

Interview with Ron and Mary McDermott

by Annette Robinson

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Early Life

I was born on 29 November 1924 in Wright Street Middle Park. Babies were commonly born at home in those days. We moved to 115 Harold Street when I was about 12 months old and I've lived in this house ever since.

I was an only child, and I suppose because of that I was a bit spoilt by my parents, who both died at an early age.

Dad was Wilfred McDermott. He was a Staff Sergeant Major in WW1 and a Sergeant in WW2.....he was gassed in WW1.

He was born in Darjeeling, India, where there was a big family of McDermotts. His father was Commissioner for Railways in India. Dad's family later came out to Australia, and then, as often happens in families there was some dispute, and young Wilfred McDermott went his separate way at about 19 years of age.

At some stage dad tried to teach me the Indian language but that was a level of difficulty that was a bit beyond me! He worked for the original Myer store as a commercial traveller in Bendigo. He had a good singing voice, and sang with the choir of the Wattle Street church, a big Methodist church in Bendigo. He met my mother and they were married in the Anglican cathedral in Bendigo. I still have a clock on the mantelpiece that they were given as a wedding present by his army unit

Mum was Sophia Ellen McDermott , she was known as Ella or Ellie.

Childhood

I had a happy childhood growing up in Middle Park. I had a gang, there were 4 boys, and a girl who was a bit of a tomboy. We had fun doing a few things we perhaps shouldn't have done like going up the big pipe drain from the beach all the way up to the Danks and Harold Street corner...we used to stink after we had done that!

There was a vacant block of land around the corner from the flats (corner Parade/ Harold) where we used to play cowboys and Indians, etc. That was fun, but later they turned it into a mini-golf course and you had to pay to go in. Of course we found a way to get in from the back.

That empty block was also where we would have a huge bonfire on Guy Fawkes night. I also remember a bloke who had a monkey and organ on a 4 wheeled contraption who would come around....he made a fortune going along the beachfront in the summer!

We used to play cricket in the street, as there were hardly any cars unlike today. We smashed our share of windows too.

Names I remember from then are Keith and Betty Trotman, Barney O'Brien and Claude Hayden. Also the Martini brothers Geoff and Ron (the Martinis went to the convent school, others went to Wesley). Anyway we were all mates until their families moved away from the area.

I remember Mrs Collis at the back of our house used to come in to chat to mum. She had bungalows in her backyard for single men, what you would call a rooming house I suppose. One day she called dad to come over as she couldn't get one of the men to answer his door. That was the day that one of the men hung himself there, a very sad day.

Just before the war, after the bungalows had gone, I remember helping and watching dad and two of his mates digging an air raid shelter in Mrs Collis's backyard. It was big, with an entrance at both ends, lined with duck board. It was well stocked with candles and food etc.

Middle Park School days

I had a teacher called Miss Cauliflower at Middle Park! I enjoyed all my subjects and time there, but later went to Thom's Business College a small private school attached to the Congregational Church in Cecil Street South Melbourne. It was held in the hall of the church and was an offshoot of Melbourne Grammar. The teacher had only one eye which made things a bit confusing. When you put your hand up to answer a question, and then went to answer it, he'd say I'm not talking to you McDermott, I'm asking the fellow behind you! I left school when I was about 17.

I was a bit of an all-rounder at school. I liked sport and most subjects, but I was particularly good at Algebra getting 100%. The teacher offered extra lessons at his home after school too.

Teenage Years

We learnt to swim at the Wright Street Swimming Club. Pretty much every street had a lifesaving club then, of course Harold Street had the toilet block. There was a buoy, we called it the Maggie. Once I had learned to swim, I became a Junior Lifesaver, then a Senior Lifesaver, and could swim out to the Maggie and back easily.

From then we grew up and the "gang" went their separate ways.

When I was about 15 I got a job as an usher at The Park Theatre at Albert Park (where the library is now). It was a great cinema. My job was to go down through the stalls with my torch to make sure everyone was behaving. By the time I was 18 I was made head usher. One night there was a huge fight involving a gang of youths from Port Melbourne. The Manager called the police to come.

The gang was waiting for me at the front of the place, so I quickly went back across the stage, out the back, jumped a couple of fences and made my way home to live another day. The police gave them all a very effective kick in the backside, a commonly used deterrent in those days. Other than that it was a great job, I enjoyed it and was paid about 17 shillings and 6 pence a shift, half of which I used to give to mum for board.

