

EVELYN MULLENGER



My father, Fred Mullenger, bought his St Albans property in 1942. I was born that year during the war. He had a few acres on the northern corner of Conrad Street and East Esplanade, and I think the old house may still be there incorporated into some units. He worked at McKays and his job was classified as an essential service, so he didn't go to war like many of the other men in the district. We were mostly surrounded by small farms, but our next-door neighbours had greyhounds, and dogs were always a big part of life in St Albans. ICI in Deer Park and Albion Explosives were big industries at that time. I think the quarry may have still operated a little bit, near where the St Albans hotel now stands. I know that was out of bounds to us kids in 1950.

St Albans was a great place to grow up as a child because it was friendly, everybody knew each other, there were very few cars, and lots of people had animals.

We had horses. We also had a house cow, so in the morning we would have to stay in the house on our own while mother went to collect the cow from wherever she'd wandered and bring her home again. I have some memories of screaming out 'Mum!' across the plains, and getting into big trouble when she got back, because everybody knew we were in the house on our own. (laughs)

Not that there was any real thing to worry about in being on our own, because everybody looked after you. My mother was Florence Clark before she married. When she went to hospital to have her third baby Mr Perrett came and took her to Sunshine Hospital with his big black car. We just went to the neighbours. The neighbours looked after us while she was in hospital, and when she got home the neighbours helped with meals and things like that, and that was just life. The big kids took the little kids out. We went ice skating at St. Kilda. The big kids went and the little kids had to go too. It seemed to be that the parents thought if the big kids had the little kids to look after they would be less likely to get up to mischief. (laughs) So I have memories of hopping on the train to go there.

St Albans had more trees than probably a lot of people who came to live there later in the 'fifties would imagine. And stone fences. There were stone fences that I always would be a little bit afraid of because we had to walk past them coming home at night. I was afraid of what could be behind the stone fence. It was very rocky; there were lots of stony paddocks around where we lived.

(When you say stone fences, around where are you talking about?)

There were stone fences on Biggs Street, East Esplanade, and on Stevens' property the other side of the railway line. A lot of the farmers had collected stone and built stone fences in the early days, but wire and things like that became available after the war and a lot of fences were replaced, I guess. But my early childhood memories were of stone fences, cypress trees, peppercorn trees, and gum trees. And of course, lots of grassland.

Sunday afternoons my spinster aunts would come and visit from Sunshine. They had a horse and cart, and we would go for a drive and pick wildflowers.

(Where would you go to get those?)

Well, we used to call it 'The Pinnacle', which used to be over towards east St Albans. We would drive the cart around and pick yellow buttons and different things and come home with a huge bunch of wildflowers. So that was the big thing.

Sunday was visiting day, when a lot of relatives would come and visit St Albans on the train. I've got so many memories of walking down to the station to meet my grandparents and meeting all my friends and seeing who was coming to visit them that day and having a chat, and all the people talking to each other. Because my grandmother used to live in St Albans when her family

was young, she knew a lot of the older people in the town. So they would have a chat at the station and then we would go home and the kids would help shell the peas as we had a roast dinner, and then we would go for a walk or whatever, on Sunday afternoon.

Because we had chooks and we had a house-cow my mother made her own butter and we always had eggs. I can vaguely remember coupons and things during the war, but I was fairly well clothed, because we had neighbours and people who worked at ICI so my clothes were basically khaki overalls. I don't remember having a dress, because I was considered a bit of a tomboy. I had an older brother and my mother did not sew dresses; you had to wear what was available and she was good at sewing trousers. So I wore khaki trousers and boots. I don't remember having shoes until I was a bit older, because shoes were hard to come by and did not last as long.

We had a lot of freedom. Our parents were largely busy at living life, because we had wood stoves, the iceman came once a week with the ice, we didn't have refrigeration, didn't have electricity out of town. I'm not sure when the electricity came through, but I remember that we went to the pictures in the hall and everyone talked about our going home to turn the switch on, and that was a big time. I remember the freedom we had to ride our horses, ride our bikes if we had one, and we didn't always have a bike the size we should have had so we often rode through the bar on unmade roads of course. But we had the freedom to do that, and also to catch the train. Children often went to the station on their own, catching the train. When I say on their own, there were usually smaller children with bigger children. The bigger children would be nine. Nine was probably considered a fairly reasonable age, but if you went to St. Kilda to ice skating you would have to go with a twelve or thirteen-year-old. I've got memories of my brother and I going to Coles in Sunshine to do our shopping for Christmas, also catching the train on a Sunday morning to the Footscray baths, where we went to swimming lessons, and then caught the train home at Middle Footscray. On those hot days we sat on the train with the windows open—we had big lectures—we were allowed to open the windows, but we weren't allowed to open the doors, in case we fell out.

(That was the old red rattler?)

The old red rattlers.

We knew we were trusted as children because the minute we left home our parents didn't have a way of knowing where we were, other than by other people seeing us. I remember one night I didn't go home straight from school; I went to play with a friend who lived up on Arthur Street. I was in the chook house when my mother came through the gate (laughs) with a huge stick, and I went straight home to bed. As an adult I can appreciate how worried she must have been when I didn't turn up.

In St Albans we often had a gypsy camp, camping at the bottom of the hill in Charles Street. It was a good place for the gypsies because there was water (a dam) and they could tether their horses. We were always told to never go near the gypsy camp. We kids thought they were really interesting because they always had fires and action. Often they had coloured horses.

(So, who were the gypsies?)

Well, I don't really know. I think they basically were people who lived by moving from place to place to find work.

We also had swagmen. They would chop some wood and mum would give them something to eat. They were a no-no for us kids as well—not allowed to talk to the swagmen or gypsies.

