

Tim Harvey YHS 1971 - *Yallourn Memories - Water*

I was born at the end of the 1950's and lived in Yallourn until our family moved to Newborough at the end of 1975. For people who lived all their lives in Yallourn, this is such a brief and late period, it's hardly worth worrying about. And looking back now, I think they would have a point. Being young, there were many things about Yallourn I realise I never knew anything about. My lack of curiosity amazes and appals me now....and though I had a number of good friends, they and their families often moved on and became a series of faces rather than the friends for life that I have often read about in the pages of this newsletter. So, rather than simply catalogue names which would mean little to most people, I tried to think of some sort of a unifying theme to string together some of my memories in the hope that others might identify with them too.

The first theme I thought of was water. This might sound curious, but it will, I hope, make more sense as we go along.

First, there was drinking water. It was impressed on me at an early age during one of several visits to the reservoir that in Yallourn we had the cleanest drinking water in Australia, possibly the world. That may not have been strictly correct, but I imagined we were famous for that ("You think **this** water is clean, sir, but you should go to Australia and see Yallourn!"). I have since walked on the floor of the dam when it has been drained and seen the quaint little bridge over the submerged river course. The bottom is mud. The river is muddy. It's **all** mud. So, considering the source was Lake Narracan and the Latrobe River, the fact that we had such clean water probably borders on the miraculous. We should have been famous for that, at least.

Second, the briquette water heaters. The SEC may've made electricity, but hot water in Yallourn was supplied by briquettes, which got shovelled into our water heater in the laundry. There were none of your fancy temperature-limiting thermostats in those days. It was quite normal, when the fire was overfed, for the in-roof tank to boil and spit hot water out a vent pipe in the eaves onto the ground below. The idea of tens of gallons of boiling water belching violently over my head is not one I care to think about too much now, but I remember going to sleep quite peacefully by the noise, while gas and liquid fought in massive random explosions in the roof. The first time my mum heard it, on the other hand, she thought it was the Martians landing. Her sense of unease was not improved by the local custom of frantically running around turning on all the hot taps, in an apparent attempt to appease the thundering water gods in the roof

Third, weather. Global warming is the current vogue. When I was growing up, it was the coming of a new ice age, the evidence for which was easy enough to see. We would get heavy frosts on the grass and fogs were a part of life. I remember sailing down a hill on my bike and watching icy streaks building up on the arms of my high school blazer. I think we got fogs and frosts partly because Yallourn was on the lee of the Coach Rd and Reservoir hills, which was a stupid idea really. The sun disappeared early in the evening and the town got dug up because it was on that side. As I said, it was a stupid idea. We got a fair bit of rain, but Morwell always got the best thunderstorms. I was always quite envious of that and put it down to poor planning on someone's part. (Location, location, location.) And, on occasion, we got massive hailstorms. When I was little, I remember my dad going out in his hard hat to collect hailstones the size of golf balls to put in our freezer, where they stayed for years, slowly growing larger as they collected frost.



The Swimming Pool. Not the old one many of you remember. I only remember the good one, that opened in 1959. Three pools, immaculate sculpted grounds – not the featureless flat spaces they make today. I have fond memories of the Swimming Pool, but it didn't start like that. When I was little, I stayed in two foot pool. That was where I learned to swim. It was all of about two feet across too and I couldn't swim even that distance. I felt the cold too badly and I always froze in that pool. If it wasn't the height of summer, the weather was cold (did I mention the coming of the next ice age?) and the pool was colder. Progressively, I learned to swim, more or less, and got teased over into the big pool. Everyone I

