PHILLIP CINI : STUDENT 1971 - 1972

St Albans - The Second Beginning

My name is Phil Cini and I was born in Melbourne in 1959 as a descendent of the Portelli and Cini families, so I am proud to be an Australian of Maltese heritage. As well as being Australian-born I have been a St Albans boy for most of my life.

It was to escape the deprivation and ravages of the Second World War that my mother Tessie Portelli's family left the austerity of post-war Malta in 1949. Their story is reminiscent of the dislocation of thousands of others who left their homes of birth on the other side of the world to make St Albans their home.

The Portelli family

The Portelli's lifelong journey began in the latter days of the 1920s in Malta. Mary Pirotta and Paul Portelli had married in 1919. Mary, slight and pretty, was from the village of Birkirkara. Paul, from Qormi, was an able man - tall, tough and wiry, he bore an uncanny resemblance to John Wayne the actor. Apart from the naval dockyards in Valleta's Grand Harbour or low-income government utility work, Malta's only offering of secure employment was backbreaking work in stone masonry, building, or tending fields from early dawn to dusk. Migration was the only way out of a life of drudgery.

The year 1926 saw Paul Portelli migrate to the United States to secure a better future, leaving behind his wife and two daughters, Georgia and Stella. From New York then on to Chicago he made his way to California, obtaining work in the docks of San Francisco Bay, loading and unloading cargo on ships. It was the time of a new phenomenon originating in America called mass consumerism and work was plentiful.

Having spent several years securing a home base, he returned to Malta for a brief spell before setting sail again, this time with his family back to the States - to a new life in a new country. San Francisco, where the suburbs comprised of different ethnic groups heading down to Fishermans Wharf, was now home for the young, growing family. The Golden Gate Bridge which was still under construction and Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary in the middle of the bay provided a scenic backdrop.

Six more children would be born to them in the following decade of the depression-era thirties. My mum, Tessie (Theresa) was born in 1932 on the 27th of February, sharing the same day of birth with actress Elizabeth Taylor. San Francisco was a well-established cosmopolitan melting pot of multi-culturalism nestled around the bay area. There were a number of Maltese families living in the Italian quarter known as Little Italy in the North Beach area. Chinatown and other communities also were in established quarters. Then came the Great Depression of the thirties resulting in less demand for manufactured goods and reduced hours of employment. Many banks and businesses shut their doors. Soup kitchens became a common sight in major cities. People moved

from mundane job to mundane job trying to eke out an income, and the same applied to Paul Portelli. The days of milk and honey had become the days of sour grapes.

Whether for lack of work opportunity or homesickness or both, the Portellis decided to migrate back to Malta when they travelled on the Queen Mary before it was requisitioned as a troopship. It was a case of bad timing. They returned only to find themselves on the threshold of a major European conflict, with Italy declaring war against Britain and the tiny British colony of Malta, only 60 miles south of Sicily, was first in the firing line. On 10 June 1940, the first of countless air raids took place.

The Portelli's story, along with the rest of the populace, was of submission to fear and deprivation due to the ravages of constant air raids. But it was also a story of fortitude against the odds. For a brief period in 1942, Malta was the most bombed place on earth but the island held its own. As 1942 dragged on, whatever shipping convoys made it to the island were able to replenish vital stores of goods needed to fight back. Food, ammunitions, and fuel all guaranteed to keep Malta from capitulation. Eventually the tide would turn when Malta was used as a stepping stone for the Allies to attack the Axis powers through Sicily, and the rest is history. The Maltese had at last received some respite and the island now faced the task of restructure. It was the same all over Europe and everyone had a story to tell. For many, migration was the only key to a better future.

The Portelli family along with many hopefuls decided to start afresh through migration. Paul, now fifty-four, was first to arrive in Australia and the rest of the family followed, three by three, to their final destination. The year was 1949. It was the start of the great migrant influx the likes of which Australia had not seen since the gold rush days of the 1850s.

Initially residing in North Melbourne, Paul found work in Geelong at the Ford Motor Company. Within two years the family were once more together - my grandmother with aunts Sylvia and young Cathy being the last to arrive.

For many other migrants, St Albans and neighbouring West Sunshine offered the best opportunity to start anew. Around 1951-52 the Portellis purchased a block of land in Walmer Avenue next door to the Walker's residence. Within a short time the weatherboard at number 30 was constructed and to this day it has withstood the test of time. St Albans was their final hometown and from where the Portellis, one by one, would start families of their own making. There is a photograph of my grandmother, Mary Portelli nee Pirotta, standing in the yard with the stark background of an empty horizon along Biggs Street and beyond, which pretty much sums up St Albans as a suburb yet in the making.

Granddad was now able to work closer to home at the ICI complex at Deer Park as a cleaner. Apart from the weatherboard house his other investments were a small property up in Wandin along with an old AEC tray truck with which he'd cart firewood to take back to St Albans with help from his sons Tony and Frank. Granddad's personal means of

transport was a late thirties straight eight Oldsmobile sedan which he drove to work during the week and on Saturday to Victoria Market to haul back the weekly groceries.

Saga of a migrant family

The weathered Oldsmobile sedan turned off the unsealed road onto a dirt driveway at 30 Walter Avenue. There were few houses then in the sparse windswept paddocks of St Albans, home to the wildlife of rabbits and tiger snakes and copperheads that slithered about in the grassy, rocky landscape. An old weatherboard house and a bungalow lined the street and, beyond, the timber skeletons of dwellings in the making broke up the monotonous landscape.

To this backup, Paul Portelli returned home after a mundane working day at the ICI complex at nearby Deer Park. Awaiting him were his wife and four daughters and two sons to commence their evening supper. It was not served until he took his place at the kitchen table and a prayer of thanksgiving was offered. A bowl of chicken soup and thick slices of day-old bread, followed by black, sweetened coffee, comprised the evening meal.

