

Wednesday July 30th 2014

Ken Lewis Interview

Family

I was born on 3rd January 1925 at the small private hospital which was situated on the corner of Mills Street and Canterbury Road. It was run by Nurse Sandford, whose nephew later on worked for my father.

Mum and Dad lived first in Brunswick and later in Middle Park at 54 Canterbury Road, a double fronted house which still exists. My grandparents lived at "Lewisville", 90 Page Street Albert Park. I think at some stage before living at 54 Canterbury Road, Mum and Dad lived above a two storey shop in Dundas Place Albert Park, which housed the electrical business. It was near where the Commonwealth Bank is now, between Montague and Fausset Streets. Later Dad moved the business to 115 Dundas Place, where there was a big yard for storing goods and vehicles at the back.

Dad was a self taught electrician, whom I always admired. He bought and borrowed books on electricity and taught himself. Over time he established a large electrical business J.R. Lewis Pty. Ltd. which did work all over Melbourne and regional areas of Victoria. Dad was James Richard Lewis, mum was Vera Melita Keay. I have early memories of my father's mother, a short, well-rounded, energetic woman. They had stables and horses at 90 Page Street. I believe that she used a horse and jinker to collect debts for Dr Drew who had his surgery in Park Street.

I remember going to visit Dad's mother later in Chomley Street Prahran. Up until I was about 16 I would cycle over every Sunday morning. I remember Dad playing cards with his brother while I would just hang around. His brother married a Roman Catholic and "turned", to our family's dismay!

Dad had three brothers, Frank, Ray and George and a sister Louise.

Stanley, my brother was born in August 1923, he was 18 months older than me. I have lived at 68 Herbert Street Middle Park since 1962.

School

I started school in Brunswick at South West Brunswick training school. We finally moved over to Middle Park, as Dad was tiring of driving between Brunswick and Albert Park. I entered Middle Park Central School late in 3rd grade or early in the 4th grade. Colonel Kent was in charge of the 6th grade, Mr Smith was the headmaster. When I was in the 8th grade sometimes the teacher would leave me in charge of the class, it was boys and girls. I have especially fond memories of a girl called Joan Minty, an American. Clive Leslie Romeril was the head teacher responsible for Years 7 and 8. He was a great teacher, he even invited us all to his home for a Christmas party. He was a train enthusiast, and we went on a lot of excursions to various railway yards, stations, etc.

Some of the friends' names I remember from school are Des Guy, son of a Chinese family who had a laundry in Canterbury Road between Nimmo and Armstrong Streets. Carl Hinckel lived at 54 Wright Street, and Eric Mouy was in Danks Street. Gordon Young lived in Hambleton Street, we used to have a great old yack in the backyard bungalow. I lost touch with him during the war, but we resumed our friendship for a time. Also Davey Jones who later moved to Newcastle. Other friends from those days are Keith Trotman, who lived on Beaconsfield parade, Mal Collett, whose relation had a garage in Cecil Street between Park and Bank Streets. Mal's uncle also had a paper delivery run, delivering papers to the many towns between Melbourne and Albury. Clarrie Collett, Mel's uncle has been the mayor of South Melbourne. Keith Kempson lived in Kerferd Road, he joined the Airforce and was killed during the war. Another mate from my twenties was Jack Furness, who was related to Madigan the Antarctic explorer I think. Also Stan Martin who lived in Cecil Street was a good friend.

Dick Fox lived in Foote Street, and later he was working at the Master's Dry Cleaners in Victoria Avenue.

Ivan Ashley was a good friend in my early school days. He lived four doors away at 50 Canterbury Road, Middle Park. There were 2 two storey double fronted houses there (where there is a block of flats now), and at the rear of the block on Canterbury Place there were stables. There was a tunnel from the stables which came up inside the tower of one of the houses! Ivan died in the war.

Later Dudley Eldridge of New Street Brighton bought those houses and had them set up as rooming houses with bungalows in the back, each with a separate meter. We used to do electrical work for him there.

When I finished 8th grade at Middle Park Central, I got a letter from the headmaster of University High School inviting me to go there. As Melbourne High had been my first preference, I showed that letter to the Melbourne High School and they let me go there. I was at Melbourne High in 1940 and 1941. The first year there I worked hard enough to pass my exams, the second year I did not work very hard at lessons, and left school before the exams at end of year.