There was an Indian trader, who used to come around every year with a horse and cart, and he used to sell clothing and material and he wore a turban. He was wonderful; he was friendly and put his horse in our paddock overnight. The baker called with a horse and cart; it wasn't every day of course, probably once or twice a week we got fresh bread. The iceman came with ice for our ice chest. The mothers would write a list of what groceries they needed, and we would take that down to the shop. Often the children would drop the list in and then the groceries would be delivered at home. So it was a very different life.

Our parents were washing by hand and cooking with a wood stove. Water was always an issue in St Albans because we had tanks and there was water laid on until Biggs Street. In a drought you would fill your tank up in Biggs Street to bring the water home and put it in your tank, so in my childhood water was a big issue. You would never run the tap without a purpose. We

had very little garden. Most of our garden was of cactus plants and very hardy things like a few geraniums. Washing up—we didn't have a sink, the washing up was done in a dish on the table and the washing-up water would be put on the plants. Our house was surrounded by a boxthorn hedge that did not need watering.

(Can you describe your house?)

It was cement sheet and weatherboard with big ceilings. It had three bedrooms and a lounge, so just four rooms with a hallway down the middle, and off that came a fairly large kitchen with a wood stove. Then there was a concrete floor that had the laundry and bathroom, which was a copper for heating water and a galvanised bathtub. Our house was all of one piece. A lot of the farmhouses at that time kept the kitchen separate in case of fire. Ours was all connected so that I suppose it was a fairly modern house. We had a lot of sheds because it was a little farm: there were pigeon sheds, and sheds for the horses and chooks and an outside toilet. The house was very sparse, I suppose. We didn't have any carpets on the floor; it was linoleum in the bedrooms and other rooms, and concrete in the laundry (bathroom). The lounge room was very seldom used; we only went into the lounge room on high days or wet days. (laughs) My mother had the eggs she was preserving behind the couch in the lounge, so we had to be well behaved a bit in case the eggs got cracked. I guess life was really hard.

My mother didn't go to work, although before she was married she had worked in Spaldings and Nettlefolds, and most of the people in the town probably worked at ICI, Spaldings or Nettlefolds.

(What location was that, Sunshine?)

Sunshine. On Ballarat Road there was Nettlefolds and Spaldings; McKays was Sunshine central at that time, and ICI was in Deer Park. That was always a fear for us as school children. I still remember the fear of playing in the playground and we'd hear a large explosion and look over towards Deer Park. If there was smoke we'd know that there had been an accident ... for those of us who had family or friends who were working there it was a worry because a lot of men were injured and killed working there with explosives.

(Was that a regular occurrence?)

To me it was, perhaps many were small accidents. I still have vivid childhood memories of looking across and seeing the smoke. I don't know when they stopped keeping explosives. Many years later my father was a shepherd at ICI where they started keeping sheep to keep the grass down so there were fewer fires. I think the explosives were kept underground but they were still dangerous if a grass fire took hold.

(So the thing you're talking about, was that in the open area?)

That was where the new development is happening near the university, near the Powderkeg Players, to the left, and that's where my father was a shepherd. That was his last job, a Commonwealth Shepherd. I think they later introduced sheep to other places like Maribyrnong because it was quite a successful way of keeping weeds under control.

(You had horses and a house cow. What were the horses used for, what was their function?)

My father drove a horse to work every day, so he was very well known in the town for driving along St Albans Road beside the railway line. People going to work on the train would wave to him from the train and there were lots of jokes about who was the fastest, the train or the horse. He shod horses, so all the children who had horses or all the people who had work horses knew him, and a lot of people still had work horses. There were dairy horses, and the bread and the milk were delivered by horse and cart. So he used to shoe horses on the weekend and when he wasn't in the factory.





Fred Mullenger preparing to shoe horse

We had ponies to ride, and my mother would actually drive the horse and cart. She never had a driving licence but, before cars were around, she was actually one of the few women in St Albans who was mobile, because she could harness the horse and go places. I can still remember coming home sitting in the bottom of the jinker and seeing the lights of St Albans as you came along the road, and the red light at the radio station, that was home; if you looked up and you could see that, you knew that you were getting close to home.



Local swimming was down at Biggs Street swimming hole (now in Brimbank Park) not only with our parents, but also with the bigger kids, as on a hot day other adults (and half of St Albans) would be there. The two swimming holes were at Arundel Road, Keilor, and Biggs Street, St Albans. We did go for swimming lessons at the baths, but most of our swimming was in the creek and our one sea swim at Altona Beach on Boxing Day. We went with our extended family by horse and dray, put up tents, and stayed all day.

I left St Albans when I was in grade three and went to live in many different places. One of the places I went to was a one-person school in Coimadai, near Lake Merrimu in the Bacchus Marsh area. I also went to Geelong Road School, which was a massive, big bluestone building; quite a different experience to being at school in St Albans. I went to Woodend Primary School, which was a very lonely experience.

I had to ride my bike for three miles to get to school there, and at Coimadai we rode our horses. Coimadai was a one-teacher school with twenty children attending. We actually got paid by the government for going to school because we were living more than three miles, as the crow flew, from the school.

When I came back to St Albans, I was happy because St Albans was such a happy place for children. Anywhere we wanted to go was within possibility—our feet could take us there and we could see where we were going, and our parents could see us on the horizon. We could also catch the train. So I was really happy to come back. The St Albans I came back to was very

different to the one I grew up in because immigration had started, and lots of little bungalows were being put up in the streets, and the horizons were no longer grassland.

My father brought us back to St Albans because he had always owned some land there. He had a house in Theodore Street that he'd moved from the Calder Highway on the outskirts of Sunbury. When we moved back the house was fairly rough. Money was scarce, and dad was not a 'handyman' when it came to buildings, so he called on two of his old school friends, one a builder and one a plasterer. While we were living elsewhere a section of the land dad owned was rezoned from residential to light industrial, which he considered unsaleable in 1950. So he arranged to swap a section of land to each of these two friends in return for their repairing and completing the weatherboard house he had moved to Theodore Street. He had another two blocks of land that he really didn't need but was not prepared to sell them to the migrants, because he didn't consider them to be very good blocks of land as they did not have water. In the end he sold them to a local who turned them over pretty quickly. He built a bungalow and toilet on them, met the ships and sold them to some migrant families who came and lived next to us.



