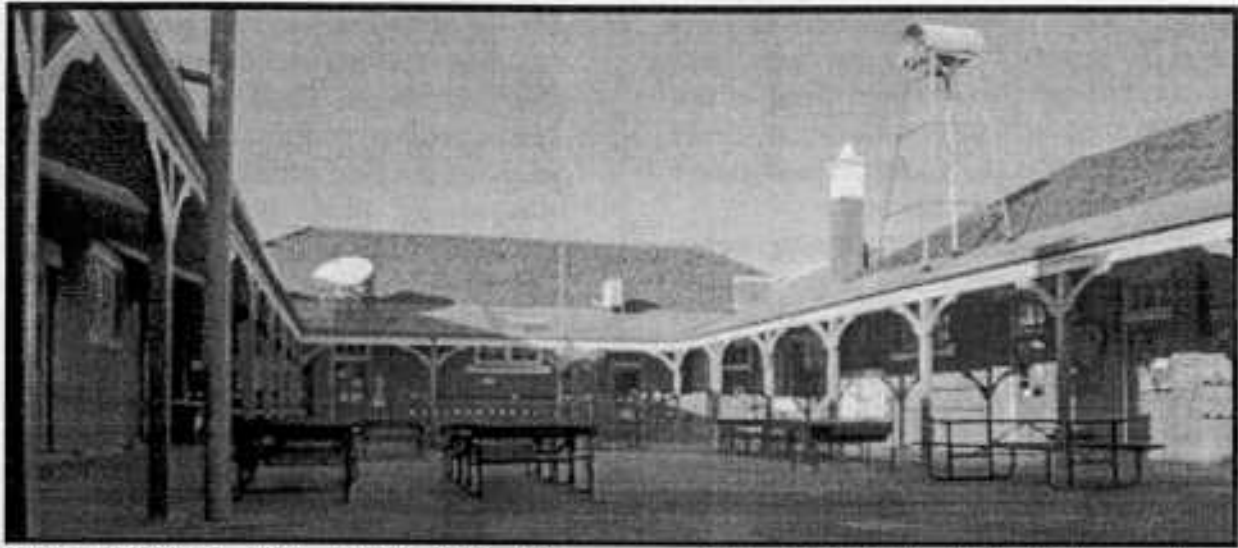


PLOD Essay: Best Day at School, EVER



I can't remember very much from my primary school days: it was a long time ago and the sands of time have long since covered those particular tracks. Most of the memories are vague generic ones of sitting cross-legged on classroom floors for stories and songs or of cutting, folding and clagging bits of coloured paper.

I can quite clearly remember the layout of the building and grounds though, and I have very clear memories of the best ever day at primary school: The Day Of The Big Fire.

Wonthaggi Primary School occupies a large, seven or eight acre centrally located block of land at the edge of the shopping centre and bounded by King Street to the south, Drysdale Street to the west, Billson Street to the east and a laneway and bowling club to the north.

In my day, there were two main buildings. Facing Billson Street was the main building, known to the kids as 'The Big School'. This was a red brick building, typical of school design of the era, with schoolrooms surrounding a central asphalted quadrangle. This building housed Grades Three to Six.

In the southwest corner of the school block was the other building, 'The Little School', the junior section of the primary school housing Prep and Grades One and Two.

The 'Little School', I think, was the older building. It was a large weatherboard building also conforming to the standard school design of classroom wings surrounding a central space, except in this case, the central space was occupied by an unkempt garden rather than an asphalt parade ground.

I suspect that the 'Little School' was first built and served the role of being the entire school building while the brick building was subsequently constructed, because when I went there, it was too large for our needs.

Prep occupied the western room, a large double room capable of being divided into two by folding doors. Grades one and two occupied the next two rooms along the south of the building. There were then two more unoccupied rooms along the south, then another large double room, like the Prep room, at the east. The north wing contained a sick bay, staff room and two large cloak rooms, one at each end.

While I was a student at the 'Little School' I can't remember the two unoccupied school rooms in the south wing being used for anything. The large double room at the east was used for special occasions: where we had class photos taken, where we lined up with great trepidation for mass vaccinations and where we lined up clad in underwear for the visiting school doctor to conduct physical examinations periodically.

Amongst the blur that was my time in the 'Little School', the day of the big fire stands out like a beacon – it was very exciting.

A fire broke out in a house directly opposite the 'Little School'. It would have been at about 26 Drysdale Street. I don't know who lived there – my friend Geoff Thorn lived a few houses to the north and another classmate, Bruce Johnson, lived just to the south, perhaps even a next door neighbour to the fire house.

The fire must have broken out during a class break – recess or lunchtime, because it was immediately noticed by the kids. Along the street boundaries, the school block had post and rail fences about four feet high with several strands of fencing wire below the rail. Within seconds of the sighting of smoke and the alarm, the fence was packed solid with kids observing the excitement, and there was no way known that we were going back to class until it was all over.

There were about one hundred kids spread over the three junior grades and every one of them was standing on a fence wire with arms wrapped over the top rail of the fence.

The Drysdale Street house was a weatherboard building dating back forty or fifty years to the early days of the town. A Real Estate Agent would probably describe it as 'a miner's cottage and renovators dream' if it was for sale. Nice dry forty-year-old weatherboards burn very well and it wasn't long before the smoke seen at first had been replaced by raging flames.

The police and fire brigade had arrived with alarms ringing, and people were running all over the place uncoiling hoses and starting the

fire-fight. Someone, perhaps the house owner, braved the flames and rushed into the burning house a couple of times to rescue something of value.

All of the kids were jumping up and down on the fence, yelling encouragement and expert fire fighting advice. There was smoke and flames and crackling noises. The fire brigade was fighting a losing battle: windows burst out and tongues of flame roared through, the roof collapsed with a crash and a huge shower of sparks. The brigade concentrated their efforts on preventing fire spreading to neighbouring houses.

Eventually, by the end of the day, all that was left of the house was a forlorn brick chimney and some blackened wood beams – the house was completely destroyed. For years afterwards the block remained a weed grown vacant block.

It was an exciting school day, though: the best of days, and we saw it all from close range.



- by Kit Sleeman