

LORNA CAMERON



The marriage of Jack Cameron and Lorna Yates 1945

I came to St Albans in September 1949 with my husband, my two young sons and little else, particularly in the bank. At the time the place was only a village with about 900 people. The public facilities were St Albans Primary School, the Mechanics Institute (which was burnt down later), two churches, and the post office was in the newsagent's shop.

We had bought a block of land for about fifty pounds and put an unlined fibro-cement three-roomed bungalow on the back of it. Keilor Council was almost the only council that would allow this type of dwelling. The timber frame we obtained from dismantling old car packing cases and that was one of my jobs, helping to pull out all the old nails from the packing cases.

In the first week I came to St Albans, Dick and Myrtle Yeomans¹ asked me to join a fund-raising committee to help in raising money to obtain a kindergarten,² and so began my first dabble with the kinder. Alf Clarke³ was also one of the early fundraisers. This was slow work and it soon became clear that many facilities were to be needed and quickly. Eventually the St Albans Kindergarten Committee combined action with the Church of England and opened the first kindergarten in 1960 when it built the hall at what is now St Albans Anglican Church, and it is active to this day. It took ten years of fundraising before it was opened. Miss Oakley was the first director

¹ Richard William Yeomans' ancestry is traced to 1571 in Derbyshire, England. They migrated to Port Phillip Bay in 1852. Richard was born in Fitzroy in 1888 and died in 1954. Myrtle May Hills was born in Carlton in 1912.

² In 1948 the St Albans Free Kindergarten committee comprised Mesdames Baulch, Leigh, Priest, Minns and McMaster, and Messrs. Yeomans, Thomas, Lloyd, and Ferguson. It opened in 1960 as the Alfred Clark Memorial Kindergarten.

³ Alfred and Gertrude Clarke came to St Albans about 1919. He supported the severance movement in the 1930s, stood for council, became an area warden and a J.P. He died in August 1951 after he and Gertrude were struck by a hit-and-run car driver.

and she was followed by Mrs Arms.⁴

My original candidate for the kindergarten was Les, who by then was in secondary school, but my youngest was there for two years with wonderful Mrs Martha Arms. I served on the Kindergarten Committee for many years and learned a lot about the management of such institutions from Mrs Arms. She was a pioneer of kindergartens and other early intervention for children. I can remember running a threepenny sweep weekly among the bungalows of St Albans and getting to know many people. One Australian, later to own a big property, said one week, "I don't think I'll take one this week as I did not win last week." So, not everyone thought it as good an idea as I did. I was young and healthy then as I pushed a pram and a pusher around rough and muddy roads through rocks and thistles. Another German lady, I think it might have been Mrs Gross, spoke to me when I had a depressed moment in the Post Office waiting to pick up a letter. Twenty-five years later with a shy smile she told me, "You were the only woman who asked me to join the mother's club. Your children taught mine to swim."

The mothers' group of most of the local organisations was generally quite shy and often gave the impression that it was hard to get in. Most of these women had their confidence ruined during the depression when they were unable to go to school etc. because of poverty induced by unemployment that we did not know in Australia since WW2. Unemployment is rife enough now but at least it is possible to receive sustenance.

It took six weeks before the water was connected to our block and the small bungalow in which I was living with my husband and two children. It soon became apparent to me that there was not going to be enough room in school for the population of young families that moved in rapidly in large numbers from 1950. This spurred me to agitate mainly in the field of education but soon in welfare and recreation as well. My husband was interested in sport and eventually the St. Albans Community Youth Club became our busiest interest. Many initiatives were encouraged from there.

In the little township there were about six shops including an 'unofficial' Post Office run by Mr and Mrs Perrett⁵ in Main Road West. Every day people gathered there to collect their mail, the delivery extended to a very limited area – another St Albans first was once-a-day postal delivery – everywhere else it was twice a day. There were two general stores, a Mechanics Institute hall and library, one hairdresser and tobacconist, butcher, baker, greengrocer, one petrol pump at the store,

⁴ Martha Arms (1911-1981) became director of the kindergarten in 1961 and started the toy library in 1981.

⁵ John and Elizabeth Perrett came to St Albans in 1923 and took over the general store. Their son Eric wed Effie Hughes and they ran the store through to the 1950s.

four cars, three churches, one primary school, no doctors, no social workers, no chemist, and no banks.¹ The baker and milkman delivered their wares and spread the local news among their customers. There were deliveries of milk (into your own billy can), bread, meat, fruit and vegetables. The purveyors of these necessities were social workers and coordinators who spread the news of community activities. They could tell you when Mrs "X" had broken her leg and needed some help. One had an education as to how people lived just by observation as we gathered around the baker's cart. Mr Self² would drive around in his horse and cart and take orders for groceries.

All shops closed early, but most of the shops were the front room of the shopkeeper's residence, and they could usually be prevailed upon to serve out of hours. The only school comprised of three classrooms and served 100 pupils. The Presbyterian Church and the St Albans Church of England were small weather-board buildings near the railway line.

The Mechanics Institute, which housed a small library, was built in 1906 on the site of the Public Hall in East Esplanade (now privately owned). It had not been used much during World War Two, though pictures were held on Saturdays, and there were some efforts at running socials and bazaars. The trains ran hourly and there were very few cars. There were only about four miles of formed road in the area and water reticulation was inhibited. This was the main factor restraining development since the Great Depression of 1929. The area serviced by the State Electricity Commission was also restricted and lights in the street were turned off about midnight.

From 1949, schools were unbelievably crowded and there was a shortage of teachers but increasing numbers brought the opportunity to form some pressure groups. These brought their own difficulties that linger on when interested parties think they have solutions that would work but are never tried for reasons beyond their experience. ... There was a big shortage of teachers too. The entire education department had been devastated by the war with the male teachers going away to war and some never returning. Mature women were also scarce as teachers, because married women weren't allowed to be employed by the public service in a permanent capacity, so female teachers had to resign when they married and perhaps might have been employed in temporary positions. If you weren't on the permanent list you were disad-

vantaged with regard to appointments and promotions. In WW2 my brother Ron was already a junior teacher when he went into the army. When you turned eighteen you had to go in – you didn't have to go overseas but you had to join up and go do the training. You had to volunteer to go overseas.

1950s

The migration program had begun. St. Albans had a large majority of foreign-born people since 1950, at first only about ten different languages, but with each upheaval in foreign parts we took in more of the same, and also many new languages. Integration was all the go in Australia. The first lot of migrants were the 'Balts'. These appeared to be mainly single people and they did not come to St Albans. The next lot were young married couples with families who came mainly from displaced person camps in Europe. Half of them were now stateless; the others came from England and Holland mainly. There appeared to be no special provisions for them in any way. Many arrived with almost no baggage and were surprised at the inclemency of the Melbourne weather. Soon both mother and father were working in the factories, paying off land sold to them when they were in camps as far away as Cowra, Rushworth, Bandiana and Bonegilla. The real estate boys had really moved in. Soon the school was bulging, the trains were crowded, and shops began to develop and to stock "foreign food items" (more unsalted butter was sold than salted).



The Infant Welfare Department provided an Infant Welfare Sister to visit the Mechanic's Hall once a week. The local population was now predominantly European, and almost every one had children and many were expecting. The only school had three rooms and 103 children; many did not enrol until seven

years of age though it was compulsory from six, when many enrolled here with a younger sibling. Les's grade one class had 60 six-year-olds but only 23 seats: there was one other Australian-born child and 58 from European countries including Germany, the Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Yugoslavia.

The Mechanics Institute hall was used as a classroom and Les attended there. There was mud everywhere in the winter time and one of the councillors put down a load of briquette dust to make the ground passable, and after that all the kids were coming home with their white socks covered in black soot. The tap on the water tank was a bit high for the smaller children to drink from, so they could be seen occasionally scooping

¹ Perrett's General Store acted as agents for the Commonwealth Bank. Later, Robert Potts and Elsa Blahut were agents for the State Savings Bank.

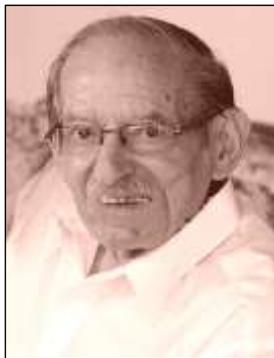
² The Self family were originally from Wiltshire, England, and migrated in 1857. Lewis Self came to St Albans in 1928 to manage the quarry. He later established Self Bros & Goddard. Refer to *Stories About St Albans*, 2012.

water from the muck and verdigris of the copper trough under the spigot. The rest of the students were bussed to schools in Albion, Yarraville, and I think even possibly Altona – wherever there was a spare classroom.

Oberon Avenue usually had fewer than four families with Australian relatives. People had to learn the customs and practices of a new country. Some migrant children started primary school without knowing it would be conducted in English. English migrants expected to enrol their children as three-year-olds and for lunch to be provided – it was a custom to feed children in wartime Britain. A Ukrainian neighbour of mine once said to me that the hardest thing about another culture is stuff like whether it is correct to say "goodbye" to the butcher after you have bought the meat or whether you should just go.

