

Stories from the Shed: *Growing up in the 50s-60s*

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- **Story-teller's cultural background:** Australian
- **Categories:** Urban, Life-style
- Paul's story of his growing up in Tarragindi is well-told with personal anecdotes giving life to his describing of a time and place many of us remember, and which no longer exists in many places.

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Growing up in the 50s-60s

Paul O'Neill

I was born in 1952 and, with the exception of a short stint working in North Queensland, I have lived in the Tarragindi/Holland Park/Mount Gravatt area all my life.

I'm sure that I didn't think it at the time, but perhaps the best thing about being a kid in the 1950s-1960s was the freedom. Fewer cars and more people and other kids on the streets, probably left Mum and Dad with far fewer concerns about my safety than we had about our kids, who grew up in the 1970s and 1980s.

My time as an only child was so short that I have absolutely no memory of it. My younger brother, Mark (born in 1954) seemed to have always been there. I recall early frustrations with his inability to throw or catch a ball when I was about four and he was two and a half, but this all changed as we grew older and that 18 month gap in our ages shrank away.

Our first real home was at 74 Chamberlain Street, Tarragindi. Mum and Dad "built" the house - a statement that I always thought was a bit odd. What it meant of course, was they designed it and contracted a builder to physically construct it. I remember visiting the house during construction with Gran (Mary (May) O'Neill). Gran had a car and at that time Dad didn't, so we were often driven about by Gran.

Number 74 was one of the last houses to be built in Chamberlain Street. Some of our neighbours, like the Klumpps next door, had lived in the area for a couple of generations. Tarragindi was not really on the outskirts of the city in the 1950s, but it was definitely considered outer-suburban. Many of my younger brothers and sisters have rather negative views of this house, although I never understood why. Sadly, it was demolished in 2012.

Our little patch of Brisbane was bound by Chamberlain Street, Brampton Street, Toohey Road and Marshall Road. On the southern side of Marshall Road, a large cow paddock stretched over the ridge to the edge of Toohey forest. It remained in this state well into the 1960s. At the end of our street was an old corner shop and at the bottom of the hill, at the junction of Toohey and Marshall Roads, was the local butcher shop. Over the road from 74 Chamberlain, was the home of the local greengrocer. It was a fairly self-contained world. Even as little kids, we were amused by the fact that the butcher's name was Coward and the greengrocer's, Mr Vine.

I was a frequent visitor to both the butcher and corner shop. The butcher shop was much like such establishments are today. The Coward Brothers were a cheery bunch who had a smart crack or a joke for everybody who came through their door. They called me “the whistler,” because, just as today, I was constantly whistling. Sawdust covered the floors and enormous, white-painted tree stumps were used as chopping blocks. Trays of brains and bacon sat on the counter and whole cattle and sheep carcasses hung from steel rails in the back of the shop.

The corner shop was run by a man who wore a white apron over his clothes. He stood behind the counter and pulled what you wanted from the shelves behind him. Bags of bulk flour, sugar and other produce leaned against the wall and, under the glass counter front, there were boxes of lollies, that he served out in little white paper bags. Some days Mark or I would make several trips down Chamberlain Street with a list and a few coins to pick up items for Mum. She had a regular delivery that arrived in a large cardboard box, but she always seemed to need something else, or perhaps she just wanted to get us out of the house. A trip to the corner shop could take a half an hour or so, given the many distractions that small boys could find along the way.

Mr Vine ran his business out of a lock-up garage beside his house. Early in the morning he would head off to the markets, which were in Roma Street in the City, before they moved out to Rocklea. He repacked his fruit and vegetables and boxed up orders for his regular customers. Fruit boxes were mostly soft undressed pine - just the thing for making “stuff.” As a result we were often at Mrs Vine’s door asking for empty boxes. She was a lot more friendly than her husband.

The baker and milkman called every day so, apart from a trip to the butcher there was no need for Mum to leave the house to buy what was needed to feed the family.

There were also other regular visitors. The rubbish man came around once a week and he came right into the yard to empty the metal bin. For our first couple of years in Tarragindi, we had an outhouse toilet, colloquially known as a “dunny.” Naturally enough, the men who came to collect the black, smelly can from beneath the wooden toilet box were called the “dunny men.” In Brisbane they were also called the “Hunter Brothers,” because that was the name of the company that had the contract.