Devout Catholics, the solemn recital of praying the rosary would be prayed in a monotone as an act of tradition, faith and hope for a rosy future. The perception of future lay in the hands of the Almighty and whatever devices would be of their making. As for the present, a bakelite wireless would be turned on for the latest news broadcast and the weather report. On occasion one of three married daughters would pay a visit while their father would play traditional folk music on his battered acoustic guitar while his daughter Theresa would accompany him, making up the words as she sang along, which was the Maltese custom. Paul Portelli would then call it a day amongst the many days that passed into the recesses of his memory in his checkered yet eventful life.

On Saturday mornings, the family sedan would be driven to the Victoria market which offered more variety for grocery shopping than the half-dozen or so shops situated at St Albans. Occasionally, Paul and Mary would pay a visit at St Francis Church in the heart of the city or at St Mary's in Victoria Street. At the time there was no market or a Catholic church to cater for the migrants settling into St Albans. Sunday Mass was held at the Mechanics Institute – a weatherboard community building situated on the East Esplanade opposite the train station, where a priest would make his way from Sunshine to preside over the small but growing Catholic population. The sound of the Mass would sometimes be drowned out momentarily by a passing steam locomotive billowing smoke and steam as it crossed the Main Road junction. It would remind Mary of the time Malta had its own railway line which ran right behind their residence back in Birkirkara.

After lunch on weekends the four sisters would indulge in a little recreation. With what was left of their weekly income after paying for board and assistance, they'd catch a train into Sunshine or the city to watch a matinee movie or just walk past an array of shops and stop for a coffee and a laugh. St Albans offered no venues where people could gather for a bit of R and R except for sporting events at Errington Reserve on Main Road East.

At home, the only luxuries that were affordable to families' needs were an ice-box, a wireless radio and gramophone, and a primus cooker. In some areas, kerosene lamps were still in use. At one stage, even tobacco was hard to obtain and was rationed. Such

was the Spartan life that faced most hopeful migrants back in 1950. But better days lay ahead just around the corner.

Paul and Mary Portelli saw the suburb grow around them. Sadly, just before giving away his youngest daughter in marriage, Paul passed away in September 1962 aged 67 years due to complications of diabetic conditions. His wife survived him by only four years and died at the age of 70 years. For the remaining clan, as for other migrants, St Albans has remained their home and their families would inherit the suburb “that nobody wanted”.

The promised land

It was 1949 and the former troopship ‘Astorius’ ploughed its way through the stormy waves of the Mediterranean, already in its fifth day heading to Port Said. On board, among the many hopefuls of migrants who had just finished the usual supper of corned beef, hash potatoes and eggs, Charlie Cini felt nauseated by the rocking, unstable vessel. Seated next to his brother Joe, he swore that once they’d reached Port Said he was going to jump ship and swim back home to Malta. The passage through the Suez Canal provided relief and the desolate palm-studded sandbanks and the nomadic Arab folk on camelback provided a calming background as the ship started southward and slowly onward. Another two weeks crossing the Indian Ocean provided nothing for entertainment except strolling the decks or seeking solace in someone’s company or watching the wash left behind in the ship’s wake.

The ship’s accommodation arrangements ensured that men and women were segregated because of dormitory style sleeping quarters. The travel ticket only ensured your Spartan-like voyage, a bed and daily meals, but not a cabin. Husbands and wives had to sleep apart and only met up on deck and at mealtimes. Males were off limits to the sections reserved for the female passengers and the ship provided no private

accommodation. That was just standard fare all the way. This is what you got for your £70 ticket.

Docking at Fremantle it would take another week before Charlie and Joe would disembark at Port Melbourne and catch a train to the outer suburb of Albion where their uncle had made room for them. Before long, and after a stint at shovelling snow on some now forgotten mountain, Charlie found work at the Spaldings factory in Albion, well known for its manufacture of sporting goods. It was a far cry from working the fields of rural Gozo (Malta's sister island) from dawn till dusk and for very little pay. And so began the saga of a new life thousands of miles away from home.

The Cini family

By 1953 the three eldest Portelli sisters (my aunties) had married and it was through my Mum's brother-in-law that my dad, Charlie Cini, was introduced to my future mother, Tessie Portelli. They met at the old St Albans station when it was still on the northern side of the Main Road junction. (It would be relocated to the southern side in 1959.) After a three-month courtship my parents married in May of 1954 at St Mary's in Sunshine, which was the nearest Catholic church. The Sacred Heart church in St Albans was still under construction although masses were held at the old Mechanics Institute in East Esplanade.

Initially having lived in nearby Albion, dad bought a weatherboard house at (then) 53 Alfrieda Street (currently 113) which belonged to Mr Fred Mullenger. Sadly the old house was torn down in 2013 to accommodate four townhouses. Dad also owned the block adjacent to this house as an investment as land was still an affordable purchase. Uncle Joe had come to Australia with dad in 1951. Joe had his wife and children come over and they lived together with my dad before they moved to Main Road West. Then my uncle Nick and his wife came and lived with my dad. They bought the block next door and built their house there. Then my Uncle Lou came and he stayed with my dad. So they all helped my dad and his brothers.

At the back of the house, dad owned a couple of water storage tanks and sold water to neighbours and passers-by as no water pipeline had yet been laid. Creature comforts included a wireless, an ice-box and an old cast iron stove. Washing days consisted of a galvanized tub and a scrubbing board. An outhouse in the backyard served its purpose as sewerage was still some twenty years away.

Alfrieda Street was a wide, rough and corrugated thoroughfare turning muddy in the wet weather. Downtown Alfrieda Street near Main Road East consisted of a few old cottages behind picket fencing. These would soon be torn down to be replaced with much needed shops. The last of the cottages would be demolished by the mid sixties.

I was born at the Western General Hospital in 1959 and grew up with my brother Tony and my sister Marlene. The three of us attended the Sacred Heart Catholic school in Theodore Street - I was there from 1964 to 1970. I can still remember my first day at school and the kid sitting next to me was Robert Gauci. George Hardiman is another kid I remember from all those kids coming into the classroom on that first day.

