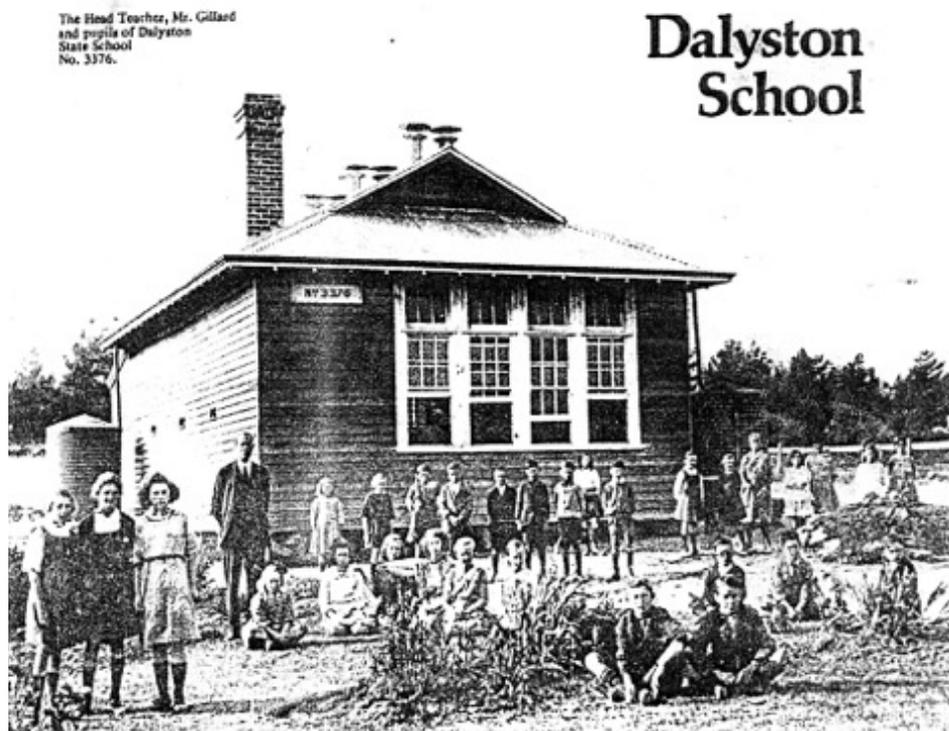


PLOD ESSAY: Memories from a Country School

There is an area between Dalyston and Kilcunda that some people still call Bridge Creek. It was most likely part of the Anderson Station in the old days, but by the 1890s it was “just a community of farmers”: Hollins had property on the main road, Hawkins’ place was on Densley’s road as were the farms of the Gunns, the Kents and last of all the Demsleys, where the name comes from. The Dwyers lived on Dobbins Road near the Haddens, while the Carews lived at the mouth of the Powlett River. Bridge Creek itself is a tiny creek that flows into to the Powlett River.

In 1897, close by the bridge, Mr Kingdom Kent built a house, which served as the local post office where ‘Miss Mary’ sorted the mail and left it under heavy stones for the children to pick-up on their way home from school after a school was established. Mr Kent also built a Hall on his property that he threw open for “wonderful concerts and Balls”. Everyone called it “The People’s Hall.” It was really just a weather-board shell without lining or a fireplace, but in 1900, two years after an application had been forwarded to the Department of Education for a school to accommodate the growing number of children in the area, this hall was deemed “acceptable as long as certain, very necessary amenities were provided” to become the new School. The Department rented the hall at £5 per annum and named it the Bridge Creek Leased School No. 3376. The average attendance at the school was then 23 students in the early years. Ten years later after it was opened the rent increased to £7/12, then £12 a year after that.

On top of these increases, the Department decided there had to be a name change for the school since Bridge Creek was too much like Rigg’s Creek, the name of an older school. This similarity was obviously too much for the Department bureaucrats to keep



separate in their records. An inspector was sent out to see what could be done. He declared the People’s Hall to be “Old and dilapidated, draughty and cold” with a smoking fireplace (clearly one of the ‘improvements’ made in 1900) and that the playground was “broken, ungraded and useless.”