Theodore Street in the 1950s © Mary Howells collection

When we moved back everybody was moving in, so we came to a very different St Albans, where a lot of people didn't know anybody and could not speak English. Some people knew only the people they came out with. Because we didn't have any fences and because we had a house that was more of a house than anybody else's (even though the kitchen was out in the shed at the time) mum cooked for the men who had come down from the Bonegilla migrant camps to stay in their bungalow and make them more liveable and comfortable for their families to join them. That was my first introduction to people from different cultures and different languages and different clothing. I had never owned a winter dress and suddenly there were children coming with leggings and beautiful Dutch crocheted long socks. It was such an exciting place to be in, and I don't think St Albans has ever stopped being an exciting place to be in since, but it was a very different place to the one of my early childhood memories. It was still very friendly—people helped one another and spoke to each other with their hands and different tongues to get their message across. The lady who lived next door to us came from Czechoslovakia and is still called 'Mama' because she was my second mum. My mum was called 'Mum' by the other children, because whoever was at home looked after the children. Of course the migrant women went to work. My mother was mostly at home so if ever the children were in trouble there was always somewhere to go to.

Of course the school became crowded. We had a lot of children in my year who were a lot older than me and who were really too old to be in primary school, but because they didn't speak

any English, or whatever reason, they were placed with us. This was St Albans Primary School. I've got some very early memories, particularly of the boys having an extremely frustrating time; of having to sit in a classroom and listen to a language they probably didn't understand or even know why they were there. I guess they received harsh treatment from the teacher; often I can remember the duster being thrown. I didn't feel comfortable, but it was still better than the big city school that I'd been in.

When I was in grade six my parents were leaving St Albans again; not selling their property but just leaving St Albans. I didn't want to change schools. Much as I didn't like some of the things, I was attached to my school and I still felt a lot more at home in St Albans than I felt in Sunshine, and that is where we were going to live. So I caught the train back every day, in with the teachers in first class, and I came to school by train. I continued to live in Sunshine till I was sixteen, but during that time I always came back to St Albans. The St Albans Youth Club used to play softball in Sunshine, so I used to go to the Ballarat Road softball ground and watch my friends. My high school friend, whose father was on one of the first Youth Club committees, told me when the game was on. I would be there on a Sunday, and then I would come up and go to the family dances that were on at the Youth Club before we moved back.

I was very happy when my parents moved back to St Albans. I worked in St Albans at the local dentist's for many years. That was a frustrating time too, because a lot of people walked long distances to come to the dentist who wasn't always there, and sometimes I would be at the practice on my own. That was when I started to take extra classes at Taylors Teaching College. I learnt German for a while, because German was a language that most people understood and at least I was able to explain to people where he was and make an appointment for them to come back another day. Most people expected me to be German.

(Expected you?)

Nobody expected you to be an Aussie, and because I was blond and because I was big I either had to be Polish or German. The Polish language was beyond me (both laugh) so I thought that German was probably the best.

I worked there and I married a man from St Albans, and that's what a lot of us did—went to the dances—always a lot of dances in St Albans. So even most of our growing up wasn't done outside of St Albans, our outside of St Albans was as far as the Moonee Ponds Town Hall, or the Arana at Footscray. There were dances at Sydenham Tennis Club, the Youth Club, the footy club, and we met a lot of the same people. If we went to Footscray by train, when we got there the other half of St Albans was there, because all the young people who danced were there, all looking quite different to the teenagers of today too (laughs) with our best bib and tucker on that was a lot like our Sunday best.

(Can you tell me a bit about your parents, where they came from?)

My father was born in Sunshine to a family that had lived there for most of their life. Both he and his father worked at McKays. Dad was a fitter and turner. He also trained as a blacksmith, and his love was horses. But I think everybody's love was horses in those days, because before motor cars everybody had a horse, and Sunshine was no different to St Albans. Everyone had like a mini-farm and my grandparents lived in Cornwall Road and they had a very similar farm there. My mother went to school in St Albans Primary School. She lived in St Albans west during the depression, and then her parents went to work on the farm in Coimadai. When she was old enough to go to work—when she finished her schooling, which was about the merit certificate in those days—she went to board in Sunshine and worked at Spaldings. That's how she met my father. So they lived in Sunshine in a bungalow (sleepout) at my grandparents' home until they bought their property in St Albans. A lot of people in St Albans didn't own their own home in St Albans at that time, because there weren't many homes, there weren't many materials, it was hard to build new houses. It was a farming community around Taylors Road etc, and a working-class community in the town area.

There were no hotels on St Albans, which was another thing. Because of six o'clock closing hotels were pretty frightening places for children. The doors would close at six and all these men would be lying all over the pavement outside; and there was the noise from the doors of the hotel just before they closed, and everyone was ordering all their beers and shouting above each other. When I was in grade six I had to pass a hotel to get my bicycle to go back to our farmhouse in

Sunshine, and it was freaky for me. That was one thing we grew up without in St Albans; we didn't have any experience of six o'clock closing and what it was really like. When the migrants came they introduced a different way of consuming alcohol, and different alcohol than we had seen as kids; we only knew about beer.

