

School Days and Other Memories

Winsome Phillis

I started school when I was four, owing to the fact that I put on such an act when my sister Elaine, who was twelve months older, started school without me, that Mr Rouse, the Head Master, allowed me to start too. So in 1934, there I was, trotting off to school with Elaine and Gwen (my eldest sister), with a little school case containing a slate, a slate pencil, a wet rag in a tobacco tin (to clean the slate with) and my lunch.

We went to Riverstone Public School in Garfield Road. Riverstone was a small town in those days and 1st to 6th classes were all held in this building. I remember 2nd class in the Hall with Miss Grant as the teacher; 4th class, Mr Handcock; 5th and 6th class with Mr Campbell. We would go in the front door and leave our bags etc in the Hat Room. In winter there were open fires in the rooms and they always had a most distinctive smell. In summer we would go down to the back of the playground and play under the trees.

The best thing that I can remember about school is the School Magazine. I loved the poetry – “The Last of His Tribe”, “The Cattle Hunters”, “The Australian Sunrise”, to name just a few pieces – and I had no trouble in memorising them. On the back of the Magazine was a song in ‘Doh-ray-me’ format and we would often learn this in our singing lesson.

Each year the Riverstone Show was held in the Park (opposite the present park in Garfield Road) and there were competitions for school children – writing, composition, etc. Entries were all displayed in the Pavilion and Certificates and Prizes were awarded to the winners. It was probably in 6th class that I received a fountain pen as 1st prize in one of these competitions and I was delighted with it. Normally we wrote in pen and ink. (Washing out the ink wells in the sink at the school was a terribly messy job usually awarded to the naughty boys. Very naughty boys often got the cane too, wielded by Mr Daly, the Head Master!) The children would also put on a display of Maypole dancing at the Show, and practicing for this was a lot of fun.

A special ceremony was held on Anzac Day; a wreath of flowers was made in the school hall and taken down to the Cenotaph. Empire Day was remembered by “Land of Hope and Glory”. There was a map of the World laid out in concrete in the school ground and we would put flags of the countries belonging to the British Empire.

The end of year Concert and Prize Giving was held in the Olympia Theatre and was always a great event. One year Elaine and I had blue and pink crepe paper dresses and hoops covered in paper flowers to take part in one of the items. I think we were flowers and danced. We thought it was wonderful! Mum made our dresses. She also made us lovely dresses for a Fancy Dress night held at school. I had a pretty ‘Lavender’ Dress with lace on it and a bonnet to match, and Elaine was the ‘Queen of Hearts’.

We walked to school every day, usually meeting friends on the way. Sometimes we would go along Railway Terrace, round Rosenthal’s corner and up Garfield Road, or else we would go up Regent Street (which was gravel then) and in the back gate. There were numerous culverts to jump over or look in for tadpoles, and in winter they would be examined to see if there was any ice on them.

Skipping, hopscotch, fly, marbles, yo-yo's, rounders, countries, there were many games to play at lunch time. That is if we were not out in the playground with Mr Campbell, learning our tables and spelling till we knew them off by heart. He was a very tough teacher, but a good one.

The 2nd World War started when I was in 6th class in 1939. We had Air Raid practice and I remember we had to go out of school and lay down in the gutters along Garfield Road.

In 1940 Mr Daley and Mr Campbell left Riverstone and I moved on to Parramatta Domestic Science School.

I've always said that I didn't like school, but looking back there were lots of good times and good friends to bring back some happy memories.

This story was written by Winsome in 1984 as part of a Christmas present for her daughter Rosemary who has always loved history and stories of Riverstone.