

## ERIC PERRETT: SCHOOL ADVISORY COUNCIL, 1957-1970, BUSINESSMAN, COMMUNITY LEADER

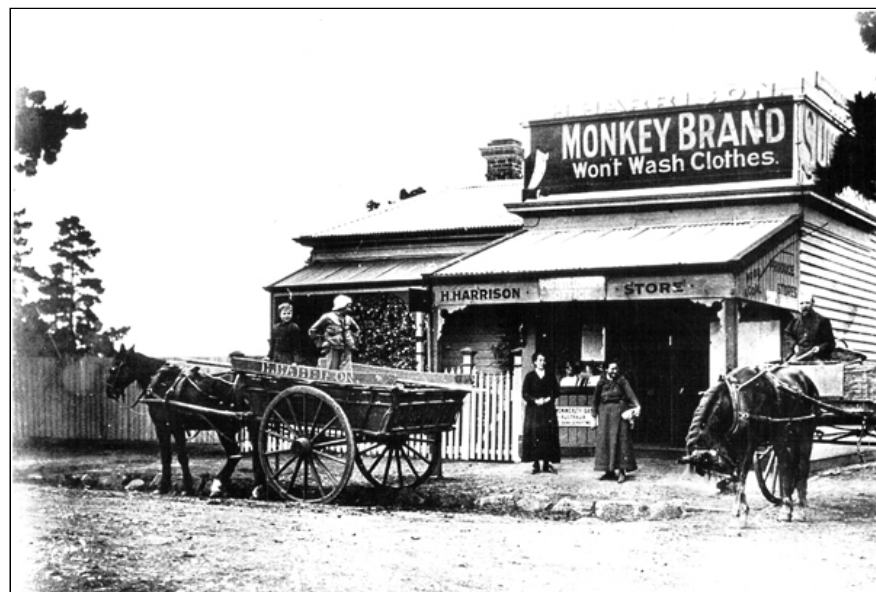


Eric Perrett was born in 1901 and moved with his parents, John and Elizabeth Perrett, to St Albans in February 1923. The family had been operating a delicatessen in Richmond and for a while had a produce business in Flemington, but they wanted to move further out into the country, so they bought the general store that Harry Harrison had been running since 1914 in St Albans.

St Albans in the 1920s was a small country village with a population of about 120 people. There were just a few shops in the central area and only one paved road; the rest of the streets were only tracks made by horses, drays and people walking about. There were a few houses scattered about the central area and all the rest were on the small farms around Taylors Road and Main

Road.

Electricity was already connected to the central area, but there was no water and no sewerage. Everyone had a galvanised iron roof and they would collect rainwater into iron tanks. When the large blocks of ice began to be delivered to the area people bought ice chests. Before then the only form of cooling available was the old Coolgardie safe method. People would locate these near the back door or in a shed or a fernery in the shade where there was a regular breeze available. That's where people kept their dairy products or meat, but lack of refrigeration was also the reason that people had to get fresh food.



Harry Harrison's General Store, 1920s.

Horses were important for farmers as well as in the business and social lives of the equestrian fraternity. Stores relied on horses to deliver groceries as well as bringing produce to the store. There was a bit of a siding off the railway line near the station and that's where some of railway trucks would be shunted for loading and unloading. Sometimes there might be three trucks there filled with wood, briquettes and wheat. The shop was relatively close to the railway station but it was still a big task to move the tons of material into storage at the back of the property. Extra help was hired to load horse-drawn drays to bring it all into the huge back yard and then stack it up. It had to be done properly and that was all by manpower, so the stacks of wheat in the big shed were built a tier at a time to form a ramp so you could get the sacks right up on top.

The horse and cart was used to deliver the produce that people had ordered from the store. One

day John Perrett was thrown from the cart when the horse bolted and he was injured in the fall, which led to serious health complications and he later died. This would have been in 1938.