In early days a surveyor from Keilor Shire appeared in the street with his twelve-year-son dressed in the khaki uniform of the Melbourne Cadet Corp. Everyone thought they were the "polizia" who had come to question them, move them on, or otherwise harass them.

Some of my thoughts and stories about the immigrants coming to the town are included in the St Albans history document. Some of the more tragic stories you probably wouldn't want to repeat, but there are some more amusing ones. There was one about prospective migrants in a camp who had to write about why they wanted to go to this Canadian farm because they had written down they wanted to go to Canada. They had probably selected a range such as Canada, USA, South Africa, Australia. Colin had to write down what he knew about sheep, so afterwards he was asking questions of people and trying to learn what he could about sheep. He got in a queue with about 500 people and they were each being asked what they knew about it. His question turned out to be what dog would he use. He'd been studying about sheep and was asked a question about dogs. He was out – didn't go to Canada.



A sadder story would be about people like Harry Unger¹ who fled to England to escape racist oppression in Germany and ended up being imprisoned and shipped off to Australia for internment. He was one of the Dunera boys. They were already here when the first shots were

¹ Unger's milk bar and news agency was near the corner of Collins Street and Main Road East and "Unger's corner" became a popular meeting spot for youth before and after school. Who could resist their Blue Heaven milkshake?

fired in Port Phillip Bay at a ship leaving the harbour. When the Dunera people heard that war had been declared they tried to leave but they were imprisoned. They were mostly Jewish men trying to escape Hitler.

My husband and I became involved in the community youth club in the early fifties. There had been a Police Boys Club operating in St Albans in the 1930s,² which disbanded during the war years.

The boys' club that was held at the old Mechanics Institute and was led by Constable Shaw of a neighbouring district (I can't remember if it was Albion) lapsed when he was transferred. In 1950 or 1951 we had a visit from Clem Buckingham,³ a neighbour and acquaintance. He was a second-generation worker at the Sunshine Harvester works (one of the most progressive manufacturing plants in Australia) and worked in the metal shop. He said that Constable Shaw had noticed there were several migrant boys who were teenagers (who did not want to go to school) already working in such places as ICI and Sunshine Harvester, and who had nothing to do after work.

At this time there were several Police Boys Clubs and an intervention scheme where young constables were given duties of gym tutors, etc, and allowed use of a utility truck with tuppence a mile for petrol, and thought this would be good for St Albans if one could be stationed here. He needed a committee and Clem was asking Jack if he could support it. The other people who were recruited early on were Eddie and Esme Mundy; Esme was a champion swimmer and they had settled with their three children in View Street. Others included the Brotchies, the Sands, and Jim Sharp, who was making roads for Melbourne City Council.



Cliff McCulloch, a work mate of Jack's at Wiltshire Files, had recently arrived with his family in Vincent Avenue and he also took a very strong part. Emily McCulloch and I were enthusiastic in our support. Clem asked Jack to be president of the Youth Club, which is when he started to

² A Sports and Social Boys' Club existed in the 1930s and Geoffrey Sambell of the Anglican Church reformed a St Albans Boys' Club in 1938. He left in 1940 to become the curate at Malvern.

³ Clement Sydney Buckingham stood for Keilor Council in the Maribyrnong Riding in 1954 but was beaten by Harold Edward Easton.

learn about community activities. He became president of the Youth Club and became more interested in youth activities. It probably reflected on his days as a boarder at Scots College in Sydney and the experience of being a champion swimmer and good at gym.

Jack and Constable Miller with help of others set up a table tennis and gym class in a dilapidated change room on the Errington site where the elderly citizens now reign. In 1954, it was revived as the St Albans Police Youth Club and a boy's gymnasium class began in the small dressing shed made of galvanised iron that was approximately 30 feet by 15 feet, on Errington Reserve. (The HACC facility is now on this site.)

A small hut was erected opposite Self's supermarket in East Esplanade. This was the temporary office of the St Albans Police Station and First Constable Frank Miller was the first St Albans policeman.



I think that Sergeant McLeod of the Sunshine Police, to whom Frank was answerable, was the guiding instrument at this time. Frank was a keen gymnast and loved the sporting life. Youth work was part of a policeman's job in those days and many loved doing it because it was constructive work with much more appeal than chasing criminals around in the darkness. Soon a new committee was formed to raise money for the present structure. While boys and girls were taking part in gym, and swimming instruction at the Footscray Baths, athletics, etc, great effort was put into running such fund raising ventures as carnivals, street stalls, Melbourne (and other) Cup Sweeps, bottle drives, boxing contests, Holden raffles, in fact anything legal (or mostly legal). Two thousand pounds was raised in one year.



About 1954, youth club officials heard of an opportunity to buy a war surplus Nissen hut from the wharves. Just the frame and sheets of galvanised iron were being sold; it didn't come with the floor or end walls. Sergeant McLeod of the Sunshine Police negotiated a £1,000 loan from Sunshine Council to be paid back at £100 per year.¹ This enabled the tin shed to be purchased from Army Disposals for £600. It was dismantled, transported, and stored at the back of the Hounslows² near Errington Reserve.

We were an original member of the Victorian Association of Youth Clubs and Jack was one of the original executive members. Jack had never done anything like that before but he was quite capable of doing it. He knew a fair bit about sports, athletics and gymnasium because of his experience in the private school system and the air force. The police reps also were familiar with such organisation because they looked after the Newsboys, who were a club for news boys that was also part of the VAYC. I don't think it exists any more.

When we started there used to be a youth club in Footscray and another one in Maribyrnong near a speedway, where the elderly centre is now located. Sometimes when we had a dance we would ask one of these clubs to come and they would bring a busload of kids. We'd also have some annual events together. Bev Toogood³ still has a certificate where she won the high jump competition. We would have gone to Melbourne University or Scotch College or one of the other sports grounds to have the annual sports. We always did quite well.

Jack and I were active in raising money for the St Albans East Primary School. When I was trying to get the grounds for east school and the high school, a school inspector said St Albans would never get bigger, but discussions with Mr. Ernie Shepherd and the regional directors finally resulted in Sunshine Harvester releasing the land for a high school. It was a time when the population projections based on old figures were absolutely meaningless. Here I was being told that the figures did not support the argument for extra schools, whereas if the experts had just walked around the town they would have seen all these pregnant women, a very obvious indicator of schooling needs in a few years time.

¹ The club eventually paid off £600 and the council wiped off the rest, which was good support.

² Raymond and Mary Hounslow had a timber yard and furniture workshop at Collins Street and Main Road East intersection. He was the brother of Mrs Alice Errington.

³ Bev Toogood came to St Albans in 1954 and became a member of the youth club. Married Ken Smith in 1972. She continued her involvement as a volunteer and committee member until her death in November 2017. Her story is included in *St Albans Secondary College Celebrating 60 Years 1956-2016*.

One fund-raising venture the community initiated was to hold a debutante ball. They first held a bazaar and raised about \$500 to cover the expenses of holding the ball, such as the cost of the band and hire of the hall. As it turned out, the ball made a loss of \$300, and the committee decided to hold another ball to try and cover the loss. I said what about having another bazaar, because at least that made a profit. Sometimes things don't work out as you hope.



Dance classes at the Tin Shed © Bev Smith

In 1951, a football team of all the able-bodied under-sixteen youths was formed. The McCullochs were very active during this time; they ran a dance every Saturday night for many years. The other activities were basketball, table tennis, inter-club socials, teenage socials, balsa boat building (and sailing), girls gym, weight lifting, ballroom dancing, boys gym, body building, wrestling, drama. Later there was roller skating and rock dances. Side by side with these indoor pursuits there was softball, football, marching girls and baseball developed from the Youth Club, to say nothing of several romances.

Neighbourhood House



The Community Youth Club officially became a neighbourhood house in 1974 although we had operated without much funding up until Gough Whitlam's Australian Assistance Plan was put into action and we were able to obtain a salary for a coordinator for about 20 hours a week. We were still basically running as a youth club, but already were doing more than that and this was an era of change in many things.



The way that we started to change was to go for a grant through the advice of a teacher from the high school; she was also a social worker and interested in community work.¹ There was no money for equipment but there was a bit if you were a youth organisation

under an appropriate auspice, such as the VAYC, to get maybe a table tennis table or funding for a youth leadership course. She asked me what I thought of becoming the coordinator as there would have to be someone in charge. St Albans became one of the pioneers of the Play-group movement in about 1974. I believe this arose out of needs of young mothers caught in a new and developing area where the children were coming faster than the facilities for them. We were still struggling to obtain adequate kindergarten places.



My idea of the club at this stage was to provide a network of activities that created opportunities for the development of local folk. We thus become immersed in welfare and are drawn into people's lives so that there is hardly a dull moment. We have our

share of catastrophes and disasters and sometimes we laugh in case we should cry, but we have quite a few successes because we have 100 volunteers with a weekly clientele of about 2,000.

