

BEVERLEY SMITH nee TOOGOOD: CLEANING CONTRACTOR, TIN SHED VOLUNTEER

Family Origins



I was born in 1942 and I remember growing up in Maidstone and going to St Johns Catholic School near the Footscray Hospital. My father was Peter James Toogood from Ballarat. My mother was Kathleen Betty Toogood and was originally from Maffra, but then her family came to Footscray.

Both my parents were working. My father's job was with Angliss, packing meat to send to the soldiers overseas. From that job he moved to the Housing Commission and worked for them for the next 50 years, putting in the walls in high rise buildings.

My mother worked in Smorgons for years and years and years. I think she was there for about 28 years. At first she was packing legs of lamb, and from there they put her in the sick bay, where she would assist the nurse. She never had a first aid certificate or anything, but I guess she would have learnt something from the nurses. They used to have a doctor who came around twice a week, and that was Dr Thomas from Maribyrnong. She ended up running the sick bay when they were short of nurses, because she'd be there months on end by herself. Most places had sick bays. Even St Albans High School had a nurse and a sick bay. That only went out about 16 years ago. Then they started employing bursars and registrars, so they'd get girls who had some first aid certificate and employ them.

Moving to St Albans

We moved to Beaver Street in St Albans in 1954, and I think that was because there was cheap land available to build your own home.

My father used to ride his bike from Maidstone every weekend to build the house in Beaver Street. There was an old guy who lived around the corner in Percy Street who was also building a house. Every weekend that my father came up there was a bit more timber missing, while this old guy kept building his home without any timber in sight. My dad used to say, "I think the old so-and-so has been pinching my timber."

It took dad years to build the house, so while he was building we lived in the three rooms at the back, like everybody else did, in a skillion.

Early Neighbourhood



Beaver Street in the 1950s.

When we first moved here there was nothing here. From where we were in Beaver Street there was nothing opposite us looking to the east; nothing at all. I could see from our front door right across to McIntyre Road because it was all paddocks. What's more I used to stand on the back porch and wave to my visitors on the train as they were going, because there was nothing more than a few houses in that direction.

There were only a few houses in Beaver Street. Keith Tully was one of the boys; he went to the tech school. Jeff Barlow was in our street, though we didn't have much contact with them. His sister, Glenda, joined the Navy.

There were some buildings along the south side of Main Road. Nearest the station there were two or three railway houses, then the old espresso bar which was back from the road, about where Daniella's is now located. That's where all the boys from The Untouchables used to hang out for their coffee. That was the gang back then, in the Georgie Biris days. They used to wear leather jackets with "The Untouchables" written on the back. They were harmless, but it was the era of the bodgies and the widgies.

After the espresso bar there was a house occupied by a Polish lady, and Dr Rogozinski ended up working in the back of that place before he opened up his surgery further along the road.

Then came the Gross's home, then the Hounslow's - there were about four of these very fancy looking homes. Then came the garage, which was where Safeways has their car park. That was a long time ago.

Meeting the Europeans

I remember when the Europeans started moving into the area. Mrs Babicz was across the road from us, and she had two girls, Maria and Stasia. Before they came we never had anything like panczki or Vienna bread. Because both their parents were at work, Maria and Stasia weren't allowed to come out of the house after school, so we would go over and talk to them through their front window. They'd say, "We'll give you panczki if you give us an Australian something." We'd swap through the window. My parents wouldn't have dreamt of buying a Vienna loaf.

St Albans Primary School

I was 10 years old when I came to St Albans and enrolled in the primary school. Because we came from the Catholic school they kept us back a year; they reckoned we were dodos. So I stayed back in Grade 5. We used to have assembly on a Monday morning and sing the national anthem. We used to meet our teachers at the station and walk to school with them. The suburban train always went through the northern side of the gates then, because that's where the platform was. I had Mr Monohan as my teacher, and I still remember him as plain as day: a big, tall man with glasses. I'd meet him at the station every morning and walk up to the school with him. Mr Proud was another teacher, who was from Sunshine. He was a really fine looking man.

