

Interview with Joan Laragy, formerly of Middle Park, born 27 May 1926. Joan was the only child of Thomas Eastwell and Evelyn Coffee who lived at 11 Madden Street, Albert Park, 167 Mills Street, Middle Park and also at 88 Page Street, Middle Park . Joan Eastwell married another Middle Park resident, Christopher Laragy of 345 Richardson Street, Middle Park in Our Lady of Mt Carmel Church, Middle Park. Interview conducted by Jackie Tidey in Joan's present home in Black Rock on 29 July 2014.

Earliest memory

My earliest memory in Middle Park is when my father on a very, very hot night would take a mattress and we would sleep on the beach, on the sand... I would have been two or maybe three then... it was really hot in the day time and it would be cooler on the beach. It was quite common to do that, people in those little houses that had heated up during the day, you couldn't breathe. My mother would be there too and it was quite safe, you would never think about it not being safe. In those days there was no danger ... at least I never remember it... in those days there were more people around, hanging over their front gates, walking on the streets, it was different to how it is now, totally different.

School days

I went to primary school at St Peter and Paul's in South Melbourne and then I went to Vaucluse in Richmond. I had the Loreto nuns for Primary but for Secondary they were the FCJs [Faithful Companions of Jesus], Vaucluse was a sister school to Genazzano.

After school when I was at primary school I would play in the church yard opposite. I had a friend Jack who was like an only child (he had an older sister 10 years older than him) and we always played together. We played cowboys and Indians. I liked playing with boys more than with girls. I was an only child and I loved that... I would pray, "Please God don't give me a brother or sister..." Basically I played with boys... I hated dolls and things like that... I liked action games, playing cricket. Jack and I were friends from when we were six until I was about fifteen... when I came home from school I was totally free to do what I liked. Jack would ride his bike and I would be on my scooter... we used to go for miles and miles... you can't do that now... I lost touch with Jack a long time ago when his family went to Sydney.

The shops in Bridport Street

I remember going to the shops and getting milk in a billy and I remember swinging it because if you could swing the billy, the milk in it wouldn't spill. When we were in Madden Street the nearest milk bar was in Bridport Street, and there was Taylor's Cake Shop and Richardsons had the milk bar and there was a fruit shop. Now there's an Op Shop along there and on the corner where the big coffee shop is now... that used to be Hammond's Grocery Shop. It had a big counter and you could go in and get a penn'th of broken biscuits. We would shop every day then because we didn't have a fridge or even an ice-box and so we would buy the meat and milk every day and we would buy only a few things at a time. Butter would be in a big slab and they would cut off a pat of butter for you. We used to call them Ham and Beef shops and they had a lovely smell when you

walked in... you could smell bacon and ham and they always smelled beautifully. With the broken biscuits they would make a cone of paper and put in the biscuits and if you were lucky you might get a chocolate biscuit and a biscuit that wasn't broken.

Moving to Middle Park

We moved from Madden Street (Albert Park) to Mills Street when I went to Vaucluse. I used to get pocket money... too much. My father would give me 2 shillings every time he saw me, other kids would get a penny but I was getting a fortune in those days. My dad was a plumber and he worked for the South Melbourne Council. And then he went to the war... he had gone to the First World War and then he went to the Second World War and he was a prisoner of the Japanese for 4 years and it was just Mum and me then when he was gone... she was very depressed... I would have been about 13 when he went. Then he came back and he had been on the Burma Railway... but when he came back he was just as he was when he went... happy and whistling because that was what he was like... but he only weighed 5 stone, they had kept the boys in the west to fatten them up before they let them into Melbourne. If he was scarred by his experiences he certainly didn't show it and he never mentioned it. He died when he was 54 and I'm sure his war experiences shortened his life... he developed liver problems, though he was never a drinker... and cancer. Dad's parents were English and they lived well into their 90s but he died at 54 and so did Mum (she was 4 years older than him) although she died four years before him. It seems young now for them to die at that age, but when you are 18 or 19 [as I was] it didn't seem so young to me. I was married when Dad died.