Eric Perrett was a keen horseman and rode at the Royal Melbourne Show and various country shows, including local gymkhanas as they were sometimes held in places like Sunshine. He was friends with Farquhar and Sonny McRae of Taylors Road, who were keen horsemen; they were members of the Oaklands Hunt Club. Hunting with horses and hounds was a very popular activity and tended to be somewhat exclusive, because you had to be nominated to be considered for membership and then invited to join. This club was named in the 1880s after the place where it was established, Oaklands Junction, which is out Bulla way north of St Albans, and Farquhar McRae was involved in its early stages. They held riding and hunting events all over the region including Sunshine, St Albans, Keilor and Keilor Plains, which is one of the old names for the St Albans area. If there was no fox to be found on the day of the hunt they would lay a scent trail for the hounds to follow anyway so that the day's activities could still be held.

In 1933 Eric Perrett married Euphemia Clara Boadiciea Hughes (known as Effie) who was born in 1909. She was the youngest daughter of William and Clara Hughes who were a large family living in St Albans. There were a number of sisters around the region; their married names include the Bedfords and the Bloxhams. Eric and Effie's son, John Perrett junior, was born in 1934 and was the only child of the marriage.

Eric and Effie worked very hard seven days a week, and Sunday was when they did all the clerical work. Eric was very good with figures, which was an important skill because he had to balance the books, especially the bank and post office records. Effie was always a partner in the running of the business so she was also very busy. On top of that she would leave the store before closing time and go home, which was about 100 metres away, to prepare the dinner. After a full day's work she still aimed to have dinner ready when her husband and son arrived home.

Eric Perrett and Stan Haynes were the local Justices of the Peace and they were always busy with forms and witnessing declarations. The Progress Association approached Keilor Shire Council in 1945 and nominated Perrett because they thought more JPs were needed and that's how he was appointed. People needed all sorts of things signed by a JP and it would happen at all hours. It wasn't unusual for Perrett to be interrupted during his dinner because someone needed a form signed. Another thing was that the St Albans Police Station would close at 10 pm, but if the police had to take people elsewhere overnight they had to get a JP's signature so Perrett was doing that as well. A lot of people in St Albans remembered him as a JP. He was a regular M.C. at the Mechanics Institute Hall in East Esplanade for occasions put on by the Anglican church and he was also a committee member of the Ratepayers Association that would also meet in the hall. There were regular events such as euchre and dance nights or cribbage and dance nights that were put on as popular entertainment as well as fundraising for local clubs or charitable purposes.

Perrett had an old Ford with canvas sides and because there were only a couple of cars in the area at the start he was offering lifts to people, or people would come and ask for help in emergencies or when other options were not available. Taking a pregnant woman to hospital was so much easier if you had a car.

He also took on local fundraising. When Footscray Hospital was being built in the 1920s Eric did fundraising for them with raffles and so on; he was constantly selling tickets. He didn't want any recognition for his work but the hospital did make him a governor. Maybe it was easier for him than other people because he knew everyone in the town and he enjoyed people's company, particularly with the football ... he did a lot of work in the football club.



J. Perrett & Son, General Store, Bank Agency and Post Office, c.1950s.

Perrett's General Store was central in many people's lives. Everyone had to come to the store at some time because it was the only place you could buy a newspaper, it was also the local post office agency so there was the collection or postage of mail, and pension payments at the time were made through the post so had to be collected from there, and the only public phone was outside on the porch next door. Working in the grocery store also had its moments and interesting ways that people would overcome communications problems. In the fifties, some of the migrant women would bring food labels from packets so that they could be sure of getting exactly what they wanted. Effie made friends with one woman who was a regular buyer of OK bars – they were a type of chocolate bar – so her nickname became “Mrs OK.” One chap came asking for “aggs, aggs” and Eric thought he was saying “axe” so he went out and got him one - turned out the chap wanted eggs.