When we came here my younger brother Christopher was put into Grade 3. He was always in trouble with the principal up there. You used to see a diesel train maybe once week going up to Bendigo. My brother used to be a demon and get out of the school ground and sit in the middle of the railway tracks. They always had him in the office giving him the strap. He'd bring the letter home telling mum and dad that he'd got the strap again today. I don't know what his problem was, but he was a horror. When he got to the tech school he used to jump out of the two-storey building and disappear because he'd get into this argument with the teacher. He's mellowed with age, of course.

When I was in primary school there was a girl, Glen Stone, who lived in a house over the railway line near Station Road. There weren't many houses on that side of the railway line as it was nearly all paddocks. She'd say, "Do you want to come to my house?" I'd say, "Gosh, I've got to walk all that way." It's a long way now, but when it was all open paddocks you didn't notice it that much. We'd choof off up there and have a good time.

Furlong Road

There were no houses on the west side of the railway line between the St Albans station and Furlong Road. There was only one old shack, like Steptoe's shack, in the middle of a paddock and surrounded by a big fence. You could see it from the train as you were going past. They had one of every animal you could think of. They had horses, they had ducks, they had a cow, they had rabbits - they had everything. I remember those girls, Elaine and Denise Chester, because they were going to the primary school and I went to their place after school on several occasions. They also had an older brother. The family later moved to Braybrook.

At first the area along Furlong Road had been just empty paddocks because it was supposed to be a green belt. Then in the mid to late 'fifties a few houses started to be built there. That Furlong Road intersection with the railway line has always been a problem. When we first moved here, there was a man killed on that crossing as he was going home from work in his horse and cart when it got caught on the track.

Wittingslow Carnival

Our first carnival was put on by Tom and Des Wittingslow. Des was still young then, and he was a bit of a demon. When Mr Cameron asked Des to come to St Albans with his carnival he replied, "Where the bloody hell is St Albans?" The Wittingslows lived in Ascot Vale near the showgrounds. Mr Cameron said, "I reckon you could make a quid there, because there is nothing up there for the kids."



St Albans East carnival, 1957; Kopmann archives.

Des came here a couple of years in a row. The first year he was here he made his first thousand pounds. My brother is involved with the Wittingslow family because his partner is one of the Wittingslow sisters-in-law, so I know the family. Des said to me before he died, "I'll never forget St Albans, because I made my first thousand pounds there."

The carnival was held where Quicks is on the corner. Then he moved to where KFL is on the corner of Alfrida Street and Main Road East, which became known as the Coles Corner. There was no Coles there at the time, that was a paddock, and he used to hold the carnival there. He had a fashion parade on the back of his big tray truck. We all got done up like sore toes and thought we were Paris models. I got second prize in that one, and one of the Dobrowolski girls won first prize. It was funny when you think about it.

Behind the Tin Shed, which wasn't there at the time of course, there was an old shack out the back, an old corrugated iron shed. They used to have all sort of meetings there, even the Country Women's Association used to have their meetings there. European people used to live in one end of that, and I think the boy's name was Unick Polonczak and he went to the St Albans High School. There were about three houses in Princes Street behind that old shack. There was a old guy living there by the name of Cebisev. One day his German Shepherd went missing and could be heard barking from the other side of the railway line where the pub is now. There was nothing there at the time, no made roads or anything, but there was an old well there, and that's where they found the body of Stanislaus Kaska who was a buisnessman from Sunshine. The dog could smell the body that has been dumped in the well. They never did convict anyone for Kaska's murder.

St Albans High School

I went to St Albans East Primary in 1956. That was the year it opened and I was in Grade 6. Then in the following year, 1957, I went across to the High School when it started up in St Albans. To start with, there were only the two buildings with the big, long corridor.

Mr Barker was the principal in 1957, and he lived in the old house on the corner of Millawa and Main Road. The school was strict about proper dress. You had to be in uniform all the time. In winter you had a jumper and the grey blazer with the emblem on the pocket and the motto "Truth is Our Light". We used to wear berets in the winter and sun hats in the summer. We had to have our socks rolled down to the ankles. I used to wear long socks and pull them up over my knees,

and get pulled in for a strap nearly ever morning because I was naughty for not folding my socks down to the ankles. Kids don't know how good they have it these days.

