

Memories from the 1930s

A letter from David Maurice Train
(Number T22)

Dear Moreen,

You asked for some stories of the 30s for your next issue. I won't write you a story, but will list some memories which others no doubt share and will enjoy remembering.

I was a resident of Blackwood from the mid 1930's on, a rather lost little boy of 5 years of age, but I can remember many things over the years.

We were very inventive as children having little to call our own, so we kept busy in many ways. Our toys were made from scraps of old butterboxes which we laboriously carved on the cement steps by spitting on the sharp edges and rubbing the wood back and forth to make guns and daggers and swords. We made yo yos from old wooden cotton reels or we did endless yards of french knitting from unravelled jumpers to make table mats and teapot cosies for presents for Mum when she visited.

We had our pets, too. We kept flies in little cages made from flat sheets of cork joined by pins - we'd float them on handmade boats in any puddle of water. A favourite pastime was to catch blowflies and carefully tie a piece of cotton behind their head and attach a wisp of paper to the cotton and release the poor fly to be chased across the fields and into the bush. One had to be careful not to pull the cotton too tightly or the fly would suddenly become headless.

We used to catch bees in the clover and spit on our tough soles, let the bee sting us, then watch in wonder as the barbed sting writhed and pulsated on our wet skin.

In summer we spent hours under the gum trees pouring endless tins of water down the cicada holes until finally some half-drowned nymph would lumber out of the flooded earth to be quickly scooped up and popped

into a leaf-lined box where it was carefully nurtured until it emerged as an adult cicada.

We were all good at knitting. We used old nails ~~as~~ needles and any scraps gleaned from anywhere. We made scarves, pot holders and clothes for our sister's dolls for when she visited also.

Sometimes there was a health parade on Saturdays. We would line up shivering with our shirts off. We were given an eggcup full of yeast to drink, then a large wedge of raw swede turnip which we munched while we waited for our hair to be washed in kerosene. Then we finally sat down with our head over a large sheet of white paper while the matron combed our hair looking for lice. If we said we weren't well, we were given a spoonful of powdered sulphur with licorice powder to eat or a big spoon of warm castor oil to drink. We learnt not to complain of feeling unwell!!!

Food was very important to us in the 30's. We stole bread from the baker's cart when he stopped on the road outside, or we raided the cornfields and fruit trees in the nearby farms. The gum from the wattle trees was nice, and we even scraped the chewing gum off the footpaths. Gum would last for days and could be traded for a wonderful blue or green jewel beetle (we called them "splinter pullers") which would be found in the wattle bushes.

I remember doing kitchen duty on week nights. We had four gallon drums of plum jam which had to be spread onto mountains of sliced bread for tea. To eat it you folded a slice into quarters and shoved the whole lot into your mouth at once while your other hand was reaching for the next slice. You were only allowed to take one piece at a time so you had to be quick or miss out.

Saturday nights we usually had boiled macaroni custard for sweets. It was bland and revolting but on Sunday we had plum pudding. That was wonderful. At other times we had Jerusalem artichokes - huge mounds of sullen grey-brown

slush. They were awful and I still can't eat them today!

Sometimes we were piled onto a bus and driven to the Bear Park or the beach. We would be coated with zinc cream and sent off for a wonderful time to do what we liked. Lunch was usually home-made sausage rolls. I still recall the delight of these monstrous white rolls of pastry filled with grey-brown mince - such bliss!

On one momentous occasion we had an "important visitor" who stood on the top of the steps at the back of the home where we were all assembled to hear him speak. Afterwards this eminence threw sweets to us below. I was lucky because I was so small (i.e. very young) I scurried among the legs of the others and picked up more than my share from the ground while the other boys ~~leapt~~ leapt into the air to catch this largesse. *leapt*

Names and faces have faded from memory. I will never forget the Matron. She terrified me! She was a huge woman with immense strength and a powerful backhand! Nor will I forget her off-sider. She was gentle and kind and often sought me out to feed me some little delicacy she had cooked in the kitchen.

I still think with sadness of my brother Jimmy who died while we were in the home. I didn't find out until many years later that he had died. All I remember was that there was no-one to take me to the toilet in the middle of the night anymore. Jimmy just went out of my life and I wondered why.

Some of my memories of Burnside are sad and some are happy. I don't regret any of them.

*Dave Hegarty
(I was David Maurice Train in the
home - Number T22)*

Reflections of a Pioneer...David Hegarty

I like to think that my early life prepared me rather well for being a pioneer at Bathurst Teachers College. From the age of three I was brought up in the Burnside Presbyterian Homes near Parramatta. When the homes were taken over by the army in 1943 I was sent to Goulburn where a seventy year old lady (Granny Smith) provided me with very little food and a bed in a bare room at the back of her house.

Later, when my mother reclaimed me, we lived in an unlined military hut left by the army whose camp had been in Centennial Park, a wonderful place for a wild young boy to be let loose. It had birds and bird's nests, trees and open spaces, lakes with eels and little fish and islands where the water fowl flapped and floundered amongst the water lilies.