I remember the Buttigiegs, and the Farrugias over in Erica Avenue. The Farrugias came just after the Suez Canal crisis – they were what we called the Egyptian-born Maltese

because their ancestors were born there, their grandparents, because before Australia most Maltese used to migrate to North Africa in search of work. When Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power there was trouble over the Suez Canal crisis; he declared that all British passport holders, notably Maltese and Cypriots, should be out of the country. He was a socialist nationalist advocating "Egypt for Egyptians". Whether you were sick or pregnant or whatever you were told you had to be out of the country by a particular date. That's where the Red Cross stepped in and helped many people get passage to England initially and then to a country of their choice.

Work hard and fear the Lord

Both my parents were literate to a good degree in English. Mum had the added advantage of having elementary school along with her kin in an English-speaking environment, as the eldest two children attended secondary school in America. Early Hollywood cinema provided extra curricula tuition when they watched the latest releases at the "talkies". Mum spoke with a strong American accent which she never lost and her Maltese was also fluent as this was spoken at home.

Assimilation into this country was an easy transition. The Portellis, especially my mother, lived and breathed the cinema, especially the musicals, her favourite being "The King and I". She'd sing the tunes word for word. Though dad was tone deaf he had a soft spot for country and folk music. He had no ear for Rock 'n' Roll but would later in life come to appreciate early Beatles' songs.

My parents struggled like everybody else. My mum worked as a dressmaker in the city between 1964 and 1971 which is when she had the stroke. She'd catch a red rattler every morning to the city because she worked in A'Beckett Street. I remember me and my sister going with her one summer's day just to see what she did. That was in 1967 and I was about eight years old. I loved going to the city because there was always something to see. It was November 9th, 1971, that mum at age 39 years succumbed to a massive stroke that left her partially paralyzed for life and her voice was also affected. I guess in a sense it was the day her normal life ended. She was no longer capable of holding a job let alone carrying a tune. It was a terrible time for her. We put it at the back of our minds and soldiered on as all kids do, but life would never be the same again.

My father worked at ICI in Deer Park. He watched the instruments and dials to make sure the acids that made the chemicals were being mixed properly and there was no overflow. He worked three shifts. The fumes would have been dangerous and if any acid spilled on you it would have burnt you. We'd go upstairs but have this fear that if you fell in there you'd get burnt alive. This was in Deer Park where Cairnlea is now. It tugs at my heart when I drive through that area because I remember that dad worked there. Initially he pushed a bike in all weather conditions along the roads to Deer Park just to get there. The guard knew this and told him "Charlie, come through the back way where the St Albans pub is. I'll open the gate and you come through there instead or riding all the way up to Deer Park." Because he'd get chased by dogs and the road was rough. So the guard had a bit of heart.

My parents' life centred on work and the newly formed Parish of the Sacred Heart where my Dad made good his loyalty and association with St Albans' first Catholic parish priest, Fr Con Reis who was known as "The Little Digger", having seen service as an army chaplain in the jungles of new Guinea during WWII. After the war he was given charge to form a new parish by the indomitable Archbishop Mannix.

Dad became involved in what was known as St Joseph's Guild, a group of volunteers who gave their free time to the maintenance of the new primary school and running the weekly block collection, i.e. door-knocking parishioners' residences to obtain funds for the running of the church and school. Government funding was non-existent. Jim Shanley, originally from Flemington and then living in Scott Avenue, supervised the weekend working bees and Fred Barnard from Ballarat sacrificed his free time in obtaining materials to build the school. To the men of St Joseph's Guild it was a labour of love. The parish could not have materialized without the dedication of these loyal men and the migrants that gave up their free time and whatever funds they could afford.

Keeper of the flame

The principal reasons a Catholic church and school were established in the heart of St Albans was because of the increasing need to cater for the Catholic migrants moving into the suburb. The humble beginning of the Sacred Heart parish was inaugurated and consecrated in 1953 and became a Mecca for the faithful.

The central figure in the establishment of the parish was the legendary Con Reis. This remarkable man was affectionately known as "The Little Digger" and "Keeper of the Flame" and had many endearing qualities which qualified him to take on the role as pastor and navigator of his ever-increasing flock. He was steadfast, compassionate, patient, understanding and maintained an amicable social interaction with migrants. Aware that many migrants were impervious to the English language, his sermons were worded simply and at a pace migrants were apt to comprehend. He understood the importance of communication but he did not suffer fools gladly. The parish needed funds from its congregation if it were to maintain a school and a church and insensitive foolhardiness butters no-one's bread. Fr Reis was a forthright being but was flexible.

Fr Reis was born in Albury in 1914 and educated at Xavier College in Kew and Corpus Christi College in Werribee. He was ordained in 1939 at the onset of the Second World War. In 1941 he served as an army chaplain and witnessed men fight and die in the jungles of New Guinea where he dispensed his duties with the wounded and the dying. After the war he was back in Melbourne and in the wake of the migrant intake he was authorized to establish a new parish. With church funds he acquired the Stenson property in Winifred Street for the sum of £16,000.

