

Riverstone and District Historical Society - The First 10 years.

Rosemary Phillis

In March this year it was 40 years since the Riverstone and District Historical Society was formed in 1980. This article provides a brief overview of the first ten years of the Society.

The residents of Riverstone have always loved their history. Looking back through the early days of the *Windsor and Richmond Gazette* there were often stories in the Riverstone column relating tales of the residents and their early lives.

In 1934, the coming of water and electricity to the town prompted the week long *Back to Riverstone* celebrations. 1971 saw the *Back to Riverstone School Day* celebrations organised by Heather Smith and the Riverstone Public School Mother's Club.

The early 1980s were a period of strong community activity. The Riverstone and Districts Progress Association was one active organisation. Although people had suggested it would be good to have a Museum in the town, no one had taken steps to progress this, until Alderman Lindfield of Blacktown Council suggested to the Progress Association that they look at forming a historical society.

In 1997 Irene Reilly wrote a letter to Blacktown City Councillor Allan Green recalling how the Historical Society started:

After discussion with the then Alderman, Alwyn Lindfield, on how to start a Historical Society, I placed an advertisement in the Riverstone Press for any interested people, to come to 10 Deborah Place Riverstone, at 7.30 PM on the 17th March 1980 for a meeting on the matter.

The meeting consisted of eight people, Mr. Greg Patterson of Brighton Street Riverstone, Mr Boyd Hilton of Creek Street Riverstone, Mrs Eileen Hynds of Piccadilly Street Riverstone. Mrs Lorraine Forbes of Riverstone, Mr Luke Grealy, Mr Robert Reilly (my husband) of Riverstone and myself.

A committee was formed and Mr Greg Patterson Chartered Accountant was elected Honorary Treasurer, Mrs Lorraine Forbes as Secretary, Myself as President and Mrs Eileen Hynds as Fund Raiser.

My dream in forming the Society was with the aim to one day obtaining a Museum to collect and preserve the history of the Blacktown Area.

The next meeting was held at the old site of the Riverstone R.S.L. Hall, at this meeting other people joined with us, including Mrs Judith Lewis of Riverstone, Miss Rosemary Phillis and Mr Mervyn Davis, who was appointed Historical Research Co-ordinator.

At this meeting we planned the first fund raising function, the O'Connell County Fair and Beauty Quest, for 7 March 1981.

Straight to Work

The Historical Society got straight to work. Lorraine Forbes was appointed the O'Connell County Fair organiser and a huge effort went into the organisation of the event. Eileen Hynds raised much needed

initial funds via a raffle and Merv Davis became the Historical Society representative on the Blacktown Council Historical sub-Committee. One of the first projects Merv was involved in was collating information on local sites and buildings that the Society felt should be heritage listed.

Meetings were held monthly on 4th Monday of the month at the old Riverstone R.S.L in Market Street (the site is now a vacant lot). Monthly speakers included Mrs M Robinson, Mrs R Simpson, Ald. A Lindfield, Kevin Moore and Company, Sam Lane and Miriam Hamilton.

1981

The O'Connell County Fair on 7 March 1981 was an outstanding event. Untold hours by members of the Society went into the organisation. The money raised was to go towards a Museum in the town, a vision ultimately achieved with the official opening on 3 December 1988 of what was known then as the Blacktown & District Bicentennial Museum. Irene Reilly continues her recollections:

This function proved more successful than we had anticipated, with 23 local girls in the Beauty Quest, Thousands of people turning up on the day to join in the festivities, I managed to get Mr Colin Segelov of Channel Ten news to cover the event....

Miss Lisa Haigh, who was the granddaughter of Mrs Eileen Hynds, became the first "Riverstone Miss Society Queen", as she had raised \$5555 for the Society. Miss Sandra Bowie was the first Miss "Teenage Riverstone" judged for her beauty. The judging panel, included Alderman John Aquilina, Mayor of Blacktown City Council, Mrs Aquilina, Mr Alan Cadman Federal Member for Mitchell, Mr Paul Arundel Public Relations Officer for Blacktown City Council, Mr Colin Segelov of Channel Ten, Mr Brian Rodgers of Parramatta Branch NSW Real Estate Institute, Mrs Edgecombe Head Mistress of Riverstone Infants School, Mr Rex Davies, of V.D.B. Relations Box Hill.

