WATSONIA  [some memories]

As at July 2010

Watsonia is a northern suburb approximately 15 kilometres from Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

My name is John Kellow I went to live in Watsonia in 1934. This is a record of my own experiences over the years and recollections of conversations with Wilkinson [Wilkie] Joules regarding the general area in which I lived.

The area I knew was the one west of the railway and was subdivided by William Black and called the Electric Station Estate in 1925.

The area was originally bounded by Grimshaw Street in the north, Wattle Drive in the south, Greensborough Road in the east and Mont Park in the west.  Over the years it has extended north of Grimshaw Street to the new area of Watsonia North.

There was also an area east of the railway and this was called the “Grace Park Estate” Some of it was subdivided along the Plenty River boundary called Plenty Lane and was included in Greensborough.

The whole area was surveyed for farmland about 1838 by Robert Hoddle who was also responsible for the layout of the City of Melbourne. The area east of the railway and bounded by Greensborough Road and Wattle Avenue was sub-divided in 1927 but except for the store which also sold petrol and fodder there was little development until 1952 West of Kenmare Street to the Mont Park fence was Pateman’s dairy farm, they mainly sold cream to a butter factory.

The only doctor was Doctor Cordner at Greensborough and he served the area as far as Eltham. There was also a small hospital at Eltham and much later Dr Cordner was instrumental in the establishing Diamond Valley Community hospital. The other nearest doctor was at Heidelberg and the nearest public hospital was the Austin at Heidelberg until the Heidelberg House hospital was built in the late 30’s

Originally the area east of Greensborough Road was known as Grace Park and was owned by Frederick Nell. Frank Watson managed a section of the land around 1900 and later purchased it and sold a portion to the railways.

A station was to be erected at Main Road and Greensborough Lane [*more correctly Grimshaw Street*.] The landowners paid a levy and erected the station at its present site. It also contained a golf course shared with the cows although a golf club was formed in about 1924.  This was the location later for the Watsonia High School and the Watsonia Technical College.

Originally the road to Greensborough was through Preston along Plenty Rd. then along Plenty Lane which later became Grimshaw Street. A road was constructed from Lower Plenty Road along what is now Watsonia Rd. then later Greensborough Rd was made to cut off the corner and avoid the level crossings at Watsonia Road and Grimshaw Street.

The area where I grew up consisted mainly of the Black’s farm subdivision from Lambourne Road to Grimshaw Street on the west side of Greensborough Road

The farm was subdivided in about 1924 and called “The Electric Station Estate” following the electrification of the Eltham railway line. In her book “The Diamond Valley Story” Dianne Edwards has several points of  interest

The railway from Melbourne to Heidelberg was established in about 1881*. [In those days the line went to the city via Clifton Hill and around through North Carlton. The tunnels at West Richmond and Jolimont were constructed much later]. [Passengers alighted at either Clifton Hill or Collingwood and travelled to the city by cable tram]* The line was extended to Greensborough and Eltham in 1902 and electrified in 1926.  .

 J C Jessop [known as Ces Jessop was also a councillor and one time commissioner of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works which controlled the water supply and sewerage of Melbourne] was an estate agent at the time and lived in Greensborough Rd. near Yallambie Rd.

The partly constructed Anglican church building at the corner of Yallambie Rd was a result of the haphazard development of the area which included the McLeod State School 4246, the store and post office further down the hill also the few houses in the Wattle Ave area.

Apparently there was some demand for a church building but it seems there was a shortage of money and so only the central section was built. In the early fifties it was used for square dancing and other social events including the progress association.

The Anglicans obtained a court order enabling them to sell this disused church property on the corner of Greensborough Road where the Shell service station is now and build a Church at Crellin Crescent. Other Churches in the area were the Baptist in Greensborough Rd. near Grimshaw street until they built a new complex on Diamond Creek Rd, St Mary’s Catholic Church on Grimshaw St. and the Methodist  Church in Devonshire Road.

Secondary education was either Eltham Higher Elementary to year 10 or Northcote High School for boys and Preston Girls School for girls otherwise  travel into Melbourne.    In Watsonia there were two shops. The one at the corner of Watsonia Rd and Lambourne Rd was the estate agents office for a few years then at various times it was a general store until it became Weidlich’s butcher shop for several years.