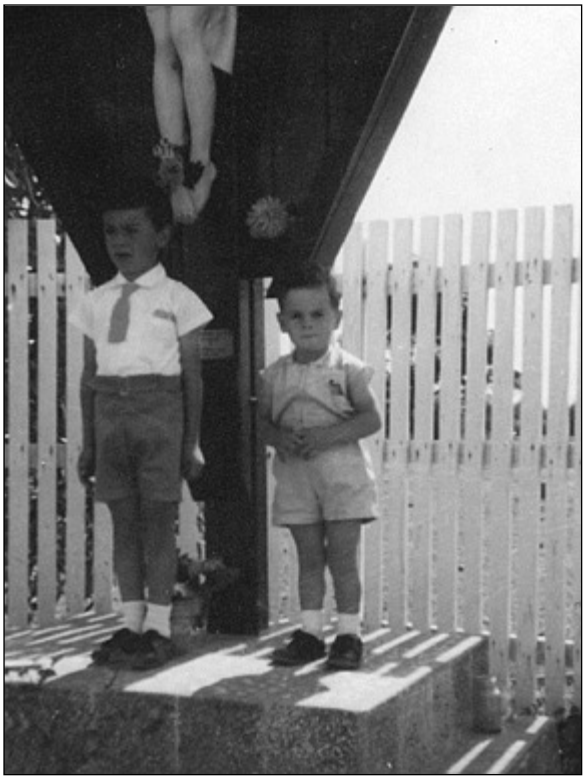
Frederick Charles Stenson was a Protestant but Fr Reis was never one to discriminate. At Stenson's funeral in 1958, Fr Reis along with the Sisters of St Joseph and school children of Sacred Heart Primary formed a guard of honour to pay their respects at the old Presbyterian Church in Elaine Street. On Stenson's death, the church took over his residence (named Keighlo, originally the home of Alfred Henry Padley) which was in need of restoration. The adjoining property was also purchased and further classrooms were built there.

Father Reis's amicable nature was able to inspire loyalty from his fellow parishioners. His social interactions drew skilled volunteers, many of them from migrant backgrounds to help build the school. These volunteers formed the local St Joseph's Guild. Their other responsibilities included block collections where volunteers door-knocked selected fellow parishioners' homes to ask for donations. My father Charlie and his brother Joe were instrumental in this field as well as helping out on weekends maintaining the school grounds and buildings. The Sisters of St Joseph were always on hand to provide an urn of tea and freshly baked scones served with butter. In acknowledgement of their contributions to the parish, a shrine was dedicated to the volunteers of St Joseph's Guild. It is still there today on the corner of the entrance to the school though the original crucifix was replaced after being vandalized.

As the fifties wore on, more classrooms were added. Local builder Fed Barnard worked hand in hand with Fr Reis to ensure that migrant families' children along with the rest were ensured a good Catholic education well before the days of political correctness forbade the teaching of any religious instruction in mainstream schooling.

The rate at which St Alban was growing gave Fr Reis the necessary foresight to acquire land in neighbouring Sydenham in 1962. Twenty years later that acquisition would become the parish of Emmaus and Catholic Regional College. 1968 saw the building and consecration of St Pauls Church in St Albans East, followed by Holy Eucharist in 1972 near Ginifer Station. St Albans had come a long way in a short 20 years.

I served as an altar boy under Fr Reis and Fr O'Reilly. I found them both to be excellent men with deep morals and good principles.



Fr Reis was in his sixties when he handed his authority to Fr John O'Reilly in 1973 because Fr Reis was appointed parish priest at St Colombo's in Elwood. Fr John O'Reilly was originally from County Wexford in the Republic of Ireland. He migrated here in 1961 and came to St Albans in 1968. Forthright with an indomitable character he ensured that the flame would continue to light into the future of the parish. Under O'Reilly's unwavering guidance and persistent dedication, the parish opened its doors to secondary school enrollment in 1978. The concept of a Federation of Regional Colleges in surrounding suburbs with 3,000 students stands as a legacy to a timeless giant among men whose dictum of "Faith, Hope and Charity" has ensured these virtues have been well put into practice.

After Fr Reis's departure for Elwood he was sorely missed by his St Albans parishioners who came to know him and worked with him. His legacy and influence were immense and no study of St Albans history can ignore his contribution. He gradually became blind and frail in his twilight years and passed peacefully away in 2006. The eastern end of Winifred Street was renamed Reis Street in his honour.

Spare the rod

The Sisters of St Joseph were integral in the development of the Sacred Heart primary school because they provided the administration and the tuition - some were lay teachers while others had earned their diplomas at teachers college. Strict and austere with sixty children to a class under their wing, their ethics and manners were impeccable. Without them the organisation of the school would not have occurred. They were quite strict as it was necessary to maintain order in large classrooms made up mostly of children from a migrant background. The task would not have been easy but they carried out their duties to the letter and for this they deserve recognition for "duty above and beyond the call of the faith".

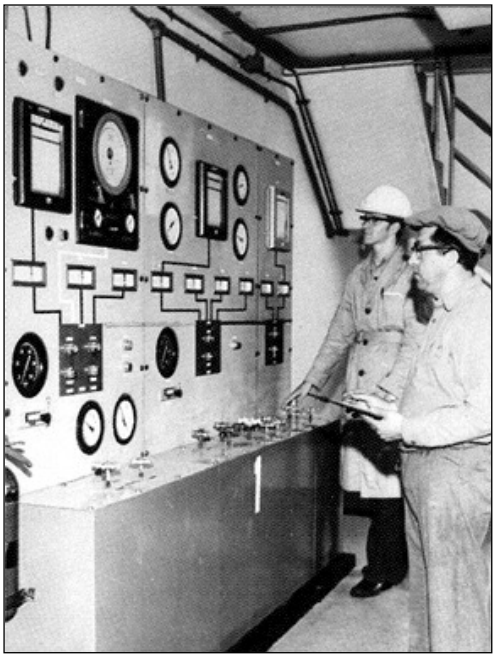
Corporal punishment was the norm throughout all schools back in those conservative days but discipline has served its purpose. The venerable principal of the Sacred Heart primary, Sister Assunta Neeson, was in charge of her convent of Nuns, her dictum being "To err is human, to forgive divine". If some kid stepped out of line you felt the wrath of the divine come down on you.

Most of the original sisters at the Winifred Street convent were born around the time the Titanic was launched (1911). What we got were mature women who had witnessed the men of their families go off to fight in the First World War. They lived through the Depression and then witnessed their nephews and cousins go off to fight in the Second World War.

They came from all classes of society: from working class suburbs, middleclass establishments, rural settlements and the bush. They were well educated and above all else were Australians – as Australian as meat pies and magpies. Their trademark was a dark brown habit which was always impeccably maintained. In summer they wore white.

