

2014.005

**Williamstown Botanic Gardens
Oral History Transcript**

Patti Gerkens and Eileen Gleeson

3rd October 2014



This is an interview with Patti Gerken and Eileen Gleeson on behalf of the Friends of Williamstown Botanic Gardens. It is one of a planned series to document personal memories and experiences of the Gardens.

Patti and Eileen are the daughters of Jack and Millie Gerken who lived in Power Street, Williamstown before moving to 25 Gellibrand Street, Williamstown. Jack worked at the Newport Railway Workshops. Patti lived overseas for many years and Eileen has lived in Williamstown all her life. Patti and Eileen recall memories of the Gardens during their childhood and of taking their own children there during the 1960s and 1970s.

The date of the interview is 3rd October 2014 and the interviewer is Lindy Wallace.

LW Patti, can we start with you, if you would just introduce yourself and tell me where you were born what date please

PG I was actually born in South Melbourne Hospital but Mum and Dad had moved to Williamstown, Dad worked in the railways, that was on January 13 1942 and we lived in 50 Power Street, Williamstown

LW Would you tell me the names of your parents?

PG Jack and Millie Gerken, their names were John and Amelia but they were known as Jack Millie

LW Eileen is Patti's eldest sister by thirteen no fifteen months – Eileen if you would just introduce yourself please

EG Eileen Gleeson, Patti's sister by fifteen months, and we lived together at 50 Power Street, North Williamstown, it was called then, because Dad worked at the Railways

LW Fantastic, thanks very much for that. I don't mind if you talk over each other so if we could just start with your earliest memories of the Gardens

EG Well when Patti and I were growing up our parents used to bring us to the Gardens to play and we can remember walking around the Gardens. There used to be an aviary there and Patti remembers the aviary better than me, climbing up onto the steps and looking through the wire because you couldn't reach the birds because there was double wiring, like a fence

PG Double wiring around the cage so the little fingers couldn't through and we couldn't throw anything in there. I loved the rabbits, they had rabbits in there. I can remember the smell to this day of the birds and the rabbits.

EG That's right they ate the seeds. So we spent a lot of hours down the Gardens; that was when we were growing up. Then when I married I actually lived opposite the Gardens in Osborne Street and I used to take my children across to the Gardens to play. That was in the early sixties, seventies, that's about it. We walked around there and still do, I take the grandchildren down now.

LW So you've been there for three generations – you as a child, your children and now your grandchildren. Can you think of the difference that you've noticed in that time?

- EG Probably it's just so well maintained now, that's what I really like. You walk around and I take my little dog for a walk around there and look at the plants. It's very peaceful. If it's a hot day you can take a picnic and take the kids down and make a lovely day of it.
- LW Talking of picnics Eileen, did you and Patti ever go for picnics when you were little?
- PG Well, we did because we had an extended family and I can remember whenever Cath and Alby and those kids came down we always went to the Gardens and walking around the fish pond
- EG That's right I forgot the fish pond
- PG Yes, that was always lovely
- LW Can you describe what the fish pond was like for you as children?
- PG I always liked to walk around it, it was always covered in bougainvillea; that was always really pretty. Then just looking at the fish, I think it was only goldfish but it was fun to see them there. Mum and Dad used to always point the fish to us.
- We did have picnics because the Gardens were always somewhere to go after you'd been swimming and you were hot. We were all red haired and sunburned and it was nice to go into the Gardens.
- EG And don't forget the fountain, we'd show the kids the fountain
- PG Oh the fountain
- EG The lovely fountain there, we'd get a drink of fresh water, the drinking fountain, it was very nice
- LW When you were younger and you went to the beach – I believe there used to be a lot of activity on that beach area. Were there carnivals and things like that?
- EG Yes, can you remember the carnivals?
- PG Vaguely
- EG Yes, I can the carnival being down the end of, I think its Stewart Street, not quite sure, opposite where the St John Ambulance Hall is now; there was a big carnival set up there.
- PG That was just outside of the Gardens
- EG That's right, it was the other side of the Gardens, but that disappeared.
- We had to walk to the beach from North Williamstown or ride our bikes which was a bit of a journey. Then we'd get sunburned and had to get home (laughs)
- LW Did you ever ride your bikes through the Gardens?
- EG Not really, we didn't ride our bikes through the Gardens, no I can't remember doing that. Can you remember doing that? Probably only walked.
- PG Yeh, I can only remember walking around it, I don't know why we didn't ride our bikes through it. We did have bikes
- EG Yeh, you had to in those days

