

LIFE and LIVING IN BELMONT

By Alma Jean Missen (nee Ruffin), 12th March 1930 – 12th July, 2015.

(Transcribed by Ian Henricus, November, 2017)

We, the Ruffin family, my father, Bert, mother Hazel, sister Gwen and I came to live in Belmont in the 1930's, just as Australia was recovering from the Great Depression [We think this story begins around 1936]. Of course, at the time my sister and I did not know that, as we were loved and always well cared for. We lived in the house at 15 Church Street in one of the oldest settled areas in the district, as mentioned in the History of South Barwon compiled by John Pescott in 1985 for the 150th anniversary of Victoria.

I have been remembering what it was like in the immediate vicinity when we first moved there. Ours was the first house on the east side of Church Street down from the Regent Street corner, and there was a big paddock from our place right along Regent Street to the Fire Brigade. Sometimes there were a couple of horses in the paddock. Some of the other houses in the area were opposite us to McDonald Street and a few others on our side with a number of empty blocks. The Herd family lived on the corner of Mt. Pleasant Road (Margaret Hird married their son Frank). They had an empty block behind their house in Church Street, where there were often animals and also turkeys particularly before Christmas.

There were some houses in Regent Street between Church and Thomson Streets, and the one on the corner of Church and Regent Streets had a small office on the side which was the Police Station. There was just one government school in Belmont. It is still there in Mt. Pleasant Road. It has a long history as it is No. 26. Belmont was a much smaller place than it is today. There were people living in the central area mainly bounded by Francis Street, Roslyn Road, Corio Street, High Street, to past Wimmera Street, Roslyn road to the east side of Scott Street, Mt. Pleasant Road and Riverview Terrace, as well as Kardinia Street. There were also some houses in Cambridge Street. That is a rough idea of the size of Belmont.

High Street was the main shopping area and also the main route for all traffic until the James Morrison Bridge was built. That meant that trucks carrying goods to the western district were very noisy as they made their way up the hill. Most of the shops fronted the street with a dwelling behind, so the families lived there. The majority of the shops were on the west side of the street, with Mr. Lester's grocery store about half way between Regent Street and Mt. Pleasant Road. Gwen and I often used to take our dolls' prams with Mum to help carry the groceries home and were often given some boiled lollies or broken biscuits. Later, another family took over that grocery business – the Rankins had arrived and there was never a dull moment as the groceries were procured. It was all so different in those days as the various needs were weighed up as you waited. There were various other businesses as you went up the hill (they changed hands at various times so are hard to remember) but there were bicycles and toys, fruit and vegies, hairdresser, dressmaker, chemist, butcher (for many years) where the second hand shop is now. Harry Hooper's grocery was on the corner.

On the other side of Regent Street [were] Maddern's Newsagency and the Post Office, a mixed business at one time owned by Lorraine's auntie and uncle, the Matthewsons, Bones wood yard,

where the Bendigo Bank is now and various other shops and free standing houses up to Roslyn Road. Coming down the east side was a garage with petrol pumps on the corner where the fruit shop is now; Mr. Syd Johnson ran an estate agency from a small office where the library garden is. I can remember Dad saying that blocks of land could be bought for ten pounds. Oh to have some money to spare! Further down the street was a saddlery. There were houses right down the rest of High Street to where the K-Mart is now and St Bernard's Church and School. Just above that was a poultry farm, then a Chinese market garden where the car park is now. Right on the corner of the Barwon Heads Road was a garage with another garage on the other side on the corner of Sommers Street. I can remember that hot cross buns were very special on Good Friday – Matthewsons used to take orders and Mr. Matthewson would deliver the buns early on Good Friday morning.

Peg Maddern, daughter of the newsagent, was a very keen tennis player and used to spend lots of time hitting a tennis ball against the brick wall facing Regent Street. That wall now has boards advertising houses for sale at Heane's Real Estate. There certainly wasn't very much traffic in Regent Street as Peg would be across the road hitting the ball as hard as she could. There were schools in Belmont – the State Primary School and the Catholic Primary School. Most children in the district attended either of these two schools and most lived within easy walking distance. However, there were a few who had long walks to and from school as they lived on farms on the outskirts. The Bush girls came from on a farm in Colac Road near the Protestant Orphanage, which became Glastonbury and is now the Junior School of Christian College.

