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At the Beginning



I came to St Albans in September 1949 with my husband Jack Cameron, my two young sons Les and Garry, and little else. We had bought a block of land in Oberon Avenue and put a bungalow on the back of it. We spent two years in this six-by-three metre sleepout until the house was built, because materials and skilled labour were very scarce and it took quite a time to have a house built.

It soon became apparent to me that there was not going to be enough room in school for the population of young families that moved in rapidly in large numbers from 1950. This spurred me to agitate mainly in the field of education, but soon in welfare and recreation as well. My husband was interested in sport and eventually St Albans Community Youth Club became our busiest interest. Many initiatives were encouraged from there.

In the little township there were about six shops including an 'unofficial' Post Office run by the local storekeeper in Main Road West. Every day people gathered there to collect their mail, the delivery extended to a very limited area - another St Albans first, once-a-day postal delivery - everywhere else it was twice a day, then.

There were two general stores, a Mechanics Institute, hairdresser and tobacconist, butcher, baker, greengrocer, one petrol pump at the store, four cars, one primary school, three churches, no doctors, no social workers, no chemist, no banks. The baker and milkman delivered their wares and spread the local news among their customers. There were deliveries of milk (into your own billy can), bread, meat, fruit and vegetables. Mr Self would drive around in his horse and cart making deliveries and taking orders for groceries.

The purveyors of these necessities were social workers and coordinators who spread the news of community activities. They could tell you when "Mrs X" had broken her leg and needed some help. One had an education as to how other people lived just by observation as we gathered around the baker's cart. All shops closed early, but most of the shops were the front room of the shopkeeper's residence, and they could usually be prevailed upon to serve out of hours.

An Overcrowded School

From 1949, schools were unbelievably crowded and there was a shortage of teachers but an increasing number of residents brought the opportunity to form some pressure groups. These brought their own difficulties that linger on when interested parties think they have solutions that would work but are never tried for reasons beyond their experience.

There was a man here called Krashinsky, who was a Russian professor at Melbourne University and later lived in Millawa Avenue. He was keen to have the schools in St Albans introduce a double day system from 7am to 1pm and 1pm to 7pm because there weren't enough buildings. He didn't understand at that time that the education department was run as a statewide system and that the rules that applied to St Albans schools were the same as for every other school in the state. It would have been an enormous change to try to put teachers onto shift work, never mind that in the rural areas the kids would be having to go to school while the cows were still being milked.

There was a big shortage of teachers too. The education department had been devastated by the war with the male teachers going away to war and some never returning. Mature women were also scarce as teachers, because married women weren't allowed to be employed by the public service in a permanent capacity, so female teachers had to resign when they married and perhaps might have been employed in temporary positions. If you weren't on the permanent list you were disadvantaged with regard to appointments and promotions.

The only school building had three rooms and 103 children. Many children were not enrolled until 7 years of age though it was compulsory from age 6, when many enrolled here with a younger sibling. My older son's grade one class had 60 six-year-olds but only 23 seats; there was one other Australian-born child and 58 from seven European countries, including Germany, the Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Yugoslavia.

The Mechanics Institute hall was used as a classroom, and my son Les attended there. There was mud everywhere in the winter time and one of the councillors put down a load of briquette dust to make the ground passable, and after that all the kids were coming home with their white socks covered in black soot.

The tap on the water tank was a bit high for the smaller children to drink from, so they could be seen occasionally scooping water from the muck and verdigris of the copper trough under the spigot.

The rest of the students were bussed to schools in Albion, Yarraville, and I think even Altona - wherever there was a spare classroom.

New Schools are Built

1956 was a hectic year as several new primary schools and St Albans High School were built. Jack (my husband) and I were active in raising money for the schools, especially the East Primary. I was able to find the grounds for the east school and the high school because there were lots of empty paddocks near my house. A school inspector had told me that St Albans would never get bigger, but discussions with Ernie Shepherd and regional directors finally resulted in Sunshine Harvester releasing land for the high school. The high school started in 1956 but was temporarily based in Sunshine, because the school buildings weren't ready for occupation until 1957. I joined the inaugural Parents and Friends Association in 1956 and remained connected with the school for many, many years.