After School

When Mum and Dad lived at 54 Canterbury Road and I was apprenticed to my father, the local real estate agent A.J. Matthews had a business in Canterbury Road near Armstrong Street. He said to my father "it's about time your son got into real estate". I wasn't earning much, but I managed to scrape enough together to buy my first house 13 Raglan Street Port Melbourne, a single fronted weatherboard, a few doors from Esplanade East, for 400 pounds. I was about 20 years old.

Apprenticeship

I was initially apprenticed to another firm which specialised in commercial work, but one day the boss of that firm suggested that it would be better if I went to work for my father. Dad employed about 5 electricians and 2 apprentices at that stage. He occasionally would get big jobs where he needed more hands, and would borrow electricians from a friend who had a business in Preston (E.H. Waldron). In one case he kept them on for 2 years! During the war Dad's business did most of the work for protected industries, we did a lot of automotive work, wiring up the electrics on ambulances and other vehicles, for the American forces.

During the war, Dad's firm was designated by the Government as the electrical business to service the area from Port Melbourne to St Kilda. We did a lot of work for the Americans too. All the paperwork had to be completed in triplicate. The Gatwick Hotel in Fitzroy Street St Kilda was the US Officers' quarters. We got plenty of cigarettes and petrol coupons, which we quite easily disposed of! The building opposite South Melbourne market on the North west corner of Cecil and Coventry Streets also housed top U.S. Army people – headquarters for South West Pacific area.

In between Government jobs we did private residential and commercial work.

After the war there was a great deal of work in changing petrol pumps over from manual to electric operation. We had more work than we could keep up with during the changeover. There were plenty of frustrations too, plumbers doing the pipework were supposed to leave a fish-wire in the pipes so that when we came to put the wiring in, it could just be pulled through. More often than not, when we came to do this the pipes would be clogged up with cement.

Dad also operated as an agent for a form of electric advertising sign called "Vibrilux", which you occasionally still see today in hardware shops or similar. They had moving or circulating parts and were battery operated.

We went all over Melbourne within 20 or 30 mile radius of Middle Park, and sometimes into country areas. I remember Dad telling me he got a big job at Lakes Entrance for which he bought a new Fiat car just to get there. He was down there for about 6 weeks I think.

Dad was quite an entrepreneur, he had an advertising sign on a side wall on the corner of Carter Street and Kerferd Road, and an ad. on the spare wheel on the side of his car. He was one of the first to use a glass slide at the Kinema in Albert Park to advertise his business. Dad operated his business from 115 Dundas Place, from a retail sales shop

for radio and electrical goods. Before the war he had been in a shop in Dundas Place between Montague Street and Kerferd Road on the same side as the present Albert Park Library. The rent went up from 5/- to 7/6 per week when he painted out the shop!

Middle Park Shops

I remember that there were two lolly shops opposite one another in Wright Street near the school, Thelma Fox's father had a lolly shop on the corner of Canterbury Place and Wright Street. He also operated a greengrocer from the rear of the shop, with a horse and cart for deliveries. There was a shop on the corner of Canterbury Road and Wright Street which sold confectionery – they lived upstairs above the shop. Another favourite shop for confectionery was Flemings on the corner of Harold and Richardson.

I went to school with the Gagliardi sisters Roma and Mimi. Their family ran a wine saloon on the corner of Armstrong and Erskine Streets. On the corner of Mills and Herbert there was also a wine shop.

On the corner of Canterbury Road and Armstrong there was a chemist. Mr Pope had a newsagent where the current newsagent is. Mr Pope owned the block of flats on the Harold and Page Street corner. Dad did all the wiring there when they were built.

T.R. O'Connor operated a bakery and cake shop on the corner of Canterbury Place and Erskine Street. There was Mr Cameron the barber in Armstrong near the Richardson Street corner. Opposite where IGA is now there was a lolly shop. Corner Canterbury Place and Hambleton Street was Convery the greengrocer, also Bailey the butcher in Hambleton Street. George and Norman were two brothers. Norm was a bit of a lad, he drove a Riley car back then.

There was a butcher shop on the corner of Carter and Mills Street Middle Park side. There was also a large commercial laundry in Mills Street Albert Park between Canterbury Road and Herbert Streets.

At the Godfrey's Hat Block Factory in Neville Street, we used to do their electrical work, and also continued their work later when they moved to South Yarra.

