

2014.016

**Williamstown Botanic Gardens
Oral History Timed Summary**

Ken Speakman

2 June 2014



This is an interview with Ken Speakman 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.

Also present was his daughter, Nola Wilson. His son visited part of the way through the interview. Ken's family moved to Williamstown when he was a baby and he has lived in Williamstown, close to the Gardens since that time. He was a keen lacrosse player, playing on Fearon Reserve. Ken was interviewed for his memories of the Gardens and its relationship to Fearon Reserve.

The date of the interview is 2nd June 2014 and the interviewer is Lindy Wallace.

LW Ken if you would just give me your name and where and when you were born please

KS Kenneth Speakman. I was born on 3rd February 1918 in Port Augusta, South Australia and I came to Williamstown, obviously I was a baby in arms, I remember nothing of that, but that was ninety-six years ago and I'm still here and I have never lived anywhere else. I'm in Williamstown in my ninety-sixth years except for seven years war service. The rest of the time I've been in Williamstown and I've no reason to want to leave.

LW Today we're going to talk about your memories of the Gardens. You've been in Williamstown for a long time. Maybe we could start with you telling me your earliest memory on the Gardens.

KS Yes my earliest memories of the Gardens were more attached to the Fearon Reserve which is attached to the Gardens. I've played Lacrosse all my life from the time I was eleven. So I've spent a lot of time on the Fearon Reserve sporting field which was part of the Gardens estate. Outside of that, a trip to the Gardens, a walk along the beach of a Sunday afternoon, after Sunday School we'd have a walk along the beach – this was myself and about six other chums who felt the same as me – played lacrosse and went to the Methodist church and all that – we'd have a nice walk along the beach on a nice day and it was invariably besides the gardens and have an entertaining hour or so mopping up what was available in the Gardens. What was available in the Gardens at that time was the bird cage, which was very very good, they had a lot of birds there. That bird cage was up in the corner (Ken draws a plan on a piece of paper) – Billy Crowe's residence was here and the bird cage was here.

We would walk around the fish pond – there was the fish pond and it had walkways over it – like a bridge – water all around and a couple of walk-overs so you could be standing in the middle of the fishpond. You came over here from those gates and there was lawn here and garden paths all around here,

NW What was next to the bird cage Dad? Was there something else next to the bird cage?

KS Not from my memory

LW So Ken, this is Fearon Reserve here (pointing at Ken's drawing)

KS Yes, Fearon reserve here – the whole lot. We'd come down to the half way mark, this is where the haircut and shave for want of a better expression

LW Can you just tell me what you mean by haircut and shave?

- LS They were very very well looked after by Mr Crowe and staff. But this half was fairly – I don't suppose it's that much different today as it was then – I think there are tables and chairs. This part here has been encouraged to have a picnic area where once it didn't seem to warrant that sort of interest. They spent money on this half of the Gardens. Whilst they had it looking spot on, this was a toilet block up in the corner here. There were paths leading down there and there was another gate on the corner of Giffard Street, I'm sure – I think I'm right – there was a gate on the path that'd take you out through that part of the Gardens. It was a pretty rough area, mown but not treated as a lawn – keep the weeds down and the gravel paths
- NW It was very much the big pine trees so you wouldn't be growing much grass
- LW What about the rotunda? Do you remember much happening there?
- KS Yes – I forgot to put that in here (Ken drew the rotunda positioning on his plan)
- NW Because when I was young not much happened there. We used to run in and out and play around there; that was after Mr Crowe – he was not in that position, I'm sure. I believe it was used as a band rotunda in days earlier.
- KS This was before the bandstand was built on the Esplanade – what is now the café was the bandstand – as you tell by its shape. (Indicating his plan) – the platform was up here, all this was open. People would sit on the lawns on the Esplanade there and listen to the band playing. Prior to that Williamstown was always noted for its pretty high class brass band. They used to perform regularly of a Sunday in the old band rotunda which consisted purely and simply – it was just raised up
- NW With rocks around the side
- KS Yes, and a rail around it. It was quite open and they just elevated it a yard or two to increase the sound all around the place – and the band used to perform there. And we of course as young blokes, we'd sit there and listen to the band of a Sunday afternoon
- NW I recall that when I was young around that rotunda were a lot of succulents plants, like cactus
- KS Yes, you're right Nola
- NW I think they'd been there for a long time
- KS I think there's some evidence of the old bandstand still there – it was quite a feature but it lost its punch when they built the one on the Esplanade. In those days the brass band was great entertainment and in some instances, the only entertainment. The people looked forward to a trip down the Esplanade, or the Gardens or whatever and listen to the band. It was a good hour or twos entertainment, which people couldn't afford otherwise. It was back in the depression era of course and things were tough. There were plenty of trees around here.
- LW Were there any little shops adjacent to that area?
- KS No
- LW You didn't go and buy an ice-cream?