Some of the high school students used to come from North Sunshine by bus - all the good-looking European boys when they first arrived.

We had sports groups named after different coloured flowers: there was Jacaranda, Wattle, Kurrajong, and Waratah. These were our sports teams, and each kid was put into a sports colour.

We had Doc Walsh as a teacher. All he ever talked about was football. The girls were all dodos about history and geography because he wanted to talk about the footy team. Needless to say, most of us girls failed these subjects.

Mr Reid took us for French. I never learnt any because I wagged too often. It was very handy living across the road from the school because you could sneak out and nobody could see you. Other girls would come and stay with me for the day, including the Dobrowolski girls. We used to enjoy making nice hot chippies. My mum and dad would be at work so they didn't know.

There's been a lot of change at the high school since my time there. In the late 'sixties they put the science wing on and then the assembly hall. Over the later years the three-storey library was put on. Originally down my side of the school there used to be a laneway between the school grounds and the homes on the western side. You used to be able to walk from Main Road along the laneway to Foxtton Street and across to my place. It also went down along Beaver Street as far as the end of the school ground. Eventually, the school ended up with that land.

I remember when the cyclic maintenance went through and all the renovations started. They gutted the joint, and while they were doing the inside of the buildings they'd put everything into the old gymnasium. It was all locked up, nobody could get in there, but the things that went missing and the Drama filing cabinet went missing and that had all their plays from years ago, and all the MAC concerts, all that went missing.

Fun and Games

It was about 1956 that TV came in, and we got a TV early on. We started with just the three rooms, then dad built the big kitchen cum lounge room. The TV was on top of the fridge to save space.

Saturday night was a big night, because everybody would go down the street to get the newspaper. We'd tie a piece of string to an old purse and hide behind a tree or something and put the purse on the footpath. As people were passing by they'd stop to pick it up and we'd pull it away and they'd realise they'd been had. We did some stupid things. They all thought it was a circus.

St Albans People

Everybody knew everybody. There were a lot of European people, and you might not have known everybody's name but you knew the people. They'd say "Hi, how are you today?" It was a big night out, walking to where Ungers is now to buy the paper. Donny Martello had that shop for a while. When I worked there, there were Italian twins who were running it, then the Herricks, who were from Seaford. Mr Herrick ended up going back into the navy and then went down with the Sydney. It was sad.

Elsa Blahut was running a shop with a European colleague who lived around the corner from me. I always called him "Sonny Boy" and he always called me "Sonny Girl".

I remember Mr and Mrs Knowles. Their first shop was originally in Alfrieda Street; that was a clothing shop. It was roughly past the site of the State Bank. Then going up there were paddocks



and another shop built later that was connected with the Footscray auction rooms. These guys would auction off furniture on the weekend. Up a bit further there was a big paddock with a tiny little skinny house. The Kassers used to live there. Annemaria Kasser was the woman's name. They were very flash looking people, very smartly dressed, very attractive looking people. They were very fair skinned people, almost like Austrians. The man, Albert, was a hairdresser, and he was always in a suit. Later, Eric Allan opened a bicycle shop in

the street. Once the Coles building went up, the Knowles had the shops next door in Main Road. They had the Adams Cake Shop there.

Tommy Straughen was a boy who had a disability; he was a character. The family lived in a big house in Walmer Avenue. Tommy really loved trains and he loved to play with his green flag and whistle. Mrs Straughen used to take him shopping to Footscray, which was the place many people went for an outing. One day Tommy put his head out the door of the old red rattler, waved his flag and blew his whistle, and the train headed off, because the driver thought the guardsman had given the all clear. Needless to say Tommy's mother had to take his flag and whistle away from him when he was on the station.

We've had a few famous or well known people come out of St Albans. We've had Broderick Smith, the singer. Muc the dentist is no dodo. Claude Calandra and Bela Ajayoglu are both doctors, and there have been others that have become university professors, such as Evelyn Hovenga, Sneja Gunew and Norbert Loeffler.

