

ELWOOD MEMORIES 1922 -1950

Correction: 9 June 2009 and 2 January 2010

Mr Keith Smyth

My family moved to No 17 Rothesay Avenue, Elwood SE3 when I was about one month old in 1922.

My earliest memories are of standing at the front gate watching a very large steam roller working in the street, the fat horse and dray collecting the rubbish bins, the open chariot milk cart doling out our milk into 'billy's the occasional rabbit' oh with his rabbits hanging on sticks across his cart, and the gas man on his bike turning our street lights on and off with a long pole.

I commenced at the little school in Mitford Street in 1927, and I have two strong memories of that time. The first was my mother standing at the gate as I went up the steps and the second was a boy getting his mouth washed out with soap. He struggled a lot. No bad language was the message there.



Me extreme left in middle row
Elwood Preps, 1927

About that time we all marched down to St Kilda Pier to welcome the Duke and Duchess of York. They landed on the pier and I remember standing there waving a flag and receiving a little bag of lollies

In grade 3 we moved over the road (Mitford Street) into the "big" school. We were taught by Miss Withall. In grade 4 we were taught by Miss Quirk.; in grade 5 taught by Miss Tinan; in grade 6 by Mr Bain. The Headmaster was Mr White, who was renowned for his use of the

strap. The common practice was for all the boys for punishment outside his office in the passageway. They would be sent home with sore hands. Failing to wear one's cap would be enough.



Me holding the Slate
Elwood Central, grade 6, 1932

One year, in grade 7, I was given the job of ringing the bell on the balcony to mark the change of lessons. The bell was salvaged from a shipwreck in Port Phillip Bay, It's probably still there.



Me second top row, extreme left
Elwood Central, grade 7, Boys only, 1933

In grade 6 a student teacher took over from Mr Bain for 2 afternoons. Her name was Alexandra Trezise. At that time she married a teacher at Elwood named Cartwright. In later

years she lived next door to us at Croydon and retired as Headmistress of Lilydale High School.



A group of Rothesay Ave boys – still wearing their school caps. Probably about 1932-33. They were not all our bags. The photographer arranged the photo for the Herald.

We still had very few cars about Elwood in those days, only 2 in our street - ours which was a Belgian car called a Nagant and Mr Young's over the road named a Rugby. It had pull down blinds in the windows. We went to Sydney in the Nagant in 1928 - 1929 with Mr Nicholls who lived behind us. He had a car called a Moon. The Princes Highway then was just a dirt track.

We had two radio masts fixed to our side fence about 25/28 feet in height. The aerial was connected to a rather large wireless all built by my father, driven by a series of car batteries. It sat in the front room, along with the bagpipes lying on the sofa.

As children, we were not allowed in the room. A cable which ran down the passage way connected it to a 2ft high trumpet speaker which sat on an alcove over the gas stove. It didn't always work.

Later we updated to a Mickey Mouse portable radio built by the Astor Co. I can still picture my mother walking down Rothesay Avenue with this box on her hip.



My father broke up all the concrete driveway at No.17, bringing this van into the backyard for safety. It was loaded up with salmon. (Late 1920's)

It sat in the middle of the kitchen table under the light. No power points in those days so we would take the globe out and plug in the radio. Breakfast time was brightened by Fred Tupper and his "Smile Away Club". We would start off singing:

Ten to seven, let's be bright and gay
 Ten to seven, smile away
 Ten to seven smile away etc.

My mother played the violin and as Elwood Central School catered for weekly music lessons. It was thought that I should attend. By 1932 it was also thought that I should play at some function held at the Musical conservatorium at Melbourne University. I had a black eye at the time and when I appeared on stage people laughed and gave me a great clap. I was given a book as a special prize. I still have the book. It was "Monsieur Beaucaire" written by Booth Tarkington. It was presented by Mr Charles Mawby, conductor. I see it was organised by the "Victorian Union of School Orchestras". I should mention that I played the violin. My sister was taught the piano, which was also in the front room along with a gramophone. I have some of the records still: Richard Tauber etc.

Elwood School had a "live-in" caretaker, a Mr Wilson whose son was in my grades. The Wilsons lived in a house connected to the school in Scott Street. Once when I didn't bring my home work home, my mother hauled me around to Mr Wilson, late at night, asked Mr Wilson to open the school and let me get my books. The poor man complied.

When my mother felt I needed punishment, I had to learn some stanzas of Longfellow's poems off "by Heart" before I was allowed out to play. Either that or do the "washing up".



In the backyard of No.17 Rothesay Ave. Mum and sister Shiley off to fancy dress afternoon at Maison De Lux. My sister also learnt tap dancing at the Maison (Shirly Temple or Fred Astaire mania)

We still had gas lights in the street till about 1930, every morning and evening a man on a bike would come along the street with a long pole and turn up or down the lights. The gas would have come from the Brighton Gas Works. We could buy a potato sack full of coke for one shilling. Many houses around us had coke grates. About this time the Elsternwick railways yards were stacked with huge stockpiles of Mallee Roots which we could buy cheaply, but very hard to cut up into smaller stove size pieces.