Most of the parties around St Albans were pretty good parties. I can remember sitting and waiting for the big kids to come after some of the parties when we'd been to the pictures and it was normally beer, we didn't see wine or any other liqueur as kids until the Europeans came. My father never really visited the hotel, so they were foreign things to me. When the St Albans hotel was built that marked a big day for a lot of the people who'd lived there. We'd never had a hotel in the town before. It opened in the 'sixties, because I only had two kids, maybe 'sixty-five or something. It was a barn, so big. I can remember going there on a Sunday afternoon because it was very hot and that was the only place with air-conditioning. (laughs) It might have been with the cricket club or the tennis club, something like that. The tennis club, the cricket club and the football club certainly played major roles in the town for social life, as did the primary school and the Mechanics Institute, which supplied the reading material before Keilor and Sunshine Councils supplied library services.

(What was the Mechanics Institute?)



St Albans Mechanics Institute Hall 1950s © Norma McKay

The Hall, which is what we called it, the Mechanics Institute, was in East Esplanade across from the old station and that's where we went to the pictures. It had a supper room with a copper to heat the hot water so we could have tea or coffee. They'd show films there. The best seats were up on the stage; children sat down in the front. It was a picture theatre on Saturday nights. School events were held there, anything of importance took place in the hall. I think there must have been a second hall in my childhood, because the first hall where I remember the Mechanics Institute was, there were the books there, and I seem to remember the room being up a little bit. I can still smell the books; they were really interesting books. When we finally did get a library in St Albans it did come to the hall, so the hall played a major role in our lives.

The St Albans Primary School had a double room with sliding doors so there were dances held there, but big occasions like the school ball, would be at the hall.

Councillor James Eddie was a local farmer and he was in council for a long time. Most of the people who were in council were businesspeople. Those prominent people were easily recognisable in a smaller community. Even when it became a busier community in the 'sixties people like Eric Alan were still well known. Eric ran the bike shop in Alfrieda Street. I don't know a lot of his background except that he spoke the languages; he spoke English very well when a lot of other people were still struggling to learn English. Eric had a mechanic fixing bikes, because bikes were a major form of transport for people. They took their timber home on their bikes, rode the bikes to the station; the bikes were their lifeline for many people who were living a long way from the station. So many migrants were needing their bikes and needing them working, not having any sheds or means of fixing them. I suppose he established a very big business in Alfrieda Street which was basically a bicycle store. He became a councillor and built the big house on the corner of McIvor Road and Alfrieda Street, which later on was owned by the Puli family.

(Can you tell me about some of the shops in your early memories?)

In East Esplanade there was Selves, where you could buy groceries and petrol. A milk bar was next to that, and a draper—Clarke's, later Hamptons—on the corner of Main Road East. In Main Road East there was Scobles, where you could get your battery recharged. You could also buy petrol there. It was a wood yard. On the other side of the railway line there was a barbershop, just near the station, Mr Perrett who was a newsagent and grocery shop, general store, telephone, post office in Main Road West. Farther from him there was Hassets, the greengrocer. The two places you could buy ice-cream or an ice-block were Hassets the greengrocer, and the milk bar.

There were only two churches. The Church of England was black weatherboard with a red roof. There were lots of trees around that and you could always go inside the churches because the doors were never locked. There was also the Presbyterian Church. Sunday school was always in the Church of England in the morning, Presbyterian in the afternoon. We children got sent to both (laughs) whichever one seemed to suit the family routine, I think. Most of the kids went to Sunday school—I'm not saying all the parents went to church, but most of the kids were sent to Sunday school, and the ministers of course came to the school and taught religious instruction. That was the big change when I came back to St Albans, because the majority of the school population was then Roman Catholic, but there wasn't a Catholic Church and there wasn't a Catholic school.

(What happened with the Catholic boys and girls?)

Well, unless they were able to go to Our Lady's in Sunshine, which meant going by train and which was a cost to the parents, they went to the local primary schools until the Catholic school was built. A lot of people went to mass on Sunday. I think they did have a service somewhere, maybe in the hall in St Albans, because I remember the railway workers from Sydenham going past our house on one of those trolleys, and they used to go to mass and back on a Sunday morning. It must have been held in the hall.

As a young mother with children, I saw St Albans as a deserted town during the week. Nearly all the women were at work.

(What year are you talking about?)

In the 'sixties. Most people were at work because work was available. I was one of the few women who didn't work. The men were working very long shifts. The railway station was a very busy place. The women were also working shifts and passing over their children at the railway station to their husbands or neighbours when they were coming home from the early shift. There was no childcare, so the parents were forced to make a choice about working, because some people couldn't find childcare. There was none.

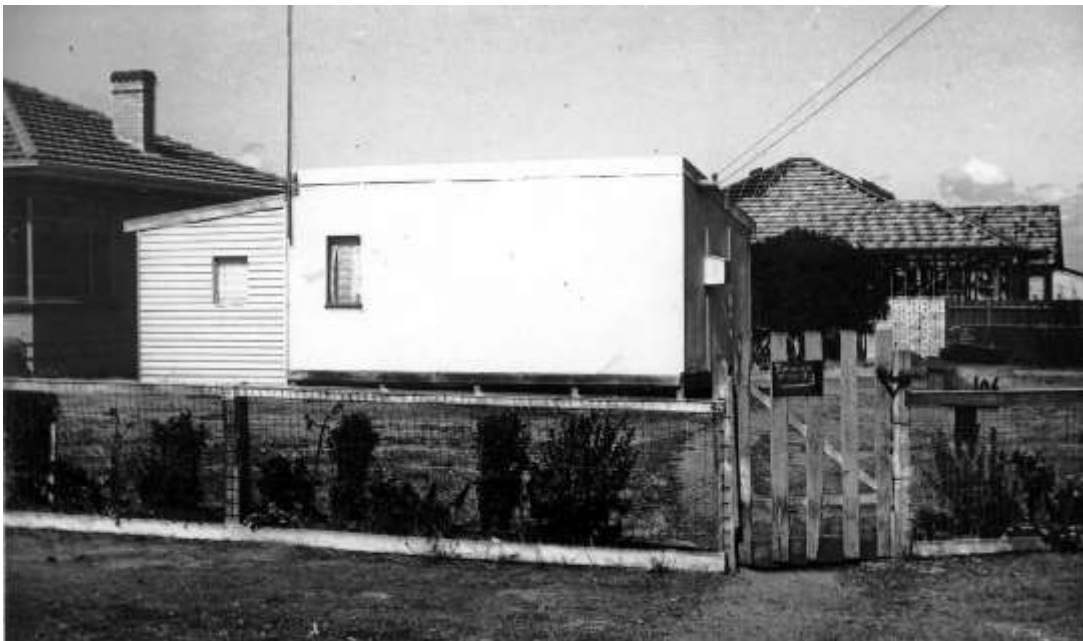
(This was in the 'sixties?)