There was a licensed grocer run by Les Cunningham on the corner of Harold Street and Hambleton Streets. On the opposite side closer to the beach and running down to Erskine Street there was a big woodyard, with the entrance via a lane off Harold Street which is still there.

Farnsworth's dairy in Hambleton Street was a local Middle Park landmark. Over the other side of Mills Street in Albert Park, Mr. Dobeli ran a dairy in Herbert Street which had stables for horses. This later became Murphy's carpet factory.

Entertainment

The Bughouse was where we normally went to the pictures. The owner was Frank Thring senior. There was a row of about 5 wooden seats joined together. If we didn't have enough leg room we would just push the row in front of us forward. There was a lolly shop serving the Bughouse where Ari's shoe repairs are now.

We always used to get two films, and an interval when there was a lot of fun and noise. A lolly boy would come around with drinks and lollies etc.

Where Albert Park Library is, there was a wood yard for many years, it was also a Hoyt's cinema, then an Amoco service station. When it was a theatre it had a Hammond organ which swung out from the wall. It was a really great theatre.

I remember the Sea Baths at Armstrong Street being badly damaged in the big storm. They then gradually fell into disrepair before being demolished. There was also a deck or raft that people could swim out to from the Sea Baths. There was also a Sea Baths at the end of Victoria Avenue – "Stubs" I think.

Church

The Presbyterian Church in Richardson Street opposite the school was a big part of our growing up. I was a member of the PFA (Presbyterian Fellowship Association), and we went to bible class there.

Frank Crean was Superintendent of the Sunday School, and his wife Mary also played a large part. We used to go on picnics, and in a charraban, a furniture truck converted to hold enough seats for quite a few children, teenagers.

We had a lot of fun on Sunday School outings. There were so many kids, everyone knew one another and their families. When we lived in Brunswick the Sunday School was so big that we hired a steam train for an excursion out of Melbourne.

Sport, cars, motorbikes

From when I was about 15 years old I went to Bendigo each year for the Easter Fair and stayed with a mate. We used to wander the streets looking for girls. We were pretty young and didn't know what to say when we met them!

We used pushbikes to get around when we were young, also the trams. Trains were for trips further afield.

I remember going over to Albert Park Lake, there were Hoopers and Harmans sailboats and rowboats. Dad did any electrical work for them. We were also offered a free sail at times. During the war you used to be able to get a drink over at the lake, unofficially. Dad was not happy about me going over there.

We also loved going ice skating at the Glacarium, affectionately known as the "Glassie" in City Road South Melbourne. When it closed we were forced to go to St Moritz, but we didn't like it as much. It was always a bit too wet. When the "Glassie" was operating, there were two different rinks on two levels. The lower level was often used for storing frozen meat, but whenever that lower rink was available we skated there too.

I always seemed to have a car or motorbike from the time I was about 20 years old, The first car I had was a second hand Ford Prefect, bought from a neighbour. Then I had a Morris Minor 2 door. I used to drive it up to Emerald to see a girlfriend. Another friend from Page Street was Jimmy Weldon. In 1946 I bought myself a brand new Harley Davidson, and I talked Jimmy into buying a second hand one too. We had some great trips together. We went to so many places, including a trip to Sydney, taking a hammock and sleeping bags, we couldn't carry much on a motorbike so we just camped pretty roughly, but good times. Jimmy got to know a girl from Wandin whom he eventually married.

I also loved dancing, and went to many dances. Wantirna, Dollar etc. During the war there was a dance every Friday night at the Masonic hall in Collins Street in the city. That was a great place to meet girls, especially nurses from the Mercy Hospital. It was safe enough to walk them home through the gardens back then!

Marriage

Dad always had a couple of girls in the office to do the admin work and also to serve in the radio / electrical shop, and Marlena was one of them. One Friday afternoon or Saturday morning, when I hadn't been able to tee up a date for the weekend, I asked Marlena if she would be interested in going with me to Carols by Candlelight. That was in the days when you got in for free and only had to buy a candle. Marlena agreed to go with me. I remember her mother was anxiously waiting in the hallway when I dropped her back home to her parents' home in Kensington. Anyway the rest is history as we were married in 1957 at the Presbyterian Church in Richardson Street opposite the school.

I have two daughters Suzanne and Sandra. Suzanne has one daughter Julie. All three also attended Middle Park Primary School.