This includes a period where activities received no financial support and a period of recurrent funding from Community Services of Victoria. It was originally established to cater for needs of women, particularly those with young

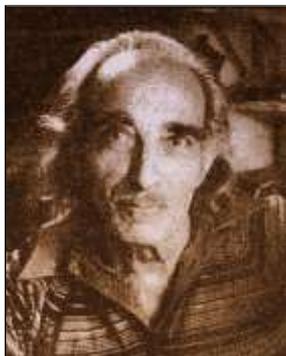
¹ Jan Uniacke, a youth worker graduate from the Institute of Social Welfare. School and community interaction was a concept being taken up by some schools that had 'certain problems'. At the time 80% of local people were of migrant origin and the high school had 1,100 pupils.

children who were socially, financially and geographically isolated. Since its inception the Community Youth Club has relied heavily on the enthusiasm of local volunteers who have a commitment to improving facilities for this corner of the "deprived west". The energy of such people who give so generously of their time continues to be the driving force behind all of the CYC's programmes.

Information about the community's needs is primarily gathered via the Club's focus on out-reach activities, which include regular interaction with local residents and workers, attendance at meetings and participation in events and generally adopting the policy of "thinking globally and acting locally." The Club is also on many mailing lists and attempts to keep up with all the latest reports and statistics commissioned for the area.

The 'local' community is loosely defined to include any person or group that identifies with St Albans as home, as a meeting place, a centre, or a recreational facility regardless of municipal, state, federal, health and community services, social security service boundaries, etc. The Club tends to focus on the needs of local people who are the most socially or economically disadvantaged.

The Club also recognises that effecting systemic change to alter basic inequalities is a global target and so seeks to encourage service users to achieve an optimal level of functioning within wider social and economic constraints, e.g. offering craft classes that teach skills of making low cost Christmas gifts does not have a major impact on increasing materialism, but does assist low income families to celebrate and to sometimes avoid being caught up in a credit cycle. Almost everyone who attends our club is of non-English-speaking background. There are 80,000 people in St Albans with twelve Aborigines. Owing to the diverse nature of the population, the Aborigines are often mistaken for southern Europeans.



Art was one of our new ventures. Evelyn Mullenger also had a lot to do with that as well as Pino Calati. Pino came to us from one of the local art exhibitions that had been instigated by Mr Joseph Francese who came from the St Albans Community

Centre. Joe's idea was that we should build a hall in St Albans that could be used as a gallery. In the end Pino Calati ran art classes from the Tin Shed for nearly two decades.¹

¹ Pino Calati (1916-1993) migrated from Italy in 1950 and worked as a carpenter. His artistic talents were in

This was also the time when basketball got another fillip when Roy was about 16. George Wilson was an American teacher at the High School and was staying at my place. He and Roy started a competition. George was a good basketballer. There were girls and boys teams who played competitions one after the other so that one lot could score for the others. This proved a good way of running it. We did it at South school. At one stage we were running it at Keilor Downs High School, the half court at St Albans School, the one at South. You had to provide umpires for them all, which is very hard. And that's another thing that is typical of St Albans.

When we were going to get a basketball stadium it was recommended by Lindsay Gaze and co. and us that we get – instead of a stadium like we ended up with – two courts in St Albans side by side or next to another one. That way you could put on a competition without having to employ a lot of people to mind the gates. It would make the administration easier to have two or three courts. They did that in Preston and Coburg. But at Keilor they put that white elephant out there – you can't get to it by public transport, you can't get the parents to take the kids because somebody has to supply the cars and the coach usually has to do everything. They built another white elephant in Sunshine. At Footscray Tech they have five courts but they are all over the place. It'll run itself if it's like Albert Park and you only need one or two people on the gate.

A junior committee headed by Russel Ridgeway supported by Jan Uniacke has opened up a "Tin Can Coffee Night" on Friday nights. Roy Cameron and Martin Simpson are leading the basketball team that is entered in the Footscray competition; Keilor Rotary Club donated funds to equip the team with uniforms and basketballs. Cliff Burns of Keilor Council and Jan Uniacke the youth worker with the High School have organised leadership training courses that have been attended by a number of Youth Club volunteers.

Swap Shop



The Swap Shop is a clothing and goods exchange program that has been offered by the club for many years since it started in the 1970s. Helen Vasjuta is involved in running that. The activity is about recycling and outreach, it is about listening and talking to people as much as it is

the naïve painting genre while his whimsical sculptures evoked comparisons with Salvador Dali.

about exchanging goods. The Club receives donations of clothing from many sources, and volunteers sort, store and display items. The people who know that there is a hidden agenda of welfare in our program have continued to supply us with second hand and new items which are passed on to where there is a need. Clothing and some other basic items of furnishing (crockery, etc) are redistributed either by direct request or referral for those in need or via a new system of displaying items which can be "self-helped" from the front of the clubrooms.

The key to the success of this program is the volunteers who happily sort the clothes and marvel at some of the many articles that are considered ready to be recycled. The communication of shopping for articles builds strong networks. We try to meet most needs that are presented to us and appeal to participants in our activities if we run short of particular garments. We do not sell any items although we are sometimes offered money. People gradually realise it is more stuff we require to recycle, not money. Occasionally articles are used directly to support our programs. There are many goods that can be recycled including shoes, clothing, furniture, wool, bedding, patterns, house hold goods, magazines and books. Inquiries for support are much greater whenever there is a financial decline and the unemployment level rises. We have had a regular free bread distribution as further assistance. Quite often we run out of tinned food donations.

Our "depression lunches" were another innovation ably led by Edna Cooper that provided a communal meal while demonstrating that frugal meals could be both appetising and nourishing and more than a substitute for fast food. Our main target for the recycled goods is locals straight from our clothes racks displayed at the front of the Tin Shed. However, we do answer appeals from disaster areas as far away as New Guinea, the Philippines, Poland, Chernobyl, Russia, Tasmania and even Geelong. When the Tweedle Hospital ran short of baby clothes at Footscray, we were able to respond.



We have appeals from other charities for prams and children's clothes. Usually mattresses are the first requirement for refugees. We also have constant enquiries about men's shoes and jeans. Extra large clothes are of course most scarce. We often get SOS calls particularly for children's

clothing but sometimes for furniture. Often the request for material assistance evolves into requests about housing, legal advice, financial counselling, transport for the disabled, and

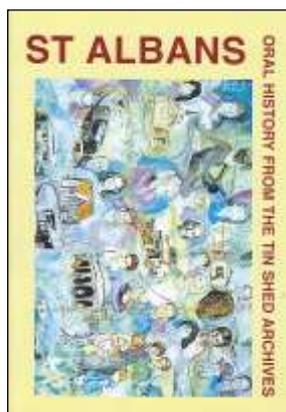
complaints about health treatment. We refer many of these enquiries to appropriate services and follow them up to see that there are no difficulties experienced in obtaining the required service. Through these services we have amassed much useful local information about the strengths and weaknesses and limitations of local institutions.

Our model volunteer for this activity is a person who has lots of knowledge, a reliable network of people and a person who is willing to welcome people into the club, its activities and St Albans. This service has been very effective in encouraging participation in other activities and programs, and clearly provides very real resources for the growing number of people economically disadvantaged in our community. Swap Shop was begun because of the generous donations of goods of various kinds contributed mainly by people who have participated in our activities. Helen Vasjuta is the one who keeps the operation running smoothly responding to needs as they arise and are communicated through demand and the needs of welfare workers in the area.

Welfare support forms quite a large part of our work and is probably the most demanding part of it. We find that many of our residents are isolated and usually busy about their own business and not very sensitive to the troubles of others when their own seem insurmountable. Helen is the boss of the swap shop, which is our recycling department, meanwhile delivering her gentle counselling and practical assistance.

Thank you to all our many donors for their helpfulness and generosity.

Talking History



At one stage migrant history must have come into vogue because in St Albans we started to get lots of requests for people to interview migrants, and one man offered to pay \$10 per interview. One year we raised \$3,000 for the club in this way. They had to do surveys on students for their uni courses.

For some of the students we'd pass the money onto them because we knew that they needed it. Someone came from Rusden State College and made a video of the area. Sneja Gunew, a local girl who made good in the academic world, also made a video out of some interviews.¹ She's now a professor of English in Canada.²

¹ *Reviewing The Migrant Story: Place – St Albans 3021*; Deakin Media Unit; 1981.

² Prof. Sneja Gunew, Professor of English and Women's Studies and Director of the Centre for Research

We started talking about forming an oral history group as a possible project back in 1983 and 1984 and had a team interested in investigating the origins of the local sport clubs, youth club, senior citizens centre and Maltese group. Then in September 1985 we held some discussions at the Club with Antonia Bruns about the proposed oral history project. We held several public discussions and open meetings and there were lots of ideas thrown about. I also went with Elfie, Marie, Ruth, and Rachel to discuss the project on radio 3CR.

