

## REMINISCENCES OF HEATHMONT

SUNDAY 30 APRIL 2006

**Uniting Church Hall, Canterbury Road, Heathmont at 3pm.**

The spring of 1934 was unusually wet. Even before Cup week, large parts of Victoria had suffered from severe flooding. Tuesday 6 November was not too bad, especially for the punters who backed the top weight, Peter Pan, for his second Melbourne Cup. But two days later, on Oaks Day, the skies opened. Tragically, some of the loveliest hats in the Southern hemisphere could never be worn again. Those who could afford the 1½p to buy the Melbourne "Argus" would have read that in Edenhope that Thursday 8 November, 112 points of rain fell in the 15 minutes after 9.00 am. But this was a mere prelude to the downpours to come. Starting on Thursday 29 November, and continuing for the next 48 hours, 562 points – over five inches, or 140 mm - fell in Melbourne, with more in the hills east of the city. At least 36 deaths were attributed to the floods. The headlines in the "Argus" of Saturday 1 December were, for those days, as thunderous as the skies: "TEMPEST SWEEPS STATE DAY AND NIGHT. SEVERAL LIVES LOST. HUNDREDS HOMELESS. THIRD FLOOD IN YEAR".

Almost 72 years later, the impact on the then residents of Heathmont of the floods that followed is captured in "Heathmont Recollections 2006". In the very first of these 52 fascinating contributions which, thanks to Gerry Robinson, are today ready to be launched, David Allen remembers (as did Lyn Washusen when she spoke so well during the "Orchard" segment of yesterday's tour) "the family Penn" who "lived right on the [Dandenong] Creek at the end of Marlborough Road, and were often flooded." Since the Penn family included 11 children, this must have been a pretty ordinary state of affairs. Keith Norris, in his contribution to the "Recollections", also recalls as a child in the 1920's and 30's, the many occasions when he had seen the creek in flood "and it was quite awesome".

But no floods compared to the floods of 1934. We know this because, for two of the Penn children who lived through them, they will remain among the most vivid memories of their lives. Here is Florence Penn (now Florence Tutton) adding dramatic detail to the story begun by David

Allen. In 1919 she had come with her family to live on 14 acres along the northern bank of Dandenong Creek. *"The house", she writes, "was built very close to the creek with a steep 20 foot drop to the water. My father made a fence by opening out 44 gallon tar drums along the top. This fence had a dual purpose, serving as a safety barrier for us children, and in times of flood, the water was diverted from the house. I remember many times during floods lying in bed listening to the water trickle under the house. This fence worked well until the big floods of 1934, when everything was swamped and some of the family nearly drowned. On that terrible day I was at work and arrived home after it was all over. Bessie, being a child at the time and one of those caught in the flood has more memories of it. My mother was so traumatised by the events that she refused to go back there to live."*

The story is taken up by Bessie Penn (now Bessie Carmichael). Speaking of her childhood, she says:

"In those days the creek was a clear running stream, which we drank, and was inhabited by black fish, trout, eels and a platypus family living in the bank opposite our house. This really was an idyllic place for us to live, especially us kids.

...

Every so often the creek flooded and ran under the house, but in November 1934, when I was 10, we had a huge flood, and had to be rescued. Sam Brown, who owned a timber yard in Ringwood, arrived with a big draught horse and dray to get us out of the house. He loaded all eight of us in, but the current was so strong, horse, dray and us were being swept away, when a big log jammed in the wheel spokes and anchored us. Obviously we weren't meant to drown. Sam loaded two of us kids on the horse, undid the traces, hopped on himself, and took us to dry land. He did this on several occasions, then the police boat arrived and took my parents off the dray."

Other children, other times. Seventeen years and two months after the dramatic events of Friday 30 November 1934, about 70 remarkably tidy children arrived at an important juncture in their lives. It was Tuesday 5 February 1952. This, for those of you who are still very young, was a mere fifty-four years and three months ago. Much had happened since the great flood. The price of the "Argus" had doubled from 1½p to threepence. Herman Pump's orchard had gone, and on part of the land it once occupied is the newly-built Heathmont Methodist Church/Hall.

