

PLOD Essay: Members' Memories May 2023 W&DHS Meeting:

Preface:

At our May meeting, when everyone was called to order, Irene stood up to speak. She did not introduce an invited speaker as usual but informed the group that different members would be called upon to tell a story about their lives. She called it *Members' Memories*.

She asked three people – Fay Quilford, Bob Tyler and Jim Barritt – to tell their stories, all of which were interesting and entertaining:

- In Jim's story, he talked about his father – a policeman in the city – buying an old Miner's Cottage on Epsom Street in South Dudley for the family to use as a holiday house. The owner asked \$1600 for it, but when Jim's dad went to the centre of the house and jumped up and down to see how sound it was, the owner immediately dropped the price to \$800. This was the early 1970's.
- Bob's story came from his time growing up in England. Although he migrated to Australia in the 1980's, he was born in the 1950's and memories of his childhood in England always settled on wartime stories that were legendary. For Bob, it was the story of The Bridge End Great Escape, which happened before his time but in his village. (you can Google it and watch a whole film about it, according to Bob.)
- Fay's story about Primary School is below.

These three talks at the May meeting were fascinating and Irene will call on more of us to tell things at the June meeting. She will probably warn you; but be prepared.

Fay Quilford's Memories

I am going to talk about my years in Primary School because there was a particular turning point that made a significant change in my life.

My parents got a Soldier Settlement block in the Western District when I was three-and-a-half, and Mum and Dad moved with me and my older brothers away from our grandparents to isolation west of Mortlake and not so far from Hamilton. Even though, after World War II, the Soldier Settler farms were a good size and came with newly built but basic houses as well as new roads and fences, getting a farm going was hard work for Mum and Dad. However, that's not the story I am going to tell. I am going to talk about the schools we kids had to go to.

I turned five in September 1955 which meant it was time for me to go to school, but there wasn't a bridge across the creek which would have taken me to the nearest primary school. So, I had to go to Hexham Primary school. Hexham is a little town that had a post office, a general store, two churches, about 10 houses and a pub. It was eleven miles from our farm, too far for a five-year-old to walk. I had to wait until Christmas before I got a bicycle – a repurposed bike, all fixed up and painted, but wonderful. And, of course, the reason I was given a bicycle was because my parents did a deal with the parents who set up a carpool system for the kids in our area to get to school.

So, for three out of the four weeks we kids had to peddle our bikes to the other people's houses to get to school. That all sounds good, except when in winter there were icicle puddles on the road, and when you're



only 5 and your school bag keeps slipping off the shoulders of your winter coat, or, in the spring when there was soft mud and deep puddles and magpies swooping, it was a little bit of a challenge.



And the carpool cars! Well, my dad had a Desoto, a Dodge Desoto, which was not a big car, but there were nine kids who were all trying to get to school at the same time. I remember us all piled into that car. At the beginning of our run, it was just us and we had a choice of seats, but by the time everyone was in the car, we were bundled in and piled up. But, our car wasn't the worst. The neighbours up the road had a short-wheel based Land-Rover, so



only three kids could manage to get in the front and the other six of us bounced around in the back tray. No seatbelts back then. You just held on for dear life. We littlies were squashed in between the legs of the big kids.

Now, about school: All the other kids in the school were Soldiers Settlers kids the same as we as we were. The school started at Grade 1 and went to up Grade 8 boys. There were twenty-one boys in the school when I started and only six girls. Since there was no Prep Grade, I had to go directly into Grade 1. There were six of us that year who started at Hexham Primary in Grade 1: twin boys, two other boys, Judith Fry, the teacher's daughter, and me! To us littlies, Grade 8 boys looked *ginormous*. And they were actually quite intimidating and fairly much... well... teasing, bullying, I would suggest, of us littlies. Bias at the school was very much in favour of the boys and all of them were in Grades 7 and 8. The oldest girl in the school was in Grade 5.

So, what did that mean for the school? It was a one teacher school. Mr Fry was his name.



He and his daughter, Judith, went home for lunch every day and so that left all of us kids to do what we wanted at lunchtime. The small general store in town was very close to the school, and we kids called it the cafe because if we had no lunch, we could get fruit there or, I guess in an emergency, we could get help there.

As for the games we played at school, I remember rounders and hopscotch and marbles. The boys kicked the footy which pretty much left the six girls on their own. Remember, most of us girls were all littlies. We were pretty much isolated in terms of activities and sports.

The curriculum in the school was pretty traditional and when Mr Fry was in the room, I think he must have been an excellent teacher of maths and basic fundamentals because I did manage to get a tertiary education along the way, and they say it's the formative years at school that are the most crucial for further learning.

