



ST. GEORGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

INC.

7 Lynwood St
Blakehurst

MARCH - APRIL 1993

SOAP POWDERS, CEREAL AND SAOS



Austerity was the order of the day when this photograph was taken in the early thirties. No luxury items here - Persil, Lux, Lifebuoy, Kellogg's All-Bran and Arnott's' Sao biscuits - and a sawdust floor. Pictured is "Paddy" McRae at 67 Forest Road, Arncliffe. Photo courtesy of Mrs Marie Hynes.

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TEMPE HOUSE UPDATE

Following concern expressed about the future of Tempe House we have requested the Heritage Council of NSW, in conjunction with the National Trust, conduct an inspection of the site to determine the current state of the building and assess whether the present level of security is adequate.

We should have an answer for members at the March meeting.

MEETING PROGRAMME

MARCH 9 RON RATHBONE

"The Benevolent Society of NSW" is one of the oldest charitable institutions in NSW and has interesting history. It has also has connections with the Rockdale Municipality through its operation of the Lucy Gullet Hostel in Bexley.

APRIL 13 DAVID HALL

"Tracing Your Family History - How to get started"
Having traced his own ancestors back to the 1400's David Hall has plenty of tips for the unititiated.

Meetings are held 8pm at the Council Chambers, first floor, Town Hall, Princes Highway, Rockdale.

Members please bring a plate.

PICNIC IN THE GROUNDS OF ROZELLE HOSPITAL

SUNDAY 2ND MAY 1993

The extensive grounds of Rozelle Hospital are an unexpected delight to the visitor and provide an attractive location for a relaxing picnic.

The hospital contains a great many historic buildings so there will be plenty to interest our members.

Bring a picnic lunch and join us for a pleasant day. For details contact Dora Lenane 660 2714.

Starts 10.30 am

There will be a minimal charge per person.

NOEL BEEHAG

Society members send their best wishes for a speedy recovery to our Senior Vice-President, Noel Beehag, who has recently undergone surgery. Look forward to seeing you back on deck, Noel.

AS WE WERE

A question put quite often by young people of today to their elders is "How on earth did you amuse yourselves when you were children and up into your twenties?"

This is understandable seeing that we had no radio or TV, no clubs or discos, amusement parlors or color movies; drugs were only used, we were told, by a few depraved doctors, there were no hotel lounges, in fact teenage drinking was a rarity and in any case hotel bars closed at 6pm under strict police surveillance and woe betide the publican caught with an under eighteen aged youth on his premises.

Owenship of the comparatively few cars was usually limited to heads of well-to-do families and a junior was extremely lucky to be allowed use of the parental car.

Around 1920 the population of the Illawarra coast from Stanwell Park down to Nowra was pretty evenly divided between town and country dwellers, the latter comprising people engaged in farming, quarrying and the timber and fishing industries. The towns were peopled by the business, professional, mining, transport, industrial and retired sections of the community.

As school children our playground diversions lay in activities not much indulged in these days and included marbles, top spinning, running games such as "Fox and Geese" and "Egg in the Hat" and ball games; while for the girls there was hop scotch, skipping, jacks, rounders and croquet.

In the rural areas most children on arriving home from school had allotted tasks to perform such as milking, feeding calves, gathering eggs, watering vegetable plots, chopping firewood and making sure that in wet weather there was plenty of dry kindling wood for the fuel stove next morning.

Once home it was not usual to go out again except in a family group to some definite fixture in a nearby town or village such as a concert, bazaar, circus, or to see one of the numerous travelling shows which toured country areas: these included the Lynch Family of Bellringers, Fisk Jubilee Singers, vaudeville shows and dramatic theatres (how we all sobbed over "East Lynne") and "Magic Lantern Shows".

Most homes had a piano and someone who could play the tunes and songs of that era so evenings were often spent in singing, card games such as euchre and cribbage, Ludo and Snakes and Ladders and "Bobs" played on the dining room table with a billiard ball and cue.

Going to the pictures to view black and white silent movies was a feature of family life about twice a week in Wollongong and with the Crown theatre packed with children and teenagers on Saturday afternoons.

Milk bars had not evolved, the meeting places for the youth being the "soda fountains", two of which, Howarth's and Cook and Cornforth's in Crown Street sold luscious and variegated ice cream sundaes together with a popular drink known as a "spider", a mixture of ice cream and ginger beer.