I thought looking at the history over the last thirty-five years was the most important, i.e. since 1950, because it has been particularly interesting. What happened before then probably happened everywhere more or less, but the last thirty-five years happened in a different way here and was almost completely unrecorded. Many of the people who came in the fifties are still here; it is not necessary to confine ourselves to that period, but you do have to pinpoint it somewhere.

When I first came here people worked in factories like Massey Ferguson or ICI, but it's different now. A lot of talent came with migrants that wasn't used; they were putting nails in boxes instead of what they were trained for doing. One man was a fully trained orchestra leader but he has never conducted here and he still lives here; it must have been a blow to his confidence. Someone else had been the editor of the Berlin Times but over here he worked in the slaughter yards. Antonia mentioned the story of brain surgeons working on the trams. When Sunshine council advertised a position as librarian, one of the local applicants was a Hungarian man with a Doctor of Philosophy qualification.

Garry was more interested in the process of people talking to each other rather than just writing a book, which he thought could become a burden; he preferred publishing the stories through the local press.

I believe that everybody is interesting so probably you could have the group members interview each other. An exhibition of old photos at the Youth Club would be a good idea.

Around at the Club we have been talking about an oral history project that we have received a grant of \$700 from the Arts Council and we are discussing ways and means, making calendars, questionnaires, etc. It's always a bit sad but interesting to hear of the day-to-day struggles that people have been confronted with and surpassed in their life. Talking about the oral history project encourages people to tell their own stories.

The history project coincided with the centenary of the establishment of St Albans, but there was nobody still alive from that particular era. However there were other long-term residents

who would have their own stories of isolation, settlement, and the rapid population expansion that caught up with them as well as everyone else.

Some time before 1949 Keilor Council passed a by-law relaxing building regulations to allow part-houses to be built; some people called them substandard houses, but the obvious need for affordable housing was quite understandable, and it benefited the local population desperate for a home in the post-war housing crisis. It also was of significant advantage to the displaced European refugees and the foreign labour force recruited by the Australian government, these "New Australians" who started arriving after World War Two. This was the start of the suburbanisation stage of the area.

The first refugees came about 1949, the "reffos" who ended up in St Kilda. Next came "the Balts", as they were often referred to, from the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. They were unmarried and required the minimum of housing or other support and made a good workforce.

In about 1950, the foreign-speaking contingencies arrived locally. Many were met by land-sharks as they were coming off the boats, trying to sell them land. One reason why we have enclaves of ethnic groups is that people who had arrived on some boats bought land together. Some builders would go to Bonegilla and the other migrant hostels and offer to build bungalows to the migrants, some of whom thought they were getting a three-bedroom house. If the sales pitch was enticing enough and their interests coincided it could be that several families could agree to the purchase of land and building packages in the same street.

Afterwards came the migrants with families, about 1955, then the displaced and mixed-marriage type of refugee, such as the Russian-German or Polish-German couples, who would have found it emotionally strained to return to their parent countries.

In St Albans there were some pockets of nationality established through new estates opening up at regular intervals. For example, the Dutch and German families settling in Errington Road, the Poles in North Sunshine, the Ukrainians who bought up along Main Road West and also in Ardeer (where there ended up quite a strong contingent) and the others such as Greeks, Maltese, and Yugoslavs, who settled all over, more or less. And sometimes where the first few community venues were established shaped the recreational opportunities – some people report that on a Saturday night they might go to Ardeer to listen to a Hungarian band at the Ukrainian Church.

At the start it is difficult to know individuals, because the circumstances of their displacement appear similar, albeit from different regions. It's later when you get to know your

neighbours, or their children, that you recognise that some highly skilled people have arrived: like getting to know the school boy who tells you that his father was a professor of mathematics in Warsaw but is now working locally as a road labourer; or one of the new residents of Walmer Avenue who had been a member of parliament “back home” and was now working in a factory. Factory work, land ownership, and jobs for everybody was how one person phrased it. Anyone who could get a job worked, and “all migrant women”.

Then there is the oft-repeated tale that childcare meant being tied to the bed whilst the parents went out to work. No one knows the author of the original tale, whether it is genuine or just genuinely apocryphal, but it became part of local folklore.

Some of the migrants established businesses and became community leaders. George Eisner was a Czech who built some of the early bungalows. He also served on the school council and they even named a street after him. Eric Alan was a Polish immigrant who set up a bicycle and sports store and served for many years on Keilor Council, including a stint as the Mayor. George and John Cini worked hard at establishing the ‘Malta Star of the Sea’ organisation, and encouraged their community by writing plays and organising music and drama performances. Harry Unger’s newsagency and milk bar in Main Road East was very popular with the younger generation of all persuasions on their way to and from school. Who would not remember Dr Balabin, who spoke half a dozen of the eastern European languages?

Except for language, the scenario of post-war settlement in the area must have been similar for many people, whether Australian or European, whether it was internal or external migration: no sewerage, no power, no water, no made roads, no fences, no cooking appliances. People improvised with what was available. An open fire and a billycan in the back yard will boil water or cook your food, and this is what some people did do initially. The post-war hardship was not the exclusive province of the refugees; most people starting up in St Albans shared the experience. Some people lived in boxes that were used to import cars. There was a general shortage of timber, so people built a part-house with what they could and moved in: sacking inside the wall as a lining, orange boxes for furniture, kerosene tins provided showers. It was a proud child who could say they lived in a “deluxe” bungalow because their dad was a carpenter.

One lady, who lived in the Furlong Road area, had no problem in using packing cases for furniture. Her problem was that the nearest water was at the railway line; she used a primitive cart to transport water. One day a lady having a baby had to be transported – they went over a pothole in the

road and gave birth on the spot. In the winter the roads were ... mud, mud, and more mud.

The New World must have been quite perplexing for the many children who spoke absolutely no English at all. There are tales of children going home at lunch time on their first day, thinking the school day was already over. The De Vries family¹ lived opposite the primary school in St Albans, but each morning one of the young boys was bussed off to attend school in Deer Park. Albert had expected the “normal” ninety minutes which enabled children to go home for lunch, and instead spent the time on buying a threepenny icecream from the shop opposite the school in Ballarat Road and having a good time with his mates.

When he finally returned to class he received a shock when the principal called him out with the other kids and gave them all six cuts for coming back late. Albert also recalled exploring the surroundings in the early days: sliding down the Cypress trees near the Stevens’ homestead, picking mushrooms in the fields of what is now the St Albans High School, and going rabbiting in the wilds of the outlying area now known as Kealba.

1986 Drama

Some concerts in 1951 were held on the Errington Reserve, then little more than a rough paddock, usually with two lorries backed together for the stage. Other concerts were held in the Mechanic’s Institute which stood on the site of the present Public Hall.²

When the Tin Shed was erected by a local committee in 1955 the name was an accurate description. It literally was an unlined galvanised iron building on concrete stumps, with bland secondhand brick ends and the minimum number of doors. There were no windows, but it had a beautiful timber floor. Nevertheless, in the rapidly expanding population of the post WW2 migrant wave, it was looked upon by some of us as a place of opportunity for beginning or restoring activities that had largely been put on hold for scarcity of large public meeting places.

Drama groups used the two churches, the Mechanics Institute that stood on the present site of the Public Hall in East Esplanade, and the local Primary School in West Esplanade. Em and Cliff McCulloch were the representatives of the Youth Club who were the pioneers in shows generated from the Youth Club.

One of the first improvements was the building of the stage by local volunteers. Calisthenics’ audiences were actually put on this stage while participants performed on the main

¹ John and Kitty De Vries migrated from Holland in 1952 with children John, Albert and Alie. They helped form the Dutch social club in St Albans. Alie married Kevin Missen and is now a local historian.

² Refers to the former council building in East Esplanade, now in private ownership.

floor. Concerts and one-act plays were the go. Adults and youngsters entered into drama competitions. Oddly enough the building always had reasonable acoustics. There were experts in every field able to be called on for help who were often unable to use their qualifications in paid work in Australia for want of a little bit of paper.



Dot Baulch¹ was a driving force in the St Albans Little Theatre, which ran quite successfully from the early 1950s until TV came along, and probably for some time after. Dot produced many plays in the English tradition and other favourites. She was an accomplished actress and producer

in Britain and had come to St Albans as a war bride straight after World War Two. Her acting experience was a guide to many young local people eager to take the challenge of budding thespians. I count myself lucky to have been able to see these theatre productions. Names that come to mind include Neville Thurgood,² Janet O'Hare, Peter Hewitt, Marion Bentley, Brian Wale, Bev Lodge and Martin Los.

There were strong groups from the local Maltese community, the first one being led by George Attard. Yes, that was George who had worked as a ticket collector for many years at Spencer Street Railway Station. Lots of comedy sketches. There was Shakespeare in Maltese, even some folkloric shows, but the latter may have occurred a bit later with George Cini.³ Emanuel Zammit's dancers played a large part in some productions and many St Albans people will remember the joys and difficulties of putting

¹ Muriel Dorothy Wilmer wed Walter Trevor Baulch in 1945 at Eastbourne, England. Baulch had enlisted with the AIF and served overseas including time in England. Walter worked for Keilor Council and Dot was involved in the local theatre and the kindergarten committee.