Theirs was a Christian crusade to bring up children with a good education and a fear of God drilled into them – with a rosary in one hand and a strap in the other. Misbehavior was expected but not tolerated at any level. Discipline ruled the school. The Catechism they taught, lived and breathed was vital in walking the right path if you were to succeed in life and progress to the hereafter. Theirs was the fight of good over evil and they expected the children in their care be brought up as examples of Christian citizenry. Their lessons have in time proven to be unassailably wise.

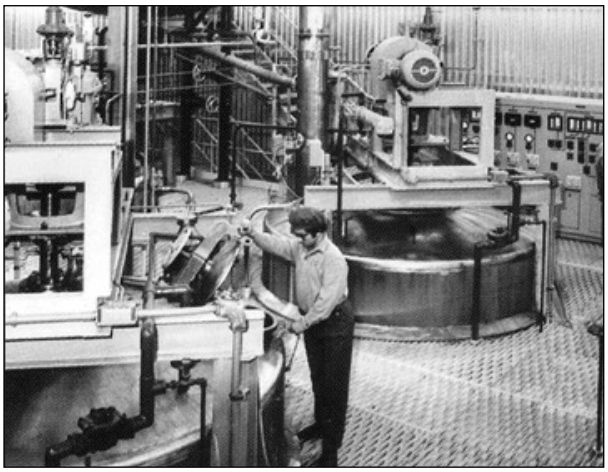
Their ethics were of the highest standard which is one reason children of all nationalities were able to assimilate. Fairness and equality were virtues they voiced and put into everyday practice. Though they didn't voice their opinions publicly in regard to gender issues, my view is that they were firm believers in a woman's right to recognition and equal treatment. Their founder was Mary McKillop who was canonised as Saint Mary of the Cross and is Australia's first Catholic saint, and this happened in an age where Victorian values placed women in a subservient role to men. It wouldn't surprise anyone that the advent of women's liberation in the late sixties would have been a great welcome. Even the more vocal liberationists like Germaine Greer who was educated through the Catholic system would have received some silent applause. As Brides of Christ, adherent to a strict regimen of duty to the soul and their order, the Sisters of St Joseph were fundamentally women with a cause.



A foot in the door

Dad initially worked at Spaldings in Sunshine (where Bunnings warehouse now stands) after short stints at nearby ARC and the Albion quarry. By 1958 he obtained a higher-paying job at the Albion explosives factory working three shifts at the new RDX plant, which produced explosives for shell and bomb casings. Even though the

official war was over, the Cold War with the Soviets had started and ICI ran their production of RDX at Deer Park for the next 30 years. Only British passport holders were eligible to work there, perhaps for security reasons. Along with his brother Mick, they kept an eye out in the mixing control room located upstairs above the kitchen and meals area keeping check that the acid vats did not overflow in the process of making powder for artillery ammunition. Dad's younger brother Lou arrived here in 1957 and also found work at the ICI complex. Sunshine at Albion was a beehive of industry where work was readily available. A foot in the door guaranteed a job "for life".



Throughout the course of the opportunistic fifties and sixties, the maternal side of the family had increased. By the time I'd arrived in early 1959, the number had increased to sixteen cousins. Added to this list was my brother Tony (1955) and a younger sister Marlene (1961).

With a good monthly influx of European migration, St Albans had been transformed from a rural backwater to a suburb in its own right with a flourishing population growth that showed no sign of abating. St Albans was the place to be!

Like all migrants, my parents' endeavour was to improve their living standards and to make life more comfortable. Around 1963 my parents packed up and we moved to lot 9 (now 271) Main Road East just opposite the White Corner shops. Our triple-fronted brick veneer was one of the first erected on the new estate with miles of empty land toward the horizon facing North Sunshine while bungalows and a few weatherboards laced the Keilor side of Main Road. I remember when we moved in there I was laughing saying "where are we?" because I looked out the window and all I could see was paddocks. Within a year everything just mushroomed, which goes to show how quick things develop, especially at that time when there were so many migrants coming in. Later we moved to Mulhall Drive, which was a new area being built in 1972.

Mum had found a job around 1964, catching a "Red Rattler" into the city every morning, working as a seamstress in a clothing sweatshop in A'Beckett Street and always bought home a slab of chocolate, lollies and a dozen cream buns. She was quite capable of making a dress from scratch. Her tool of trade was an old Singer sewing machine that took pride of place in a nook in the kitchen.

A rabbit in the pot

Commodities were on the rise during the post-war migrant influx though expensive and more durable than our throw-away society has on offer. The adage "You've never had it so good" rang true. European Continental foodstuff had become available to consumers and a large variety of everyday groceries were on hand. Self's Store had become a supermarket and the only one in St Albans at one stage.

The only take-away food premises in St Albans up until 1968 was the Fish 'n' Chips shop inside the Arcade in Main Road East next to the Hounslow property where Woolworths now stands. All orders were wrapped up in newspaper which gave your serve a unique smell and characteristic flavour. Apart from this there was the ubiquitous meat pie and sauce and Cornish pastie sold over milk bar counters. You could also settle for a plain hot dog. A bottle of Tarax soft drink, a Coke, a milkshake, or an ice-cream soda known as a "spider" were the available refreshments. American franchising take-away had yet to reach the western suburbs, so if you wanted a pizza you had to go to Carlton.

About 1968 Gerry Spirados opened the fish and chip shop up on White Corner and everybody was excited about it because it was just across the street - he was our neighbour two houses away. Formerly, the building had been a tyre service centre but had been vacated around 1967. It was then renovated and partitioned to incorporate a fish shop and two billiard salons. Soon enough the premises became a hangout for the suburb's young and restless. My dad wasn't much into fish and chips but I remember he went there a couple of times and every time I went in there it just smelt divine. That fish and chip shop is still there and that building is still White Corner but it now has a big shark above the entrance that looks like it's been there for years.

Pizzas came along in the seventies and now its kebabs. Pizza shops, McDonalds or KFC were non-existent up until the mid-seventies.