Eric and Effie put an emphasis on education because they saw that as the best way of making a success in life. When their son went to primary school from 1939 to 1945 there was only the one school in St Albans and that had only three classrooms. There was no secondary school in the area, so after grade 6 the choices were the technical school in Sunshine, the high school in Williamstown, or the Hyde Street Central School in Footscray. Eric Perrett became involved with the Advisory Council of the St Albans High School when Mr Torpey was the principal there, which was in 1957. He continued his involvement until about 1970. He was a conscientious member of school council and if he saw any students acting up in the street when they should have been at school he would have a discrete conversation with the principal.

As far as football goes, Eric always saw St Albans as a country town and said it was only natural that country towns had to have their own football club. He was the foundation president of the St Albans Football Club and was involved for many years. A public meeting was held in September 1946 at the St Albans Fire Station to form the club. Twenty-six people attended this meeting and that's when the club started. Eric was elected as the President and Stan Taylor as Coach. Errington Reserve became the home ground. The club started with 26 members but in country towns in those days people paid as much attention to the local football team as they did to the VFL and before long there were two or three busloads of supporters turning up for the games.



Eric Perrett (second row, fourth from left) President of St Albans Football Club, 1947.

Part of the family's oral history is that Eric Perrett recommended Welkin Sun, the horse that nearly won the Melbourne cup in 1952, to Sonny McRae who bought it. That horse won the Werribbee Cup, the Geelong Cup and more, so there were definite possibilities of an even bigger win. Nevertheless, it was thought Sonny was aiming a bit high by nominating for the 1952 Melbourne Cup because it was a longer run against tougher competition. On Melbourne Cup day it was very exciting listening to the race call over the radio because Welkin Sun ran very well and 100 metres from the finish was leading the pack but was beaten by the New Zealand horse Dalray by half a length.



After running that general store in pretty much the same way for thirty years it was time for change, because St Albans was suddenly growing much bigger. From a couple of hundred residents at the turn of last century the population had increased to about 1,000 between 1930 and 1950. Then in the fifties the population really went ahead because of the post-war migration and the little village grew to 4,000 residents in 1955. This meant that there was much more demand for goods and services and a variety of other stores were started to cater for this demand. In September 1955 an official post office was established, so the Perrett store lost that part of the general business. Eric then sold the grocery side of the business to Mr Wardle and established the

newsagency as a separate shop just a couple of doors further along the street. This became the St Albans Authorised Newsagency – the town had grown large enough that this was now viable as an independent business whereas that was not possible earlier.

Effie Perrett died in 1960 of a stroke at the age of 50. After that Eric retired and bought a farm in Gisborne to breed cattle and race horses. However, he still maintained connections with St Albans as by this time he had purchased several properties and built a few shops along Main Road that he leased. So he still retained a business interest in the area and the newsagency still continued as a business.

Eric Perrett was constantly involved with his Gisborne farm until the late 1980s. When his memory started to fail and he started to lose his independence, he went to live in the Western

Suburbs Nursing Home in Yarraville. He died in the Footscray Western Hospital in September 1991 at the age of 90.

Effie and Eric Perrett's son, John Perrett jnr, started his secondary schooling at Hyde Street Central School in Footscray and completed it at University High School. He wanted to become a veterinary surgeon, but at that time there were no vet courses on offer in Melbourne so he decided instead to become a pharmacist. He worked in a pharmacy for a year to get some experience and then enrolled in the Melbourne Pharmacy College. After graduating he worked for John White in Glenroy for eight years. Then in the early seventies he had the opportunity to buy a store in St Albans, so did that. It was well situated on Main Road West near the railway station. In those days the St Albans Community Health Centre was providing medical consultations and it was very busy but did not have a dispensary. It was common to finish business at 6 pm but Perrett's wasn't very far away from the health centre and he decided to keep the shop open till 9 pm in order to cater for their patients. In those days the doctors in St Albans were mainly located on the west side of town, so he was very busy.

John ran that pharmacy for 15 years and then in 1988 sold it. He retired from business to help look after his aging father who at that stage was requiring more care. John has continued his involvement in horse racing as part owner of several horses. He is still living in his old home town St Albans.

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John Perrett and John Stevens (at back) with friends at community function.

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This article is based on discussions with John Perrett in 2012.