² Neville and Mary Thurgood were English migrants who became involved in local theatre, with Neville as an actor and playwright for stage and television. Mary was part of St Albans Little Theatre, President of the Church of England Ladies' Guild, Secretary of the High School's Parents and Friends, helped in the tuck shop, and was District Commissioner for the cubs in the Sunshine area.

³ George Cini (1933-2014) migrated from Malta in 1954. He established the Malta Star of the Sea Drama Group and produce many plays. He was active with the Maltese Community Council, the St Albans Community Centre Cooperative, Community Health Centre, Malta Star of the Sea House, and the Maltese Pensioners group of St Albans.

the shows on. Acting was of a high standard. Perhaps the lollypop man at Kings Park gets some of his flair from these days.

Another highlight in drama was the St Albans Show put on in 1982, for which a large marquee was erected on Errington Reserve. The show combined the efforts of local people and especially seven schools with original music and humungous puppets. They told the tale of St Albans from the first Aboriginal inhabitation until 1975 and produced films, tapes, and records. Dot Soderiou was the ingénue who sang a song about "Goin' down to Ungers"⁴ memorably, while Edna Cooper and Alf Leckie were backed up by Mame MacDonald and Phil Sumner. Barry Jones⁴ even had a few lines but I forget what his promise for his electorate was. The event was produced by Neil Cameron (no relation to me) an actor and producer famous in Scotland for his outdoor, meaningful productions, and brought here by the Whitlam government. He chose our story from many others for his first effort here. He is at present [1986] in Darwin still doing the same kind of community education performances.



The St Albans Show was held in 1982

Another show produced at the Youth Club was an original version based on the dead heat of thirty horses in the Melbourne Cup, once again with full audience participation. Frank Hardy was in our audience for that. Meanwhile, the Essendon Policewomen were formed from this group and performed here several times. We were invited to the show again when it showed at the Moonee Valley Racecourse Clubrooms. (And we went.)

For several years we had a Grand Final Footy Breakfast of bacon and eggs, usually a week after the local grand finals. Billy Picken and

⁴ Local member of parliament: member for Melbourne 1972-1977 and member for Lalor 1977-1998. Famous for being a champion on Bob and Dolly Dyer's "Pick a Box" television quiz in the 1960s.

Ted Whitten¹ were two of the visiting superstars, always supported by local entertainers such as Kevin Hewitt.

In the heady days of the expansion of the Arts we had several visits from the Women Workers' Theatre through our connection with Mary Owen.² They enacted scenes from the floor of the Club depicting the roles of factory workers.

About thirty years ago we hosted young Broderick Smith in a revue directed by Lorenz Schwab, where the program was produced on an old smudgy Fordigraph. There could have been some dissension about the name of the show. It was called "Huh". Regulars like Colin Thorpe sang black face, or was it the Everly brothers with Brian Toogood and John Heale? Probably both! Elaine Cameron soliloquised, two cigarettes anonymously performed "John and Marsha" and Broderick Smith could not face the audience until his mother and father had pretended to go home. Next year, it was "Son of Huh".

I was away in USA when the members produced "The St Albans Festival" which ran for a week involving lots of local performers. A film society showed good films that year, too.

It is appropriate that I should mention our audience participation over the years. We have had many theatre excursions, probably most to the Powderkeg Players who are still going strong under the new name of Sunshine Community Theatre. We have attended many performances at the Pram Factory, Worker's Theatre, Grant, Playbox, M.T.C., Footscray Drama with Jimmy Howard, Kee Leetonen, Peter Green, The Incinerator, The Ink Factory, and Footscray Community Arts.

We had breakfast with Googie Withers, supper with Max Gillies, and dined with Terry Norris. We visited with Mary Hardy at the State Film Centre and have supported as many local school performances as possible.

The types of entertainment produced by the club have usually depended on the talent available, and the willingness to work for us but be paid by someone else, like Neil Cameron,³ Mary Owen, and many others.

We have attempted to give a start to groups or to assist them if it was practicable. We

are aware of the shortcomings of our building, but feel it is ideal for allowing a group time to get themselves together before moving on and becoming self sufficient.



Lorna Cameron in Tin Shed office

Playgroups

St Albans was one of the pioneers of the Playgroup movement in about 1974. I believe this arose out of the needs of young mothers who were caught in a new and developing area where the children were coming faster than the facilities for them. We were still struggling to obtain adequate kindergarten places.

As a child of 50 years ago, the roads provided a reasonably safe pitch where neighbourhood kids could play cricket or whatever game was in season. They included exotic versions of skipping and marbles and other versions of games such as "Charley all over the water" and "Prisoner's Base" handed on by our Anglo-Saxon ancestors in the main.

There were deliveries of milk, bread, meat, fruit and vegetable and the purveyors of these necessities were social workers and coordinators who spread the news of community activities. They could tell you when Mrs X had broken her leg and needed help. One had an education as to how other people lived just by observation as we gathered around the baker's cart.

Shopping is now much more impersonal, and these factors are small parts that contribute to the loneliness and isolation that can occur in a big city. Families are usually smaller these days than in the past, and one way to give your child the advantage of mixing with other people in the community is to go along to a local playgroup and contribute to the program that other parents are organising to stimulate the children. There is a bonus for mothers in the throes of the fascinating task of bringing up their children in observing the handling of other children. Ideas that are picked up in such a way can offer a simple solution where the "wood is obscuring the trees".

Both Sunshine and Keilor Councils could offer guidance and help in finding a convenient playgroup. They could also help in establishing a new group. Most kindergartens and infant welfare classes would also give information on

¹ Known as "Mr Football", he played for Footscray. He married Valda Rae Scoble of St Albans.

² Mary Owen is a Women's Liberationist and the founding coordinator of The Working Women's Centre before it merged with the ACTU. She became Deputy Chancellor of La Trobe University in 1989.

³ Neil Cameron was an actor, theatre director and producer from Scotland who was known for his community theatre productions, and brought here by the Whitlam government. In 1982 he helped produce the "St Albans Show" for the Tin Shed, which was funded by the Australia Council.

these matters. The Youth Club ran formal playgroups each Wednesday and Thursday morning from 10 a.m. to 12 noon. The program on Wednesday was a general one that provided as far as possible to give local mothers and their children a time to:

- relax together outside their own home;
- find other people to talk to;
- find other playmates for their children;
- renew friendships.

We believe that everyone, including the children, needs the company of other people and interesting things to do and to talk about.

The playgroup activities were run by mothers – other relatives as well, if they could come too. Extra people who were interested in children but who have none of their own to bring along were of special value to us. The things that were organised for the children were designed to widen their experience of things around them and to get them used to working happily in a group of other children and adults. These experiences are particularly important if there is no chance of the child going to kindergarten before he starts school. Organised activities will usually take up about half of the time for those ready to participate in them.

The children have milk and fruit – no sweets, no chips, no biscuits, no cheezels, no cordial, no fast food, etc, are allowed at Play group. Mothers are wise to supply children with a smock or apron to protect clothes as such doings as finger-painting can be messy. All children from very young babies to school age are welcome. Each adult stays with the child at the Youth Club, but not necessarily staying close by her own child all the time.

Each mother takes a “work card” of her choice when she arrives, thus she does her share in ensuring the smooth running of the group and the safety of all the children. Jobs are displayed on the ‘Work Sheet’ as well. You can swap your job to suit your circumstances - don’t feel obliged to make coffee or to cut fruit if your child is still clinging to you before he becomes used to the new situation - your turn at that can come later ... instead you can keep an eye on the activity your child selects until he settles in.



Kerrie Taylor, Marilyn Medenbach, Elfie Haggblom,
Jenny Carroll, Angela Jolic, Edna Cooper, Lorna
Cameron, 1988

St Albans can be a difficult place for transport. We can help if this is your problem. Ring us or call in to the clubrooms any day when you are shopping and we will organise a lift for you. We have a minibus and no notice is required. Tuesday's program is orientated around musical activities.

The playgroup is part of the program of St Albans Community Youth Club, a registered charity with the Health Commission of Victoria. The Health Department has ruled that everyone using the clubrooms pays a family membership. To make it easy, the local committee has set this fee at one dollar per family per year. After you have paid this membership, your family is entitled to participate in any relevant activity either separately or together.

There are no bosses in the playgroup. Some girls are more experienced and therefore take a lot of responsibility. Our aim is to assist everyone to be experienced and confident, so please take the opportunity to make suggestions, to voice complaints and to demand explanations.

We do not run raffles, party plans or other fund-raising ventures in our playgroups. We are part of the Youth Club and we rely on money contributed by taxpayers and ratepayers which comes to us from Government grants to cover our expenses of administration, telephone, electricity, maintenance, etc.

We ask you to pay twenty cents per family for the cost of providing milk. We ask you that you bring a piece of fruit for each child who comes with you. If you have none at home, it can be bought by a messenger as the clubrooms are close to shops. We try to make it easy for you to participate. We welcome your ideas.

