

YALLOURN HIGH SCHOOL SEX SCANDAL

by **Reg Penkethman** YHS 1951

Now that I've got your attention – have you ever had that sinking feeling? Yes; me too. My latest stomach lurch was brought about by an oh-so-friendly reminder from our hard-working Secretary that my oft-promised contribution about early Newborough days had never quite seen the light of day. In desperation (and no little guilt), I dusted off a “draft” and tarted it up a tad. Better late than never, they say : things can only improve.

Picture the scene: a grey rainy 1950 mid-September day at Port Melbourne. Included among the somewhat bewildered passengers disembarking from the migrant ship “New Australia” were my dear mum (Gladys) and dad (Reg), sister (Norma) and yours truly, a highly curious ten (but nearly eleven) year old.

My earliest memory of life in Australia, apart from the dreary day, was going through the arrival formalities, cavernous shed, tables, probably bored officials. My dad, a smoker in those days (it was 1950 after all) was, consistent with the understood practice, bringing in the allowable limit of ciggies for two adults, himself and my mum, a non-smoker. The Customs bloke confirmed the allowance for the two of them and then, because I'm always helpful, I called out in my loudest ten year old voice “But mum you don't smoke.” I think the Customs bloke gave my dad a look that said something along the lines of “What a dill of a kid! (Re dill comment, see previous reference to 1950) - and waved us on.

Thoroughly chastened, I boarded a grey SEC bus with the rest of the family and some other disembarking passengers who were also bound for the Valley (although none of this meant anything to me at the time). We drove through the rain, mist and Melbourne suburbia – ah how familiar it was all to become – on through Dandenong and into the green Gippsland countryside.

We were taken straight to a hostel, in Morwell I think it was, given a meal and then back on board the bus to be dropped off at our respective houses.



*Norma & Reg outside 7 Delburn
St, Newborough - 1951*

We then drove to East Newborough (in those very early days there was a few core streets in East Newborough plus “old” Newborough – North Newborough started shortly afterwards – nowadays of course it is all Newborough – good thing too). I think there was some surprise when we arrived on a dull, wet and muddy September afternoon to see a raw construction area with some recently completed and occupied houses, some very new and unoccupied houses (filled by our bus load), no fences, mud roads and a dunny (I'd never heard the word before) in a woodshed out the back of each house. None of this bothered me at all, although I suspect it mattered to some of the adults. I can also recall that a kind family, formerly my mum's pen friends, the Magnussens from Morwell, had placed flowers and prepared afternoon tea in our Delburn Street house. I can also recall there was some concern when a lady from the estate welcoming committee fell through the floor boards on our uncompleted front porch. Fortunately she wasn't injured and, equally fortunately, there was one of the SEC “heavies” present at the time; consequently the porch was completed the next day. I believe now (although at the time I wouldn't have cared anyway) that some folk on the buses had thought they were bound for the then comparatively picture post red brick model town of Yallourn! “Life's full of surprises.”

The countryside between Newborough and Yallourn was, in those early days, covered in bush. There was a tent camp near the creek opposite Newborough Road, along with a few basic

timber and iron buildings and a small camp shop. East Newborough shops came later. Milk was initially delivered to a billy can. My mum and dad bought an ice chest; the Kelvinator came later. Anglican Church services were held in a marquee on Old Sale Road under the dedicated stewardship of Deaconess James. The Rev. Clarke from England took over, later followed by the energetic and popular Rev. Bill Frawley, who subsequently came to prominence as the Chaplain at Pentridge Prison. (My father, who was a carpenter, was a member of the volunteer labour force that built St. Aidan's Church some time later). There was a construction compound located at the bottom of our street and a nissan-type hut/hall was erected nearby which, over the years, was used for all sorts of functions, including films, concerts, dances and so on. (See later reference to my "Great Raveen" disaster.) Film watching was tricky because the multi-purpose hall had a level floor. Additionally, there was also a "picture bus" that used to trundle through the streets of the estate and on to Yallourn Theatre (where there were no level floor issues) and then back to the 'Borough' after the show.

