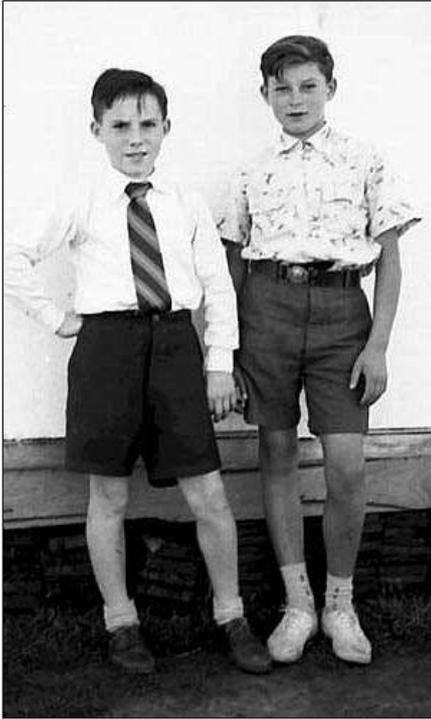


# GERHARDT "GERRY" HAUMANN : DONAUSCHWABEN



## Introduction

Gerry Haumann and his family came to St Albans in October 1954. They were Donauschwaben from Batschka Brestowatz, in the northern part of the former Yugoslavia. The Batschka area was previously part of Hungary, which was part of the Austrian Empire until the First World War, hence the German influence. German colonists settled in the area in the eighteenth century when it was part of the southern Hungarian military frontier, though in Batschka Brestowatz there had been a German presence ever since 1786. The Donauschwaben or 'Danube-Swabians' are people named after their ancestors who left their homeland of Swabia in south-western Germany and floated down the Danube right through to Batschka and the Banat to settle lands that had been recaptured from the Ottoman Empire. Colonists from Germany, Switzerland, and north-eastern France were enticed to the new frontier by the Austrian Empire's promises of land in exchange for labour.

In the 1920s there were more than 500,000 ethnic Germans settled in Yugoslavia, representing about 4.3% of the population at that time. At that time Batschka Brestowatz had a population of 5,000 people, the large majority of whom were of German background. At least 350,000 Germans fled the country after the Second World War. After being imprisoned in Yugoslavia for a couple of years the Haumann family fled to Austria and from there migrated to Australia as stateless persons.



Gerry Huamann (centre front) and his family, circa 1950.

We arrived on the ship Fair Sea in Melbourne on 29 March 1954, after a five-week journey from Bremerhaven in Germany. After a few weeks at the immigration camp at Bonegilla in northern Victoria we came to Chelsea and were living in a boarding house that was supported by the Catholic Church through Charitas. My father and two older brothers obtained work with the Victorian Railways. The family then bought land in Alfreda Street, St Albans. Originally there were two blocks of land, with a bungalow on the corner with an empty block next to it. The family home was built on that, and it took a number of years to complete as we had to finance it ourselves. It was not easy to get finance from the banks in those days.



Alfrieda Street in the winter, 1954.

## **Expect the Unexpected**

Things are sure different in St Albans to other places in Australia. As I went down the road, I noticed an odd-looking car, because one of the front mudguards was painted blue and the other one purple. It also looked rather odd from the back, as it had the same colour scheme except on opposite sides. It certainly was different, one could say, but it must have been easy to find in car parks. Anyway, so much for that observation, because you should always expect the unexpected in St Albans.

## **St Albans Shopping Centre**

When my family first arrived in St Albans there were very few shops and you could only buy a limited range of food. Now one can buy all different kinds of food from all nationalities and there are a lot from Asia, Europe, Africa, South America and some Aussies.

Now the shopping centre stretches from the station along Main Road East to Erica Street and up Alfrieda Street. There are no less than 12 hairdressers, and a basic haircut costs \$7. In that same area there is no shortage of doctors (6-8) and about the same amount of take-aways. There is also an abundance of employment agencies, which makes one think there must be money to be made out of unemployment services, otherwise these private concerns wouldn't operate them.

Again, when we first arrived there were very few cars. Now the car parking in the shopping area is just shocking.



The heart of St Albans shopping centre, East Esplanade, 1954.

## Brief History of St Albans

The current St Albans is a far cry from what it was like when my parents, brothers and I came to St Albans in October 1954. Things in those days were very primitive to say the least - there were about a dozen shops and no made roads to speak of.

Our family was a lot more fortunate than a lot of people because our place in Alfrieda Street was close to the train station. We also had water connected to our place, and a bath, although we had to heat the water outside in a copper and carry it in by bucket.