Many playgroup mothers also join in other activities at other times, such as arts and crafts, basketball, aerobics, discussion groups, painting, yoga, etc. Children are always welcome at these activities. The club is open every day from 9 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. where you can drop in with or without your youngsters for a cup of tea or coffee or a chat.

Clarifying Playgroup

I have been asked to clarify my concerns about the current (1988) running of Playgroup because a few people have noticed that I have been bitterly disappointed about its commercialisation. The main change that I would like to see is a return to a commitment to the values of running the Playgroup with an emphasis on women as the primary target of this part of the Tin Shed's overall program.

I believe that the credibility of the Youth Club's third objective, "To develop community, social, educational, recreational, cultural and survival skills to develop confidence and awareness" requires us to focus all of our activities in this way. I believe that this is not

something that can happen easily or quickly but that we can aspire to set feet on the road.

Throughout the Youth Club's history, we have been lucky to have the opportunity to meet people referred to us by community workers including social workers, maternal and child health nurses and others who believe that our objectives are important. We have benefited from our central location and also our reputation as a local service that offers a non-threatening and welcoming environment.

I see the Tin Shed building, the equipment and materials as the physical resources we have to aim towards achieving the above objective. I see the women who come to Playgroup as the more valuable resource for this community's present and future.

Basically we have these mothers for one year. Most of them are new each year. Some come back after two or three years. Therefore we must make sure that we are welcoming and encouraging of their attendance right from their first day. This means that a lot of listening has to be done for each woman. The strategy of asking old members to welcome new ones does not work as effectively as it did in the past. These days the "old" ones are so happy to see each other and have many other commitments and interests as they usually have older children.

For some time now I have found myself alone in supervising the goings on in the main hall and there have been a number of complaints that I do not care to relay. I have found it very hard to be listening to a story that is important to a woman when out of the corner of my eye I can see equipment being moved dangerously.

There are a number of alternatives for those people who prefer to go to playgroups where the women socialise separately from their children or where the activities are regimented for the kids. I do not think that we should duplicate other programs.

I believe that the situation of loneliness is worse today for some. I see no point in us herding women into play with other toys when they have plenty at home, unless they are included in the social aspect.

To improve the present situation, we need about five people in the gym for safety and to make people comfortable by enjoying their company. This gives them greater confidence to express their interests and ask questions about the program or seek information and feel they have a connection to the community and someone they can confide in; not necessarily telling the story of their life, but something that may be worrying or puzzling them at the time.

I think we have a responsibility to know about things people need to know, or at least have some idea about where to get accurate information. I am appalled by the myths that exist

and the difficulty of getting through the bureaucracy even when we have to do it

An analysis of participation figures for the Play Group over the 1990s shows that attendance has fluctuated from about 150 per quarter in late 1992, before rising to reach a peak for the decade of 360 in mid 1994. In early 1996 it was again around 150 for the first quarter, then rising to an average of about 220 per quarter until late 1997. In mid 1998 the attendance was about 195 for the quarter.

Support for Women

Another thing we used to do in the good old days was support women's theatre. We'd visit as a group or invite them to the club. One troupe had all members aged over 60 and one of the tap dancers was an 80 year old. They were all show biz people and called themselves the Variety Singers.

There was a women's studies course being run at the Footscray senior tech and there was the Footscray Women's Learning Centre which we used to visit. Gwen Wesson¹ was an English teacher from Latrobe University and used to run some classes at the Centre. She wrote a book called "Brian's Wife, Jenny's Mum" about women never having their own identity. She was a very capable woman with five children and built her own home of mud brick. Quite a lassie was Gwen. She had quite a lot to do with the Footscray Women's Learning Centre and was often a tutor there. She knew about the isolation and alienation of migrant women and the myth that they all had big supportive families.

We invited her to come to the Youth Club and she probably helped us start the English as a second language classes. We didn't actually start that for St Albans as it was started in the state schools, but we started the adult ESL classes that are in St Albans now; it grew out of our activities. We used to get one teacher for 10 students. The teacher got paid but we would have 10 volunteers helping with those classes. We started that in about 1978 with a regular core of 24 persons attending and an average of eighteen on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Evelyn was very interested and involved in that.²

At one stage Sue Lockwood was running an English class for adults on Monday evenings. Anice Harrowfield was also very good as a teacher. Jack Ginifer³ offered the use of his premises in Alfrieda Street because the Tin Shed

¹ Lecturer in Urban Education, La Trobe University, was on the national executive of the YWCA.

² Refer to chapter by Ev Mullenger in this publication.

³ John Joseph "Jack" Ginifer (1927-1982) was the local MP from 1976 until 1982. He was a member of the John Cain government that was elected in 1982 and was made Minister for Consumer Affairs and Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, but died a few months later with terminal cancer.

where the classes were held at the youth club was too noisy. They moved to Ginifer's office in 1979. Later the classes became fully funded and moved to better premises across the road in Alfreda Street. They were officially opened by Gerry Hand when he was the Minister for Immigration.



Lorna Cameron, Edna Cooper, Joan Kirner



My friend Marj Oke¹ was a teacher who went to University High and was always one for women's rights. She must have got her teacher qualifications after Mum, but not that much after because she was born in 1911. When she married she had to leave her job, scarce as teachers were, and had to go and work in a jam factory. That was because married women were not allowed to be employed by the public service. That was the way it was when I left work. I was married in 1945 and I couldn't go back to my job. I might have been taken on as a temporary worker but I couldn't do my work as a supervisor – you couldn't just go home and come back a week later doing something else like it is expected today.

Mrs Dubarry (the principal at St Albans East Primary School) fought a long time too, because whenever there was a promotion going the odds were very heavily favoured for the males. A headmaster's job was often given to a man even though a woman may have had more experience or qualifications. The woman usually had to do a couple of extra years so that she could compete for the job. I can't see that women are any better off today. So many of them have to go off to work and bring up the family as well, don't they? Before, the woman had a fairly heavy role in the family because the man was working really long hours and brought home the money and that was his job. Men had a different kind of influence on the family.

All these things effected what you did at the Youth Club, whether one way was better or not, especially in what's expected of you.

Discussion Group

The discussion group started in 1971 and has been going for 30 years. This was an open group, not just for women, but I believe it was particularly relevant for women in that era because more of them were in that 'housebound' syndrome and looking for something better. That's where other activities that were being explored at the club provided multiple opportunities to reach out to women. The developments fit in beautifully with the concept of life-long learning. As Ev Mullenger discovered, there were a number of migrant women who wanted to improve their English and started to lobby for that once they joined the club. Their children were becoming more independent so mothers had more leisure time that they wanted to use creatively. For some, a better command of the English language and understanding of Australian society was desirable. The playgroup was also part of that because though it was about the children it was also about outreach to isolated women. Many playgroup mothers

¹ Marjorie Elizabeth Oke was a teacher, community worker and political activist; founding member of Union of Australian Women, formed a branch of the Aboriginal Advancement League, founding member of Network for Older Women. Awarded OAM in 1991.

joined in other activities at other times, such as yoga, aerobics, arts and crafts and the discussion group. As these programs drew in new participants and volunteers it was a natural progression to extend that to developing networks and interests and becoming involved in the community.

The object of the discussion group sessions has always been to inform people of the current issues of society and to help participants to gain confidence to speak up when necessary, discuss the ways to handle public problems, such as the disappearance of the local library bus, and to ask questions about the issues that affect their lives and those of their children.

Together the group shares the differences of youth and age, sometimes shocking each other with our realities. Guest speakers offer fresh ideas and stories to stimulate further discussion. We want our words and ideas to give us enough power to make necessary changes in those places where it is possible and to gain confidence to speak up on the issues that make effect out lives. There are also plenty of laughs. We became a centre for alternative theatre, culture, art and debate as our community matured. In the 1970s we became a centre for women's rights and action as feminism liberated our thinking. Everyone was talking about Germaine Greer and *The Female Eunuch* which encouraged women to reject submissive roles in society.

The 1970s was all also about change in local and national concerns and encouraged political action. Eighteen-year-olds were now able to vote and the election of Gough Whitlam and the A.L.P. brought a revived optimism in political processes. It meant that groups like the Western Region Council for Social Development engaged with local groups. Suddenly St Albans people had a say in what was happening. Neighbourhood action was generated around the issues of health, education, child care, poverty, and feminism. Regional agitation developed local consciousness, identity, and social planning: education action, deprived west seminars, regional commission, and even funding from Canberra. The best thing about it all was that people were working together whether they were first or third-generation St Albanites. It was really exciting.

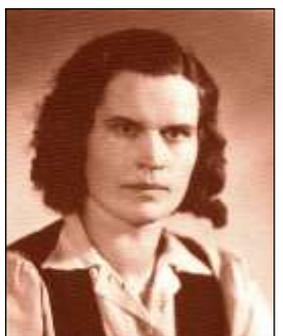
The discussion group tapped into this optimism. It brought in many experienced women (and men) to talk about social concerns and consider local improvements. Over the years there have been discussions led by a broad range of speakers from professional and civic life such as ambulance drivers, international nurses, priests, local authors, rabid football supporters, firemen, people struggling with addiction, herbologists, podiatrists, teachers, academics, people from councils and universities, business leaders, aspiring and sitting politician, reps from

government services, and many others. There are too many names to list even though they are listed in our AGM reports in thanks for their enlightenment.