- LW What were your feelings when you went in the Gardens? Was it somewhere where you were going to go and play or was it a more quiet restful area compared to the rest of the beach and that area?
- PG Yeh, that's how I looked on it. After the beach and heat and everything, the Gardens was always such a lovely green place. I remember even outside the Gardens where that round thing is now – the bandstand – that's it – we can remember that. It's still there. That's where we had concerts 'cause I was a dancer and I used to make everybody have concerts (laughs).
- LW Can you tell me a little about that?
- PG I learned Irish dancing when I was twelve but before then I used to round up all the kids and force them to dance. I could make up steps – I hadn't been taught anything – but I knew I could dance, so I used to make things up and teach them. We used to sing – we used to sing Two Little girls in Blue – I remember that song
- LW Can you sing that for me now?
- 7.57
- PG and EG (laughs) go on - Two little girls in blue, lad, two little girls in blue, one would – oh I've forgotten the words.
- EG Anyway we did enjoy that – getting everybody up on to the bandstand. I've only just recently taken my little dog up onto there again - it's still there. I can remember the band, I think it was either the local band or the Salvation Band and they'd be there of a Sunday, or it might have a Williamstown Band – so that was quite an attraction.
- PG Our Dad didn't have a car so we always had to walk everywhere and when we went as a family we just all walked everywhere. We couldn't afford the bus- that was a real luxury. We used to beg for donuts because the donut van used to come down to the beach and after you'd been swimming and you were all salty and everything there was nothing more beautiful than to get some of those jam donuts. It's still a treat to me these days. That Footscray man, I love to go get a jam donut off him. Just having that smell permeating around the beach and the Gardens was – oh it was so tempting. Yeh, loved those jam donuts.
- LW Did you go down especially to listen to the bands or you just happened to be there?
- EG No – you'd just be there because there wasn't the communication they have now. You never got told anything. I don't think there was pamphlets and things in those days. At weekends probably more people came to the beach – probably it was a weekend thing.
- PG Yes, weekends for sure.
- 10.07
- LW You were saying to me then that the area where the bandstand is – did you ever think of that as part of the Botanic Gardens?
- PG We knew it wasn't as well kept and that you had to go through the fence and through the gate to get into the real pretty part of the Gardens but we did used to use that outside part

for picnics too because I think there were barbeques there wasn't there – we did used to use that park. Were there swing sets or something – there was something there

EG Maybe swings - until they went across the road then – they put them across the road

LW You don't remember playing on the swings?

EG No

LW So once you were inside the Gardens, just near that entrance there's that statue – do you recall anything about the statue at all?

EG I can't remember the name of it

PG I've read it a million times and I can't tell you

LW Clark

PG Yes Clark, that's correct. And those big trees there – they always amazed me with those big roots coming out. Do you know the names of the – figs – are they the Moreton Bay Figs – that's right yes that's it – lovely entrance there

LW What did you used to do there?

PG Play around the statue and on the statue

LW Did you climb on it?

PG Yes, I'm sure we did

EG It's got a fence around it – has it got a fence around it now?

PG Yes, a small one

LW Do you remember the cannons?

PG Oh the cannons, yes.

EG They've gone

PG Oh but we definitely played on them – our brothers liked to climb on them

EG Where was the cannon, I can't remember – the boys might have played on them

PG I do remember – I loved climbing on them and sitting on them and playing on the cannons – yeh that was fun

LW Did you used to pretend to play wars or what did you do?

12.35

PG No, I didn't play wars – I didn't like wars. I just thought that they were interesting to climb on. That's true, there were cannons there.

EG You had nowhere else to go when we were growing up in Williamstown so you always headed for the beach or the Gardens. I'm the same now when I go for a walk, I go along the beach and then I finish up in the Gardens and head home. It's always just lovely, I just say 'I'm going out for a walk' and I go to the Gardens.