Magdalen, George, and Gerhardt Haumann amidst their vegetable plot, Alfrieda Street, 1954.

A lot of people didn't have water at all for quite some time. I remember a lady from two streets away coming to our place and getting two buckets of water in the morning and at night. Saturdays she would get quite a lot more for the washing and weekly bath for her and the family; I think they had two kids. That seems too much to comprehend these days, but that was St Albans in the early 1950s.

Wait, there is more - can you image no drains, that's right. Around 1955 or '56 graders made gravel roads and open gutters, into which the kitchen, bath, and laundry waste water ran, not at all ideal.

Also, when it rained the streets and gutters were just mud, and the cars that were around got easily bogged.

Most people were going to work by train, apart from the occasional taxi, which was an unusual sight. Trains were the only form of public transport available in the area. On rainy days people would walk to the station in their gumboots and change into their shoes at the station, leaving the gumboots there. When they came home from work the gumboots would still be there. (Not so today.)

The baker used to deliver bread in a horse-drawn carriage. The milkman used to also deliver the milk in a horse-drawn wagon; the horse was so familiar with the delivery route it would know where to stop. People would leave the money for the milkman out by the meter box or such places. Nothing was stolen.



The heart of St Albans shopping centre, Main Road East from the railway crossing, 1954.

Although things were pretty primitive in relation to today's mod-cons, people were more content and happier, also very proud of what they had and where they lived. It is sad to see St Albans now, as it seems to have lost its proudness.

## St Albans High School

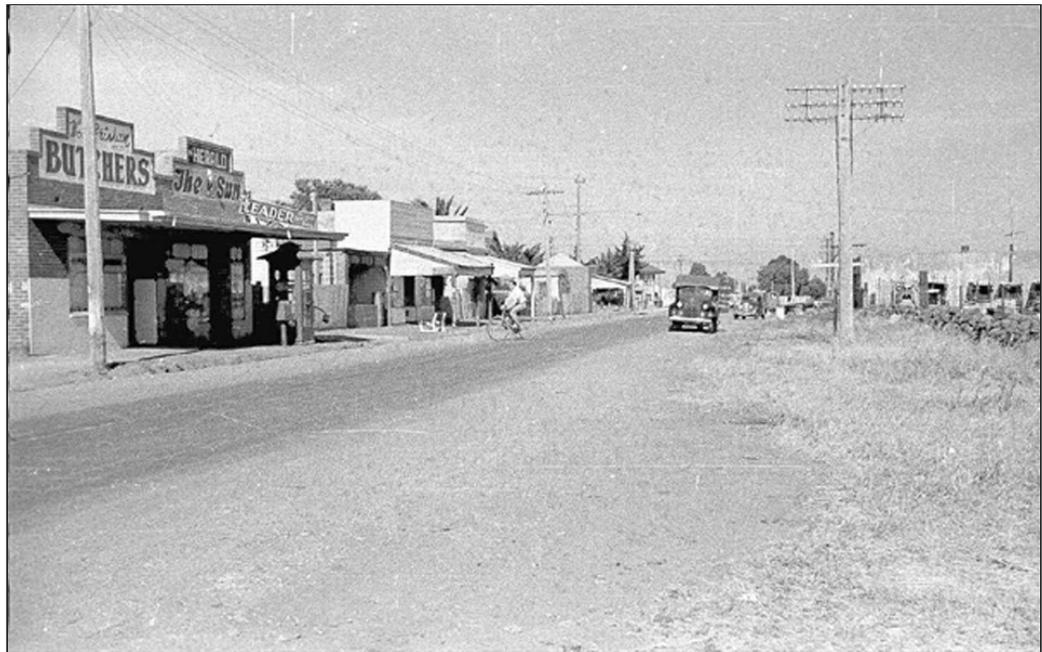
St Albans High School started in 1956. The principal was Mr Barker, and the sports teacher was Mr Walsh. Some of the teachers I remember were Mr Lahy, Mr Alcorn, and Mr Murphy. The buildings for the High School in Main Road East St Albans were not finished by the start of the school year in 1956, so we had to go to Sunshine, to a temporary building at the Presbyterian Church Hall in Anderson Street, Sunshine (between Sunshine Bowls Club and George Cross Soccer Club). The Hall was partitioned off into three "classrooms", which were rather crowded. For woodwork class we had to walk to Sunshine Tech which was about one kilometre away, carrying our gear; for us at the time it wasn't too bad at all. I remember about half way through the year we had a reporter from The Herald (the afternoon paper at the time) come to our school and do a bit of a write-up as there were around 20 different nationalities at our school, mainly of European origin, so it was strange to hear names like Jones or Smith.

