I would go hunting birds. I treasured my bike as it was made from parts scrounged from other kids and was my only means of transport.

Another favourite pastime with kids was to collect bird eggs, I would climb to the nest and would put one egg in my mouth to climb down. I always would only take one egg, I carried a pin to make a hole in each end of the egg and blow out the yoke. At home the eggs were kept separate in a match box lined with cotton wool, surplus eggs were swapped with other kids.

Jimmy Martin our local milkman had on his property many large sheds stacked with feed, often we would go climbing on them, one day we were doing this and once on top I saw this large snake, Jimmy had this pet carpet snake to catch the rats and mice, the snake frightened Christ out of us. Some people grew watermelons and had fruit trees, like most kids we thought these fair game and always tried to sneak a feed unbeknown to the owners.

I joined the Boy Scouts at age 14 in 1941, Mum took me to the Scout shop at Parramatta for my uniform. During the war the scouts went around town from house to house with our billycarts collecting aluminium for the war effort. Being in the scouts and having a pushbike we were trained as “runners” to the air raid wardens.



Photo courtesy of Ernie Byrnes

During the war and long after everyone was subject to rationing, petrol, clothes and food, no ration ticket no goods, black marketing was rife and you could buy ration tickets if you had the money.

During the war years there were many air crashes around the Richmond base, two close to Rivo that comes to mind. First was the Avro Anson that crashed near Cow Flat killing all the crew. I pushed my bike to the scene - wreckage everywhere not a pretty sight. The other was when a Wirraway crash landed in the meatworks paddocks, Airforce people landed in a Tigermoth to survey the damage. The plane was dismantled and trucked out. I can also remember the airstrip at Berkshire Park and seeing the planes under camouflage nets along the road.

At the meatworks there was what was called a tally [number of animals to be killed], often we would finish early and go home. In the summer time when this happened it was time to go swimming in the creek at the “White House” on Eastern Creek, there was a rope swing in a large pine tree near a deep hole, there was always a large congregation of girls and boys, many a lad learnt to swim here. Another swimming hole was at “Bakers Flat” near the northern end of Riverstone Road, Killarney Chain of Ponds creek ran through here.

Another favourite swimming hole was the Hawkesbury River at what was then called “Phillip”. There was a small railway station here made of railway sleepers (13). We would catch the steam train to Richmond then “Pansy” to Phillip, summer time the place was very popular and always crowded, Pansy ran from Richmond to Kurrajong.

I used to catch Pansy to Phillip and also other stations between Phillip and Kurrajong with my ferret and a bag of nets that I made. I also used to rabbit along the west side of the river up to what we called Phillip Charlies, sometimes I would carry my Lithgow single shot 22c rifle and pot off any rabbits. At home I would clean the rabbits, what Mum did not want [no freezers then] I would sell for sixpence each. The skins were pegged out to dry, stored, then sold to a skin firm, it was a problem to keep the weevils out.

During the summer several of my mates and I would either push our bikes or catch the train to Phillip and camp on a sand island in the middle of the river for the weekend. Back then the river was crystal clear and we could catch prawns, we would take tins of “Irish Stew, Bully Beef and Baked Beans” to eat, an old tent with no floor to sleep in, we burnt cow dung in the tent to ward off mossies. The river had some deep holes and kids often got into trouble.

Some weekends or school holidays brother Kevin and myself as well as others would walk out to “Jericho” to shoot rabbits, foxes, wild ducks and kangaroos, we normally used shot-guns.

A lot of dams around Rivo had carp in them, I would get a long stick, a bit of string and fashion a hook from a pin then use a worm, fish caught were not harmed and let go for another day, a lot of time was passed this way.

During the bushfire season it was a common occurrence to have a bushfire somewhere, when the siren sounded you would look for the smoke then take off on your bike to help fight the fire, we normally used a wet potato sack or break a branch off a tree. Flood time was also a disaster for some townsfolk, the same as fires everyone pitched in to help others.

A lot of kids played football and being local you always wanted to play for your hometown and pull on the “Maroon and Gold”. I was a good runner and was always placed on the wing.

My brother Kevin and myself would either walk or ride our bikes to the junction of South and Eastern Creeks with our Kelly rods tied to our bikes and always get a feed of fish. We were not the only ones, a lot of locals used the Eastern and South Creeks for fishing.

To earn pocket money I often rode my bike to Cornwallis to pick vegetables spuds, beetroot, peas and beans. Stinging nettles grew amongst these and made picking hard. You had to be aware of three-corners as they would puncture your tyres very easily and it was a long walk home.

Bonfire night was always a challenge, we would start building our bonfire weeks before - the bigger the better, we would scrounge as many old car tyres to put inside the bonfire, the more tyres the blacker the smoke. We had to be watchful, as a prank was to try and torch the other bonfires before the night. This event was eagerly awaited as we got to let off our fireworks.

As time has rolled by I can honestly say “that I have lived through the good old times”.