- LW What's your reason for going to the Gardens?
- EG Well I as I say, it's peaceful and I look at the plants even though I can't remember names of them but I come home and I just think that was my half an hour of peace. At the end of the day, it's usually around four o'clock I go. I enjoy that.
- PG We always thought we lived on the wrong side of the tracks in Williamstown growing up, it was just the workman's suburb. Dad used to tell us that. We were always surprised when relatives and people used to want to come to visit us because we lived near the beach. We were always a bit surprised about that weren't we, but it was a big deal for them to come from Moreland and Coburg and places on those hot day, to come and visit us at the beach and we always ended up in the Gardens, always, with them when we had visitors.
- EG It was shadier and cooler
- LW Do you remember - so that would have been the fifties?
- EG Yes, the fifties mainly
- LW Do you remember seeing the gardeners working around the gardens? And I know then they used to have big floral displays, do you remember those?
- EG No – did they put them?
- LW Yes, in spring time
- PG It was always pretty. They didn't have the floral clock there?
- EG No, you're thinking of the one in the city. I don't think they had one, Shelley would know
- LW Before you mentioned the palms, what do you remember about those palms?
- EG Well, you could see them because they were so tall. You could see them from Railway Crescent because my mother-in-law lived in Railway Crescent and over the houses they were really really tall. And then – all of a sudden you didn't see them anymore. I understand they were cut down and now they're tall again. (laughs) I don't remember what year and how long it took to grow them but now it's just lovely.
- 15.21 Now the brides they walk down that main avenue and they've got the big palm trees back again, which are lovely I think.
- LW When we were talking earlier, you've got some photos here of brides and the gates. Tell me what you said about the gates.
- EG I remember them being white gates, lovely, these big white gates. One of my daughters had her photo taken in front of these lovely white gates. Then they got painted black. I believe it was because they were rusted and needed to be refurbished or renewed and I prefer the shire actually but anyway that's the way time changes. Perhaps when they take photos now of the brides, you have the white up against the black. But I don't know I just like the white.
- PG I think the white was lovely. It just looked so elegant. Here's a picture of the white bride in front of the white gates but it still looked really elegant. I miss the white gates
- EG Especially when you come around the round-a-bout, you don't see them- they're dramatic

- PG They were very dramatic when they were white. You don't actually don't see them so easily now
- LW These photos here of the wedding – did your daughter get married in the Gardens?
- PG No, she didn't, this daughter didn't. This is Eileen's daughter, Eileen. But she got married at Holy Trinity. But everybody, no matter where you got married, went down to the Gardens for photos anyway, that was the standard procedure. But this daughter, she got married in the Gardens didn't she? (referring to one of the bridesmaids)
- EG Yes, Janet, she did.
- PG It was in the Gardens. I wasn't here I was in America.
- EG Yes she I think she had her ceremony there. We had nieces married there. And now I go down on a Saturday afternoon, when I'm walking my dachshund dog or if I have grandchildren – I go and look at the brides. That's another thing I've passed on from my children to my grandchildren. 'Come on, we'll go on Saturday afternoon and we might see a bride'. That's something I'll always remember
- PG That comes from our childhood.
- EG Yes that's right. Not that long ago I was down there and there's always a ceremony or they've gone to have photos taken there
- PG Mum always used to smile – there's a picture of Eileen and I – I was only about four – John was in the pram, he was the baby and I'm three years older than him – so I would have been three or four and Eileen would have been five tops, younger probably – but they all thought we were guests at the wedding. Because in those days, the photographers, was the only way you'd ever get photos, we didn't have a camera. So Mum let him take a picture of us and then she went into the city and got that picture so we do have that picture. It was a big deal to get a photo in those days. But we were just hanging around looking at the brides, that's what we used to do
- EG Go to the church
- PG Yeh go hang out at the church or go to the Gardens and see the brides.
- LW Eileen what do your grandchildren like to do when you take them to the Gardens?
- EG They love to run and hide, play hidey – to get away from me. Actually I shouldn't say this but about three or four weeks ago I have one granddaughter aged ten – and she actually climbed one of the trees so I thought I had to get her down – 'I don't think you'd ought to be climbing the trees Kristen' so we got down – we took a photo – but she enjoyed the time down there anyway. That was nice.
- 20.00
- LW Have you ever noticed the reading corner they set up there in the school holidays?
- PG I see it all the time because I do yoga there. I do yoga and that's beautiful to go down and do yoga in the Gardens and I see the reading corner there
- LW How often do you do yoga there?