When Mr Barker held his first assembly, he said that both staff and pupils were faced with an important task, in fact they were witnessing the birth of St. Albans High School, and each member present had a part to play in helping to deposit the foundation of what kind of High School St. Albans would become in the future.

Our school had no funds, and it fell to Mr. Walsh to organise use of sporting equipment that Melbourne Sports Deport had supplied gratis, until we were in a position to pay our way. Another staff member collected the first composite fee so that a bank account could be started.

The outside arrangements for recreation were ideal. The hall was located in the Municipal Gardens, having a tennis court alongside the building. We had an oval with a pavilion and dressing-rooms a few yards away, while there was a better oval with a turf wicket - called "Barclay Reserve" - on the other side.

All the staff were delighted at the neat appearance of the pupils. The girls had no set dress, but the boys on that first day were in uniform. Open-necked grey sports shirts with grey shorts of the sports patterns Mr. Barker had circularised the parents of the boys beforehand, expressing the wish that they come for a start so attired, and they responded splendidly.

That afternoon, cupboards, benches, tables, office equipment, screens and teaching material arrived. A welcome surprise was a part-time teacher, Mr. Alcorn, later a Senior History Master.

There was no telephone at first. Mr. Barker had to use the public phone on the other side of the street to contact the Education Department. On one of these telephonic pilgrimages, Mr. Barker heard that next week, a sewing teacher, Mrs. O'Halloran would be arriving, whilst approval was received for the appointment of Mrs. Johnston, who had resigned from the Department of Air to become the first office secretary.

Then one day after conception, on the Wednesday morning, St Albans High was born as a school unit.

Mr Barker, the first principal at the high school, asked to use the youth club premises for some sessions. It was also used as a classroom in 1960 and 1961. At that stage the youth club was an austere place without any windows. Not that you could complain about lack of ventilation, because the wind blew in from under the corrugated iron in all directions. At least the school paid for using the hall, which helped defray the running expenses.

Mr Barker and his wife Bernice, who also taught at the High School, were some of the few teachers who lived in the area. They had a place on the corner of Millawa Avenue.

Mrs Barker also organised the school's first debutante ball to be held at the Youth Club. All the girls in their long gowns and their escorts in formal attire certainly made a picture of classic elegance.



Mr James and Mrs Bernice Barker with the St Albans High School Debutantes at the Tin Shed.

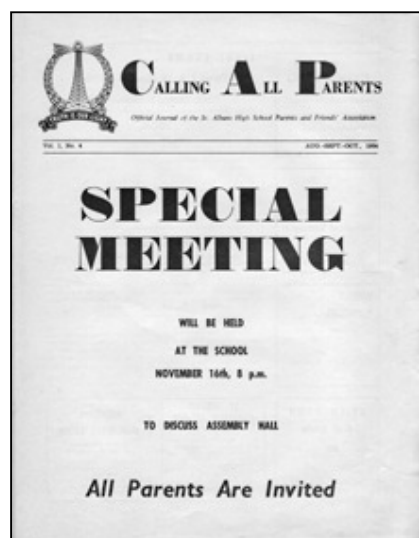
A Community School



The High School became the place to which everyone seemed to have some connection and it helped that the principal and his deputy (his wife) lived locally. There appeared a little light at the end of the educational tunnel. Schools were very sparsely equipped, even the building was temporary.

This school united many able people in the interests of the education of their children, the most frequently offered reason for migration being a better life for their progeny. In those years, it was not uncommon for hundreds of parents to attend school meetings. Interpreters were provided, often from among the teachers in the main seven languages that prevailed at the time. Bilingual speakers were much less common then.

At one stage the St Albans High School Educational Council was meeting every Wednesday afternoon - the President was Mr Rushan - and parents were welcome to join teachers and students at this meeting.



Teachers had little knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages of this village, which was then quite separate from Sunshine, Deer Park, Keilor, and Sydenham, all of whom it drifts into now. They came over Green Gully every morning at 9am, returning at 4pm, like the British in India returning to the hills after 'ruling' the Indians during the day. (What's changed?)

One day after attending a students' meeting, where I was the only parent present, I picked up a pamphlet proposing a visit to Strathbogie, the new school camp. There were hundreds of these pamphlets on the floor and I took about 20 of them home. They were ill constructed in many ways, and purposeless, as they asked would you take passengers and how many seats your car had, but did not ask for a name or contact number.