Fences, road construction, additional drainage and sewerage works plus other community structures including a health centre (which I visited early in the piece for treatment to a spectacular cut on my knee after becoming semi impaled on one of the swings – it's too complicated to go into details) were all completed in the following couple of years or so. A Scout troop was soon established and we used to meet at a small hall which, from memory, was on Torres Track. I can recall camping for a couple of freezing nights somewhere near Narracan Falls. I also became interested in fishing and used to ride my bike with a couple of other kids to the gorgeous clear waters of the Tanjil – all pre the introduction of the now ubiquitous European carp! Talking of bikes reminds me of a nasty fall off my bike while lairising down Rutherglen Road – but I digress.



Reg (dad), Norma & Reg having an ice cream at Camp Shop 1951

The estate quickly developed a strong sense of community. In those early days there were no wide-bodied aircraft providing large-scale intercontinental travel. No, it was entirely conceivable that migrants leaving the UK (and elsewhere of course) would never see other family members again. I believe this reality, plus the fact that most people were literally starting a new life, encouraged the making of deep and lasting friendships to compensate at least in part for the absence of extended family networks which, in those days, were such a strong part of life back "home." Remember also, in those days, that families in the UK were much more inclined to live and remain comparatively close to parents and other family members.

The estate houses were similar in design and appearance. This fact, plus the broad common knowledge of pay and salary conditions at the SEC also, I suspect, contributed to a broad egalitarianism in the community. There were few social tensions. All these comments are offered with the wisdom (if any) of hindsight. I had absolutely no idea at the time.

One of the first acquisitions my family made following arrival in Australia was a piano (not a new one of course – I suspect that no one we knew had the money for such a luxury). My father was an accomplished pianist and I can recall our house becoming a venue for other musicians, such as an Irish tenor (later, together with his musical family, to become well known in the district), and a Polish violinist. My parents also formed a close-knit group of friends who, in turn, hosted some memorable parties. (I remember returning home from a dance several years later with my great friend Bob Nash to such a party. Following a quick visit (by me at least) to the keg we wowed everyone with our version of "On Moonlight Bay").

SCHOOL DAYS

My time at YHS started late September 1950 and finished end school year 1954. It was at first a tough gig. Fresh from being a top dog in Primary School in the Greater Manchester area and then as still a ten year old into a High School class not only half way around the world but also approaching the end of first year took some adjustment. The couple of months until end of 1950 school year became an interregnum before formally starting high school in 1951. Interestingly (to me anyway) I have since come to realize that even though I stayed “down” in order to start in 1951 I think I was maybe still the youngest kid in the whole year group. Somehow or other, perhaps due to the difference in northern/southern hemisphere school commencement dates, I think I missed some schooling. (No wonder I didn't like maths).



YHS 1954 Form 4B Boys - from L-R: Back - David Baldock, John Jell, Derek Harris, Bob Nash, Reg Penkethman, Peter Butcher
Front: Garry Grant, Frank Jewell, John Quinlivan



Reg & Bob Nash - 1954
Taken at YHS (still good mates)

I should also mention that my sister, Norma, also started at Yallourn High at the same time. While attending YHS, Norma met Alan Marr who, I think at the time was Head Prefect. Norma and Alan were married at St John's, Yallourn in June 1956. (They had a guard of honour of local Newborough girl guides). Not all readers who knew Alan may be aware that in December 1977, he suffered a very serious accident on a building re-development site in Canberra. Alan never fully recovered. He died in Merimbula in August 1990. Norma now lives near her daughter a few kilometres from Caloundra. I also noticed a recent obituary notice in the Newsletter to Alan's sister, Mavis. Through Alan I knew Mavis and other members of the Marr family – although contacts were few over recent years. Mavis died in Canberra where she had lived for a long time.

After coming to terms with a new school environment, I eventually started to quite like High School. Class mates and other kids were pretty much like kids anywhere, I expect, and ditto the teachers, although perhaps one or two of them thought we migrant kids were from Mars (bear in mind that in the early 1950's it's unlikely that many of the teachers would have travelled much). I participated in most sports with great enthusiasm and limited ability. I formed the view (and I was not alone) that Yallourn High School girls were the best-looking girls anywhere. *[The Editor agrees with this!!]* I went to school socials and danced like a block of wood. In those early days, Newborough kids had to find a way to get home from Yallourn – walking over Coach Road hill was not unknown. Dancing skills improved following an interesting visit to a dance class in Morwell. During all this time I would chat away nineteen to the dozen to girls I regarded as friends or “my mates”. When it came to girls I really “liked” however, I had barely a word to say – pathetic really.