11.02

- KS No, if you wanted an ice-cream – on the corner of the Fearon Reserve was a kiosk
- NW Corner of Fearon Reserve and Garden Street
- KS There was a little café there. Across the road was Ramsays Café on the other corner of The Esplanade and Garden Street, was old Bud Ramsays cafe, which was quite a well run café. He had a room for entertainment there, there was a dance hall alongside it
- NW You told me a story about you and your brothers, you were a bit naughty. You used to go and let Mr Ramsay's horse off and go and tell him 'Mr Ramsay Mr Ramsay your horse is off' and you would get a donut each.
- KS That's true, that's right (laughs). You had to find your own entertainment and all sorts of things during the depression
- LW There would have been a few people with horses. I know there were horses that used to work the gardens
- KS Oh yes, the Council had quite a stable of horses
- LW Do you remember seeing the horses at work? Can you describe to me what they did?
- KS The dust cart was powered by horses
- NW Were they all housed at the back of the Gardens?
- KS No, the Council I'm sure had their stable somewhere at the back of the Town Hall
- NW Lindy's wondering if you remember the horses working in the Gardens. Can I remember the horses pulling a hessian the gravel paths?
- KS Yes, to level the gravel path out
- LW Is that the gravel paths in the Gardens Ken?
- KS Oh yes – and very very well kept. A chap by the name of Stitch [believed to be Harry Stitt] – how rude you were as kids – he had a pad over one eye and we used to call him 'What'll I stitch' – because that was his name. He would be there with his barrow and his rake and with addition of the horses trailing the mats over the gardens – the gravel paths were quite a feature – they were very very well kept – very well kept
- NW So you wouldn't have ridden your bikes in there
- KS No, if we did, we'd have Billy Crowe on our wheel very very quickly – very quickly
- LW Tell me a bit about Billy Crowe. Billy Crowe was the Curator when you were young. Did he live in the caretaker house?
- KS He lived on site and his children. They were Roman Catholics from memory, I can remember his daughter, I'm just not quite too sure of the complete family but he had at least a daughter I know who went to St Mary's. Billy was most vigilant – you'd see Bill with his hands behind his back walking around the Gardens at any old time – one, checking on the workmen, that they were doing their jobs properly and two, there were no bouts of larrikinism by the young and just to see that everything was in top shape. He was a real taskmaster – a real taskmaster.

15.50

- LW How did you feel about him being tough?
- KS You made sure you behaved yourself – that was about the long and the short of it
- NW You knew what was expected if you visited the Gardens
- KS Oh yes
- LW Did you and your friends ever do anything to tease him
- KS Not really, no
- NW Didn't you climb on the statue?
- KS AWT Clarke's statue – yes that was here somewhere (marking on the drawn map in front of him).
- NW It's under the Moreton Bay fig tree
- KS I can't remember defacing the statue of AWT Clarke but there's a possibility that we did.
- LW Were the cannons there when you were young?
- KS Yes, the cannons were there
- LW Can you describe to me where the cannons were?
- KS In this area – they didn't form part of that area (indicating the drawn map) – I can't imagine a cannon there at all
- LW Did you and your friends play on the cannons?
- KS Yes. We just hopped on and were shooting somebody or firing at something
- NW And you'd slide all the way to the end because they became really shiny from the kids doing that
- KS Oh yes, you'd slide out on the barrel
- NW In a way it was a bit like having what the kids have these days – the adventure playground - the statue and the cannons because they were there when I was growing up too.
- Dad, you were talking about a lot earlier than I remember, you're talking about the nineteen-twenties and thirties and forties. Certainly from the forties on there were a lot of very big picnics that were organised in the back section – you remember, around Christmas time? ACI and
- KS Yes, indeed, even Sunday school picnics were held down here. They could have the races which is part and parcel of a Sunday School picnic. The foot races they had along the Fearon and the picnic part was here. It was fairly well patronised, as were the Gardens
- NW The organisations like ACI had a very very very big Christmas party for the employees
- KS That's the bottle works up at Spotswood, ACI Glassworks – yes, they had their Christmas function there. Oh no, it was well used.

19.40

NW They used to put up big marquees and tents. It was a very big organisation. I think some of Masonic Lodges used to have picnics there.

LW So all their picnics were held in what they call now the pinetum area and over here into Fearon Reserve?

KS Now I'm just thinking of any seating that was available. Certainly there would be some provision for people to sit and listen to the band. On the Esplanade when they built the rotunda it was different, it was built in grass clusters – all that was grass and that was kept mown too. People just sat on the grass and listened to the band. I'm sure here there would be – although I can't recall - we never used it – there would be some provision – tables or chairs or something for people to listen to the band, which was quite a feature – they were good.