Yes. There was a bit of private childcare, but that was just private people looking after children. In fact my mother in the 'fifties looked after the children of our neighbours. One little Polish girl almost became part of the family, because her mother worked long hours for quite a long time. The children started school early. Many of my friends at school left an empty bungalow and went home to an empty bungalow, because there was no childcare and parents travelled on the train, which took a lot longer than a car does today to go to and from St Albans.

(Can we talk a bit about the bungalows?)

My memory is that a bungalow is something that you had at the back of the house, something like a sleep-out. My father lived in a bungalow at the back of his parents' place when he was first married and when my brother was a baby. But the St Albans bungalows that were built were something else. They were just two rooms often, and I can't even remember if they had a division. They had weatherboard on the side and cement sheet on the front so that it could be extended, and a door in the back. The two bungalows put up next door to us in Theodore Street had virtually nothing in them, they had no facilities. They had to get water because that wasn't laid on, water wasn't a given. They had to find some means of getting water and many people didn't have water for a long, long time. They had to carry the water in buckets on trolleys.

They put in a window in the cement sheet wall so there was a view to look out to the street. The bungalow was placed towards the back of the property so that the house could be extended in front of that—they were to be the back rooms of the house. It was really like a closed-in veranda with a door in it. The roof had the slope on it to be the back of the house. The men who lived next door to us worked very hard getting the money together for timber and putting in the window to look out to the front, putting in benches and wardrobes etc. One family had four children to fit in, so there were six people to be living in these two rooms. The other family Mr Byzac had five children. There was an outside toilet, and they built a little room onto the toilet so that they had a little storage area, somewhere to keep things. There were no fences, so it was sitting out in the open. There were no steps leading up to it, it was often quite high off the ground, you had to build steps to get in. There were no floor coverings or things like that, so the men had to make them, then the women and children moved in.



Bungalow in Alfreda Street 1950s © Kon Haumann collection

(So the men came down first to prepare the basics for living?)

Yes. The men had to secure employment too, I guess. I don't know how they lived until they got a job. I think the initial purchase of the land and the bungalow came together as one item, but it was not liveable. Maybe the home we were living in was not liveable by Australian standards because the kitchen was in the shed, but what we were living in was a palace compared to the bungalow because it was very hot; it had a low flat roof, there was no insulation, no trees, absolutely no trees, and built on land that my father considered not to be good land, because it was very stony. It was very hard clay soils, it wasn't easy to dig, and to put a garden in without water was very difficult. There was no mains water laid on, but some people had a line that you could tap into. I think our neighbours tapped into the line that was coming to our house so they were able to get water. People further up in Theodore Street were not so lucky and they had to carry water for a long time until the water pressure was good enough to take to all the housing.

(You mentioned English classes. Can you tell me about that?)

Through my work at the dental surgery and during the early 'seventies I started doing some activities with the Youth Club, with Rosie Lemmer who started Yoga classes. We wanted to organise art classes too. We tried to get the few women who were at home interested in doing



things because more people were starting to be at home. This is in the early 'seventies. Lorna Cameron started the discussion group. Lorna was working part-time when Rosie Lemmer and I were making Yoga classes possible. Rosie was wanting to be able to write her school lunch order for her children—although she spoke English very well and she could read, she couldn't write English to her satisfaction. She kept saying that we needed English classes and because I was the Aussie I should do something about it. So we finally applied to get a teacher to come and we were lucky because we got a great teacher in Anice Harrowfield.

Before we accepted her, we invited her to come to our discussion group morning as everyone was very skeptical about the government giving us these English classes, because it was felt the government would start them and then take them away. No-one believed that they would eventually get free English classes. The teacher came along and was very interested to listen to what people wanted and was very happy to work with Rosie and myself in establishing the classes to meet the needs of the people. One of our problems was that although the government gave us the money to establish the English classes, we were not allowed to advertise. We overcame that. I advertised the English classes with my home telephone number and the community recruited the students. We had to implement ways of making sure the English classes always went on. I recruited Margaret, who I knew was no longer working and was at home; we knew the women in St Albans who now had leisure time. Margaret was very valuable because she had a car, she had the time, and she was a lovely gentle person to coach people to come to the English classes. The first classes were started in the Youth Club—not in the front room, we were in the tin shed. This created a lot of bad memories for many of the people; they didn't feel it was good enough. Once we got the classes, they started saying we shouldn't be taught in a shed. When it rained we couldn't hear the difference between 'p' and 'b' and when it was hot we absolutely cooked in there.

So I started tramping around the town trying to find a new space. I went to lobby Jack Ginifer, our local member of the Legislative Assembly. His electorate secretary, Frank Donovan, suggested we share his office space, because he had plenty of space and they had a big room which they used as a meeting room. We thought that was wonderful. It had one handicap, and that was that it was upstairs. We decided to take it because there were no other offers. Besides, it had a balcony, an area where we could care for the children. We wanted the students to be able to bring their pre-school children along. The new arrivals were anxious about their children, also the children were anxious because they couldn't speak English. Here the mothers and the children could be separated only by a small partition within the class. We applied for money to mind the children. It was a good spot because it had an outside area on the balcony where I could set up activities.

