

Remembering the Old Schoolyard

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Much of the following article is from a talk given to Riverstone Primary School students for Education Week 2004.

I have much to remember about Riverstone Public Schoolyard. I spent 33 years, almost half of my life, there. I was a student for all my primary years, from 1943 – 1948, returned as an Infants' Schoolteacher from 1958-1960, retired, then returned in 1968 as Teacher-Librarian. I retired on my 55th birthday, in 1992, as Relieving Principal

I started school in June 1943, during the Second World War. The school was in Garfield Road. In the schoolyard at that time was the long trench the fathers had dug along the Castlereagh Street fence. Riverstone, being between two military airbases, Schofields and Richmond, would have been threatened had the Japanese fighter planes attacked Sydney, as those two airbases would have been prime targets. Mothers made each child a cloth drawstring bag. These were hung on the pegs outside each classroom. The only thing I can recall being in the bags was a wooden dolly clothes peg that we were to bite on to stop our eardrums shattering if there were any loud explosions. We practised in, but never had to use, those air raid shelters. We were ready if we had to.

I have a very clear memory of the day the war ended. We all assembled in the playground. Four big boys carried out the huge wooden school wireless (radio) and we all listened to the Prime Minister's announcement that the war was over. There was much cheering and we were given the day off. Some boys rang the school bell for ages and as we raced home we heard all of the town's church bells joining in. Mothers were all out in the street, talking, laughing and crying. We kids were mostly happy because we had a holiday!

At playtime we girls usually played games like Skipping, Hopscotch or Fly and the boys played chasing games or marbles. Skipping was usually a group activity. Two girls would turn the long rope whilst the others lined up for their turns at running in to skip. A favourite was "Miss a Loop". Each girl ran in succession and skipped once. If you allowed the turners to turn the rope before you ran in you had "missed a loop" and became one of the rope turners. This was all right if there were a lot of girls playing, but if the numbers were few you had to run fast to get back on the line so you did not "miss a loop". Many skips were done to rhyme with the appropriate actions, such as:-

"Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear touch the ground,
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear turn around,
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear do the high kick,
Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear run out quick."

Really smart girls could skip with two ropes being turned alternately. This was called "Double Dutch" or "French and English" depending on which direction the ropes were being turned, clockwise or anti clockwise.

Fly could be played with two or more people. A number of sticks were placed on the ground about one foot (30cms) apart and each person had to step into every space without touching a stick. The last person was "The Fly". The Fly made an almighty leap after stepping into the last space and then chose any stick, except the first one, to be moved to where their toe had landed. As the game progressed the spaces between the sticks became further apart and running starts became a necessity.

Once you were no longer able to take only one step between each stick you were eliminated from the game and the last person left in became the new “Fly”.

A popular game we played in the weather sheds was “Puss in the Corner”. One person stood in the centre, four others one in each corner. The centre person had to try to ‘steal’ the corner as the four encouraged each other to change places by beckoning and calling “Here, Puss”.

Games played with a ball against the wall were also popular with the girls, as were games such as “May I?”, where one girl stood out the front and gave directions in turn to the four or five girls who were lined up some distance away. Directions for “May I?” were varied –a needle was one foot’s length whilst a pin was half of that; a frog’s leap was as long as you could make it or you could be told to take any number of needles, pins, frog leaps or whatever. Before doing your action you had to ask “May I?” If the answer was “Yes” you proceeded if “No” you stayed put. If you forgot to ask “May I?” you had to go back to the start. The first girl to reach the front was the winner and became the director for the next game. A game of similar format to “May I?” was “Alphabets” where the person at the front called out letters of the alphabet. If you had the called letter in your name you took two strides for each time the letter appeared and four strides if the letter was a capital.

Because not many mothers worked most children went home for lunch, coming back to school in time for afternoon classes. When we were in 5th and 6th classes we would sometimes hurry back from lunch because we were allowed to play in the large open paddock opposite the school (where the swimming pool is now). I don’t ever recall any teachers going with us. The boys would play cricket on one side of the paddock and the girls played vigoro in the corner near Market and Piccadilly Streets. When the bell rang we hurried across to school because no one wanted to be late. Being late for school without a good reason might mean being caned.

Nearly all teachers used canes. I was caned in my first week at school, for talking. I don’t recall it hurting at all, but I was very embarrassed and was never caned again. Boys were caned often, especially if they were fighting in the schoolyard. The smarter boys learned to save their fights till after school. They would arrange to meet behind the paling fence of the Masonic Hall (now the Museum). I don’t know what happened there because girls were never allowed to watch.

In 1958 I returned to Riverstone Public School as a teacher. The new Primary Department had been built in Elizabeth Street and the Garfield Road School had only six Infants’ Classes. That meant five teachers saw a lot of the schoolyard as we had to do playground duty once or twice every day. When we had a special morning tea at Recess the children were limited to playing on the quadrangle where we could watch them from the Kindergarten Room verandah.

In 1947, two years after the war had ended, there were 72 children in 5th Class. Teachers were very scarce and one of the 5th Class teachers was a very old retired teacher (we really believed he was 102). Each morning he pulled a big alarm clock out of his bag and placed it on his desk. The boys in the class said it was to wake him up at home time. He couldn’t cope, so all 72 children were taught by the Deputy, Mr. Russell, in the weather shed, which only had three full walls. An old army hut was brought to the school and put near the Piccadilly Street corner. A new teacher, Mrs Payne arrived, and my 5th Class, with Mr. Russell, moved into the new room. It was later moved and, in 1960, became my Kindergarten Room. In later years it became the Infants’ Department Canteen and was moved to the Elizabeth Street site as the Community Room when the school consolidated.

I left teaching that year, 1960, and returned in 1968 when my three sons were at school. This time I was the Teacher-Librarian, so I didn't spend a lot of time in the schoolyard, but quite often the schoolyard came to me. The library was the place to escape to if you were in strife in the playground.

Three times a year, on the last day of term, then a Thursday, I joined in when the Staff played the students in a game of softball. On one occasion one of the students hit a high ball and Class 6 teacher, Anna Kragt, called "mine". Another teacher, Ian Woods, also ran to take the catch and they collided. Anna's jaw was broken. She was in great pain and could barely say, "I do" when she was married on the following Saturday. Anna, Ian and I still keep in touch and often share a laugh about the many happy days we spent in our old schoolyard.

My three sons tell me their very best school memories are of the fun they had with their mates playing in the schoolyard. Most of our school friendships have been long lasting. Many of our schoolyard games were also played in the backyard at home in the afternoons and, in summertime, in the evenings. With the advent of television, computers and video games and the trend to very small backyards it is rare now to see children enjoying the after school fun of games they learned in the old schoolyard.