Dislike of Schooling



I was at the high school for three years but was probably really only there for one year, because I was wagging so often. I feel guilty about it now, but I hated school. I think the interest in being at school was knocked out of us after we transferred from the Catholic school at Maidstone. When we got here the closest Catholic school was in Sunshine. Funnily enough, the nun who signed us out at Maidstone was now in charge at Sunshine when we tried to transfer there, but we just couldn't get in because there was no room. There were a lot European migrants who were Catholics, including the Italians, and they were enrolling in the Catholic schools. It was a matter of timing - we should have registered much earlier, while we were still at Maidstone, but my parents didn't think about it then.

We tried to get into the Sacred Heart school that was opened and we couldn't get in. It took the sails out of us younger ones, me and my younger brother, but my older brother, Brian, was alright because he went straight to secondary school. My younger brother, Chris, was a demon. He eventually went to Sunshine Tech and was always in trouble, but he was in trouble in primary school anyway. Our setback was that Chris and I were both kept back a year when we went to the state school. I was put back into fifth grade and felt like a bit of a dodo.

St Albans Community Youth Club



I got involved with the Youth Club just after we arrived here, when I was about 12. The club building wasn't actually built then, but they had started the fundraising. It was a Police Boys Club then, which used to meet in the old shed up the back. The St Albans policeman said, "Let's get a club going for these boys because they've got to have something to do."

We had penny drives that used to start from corner of Collins Street and Main Road. They'd draw a line along the footpath close to the gutter along Main Road and then along Alfrieda Street to where Mrs Knowles' old shop was. People would come shopping on Saturday morning and put pennies on the line trying to fill it up all along the line.

We had bottle drives. The kids would get inside the back of a furniture truck, which had a long seat down either side.

We'd all be in there and we'd go around to all the houses collecting bottles and sell them to the bottle-os. That is how we raised the money for here.

Social Activities



I was talking to my sister-in-law the other day. When she first came here she came from West Footscray. She got involved here because of the swimming. She was a state champion swimmer down at Footscray, and met the St Albans people because Lorna Cameron would take girls swimming there.

My sister-in-law would come up on Wednesday night to St Albans for the dances. We'd have the girls on one side of the hall and the boys on the other. The first Wednesday of the month would be dancing, the following Wednesday it would be badminton or table tennis and that sort of stuff. She had her eye on my brother and another guy, the two best looking guys in the joint. She said, "I want to sit over there between those two," and goes over and does that. Well, all the other girls envied her because she had more guts than the rest of us. One night she won a raffle here, and the prize was a little live piglet. She had to borrow a dog collar to take the piglet home on the train. They didn't have a car then.

I had my 16th birthday here, which was a surprise party. Colin Thorpe came and escorted me to the party. Everyone sang "Sweet Sixteen".

We had social dances at the club, and we also did our Deb at the Youth Club, but that was through Keilor Council. Colin Thorpe also partnered me for that.

Sport Activities

We had gymnastics. We'd normally go by train as few people had cars. I remember Jack Cameron taking about all the football team in the back of his station wagon. There were no seatbelts then, it was just get in or stay behind. They'd all pile into the station wagon and he'd



take them to Sunshine to play football. We used to have this interclub sport activities with different youth clubs.



I remember being on the oval behind the Royal Melbourne Hospital and winning the high jump competition for the under-fifteens, because I was really good at high jumping back then. Back then I was pretty fit, but I can't jump over a fly now. I've still got that certificate.

Work History

After high school I worked at Coles for two years. That was in the days when cash registers didn't tell you how much change you had to give. There were big long counters and the people serving you were in the middle between two counters. Mrs McPherson, who lived in the third house up from the x-ray place, was one of the bosses there. She was a very smart lady.

When I was about 16, I worked at Ungers when it was a milk bar. It was mainly a milk bar and also had newspapers. Guys used to come in the morning on their way to the train and work. I used to heat tins of spaghetti in milkshake containers on the coffee machine by blowing steam through the spaghetti, and they'd have that for their breakfast. I was with Ungers for about two years.

