

Childhood Memories of Riverstone

Fay Priora (nee Leach) as told to Judith Lewis

I was born at Beaconsfield in Sydney and lived in Botany until 1942, when the Japanese submarines visited Sydney Harbour. We moved to Riverstone and lived in a shed behind my Auntie Maudie and Uncle Jack's home in Melbourne Street. Nearly all my aunts and uncles lived in Riverstone. Dad bought a block of land on the corner of Edward Street and Riverstone Parade overlooking the Meatworks' paddocks and the railway line to Richmond. Dad built our home himself, with most of the timber coming from Anthony Horderns in Sydney. He would bring the timber home on the train and throw it out as the train passed our block on the way to Vineyard. He would then walk back from Vineyard station. Dad owned a fruit run delivering to Marsden Park and Cow Flats (Schofields, near the border of the aerodrome). Dad would visit the Sydney Markets with old Dick Stacey.

Next door lived Fred Alcorn, a lovely old fellow, who knew a lot about the early days of Riverstone. In the summertime a lot of dust storms blew across the paddocks because there was not a lot of grass there. When the storms were approaching Mum would lock up and head for Fred's. The trains would blow their whistles at our place quite often because people crossed the line further down, at the Meatworks, going to work.

Down in the gully from us, in a bag humpy, lived Metho Lil, Old Mick and a few hangers-on. They drank and fought regularly and Mum was always ringing the Police. One day Nugget, whose home was near them, came running up to say Old Mick had cut Lil's throat. Mum always said Metho Lil came from a well-to-do Windsor family who ran a business there.

Further along Riverstone Parade from us lived old Connie, the German. She would walk into town to do her shopping then catch the train home. As the train came level with her house she would throw the shopping out. Charlie Weaver's father looked after the train line between Blacktown and Richmond. He was always up and down the line on his trolley. He commented to Mum that one day Old Mick would catch on to Connie's trick and pick up her shopping before she could get back to collect it. Dirty Old Bill lived with Connie and was always very good to her.

On the corner of Loftus Street lived Red Indian Bill. He was given that name because he had a red face. He always rode a pushbike into town. He was forever blowing stumps out of the ground. It made a hell of a noise. Mum was a nervous person, so she asked Dad to speak to Bill. After this Bill rang a cowbell each time to warn Mum that he was about to begin blowing. It was a funny thing, he would also come down to ask if he could be heard and Mum would say "That's O.K.!"

Sparks from the steam trains were always starting bush fires in the Vineyard scrub. An aboriginal family lived in a bark hut in the scrub and they were often burnt out. One fire came to our fence. We all left and went to town till it was over. We were never allowed to ride our bikes near the aborigines' home. There were quite a few old people living in the bush near us. One of them, Old Paddy, lived in a house with a dirt floor. Another was George, who lived in a humpy also with a dirt floor.

I would often go bike riding around the Riverstone bush with Robbie Hurley, catching tadpoles in the creeks and dams there and over in the Meatworks' paddocks. To get to the primary school we walked along Piccadilly Street. I was always in trouble because I was usually late home from school. I often played with the Mason kids who lived on the hill near the Catholic Church on Garfield Road. Helen Wheeler was another friend I played with. We all used to swim at the Creek even though my Mum had warned us not to. She would always say, "Lift up your dress!" and if my undies were brown she would know I'd been swimming. It took a while before I worked that one out!

I also played quite a lot with the Tozers. They lived in a big old house on Garfield Road, opposite the Presbyterian Church, where Croghans later on had a secondhand furniture business. This was eventually sold to my brother-in-law Ern Nichols' family for their Service Station. We played tennis at the Presbyterian Church's tennis courts, which were next door to Dr Boag's house and surgery. He would call out, "Not too much noise there, please". Zane Hillier and Warren Nichols would join us in a game. I loved to watch the football because my uncle, Len Belshaw, played for Riverstone.

When I went to high school I went to Richmond. We were always wishing floods would come and stop the trains from running so we could stay home. Robbie Hurley and I used to ride our pushbikes to the station and leave them at Conway's shop and sometimes I left mine at Pop Nichols' garage. One day I remember all the kids were perched on the paling fence of the paddock next to Conway's. Old Jockey was sleeping stark naked under newspapers with his empty bottles beside him. Old Jockey also often slept on the steps of the Billiard Room on the corner of Market Street and Riverstone Parade, or on hay at the Taylor's Produce Store just across from there. Old Pop told us of the time Jockey was cleaned up for Anzac Day, and then came into the garage for some sump oil to put on his hair as he was going somewhere! When I was older I would travel by train to Parramatta to shop and dock my bike at the Railway Station.

I met my husband John Priora when I started work at the Villawool Textiles, which was part of the Riverstone Meatworks. We married in 1957 and lived at Oakville for 22 years until we moved to larger farming acreage at Goulburn. Our three children did their schooling at Riverstone.

My sister Joyce married Ern Nichols from Nichols Service Station and had five daughters. Ern and Joyce lived in Riverstone until about 1987 when they retired and moved to Nambucca Heads.

My brother John (aka 'The Bear') lived in Riverstone until his death in 2001. He was an early member of the Riverstone Motorcycle Club and was active for quite a while in the RSL. A very 'colourful' identity, John was very popular with the locals. He would do anyone a favour anytime, day or night.

I still call Riverstone my home and I have lovely childhood memories of growing up there. Riverstone hasn't changed that much, but the whistles from the train and from the Meatworks must have been missed when they first stopped. They were the timepieces of our past!