The catchphrase "A car in every driveway and a chicken in every pot" did not apply to the newly arrived migrants. In the immediate post-war St Albans, it was more like "A warren in every yard and a rabbit in every pot". Rabbit became a common staple in many a household. There were heaps of rabbits through the district and even around the ICI plant where dad worked. He used to take us rabitting there on the property and take us inside and show us where he worked. What my father would do was go and get a pair of rabbits while his brother was watching the dials and all that was going on. They had a little cabin down below and whatever rabbits he got he'd cook them up, so they had lunch or dinner together. Even after work he'd get rabbits from there or wheel all the way to Keilor to get a couple of rabbits and have a stew within an hour, because they were pretty adept and skinning them and gutting them and cutting them up ready to go. It saved yourself a quid.

As for a car, it took my Dad thirteen years before he took purchase of a blue and white 1957 FE Holden Special Sedan which cost £300. It was a humble looking vehicle compared to our neighbour's brand new 1965 X2 Premier Station Wagon, but the '57

was an addition to the family and it was ours. Dad later updated to a '64 Holden sedan. Uncle Lou bypassed the car ownership difficulties by buying a motorbike.

Sadly about this time, Granddad Paul Portelli passed away aged 67 in September 1962. Mary Portelli passed away in June 1966. Their contribution to St Albans is that a dozen or so grandchildren and great-grandchildren have made St Albans their home.

Most members of my mum's family, the original Portelli clan, have passed on. It's the same with my dad's family who reside overseas. Their legacy is having left behind three generations numbering nearly a hundred people scattered near and far of whom a fair number reside in St Albans and the western suburbs.

Ring ring goes the bell

School life commenced for me at Sacred Heart primary school in February of 1964, kind of reluctantly. That same week, the Beatles had arrived in America to take on the world, which was still reeling from the aftershock of the Kennedy assassination ten weeks previously but we were too young to fathom world events. Closer to home the carrier HMAS Melbourne had collided with HMAS Voyager in Jarvis Bay killing 80 crew members. The Vietnam War debacle was yet to become a full-scale conflict. The sixties had indeed arrived and we would be caught up in the whirlwind of “happening events”. For the present, our world was the Sound of Music, colour-blocks, Dick and Dora, Choo-Choo bars and the smell of plasticene.

In primary school when we went on class outings it was to Ferntree Gully for Puffing Billy or the zoo. What I particularly liked about primary school was when they had toffee day. On Toffee Day there was a big array of toffees with different colours and different toppings: white ones with sprinkles or yellow ones with sprinkles. We couldn’t afford much so we always bought the coffee flavoured ones which were about half a penny. That’s about all I ever tasted, but they were toffees and they were good. Choo Choo Bars were also one of my favourite lollies. You would always end up with a black mouth and tongue, so you would stick out your tongue to see who had the blackest. There were also Kangaroo Sticks, the glucose sticks; there were red, orange, and green ones and it would take you a day to suck on them. You had little cocktail lollies with clear wrappers and things like that. A lot of kids wandered into the tuck shop but didn’t buy anything because they didn’t have any money; they just went window shopping. Mrs O’Brien ran the shop and she would warn everybody “Get out of the shop if you don’t want to buy anything.”

Throughout the course of our primary school education back in the 1960s was pretty much elementary. From preps through to grade six before the commencement of classes we would assemble in the school ground and stand at attention in line formation for any daily announcement from the school's principal, Sister Assunta Neesom. Monday mornings the flag was raised as we recited "God Save the Queen". Then would follow the daily march around the schoolyard as "Liberty Bell" blared out from an old gramophone.

All schools were supplied with government-funded crates of milk for morning recess which we had to drink. The term lactose intolerant was unknown or unheard of back then and the sight of kids throwing up all over their desks became a common ritual. Vomit and sawdust went hand in hand just like spilled ink and blotting paper and the smell came with a lifetime guarantee.

In seven years we'd progressed from simple color blocks for sums to brain-busting logarithms, from "Dick and Dora" to writing our own essays. I recall a particular episode when we were told to write an essay about our suburb. Mental block would automatically set in. What could you possibly write about the place - empty blocks and bungalows and unpaved streets or the fact that we just happened to live here - what could one possibly write about St Albans? One essay that was read out to the whole class was submitted by Vicky Hermann who apparently had done some pretty hardcore research revealling that the plains surrounding St Albans were once part of an active volcano, hence the existence of hard granite rocks strewn out over and under the terrain. That essay really impressed us!

A number of the parents of those children whose shared my class were longtime residents before the post-war migrant intake. The twins Anthony and Joanne Doherty's father John was the local postman and part-time fire brigade volunteer along with Tom Hewitt whose daughter Mary also shared my class. Chris Farrugia's grandfather migrated from Malta in the early 1920s, being the first Maltese to settle here. Most of my cousins from both sides of the family attended Sacred Heart Primary from its inception: the Azzorpardis, Zammits and Pisanis along with a handful of Cinis. Maltese made up the bulk of the enrollments along with a good number of Italians, then Polish, and a few Germans. Children of Anglo-Celtic origin comprised around one-sixth of school enrollments.

As children we played marbles in primary school, we played British Bulldog, cricket and football in season but I never belonged to a club. It was a simple life. I still remember the Mass being said in Latin. Around 1965 they changed the format. The altar was placed in a more central position and there were other changes. That was by decree of Vatican II. It was a big change for us.


Sacred Heart Church, Winifred Street St Albans, late 1960s.

Very rarely was there a Maltese priest in the area. That didn't happen until St Pauls opened up off Station Avenue. That's where my parents lived their last years, at 33 Station Avenue; it was predominantly a Maltese area. They opened the church there in 1968 and the first priest there was Fr Cini, who was no relation. I served as an altar boy under him. Then Fr Gooligan came along and he was given his own Parish of the Holy Eucharist and I was an altar boy under him as well, so I served with several priests. Looking back you see that from one church with all these people coming in the thousands over the years, within 15 years you had Sacred Heart, St Paul's, and Holy Eucharist. That's quite an achievement. They built schools and whatnot. Prior to the war it was a rural settlement with people predominantly of British stock who were either Anglicans of Protestants, but I don't think they discriminated. They were hard working people who had seen war and deprivation and the Depression, and eking out a living was more important than anything else. And they had it hard too. They probably appreciated the fact that there were migrants coming to St Albans and made St Albans what it is. It brought business to the area.