I became the official child minder; I was paid by the government to mind the children. We bought equipment, some child care equipment, and begged and borrowed the resources. We had sessions that assisted the children while the parents were also learning. Margaret, Rosie and myself worked as assistants to Anice. If she wanted to work on a one-to-one she gave us an exercise to do with other small groups of the class. Although we only had one teacher she spread herself around and if we had, say, a Turkish person who needed to have extra one-to-one sometimes she'd organise what had to be done and Margaret or I would do that with that person, because everybody was learning at a different pace. Some people had been in Australia twenty-five years or thirty-five years and others had been here only two minutes. We were getting new cultures that we didn't know so much about: like the Turkish man who was sent to us from a factory because he couldn't read the safety signs, but we couldn't find anybody at that stage who could actually translate for us, and the phone translating service wasn't operating. It was really tough in the early days.

That's how we started, and it went on. Then we got space in the community centre across the road because it grew into more classes and we got a second teacher in Sheila, and Thea was the child carer for that class, and Helen the helper. Then it just grew and grew to that big AMES centre. But that started from the Youth Club.



English class participants on balcony at Jack Ginifer's office

(I'm not sure if they recognise their origins these days. Do they?)

Well, I don't know, but Anice, Margaret, Rosie and I still meet every year, and Sheila is still around—the baby she had at the breast when she started is now a young man. A lot of people know where it started, and it certainly was the joy of some of those Maltese women who never had a chance of going to a school in Malta. Some were getting older and couldn't remember what they needed at the shops and wanted to learn to write shopping lists and birthday cards by themselves. It was really a lot of fun. Anice and Margaret used to pick people up if they couldn't get to class; we had a pick up service. Because I didn't have a licence at that time I used to have to go down and set up. If for any reason Anice couldn't come we still opened the door and the classes went on because we could run them with or without Anice for a day. All because the community didn't trust just a teacher, because they thought the teacher would just leave or move away or go somewhere, and that we wouldn't have English classes. So that is how the English classes started, through the dedication of Anice. She was given no resources, few materials. We had to use shopping catalogues (laughs) to make work kits. We would beg-borrow-steal paper and things from wherever we could to make resources for her to work with, until Myer House came along and looked at what we were doing and then we got more resources. And so it became easier. It was operating well when I left in 1982; it was going on to bigger and better things.

(You've mentioned the Youth Club a few times. What are your earliest memories of the Youth Club?)

My earliest memories of the Youth Club are from the 'fifties. In fact that's where I met my St Albans husband at the Youth Club. My earliest memories were when it had been built, I think, and I wasn't actually living in St Albans at that time, but I came up on the weekends to stay with my friends. So we went to some of the dances there, and it was at one of those dances that I met Mr Right. He was on the Committee and very involved with the Youth Club. Then as a young married woman I did youth training, I think with you (both laugh) and went on camps, youth training camps, when my kids were little. It is probably through some of the training in those early days that I established my interest in working with younger children rather than older children, looking at what happens to children in the first seven years without childcare. I'd become concerned with, seeing what was happening to children when I worked at the dental surgery, how the children were having sedatives at age three.



Lorna Cameron (L) at Tin Shed c.1970

(Sedatives at three?)

Yes, we had to ask people what medication they took and a lot of women and children were actually on sedatives in the early 'seventies, late 'sixties. Men were on sedatives too, trying to cope with the twelve-hour shift. A lot of men thought they were in gaol, working six days a week twelve hours a day, and they weren't very happy.

I was concerned with what was happening with children and that is why my interest moved from youth-working to working with women and young children, though I enjoyed the coffee shop. (Yes, yes. They were the good old days.) The Coffee Shop, the Learning Exchange, and Education Action, and all the things that came out of the immigrants' children who were educated, putting back into the community.

(That's the nice thing, isn't it, to see people putting back in.)

When I think about all the campaigning for the university and going around doing surveys so that we could get the university and we've almost come full circle now at university—you have to pay, and paying-students get better services than those who are on HECS. It's almost like there's been created a new need.

(I remember going to the St Albans Technical School, as it was known then, and reading with kids who were at the Tech School and who had a very low level of literacy really.)

And the Community Centre with the Book Exchange, and we had the students coming in with their homework and people were rostered on so that kids could get help. It's almost done a full circle. Now it's not that children don't have quiet or a place to study, it's that some don't have computers.

(I still think some of those ideas were good ideas.)

It would be good if some of the good ideas put into action in St Albans were actually written up.

Because I was the English-speaker and the biggest girl, when the school holidays came in the 'fifties it was my responsibility to take children down to the Hall where the school holidays matinees were. I would have to round up all the kids and take them to the hall. Suzie always wanted to come back after they'd played the first ten minutes or so, she wanted to go home right now and she'd start crying and I had to take her home. I came back just in time for the end of the film. (laughs) I still remind her of that. So I did my time of walking up and back, because it was quite a walk by the time I got home and had to explain why I had to bring her back again, and then go back to the Hall myself.

I guess we had a lot of fun together. We all grew up together because nobody moved house very often. A lot of these families are in touch with each other today. Not only were we an extra family for the newcomers in Australia, they created an extra family for us, because we grew up with our neighbours like we were brothers and sisters.

A lot of our activities took place outside our house. On birthdays—we didn't really have a birthday party, or rarely had one—but most of the European kids did have a birthday party and photographs were taken to send to families who were overseas, in America or wherever. So, the makeshift tables came out, and all the 'aunts and uncles' off the boat or collected while staying in migrant hostels, because those who came to Australia together became the aunts and uncles. We had lots of fun birthday parties. Depending on the weather it could be either too windy, too hot, or too cold, but you had to be outside because you couldn't fit inside the bungalow. None of us had very big houses. As we got older we had parties in the street, where people got bogged because we had open gutters. Friends would come in cars and park on the side of the road and park in the gutter. (laughs)

(At that stage they were really lucky that they had a car.)