When it was hot, sometimes we were given a penny each to go to the shop to buy an ice cream or ice block – they were real treats. We had an ice chest to keep the meat and butter cool but no fridge. There was also a Coolgardie safe outside which kept things surprisingly cool. Belmont had its own paper – the Times – which was delivered fortnightly. It was financed by advertisements. The Editor was Mr. Alex Bennett who lived in Thomson Street. I can remember often seeing him walk along Regent Street. He was always very straight and walked stiffly. I seem to remember that his wife died – I don't know if they had a family. The Barry's lived opposite us and Mrs. Barry's sister Dorrie came to live with them and shortly afterwards she became Mrs. Bennett and then the babies came in rather quick succession. You might have recently read about the death of Steve Bennett of Steve Bennett Hifi in Ryrie Street. He was the oldest of these children. There was a notice in the Addy from his brothers and sisters and I count there [were] eight of them in the family. Another big family in the district was the Buckley's. They lived at the top end of Church Street about opposite this church, and a baby seemed to arrive every year. I don't know how many there were in the family but Mrs. Buckley died at a fairly young age.

As teenagers, our lives mostly revolved around the church for entertainment and for me it was the Methodist Church. There was the tennis club and a lot of people (adults as well) took part in that. Quite often there were Socials (Gypsy Gay) and Saturday nights and we had a lot of fun in the big group of boys and girls. Groups from other Methodist Churches in Geelong also took part and we invited other places, such as Pakington Street in Geelong West and Ashby from Manifold Heights. We would travel there by tram and I remember all the group walking all the way home afterwards. Most young people didn't have cars. A girls group was begun – that was the forerunner of the Regent St Evening Fellowship, which continues today. When we began, it was the time when the minister's wife was automatically president of all women's groups. We got to the stage when the girls were becoming engaged and married. Each girl had a night in her home when she showed her glory box and a kitchen tea was given in the hall from all the church. A lot of weddings took place for girls who were members of the church and there were always a lot of female members of the congregation who wanted to have a look.

[Line lost in original] I think I was very lucky to have grown up in Belmont as I was given the opportunity to play the organ beginning in 1948. I haven't done it continuously but was never too far away from it. I also had the opportunity to accompany the children's choir which was formed for the Methodist Sunday Schools Choir Competition and conducted by Gwen Foster (Enterkin). Because we won our heats, we were in the final at the Melbourne Town Hall! Hard to imagine now. Some of the choir members are still members of our congregation – Pat and John Rankin and Lorraine and Cliff Rankin. Round the same time a group of children also took part in a production put on by the Tennis club, called Little Gypsy Gay. Pat's father, Mr. Carter Hirst, was the leader of it and I played the piano. The ladies made costumes for the cast and it was quite a success.

1951 – 52 were years almost impossible to imagine now. In October both the Barwon and Moorabool rivers were in flood. One of them – I'm not sure which year – was the highest ever remembered. Everything was under water – the lawn tennis courts, all the Common across Barwon Heads Road. The Chinese market garden and both sides of High Street almost to the tram lines. We went to work in the morning thinking that if it came any higher the trams would not be able to run. Luckily it had gone down a little by late in the afternoon. That happened before the West Barwon Dam was built. After the dam was built, the river did not come up as high again, although there have been an number of occasions when the Breakwater Road was closed and there was a lot of water on the Common. It is a long time since the Barwon Heads road was flooded.



Image: After the 1951 flood in the Barwon River at Belmont.

Source: Belmont Hostel Geelong, Vic. After Flood Barwon River 1951, Mr/Mrs Dzierlega, State Library of Victoria.

After the war when refugees were brought out from Eastern Europe, they were housed in Nissen huts along the Barwon Heads Road. They often travelled on the trams from Geelong and we found them very different. I think we had lived sheltered lives until then and had never heard people speaking different languages. It must have been very difficult for them. In 1951, a new family arrived in Belmont, Oliver will tell you about that.

We were married on the 11th April 1953, and our first Sunday back at church was the day the site for the new church (on the tennis courts) was dedicated. We had moved into our house at 23 Morris Street and neighbours at 21 were Lew, Isa, Barry and Noel Abley. Isa and Lew were wonderful neighbours for 54 years. Edgar and Edna Hoe were also around the corner in Kenneth Street. When we went to live there the streets had not been made and the sewerage was not connected. The roads were in a terrible state when it rained. The trams were still running at High Street at that time and the Highton bus route was begun. At first the buses ran along Roslyn Road and turned into Scott Street, then into Mt. Pleasant road and into Geelong. By this time, Belmont was developing and houses were being built towards Roberts Road and in streets off Mt. Pleasant Road towards the river. People walking from these areas often wore rubber boots to cope with the mud and would leave them on the veranda of a house near the bus stop and put on their clean shoes. On the way home they would go through the process in reverse. It wasn't very long (thank goodness) before the sewerage was connected and the roads and footpaths were made and then the buses began to run along Morris Street as they still do today.