Pet

Dad bought me a dog as a pet. He was an Irish Setter, and had been bred by a man in Wright Street who lived on the corner of a lane, possible Erskine Street and Wright Street. The man was one of the members of the swimming club, and he bred dogs as a bit of a small hobby/ business. That dog became a wonderful friend. I could get him to do anything. I used to swim holding on to his tail.

My mother used to suffer from bad migraines and the dog was a great comfort to her when I was not at home as much. She would just put out her hand from the bed and the dog would put its head on her hand. Unfortunately the dog later contracted pleurisy and had to be put to sleep.

Middle Park Shops

I can recall Corrigan's shop in Wright Street down near Beaconsfield Parade. On the corner of Mills and Danks Street, there was a butchers shop on one side. On the opposite side was a group of shops including a hairdressers, a fruit shop, among others, while further up Mills Street towards Page Street there was Mr Adams the chemist, a fish and chip shop and a delicatessen.

Every Saturday evening Dad used to walk around to the little shop in Armstrong Street near the doctors on the Danks and Armstrong Street corner to get the Herald. In Danks Street, on the lane nearest to Wright Street there was a dairy (McLachlan's or McCrackens or a similar name), where you would take a billy for milk or cream.

It has been sold many times since then, but the current owner was interested to hear that I remembered it as a dairy.

I also remember Bailey's butcher shop. If you were unable to pay, George and his father would say "Pay when you can".

The shop opposite the Catholic church sold lollies, ice creams etc, on the corner opposite was another delicatessen which I think sold hot food. I was in there one day with a mate, when they asked if we wanted a job. They wanted the outside of the shop painted, we took it on and finished it in just one weekend. We were pretty well paid too!

Entertainment and Sport

I remember going to matinees at the Bughouse in Armstrong Street which was certainly an appropriate name for the cinema. There was also an SP bookie down the lane close to it.

The Old Buffers was a day when everyone was either in the procession, or watching. I remember one of the men from the licensed grocer next door to Bailey's butcher shop would always dress up as Mae West or something of similar ilk. There was a procession from the beach, up to Armstrong Street, under the underpass, and through to the park. The football match was a competition between North and South teams. I recall one bloke with a red wig and a long dress. He put the football up under his dress, and went hell for leather towards the goals.

I played soccer over in Albert Park too. Norm Bailey, George's brother used to play on the same team. His father had a lot to do with the club.

I used to go to St Moritz on the Upper Esplanade, where I learnt to skate. My father was pretty strict and insisted on dropping me off, and picking me up. I didn't like that much! I went from figure skating to speed skating. Then I got into ice hockey, that was a rough game, very rough. I used to enjoy that and played there for quite a while. In the end I sold my skates to get some cash.

I also had a job as a paperboy, and used to catch the tram from our corner here (Danks and Harold Street corner) up to the stop opposite the school in Mills Street, selling papers to the commuters. Then I would hop on the tram coming back this way and do the same. I did quite well that way. Dad and Mum were not always happy about this way of making a bit of pocket money. They had their standards!

I went to Sunday School for a while at the Presbyterian Church opposite the Middle Park school. Mary Crean (Finley) was my teacher. Her father used to coach and play golf. Mr Finley was also a very good fisherman. They lived opposite us here in Harold Street and we knew them well. He had a big wooden boat in his back yard.

I used to live in a bungalow in our back yard, and in the middle of the night (probably about 4.00am) he would throw stones on my roof to wake me up, so that I could help him get the boat down to the beach. I was about 12 years old at this time, and would leave a note for mum and dad, "gone fishing. They always worried about me, but didn't stop me from going.

That was a hard job to get that heavy boat out of the yard, down the street, onto the beach, across the sand to the wooden ramp with tracks which led to the water. I liked going fishing. Mr Finley knew how to look at the clouds and tell what the weather was going to do.

I recall one morning we were way out, close to the South channel, and were catching heaps of fish, when Mr Finley said "pull up the anchor, we're going in". I protested as I was having the time of my life. But he said there was a big storm approaching, and he was usually right.