There have been several speakers that I remember because of their particular local and regional links.



A local resident, Joan Carstairs of the St Albans History Society spoke about her local history research; she was instrumental in publishing the book about the history of St Albans for the railway station's centenary in 1988 and helped us get heritage listing for our building.¹



Elsa Blahut spoke nostalgically of migrating from the Somers Migrant Camp to St Albans in the early 1950s and the experience of working at Potts' Store². She established her own haberdashery and also became an agent for the

State Savings Bank, so she escaped the stereotype of migrant women as mere factory fodder. It brought back memories of the times when we had youth and strength.



Elfie Häggblom was at the Youth Club before the Whitlam era. There were a number of volunteers working on the holiday program and she became one of them. Elfie came to St Albans in the 1950s but left the area in her early adult years. She then came back in the 1970s with her three kids

¹ Joan Carstairs wrote a brief history of the club: "St Albans Community Youth Club, The Founding Years 1954-1956." The submission to the National Buildings Council was in August 1993. The Building Council determined that the building was of local importance and recommended that Sunshine Council protect the building under its planning scheme. Brimbank council has been supportive with maintenance and renovations.

² Elsa Blahut was a Czechoslovakian refugee at the Somers Migrant Camp and started working at the general store known as Pott's Emporium. Robert Potts moved to St Albans in 1953 and set up his store in Main Road East. Elsa became his assistant in the business.

under five. She was very good with crafts and has continued as a tutor and leader in these classes ever since. She's always been with us, even when she was working elsewhere she would be on the committee or volunteer during the holidays. She was on the CYC management committee in various executive positions during the '80s and '90s and even had a spell as President for a few years.

Norma Valenzuela who was an industrial nurse spoke of her experiences in Chile up until the time when Allende came into power. Maria spoke of her visit back to Free Czechoslovakia after 40 years working hard in Australia, but she came back home. Janet Pine a lecturer in women's studies spoke of the transition of women through education. Gwen Wesson from Latrobe University was another inspirational speaker. She had quite a lot to do with the Footscray Women's Learning Centre and was often a tutor there. She knew about the isolation and alienation of migrant women and the myth that they all had big supportive families. During this time Edna Cooper¹ and I were operating as the joint coordinators of the club. After Edna retired due to health problems, Elfie and I became the joint coordinators, and that arrangement would have started about 2001. In 1987 with the advent of the Western Institute in St Albans we encouraged our members to apply for the access courses as an entry to tertiary education. I attended with several others and my particular challenge was to document the variety of problems being experienced with local health services.

Several of the discussion group women enrolled in the Ethnic Studies course which sparked off discussions about women in the workforce, the problem that Aborigines have with multi-culturalism, and the effect of gender, financial position and ethnicity in our lives. And so it continued.

In 2002 the Discussion Group celebrated its thirtieth year of weekly meetings. I believe that milestone reflects and confirms the value of helping people gain confidence to speak up, to ask questions, and ultimately to take action about the issues that affect their lives.

Churchgoing

Growing up, I found church-going was a popular family activity because apart from its religious significance it was an opportunity to catch up with friends and neighbours about recent news or arrange harvests and other events.

I was born into a Christian family and though born in Gippsland was baptised at the St Michael's Church of England in Windsor, probably because my grandmother would have been there. My mother told us bible stories and we probably

went to the church in Poowong; there was a Methodist, Presbyterian, and Church of England (they call it Anglican now). Later, when church services were held at the nearby school, the Vicar would have dinner with us on the farm. The Vicar came from Loch about six miles away. One time when the Bishop of Korumburra came to dinner at our place it was our first sight of someone wearing gaiters; I know my father was quite amused and impressed by the gaiters.

I suppose that the local church would have had christenings and likely as not my sister would have been christened there as she would have been born in Korumburra or Loch. Mrs Henning used to play the organ. Another girl, Isabelle Rules, who was five years older than I, was quite a good pianist. We looked forward to going to church, the local ones being at Loch and Poowong. They would also hold functions to raise funds and sometimes we would attend for that reason.

When I came to town I went to church or Sunday school at Chelsea with my cousins. When I was at the YWCA there was an Anglican church opposite and we would often go in there in groups. The Salvation Army would come around the streets and you would join in their meeting; it was part of the entertainment. I did that a lot when I was at the YWCA.

I always went to church wherever I lived. When we went to Preston I went to the All Saints Church on the corner of High Street and Murray Road. The Minister used to come to our house to give my mother Holy Communion. I did not go to church very often when I was at the telephone exchange because I had to work a lot of shift work. I always liked the music in church. I went a lot to St Paul's when I was in the city. I went to St Paul's café for lunch and went to St Paul's bookshop to look for books. I always kept in touch with the churches. They used to provide a fair bit of entertainment and I enjoyed listening to the choir. I think I even saw a rock opera at St Paul's once. I even went to church in Tocumwal where my husband was based before he was discharged. When I came to St Albans I went to the Anglican Church and we changed our church a couple of times here – not because we didn't like it but because Jack was teaching swimming on Sunday mornings. When the Anglicans had their service in the morning we went to the other one; we even went to the Church of Christ when there used to be one here.

I didn't get confirmed in church until I was an adult; in our church you don't get confirmed as young as you do in others. Because I had moved around I hadn't actually been confirmed and did that just after my husband died. My husband's mother used to be Presbyterian and we went for Easter to their church. After my husband died I went back to the Anglican Church. I always liked the ordered service of the Anglican Church and

¹ Edna's story is included in *St Albans Oral History from the Tin Shed Archives*, 2004.

the fact there was a regular thing to do for each service. It's a beautiful book the Anglican book.

When we were kids we always went to Sunday school wherever it was and my kids always went to Sunday school. Once when Garry was only about three and was going to a new one I told him they would sing songs and tell a story. When he came home he said "they didn't tell no stories and sang us a whole lot of songs what I didn't know".

After my husband died we went regularly to the Anglican Church. At that time they were raising funds for a new building. I'd also been there a good bit when the kids went to kindergarten. Roy would have been the first to go to kinder and he was there for only five minutes the first year then went to school; this would have been about 1963 when he was six. Jean would have been at the kinder all the time.



Mrs Arms asked me to be President of the Mother's Club and that was while Roy was there for his brief sojourn. I stayed until Jean left about four years later. While I was there the kindergarten and the Anglican Church came together a lot more.

Before that they just hired the premises and didn't have much to do with each other.

The Anglicans who used the kindergarten started that. We used to have church in the kindergarten after the church burnt down one Christmas day. Mrs Haynes¹ had promised to go to church and the place burnt down, so she said it was a sign. For years we did a fund raising there, had deb sets, and did a lot of social work from the church as well as the youth club. At this stage I don't think the youth club was open during the day, only at night time. They did a few things between the both of them. They had plays: Blythe Spirit was one put on by a very healthy St Albans Little Theatre. Dot Baulch was the director. There were quite a few good actors in St Albans. Some of them were English migrants, some Dutch, and others were Maltese. The Maltese had their own theatre group and they did things in the youth club. George Attard was very involved in that, later George Cini. George Cini did more with the Labor Party than the Youth Club, I think. St Albans was expanding like mad while all this was going on.

¹ Keith and Bess Haynes lived in Main Road East near the high school and worked at the school as caretakers. They supported youth activities and Keith with cricket and football. They held many a pie night when Keith was looking after the Community Youth Club's footy team.

At the church we did a lot of fundraising things like games nights, car trials. There were four or five people who were really good workers. Gordon Cooper was a real live wire, and so was Bernice Goddard, in the year after Jack died. We used to have some of the games nights at Goddard's where they had a big house and a tennis court, so we had room to do things. Some of them were held at the church. We used to sell lamingtons and Bernice Goddard was one of the chief lamington makers. Alf had made some wide trays like bread frames. They would buy slabs of Adams cakes, cut them into squares, dip them in chocolate and coconut, and lay them out to dry on these trays. They made thousands of them. Everybody used to take about 20 dozen for delivery. Bernice was a good manager and made sure the process ran smoothly. I didn't have time to make them, so my part was selling and delivering. Whenever you delivered to a place they normally took more than before. We delivered probably fortnightly. One family had thirteen kids and they gave them lamingtons for their birthday.

I was on the Vestry, which is their management committee. I was busy on the kindergarten too. The kindergarten was the first thing I was raising money for, right from the beginning when Les would have been eligible to go. So, I was always interested in it, but it was ten years before it was built.