I rather enjoy filling in forms. I showed them to my friend the sports teacher and we had a bit of fun putting in entries for 20 famous names - foreign ones of course to match the student's names. Who would query the sincerity of J Caesar, especially when he wrote he would take iv passengers? My friend the teacher slipped the forms onto the school office desk. Funny we never heard the result of that survey and I never ever saw that camp.

Working at the School

In 1958 Mrs Barker surprised me outside Haynes's place by asking me to join the English staff at the High School, and especially to build up a library. When I was younger I always thought I would end up in teaching so this was another opportunity in that direction, but without many resources. There was hardly a book in the school.



I was offered a job at St Albans High School for five afternoons per week, teaching English and looking after the library. The school was in a convenient location for me, being at the end of my street. One day when I was with a class of 30 students, my youngest son Roy who was of kindergarten dragged a rug and blanket down to the school and through the corridors to the library room to tell me "I felt a bit tired Mum." I made a spot for him in the back room and went on with normal routine.

Geoff Reid, who was head of the English department and a lovely bloke, gave his old dictionary to the school because it was still short of everything. He was one of the well qualified teachers at the school and taught English and French and was a very highly principled person. I've had the equivalent of 63 years of service on various school committees, nearly all at St Albans, so it was interesting to be inside the classroom on the other side for a change. I'd also done duty in the tuckshop since it started.

I worked part-time at the school, in the afternoons. Nearly all the kids had no books at home and most parents wouldn't have known what sort of English classics to buy for the kids. Nearly all the teachers were either first year out of college and therefore qualified, or were teachers from overseas who had good enough qualifications but perhaps not quite so good in English language; some had very good qualifications.

As it turned out, I stayed about 3 years at the school and formed friendships that have lasted a lifetime. As a perspective on how long ago that was, in the early '60s people still wrote with the old fashioned pen and ink, and so did the school children of course. Each class had its ink monitors whose job was to fill the ink wells in the desks. There was still a lot of emphasis on "good writing" with heavy down-strokes and light upstrokes; at the start ball point pens, or biros as they were commonly known, were thought of as something wicked.

The Teaching Staff

Mr Strauss had very good qualifications. Mr Hill had good science qualifications and some like Smith were trained in Arts but taught science. Mr Walsh was known by everyone as "Doc" and had a very good history background and qualifications, but his main other interests were football and drama. Mr Bolvari came from Bulgaria and was an absolutely charming and versatile man. Apart from being the resident locksmith he taught French and made in German through the school newsletter that he was running English classes for parents. On top of all that he made up French crosswords and competitions to raise funds for the assembly hall and had a fine baritone voice. Miss Mary Myer was the first psychologist at the school. She was a very tall and attractive woman who was really good at encouraging students to develop good study patterns and organised evening private study classes at the school to help students.

Mostly the locally trained teachers would have been aged about 30, with the overseas ones being older; Mrs Sturesteps was the eldest. I always thought some of the younger ones were very prudish, they hadn't had much experience in life. There was one teacher who was absolutely shocked out of her mind because some boy of 14 years winked at her. I just laughed. She was telling all the other teachers and they were horrified at the disrespect. I said you can't really claim he walked up the corridor saying he's going to wink at so-and-so when he gets there



Teachers at St Albans High, 1961; Lorna Cameron is fifth from the right in the second row.

Sometimes teachers would tell me things like that about what had happened to them. I was living among the people whereas other teachers weren't, mostly, so I was more aware of the circumstances of local people. I'd try to say something like: "Well look, this kid has probably been in migrant camps for 10 years and has been interpreting for his parents ever since he started school in Australia. Now he's going home and paying the bills or arranging the insurance for the family ... we're dealing with teenagers who are not going to behave like little kids because they've already taken on more adult responsibilities."

Supporting the Students

The more I worked with kids the more I felt I had to stand up and defend them at times, even if it was in an abstract sense, because you just couldn't mention private information. I was sometimes confronted with the very negative and withdrawn look on young faces that I previously had associated with girls who had been subjected to incest or boys who had been bashed a lot. You don't know what to do at times, but you know that the kids need understanding and support.