High school years had a certain rhythm. Cricket and swimming early in the year; football in the winter (we migrant kids mostly played soccer football); athletics in the autumn (I can remember my mum asking why I had soil in the turn ups of my new school long pants – the answer, of course, was because I had been practising long jumping at lunch time.) Winter time would also see the senior boys splitting firewood and junior boys carrying the wood to boxes outside the class rooms. (I doubt you'd ever see anything like that these days). High school retention figures were much lower then and, against my mum's wishes, I left YHS at the end of Form 4 (Dec 1954 – I had recently turned 15). (In the 1970's, I completed several Higher School Certificate subjects and then slogged my way part time through University, but that's another story). I find it sad these days to hear about violence and bullying in so many of our schools. I can only vaguely remember witnessing one incident the whole time I was there. In fact, particularly in

Form 4, the boys all seemed either friendly acquaintances or really good friends.

Before moving on from school days I'll recount just one more little personal disaster. I have previously mentioned that my father was an accomplished pianist. Well, dad agreed to lead a three piece combo to play at an end of '54 school dance to be held at the school. The combo was to consist of my dad on piano, class mate Derek Harris on piano accordion and a drummer (an edgy group obviously). To cut straight to the chase, I turned out to be the drummer. It did not go well. A really great friend of mine, if not feeling too well, will occasionally lift his spirits by telephoning to remind me of this and other shortcomings.



AFTER SCHOOL

The next two years or so saw employment as a Junior Clerk at the ever present SEC. Highlights there included a stint at the Power Station timekeeping office deep in the bowels of the power station complex. It was always possible to leave the office to chase up attendance record "time sheets" and I always found the old boiler houses and the long, sparkling-clean turbine room interesting. I marvelled that the turbines bore a brand stamp "Metropolitan Vickers Manchester" meaning that those mighty machines and myself had travelled an almost identical journey to that very turbine room (I guess you had to be there). Lunch times were usually spent playing table tennis and snooker at West Camp.

Weekends were spent playing sport. At one stage my well-known mate, Bob Nash, and I were so fit that we played underage Australian football on Saturday mornings and senior Latrobe Valley soccer in the afternoons. Newborough won the Under 17 football premiership. We may also have won at least a heat of the unofficial world champion filthy song singing competition on the way home. We later had a pie night. Nashie was awarded the "Best Defender" trophy. I was awarded the "Most Rugged Player" trophy. I believe I received this award because I had a tendency to run into people. Given that we won the premiership, you may appreciate that we did have some really good players. The late John Somerville, who later played for Essendon, is but one who springs to mind.

While working at the SEC, Bob and I were studying Accountancy at night school. After a while, it became clear that Accountancy was not for us so I must confess that, occasionally, instead of attending Thursday night Accountancy classes at the Tech, we would finish work, go to soccer training, scrounge some food and later head off to the "Valley Dance" at Traralgon. We also greatly enjoyed the dances at Shaw's in Moe and sometimes the RSL in Morwell - suits and ties in those days. Plenty of opportunities for social disasters such as slipping on polished floors - generally great swing music just ahead of guitar based rock n'roll.

Round about 1956, one of my more idiotic moments occurred at the hall in East Newborough where I attended a performance of a hypnotist by the name (I think it was) of the Mighty Raveen. Like a fool I volunteered to be one of his "subjects" and for days after that people would point at me, cover their mouths and whisper to their companion/s. My father heard about

it and I don't think he was impressed. I still think it was all a bit unfair.

In March 1956 Bob, who had figured in so many of these stories, and so many not told, left to join the Navy. In November that year I too moved to Melbourne in search of adventure (and I found it!) In October 1957, within a year of my leaving the Valley, my parents moved from East Newborough to Mornington. Consequently from that time onwards at weekends or days off I went home to Mornington, rather than to the Valley, and a whole new chapter began.

There are many names (and many more stories) that probably could and should be mentioned in this piece. Some of you will know who you are. Thanks for the memories. Any errors are purely innocent!

PS : Proud Yallourn, the model town, has gone. The vigour and optimism that was an integral part of life in the Newborough estates seems also to have gone. It's not too late though to wander around and reflect. While you may not hear the lilt of an Irish tenor, or the passionate violin sound of a Polish Mazurka, you just might, particularly if a soft summer breeze is blowing in the right direction, hear the voices of two lusty teenagers still sailing along – on Moonlight Bay.