After that I went into Smorgons Meatworks in Brooklyn, where I worked in the beef house. They used to have overhead chains going along from which the carcasses would be suspended. They'd kill the cattle up the other end and come along on chains where the guys would skin it and somebody else cut the head off, and so on. By the time it came to me at my desk near the weighbridge I'd write down the weight of the carcass.

I was there for 3 or 4 months and they asked me if I wanted to work for the office. They got me a little Vespa scooter, put a box on the back of it, and I would do all the banking, pick up all the shipping documents from the city, and go and pay wages out at Carlton where they were building units. It was interesting hooning around on a Vespa, but I wouldn't get on one now.

After that I did school cleaning. I worked at St Albans High part-time for four years then they redeployed me to Keilor Downs Secondary, and I was there for years. When Mr Kennet got in he got rid of all the cleaners and I started up my own little business. All the cleaning was going to be done by contractors, so it was either that or be without a job. I said to all the other girls who were cleaners up there: "Today is the last day to put in your letter of interest if you want to do it. Are you going to do it?" They said no. So I had a go at it and set myself up as a contractor. I ended up with five people working for me and ended up doing that for fifteen years. I finished up only two years ago, when the school got in other contractors.

Marriage

I married Ken Smith in 1972, and the wedding was at St Marks in Ascot Vale. Ken was from Maribyrnong but we stayed in St Albans after the marriage. We both worked for a living. Prior to the marriage I had been working in Smorgons, and when I had my son I was home for about 3 months and then was back at work, with a sitter in the street looking after the baby. I've worked all my life and after Ken and I married we both kept on working.



Surviving Serious Injury

I was working at the Maribyrnong Secondary College when I suffered third degree burns and nearly had my legs amputated. I was working there as a cleaner when it happened. Back then you had polish to put on the floors. It was the consistency of boot polish, which was soft but firm, though it was normally mopped onto the floors. I had been at the school only a couple of weeks and nobody had told me how to soften this stuff to put it on the floors, because they mopped it on. There was an incinerator to burn the papers and it was still warm. I thought this would be an easy way of melting a 20 litre drum of floor polish and get it nice and soft. I was holding the tin on the metal lid of the incinerator and the polish was starting to melt. Some guy came up behind me - this was 6:00 in the morning - and frightened the hell out of me. Not thinking, I jerked back, still holding the handle of the tin. The melted wax ran into the incinerator, ignited on the embers and went up just like petrol. I jerked back and the molten wax and the flames followed the tin and poured over my legs and feet. I was running around on fire with third degree burns and my flesh was burnt to the bone in a number of places.

At first they wanted to chop my leg off, but thank goodness it didn't come to that. I spent three months in intensive care at Footscray Hospital and can't remember too much of that, thankfully. There weren't any of these pressure suits to ease the pain or aid the healing. I had dozens and dozens of operations to put skin back onto the legs, because it was all burnt off. I was lucky to retain the legs. When I was first taken to the hospital one doctor wanted to amputate both legs. They told me afterwards that Dr Swan came in and said: "I think we should wait. Bill Wilson the plastic surgeon is back from America tomorrow. Let's clean her up tonight and get rid of all the dead flesh." They did that, and when Bill Wilson came in he said: "We'll have a bash at saving her legs. If needs be we can always amputate them later." Thank goodness they didn't have to.

Voluntary Work



These days I'm retired, but I'm too young for the pension and they reckon my injuries are not enough to get a disability pension.

I'm still connected as a volunteer with the Youth Club, or the Tin Shed as it is known these days. I'd like to do more if I could stand long enough. My old injuries still cause a lot of pain. It's mostly my feet, because a lot of flesh was burnt off the toes and bottom of my feet, so when I stand or walk all the weight is on the bones.

The skin on my feet breaks easily and I end up in hospital again for 4 weeks at a time because I pick up infections as soon as the skin breaks. You've got to put up with it and learn to live with it, because people are always worse off than yourself.

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Bev Smith, 2005.



Bev Toogood-Smith at the Tin Shed's 60th Anniversary, 2014.

Note: Beverley Smith nee Toogood passed away on 10 November 2017.

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