Mr John Aquilina Mayor of Blacktown City Council Crowned the girls, in front of Market Town Shopping Centre on Saturday 7th March 1981.



Irene Reilly, Sandra Bowie, John Aquilina, Lisa Haigh and Alan Cadman. Photo: Maurice Agius

The streets of Riverstone were packed with thousands of people, enjoying the days events, which included, "bush rangers" riding through the town, staging a mock "bank holdup" at Mr Greg Paterson's office, which had been dressed to resemble its original look of a historic bank. The grand parade was enjoyed by all, and included a Cobb & Co Coach, Penny Farthing Bike. The boys from HMAS Nirimba Naval Base 1923 Steam powered truck, plus floats from the Local Lions Club, Sporting Clubs etc.

Roving minstrels, a billy-boiling competition, sheep shearing, wood chopping demonstrations, coach and dray rides for the children, a bush band, tug-of-war between the Riverstone Football Team and HMAS Nirimba, rollerskate races, face painting, craft stalls, made this a day to remember. HMAS Nirimba also donated a 60 cm by 60 cm cake, specially made to help celebrate the fair.

Following this the Society managed to get the local High School history master Mr Garrett Barry involved, he proved to be a major asset to the Society. Membership continued to grow and new members included Wal and Lorraine Smith from Riverstone, helped to swell the ranks of the willing workers.

The following year we planned a Colonial Ball Fund Raiser. The committee voted to make the fair a Bi-annual event to give the committee a breathing space.



Lorraine Forbes, Judith Lewis, Diane Wade, Glen Hartley, Scott Hartley. Photo: Maurice Agius

The First Annual General Meeting of the Society was held on 23 March 1981 at the Riverstone R.S.L. Club. Those in attendance were: M. Davis, C. Lewis, E. Hynds, D. Olsson, G. Patterson, Y. & D. Williams, M. Nichols, J. Lewis, R. Phillis, I. Reilly, L. Forbes and P. Stuart-Day, with apologies from M. Hamilton. In her Secretaries report Lorraine Forbes declared that the motto that had evolved for the Society was "Mediocrity is not our style".

1982

The second AGM of the Society was held on 30 March 1982. Irene Reilly reported details of the meeting in her regular column "On the Local Scene" in the *Riverstone Press* of 8 April 1982. Meetings were now being held at the Riverstone High School.

There was a large roll up and Irene reported on the attendance of a number of new members; *It was great to see such a fantastic roll up and welcoming of so many new members. There must have been close to thirty people present in the Library at Riverstone High for the meeting and some of our new*

members included Historians, Mrs. Jan French, Mrs. Shirley Seale, Mr and Mrs Meredith, Mr W. O'Halloran, Mr. and Mrs. Wal Smith and Mr. Sammy Lane.

Irene continued her report: We were also thrilled to see such young members of Riverstone High becoming involved and realise this younger generation will eventually take over the society and will become part of our famous History.

I had no idea when I posted a notice in the local paper to start the Society that it would reach such heights and much of the success rests on the shoulders of Mrs. Lorraine Forbes, who through her hard work and efforts has been the inspiration for so much that has happened through the foundation years.

Lorraine was the Society's first Secretary and believe me, the O'Connell County Fair would never had been the success that it was without her behind me when I was elected the first President.

I must not be remiss in mentioning Greg Patterson. Greg has also been with us through the formation of the Society and is a rock we all lean on. He was our first Treasurer and now is in his third term. Thanks Greg for always being there and putting up with us.

Mr. Mervyn Davis has also devoted many hours to the Society and he also is always there when we need him....

Further detail from the AGM appeared in the *Riverstone Press* of 6 May 1982. Garrett Barry, the History Master at the High School was elected as President for the coming year. Garrett had been appointed History Master at Riverstone High School in 1975. Garrett's role extended beyond the school into the community. He had established a Local History group which met at the High School and included community members interested in history.

At the 1982 AGM Garrett provided an explanation of activities of the Local History group at the High School suggested that *Historical Society's goods be kept at the High School, along with the Local History's collection as a unit for protection. The two collections to come together as one group.* The two collections were combined and some of the members of the Local History group joined the Historical Society.

1983

The Riverstone Public School held their centenary in 1983 in conjunction with the second O'Connell County Fair on 25 March 1983. The publication of the school history was a major success, combing the history of Riverstone and the history of the school.