I am not sure when it happened, but I can remember going outside the back door one afternoon to see a plume of black smoke in the east. We later found that it was the weatherboard St. Bernard's Church which had been burned. A new church replaced it and a new school and presbytery were also put on the block. That property was recently sold to Aldi for their supermarket.

I remember I hadn't been at Belmont School very long when we all took part in a special celebration which was held at the Eastern Oval (where the Geelong football team played before moving to Kardinia Park). I was in the item where we were dressed in Dutch costumes and danced. There were also maypole dances. Children from all over Geelong took part. Miss Kelly travelled around the Geelong schools to teach the dances. The school ground had a fence down its length with the boys strictly on one side and the girls on the other. Wattle trees were growing at the top end of the playground on the girls' side and we used to make cubby houses there and play in them. That end is now the Regent Street end but it was then the Fischer Street end. We used to go home for lunch as it was only a block away. Miss Bleasdale had the shop diagonally across from the school in Mt. Pleasant Road. Later it was Kayser's Chocolates and now the T-spoon Eatery. I enjoyed my time at Belmont Primary. In 2006, its 150th anniversary was held and it was good to go and meet up with some of the people there at the same time as me. There was no high school in Belmont or anywhere in Geelong, except Geelong High, so most went there or the newly established Matthew Flinders Girls High School or for boys Geelong Technical School. Some also went to Morongo or the Hermitage for girls and Geelong College or Geelong Grammar for boys. Geelong High was the only co-ed school at that time. We travelled to school by tram. The Belmont went as far up High Street as Wimmera Street and through Geelong to north Geelong. We got off the tram at Ryrie Street and could either catch an East Geelong or Eastern park tram or walk.

THE CHURCHES - The churches were all centrally located - same as they are today but all were of weatherboard construction. St. Bernard's Roman Catholic Church and school was at the corner of High and Regent Streets (Aldi is now there and the church was moved to Fyans Road with the School in Reynolds Road). Belmont Uniting (previously Methodist) in Regent Street is now the Geelong Masonic Centre. St. Stephen's Anglican built a new church and hall buildings on the same site as did the Baptist Church in Mt. Pleasant Road. The Presbyterian Church was here (Thomson Street) and we now have the brick building as our church with the hall extension; the former church is used for various purposes and the brick hall as the Day Kinder. The Church of Christ began meeting in the Shire of South Barwon building on the corner of Mt. Pleasant Road and Church Street in the early 1940's and later build the brick church in Roslyn Road. In 1943, some of their members heard me playing hymns on the piano at home as they walked past, and as their organist was unable to play for a time, they asked if I would play for their services for a time. I did it and found it a good experience. My grandfather had an organ and I had played that so it was too strange.



Image: St Stephens Belmont, c. 1925 Source: Museums Victoria.

Gwen and I went to Sunday School, and Mum and Dad went to church with us. I did the State Methodist exams for a few years. For a time we became involved at the South Geelong Methodist Church, as Dad was appointed Sunday Superintendent and a trustee. It was not the done thing to pay to travel on the tram so we walked the distance from home to the church after 3 times on a Sunday – church in the morning, home for lunch, back to Sunday School, back home for tea back to church again at night and home again afterwards. On the walks in the afternoon we often saw gliders taking off and landing on the Belmont Common. At that time there were no trees in the middle of the space but there were usually cows grazing there. There were dairy farms along the river between Barwon Bridge and Princess Bridge (the old one before it was burnt). The Fire Brigade was made up entirely of volunteers.

One of my first memories after moving to Church Street was the fire siren going in the middle of the night. Gwen and I were very frightened as we had never heard it before and not been warned it might go off. We heard it many times after that. It would keep wailing until one of the volunteers arrived to switch it off and start up the fire engine ready to go and fight the fire. Another memory of the fire brigade is that each year they used to practice for the competitions in the evening in Regent Street between Church and Thomson Streets with the hose and reel, and they would dash along the street, couple up the hose and fire at the target.

The milkman came around overnight in his horse and cart and left milk in the billy, which was left out. Money was often left out too and never stolen. The baker also came during the morning with his basket of loaves and rolls from which the ones Mum wanted were chosen. Tomkins Dairy was in Roslyn Road almost to Scott Street and if we were short of milk, Gwen and I would be sent on a walk up there with a billy and the required milk would be poured into it to be carried home. Later, when it became compulsory to pasteurise the milk, it was sold.



Image: Milkman, Geelong.

Source: Lost Geelong (Facebook public page) added June 6th 2016.

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- *Pictures sourced by Lana Capon, Geelong Historical Society.