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The other shop south of the railway was a general store run at one time by Watson selling groceries as well as stock food and chaff.  It also had a grain crusher.  Later it was owned by Clarkson’s who built a house alongside with a tennis court and a large fernery. Then it became Martins garage and service station.

The south corner of Lambourne Rd and Devonshire Rd was occupied by Hodgin’s nurseries who specialized in roses  before they moved to Essendon.  Part of this block is now the Uniting Church complex which was built in 1959 after services had been held in private homes from 1956 then the RSL hall.

The development of the shopping centre was divided in three parts by the railway and the electricity easement at Morwell Avenue. In 1950 several shops were built alongside Martin’s garage. They were a mixed business, newsagent/post office and Chew and Poulton estate agents .The area along Watsonia Road  between Lambourne Rd and Morwell Ave was developed with Austen’s self service and the timber yard . Austen’s later moved to a new larger store nearer to Tennyson St.  Also a mixed business followed at the corner of Morwell Ave..

In the 1950’s a clothing factory was built by Latoof and Callil in Lambourne Rd. and operated in conjunction with their factory in Brunswick.

The R S L acquired a tin hut from the army camp about 1957 and this was erected in Morwell Ave and used as a kindergarten during the week and by the Methodist Church for Sunday services which prior to this had been held in various homes, This R S L tin shed burnt down in 1967 and was replaced by the present more substantial complex.

There were active Girl Guides and Brownies companies held in the R S L hall. The pre-school was built in about1963 in Crellin Crescent and the  Methodist Church had already moved to their new building  in Devonshire Road. in 1959. The area east of the railway and bounded by Greensborough Road and Wattle Avenue was sub-divided in 1927 but except for the store which also sold petrol and fodder there was little development until 1952 West of Kenmare Street to the Mont Park fence was Pateman’s dairy farm. They sold cream to a butter factory

The railway station was built at the present location by public contribution on an acreage basis from the local farmers including Black on the west side and Joules on the east side. as only flagged stopping places  had been planned  at Wattle Avenue and Grimshaw St. [several houses were built in the twenties in the Wattle Ave area in anticipation of this].

Because the station was constructed by private subscription it did not have advertising hoardings on it until later years. Jolimont station was similar.  In later years the station was placed below ground level and the line was duplicated and lowered to avoid the steep climb out of Macleod and the level crossings were eliminated at Lambourne Rd  , Grimshaw St. and  Nell St  .

The post office was included in the rail station and the station assistant was also the Postmaster in the early days. The Post Office was built in Devonshire Road about 1959.  Mail deliveries began about 1950   The station had kerosene lamps until about 1937  and was  not manned  by railway employees until about 1955 but by families  under a contract system  These families were  Melbourne, Phillips, Buick, Waterman and Eagland.  Some of these people established gardens on the platform. The land around the station now has a capacity for parking about 500 cars and serves a very large catchment.

A two carriage train operated between Eltham and Hurstbridge and each Friday it hauled goods trucks from Heidelberg siding to Greensborough, Eltham and Hurstbridge. The trains of those days consisted of 7 carriages with 3 first class which had padded seats and backrests and 4 second class which had hard cushions on the seat and slatted backrests The doors opened outward to each compartment.  These were called “dog boxes” or ‘red rattlers’ with about 7 or 8 compartments to each carriage. Later these were replaced with Tait carriages which had corridors and sliding doors but the same standard of seating.

When Black’s farm was sub-divided a limited water service was installed but this was too small for later development, There were no made roads only dirt tracks..

Many of the early purchasers of the blocks did not keep up rate payments and in the late 1940’s an estate agent Spencer Jackson and Co arranged with council to sell defaulted blocks. Our block was one of these.  Many were bought by spec builders. We built in 1954 and were one of the first to do so.

There were about twelve houses which were built in the thirties on this particular estate at the time. As building progressed over the next few years it was necessary to make the roads trafficable in wet weather. This was done by temporary street construction This was a method whereby the Council could make weatherproof roads without needing a large capital outlay. The abutting landholders contributed about 38 pounds each in 1956.