A lot of Maltese were poor and were not able to pay a lot of fees to the Church. I remember a lot of lunches which were just tomato paste on bread wrapped in newspaper. Sometimes they could not pay the school fees and Fr Reis let it go. He was a compassionate man. The Australians were always looked at as something superior. They kept to themselves even though they would play with us because they were upper crust: "We are Aussies." But they accepted us. We weren't called wogs. God help them if they did, because if the nuns found out they would have come down hard on them. That was the attitude – we all got along well.

By the time we'd made Grade 6 in 1970, we were witness to man landing on the moon, the protracted war in Vietnam as a drag on the psyche, a span of the Westgate bridge had collapsed killing 36 men, and the Beatles closed off the decade by going their separate ways. And so too was it with most of my primary school classmates. We'd lived the innocence of youth through seven years together. We would not come together again until 1991 when I and a fellow former classmate Mary Hewitt would organise a class reunion. (I think her father was a councilor.) I rang her and she was really

interested in getting people together. It turned out that she called half the class and I called the other half and word passed along and we had this reunion over in the Sunshine pub in Glengala Road. It was miraculous because 98% of them rocked up. Dr O'Brien's daughter, Kitty O'Brien, was in my class. She had been living in America and came over for the reunion. We all got together and it was one of the most memorable occasions in our lives.

Uncertain seventies

The transition from primary school to junior high school was pretty smooth. My first year at St Albans High School was in 1971 and it was a new experience just as it was for countless others. We sought solace from our insecurities by searching out for former classmates or people with whom we were acquainted. Most of the students were of either Anglo-Celtic or European stock - Asian and African migration was still restricted although people from the Indian sub-continent with tertiary degrees were accepted; Miss Fletcher who taught English at the high school was one example. Misters Azer and Hafez, who taught maths and science respectively, were both Egyptians. Mrs Sacco, who was widowed at a young age and taught maths and French, was Maltese. Mr Naish taught woodwork, having come from England at an early age and taking his apprenticeship at General Motors as a patternmaker.

It was the first time we'd come across so many different faces, having a different teacher for every subject and moving from class to class: Miss Moore (English), Mr Graham (Maths), Mrs Hare (Science) and a host of others comes to mind. One cannot forget the venerable Mr Wilkinson, the school's principal. Once at assembly he spoke of our individuality as a unique asset and that our uniqueness had so much to contribute to our future as a society. It made one feel important. It also said a lot about his vision of the high school and his role as a good humanitarian.

Mr Fantl was our art teacher. Under his guidance we progressed from pastels to perspective and from crayons to Cubism - pretty mind blowing stuff stuff if you appreciated art. Maths was never my strongest subject but it wasn't far removed from what I'd learnt or didn't learn in grade 6. In languages we had a choice - either French or German - and for reasons beyond my grasp I chose French. Woodwork and Metalshop were new to us boys. As for the girls, they had Home Economics. It was all pretty standard fare really. We were on the threshold of puberty and what began to emerge was our growing attraction for the opposite sex but as yet that was uncharted territory and we were too shy to make any headway. Looking back I can only say that these were the best days of our lives though we were unaware of it.

In 1972 we went to Olympic Park for sports. It was the most boring day of my life because I'm not interested in sport and there was nothing to drink, no water tap around. My friend bought a can of Coke and the next thing there were 20 blokes surrounding him asking for a sip like we were in the middle of a desert. That was the only excursion we went to when I was there.

Some of the students who shared my high school classes were former primary school classmates – people I'd grown up with but in an impersonal way: Vicky Hermann who is now a school teacher, Rita Ellul who also went onto a tertiary education earning herself a doctorate. Christine Utri is another classmate of note; she also went on to tertiary education and today is the principal of Catholic Regional College at St. Albans. Kitty

O'Brien was another classmate who's father was Dr. Patrick O'Brien who'd seen service in Malta as an R.A.F. Spitfire fighter pilot during the war. Kitty's mother Josephine O'Brien was also a doctor but I'm not sure if she practiced here or supported her husband's practice in some other way. Other classmates were Rosanna D'Agata, Mary Drago, and Paul Micallef whose father ran St Albans Nursery and Mini Mix down on Errington Road. The newer faces are still crystal clear: Alex Christodoulou, Bill Marganis, Jean Cameron (daughter of Lorna), Elizabeth John with a mane of red hair, Marion Inglis, Judy Watts from Deer Park and the rest who remain persistent in memory. Where are they now?

Gough Whitlam was elected in 1972 and he promised radical change. I still remember the "It's Time" jingles. I remember when the HQ Holden came out when General Motors thought they'd saved the world. They made such a big deal about the new model of cars. I remember the mini skirts – all girls wore mini skirts at high school. The fashions, the music. I remember when the Beatles broke up and you sensed there was change in the air, that an era had ended. With the advent of the seventies, so much had changed in society. The values of the fifties' conservatism gradually made way for an air of liberalism where 1972 would usher in a new wave of political thinking and reform made possible by the new Labor Government of Gough Whitlam. For better or worse Australia would change forever.