Val Noone was a Catholic priest from the Sacred Heart Church who became involved with religious education classes at the high school and he was responsible for my involvement with the Probation Officers Association in the western suburbs. I took that on because it was another way of supporting teenagers who were neglected or "at risk" as they say.

Because I was running the library I got to know nearly everybody's name in the whole school - you had a reason for having to know it, and you probably knew their address and heard a lot of stories from the kids you were working with. My task with the kids was to get them familiar with using the library and reading books, doing research for their school projects etc. It was a bit frustrating with some classes because many of the students were poor readers and not that interested. You can't blame kids for not being able to read.

Some of these classes were on the last period of the day. With some brighter students I'd sometimes see them looking for Enid Blyton books or other such children's books and I would encourage them to take out some of the more challenging literature. I'd introduce the class to the decimal system of classification and encourage kids to help keep the place tidy and in order but it didn't always go quite to plan. One volunteer thought he did a great job by sorting the books in one section into big books at one end and small books at the other, with a diminishing range in between. Kids had to be at least minimally adept in numeracy to work the cataloguing system.

Sporting and Social Activities

Between the youth club and the school we could do a few things together; you could recruit people for activities such as football and even dancing classes. At that time I was interacting with the kids from school and the youth club and we started organising some sporting activities for them.



St Albans Community Youth Club football team, 1956.

The football interest was mostly from the high school boys. I knew more about sports than most of the teachers at the school and knew that you teach the kids a lot through sport; you really have to be able to umpire, even if it's umpiring the behaviour of your own kids.

We started football activities on Saturday morning at the Youth Club and ran that for about three years, then had about two years with it in the afternoon. In the beginning the football club wouldn't start a junior club because they said they didn't have enough people to do it, and we started it. I think in the first year we only won one game but were disqualified because one of the players was unregistered. That was against Deer Park, and probably the main reason we won was because it was also their first year in the competition. We were looking forward to playing them again later in the season and possible win again, but unfortunately that game was washed out.

We would recruit kids from the high school for the football team if they looked promising. "Doc" Walsh was always keen on football and is remembered for inserting comments such as "you'll be in the ruck next week" as a favourable comment to the boys when he was teaching history. I think the girls in his classes felt they didn't get as much attention as the boys because they didn't play football.



Lorna Cameron at St Albans Community Youth Club, 1970s.

Later when the school bought a mini bus I had an arrangement to borrow it in the evenings when I was transporting kids to basketball matches. Transport was always a difficulty because few people had cars in the early years, and even later when more vehicles were about it was just as difficult in finding people willing to ferry kids about.

We started dancing classes at the club and at first we did all old-time dancing. Then we introduced rock 'n' roll because the kids all wanted to do that. Then one time we had all rock 'n' roll and a few came up to me and whispered "When are we going to have the one where you change partners?"

Reflections

During the 'sixties the administration at the high school had changed and no longer was outside interest encouraged. Parents discovered that they could neglect this element of their children's education. However, these years led to many liaisons that became pressure groups for improvements in facilities locally.

I have a special appreciation for the teachers who have served at the school for a long time and gave it that continuity of operations despite the inevitable changes. Looking back it seems that, like in any school, there has been a lot of turnover of staff over the years while other teachers have devoted many years of commitment to the school. They put their personal imprint on the philosophy and teaching style of the school.

Mr Alcorn was one of those who was there at the very beginning and was still there in the 'eighties, though he is now retired. Ian Crocker has also been there for many years. He said to me years ago that I had awakened a consciousness to social welfare concerns at the individual level rather than just as an abstract issue. Denise Whittle is another long term contributor.

Several teachers have said to me they enjoyed working here because the parents respected the teacher's authority in the classroom and in turn the teachers developed an understanding of working within a diverse community and doing their best to fulfill the aspirations of many students.

Lorna Frances Cameron, 2006.
(Lorna passed away in November 2014.)



Maria Dobes (L), Lorna Cameron (centre), Edna Cooper (R).



Edna Cooper and Lorna Cameron, 2010.

Debutantes photograph courtesy of Vanda Bognar.
Other photographs courtesy of Lorna Cameron.