As the North Ward was regarded the poor country cousins of the City of Heidelberg it required the efforts of the Watsonia Progress Association which had begun in about 1954  to initiate any activity..  The work was undertaken by Council and consisted of crushed rock and basic drainage work. There were two such projects at the time one was our block west of Watsonia Rd and  and consisted of about 5 miles [8 km] of streets  then about two years later  the block bounded by Nell St, the rail line and Watsonia Rd  where the school was later built. The North Ward became the Shire of Diamond Valley in 1964

When we built  in 1954 we were told that sewerage would be several years away but as the Army were building a number of dwellings east of Greensborough Rd at the same time,  a sewerage plant was constructed to which we were connected about 1960

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This was before the roads and footpaths were fully made. Our street was originally called Park St then Cornwall St, Morwell Street then finally Greenwood Drive to link up with

Greenwood Drive in Bundoora  We changed address without actually moving.

The State School in Nell Street was built in 1959 and our eldest daughter was one of the first pupils. The trees on the perimeter were planted by the School committee when the school opened.  This area was known as Quinn’s paddock and had a small dam at the Grimshaw St. end which became a garbage tip then later the  A K Lines playing field. Named after a long serving councillor of the north ward of  Heidelberg council.   Macleod High School was built about 1950.

The triangle including Ibbotson Street was developed about 1957 mainly as a War Service homes area.

The Christian Brothers Novitiate, Loyola  was built in 1934 and at the time they had their own electric generator.  They had a large vegetable garden and farm and so were to some extent self supporting.

During the war years this was scaled down. In later years a portion to the east end of their block became Loyola College.

The area to the west was known as Mont Park and contained the Gresswell and Repatriation tuberculosis sanatoria. A rail spur goods line went from Macleod to the Mont Park asylum. In a location below the Gresswell Sanatorium an area had been levelled preparatory to building a new sanatorium but was discontinued due to the introduction of compulsory x-rays  in the 1950’s and  anti-biotics and so the buildings were not necessary. All the original buildings were subsequently dismantled and the land sold for housing. In the Mont Park reserve there were two dams which had been constructed by one of the mental patients probably as therapy.

A sand pit which supplied much of the sand for Flinders St rail station was located at the end of Sellars Street.

In the 1920’s the Maroondah Dam was constructed to supply Melbourne with water through an aqueduct which ran among other places through Bundoora to Reservoir. At Bundoora there was a pumping station to send water either way between Surrey Hills reservoir as it is on the same level.   The water main follows Watsonia Road, Greensborough Rd and crosses the Yarra at Bulleen and major work was undertaken in about 1980 to reline it with cement.

When Hansen’s connected to the electricity in 1937 they were the first to connect in the block and they had to guarantee a minimum payment

In 1942 the Military took over the area known as Wragge’s paddock at the corner of Yallambie Rd to build the army camp. This was mainly a staging camp for troops in transit. One of the Watsonia station signs turned up in Tobruk.  Camp Pell military camp at Royal Park was constructed to house United States servicemen during the war. This later became department of housing accommodation for some of victims of the post war housing shortage.  When this was closed many of the residents were transferred to Watsonia camp until pre-fab houses were built at Heidelberg West and similar estates. In later years the Watsonia Military Barracks was up-graded and became a permanent site now known as Simpson Barracks.

To the west along Plenty Road were several establishments including Larundel and Mont Park mental hospitals. Also the police remount depot for police horses until it moved to Greenvale. Later Latrobe University was established

On the northern boundary is the Western Ring road from Greensborough in the east to Laverton in the west on the Geelong Rd. There is still a link to be made directly to the eastern freeway and the eastern tollway.  At present the traffic finishes at Sellar*s* Street makes its way either through Greensborough or downGreensboroug*h* Rd through Watsonia, Rosanna and Bulleen.  Land was acquired some years ago for a continuation of Greensborough Road to the Lower Plenty Road junction through Viewbank and behind Heidelberg park to Bulleen. Extensive work was undertaken on Greensborough Road as far as Lower Plenty Road .

John Kellow