knew got their swimming certificates, first being able to swim 25 yards then being able to swim 50 yards. (There were others, the Bronze Medallion (?) and so forth, but that was only if you wanted to be a professional. Well, really I didn't think of it so much as professional as being more than a bit obsessive. If you got into any situation where swimming 50 yards wouldn't get you out of trouble, you were obviously swimming in the wrong direction.) I grew to love swimming underwater and I spent more time under the water than above it. And I loved diving off the boards, flying for a few seconds and spearing into the water – a joy now denied to everyone because of Occ Health & Safety and the ever-present fear of being sued over any damn thing at all. (Even Traralgon, which has an acceptably good swimming pool, bears the scars where they cut their diving boards out of the concrete.) In the summers of my years in high school (1971-1976), I found the water got wonderfully warm in the summer although it seemed to decrease sharply in three-day cycles, which I could never understand. Eventually, they put up a little blackboard outside the kiosk to tell you the day's water temperature. Once it even hit 28 °C (!), though the low twenties were more common. I hated cold water, but I could stay under forever when it was warm. One time I dived off the high board and swam underwater to the far end, just because I could. Bliss. Most summers there were a few of us regulars who stayed there, day in, day out, early morning until tea-time, pretty much all summer. Five cents to get in, another five or ten cents for food was more than enough. Honeycomb was a luxury, or a Sunny Boy, or even a pie! Everything tasted better when you were a kid and you had swum around for a few hours first. The pool had its prime areas for dumping your stuff and spreading out your towel. The best spots were along the west side, although the south was good too, behind the diving boards. The north had the bigger slope, but except at the bottom of the hill, it was too steep for lying on your towel comfortably. You could sit on the concrete up the top of the north side, but it was dry and dusty under the big cypress tree and the grass round there was full of bindi and you'd always end up with spikes in your feet. But the best spots once you'd actually got wet were around the concrete concourse, thawing out on the hot concrete after a long swim. Preferably in a shallow puddle left by the lawn sprinklers, which had then heated up in the sun. Just lie there and soak up the sun and the warmth. Being kids, we generally went brown quickly, but occasionally you got burned. The first sunburn of the year was an annual signal of the coming of summer. Being the time it was, there were rubbish cures for everything. Burns - including sunburn - were traditionally treated with the application of edibles like coconut oil or butter, as though all we needed was proper basting. But mum had a genuine cure for sunburn – Parke Davis Sunburn Cream. It was magic. No matter how bad your sunburn - and there were times I could not sleep on my back for the pain - by morning it'd be fixed. A couple of years ago, I found a decades-old tube of that remarkable cream in my parent's garage in amongst my old hiking gear. I opened the tube and that marvellous smell was still there and I was instantly transported back to holidays at the beach, to the pool, and to summers that never seemed to end. There was never anything to match Yallourn's Pool. Everything else is just a hole with water in it.

The Drain. This one's a bit singular and to most of you this won't mean a thing, but I spent hours there, so it gets a guernsey. It skirted around the west side of the town, ducked under Parkway, then ran around behind the nursery in a big sweeping curve and into the Boating Pond beside the swimming pool. I liked it because, near to Parkway, the drain cut deeply into the ground and the sides were quite sheer. My brother and I (or even just me, myself and I) used to kick down the sheer sides and use the collapsed lumps to build dams in the flow of water. I must've made dozens over the years. Once the water got high enough, or you got sick of building, you stopped repairing the breaches and watched – or helped - the dam break, sending a great gush of water down the drain. It seems kind of pointless now, but it was good fun, and combined construction and destruction in one muddy package. Occasionally your foot would slip into the water during the building stage, but that was just part of the whole watery experience. In later years, they got mechanical diggers in and scraped the sides off so they formed wide gentle slopes. Probably better to drain water away, but sadly the days of dam-building were ended.

The “Paddling Pool”, beside the Infant Welfare Centre. I use inverted commas because the paddling pool was a vindictive body of water that owed more to immersion than paddling. It was round, it was concrete with a gentle slope on it down to some not-too-deep spot in the centre. And for some reason, the bottom was always as slippery as ice, which is odd for concrete. As I said, it was a vindictive body of water. It must've dumped dozens of kids on their bums, including me, soaking them in the process. I remember going on a primary school excursion and

ending up near the Infant Welfare Centre. The teacher let kids take off their shoes and go paddling. No way I was going in - but I figured I was just a kid and the teacher was a grown-up and knew more than I did. Wrong. Wet kids, more casualties of the paddling pool. Years later, I saw it sitting, drained, a skeletal depression in the surrounding concrete path. Good, I thought. Someone finally realised what you were and had you put down. Odd thing was, drained, it wasn't slippery at all. Just an odd shaped depression in the footpath, no longer filled with decades of tears of wet, humiliated children.

