**RECOLLECTIONS of WATSONIA and CRELLIN CRESCENT PRESCHOOL**

**By Patricia Hogan**

Watsonia residents in the post-war 1950s and 1960s were optimistic, with high hopes for a happy and prosperous future. Mostly newcomers in new houses, with young families, not much money with mortgages in pre-decimal figures that seem low but weren’t, unmade roads, television, telephones, even fridges, were not yet in every home. Most households did have a car, only one, and pre-war models were not unusual. Progress was slow but we looked forward to a new life in this beautiful, almost country area. It was a time of self-help and best of all, it was a beginning. In 1957, there was no primary school and the few shops were clustered either side of where the railway line crossed Watsonia Road. A post-office and small general store next to a busy service station were situated between the “WATSONIA – Please Slow Down” sign and the railway line. The R.S.L. was an early organization with premises that may have been an army hut, were just around the corner in Morwell Avenue from where the last batch of shops would be built. The R.S.L. was a united group as many Watsonia residents were ex-servicemen with wives and young families, looking forward to a normal, peacetime life. Before Crellin Crescent centre was built C1961, the first Preschool was held at the R.S.L. ‘tin shed’, surrounded by light bush and a scattering of gum trees. To us, with no experience of kindergartens, it was well equipped, very inviting and homey. Outdoor play equipment included a baker’s cart with shafts and large wheels that kinder children enjoyed climbing on.

At Kinder, children loved painting at their easels and brought home sheets of bedaubed paper that the teachers would interpret whether your child had had a good, or very rarely, a bad day by the paint colours used that session. Mothers were involved too in being On Duty to cut up fruit, make the cup of tea for adults and generally lend a hand. We took our turn with a bagful of (water) paint-stained pinafores to be washed and returned by the beginning of next week. It was a time of close involvement with our children and the kinder staff of the Centre they were attending. As children grew older, we looked back and saw how close that involvement had been before our offspring gradually became more independent. At first, a visit to an Infant Welfare Centre meant a train trip to either Greensborough or Macleod. The first Infant Welfare at Watsonia was held in the newly built Holy Spirit Anglican Church. Prams were lined up along the open veranda with mothers and children seated in the hall waiting their turn for baby to be weighed and Sister to be consulted in one of the enclosed, glass-panelled rooms. It was first come, first served. One day, my children and I were late and with dismay, I counted fifteen prams already lined up. It was a very long morning! An Anglican Church and a Methodist Church had been planned for some time and were built around 1960. Sunday Schools were very well attended. A second group of Preschool staff and children met at the Methodist Church. It was a great time of self-help and organisations held various social activities usually to raise funds but the hidden agenda was getting to know local people. Street stalls and fetes, children’s fancy-dress parties were popular particularly in school holidays. Yes, the new primary school was also part of the busy building construction program in the early sixties.

A notable social occasion of shared togetherness, was in dreary winter weather when popular television clowns were booked to appear. The hall was packed and warmed by enthusiastic children. It was said later that those children who hadn’t recently had measles or didn’t already have them on the Great Day, certainly had them in the following weeks. The Kinder, or as it is now, the Pre-school played an important role within the community. Weekends were family time but week days in the early years seemed predominantly ‘mums and kids’ and dads, other than those on shift-work or locally employed, were generally ‘at work’, emerging from the railway station in the very late afternoon or arriving home in cars of various ages. The Kinder Committee was mostly made up of women. Its agenda had emphasis on child welfare and relevant matters and also some inevitable fund-raising. As well, every month a general meeting was held at the new sparkling centre at Crellin Crescent, with a short business meeting and a guest speaker. This was a mums’ night out with dads on duty at home. We looked forward to it all, kinder business, guest speaker and the getting together talk, as well as a good supper, everything homemade of course. We were spruced up if not dressed up, with perhaps a best cardigan, a bit of lippy and a liberal squirt of hair spray. It was a night out, all about children but perhaps to busy mums, it was also an evening of guilty freedom. Many women made children’s clothes and our own. For children’s clothes, we first measured brown paper patterns from the Enid Gilchrist books then made everything from baby nighties (no grosuits then) to kids’ pyjamas, overalls, shirts, frocks, coats, etc.

Involvement with Preschool was usually from the time of eldest child’s attendance to the year of the youngest. Although we still supported Preschool stalls and occasions, allegiance gradually moved to the schools where children were enrolled. The Preschool years were a very special time for children and their parents. It may be that parents have better memories of when skills were learnt or of funny little incidents. Sometimes children have treasured recollections of friends, the teacher or an occasion of that time but compared to the long years of schooling, the special year may seem shorter than it was. The Preschool year is an important one because it’s a beginning, with its learning, first friends and first group encounters, all contributing to a view of life and maybe even a small person’s own view of themselves in life itself.