Arthur Cutting had opened his general store, Jack and Ruth Sanders their garage, Keith Cullen his hairdresser's salon, Estelle Spargo her drapery, Bert Lavis his hardware store and Dr Deerbon his surgery. Of equal importance, Estelle's husband Ken Spargo - with some assistance from other parents - had made the Department of Education aware of Heathmont's remarkable progress. On the day of a visit to the area by a Departmental representative - I think that it was towards the end of 1950 - Ken had arranged to line up 70 children outside Ada Marden's Post Office. We kids were given strict instructions to look totally exhausted after walking all the way from the Ringwood State School. It worked. Heathmont was about to start the 1952 school year by opening a school of its own.

Although none of us knew it, on Tuesday 5 February King George VI had only hours to live: he died on the following day, Wednesday 6 February 1952. For Victoria's 250,000 schoolchildren, the last day of his reign was simply the first day back at school after the summer holidays. The front page of the "Argus" carried a banner headline, not of flood, but of fire: "NEW FIRES ROAR INTO BIG TIMBER". 300 men were fighting grimly to save Taggerty and Buxton, and perhaps Yea, from a huge bushfire after a hot dry summer. Another banner headline, this time on p.3 and with a very politically incorrect masculine bias, told all its macho readers that: "SCHOOL'S IN! BUT IT'S DAD WHO FEELS IT MOST. Thousands of Victorian children go back to school today ... leaving a tottering family budget behind them. School uniforms, always a threat to the family purse, were described as 'alarming' by parents [the word "mothers" might have been more appropriate] who packed Melbourne's stores for 'back-to-school' shopping yesterday." A table on p.3 proved the point: £1.1.0 for a blazer, £1.17.6 for a pair of shoes, £3.3.0 for a girl's tunic, 13/11 for boys' nickers, 7/6 for a cap and 4/6 for a tie.

As far as I remember, neither I nor any of my mates ever owned up to actually possessing a blazer or cap. If any of us did, we were not - even on that first day at school - fastidious about keeping our new clothes clean as we wrestled in the dust, climbed the loquat trees at the back of the church grounds, lined up our aggots for a game of marbles, and marked out the cricket pitch. Then, suddenly, we all froze. The headmaster, Mr McKinlay had walked to the steps leading into the Methodist Church Hall, placed his two index fingers in his mouth, and produced a whistle that would have pierced the sides of a Centurian tank. Heathmont State School, with about 70 kids from grades 1 to 4, was open. I was in grade 4. After 3 pretty miserable years in the three lowest grades at State School No. 2997 (Ringwood), to be in the top grade in the

Methodist Church Hall - along with Garry Holmes, Richard Law, Jim Jago, Ray Arnold, Neville Hard, Alan Swain, Lorrie Thatcher and one or two girls – and to stay there for the next three years, was to be about as close to heaven as any Methodist can ever get.

But that is just one set of memories stimulated by this wonderful collection of reminiscences of Heathmont. Each of us will have our own bundle of images of this special place. We now have a marvelous opportunity to share them with the contributors to the booklet, and be stimulated to remember more.

There are, as you would expect, some common themes. One of them is the inclusiveness of the Heathmont community. Read the recollections of Vera Alsop, and see reproduced there the open invitation issued by the Heathmont Advancement League to attend the commissioning of the Kindergarten/Community Hall. It is written in at least four languages, a rare example in those days of an awareness that not everybody used English as their first language.

And indeed there were more non-Anglo-Saxon names among the Heathmont pioneers than English ones. Yet the German families in particular were the heart and soul of the place. They had leadership roles in the various churches, the Heathmont Advancement League, the kindergarten, and every sphere of community life. The captain of the first Heathmont cricket team, in 1922, was Frank Clota. The then president of the Club was Frank Wieland, and the family of Herman Pump contributed five members of the team. And heavily involved with them during the post-War decades of the '50's and '60's were the other residents of Heathmont. I have particular reason to acknowledge publicly here the huge contribution that three of the Washusen sisters – Enid (then Enid Sharp), Phyllis and Linda – made to my childhood. They were and are some of the finest people I have ever been privileged to meet. And there were so many others: Keith and Jean Hardy; Bernie and Diana Jago; Lila and Jack McRae; Betty and Frank Secomb; Ron Sharp and his sons, my lifelong friends Ian and Peter; Estelle and Ken Spargo; Pam and Lindsay Spencer; Wilf. and Lil. Pump: the roll-call of my indebtedness goes on.