The first woman priest we had in the church came some time after my husband died, maybe in 1983. She was probably one of the first female priests in Australia, a very capable woman. The first priest after Jack's death was keen on music. He brought in a young man who had been in the navy and had had a very bad accident. He was about twenty-five and could put the organ together beautifully, tune it perfectly. The Anglican Church is always said to be a broad church. You can use a lot of different colours. The priest wears a different coloured vestment for each season: purple, gold, green and red. Red for martyrs and people who have been killed. A green one for Trinity, gold or white for Christmas or feasts. For one of the Easter fairs they have quite a few processions around the church or around the block. The Easter one you start from darkness and keep lighting the place until Easter day at 12 o'clock. This day nobody had brought the matches to light the candles so it was panic all round. Paul Fox was a very good alter boy; his father was Les Fox. Lovelock was a nice guy – his wife was good at making the vestments – and he had the most beautiful voice but it was untrained. Just to hear him singing in church was worthwhile.

In 1983 I used to go to a little Anglican church in Keilor Downs for a while, perhaps a couple of years. They had a female priest and they wanted people to go to help start up the church. It suited me because I was going to church by myself and became friendly with the

Minister. She was one of the first women to be ordained in Perth. Later I came back to the St Albans Church because that Minister had moved elsewhere.

When I came back to the local church there were people who didn't recognise me. I spoke with one of the women and said "You've got a twinkle in your eye; I want to know if you come from the country." She said her name was Trish and she came from Drouin and I said I came from Poowong. It turns out that at school she was the best friend of Nancy Halliday, a neighbour and old school friend before I went to MacRob. Trish wanted to know why I hadn't gone to the Church of England school in Sale like the other students. I haven't actually met Nancy Halliday again but this woman still sees her.

Reflections



2004 is my fiftieth year of volunteering with the Youth Club. I began when the St. Albans population was about 900 people and it was a village. There were three shops and four cars. Right from the first I found St Albans to be a fascinating and very friendly place. New

people were arriving daily. We were all mostly young with children ... and jobs were plentiful. The club has served many functions over those years. At first it was only for boys but soon expanded to include girls. At different times it has been a child minding centre and we offered temporary accommodation for classes from St Albans High School. The physical arrival of the "Tin Shed" enabled the club to sponsor many early community activities including table tennis, 50/50 dances and scouts. The club has provided a focus for my children and me after their father's untimely death in 1962.

In 1975 I decided to donate all my spare time to the Youth Club. Gough Whitlam had been sacked and I resigned from paid work to do something more fulfilling. I have always described St Albans as a trip around the world. I have been privileged to meet a great variety of wonderful people from many walks of life and from many varied parts of the world during a volatile century. I have been inspired and motivated to hear the thousands of stories from the women, men and children I have been associated with through the club.

I have come to the conclusion that one can never really put oneself in another's shoes absolutely. Everyday I have learned something and sometimes I have "unlearned" things as well. This Annual Report details our efforts over the last twelve months and demonstrates the

importance and enjoyment of local action and participation.

All the activities are made as accessible as our helpers, our premises and our facilities permit. Emphasis is placed on responding to the needs of the local community perceived as not being met otherwise.

General policy is to include the rest of the family and also to provide opportunity to develop some ability to give and receive mutual help and to get insight into being a part of the management of the activity participated in. Hence there is much interaction between the groups and this blurs the edges of categories of activity.

When the Youth Club was established we used to have a management committee and an activities committee. We used to have young people's committees as well, but it usually falls back on the same people, so you have to give more than you're supposed to give. I've found that amongst some migrants there isn't a word for volunteer and people from overseas thought that if they did anything they ought to be paid for it, and they thought that you were getting paid by the government.

But Australia is not like that; Australia was used to having volunteers. If you were going to do anything you had to do it yourself a lot. People would stand for the council and expect to have to take part in things, just ordinary people, not people who never had anything or couldn't read or write or were from a dysfunctional family. Everybody was basically poor.

But if you had a cricket club you had to run it for yourself, you didn't want the council to run it for you. You didn't really ask the council to make the ground or anything. You did it yourself. That was the way of life that had come in Australia. It seemed to be like that to me anyway. Say English people expected their kids to be given their lunch at school because they were in wartime. You could send your child to school when they were aged three, so you had a kindergarten type of school because of the war. I don't think it would have been before.

It was very noticeable that people didn't think they could decide to do something themselves. They thought the way it happened was the government told you to do it or did it for you. When you went to another club you were supposed to raise money for everybody but everybody had to share. Well, of course you were raising money for everybody but it's a bit funny when there's only two of you going and you've got to raise the money all the time.

There was not much money to be got from the parents. I'm not sure what idea they had of school. I'm not saying parents expected to have a school and not to have to get any books, but they would know there should be at the school books, clocks, equipment. But there were really a lot of

people who hadn't been to school. Some of the women would bring the kids to school but wouldn't come to any fund-raising activities because the women stayed home more. Of course they did.

The system was so different for the simple things of life. They would say "I want my child to have a good education," but they didn't know how to make that come true apart from sending the child to school clean and fed. They thought that was their part in it, rather than expected to go on the school committee and having something to say with what you are going to do, even in applying for extra rooms or going and moaning about the buses. They just accepted everything without question.



Edna Cooper and Lorna Cameron, 2010

The Poms complained like mad and I suspect other migrants did too, but you couldn't understand them. Unfortunately, the Poms sometimes sounded very ungrateful, but they always sounded as if they knew the right way to do it, and some of them did. Some of them were really terrific. It's hard to understand even partly the way it was. People who came here thought because they all had jobs that it had always been prosperous, that Australians had always had plenty to eat and so on. Of course many of them hadn't. It's hard to explain that backdrop.

The St Albans Community Youth Club has survived fifty years while most other community, social and recreational organisations that were created during the 1950s are long gone. Many have become fee-paying adult learning centres, some are gyms and sports facilities, others have given way to childcare centres but most have simply disappeared. St Albans Community Youth Club has prospered.

I believe there are several key strategies that are fundamental to why St Albans CYC is still here and still matters. These reasons include:

1. We have been innovative and flexible. We started as a youth centre concentrating on sports, music and dance because our young community required these activities. We adjusted and became a centre for alternatives: theatre, culture, art and discussion groups as our

community matured. In the 1970s we became a centre for women's rights and action as feminism liberated our thinking. In the 1980s we were one of the first to welcome people from the Philippines while others struggled with the Asian migration. We continue to change and respond to the most crucial and contemporary issues. And we do this because we are close to the people of this community.

2. We have encouraged participation. From the outset our philosophy has been to work alongside people. We have not been a traditional service provider, instead we have asked people to join us in the struggle to maintain a healthy community life. We have understood that it is the journey not the destination that makes life enjoyable and purposeful. We want our members to feel proud of their strengths and comfortable with their weaknesses. Many people come to us feeling that they are victims but find an inner strength. We encourage people to join in and then to perhaps move on to paid employment or to take their ventures to other communities.

3. We have always been political and independent. We recognised the issues of the day and we fought for solutions. We introduced child care when there was none (we started the first playgroup in Victoria); we provided learning opportunities when most doors were closed (we were the first neighbourhood house in Victoria). We lobbied for changes to schools when they were falling apart from years of neglect. Members of St Albans CYC like Colin Thorpe¹ and others can fairly be said to have changed the face of Victoria's education system. We have also fought thousands of "little battles" to make sure people got work, overcame prejudice, got material help, had their electricity or their water reconnected, or simply got a fair go! In that we exposed the nature of Government, showed the possibility of change and gave people hope that they could influence major decisions in the society.

4. We talk and we listen! I believe that every one of our activities is an excuse to get people to talk to each other and talk to our experienced volunteers, and talk and listen to specialists. The committee and coordinators have also tried to listen to the whispers that really tell the story of the community. We have listened to stories of distress about war and dislocation, loneliness, rejection and health. We have listened with joy at reunions, sports and academic success, personal stories of achievement and triumph. We have always offered a sympathetic and private ear when no

¹ Colin migrated from England in 1954 and joined the club as a participant and committee member. In the '60s and '70s he formed discussion groups where young people debated ideas with business leaders. He led the St Albans Education Action group, became an executive member of the State School Parents Association, and was the Director of the Western Region Education Centre in the 1970s.

one else was there to listen, and we have found our direction by listening to the deep ideas that are behind many of the sad and joyful stories.

As I finish my first 50 years of participation in this, my community, I know our centre will continue to create a welcoming and wise opportunity for people regardless of creed or colour; age or youth, infirmity or gift, gender or sexuality. It will do that by being principled but flexible, by being always vigilant and supportive to all and by being ready to change in the interest of the community to which we belong. We will always listen for little ideas and help make them big. Maybe one day we might begin a football team again or a Saturday night dance and maybe some of the projects that look big now to us will fade, but I know we will be true to our past if we ensure that all our work is dedicated to helping people "move on" physically, academically, and emotionally.

Like others who have joined the Tin Shed, I am grateful for the chance to have met so many people, to have heard their stories and to have participated in building our own history. Lives have changed because we knew what we were doing and because we have implemented our strategies.



Lorna Cameron in costume as La Bafana

Lorna Cameron died peacefully at her home on the 4th November 2014 at the age of 94 years.