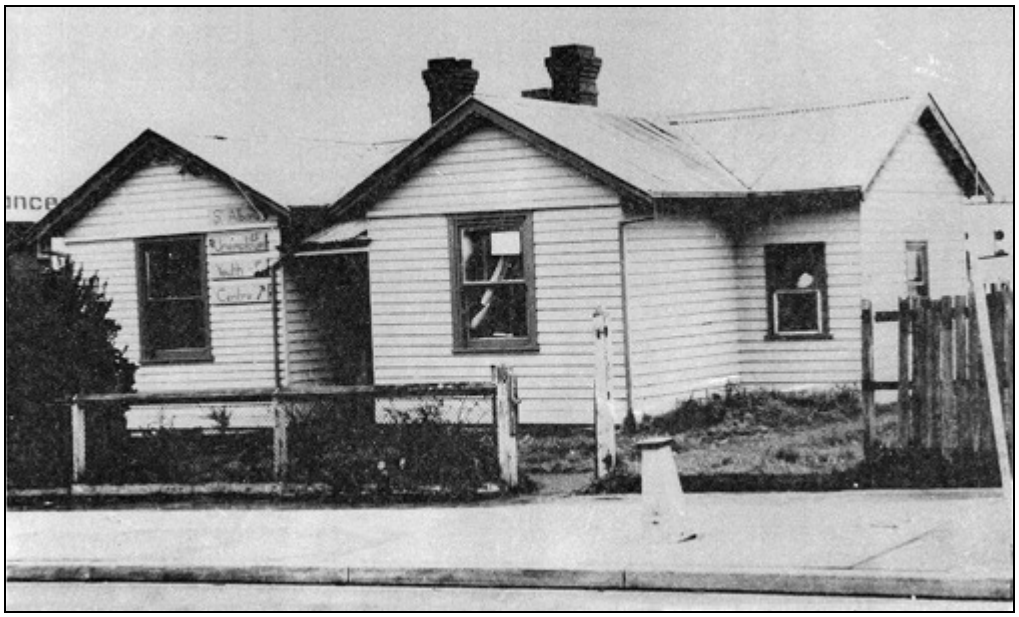
In 1973 we went to Malta and I finished my education there up to Form 4. I wasn't very interested in school and just wanted to come back, which I did in 1977.

No place like home

I commenced my adult working life as my forebears did, having come back to Australia in late 1977 and like them I was able to appreciate how fortunate it is to call Australia home whether in good times or in bad. I was back in my home town and found St Albans to be pretty much the same as when I left it five years previously. I left barely a teenager and came back on the threshold of adulthood. Yet as I went about rediscovering the old haunts there were signs that changes had taken place. The south-east of the suburb had made some progress stretching out from Novarra Parade there were still lots of empty paddocks beyond that were yet to be developed. Where Furlong Road east of the junction was a mere dirt track, a bare concrete skeleton of what was to become Western Hospital stood abandoned around a desolate rocky outcrop. At this stage the hospital's development was put on hold due to lack of federal funding. After all, these were economic hard times because of a recession.

To the west beyond Station Road, Albanvale and Kings Park became suburbs in their own right though yet to reach their full potential of development. There was still empty land heading towards Kororoit Creek.

At the heart of St Albans, two derelict railway houses at the Main Road junction still stood as relics of a by-gone era but were a year away from demolition having seen their last days as a youth community hangout for the growing unemployed. All the roads around the established areas had been sealed. Modern brick veneers outnumbered the weatherboards and the bungalows that dotted the memories of childhood. We were part of the affluent generation and the legacy our forebears had worked so hard for was paying off. We'd inherited suburbia.



St Albans Unemployed Youth Centre, corner St Albans Road and Main Road East, 1978.

In the subsequent decades St Albans has expanded to its furthest boundaries as newer suburbs have mushroomed in all directions. Demand has remained ever so strong and as the generation of first wave migrants have passed on, their children have moved up and onwards where latter day migrants from Asia and Horn of Africa are steadily filling their places. St Albans has shifted from the Continental European culture and become an exotic Asian cultural experience much evident in Alfrieda Street. It's in the heart of modern day St Albans but no longer the centre of people's day-to-day business when you consider we now have major undercover shopping centres on the outer fringes of the suburb. This is part of the reason why St Albans is still unique. As always it has offered convenience of location and value for money as it did when our forefathers came and started out. Though the days of cheap affordable house and land purchase and the local job structure are gone for ever, the newer and practical reasons have taken precedence. Many old structures have been torn down and replaced with multiple units. My parents' original weatherboard dwelling in Alfrieda Street was torn down in 2014 and several townhouses have taken its place. It saddened me to see a part of history demolished but the reality is that it is the direction the future has taken and you can't stand in the way of progress especially when big business is involved in property development and building people's aspiration of progress.

Adaptation to change and resilience is a humanistic virtue. Much has changed since those first wave migrants settled in St Albans. They left their mark not only on a suburb but a country just as this country enriched their lives. Other ethnic groups have followed suit throughout the passage of time and found acceptance. The old walls of prejudice through ignorance have come down making access to much needed diversity. It is what makes the world go round – and it was diversity and acceptance that helped create a special place like St Albans.

Back to the future

“A dragon lives forever / but not so little boys” are the famous lines from Puff the Magic Dragon and imply a million and one tales once we’d left school, moving onward and upward into the world to which we would ultimately contribute and shape.

Though always endeavouring to make that extra bit of money I never made my premises of work a home away from home, and having worked at various occupations I never strayed far from the western suburbs. There were times I'd look back where I'd wished I had furthered my education and earned a career or a trade when I was still young. But with a family to support and a steady income I could never foresee how the climate of business would change in this country. I also didn't expect that with the passing of the years how much the physical body and mental attitude can change. My reasoning was that whether you worked in an office or on the shop floor didn't make you a better person. Good intention of heart really matters because it lubricates social interaction, making the world a happier place.

I’ve witnessed Sunshine decline as a hub of industry where the suburb of Derrimut now holds that title, employing newer generations far removed from that of my forebears. St Albans has long been fully established – its outer fringes expanding to the reaches of other shires and more than ever with much to offer.

As for family and friends, those that contributed to the making of a unique suburb, the many who have come and the many who have moved on to eternity and legend, I give them the credit for the making of St Albans. Therefore I conclude, drawing inspiration from Alfred Tennyson’s poem, The Brook: “Men may come, and men may go – but I go on forever …”

This is the destiny of our chosen suburb – the story of my St Albans – a place so many have called home.

Phil Cini
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