It is therefore no surprise to read, in “Heathmont Recollections” that many other lives have also been touched by the generosity and warmth that I will always associate with this place. Rita Johnson speaks of this, as do Lila McRae, Beryl Paul, Alan and Betty Ritchie, Ken Roberts, Isobel Robin (hers is a delightful “stream of consciousness” essay) Joyce Rowlands, and Desi Stevens. You will also read in these pages of the

untold hours of unpaid or underpaid assistance that Keith Hardy, plumber and friend to every resident of Heathmont, gave to us all in times of extremity – and they occurred with startling frequency. His wife Jean was and is every bit as generous as he. (Speaking of plumbing and the like, you will also read of the relief felt by Keith Norris when the Heathmont night cart service first commenced, and he no longer had to dispose of his own.)

You will also learn, if you did not already know, of the more than \$10,000 raised for local and international charities by “The Heathmont Tuesday Girls who meet on Monday”: Joyce Ball, Mary Barro, Gwen Buchanan, Bambra Cohen, Val Davidson, Jean Head, Joan McConchie, Lila McRae, Connie Noble, Helen Rees, Jane Rodgers, Jenny Rose, Pat Ryan, Lorraine Seeley, Joan Shaw and Mary Wadsworth. Then there is “Operation Makki”, when a team of 16 from Heathmont, organised through the Baptist Church, went to Irian Jaya (from where the very newsworthy recent group of refugees have come) and, within six weeks, built two new mission houses after a severe landslide which occurred in April 1973. A typical example of Heathmont goodwill, and for Rod Fraser, whose recollections are included here, a life-changing experience.

My parents were very grateful for the warmth of their welcome into the Heathmont community in 1949. My father, being a lawyer, was well acquainted with the general cussedness of human nature, but he recalled the Heathmont Advancement League as a haven of friendship even in disagreement. He and my mother often spoke of the contributions, way above and beyond the call of duty, made by people such as Jack Lamb, who drove a Cottees truck for countless hours and countless miles on behalf of the Community Hall project, then under way. About the only serious difficulty encountered at a meeting of the League occurred when someone moved that a letter of appreciation be sent to Cottees as thanks for the use of their vehicle. Jack Lamb nearly had a fit. His employers were not aware of how generous they had been.

I must mention one other common theme of these Recollections before I conclude. It is in part the mud of winter – the rows of shoes in the station waiting room, ready on their owners’ return to be exchanged for the respectable shoes that had been worn to work, or to shopping in Ringwood or the city. It is also in part the dust of summer, the unmade roads, the lack of amenities. Above all this, however, is the powerful message that Heathmont was a very, very beautiful place. The older contributors speak almost with awe of the loveliness of the surroundings in which they grew up, and explain by reference to its natural beauty their

parents' decision to move to such an isolated area. More recent arrivals echo these sentiments. On one of her days off in 1945, Mrs Davison and her daughter Phyl, who was later to marry Alan Blackbell and become with him a vital part of the Heathmont scene, took the train to Ferntree Gully; but they were so attracted by the trackside flowers that they got off at a station they then discovered was Heathmont. In Phyl's words: "[We] wandered along tracks through the heath and orchids, saw a fibro-cement 'for sale' notice on a stump, and at once bought the block from a Mr Telford for £75!" Myrtle Carruthers speaks of the abundant bird life seen on the "Godden Green" property she and her husband Walter bought in 1943. There is also in these Recollections Ross Cowling's loving evocation of the Heathmont to which he came in 1957, with its hovea, orchids, wattles, running postman, black-eyed susan, feather tailed gliders, pallid cuckoos and pardelotes. Liz and Mick Dexter recreate and relive their delight in finding a haven of natural beauty at the lower end of Dickason Road, a haven part of which they have since donated to the Trust for Nature, to be preserved in perpetuity. Betty and John Evans refer to the beautiful bushland and orchards Betty first saw on a Girl Guides trip from Glenferrie when she was 12 years old.

All in all, "Heathmont Recollections" is a treasure. It even has its share of good laughs, as readers of the contributions by Gwen Fairweather and Alison Ingamells will discover – to say nothing of the last chapter, by "Anon", that is a testament to the daffiness of us humans.

So we owe an enormous debt to Gerry Robinson and Richard Carter and the Ringwood Historical Society for being not only the inspiration but also the blood toil tears and sweat behind this booklet. We owe, too, a very real debt to the contributors.

On 4 March 1861, at his first inauguration as President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln spoke of the "mystic chords of memory ... stretching ... all over this broad land" and touching "the better angels of our nature". This booklet itself touches those mystic chords, and we will all be the better for its publication. I am very honoured to have been asked to launch it.

D.L. HARPER