LW That drew everyone down there to listen?

KS Yes.

LW Did they play in winter or just in summer?

KS They played very regularly, either winter or summer

NW Were there any occasions that people would get up on their soapbox?

KS No no no

NW The Salvation Army, would they play there?

KS No, the Salvation Army played on the Esplanade, at the bottom of Forster Street. They also had a very good band. Most Salvation Army depots did in those days. They played at the bottom of Forster Street, on the footpath.

NW I guess because you had brothers, you didn't go into the manicured gardens section to have a little lunch or picnic

KS No no no, we just used to live in Forster Street, which I just here, all our lives we lived in Forster Street – we preferred to duck home for a sandwich in between a swim (laughs)

LW Can you describe Fearon Reserve for me? You played lacrosse – can you describe the playing areas of Fearon Reserve?

KS (Ken is drawing in a plan throughout this part of the interview) – the Esplanade Tennis Club ran from here to here, right along Garden Street was the Esplanade Tennis Club and on the end was St John's ambulance depot – in case anybody cut their foot or somebody drowned or something – the St Johns Ambulance was regularly manned during the summer months by first aid people. The Fearon Reserve was for football, played by the CYMS.

LW Can you tell me who the CYMS was?

KS The Catholic Young Mens Society. The Willie Districts shared the football field across the field that half and that would be the dressing pavilions there and there – so that's about what went on.

25.19

- LW What was between Fearon Reserve and the Gardens – was there trees or shrubs or a fence?
- KS There was a fence and it was fairly well treed because you're abutting on this part here – there was certainly a fence all along here
- NW I think it was a high picket fence
- KS Yes, I think you're right Nola. (looking at the plan) this is the gardens here and these dressing sheds were here – or dressing pavilions, not sheds
- NW One belonged to the beautiful tennis club which is now the lacrosse club and the other was a wooden shed wasn't it
- KS Yes. So that aptly describes the Fearon – there's the Gardens with the fence here
- LW Do you remember if there was a gate from the Fearon into the Gardens?
- KS I think that would be a foregone conclusion and I think there was one gate somewhere about here. The Fearon was for the sports events and the Gardens was for the Gardens events. In my opinion they were always quite separate and apart even though they're on the one block
- LW Was it before your time – I've seen a photo of a bike track there?
- KS I think you're right – it was before my time, I can't remember it but I was reading something not so long ago which made me believe that there was a bike track there – but not in my time.
- LW We also have photos that show the Mayor, Mr Liston often had garden parties down there. Do you remember your parents going to any garden parties at the Gardens?
- KS No no. The Mayor, JJ Liston – no no
- NW Probably depends which part of the social ladder you were on
- LW When we were talking you said that except for your service in the navy
- KS Thirty-nine to forty-six
- LW You joined the navy to join up for the war?
- KS No, I was in the naval reserve, which was where the high school assembly hall is on the corner of Pasco Street and Melbourne Road. All that block alongside of the hall was the parade ground. We had a very very strong naval reserve down there. I was in the naval reserve and when the war started they said 'we gottcha'. (laughs)
- LW Do you remember having any functions at the Gardens in the lead up to the war for recruitment or for fund raising?
- KS Not really, no I couldn't say yes to that
- LW Ernie Anderson's daughter told me that the American army was there somewhere. Do you recall that at all?
- KS No, they may well have been although I can't imagine it

31.55

LW How many years did you spend playing lacrosse there

KS I started when I was eleven and I played from eleven until I was twenty-one, then twenty-one to twenty-six, I was in the navy and I started again in 1947 and played until 1952 and then coached for many years. They were seven very valuable years out of my lacrosse career. The only regret I've got there because even though I say it myself I wasn't a bad player and I'd just made the top side down there as a kid in 1937 and just a couple years' experience there would have done me the world of good in the lacrosse circle but I wasn't there, I was in the navy. When you come back it's a different scenario, you've got a wife and a family and a job to go back to and all that, so you never had the time or enthusiasm for lacrosse as you did pre-war. But anyhow they were great times, great days.

LW Has the lacrosse field always been there for Williamstown?

KS Yes as far as I can remember

NW You might tell Lindy where the Fearon got its name from

KS Captain James H Fearon, sea pilot, lived on the corner of Thompson Street and Illawarra Street. A very very public minded citizen. He took the lacrosse club to heart, was president for many many years and even sunk plenty of cash into the club, principally in taking junior teams over to South Australia or Port Pirie to play over there. He wasn't just a figure head president, he was very active. When I first started playing lacrosse it was really a paddock

NW I think it might have just been call The Gardens – we play over at The Gardens

KS Then they decided to level the whole thing out and make a proper playing field – that was about 1936 and it was at that time they named it the Fearon Reserve after Captain Fearon.