Irene provided detail of the event in her column in the *Riverstone Press* of 31 March 1983. Once again local businesses and young ladies turned their hand to fund raising for the Society in the "Fair and Beauty Quest". The winners were: Michelle Strachan, Historical Society Queen, Kerry Oxnobshyn, Miss Teenage Riverstone; Jenny Ogg, Miss Riverstone and Districts, Debra Verney, Miss Crowning Glory. Along with the fair, the events also included the O'Connell County Fair Ball.



1983 O'Connell County Fair and Riverstone Public School Centenary Parade.

Photo: Historical Society Collection.

First Quarterly Journal

Another major achievement for the Society was the publication of the first Quarterly Journal, "*Death or Liberty*" in March 1983. The contents were: *The Road to Vinegar Hill* by Kevin Moore; *First Federal Electoral roll 1901 - Riverstone and District* by Jeff Follett; *Centenary of Education in Riverstone 1883-1983 from the Riverstone-Schofields Survey*; *A Brief History of the Rumery Family* by Rosemary and Beverley Phillis; *Riverstone Commercial Establishments c1900 and 1980* by the Riverstone Evening College Local History Group 1981; *People of Nelson* by Laurence V. Hession.

AGM

The 3rd Annual General meeting of the Society saw Garrett Barry returned as President. Irene reported on the meeting in the *Riverstone Press* of 5 May 1983:

... Mr Barry spoke on the very first quarterly journal produced by him for the Historical Society, and the success of the O'Connell Ball, Beauty Quest and County Fair. He also mentioned how, for such a young society, we were still able to donate \$250 to the primary school towards their centenary celebrations..... She also commented: It was very heart warming to see the Phyllis (sic) family turn up in numbers.....

The success of the O'Connell County Fairs from a financial point of view was amazing. The report for the AGM showed that the Society had no liabilities and \$10,190.56 in the bank.

1984

The 1984 AGM was held on 27 April 1984 at the High School. Garrett was returned as President and spoke about the recent acquisition of farming and historical items from Walla Walla and that it was hoped that they would be transported up shortly.

An article in the *Courier* from 4 July 1984 recorded the start of a concerted push by the Historical Society to obtain a Museum at Riverstone. The process was to take several years. Wally Smith recalls the moves taken to obtain a building to house the growing volume of artefacts that had been accumulated.

With a growing collection it was important to have a home and to establish a museum, and give Riverstone a perpetual source of pride and interest.

The Bicentennial was due in 1988, and our main focus was to obtain a Bicentennial Grant to establish the museum.

Garrett had his eyes firmly focused on the original School House which was at the time the Masons meeting hall. As Garrett was the President of Riverstone Historical Society the process of getting on the Bicentennial Committee began, finally he, Rob Reilly and I were accepted to the Blacktown Bicentennial Committee, and after lengthy selection processes, the Riverstone Historical Society was successful in obtaining a Bicentennial Grant of \$80,000. This was helped by the fact that we had raised \$10,000 in fundraising. Council purchased the School House and an agreement was reached. The Museum was finally a dream come true.

1987

The grant application was successful and work began on renovating the building into a Museum. A new organisation was formed to operate the Museum, being the Blacktown and District Bicentennial Museum Association. The Committee for the organisation was formed of representatives from the Riverstone, Blacktown and Mt Druitt Historical Societies, along with a representative from Blacktown City Council.



The Museum on Official Opening Day 3 December 2020.

Photo: Rosemary Phillis

Museum Opened

The Blacktown and Districts Bicentennial Museum became a reality. The Museum was to be operated by a Committee composing representatives of the Riverstone, Blacktown and Mt Druitt Historical Societies and a representative from Blacktown City Council. The official opening of the Museum took place on 3 December 1988 and was well attended. The Museum was popular with locals and schools.



Official opening photo from local newspaper.

The next three years saw the focus of the Riverstone Historical Society move to operating the Museum. The collection continued to grow, displays were rotated and visitors regularly attended to learn more about local history.



Bob Reilly and Garrett Barry attend to paperwork during a meeting at the Museum.

Photo: Rosemary Phillis

The Riverstone and District Historical Society has continued to be an active organisation working towards their goals of preservation and education. The story of the next thirty years is a task for a future Journal.