Starting work

When I left school I got a job straightaway. I worked at John Danks in Bourke Street... I think they are still there... they sold everything... they had a sewerage department, an electrical department, all that sort of thing. I had done Intermediate at school and then part of Leaving certificate and then Commercial... I could type... then I worked for doctors and solicitors... I never stayed anywhere long, I moved.

Meeting my husband in Middle Park

I met [my husband] Chris at the Carmelites... at the Debutante Ball. It was a big social event, the Carmelite Ball. Mum and I went to Mass at the Carmelites but Dad wasn't a Catholic... there were lots of masses in those days and the church would be packed but it's not packed any more.

We lived in Middle Park when we were first married and I left Middle Park when I was 22. I still like to go into the church when I come to Middle Park. It's such a beautiful church, it's so light and airy, none of those big pillars... and it's so big, not a cathedral exactly but much bigger than most and so beautiful.

When I met Chris he was 20 and I was only 15 and a half. I was probably 16 by the time I made my debut. And I was the youngest one making my debut. I remember this friend

of mine, Madge Burke, she was going out with Chris's friend, Jack, and I said to her "I wonder how old they are?" and when she found out and told me I said, "They're old men!" [laughter] I only met him then, he had gone to school at the [Christian] Brothers [in Danks Street]. Joan couldn't remember where Chris had been to primary school. When the interviewer suggested it could have been the Catholic Primary School in Beaconsfield Parade she said... "Oh, yes the laundry... my mother used to get the sheets done there and she said that's where bad girls go, really bad girls... they have a choice, they can either go to prison or to the laundry... and I said, "I think I'd rather go to prison... I don't like to think about that laundry place."

It was a bit of a shock meeting Chris's family [the Laragys of 345 Richardson Street, Middle Park], you know nine children. Chris's mother was an amazing woman, 5 foot nothing and she had these nine children, his father was a great big man who expected to be waited on hand and foot, typical Irishman. Nana was amazing... I can still remember the first time I ever went there for a meal, there were not only the nine children but she also had a couple of relatives staying there as well and everybody was talking at cross purposes, nobody listened to anybody and I kept wanting to say something, and I was like a fish opening my mouth... and so eventually I said 'I want to speak'... I had had enough. Chris was almost the youngest in the family, not quite... he had a sister who came after him. When I met him all the children were still living at home. I think Nana rented that place and it was owned by a man called Watchorn... a very elderly man. He died and then his son took over and then he died and Nana was still there. She was always known as Nana Rosie. When she got up she always had a cold shower and then she went to Mass... every morning... She would walk to Mass, head down, she was a tiny woman but she had long legs... I can still see her. And she would cook every day for all the family, she would have the roast beef or whatever it was...and she would go chomp, chomp chomp, chopping up everything for dinner. She was quite incredible. Even though she had five daughters I don't think any of them ever did very much...she would do everything herself, she was too quick, I think she would push them out of the way. Chris could boil water and that's about all. [When we were married] I would say to him, "Just make me a toasted sandwich." And he would say, "No, No, you make them better than I do." He would not cook.

Getting Married

We got married in Our Lady of Mount Carmel... I remember that day very clearly. I remember walking up outside the church and there was an old girl outside and I remember her saying "Oh, doesn't she look nervous." And I turned to her and said, "I'm not a bit nervous." I came there in a car with my father and I was dressed as a bride and I have a photo of me getting out of the car with my father." It would have been 1948 or 1949; I'm hopeless with dates. I kept my dress and Jen my daughter wore it and so did my daughter Sally. I remember putting the dress in the bath and bleaching it but it worked out, it looked lovely. I had two bridesmaids, one was Chris's sister and one was my girlfriend.

After we were married we stayed in Middle Park for about nine months, twelve months. We were building in Beaumaris. We had a terrible place in Herbert Street. There was a dairy there and we were about two doors up from the dairy. Maleny's was the name of the people we were renting from, Mr and Mrs Maleny. Ted was the man and I think he was a drinking companion of Chris's father. It was a half house, a Victorian place with a passage down the middle, [the owners lived in one half]... because you couldn't get any place to live because it was after the war. To get anything you would have to pay key money. You would have to offer them 50 pound or 100 pound just to be able to get a place to rent. We heard of a builder who was opening up a part of Beaumaris and got onto him so that's how we came to Beaumaris.