I remember going to the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games with the school. (I was fortunate that my parents could afford to pay for the ticket.) This was the first time I had been to the MCG and the crowd was just huge. I was able to see Betty Cuthbert win her gold medal; she was a sprinter in the 100 and 200 metre events that year.

St Albans High School was supposed to be finished in time for the 1957 school year, but it wasn't. However, there were enough rooms finished for the school to open. From the High School you could see all the way towards Albion, because there were only empty paddocks in that direction, same as going towards Sunshine Avenue. These days it is completely filled with housing.

Sometime in 1957, a grass fire came racing towards our new school, just after lunch, so us kids all went to the fight the fire, and lucky enough we managed to hold it before reaching our shelter shed. When the voluntary Fire Brigade arrived they praised us for our efforts. Needless to say it made our day. It is hard to image this now, but that was St Albans High then.

As well as being principal Mr Barker was also our science teacher. We had Mr Walsh for history, Mr Alcorn for maths, and Mr Lahy for French. Thinking back now it must have been pretty hard for those teachers trying to pronounce some of those Eastern European names. As for me I was proud to have gone to St Albans High. I always felt the school was prepared to help you if you wanted to be helped. The school is now a far cry from its simple and tough beginning, though I do hope that it still has the same ideals.



The heart of the original St Albans shopping centre, Main Road West, 1954.

## St Albans Supermarket

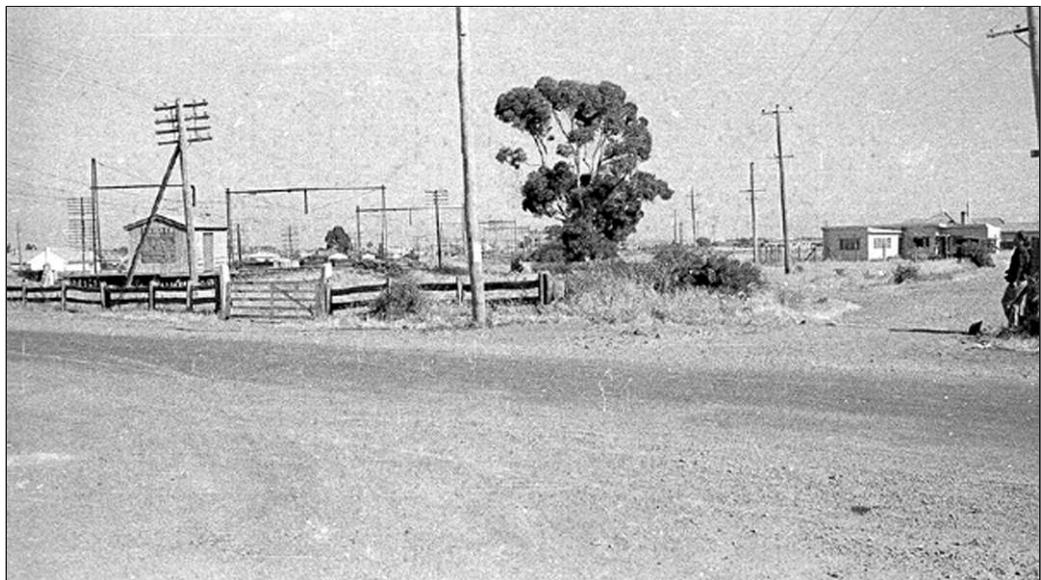
Where the present IGA supermarket is located there used to be a little country store that also used to sell petrol, owned by the Self family, who were later joined by the Goddards. That little store in the late 1950s became a little "self service", because the owners were prepared to provide good service and get anything and everything that their customers asked for. It grew to a big supermarket. Everyone in St. Albans knew where 'Selfs' was; it was an icon. It was closed for some time, but now it seems to be as busy as ever.



Self's General Store and petrol pump, East Esplanade, early 1950s.

## St Albans Station

In 1954 the St Albans Station was located on the same side of the railway line except on the northern side of the crossing. It was a wooden building with a ticket office, an office that had the controls to open and shut the gates, a little shed to store things, and one where bikes were stored hanging up on the front wheel. In the 1960s it was rebuilt on its present site south of the crossing, with a second platform added to it some time later, and the new Melbourne-bound platform being built not that long ago.



The heart of St Albans, corner of Main Road West and McKechnie Street near the railway station crossing, 1954.

**Gerry Haumann, 2004.**

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This is a reprint of an article prepared by Gerry Haumann, 2004.  
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