However, I don't remember if there was a library, although I do remember a bookshelf as big as this [*Fay holds out both arms to indicate a small shelf*] I do remember that Miss Hood used to come once a month with a mobile library that must have been in her car and that consisted of six boxes of books. She had to lay them out outside in kind of an enclosed shelter attached to the school building as there was no room for them in the classroom. There was a rack in that building where we could put our coats and boots, but everything else, bag and books and lunch was in the schoolroom. When Miss Hood brought her books, we eagerly looked through them, but, while they were wonderful, we were mindful of how we had to get to school four days of the week by riding our bikes through thick and thin in all sorts of weather to catch the carpool ride. Thus, we tended to pick books that were not too heavy or too big

regardless of what they were about, so we could carry them home. (Interestingly, because I never got to read all the little kids' books when we were in the one-teacher school, I am now catching up on all I missed by reading to my grandchildren!)

I learned to read under a kerosine lamp at home when I was little as there was no power on at our place at first, so we relied on those lamps. In fact, our life was pretty much controlled by the sun, as was pretty common for rural families back then. We went to bed when it got dark and we got up at daylight.

In terms of social life... well, we kids went to school five days a week. Because we lived out from the town, we didn't go to town. Mum and Dad went to town every Friday, but we kids never went to town. That was an especially "Blue Moon" thing for us during school holidays.

So, that was how my schooling started. I think I was a fairly good student, and I was interested in learning, but I did feel very intimidated by the groups of big kids around us. Of course, I remember the normal things all of us, who were in schools in the fifties in Australia did: I remember the school readers, the *John and Betty* readers and the normal books that kids were given to learn to read; I do remember some wonderful school excursions, when all of us traipsed out of school and wandered along the Hopkins River for nature study and those sorts of things – all very informal. I also remember things the same as everybody else, like the rotten milk that sat out in the sun in those glass bottles in the wire baskets, but I don't think I ever knew where they came from or who delivered them, just that we had to drink them to the last drop.

The biggest turning point in my life was at the end of Grade 4 when suddenly the Education Department decided they would put on a school bus to transport all us kids from the three Soldier Settlement areas around us. The reason there was suddenly a school bus is because Mortlake built a secondary school to accommodate so many Soldier Settlements with growing families. There were twelve farms in our settlement area alone, and more and more kids every year.

The school bus was the most exciting thing to happen in our lives. Suddenly, all we had to do was walk down our driveway – which was the same distance as that from the Railway Station Museum to Mitchel House. We didn't have to carry all our belongings on our backs for miles and miles, plus we were dry and warm and never again suffering from exhaustion just getting to school, let alone getting back home from school.



On the first day when we entered the Mortlake Primary School, I was just gobsmacked because there were more kids in my classroom than there had ever been in our whole single-teacher school. There were nearly 200 kids at the school! And at the School Assemblies there was all this space. There were sports ovals, and squares on the concrete

mapping out games for us kids to play. The most exciting thing I discovered was that there were specialist rooms and a library that was full, from floor to ceiling with books and I could

change books as often as I liked, and it had a librarian who really engaged me in reading, recommending things to me and helping me choose books.

At the school, there was suddenly gender balance as many girls as boys and we didn't have Grade 7 and 8 anymore so that gender and age gap of older kids harassing the littlies was no longer an issue. No longer were the big boys being asked to take control of the little kids. For instance, when our teacher was really busy, he would send some of the big kids to lord it over us little kids. I can remember all of us little kids standing up at the chalk board with this Year 8 boy marching back and forth behind us telling us what to do.

The best change for my siblings and I, once we began to go to school in Mortlake, was that on Friday afternoons, we got to stay in town for an hour because our parents, who always went to Mortlake on Fridays, would meet us after school and let us help them shop or just walk around. It was a completely new experience for me, and it was so exciting. There were two butcher shops and a milkbar, a couple of petrol stations and the post office and a couple of clothing stores. Mum and Dad gave us each two shillings and we were allowed to spend them as we wished, wherever we wished, as long as we were back at the car in an hour. That was a whole new environment for me to explore what I had never done before.

So that new school, and those weekly hours when I was allowed to wander freely in a town bustling with people rather than going out into paddock alone and watching the sun setting and the August Moon rising, meant, suddenly, that I wasn't a shy intimidated child anymore. Everything in my life changed.

And here I am today.

- Fay's memories were slightly edited and formatted by C.R. Landon.
- Photos of 1950s little girl on bike, 1950s Dodge Desoto (which may not be what Fay's father's car looked like) and early fifties Land-Rover were found online.
- Photos of her schools were supplied by Fay.