

Montmorency Memories 1950 to 1960

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In 1950, my parents bought a housing lot on Alexander Street in Montmorency and built a two bedroom weatherboard home. They moved in around May that year. At the time, the street was unpaved and had open gutters on each side. Most of the houses in the street were built after the war, except the old farm house next door. It used to be a poultry farm, but its land had since been subdivided, reducing it to not much more than the standard quarter acre lot. Remnant poultry sheds were still at the back of their property. There were other farms still surviving in the area; a couple of poultry farms in Para Rd and Airlie Road and also a flower farm in Airlie Road.

Most of the home owners were young families with kids. Housing and land in Montmorency, being an outer suburb, was relatively affordable for working people. In our street there was a mixture of trades people, office workers and professionals. Many were ex-servicemen and women. One close neighbour had been a POW in the war and suffered with bad health for years. Some characters from an older time still lived in the area. One elderly couple (the Lewis's) used to regularly go to the local tip beside the Plenty river. We'd see them returning along our street with an old brown pram full of what they'd collected.

Many families did not own a car, although by the 1960s most did. People without cars typically commuted by train or shared a car ride to work. My dad went to work at the Australian Paper Mills in Fairfield by catching the train at Montmorency station. Mum said he was always leaving late and had to run to catch the train. For three years from 1950, my parents walked to the local Were Street shops and the station, just over 1 km away. Then in 1953, dad bought his first car, a 1938 Wolseley Twelve. He usually bought petrol from the Lower Plenty petrol station close to the old pub and bridge, asking the attendant for "a quid's worth of super please".

At its lowest point, Alexander St was crossed by a small stream, long since gone. We sometimes walked beside the stream on our way home from school. I always remember a small waterfall about a foot high and the so-called sword-grass growing nearby. I got cut by it once or twice before I learned my lesson.

Daily bread and milk deliveries were by horse and cart. We had four pint bottles of milk and one loaf of bread delivered daily. One day my dad had a new Sunbeam lawn mower delivered from a local hardware store. It replaced his push hand mower. At the time, powered mowers were starting to replace the old style push hand-mowers in suburban homes, the Victa being the most popular. One time when dad was mowing our front lawn, a stone flew out and hit my leg. It stung, but no damage was done. No doubt it was worse for my dad.

Sometime in 1957 a new TV was delivered, with two men carrying it into our lounge room. It came in large cardboard boxes, one for the TV, another for the stand. It was an A.W.A. "Airzone" with a 17 inch screen and a mahogany cabinet. Memorable TV programs of the day were the Mickey Mouse Club, Whirlybirds and The Untouchables. Melbourne only had three channels - ABV2, HSV7 and GTV9 - and TV broadcasting ended around 11 PM each night, with a patriotic rendition of God Save the Queen. In order to get good reception, we had an outside antenna installed on our chimney.

We also regularly went to the drive-in theatre in Reservoir. Us kids got dressed in pyjamas and before the movie started, used the kid's playground in front of the large white screen. We'd buy lollies in the shop and then hang a speaker on the car window as the movie started. We usually went to sleep in the back seat, well before the movie ended.

Inside our house, the only heating was an open, wood burning fire in the lounge room and a wood stove in the kitchen. Having to always light the wood stove was a chore, so mum soon replaced it with an electric stove. What would now be

considered a "vintage" radio sat on the kitchen bench and we listened to episodes of the Lone Ranger and Zorro. We had an ice-chest for several years, the ice being delivered as needed. Then in the mid-1950s we got our first electric fridge. In the hallway, there was a telephone on a small stand - a big black bakelite one with a rotary dial. The phone was a necessity for mum who was at home without a car during the week. She was always talking to her mum who lived only 2 km away in Lower Plenty.

The lounge room was furnished with a couch, two armchairs, a small bookcase, a glass-fronted crystal cabinet and a standard lamp. In the bookcase, among other books, was a five volume set of encyclopaedias, a volume of Shakespeare's Complete Works, a car repair book and a couple of Alistar Maclean novels. The crystal cabinet contained mum's prized crockery and glassware, mostly from wedding presents. As was the fashion of the day, three ceramic flying ducks decorated one wall and there was a mirror above the fireplace. Dad, being a smoker, had an ashtray on small side table next to his armchair. We sometimes used a folding card table with a felt surface for scrabble and card games.

In winter we needed three woollen blankets at night and on cold mornings, huddled around an electric radiator in the kitchen. On hot summer nights, as we went to bed, mum would spray our room with what we called "fly spray" to kill any mosquitos in our room. While she sprayed, we'd hide under the blankets. It sometimes made us sneeze. Fly spray was bought as a liquid and used in a pump-action sprayer. Later in the 1950s, aerosol cans replaced the old pump sprayers.

Plumbing at the time was very basic. Household waste water simply drained into the gutters in the street after passing through a so-called "grease-trap", which stopped the most offensive material from reaching the street. Dad had the nasty job of cleaning out the grease-trap to prevent blockages. In the 1950s Montmorency was un-sewered. Most houses, as did ours, had an outside "privy" with a weekly pan collection. Mum had a laundry attached to the back of the house with a "copper" for boiling clothes, later upgrading to a washing machine with a wringer. The washing was hung out to dry on our backyard Hills Hoist. Some homes still hung washing on a rope propped up with a forked stick.

As was the fashion at the time, our house had a trellis between the fence and the house, complete with a climbing passionfruit plant. We also had our old laundry concrete trough on that side of the house, which was sometimes used for pet goldfish.

The week had a recurring routine. Monday was laundry day. Thursday was shopping day at the Were Street shops. Saturday night was bath night. Kids typically got a bath once a week unless they needed more, for example if they came home covered in mud, which often was the case. Sunday morning was for church (at least for the devout) and then in the afternoon we often visited friends or relatives.