The Big Drain beside the ovals. That massive concrete cutting that ran down beside the Croquet Club (which was always beautifully manicured, but which I never saw used) between the Ovals and Parkside. That drain was so big, it had to be traversed by bridges, which were built at intervals along its length. I never spent any time in that drain, so why mention it at all? Because it always impressed me that, on occasion, that massive drain was unable to cope, that the ovals, and particularly No 1 Oval, would flood. I never saw it, but I saw pictures and I could never understand how that much rain could descend in one place - Yallourn must've been charmed in some way. The only similar sense of amazement and disbelief I've felt is regarding a sight I've promised myself I **will** go and see one day – when the Avon River at Stratford floods and touches the bottom of the Princes Highway bridge. One day I'd like to see that. I think.

Cisterns. In today's current climate of full flush/half flush, water-saving, sculpted, jelly-moulded pastel-fashion-coloured sissy plastic cisterns, I had nearly forgotten about the massive concrete troughs that sat above your head in the dunnies in Yallourn, awaiting the summons of an industrial-grade chain-pull that would support the combined body weight of you and three of your friends. Height, gravity and gallons of water combining into a near-irresistible force. All designed, no doubt, by men who had ambitions to build battleships, power stations or mighty dams and for whom too much over-engineering was barely enough.

A few of you may've have noticed two omissions. There has been no real mention of the Latrobe River or the Dam and it may have struck some of you that the most obvious bodies of water have received almost no space at all. The reason is that I hardly went to the Dam (Lake Narracan) or anywhere near the Latrobe River. Others can wax lyrical about the joys of swimming at Tom's Bridge or fishing by the Latrobe or whatever. The Latrobe, the Dam and the Dam wall were some of those blind spots I mentioned earlier, sorry.

Finally, given regard to the theme of water, it strikes me now that Yallourn was surrounded by what seemed to be largely pointless bodies of water. There was one pointless dam between the Reservoir and Coach Rd hills, which was built during my lifetime. I spent a lot of hours up there as a teenager and I can tell you that if it ever contained water, it was only by accident. There was the almost equally pointless one on the outskirts of Hernes Oak, north of where De Campo Drive and the Haunted Hills Rd now meet. My dad has an aerial picture showing that dam with water in it (reproduced in "Back to Yallourn"), but quite frankly I think the photo must have been re-touched for effect. And Witt's Gully Dam? I have seen it twice in my life, but to this day I have no idea what it was for. (As an aside, I remember in Form 2 (?) walking to and from Witt's Gully Dam from the High School as a class excursion. The whole class of seventy of us, traipsing raggedly over the Princes Highway. What would Occ Health & Safety make of that now? And the distance! I'd be pushing to do it on my bike now, yet then there was never any question that we could – WOULD – all do it, teachers included. It was merely a pleasant walk. We must have been a hell of a lot tougher back then.)

And I don't recall the fountains in the town centre, ever doing **anything** even vaguely fountain-like while I was around. They were like carefully placed ornamental puddles. What was it about Yallourn that it seemed to be associated with so many stationary, pointless, bodies of water??

And this made me wonder in retrospect about **why** I had thought of water to describe Yallourn in the first place – after all, the town lived, breathed and choked on coal and its dust. So why did I feel that water formed such a strong thread? And then I remembered, that not only had Yallourn been built on a swamp, but the original plans for the township of Yallourn had meant to border the south-west of the town with ornamental lakes as well.

So water was obviously in its veins, along with coal. It was comforting to think that even if I

wasn't completely sure **why** I chose such an odd theme to start with, that someone else, long before the town was even born, had seen the connection too ...