I entered college with many of the skills necessary for survival in an institutional environment and an eager pleasure in exploring the places around me.

I had an obsession with food. I had been hungry all my life and wherever I was I stole food. As a boy I robbed the baker's cart, I raided the farms and fruit trees, I pinched cans and packets of food from the shops and had a regular supply provided by the garbage cans behind shops, hotels and cafes, often scampering up the nearest tree to consume my loot in the lofty canopy.

So the food at Bathurst, even the smoked fish on Friday, was gobbled down with much appreciation. Left overs from my table mates, who often scorned the kitchen offerings, were part of my staple diet.

The college had other food sources too. I caught yabbies in the dam behind Ferdinand's enclosure and, much to L. J. Allen's horror, cooked these in the college kitchen. There were apples from the experimental farm as well.

The Catholic and Anglican churches welcomed students to their choir practices especially such as I with my double bass voice trained by Elvy Cornell. There was always supper after the practice. The Baptist socials were also much appreciated. We were lured to the fold by the singing, the supper and the friendly town people. Much better than the cold dormitories back at College.

Some of us had rifles, strictly forbidden of course. I once met Archie Miller as I set out for Mt Panorama on a shooting trip. He offered his sympathy for my obviously injured leg. "Result of yesterday's football game," said I and limped away. I had a .22 rifle shoved down my trouser leg and a bullet belt hung around my waist. I like to think that Archie knew. Archie once advised me when he found me darning my socks that the best way to address the problem was to make sure that I kept my toenails short. I will never forget his advice. He really took our welfare seriously.

Sometimes Don Davies, the canteen operator, took us on the back of his truck to go shooting in distant places. He was not amused when a rifle accidentally discharged and left a bullet buried in the cabin above his head.

At the back of Mt Pan I used to roam the creeks and paddocks stalking rabbits and foxes and sometimes feral cats. Skins were given to a friend in town who pegged them out on wire frames to dry. They were later sold and the profits shared. A freshly skinned carcass was sometimes grilled over an open fire in the bush behind McPhillamy Park. The flesh was charred on the

outside and raw inside but it supplemented the food taken from the dining hall the previous night or at breakfast time.

During practice-teaching times we were bundled onto a bus and, along with a box of cans, jars and food packs, were dropped off at various one-teacher schools anywhere between Orange and Lithgow. We traded the box of goodies with the wife of the T.I.C. for a daily hot feed which she prepared for us.

I met a farmer's daughter once. She offered a job picking apples at the weekend. The farm was at White Rocks. The pay was three pounds a day and all the fruit you could eat. After work it was off to Heath's Cafe for a feast of crumbed cutlets, a milk shake and a couple of Rex Bars before going to the pictures or a dance. There was still change left from the three pounds for other luxuries later.

Going home at vacation time was not an agreeable option so a few of us camped on the orchard in an abandoned cottage. We caught and cooked rabbits and raided nearby farms to supplement our rabbit and fruit diet. These stolen vegies were cooked over an open fire after work each night. We slept on the bare floor huddled in our work clothes under the chaff bags filched from the nearby fowl house. In my early years I learned to be inventive and practical having to construct my own playthings from whatever could be found.

In our college living quarters four men shared one room. There were four beds and two shaving cabinets and after a time a large partitioned cupboard with under drawers was added. We quickly scavenged the nearby ex-army precinct and fashioned bookshelves, desks, tables and shoe racks from the timber scattered about.

I remember being most indignant when I found that my masterpiece bookshelf had been confiscated. It turned up in the office of the works foreman but he promised that we would all be given proper furniture at some future time.

Ellen Waugh's art and craft course gave us skills in weaving, leatherwork, basketry and bookbinding. These were put to good use in making our accommodation more habitable.

At one time Sandy McCausland came to our room and invited us to his den where he showed us the screws and nails we had fixed inside our shaving cabinets. They were projecting into his space for all to see. He suggested that their removal was appropriate and we plugged the remaining holes with soft soap. The holes are probably still there.

All this was excellent training for my chosen career. For the first four years of teaching I was only once lodged in a house. My accommodation was a variety of unfinished, unlined, unused tin sheds with kero lamps and homebuilt furniture. Meals were served in the farmer's dining room by his wife. She welcomed teachers because you drove her kids to school. She gave you her forage allowance paid by the Education Dept. and was grateful for the time saved from ferrying the children twice daily. Nowadays they all climb onto buses and riot all the way to the nearest large town.

The host farmer often left me to milk the cow or slaughter a sheep if we ran out of meat in his absence. I learnt to drive a tractor and cut down trees for firewood. I made more money from my part time jobs than I did from teaching. I mowed and watered the tennis court, sewed up the rice bags, worked in the

Reflections con't...

grocery store filling and sending out orders to outlying farms after unloading the goods train on Friday night and sold rabbits to the mobile freezer. Saturday nights saw me being an usher in the local theatre and in winter I taught square dancing in the public hall.

Being a B.T.C. pioneer was wonderful training for my forty years with the Education Dept. I still practice much of what I learnt in those years.

Dave Hegarty (Goliath) 1951-52