Later in Life

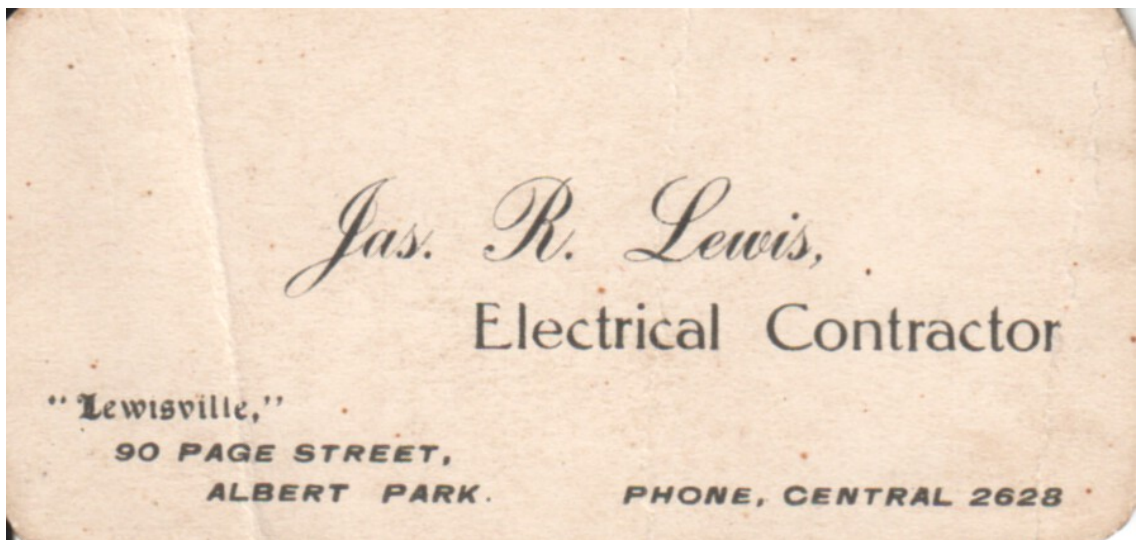
I was a member of Freemasons for over 50 years, a keen jazz fan and I am still a member of the Victorian Jazz Club, the Middle Park Hotel was a great jazz venue during the nineteen seventies.

I was on the Middle Park Primary School committee for a time, also in Neighbourhood Watch, and the South Melbourne Garden Club for a number of years. Marlena and I are members of Probus. We go regularly to live theatre performances, bus trips and monthly meetings. I also attended the "Sigs" Depot in Albert Park (opposite Albert Road) to hear the Australian Army band recitals. They eventually moved to the Watsonia Barracks, and I went there for another 10 years or so, until the traffic was so bad getting there. I also followed the rodeo at Lang Lang for a number of years – held annually. I was a foundation member of Phillip Island auto racing club, but it was eventually taken up by K.G. Lukey. I am a member of National Seniors, meeting once a month in the city. I like reading and am a regular at the Albert Park Library. I was a local electrical contractor for over 40 years, following my father's retirement – I retired in 1988. Being an RACV service member, I heard they were starting 'tag along' outback trips. A mate and I went on various trips all over Australia. My long suffering wife who opened our retail shop in the afternoons (bless her) was tired of the customers saying " He's not away again"!

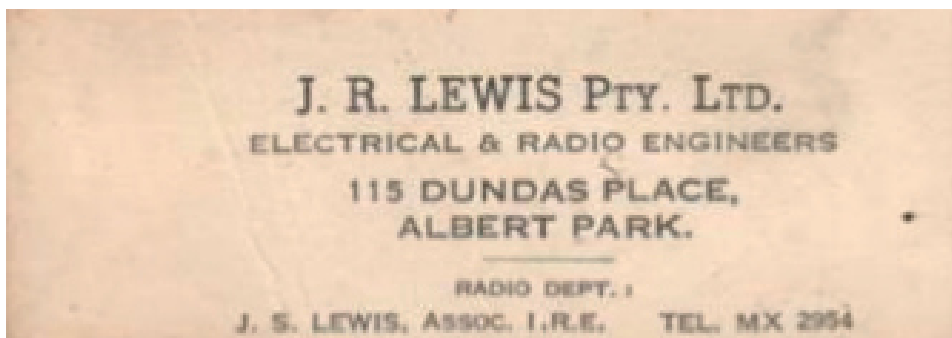
Interviewed by Annette Robinson July 2014



Ken Lewis - Brass Plate



Ken Lewis - Visting Card



Ken Lewis - Name Plate