- PG We can only go if the weather is going to be 23 degrees so it just depends on the weather. Now the sunny weather's coming on, we'll be going more often
- LW Eileen, you haven't taken your grandchildren down to the reading corner?
- EG No, they're a bit older and I didn't get there this holidays. They went away for the first week so I didn't take them down, now this is the last day of the holidays so I missed out
- LW Do any of them live locally?
- EG No, the older ones live in Altona and the younger ones are in Geelong and Greendale, so not locally anymore. But they're not far away. But they always come to Williamstown, we're not moving (laughs)
- LW Where do you live now Eileen?
- EG I live in Hannan Street. I used to live in Osborne Street and would just take the children across the Fearon Reserve and down into the water at the beach there and come back through the Gardens and home. So I've been very fortunate.
- PG She's on the corner of Gellibrand Street so her kids grew up really close to our parents. My poor kids missed out of course. It was nice for her kids to be able to run over to Nannas house. Because that was just a hope skip and a jump from the beach – just one block.
- LW So your life focused more around the beach than the Gardens?
- EG Only because it was closer to where I have lived. It's the same – I go for my walks now that I've retired. I enjoy walking so it's along the beach – and our father did too, he always walked, he used to walk as far as the football ground from Gellibrand Street so he was pretty good.
- PG And that was twice a day. He walked his dog's legs completely off. The dog just laid down one day and said I'm not going any further, that's it, he did die yeh. But Dad had just kept walking. All the old people can remember him walking
- PG We don't have a lot of memories really. I was talking to my friend Mary – her family grew up in Williamstown – and she was one of the – Hines Brothers – she was going to come today but she had a funeral. She said 'I just remember running through the park'. She was an athletic thing and she said about the aviary and just looking through there at the rabbits and birds – so that's all she could remember too. But I think if we get her talking another day we might be able to
- LW That's okay. Did you as teenagers ever have parties in the Gardens, or picnics, or school things in the Gardens or on the Fearon, sports events?
- EG The sports, they were usually at the football ground, the sports. My son played football with the CYMS on the Fearon reserve and that's still going with the CYMS. We used to watch that on a Saturday. Lacrosse played down there, cricket.
- PG We went to St Mary's school and – was it the Fearon the boys always went to?
- EG No it was another reserve. I think its Robinson Reserve, opposite St Marys School. The boys played over there. Not the girls, we didn't go out to play.
- PG I just remember the boys going off to the Fearon because it was bigger – yeh for the football

LW And no school picnics at the Gardens – I would have thought the local schools would have gone there

EG They may have but we can't recall. We didn't go off on too many things in our day. You went to school, we didn't go out having – true.

PG Father Cassidy used to take us on trips.

EG You may have

PG Mary and I can remember going on trips with Father Cassidy – the thousand steps and stuff like that – I don't know where you were. You see she was older, she was in the grade ahead of me s she had different friends than me

LW What high school did you go to?

25.23

PG We went to St Aloysius Ladies College in North Melbourne – emphasis on the Ladies. No we didn't go to the local high school. There was the high school and there was the girls school

EG We could have gone but we just carried on and went to a catholic school.

LW Tell me about your parents. It's a little bit away from the Gardens I know. You said your dad worked for the railways. What did he do there?

EG He was a Black Smith Striker – he was a labourer but he worked there for over fifty years.

PG He started there when he was fourteen and retired when he was sixty-five⁵ and then he went back because he was bored. Mum never worked. That was Dad's claim to fame, that his wife never worked but of course she always wanted to. It just wasn't done in those days

LW What do you think she would have liked to have done?

PG She was a chocolate hand decorator – she hand decorated chocolates – she did that for a while in a factory. That's all I know the work that she did.