Interview paused for the arrival of Ken's son.

LW Ken, you were just saying about the woolen mills, do you remember the smells of the woolen mills?

KS Yes, we all do. We lived as the bird flies 25-50 yards from the woolen mill. There was an aroma, depends on which way the wind blew of course, you either got it or you didn't get it

LW What other smells do you guys remember, do you remember the sea or the Gardens?

NW Can I tell you a smell because Mum and Dad had the milk bar at the Beach Station after the war, when Dad came back from the war - I was aged about four or five - and they did all the lunches for the woolen mill. Now the woolen mill might have smelled pretty revolting but the smell of the rolls being cut for the hot dogs that went into the lunch at the mill was amazing and I still have that smell, I still know that smell. Mum would be in the kitchen cutting the rolls, for salad rolls or cheese rolls or whatever, and hot dogs as well – that was the smell. So when you go to the local lacrosse club or the footy club and they've got the hot dogs that takes me back sixty four years. The smell – there you are.

The other smells, the oil refinery – do you to know what that smelt like – who farted (laughs) – that’s everyone would say – that was pretty rank wasn’t it when that smell came across.

38.20

LW Was that from the oil refinery up Kororoit Creek Road?

NW But we lived with these smells. People who came to Williamstown would sometimes say – oh phooh, smell the seaweed – and Dad would say breathe it into your nostrils, it’ll do you good. But we didn’t notice it, we grew up with it. We had the seaweed smell and then we had abattoirs at the end of Champion Road - that was pretty rank. The abattoirs was long before Mobil came. The abattoirs aren’t there anymore – what was that called Dad?

KS Sims Cooper

RS the oil refinery doesn’t smell at all now does it, you never get a smell of it.

KS We were living so close to the water - I’ve never lived any further from the water than what we are now - and you only got a sea breeze and it’s gone – they’re gone into the middle of the city and up north somewhere – we rarely got it. You’d have to have a north wind for us to - but in the season when you had southerly breeze and south easterly wind we were never concerned about that because it just blew straight away.

NW Remember we used to collect the little bits of wool that must have blown out from the mill – they be on the nature strip and that – did you do that? We used to collect the little bits of wool and feel how greasy it was. It was good for when you did projects at school because you had the little bits of wool.

What other smells were there?

LW You don’t remember going to the Gardens and smelling the pines or the cypress or anything like that?

NW Oh the pine trees – oh yes – that conjures up Saturday at the Fearon to me – the smell of the pine trees at the back of the Gardens. As I said earlier, we lived so close to the back of the Gardens, we played there a lot. That smell of the pine – and the monkey nuts.

LW Tell me more about the monkey nuts

NW Little nuts that had a groove and when you broke them open, there were your pine nuts, the ones that you would cook with – yes – the ones that you would eat

LW So that’s why you went and collected them, so you could eat them?

NW Yes. I don’t know what species of pine they are but they’re perfectly good pine nuts

LW Do you collect them green or dried?

NW No

RS They were a browny sort of nutty color – you’d get a jar full of them

NW I don’t know how many people know about that but they’re there

41.50

KS This is quite news to me really, what you're talking about

LW You didn't know that?

KS No, I wasn't privy of that free feed

LW They have the big Bunya Pine in the Gardens that drops those great big bunya nuts – have you seen those?

NW Oh yes I do – we do yoga on the grass at the Gardens, lucky we weren't lying there. One dropped between Tuesday and Friday – great big things, they'd knock you out.

There were always the big succulent plants along the fence between the gardens and the Fearon – big succulent plants. You probably weren't as good a botanist as me (laughs)

KS I was probably looking for a lacrosse ball (laughs)

NW That's a funny story – I don't know if you used to play on the Gloucester Reserve or the boys that you coached

KS Yes, the boys used to play on Gloucester

NW So, we'd be going back to the fifties-sixties, certainly the women used to play there when I first played. My husband was a scuba diver and when he was diving there once and he found a ball that had obviously been on the bottom for many many many many years. It was green on the bottom and he thought what's this – and it's a lacrosse ball – because he wasn't from a lacrosse family – and sure enough it was years old. There'd be a lot of balls in that water

Ken's son got up to leave

LW Will we end the interview there – it's been absolutely brilliant

NW I know you must have plenty of photos of the palms down the avenue. I was devastated when they had to go because you can't imagine that they'll ever grow quickly enough to see them in your lifetime but they have. The palms there now are nearly as tall as I remember

LW they've always been a significant part of the Gardens I can imagine how people felt. Did everyone else feel the same as you?

NW Oh yes, it was the talk – 'oh the palms have gone' – there was a lot of talk about it but these things have to happen don't they – they were dangerous

LW We might end it here. Thank you all of you on behalf of the Friends of Williamstown Botanic Gardens, it's been absolutely wonderful