That's right, because most of us didn't have cars.

My early memories of some of the characters in the town—I remember one of the young children who was missing had just gone down to the station and hopped on a train and got off at Sunshine. Tommy was always asking us, 'What train are you catching? what train are you catching? what train are you catching?' Tommy was probably a pretty important person to all of us kids. He had a disability so he lived with his mum, and we were always told we mustn't be rude to him. He always had a money bag on him and he was always asking people what train they were catching. I don't know what happens with all the Tommies today, but Tommy was loved by all of us kids because he was a big person who spoke to us, often. He was often down the shops near the station, so the train for Tommy was the big thing.

Growing up in a changing St Albans certainly gave me a greater appreciation of the world—it was an early social globalism for me, and I think for my children as well. As an adult I was always part of a minority group in St Albans. People would say: 'Why don't you move? Why do you live in St Albans?' For my children their real introduction to Australian people outside of family and friends didn't come until they were in their teenage years and they started to move outside of St Albans. Then they found that they could understand people gossiping in shops; they thought it was pretty terrible that people talked about one another. I had to explain that that happened in St Albans too, just that it happened in different languages. (laughs)

(That must have been a real culture shock, eh?)

I can remember them catching a train to the country and coming home. They were on the station with some people who were talking about all these New Australians, saying awful things about them. I remember two of them coming home and saying, 'I don't think we like Australians.' Because we certainly weren't like that in St Albans, it didn't matter what language we spoke or where you came from. For me, that was exciting because I had friends from all over the world. I'm sure I'm a better cook for it. My second mother taught me to make a decent soup. So many things were shared and my life was much richer.

(Thinking of your mother's time, what did the women do? I know they did the housework and everything else, but what sort of socialising opportunities did they have, what did they do for themselves?)

The school was the big thing. My mother was really involved with the school until the big rush came, and when we came back she didn't really get involved. There were card nights at the school; card nights were a big thing for the women, for my mum anyway. And dancing, she loved dancing. My father didn't dance, but that didn't seem to matter. The men came, and the men who didn't dance just chatted while the women danced and we kids danced. A few of the women could ride horses in those days too, so they would go horse riding. My mother, because she could drive the horse too, would take us on a picnic or things like that, so we were probably pretty privileged then. When I was a child some of the women would have been working at the ammunition factory, it wasn't only men that were working there. I don't have any recollection of children being left on their own at that time. It might have been that they went to neighbours, I know we did. If mum wasn't home it didn't matter, we went to Martins who lived next door, and if

you didn't go to Martins we went to friends who lived on Alfrieda Street, which is up the hill from East Esplanade. I have a lot of fond memories of going to near neighbours and them coming to us, so I think people helped each other out a lot more because the women weren't all going to work at the same time. My memory was of more women being available during the day. The school certainly had a very active mothers club, which is probably what happens in country Australia today.

(It must have been a very early start to the day for families.)

It certainly was. Washing day you had to get up early to light the copper.

(What was the traditional washing day?)

I think usually Monday was washing day. We had a bath on Sunday, so we had clean sheets on Sunday night. The other days we only had a wash. I know when we shifted back to St Albans we had a young brother. Our jobs were to wipe the dishes with Mum. Mum would wash the dishes and one of us would have to wipe them, and the other one had to wash my little brother. We had to wash his ears and his neck, and because boys wore short trousers we had to wash his knees. Mum would come and inspect him, and then of course if we had to do it again he would yell and squeal. That was probably the norm as to what happened in homes. We would do those jobs happily, because if we did when my young brother was put to bed my mother would play cards with us. That was the payoff. I remember most of my friends having jobs. We had jobs even when we got home from school, like collecting the wood or the eggs and feeding the animals.

There were women at home, but, remembering that women didn't have phones or cars, it was still very isolating, that's probably why the school was the focal point of contact. Shopping was different then, because things weren't in packages, they had to be measured out. You usually left your list and had it delivered, you didn't stay in the shop and chat for a couple of hours while the shopkeeper weighed out your order.

(You mentioned that your mother used to make butter. Was that common around the area at the time?)

Mum made butter for many neighbours. There was a lot of bartering going on, so maybe mum made butter that she exchanged for other goods. The butter was of course salted butter, remember we didn't have refrigeration. We did have a cellar and a pantry where we put food to keep cool, and the ice chest, but they were small, not as spacious as refrigerators are today. I remember salted butter being quite a strange thing for the Europeans.

(A number of people have mentioned that. Lorna has always been big on that.)

The cow had to be milked. That was mum's job, to milk the cow. She had to fetch the cow from wherever it was and milk the cow. Dad went to work early in the morning, but he milked weekends. Then the milk had to be separated. I suppose Mum did that until we got big enough to turn the separator. Then the separator had to be washed. I hated the separator.

She didn't make bread because we had bread delivered.

Washing, you had to get the water hot enough to wash. Whites were boiled and coloured were scrubbed by hand in concrete troughs. My mother probably had lots of filthy washing because my father worked as a blacksmith and in the factory. The men didn't really do anything in the house. One of my mother's jobs was to lay my father's clothes out in the order he had to put them on. Wives accepted that that was something that you did. Boys in those days were such duffers; they didn't know which clothes to put on first. She also cleaned my father's shoes. Everything was spic and span, and most of the jobs around the home were done by mum. Until we had the electricity, she ironed with a flat iron that was heated on the wood stove. We didn't live with electricity for very long because we left that house. I didn't really live with electricity until I came back to St Albans when I was sixteen. A lot of people think that electricity was everywhere, but it wasn't. It was in the town, but it wasn't necessarily outside the towns.

(Yes. Certainly the impression is that once it came through everyone was automatically on, but in fact if you had a few isolated houses up the road they couldn't afford to put a line through.)