LW When your Dad worked in the railway workshops, they were quite large in those days

PG Yes, they were massive

LW And you lived quite close to them

PG Well, that's the reason he moved to Williamstown. Dad was born and raised in Richmond. He's an old Tiger and they only came because of the job so he was literally five minutes – he used to ride his bike – and he was only five minutes bike ride away from work.

LW So a lot of people around here would have worked for the workshops?

PG You either worked on the docks or the railways – one of the two – there wasn't anything else. We never really thought we'd stay in Williamstown - it was the wrong side of the tracks. Dad had always talked about moving to Balwyn as soon as he retired. He had a house in Balwyn and as soon as he retired – by then Eileen was married and living in Williamstown and having babies and Mum said 'Well I'm not going anywhere' – so he never did get to move to Balwyn, which was the big thing we grew up with

LW I guess there was a bit of a stigma living in Williamstown

PG Yes, it wasn't a great place to live at all. We didn't really appreciate the beach and the Strand and Gardens, we just took it so much for granted. It's only now that we really appreciate it. The bridge opened it up. Before the bridge

EG No-one wanted to come here

PG No

EG If you went to a dance in the city and you met someone who might take you home. A boy would say where do you live and you'd say Williamstown and that was the end of it, they wouldn't want to get a taxi or come in the train to Williamstown. They didn't have cars in those days. So we lived in the wrong spot, that didn't matter

LW So this is why Williamstown girls married Williamstown boys?

PG You'd be right there

LW Your husband was a Williamstown boy Eileen?

EG When I met him it was because I was a friend of his sister so that's how we met. I used to go to her place to play piano, we practised piano together so he spotted me then. (laughs) it was quite funny. But his father also worked in the railways. Con Gleeson, he was a boiler inspector, a lovely man. We've just got railway blood in us I guess. Still do, my husband's an engineer and he just still loves making things

LW Was he with the railways?

EG No, he was private enterprise – engineer and other places.

PG We both had to work for the railways because Dad made us. We both worked for the railways in Spencer Street. I refused, I said I was never going to work for the railways I was as stubborn as can be but I ended up going there but Eileen you'd already started there

EG I started there yes, I did start there and then I got an offer to be a dental nurse so I went in one day said I'm resigning, I'm going to do dental nursing, so off I went. Did dental nursing for a yea, then I left there and came back to the railways again and worked at Newport this time. So that was closer

LW What did you used to do?

EG Typing, we were typists

PG I was a stenographer so I was a cut above everybody else

EG She might have been but I wasn't. She took Pitmans shorthand but I read my bosses. The bosses in those days could write pitmans shorthand and they wrote it in their notes and we had to read it of course and then you did the typing in the typing bay. But Patti, she got a job with the secretary or something – in the railways

PG Yeh I did go to other jobs first but I ended up getting a job in the stores branch in head office. And head office is called the something hotel now – the Grand Hotel – in spencer Street in the city – you can see it from the train – that used to be the old railway head office building.

LW So you didn't ever work in this area, in Williamstown?

EG Only me, I worked over at Newport Workshops – just across the road here.

LW There was a big office?

EG Yes

LW Is that building still there Eileen?

EG Yes, where the clock is, where the clock tower is, that used to be the main office. But actually where I worked I was in an office at the laboratory, called the laboratory, where they did all the testing of the paints and the engineering tests. So that was interesting. Then I got married and then the next thing you know I was leaving to have my first child and that was it. I didn't get back to work again then until later on in life.

LW I've seen a photo somewhere of lunch at the railway workshops – every one gathered for lunch and there were table cloths. Did they do that in your day?

PG That might have been in the canteen – no no we didn't get white table cloths.

EG Unless that was over at Newport canteen, it could have been. Either that or in at Spencer Street Station, there was a cafeteria in there

PG I don't remember one in the head office building. You only got half an hour for lunch anyway.

LW That's brilliant. Can I get some details of these photos from you? Thank you on behalf of the Friends of Williamstown Botanic Gardens, it is just really exciting talking to people about the Gardens.

EG We must thank Shelley, because Shelley might remember me because I did work at the Williamstown Hospital, she'd remember me, we met there. What a lovely job she does with her workers at the Gardens, it's great