Far less regularly, we had a visit from the “Rat Men.” The local kids were extremely excited when the council “Rat Men” made their rounds. The city council employed these men to hunt and destroy rats in the suburbs. To do so, they used specially trained foxy dogs. The

foxy or Fox Terrier is a small, usually black and white dog with a rather long snout. We actually had a foxy at the time, a very smart, though yappy, little guy called Tex. The “Rat Men” were popular with us kids because, once their dogs had run about sniffing out and killing any rats in the street, their handlers gathered the kids around and the dogs put on a little circus show. There was walking on hind legs, jumping through hoops and most amazingly, counting the number of fingers their masters were holding up and barking out the number.

It was in Chamberlain Street that I first experienced some of the freedom I mentioned earlier. Almost nobody in the street had a car and even down on Toohey Road, the main danger was the extremely infrequent 5A Brisbane City Council Bus!

In 1958 I started school at *St Elizabeth’s Convent* at Ekibin. The school was about 1.6 km (1 mile) from home and after a few practice runs to and from school with Mum, I was on my own!

I clearly remember my first day at school. Kids were crying, mothers were crying, but I just wanted Mum to go away! She knew all the nuns and Mother Carmel, my grade one teacher, had taught Mum at school. What an embarrassment!

I had a clearly defined route home and I was threatened with death if I was found to stray from this path, which of course meant that I found many alternative ways home. Some were of necessity, as they allowed me to avoid the much feared “Staties,” the kids from the heathen Wellers Hill State School. Horror of horrors, they wore no shoes, so Mum told me to stay well away from them. What she didn’t know was that they also threw rocks and shot at “Convent kids” with shanghais (slingshots).

Other reasons to find alternative routes were, to walk home with a friend, like Norman Rowe, (Not that one, just plain Norman) to feed the donkey at the other end of Chamberlain Street, or just to explore. Strange as it might seem, my fondest memories of these early walks home were of rainy days, when I, like the “Staties” was allowed to slush home, barefooted, sliding in the mossy gutters along the way.

Our school desks were long, bench-like affairs seating four kids side by side. Early on we had slates and slate pencils, but these were soon replaced by exercise books and pencils. Later, in grade two we graduated to ink, using single-nib pens that had to be dipped in the ink well in the desk every word or so. And, yes, we did dip the girls’ plaits in the ink wells!

Writing and reading were the main focus from what I recall. I can still hear the chants of “A like an Apple on a stick, A says ah”, “B like a bat and ball, B says ba.” Reading was from the “Dick and Dora – Early Reader.” We also had enormous amounts of Catechism, learning about the “Holy Catholic Church.”

Much is said and written about the rough treatment dished out by these early, mostly Irish, nuns. The sisters at St Elizabeth’s were from the Presentation order and short of Sister Gertrude tapping my knuckles with a ruler as she heroically attempted to teach me the piano, I can recall no extreme treatment.

There were only three classes when I started at St Elizabeth’s, grades 1-3. The whole school was housed on the lower floor of the newly-constructed parish church.

Our main games were Red Rover and marbles, both of which had the potential to end in brawls - minor and major!

Red Rover was played in a particularly rigorous style. One boy was selected by lot, using the shortest stick method. He then stood in the middle of the playground and when he was “set” he called out “Red Rover, Red Rover, Come Over!” at which point several scores of boys charged across the gravel playground. The Red Rover had to grab as many helpers as he could. Those caught would then have to assist him in capturing more players on the next round. The last boy standing was the winner. Where all this broke down was when some of the older, bigger boys decided to join the Red Rover game simply because they loved to rough-up younger and slower kids. Sometimes, the victims of this strategy joined forces and targeted the bullies who, in turn, retaliated, leading to a button-popping, knee-scraping, all-in brawl.

Battles over marbles were not on the same scale and were often caused by people’s varied interpretations of the rules or by someone playing tag or some other running game rushing through the hallowed marbles ring.

By the time I was in grade two, Mark had joined me at school and so some of my excursions to and from school were curtailed for a while. Early on, Mark was a stickler for the rules and a ‘tiddle-tat’ to boot! It took several months and a little blackmail to bring him into line. Once he got the message, he was just as willing as I was to bend the rules, particularly when it came to avoiding the state school kids.