The inspector recommended the removal of the school to a site in the Township proper and that Bridge Creek School be re-named the Dalyston School. The Bridge Creek Community objected. Although, they had no chance of stopping the name change, the removal of the school to a new 4 acres and 38/10 perches* site in the Dalyston Townships proper, was deferred for almost four years until 1915. The rent by this time had risen to £20 per annum and that seemed argument enough to make the Bridge Creek stalwarts relent.

A new school building was erected at a cost of £600 and The Hon. A. Downward, MLA, along with Department officials visited the school in May 1917, but there was apparently no official ceremony, until 1920 after the local men had returned home from the Great War 1914-1918. By 1920 a teacher’s residence had been purchased from Sarah Hunt for £450 and an adjoining block of land bought from John Blair for £5 was added to the grounds. People continued to call the

new place by the name of the old place or even with the hyphenated name, Bridge Creek – Dalyston School, for quite a long time.

In 1990, two years before Jeff Kennett was elected Premier of Victoria and tried to close as many small country primary schools as he could, the school celebrated its 90th birthday. There were many people who showed up to the party with memories still intact about those early years, and thanks to Hon. Susan Davies, MLA, then President of the Dalyston School Council, these memories were gathered into a collection of remembered stories and recipes. Irene Williams has recently uncovered the resultant book and thought it deserved another look:

Andrew Heeney attended both the Bridge Creek and Dalyston Schools with this four brothers. He remembers the bare floorboards in both schools and that they used slateboard and chalk then in the later years, ink wells and nibs. He says, “I got the strap a few times and the teacher said I only came to school on Fridays as it was sports day.” His best memory is about wagging school: “We wagged school at lunchtime and went swimming in the creek. The teacher sent the girls to find us, but the boys had gone back to nature and it was bare bums in all directions when the girls arrived. Back at school, we all lined up for the strap. We boys didn’t talk to those girls for a long time.”

There were several teachers, whose names kept coming up in the stories: Mr Gillard, Mr Abbott – whom the kids called Rabbit – and Mr Freckleton.

Dorothy Ashcroft Rae remembers walking to school with her brother on her first day. She was worried because she had always been told that you must not whistle at school. She asked her brother what would happen if you whistled. He didn’t know, “But I’ll try,” he said. Dorothy said, “The result was he got the strap from Mr Freckleton and we both ended up crying!”

Allen McKinnon remembers, “We had to learn the alphabet very young. Rabbit Abbott had a habit of standing between student and board preventing a clear view. I became frustrated and pinched him on the bottom. This did not go down very well at all! I set a record never equalled in my days at school of the shortest period at school before receiving the cuts – pre-morning recess.”

Betty Buckley Garry remembered that the school was a happy place in 1920, and the discipline wasn’t so hard, although Mr Gillard expected everyone to do as they were told. She said, “The big boys, if they played up, had to bend over and touch their toes and then be strapped.” She remembers paper folding and plasticine in the younger grades and using an abacus for counting. “There was a drum that we students played to march into school.”

Playtime always loomed large in the memories of school. When the bell rang for recess, the kids would burst out of the building: Doreen McRae Storti remembers, “We played hop-scotch known as Hoppy in our time, rounders, skippy. I could kick the footy as well as my brothers. We used to make a great cubby in the huge cypress tree out front.”

Isobel Davies Brent remembered that she and her friends used to nick off at playtime to the shop. “One day after buying lollies, we hid in the scrub until after the bell went. When we returned to school we were in trouble with the needlework teacher, Miss Bird. We had one lolly left that the four of us had all had a suck off and wrapped it up again in the lolly paper. To square off with Miss Bird we offered her the lolly. We laughed all afternoon at the memory of her sucking on that lolly.”

Getting to school each day was strong in the story tellers minds: Victoria Wilson Whitlow, who went to the Bridge Creek School, 1905-1912, remembers that “It always flooded, in winter, opposite the school and we all had to take off our shoes and socks to walk to school.”

Eva Miles Burrows was from Archies Creek and hitched a ride with her father who delivered the Archies Creek Store groceries to outlying farms. If he wasn’t coming her way, she had to walk. Others caught a lift on the cream cart to Dalyston and then walked home cutting across the paddocks.

Kath Sibly Williams rode her pony down from Innisvale each day, joining up with five other pony riders along the way. The school had a pony paddock for the kids.

What a legacy these memories bring to us. The book in its entirety is in the archives at the Museum.

* *A perch is a Middle English word, 160th of an acre, the length of a measuring rod.*