We tried to never let our fire in the kitchen go out. We had a Coolgardie safe by the back door for our butter and milk and also a 600 x 600 1 metre deep cellar under the bathroom floor built by my father. We also heated a brick in the oven to warm up our bed during the winter (wrapped in newspaper).

Elwood was a very foggy place. The fog horns in the bay would go all night, whenever the fogs came in. In the autumn, the practice was to burn the fallen plane trees in the gutter. Evenings were full of smoke and fog.

During the summer we lived on the beach. A tower was erected in front of the Life Saving Club and sometimes a shark warning bell would ring, resulting in a mad rush to the shore for the next hour or so, with much looking out to sea. Sometimes a sea plane would come up on St. Kilda beach (Cutty Sark) and take people out for a ride – 5/- a trip.

About a 3 metre grey nurse shark was caught and exhibited on the Point Ormond pier. Part of the pier was shaded in, and I think it was sixpence a viewing.

The shopping strip along Tennyson Street had some essential shops. It started in Scott Street with Riddingtons the Grocer, then the News Agent on the corner, then in Tennyson Street was Smith the Butcher with his great wooden chopping block. Mr Smith gave me a bag of sheep's eyes once which I nailed in rows along the side fence. Then there was a cake shop and a sweet shop which caught fire and had a sale of cheap, smoke flavoured water damaged chocolate. One penny a bag full. A penny would always obtain a small bag of broken biscuits from Riddingtons. On the corner of Tennyson Street and Kendal Street was the Hamilton Dairy. Ivan Hamilton was in my grades at Elwood. I remember when the dairy was modernized. I think it must have been when bottled milk superseded billies and cans. They put in a large window where we could see the bottles being filled. They also sold lovely ice blocks for threepence made of milk with fruit in them. There was also a fruit shop. Nearly all would call for your order and deliver, generally on a push bike. Another convenience was the "Ice Man". No "mucking about" with him, straight in the back door with a block of ice on his shoulder.

My sister was born in the front room of No. 17 in 1927, and I, remember being kept out in the passage way.

The depression years were financially poor (till 1940) and I was never given any money, but we, as children managed. Not that we needed much.

I don't ever remember being bored or having nothing to do. We roamed along the Beach front from Elwood to Port Melbourne. In the winter, depending on the games, we would go to the South Melbourne, St Kilda or Elsternwick football grounds. The man on the gate would always let us in for nothing. South Melbourne was then in its heyday. I still "follow" them in Sydney.

The Elwood Canal narrows on the up side of Glenhuntly Road and regular attendance along there would net us some golf balls floating down. We sold them back to the Elsternwick Golf Club, 3^d for cuts and 6^d for unmarked balls.

All the boys seemed to have 4 wheeled carts which we could race down the slope in Burns Street, but other times we would fill them up by with horse manure which we sold to the gardeners in Rothesay Avenue, 3^d a cartful. Lots of horses about in those days and not many cars.

Another little earner was cutting lead pennies out of Sheet Lead. The lead came from discarded gas pipes from the tip which was at that time being replaced with iron pipes. We found one particular slot machine in Luna Park (free entry then), which returned a good penny for a lead one if we applied the right pressure on the trigger. A penny would get us a chocolate from the slot machine on St Kilda Station, or a handful of salted peanuts from the machine outside the lolly shop at the corner of Chapel Street and Brighton Road.

One of my grandfathers was very Scottish and as a consequence my father played the bagpipes. We sometimes marched up and down our passageway with me beating a drum behind him. What the neighbours thought I've no idea. We sometimes flew a Scottish flag from our wireless mast at the front. I had a crystal set in my bedroom.

The day I left Elwood Central which I think must have been 1935, the canal had flooded, and I walked home along Mitford Street in about 2 feet of water. It never flooded our house, just lapped in the front gate. A king tide in the Bay would back the water up.

Grandma Smyth and a group of ladies had permanent bookings at the Victory Theatre on Saturday night. She was well known to the management and if I presented myself early enough I was always found a seat between her and Mrs Robinson. Grandma paid. I still fondly remember a film I saw there "Heaven with a Barbed Wire Fence". I like happy endings.

About once or twice a year, whenever a "Laurel and Hardy" film or a cowboy and Indians film was show, I would go to the theatre on the Broadway, which I seem to remember we knew as the Memorial Theatre. I thin k admission was 3^d.

On one occasion when an Indian was creeping up on a cowboy, one boy got carried away, jumped to his feet and shouted "look out". Of course we "smarties" had great fun with that.

In 1932 I joined the Boy Scouts which met every Friday night at St Bede's church hall situated on the Broadway. I also got involved in the Church of England activities. I sang in the church choir and rang the church bell every Sunday night for a couple of years. I was paid 2/6 every Christmas for my bell ringing activities.



Bridging the Canal

Carl Bleazby appeared in some early TV films. He lived on the Esplanade, Elwood. The house was called "BALBOA"

The troop I joined was the 8th St Kilda troop but the next year we became the 1st Elwood. I still have my old shirt with its badges etc. We went camping at Gilwells Park opening day, and we had to clear our own campsite. I recall the leeches sticking to us. I think it rained the

whole week. We also went to Adelaide for their Centenary Jamboree 1936/37. We also marched along Swanston Street in the Melbourne Centenary 1934. My claim to fame was getting laid out by a cricket ball at Adelaide.

