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## WHEN ANTONIO PARK WAS HOME

My family's association with Antonio Park began in 1951 when my older sister Betty Coleclough, her husband Dennis and son Mark moved into the rented single roomed building which would become known to my family as "The Shack" (officially, the address was 627 Whitehorse Road, Mitcham). Previously, this building had been occupied by a family named Burgess.

Betty, Dennis and Mark had arrived in Australia from England in November 1948 and my mother Doris Harris, my sister Margaret (now known as Julia), my older Brother Glen (Roberts) and I followed in January 1950. After living at various locations in war time England and experiencing the "Blitz" and initially staying with relatives and friends at several addresses in nearby Cook Street and Deep Creek Road, the Shack was a welcome home for the young Coleclough family.

However, conditions were very primitive at first, with no running water and an outback style "dunny" located some distance behind the house along a dirt path that sometimes served as a popular place for large brown snakes to coil up and sun themselves. With the help of friends and relatives, running water was piped to the house, a Volkswagen car case was fixed to the rear of the house as a sleepout and, some years later, a new "dunny" was constructed somewhat closer to the house (even then, night time visits on wet and/or windy nights were at best unpleasant and, at worst, frightening).

I did not envy the Antonio Brothers, who had things even harder when they were young (Old Mr Ernest told me of night time treks by hurricane lamplight through the bush, with his brother John, to meet their parents returning home from business in Melbourne by horse drawn coach along Whitehorse Road (which was little more than a bush track in those days).

On the positive side, the rent charged by the Antonio Brothers was very reasonable (ten shillings per week throughout the eleven years of our family's tenancy).

In 1953 the young Coleclough family moved to their newly built home in Box Hill and my mother, my sister Julia and I moved into the Shack from temporary accommodation in nearby Cook Street. My brother Glen had earlier moved to Queensland to seek his fortune. Julia and I were enrolled in Ringwood Primary School and, subsequently, Ringwood High School.

Growing up at the Shack was often challenging. Money was scarce and never sufficient to enable any significant improvements to be made. The outside timbers were never painted but were nonetheless in good condition (they were thick hardwood weatherboards and appeared to have been treated with oil or creosote over the years). They were secured by hand made "Diamond Head nails. The inner walls were made of tongued and grooved "butter box" boards, which were treated with some kind of preservative. The window of the car case sleep out (which became my bedroom) was a simple rectangular hole cut in the back wall (I always knew when the rain had a north wind behind it). Cats and spiders were frequent night time visitors and a swarm of bees once took up residence between the inner and outer walls of the Shack, which

provided us with a supply of free honey (and a few stings as well until a kindly apiarist came to our rescue).

On the other hand, we virtually had the run of most of what is now known as Antonio Park and the wood fire never ran short of fuel thanks to the huge amount of dead wood that always seemed to litter the ground, no matter how much we collected and burned. Apples and pears could sometimes be found on the branches of the neglected fruit trees (often difficult to discern under masses of blackberries which covered most of them) and, for some years, there were masses of daffodils and jonquils each Spring. Persistent and brazen local thieves eventually stole most of the bulbs. No doubt, the descendants of many such bulbs continue to grace local gardens.

In the early days snakes, possums and blue tongued lizards were frequent visitors until our domestic cat population blew out of control (at one stage we had seventeen) and exacted a significant toll on the native wildlife. Traffic on Whitehorse Road also took a fearful toll on our cats! In hindsight, this was probably a good thing, as passing cars were their only real predators!

My sister Margaret (Julia) and I both attended school at Ringwood Primary and Ringwood High Schools. Every morning we joined other pupils at the bus stop at the corner of Whitehorse and Deep Creek roads. In those days, Whitehorse Road was a narrow (2 lane) strip of bitumen and Deep Creek Road was not even sealed. In summer, cars driving up the latter road would produce clouds of dust and in winter, puddles would be covered in ice. It was definitely colder in those days.

My mother was a rather diminutive woman who had to work full time until 1960 to raise two young children. Keeping the bush at bay was always a difficult task and the proximity of so much combustible material to an equally combustible and well seasoned timber building was always a worry. Bushfires in the area were not uncommon and caused feelings of anxiety on many a hot summer evening.

It was a bushfire which brought our quiet and peaceful life at the Shack to a sudden and nearly tragic end. On a hot day in January 1962, fires were reported around Lilydale and a call went out over the radio for adult male volunteers to fight the fires. Volunteer fire brigades were few and far between in those days. Although the call defined adults as being aged eighteen and over, the exuberance and curiosity of youth led me to put my age up by two years, take a "sickie" from work and hitch a ride in the general direction of Lilydale. My sister Julia had married and moved to Ferritree Gulley and only my mother and I were living in the Shack by the time.

By the time I got there, there were already as many volunteers as the fire authorities could handle and, as fires were being reported closer to Melbourne, I found myself with a truckload of volunteers headed for Park Orchards. On arrival there, we saw a wall of flames heading towards us from the North. The strong northerly wind suddenly increased in strength and the fire jumped over us, setting alight one of the vehicles we had arrived in and were sheltering behind. Although I didn't realise it at the time, it was headed directly for Antonio Park.

I recall having sensed that something was wrong and I hitched a ride back home, where I was shocked to find Antonio Park a blackened wasteland and a pile of

smouldering ashes where our Shack had been, with the chimney standing like a sentinel over the sad scene. After initially fearing the worst, I was greatly relieved to find that my mother had been alerted to the approach of the fire and had managed to escape with our beloved German Sheppard "Gypsy" and her caged budgie "Jiki". Unfortunately, our chooks had not been so lucky!

The loss of the Shack brought my childhood/adolescence to a rather abrupt halt and completed the process of breaking up the family. My mother moved to Box Hill and lived with Betty and I found myself in the wide world. Following National Service and a tour of duty in South Vietnam, I completed a law degree and moved to Canberra and a career as a government lawyer.

I often think back to my carefree childhood days at the Shack at Antonio Park. Although we had little money and few "mod cons", we had the advantage of other kinds of riches and, on balance, we were well off. I had the benefits of the biggest backyard in the neighbourhood and developed a love of and appreciation for the Bush with its wonderful smells and seasons that endures to this day. The Antonio Park Bushland was, to all intents and purposes, my extended home. While the materialism of childhood sometimes led me to envy (I often yearned for a new bright, shiny geared bicycle like those some of my mates rode), I had many advantages that I now realise were denied to many of my contemporaries and which few kids of this day could enjoy.

On balance, I couldn't have wished for a better place to grow up!

Robin Harris

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