That's right.

I think that trees in St Albans probably got chopped down when the electricity came through. I don't know if that's fact or if that's fiction in my head. The gum trees that were along the roads and on properties were cropped for firewood, but they grew back. In fact the two people who

bought next to us in Theodore Street actually paid more for their block of land in Theodore Street because they thought it looked more like home, because it had the cypress trees and was a cobblestone road. Theodore Street was a made road, so to speak. So it had a road lined with stone fences. Their block cost more than one in Collins Street or somewhere closer to the station, but they wanted to have those other features and it was a little bit hilly, not quite as flat. And my father didn't think it was a very good block. (laughs)

(Whereas now we would say 'picturesque' and you'd pay more for it.)

A lot of St Albans was grassland; it wasn't trees. We value that grassland now and have fenced it off around the railway line in East Esplanade. Missen's farm on the way to Keilor also had stone fences. Do you remember that yourself?

(I remember stone fences; we had stone fences just at the end of our street, near where Helen's place was, along Leslie Street.)

That's right, and further down on the way to Keilor.

(They weren't the beautifully constructed ones like at Warrnambool, where you have these beautiful dry-stone fences.)

Yes, but we didn't have those stones. What I remember at that stage around Leslie Street they were falling down.

(Yes, and they had bits of iron posts and wire at the top.)

One thing my dad did besides shoeing horses was ploughing. I've got many childhood memories of going with Dad. He had a plough and horses. He put a crop in. He cropped at Conrad Street and East Esplanade. If other people were not using their land he cropped there too. So I've got many memories of chasing the mice around the stooks, putting the hay up into the stooks and bringing it in. I remember going with him to Victoria Crescent and that first little cross-street opposite from where the Goddards lived. There was a house there on two or three blocks, and they wanted to put in their vegetable garden. So he would go and plough the land first with the horse. That was a common practice to break up the clay soils before hand digging. The people who came later from Europe dug it over and put their potatoes in with a shovel. But it was like iron that ground. Dad did a lot of jobs like that because he had the horses. And carting water. I think he had a dray with a tank on it, so if people ran out of water he could get water from Biggs Street and fill their tanks. So, basically he was a modern man in those days, a hobby farmer. He worked in a factory during the week and had a hobby farm on the weekend. That's still an Australian dream.

(You're sort of getting back to your roots in that respect, but a bit further away from town, aren't you?)

I think I realise why I am so happy here: because of the sky, because that's one thing we had a lot of in St Albans. We had beautiful sunsets; we had lots of sky, lots of cloud, and lots of wind. It was a nice place to grow up in.

There is something about freedom for children when there's lots of sky and grassland. You are allowed to go as far as the eye can see. If you were up in the Dandenongs, parents may not have been so relaxed about that.

(Obviously, if they don't know where you are ...)

...which direction do you look? But when you walk across the plains somebody saw you somewhere.

(I remember my younger sister went missing one day and it was just the case that she and the equally young boy next door went for a walk to the railway line. Of course they didn't tell anyone. All of a sudden everyone's rushing around looking for them—where are they? This was their big trip to the other side of their world.)

There wouldn't have been too many cars when you came either. It's such a different world, because a lot of the open space we had we probably thought it was going to stay there forever, but of course it didn't. A lot of the land wasn't considered to be good enough for building brick houses on. Technology proved that was a bad theory.

(I certainly remember men on their bicycles coming home from work.)

And the timber, do you remember them on the Saturday mornings taking their timber home on their bicycles?

(No, I don't. I wish I did, but no, I can't say that I do. Funnily enough I remember myself carrying a big pane of glass on the push-bike because at least you could support it, and then getting most embarrassed when it broke. You had to carry things from Stevens' building supplies; it was called St Albans Building Supplies.)

St Albans won prizes in the Show, because we could grow great crops.

(What sort of crops?)

I think oats, and fat cattle. I remember Mr King telling me about the prizes people won. Probably those records are still available from the Royal Melbourne Show, which would be of interest to people who live on that land now. The orchards on the river were at the bottom of Biggs Street. My grandfather worked around there.

(What sort of fruit was grown?)

Beautiful apricot crops. I don't recall whether that was always the main crop, but it certainly was the main crop when I was young. Mrs Hall spoke to me about that—my grandfather actually worked for her father for a while during the depression—and they would have had a lot of stone fruits. Apricots were a prime fruit.

(Did your parents talk about the depression?)

Mum was young during that time, and for my grandparents it was a hard time because my grandfather had to work miles away—he had to walk from St Albans to wherever he could find work, live there, and then he would walk back home to bring the money home every few months, because you couldn't trust the money to go any other way. He told me that coming back to Keilor you would see Mr Stevens' white horse tied up at the council meeting at the old hall where the council meetings used to be. Stevens being quite wealthy—my grandparents didn't own any land—and a lot of people worked for Mr Stevens in those days when they had the farm. My grandmother also worked. She did washing for an invalid lady in Deer Park and she would walk there. My mother was nursing a sick child during the depression and the children were left alone when my grandmother was in hospital with the baby. My grandfather wasn't there, so the children had to clean the house and do the jobs, just like the children that I grew up with who had migrant parents. They had to do their jobs and wait for their mum and dad to come home. So it sort of repeated itself.

It was actually harder for my grandparents than for my mother, because she was a child. She lived through the Second World War. I think there were a lot of women in St Albans during the depression. Whether there were many men there ...? But I guess there were the men there who were working the land. The women did work wherever they could then because it was just so hard to survive.

Mrs Hall told some lovely stories about St Albans houses. If somebody got married—timber was so scarce in the early days and in the depression—if you weren't using a room that room would be dismantled and given to the newly married couple, and somebody else would give another room, and they actually made up a home. There just wasn't the timber around.

Evelyn Mullenger 2001



Ev Mullenger c.1980