Two doors from us in Rothesay Avenue was a little street called Knight Street. It had 2 houses and a lane ran all the way from Knight Street to Tennyson Street. It was occupied by 2 families. Mr Nicholls owned the half behind us and ran an asphaltting business and Mr Morrison ran a poultry farm there in the Tennyson Street half. Mr Morrison had the top half, both about an acre in size. Mr Nicholls ran a car called a Moon, and he also put in the cricket pitch. His son Bill played for Elsternwick. We also had the use of this pitch. Bill was killed during World War II.

Mr Nicholls also fenced in a football oval on the Elwood Green between the Canal and Mitford Street He roped the fence with thick steel cable - used cable from the cable trams. We had a gate into the lane and we used it a lot as it was a short cut to the shop in Tennyson Street.



We always went to the Grocers Picnic held at Sorrento every year. My sister is facing the camera on the right of the picture (about 1935). I think the shopkeepers held their own picnics. The Weerona was one of either two or three paddle steamers. The Hygea was another.

Every Guy Fawkes night a large bonfire was lit on the Elwood Green, and those that had crackers let them off and those that didn't watched. It was a community night enjoyed by all. A late night for us 10.30 or 11.00pm.

My mother did most of her shopping in Glenhuntly Road, Elsternwick. Even those days Acland Street was thought to be a dear place. We used to go the Elsternwick Market, which seemed to sell everything. We used to walk home along the footpath along the railway line

that adjoined Ripponlea. We could see over the fence and they had kangaroos, emus, peacocks and Indian servants working in or about the place.

There was another large place near us in Elwood, fronting Tennyson Street and joining John Street Their property ran halfway to Mitford Street It also had pheasants and servants. I think in the 1960's a telephone exchange was built in front of the building.

It was "a thing" those days for boys was to have a little museum in their bedrooms. The boy over the road had a real prize exhibit - a pheasant's egg. Their place backed onto the pheasant farm.



My particular friend Jack Irwin, on the left, my sister Shirley on the right
Jack lost his toes by burning. He ran onto a sandpit in the backyard where his mother had just cleaned out the stove and thrown the embers onto the sand. He joined the Air Force and was shot down on D day over France. Prior to that he worked for The Age newspaper. He lived next door at no. 19.
Our backyard at no.17.

We had friends called Marlows who owned a rather large boat, which sometimes anchored in the St Kilda Pier enclosure. Through them, we got to know the Kerbys who ran the kiosk on St Kilda Pier. We used to go out fishing with the Marlows a lot.

Once when my friend Jack and I were fishing off a landing on the pier, a dead man washed in near us. We told the Kerbys who called the police, who got him out with a boat hook. He was fully clothed in a blue suit.

The Marlow's boat was called the "Illuka" and the highlight for me was Henly Night when we would cruise up and down the Yarra, and see all the bright lights on the houseboats with all the parties going on. The Marlows (2 boys and 1 girl) eventually lived on the boat during the Depression. They anchored at Princes Bridge and rented their house in Prahran. During the war the boat was taken over by the Defence Department and sent to New Guinea.

Empire Day was the big day for us, sometimes we were given a free day in Luna Park. Elwood Central, Brighton Road and St Kilda Park were the 3 schools at these events. Sometimes we were given a concert at the Palais De Danse or St Kilda Town Hall.

About 1930 a father and son rented rooms with the Nortons next door to us at number 19. The boy was my age and his name was Jack Irwin. We soon "palled up" and I remember us sitting on the back fence together and him swearing me to secrecy. He had no toes as they had been amputated after being burned in a fire. His mother had died. Jack and I grew up together, he often slept at our place and he was always fond of our family. Jack went into the Air Force and was shot down over France, I believe, on D Day. I went into the Army.

My parents separated in 1936 and part of the settlement was that my mother kept the house but she got little else. By 1938 she could no longer keep the monthly repayments and we took a flat and rented the house.

The flat was in a three storey block at the corner of Burnett Street and Grey Street St Kilda. I thought it was great. My bedroom was a glassed in corner which enabled me to see the overseas liners coming into Port Melbourne. It also had a gas heater - goodbye wood heap. By this time I was working in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, and St Kilda station was just down the hill. We had the top 3rd floor flat on the corner However, it was goodbye to Elwood till 1946 when we went back to No 17.

When we went back to Rothesay Avenue we set about modernizing the place. Out went the old chip heater and old fashioned bath. We installed an electric hot water cylinder in the roof, tiled the bathroom floors and a separate shower recess. Bigger windows around the back, and removed the palms, which by this time filled the garden. Fitted power points etc. However by 1949/50 my sister and I both married and moved away. My mother soon after sold No 17 and moved to Queensland. By coincidence two other youths from Rothesay Avenue were in the same Army unit.

I have very good memories of growing up in Elwood - I cannot think of a better place.