Of course, I had to row back, but occasionally he would put up the sail. When we got back to shore there would often be a heap of kids running down the beach to see what we had caught, mainly flathead, snapper. Occasionally we would catch a shark.

Working Life

I went to work for the government when I left school. First I worked for the Department of Primary Industry. I stayed with them until I joined the Air Force. If you were in the public service it was not compulsory for you to join up, but I wanted to. The Department asked me to stay though, and when I said I was joining the Air Force, they indicated that my job would be there for me whenever I wanted to return.

I eventually went through all the exams and other hoops required to become a Full Inspector. I worked mainly with dairy produce and eggs. Dotted around Melbourne in those days were what were known as "egg floors". H.M. Ballantyne was one such. I had to go to these regularly to test the quality of the eggs. It was known as "candling the eggs", (by holding them up to a light you could judge the quality of the product).

I well recall one day having to go with the Chief Inspector to Werribee where there was a big producer of eggs, the Carter Brothers. They had a palatial home on the property and were known to be reluctant to have the inspectors visiting. Egg pulp was widely used then, and they were a big supplier of egg pulp to the armed forces.

War Years

I was in the Air Force during the war.

After the war

Following the war I returned to my job with Department of Primary industry, and as part of my role, I was responsible for handing out permits for various things. One day I got chatting to a bloke applying for a permit and he asked if I would be interested in moving across to the commercial world. As it turned out he worked for Dalgety's a big agricultural firm similar to Elders.

I said I would consider it, but as mum was not well at that time, and I was about to get married, I put the decision off for a while. After I had married Mary, I accepted a position with Dalgety's and stayed with them for 35 years.

I started as a clerk with Dalgety Ltd. preparing ships' manifestos. etc. My boss died and I took on his role in addition to my own. Eventually I was responsible for 3 varying jobs. Initially I was at 461 Bourke Street. I really enjoyed my work. I was on call to meet ships coming in to Westernport and Port Phillip bays. I would get a call sometimes at 1 o'clock in the morning saying that the ship was about to dock at either Westernport or Port Melbourne and that I had better get myself down there. The firm always supplied a cab to transport me.

Marriage

Mary and I were married after the war, in 1949 when she was about 23 and I was around 25. We have just celebrated 65 years of marriage. My mother passed away shortly after we returned from our honeymoon, Dad died about 4 years later.

We met on a blind date! There was a family who lived near us called the Corricks who had two sons, Jack and Keith, one of whom was about my age. Their parents were Vera and Lionel Corrick, and Lionel played the organ at the Regent and Plaza Theatres until the war started and Lionel joined up.

I used to play tennis with Jack and Keith over in the park. (There was a chalet near the courts too.) One of the boys of Corricks had a girlfriend Yvonne, who worked as a telegrapher. She had a friend there and the Corrick lad, wanting to set me up with a girl too, organised a blind date for me. It was arranged that we would meet in front of the Regent Theatre in Collins Street at a certain time and take it from there.

Mary takes up the story: " Yvonne , my pal from the telegraphy office had finished her shift some time before mine was finished, so I was still at work when in came Captain Cathy Watson a Salvation army officer asking if I knew where Yvonne was. It happened that Yvonne's sister had drowned in a river in Sydney and Captain Watson had the job of

passing on this sad news to her. I don't know how she did it, but I later discovered that Captain Watson had managed to track Yvonne down, and hastily arrange for her return to her family in Sydney.

Naturally, I was in two minds as to whether to still go to the Regent or not, but eventually I did go, met Ron, and the rest is history. He invited me to have lunch with his mother and father the next Sunday. I well remember that we had roast lamb for lunch, and worked out that there was some distant connection between our two families. After a bit of a gentle grilling from Ron's dad, it was clear that they approved of me for their one and only son!"

Another person I can recall as a Middle Park local is Betty Patterson. She lived near the Corricks on Beaconsfield Parade. She was a well known artist and painted portraits of young children among other subjects. I never met her but Auntie Vera Corrick spoke of her often.

We bought a block of land out at Mitcham, and had every intention of building a house on it, and living there. But that didn't eventuate, and we sold the block. Now we feel so glad we stayed in Middle Park, and thank our lucky stars that we are able to live in such a wonderful suburb in such a convenient and comfortable home. We have plenty of people wanting to come and stay, and we know why! It is close to everything.



Ron & Mary McDermott



McDermotts' House