On some Saturday mornings we would all go to the Ivanhoe shops where my parents had a bank account at the Commonwealth Bank. Ivanhoe was the closest large shopping centre, with a Coles store which sold all sorts of household items not available locally. Mum was always getting her dressmaking and knitting supplies from Coles. I can still remember the large curved glass windows at the front of Coles. The Montmorency Were Street shops had the usual staples of a milk bar, butcher, grocer, green grocer and a hardware store. Mum told stories of having to carry her shopping all the way home from Were Street in string bags and always thought it was the cause of her carpal tunnel issues later in life. Goods from the shops were usually wrapped in newspaper. Grease-proof paper was used when needed, for example on meat from the butcher. Plastic bags and plastic food wrapping were unknown at the time.

In the early 1950s, my dad played football on a Saturday afternoon for Ivanhoe Amateurs along with a few other Montmorency men. He was vice-captain of Ivanhoe's 1954 B-grade premierships team. Mum was not a fan of football and always said he was completely exhausted on Sunday after a Saturday game. He gave

football away soon after his kids were born. Shortly after some men from the football club came to the house to ask dad to play again, but he was away and mum told them he wasn't interested. Mum never did tell dad about their visit!

People at the time did lots of home handyman jobs. Some of those connected to the building trade even went so far as to build their own homes, sometimes taking years to complete the job. My dad built the concrete driveway to the garage and the concrete path across the lawn to the front veranda. Our one-car weatherboard garage, painted to match the house, had a wooden work bench inside with a vice and tools for all sorts of odd jobs. My dad did his own car repairs, as did most car owners at the time. Cars were precious, luxury items at the time and usually garaged.

Mum was an excellent cook. We never bought take-away food or ate in a restaurant. In fact take-away food had not yet arrived in Australian suburbs. It seemed that every day around 5 PM, mum was shelling peas or peeling potatoes. Once a week we had a roast dinner, typically our midday meal on Sunday, but sometimes on Saturday night. The evening meal was always called "Tea". "Dinner" was a hot lunch.

To save money, mum made some of our clothes. She was a skilled dressmaker and even altered clothes for our neighbours' kids. I remember kids standing on our kitchen table while mum made adjustments to their clothes. In the evening mum was often knitting - mainly woollen jumpers, scarves, etc.

Dad, much to our disgust, used to get the clippers out and give us a short back 'n sides haircut. Compared to today, out of necessity, people were self-sufficient. They didn't have spare cash to pay for things.

My brother and I usually walked by ourselves to kindergarten and school. Sometimes I'd stop and watch the workmen, for example installing a telephone pole, and would be late for kindergarten. Mum and dad thought it amusing more than anything else. Montmorency primary school was called the "state school". My brother and I typically walked together. At one point on the walk, we had to traverse a couple of wooded vacant lots. To me at that age, it was a scary place, like a dark forest. I couldn't wait to get to other side as quickly as possible.

On Sunday morning my brother and I would walk by ourselves along Airlie Rd to the local Church of England Sunday school. We were only around 5 and 6 at the time, but in those days parents had no qualms about letting kids out by themselves to roam the neighborhood. Different times!

On the weekends we used to venture by ourselves into nearby properties - just kids exploring the neighbourhood. Once we collected armfuls of small objects from the old poultry sheds next door and hung them in two pine trees in our backyard. Our property had a line of pine trees along the boundary with the old farm house. My dad had to remove most of them when the garage and driveway were built, but two remained at the back of the property. Anyway, when our neighbour saw his things hanging in our trees he was not amused and threatened he'd call the police and we'd go to jail. I was only 4 and very upset that I'd be going to jail. After letting me suffer for my sins, mum assured me that I wouldn't have to go to jail. So in the end all was well.

I was fascinated with all things mechanical, so on another excursion, I went into a shed on the nearby flower farm and returned home with a handful of hose fittings. Mum asked where I got them and made me return them. At my young age, the concept of property ownership had not entered my head!

There were lots of dogs in the area. Some were tied up, some roamed free. As far as I know, none were house dogs. Only cats were allowed inside. We had a long-haired Persian cat, but left her at the house when we moved. It was common thinking at the time that cats were attached to a house, not to their owners. Incredible as it seems today, the new owners of our house thought nothing of

taking over ownership of our cat!

Our local GP doctor in "Mont" was Dr. Alexander who had a clinic in or near Were St. For more serious issues, the local hospital was in Greensborough - the Diamond Valley Community Hospital. In 1958, my brother fell about 6 feet from a low branch on one of our pine trees and fractured his arm. This was literally a few days before our sister was born. Mum called her mother, who had a car, and they drove over to the hospital in Greensborough. My brother's arm was set by Dr. Cordner, the former Melbourne footballer. As was common medical practice at the time, I had a tonsillectomy in 1958, again by Dr. Cordner in Greensborough. Before the operation I was promised I'd be eating nothing but ice cream during my recuperation. My parents must have assumed I'd be scared, but I had not a care in the world. I never did get the promised ice cream.

One notable day I will always remember was in late February 1957 when standing on our front porch, we saw the smoke from the St. Helena fires, only about 4 km away. The historic 1842 St. Helena church was badly damaged, but later restored.

Our family moved to Macleod in 1960 after 10 years in Montmorency. The reason for moving? Mum had just had enough of the mud, the unmade roads and the long walk to the school and shops! Our sister was almost 2 years old and getting around the streets with a child in a pusher was no easy task given the state of the roads and the dirt tracks for footpaths. But I always missed "Mont" as we called it. To this day I'll occasionally drive by the old house when time permits.

Garry Irwin, August 2021