However it is certain that ballroom dancing was the most popular social activity in the 1920's, the end of World War I saw the phasing out of the dances of earlier times and their replacement from USA by the foxtrot, quickstep, gipsy tap, barn dance, Canadian three step, Pride of Erin and later arrivals such as the Lambeth Walk and Booms-a Daisy; all performed to strict dance-time music; the sheet music for popular songs was usually labelled as being in waltz, foxtrot or quickstep time.

These days dancing in the modern style seems to be learned in discos without formal tuition but sixty years ago the youth of the community attended dancing classes to learn at least the rudiments and basic steps of ballroom dancing.

In Wollongong the best known were the weekly classes conducted in the small Alliance Hall in Market Street by Miss Wilson, sister of Vern Wilson, one of the town's five dentists.

It could not be said that there was no class distinction as admission to her "academy" was limited to sons and daughters of the professions, business executives, heads of industry, country landholders, and from banking and government circles.

The niceties of dress and deportment were dealt with together with the various dance steps to music supplied by Mrs Osborne at the piano and with her daughters Molly and Nancy initiating perspiring and three footed young men into the mysteries of the art.

At Winter's end a formal graduation dance was held in the ballroom of the former Queen's Hotel, next door to today's Wollongong Museum and this signalled Miss Wilson's opinion that her pupils could henceforth attend public dances and balls with confidence in their ability to perform creditably.

During the winter the newspapers in country towns were full of notices of forthcoming balls organised by many competent local institutions and these assured patrons of a competent Master of Ceremonies, good orchestra, lavish supper and,

most importantly, a fast floor. This latter would be prepared by treatment with shredded candles, sawdust and kerosene and brought to high polish by dragging over it a cornsack on which was seated a small boy; one of our after school diversions.

The result was a surface compared to greased lightning on which many a gliding couple came down with a thud; men usually carried and changed into a pair of feather-light dancing pumps before taking the floor. I still own a pair of these patent leather pumps made at Baxter's factory at Goulburn and bought from Lance's store in Wollongong for ten shillings. These have trodden on some of the daintiest feet of that period on the South Coast and are still full of fox trotting mileage.

By far the most popular event was the weekly "Saturday Night Diggers' Dance" held in the Wollongong Town Hall. This was organised and continued on for a number of years by a committee of returned soldiers of which the late Herbie Herd was an active member.

Attendance was by invitation, graduates of Miss Wilson's classes were especially welcome, and a card was issued to each invitee which had to be shown at the pay window each night before a ticket was passed out at ten shillings per couple.

Strict tempo dance was supplied by Beaumont's Sylvan Orchestra consisting of piano, drums, saxophone, cornet and violin.

Strong drink was not allowed nor even thought of, but a so-called claret cup was dispensed from a table in a corner of the hall which consisted of a large china wash basin in which was mixed a bottle of red wine diluted with about twenty bottles of lemonade in which floated slices of orange and cucumber.

Strict observance of the Sabbath was a feature of the social scene and all forms of entertainment in public halls were compelled to close at midnight on Saturday nights; for this reason balls were always held on week nights so that revelry could continue on until early hours.

In this regard I remember that the Albion Park football club applied to the local Show committee for permission to rent the showground for matches on Sunday afternoons.

The letter was received in stunned silence followed by a unanimous rejection of such a sacriligious proposal; the president, William Norris, adding that he could think of "nothing more wicked than playing sport on Sunday".

Towards the end of winter the Diggers' Ball Committee always staged a formal ball which was the occasion - in the absence of dry cleaning facilities - of much sponging and pressing of blue serge "best" suits and purchase and making up of pretty evening frocks. They were always programme dances in which it was de rigeur to book one's partner for at least the first, last and supper dance.

The season always closed with a fancy dress masked ball when scores of revellers in cleverly designed outfits paraded Wollongong's streets en route for the Town Hall.

The scene on the dance floor was really spectacular as scores of colorful couples advanced and retreated, dipped and swayed, side-stepped and slid in unison to the tune of "Lily of Laguna", "Somebody Stole My Gal", or "Moonlight and Roses".

To those brought up in those days and those ways the change over to jitter-bugging and all those dance styles in which so-called partners gyrated madly but far apart from each other left us figuratively and literally flat-footed, conversational, cheek to cheek, girl in arms style suited us.

BERT. E. WESTON
14 February 1984

The St George Historical Society is grateful to Bert Weston for permission to reprint this article. Mr Weston is a descendent of Major George Johnston, reputedly the first member of the First Fleet to set foot on Australian soil and the officer who arrested Governor Bligh. Mr Weston is in his nineties today and lives on Sydney's north shore.