As more children were added to our family, Barbara (1957) and Luke (1960), Mum had less time to supervise us. Dad was always busy at the Dental Hospital or later at his practice at Moorooka, so we found our own fun and adventures, often in the company of the Klumpp boys from next door. The Beethams on the other side had a girl, Margaret, who was my age, but she was of little interest as she was a rather “girly,” girl who would shy away from the sorts of activities we boys engaged in.

Peter and John Klumpp were both older than me, Peter by a year and John by two. They were State School kids, but in spite of her dislike of any kids who weren't Catholics, Mum didn't mind the Klumpp boys. The Klumpps had a telephone, which was still not a common household convenience. Mum sometimes used Mrs Klumpp's phone to make arrangements with Nana or to call Doctor Webb, our family doctor. Mum and Mrs Klumpp got on fairly well, but Mr Klumpp was another matter. He was a bit of a recluse who seemed to only talk to Dad when he had a complaint, such as when we dug a hole under his fence for some reason that now escapes me.

Dad mostly took our side, although not after one famous incident when Mark and I threw crackers over our roof onto Mr Klumpp's precious turf lawn. We did “cop it,” then, though I heard Dad telling Mum that he thought Mr Klumpp was a founding member of the “*Flat Earth Society*.” I didn't know what that meant, but Mum thought it was hilarious so I knew it couldn't have been praise of Mr Klumpp.

On the upside, Mr Klumpp worked for the *PMG*, (*Postmaster General's Department*),” known to kids as “*Paul McCarthy's Garbage*.” (Not Paul McCartney, the Beatles were still an unknown Skiffle Band in Liverpool.) The *PMG* looked after Post Offices and Telephones, so Mr Klumpp had all sorts of old telephone bits and pieces in his shed which Peter, John, Mark and I fiddled with.

We followed the Klumpps through more schoolboy fads than I can list here. Some of my favourites were silkworms, finches, tropical fish, ant farms, making rivet guns, hunting lobbies and making skim-boards.

Both the Klumpps and the O'Neills had access to mulberry trees. Theirs was in their yard, while ours hung over the fence from the old farm property behind 74 Chamberlain Street. This “landlocked” block had no street frontage other than an easement that ran from Heathwhite Street. Because of the style of house and the way it was set on the block, I always assumed it was the original farm house of the area, which had been a pineapple farm.

Mulberries came on in the late spring/early summer, ripening progressively from green, through red to dark purple/black. "Our" tree had particularly sweet fruit that Mum made pies from and that we picked and ate straight off the tree. The berries produced a bright purple stain on teeth, lips, feet and anything else that they came in contact with, including little boys' shirts! The mulberries weren't the only benefit of "our" mulberry tree. The large leaves were the favourite food of the silkworm.

The mulberry trees and the silkworms had been imported into the Brisbane area in the early 20th century in a failed attempt to establish a silk industry in the area around Sunnybank. Thousands of trees were ripped out when the venture failed, but not before birds had spread the plants far and wide in the outer southside of the city. Even today, the trees still pop up in suburban gardens.

The silkworms were more like silk grubs in appearance. How they were passed on to finally end up with kids throughout the southern suburbs, is a mystery, particularly given the fact that the failure of the industry was due to a devastating disease that spread through the original, imported stock. However, the Klumpp boys had silkworms and soon, so did we. For several years Mark and I husbanded our stock of worms through the cycle of eggs, worms chrysalis, moth and eggs. Following the next door kids' plans, we built silk-spinning machines, small ferris wheel-like contraptions to spin the silk from the fluffy yellow chrysalis/cocoon.

The mystery of the historical propagation of the silkworm stock is probably solved by the next part of the yearly silkworm cycle. I soon discovered an interest among the kids at school in silkworms, so once the moths had laid their eggs in a darkened old shoebox, I cut out squares of eggs that were traded at school for marbles, cupcakes or even cash, on the odd occasion when some kids were keen enough to sacrifice their tuckshop money.

John and Peter had experimented with feeding silkworms on different leaves, so I had a go with lettuce, which as you might imagine produced green silk. I then had a go at feeding them oleander leaves, hoping for purple or pink silk. They ate the leaves, but soon curled up and died!

We also experimented with freeing some worms out on the mulberry tree itself. Another failure! The mickey birds (Noisy Minors) cleaned them up in a couple of days.

We had always had budgies as pets. Dad had bred them as a kid and continued his interest in them through most of his life, building a large aviary at a later home. One particular favourite was Chips, a green budgie who spent most of his day on Mum's shoulder as she went about her daily chores. Poor Chips met a grizzly end when he was startled by some noise in the laundry while Mum was doing a load of washing with boiling water - probably to remove mulberry stains. Poor Chips flew right into the washing machine tub.

The Klumpps had a large aviary in their back yard where the boys bred finches. Naturally we followed suit, getting Dad to help us build an aviary from an old machine packing crate.

Keeping finches required a lot of materials that just had to be gathered in the bush, giving us an excuse to roam the bushlands at the top of Chamberlain Street, behind the Wellers Hill State School, in search of pine needles for nesting and wild grass seeds for bird food.

Even though this was a bushland completely surrounded by civilisation, there was a small colony of wallabies in the bush in the late 1950s. Much to our surprise one day, while tracking a wallaby deeper into the bush, we came upon a shack where a couple of men were living. Terrified, we bolted home and that night told Dad. He wasn't too concerned, because he was aware that there were people, many of them WWII veterans, living in shanties like this in several parts of the city. From that point on, our pine-needle gathering trips were confined to the very edge of the bush in sight of houses. After years of trying, we never managed to successfully breed the finches and eventually reverted to breeding budgies where we had far greater success under Dad's tutelage.

Television wasn't available in Brisbane until 1959. We didn't get our first TV until towards the end of 1960, so radio was king in our household. Afternoon serials like *"The Argonauts"* were our favourites. We were members of the *"Argonauts Club"*. I can even remember the theme song, "Old Mother Hubbard and Jack and Jill and Tom the Piper's son." My special favourite show was a long running spy story called *"Dossier on Dimitrius."* Even when we got a TV we were banned from watching on school nights, so radio and records remained a major source of entertainment. I managed to get around the nightly 7:00pm curfew on the radio by using a tiny crystal set radio, which was connected to a hidden aerial strung up outside my window and a wire running to a nearby tap as an earth.

While TV had a great fascination to us kids, it was no competition for the adventures that unfolded when our horizons were expanded by *"pushies."*

Dad bought a couple of second-hand bikes for we two older boys when we were around eight and nine and helped us do them up. They had no gears and back-hub brakes. Our new neighbourhood became a very much enlarged area, bounded by Logan Road to the east and Ipswich Road to the west, including Stones Corner and, best of all, Toohey Forest. “The Bush” as we called it, was our domain. We explored, fished for “lobbies,” rolled boulders down hills and horror of horrors shot at each other with slug guns! Gangs of kids roamed “the Bush,” but there were rarely any fights.

The area had been a cattle property decades before and we delighted in following old fence lines to discover evidence of what went on in those days. A couple of special finds were the discovery of an old cattle yard and an abandoned car. The remnants of the yard are still there in the forest, though they are hard to find. A year or so back I found the old 1930s/40s car. All that was left was a heavily rusted transmission and part of the engine block.

In the late 1960s our family outgrew the Chamberlain Street home and we moved to Bourrelet Street in Holland Park West. This home was much closer to “the Bush” and as we were a little older by this time, we spent virtually all our holidays roaming Toohey Forest and the fast-developing suburbs on the Tarragindi side. The virtually traffic-free streets became push bike raceways during the holidays.

Mum was so well trained by this stage, that she packed us sandwiches for our lunch and waved us off with a cheery, “Be home before dark!” Racing and exploring was thirsty work, but I can't recall ever seeing a kid with a water bottle. There was no need. Very few of the newly-built houses had fences, so we just sneaked into deserted yards and drank from their garden taps.

We were probably the last generation of kids in Australia to have such freedom. By the late 1960s television was drawing more kids indoors, street traffic increased as suburbs expanded and there was a strong perception that suburban streets had become too dangerous to allow young children to roam free. Sadly, our children and grandchildren have not been able to experience the freedom and adventure that was ours as kids **growing-up in the 50s and 60s.**

3598 words

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