Renting in Middle Park

[The place we rented] was a strange place when I look back. We had a bedroom in the front and a lounge-room and a kitchen... that was our half. [The owners lived in the other half.] It was nothing to hear Ted, Chris had gone to night school, and there'd be a little knock on the door. And I wouldn't answer it... and Ted would say, 'I know you are in there Joany... have you got any cigarettes?' One night I must have forgotten to lock the door and he just strolled in and strolled right through the place and said hello and walked out the other door. People didn't seem to move back in with their parents after they were married. There was no room at Nana's place anyway and my dad was boarding because Mum had died by then. People would say I've heard of a place and they want such and such and you would rush off to have a look. It was very, very hard and there was rationing too. I kept working after I was married which was quite unusual because most people didn't. I kept working until I was having a baby. When I was living in Herbert Street I was pregnant but I had a miscarriage. I don't know how much longer we kept living there after that but we moved down to Beaumaris and it was like living in the country. In our new house for months we had no electric light and no gas... I remember thinking I'll go blind here reading by hurricane lamps... and I remember one morning going down the front path and meeting the night-man with the thing on his head... and I just said 'Good morning' and I think he nearly dropped it in surprise.

There were a lot of rented houses and rooming houses then, particularly in Albert Park I always loved Middle Park, the streets were very wide and there were a lot of very nice red brick Edwardian houses. Albert Park and South Melbourne were more Victorian.

Early married life

The bread cart used to come and women would rush out with their little shovels to pick up the droppings and also when the ice-cart came... we would whip behind the ice cart and he would give us a piece of ice. Mrs Richardson from the Milk Bar used to make beautiful ice blocks out of real fruit and sometimes dipped in chocolate.

I used to go to the butcher in Mills Street and I didn't know how to cook and he would tell me how to cook it. What should I buy... because we had no money and he would give me a wing rib and he would give me the best cuts and they would cost a fortune...

so we were eating the best meat, the best steak and the best chops... and then I would ask the lady in the fruit shop how would I make an apple pie... so I found out like that...and that's how I learned to cook, I learnt by doing. I'd never done anything before, never learned to cook.

When I was married I was working locally in the department that gets people jobs [rather like Centrelink now]. That was in St Kilda, it wasn't far, and I would ride my bike... I was always late so they altered my hours to 9.30am so I could get there on time. My husband then was working in an office at Robur Tea and he hated it so he took up fitting and turning and I think then he was working at the Board of Works. He would get home after 5...

I was 21 when I married and Chris was my first boyfriend...and I was his first serious girlfriend... one thing we used to do all the time was [go to] the tennis club...the Carmelite Tennis Club on the other side of the railway line... all the Laragys were very sporty and it was a great social thing. We also went to the movies, we would go to the Palais in St Kilda and there was a cinema called the Park where the Albert Park Library is now, that was big news because it was new and the Kinema in Bridport Street was really old and they had the Wurlitzer going and that was glamour, real glamour. It was fantastic.

I asked Joan if she remembers being given a box of chocolates when she was taken out on a date and she said that what she remembered was that just before she got married her father took her into the city to the movies and he bought her a great big box of chocolates. He never did anything by halves, and someone from work saw them and spread it around that Joan was marrying a man old enough to be her father.

There were always balls, all the time. There were balls at St Kilda Town Hall and also at Emerald Hall in South Melbourne... the Emerald Hall was near St Peter and Pauls...

Joan said "The life that children have today I think is absolutely terrible, too curtailed, too frightened, overprotected, they can't go out... even young people, there are no lovely dances to go to... they have to meet people in pubs. I feel sorry for them, they no longer get dressed up in lovely dresses, they just wear any old thing, even to weddings, people turn up in jeans and anything. I think it's a shame. I don't think children have much freedom these days they are stuck indoors all the time playing those wretched games all the time. And their conversation is so limited.

After the war people starting getting cars. We didn't have a car but friends of ours had a car and they would take us out for the day, we used to come down here to Ricketts Point... Jack and I [friend from childhood] we would sit in the dicky seat at the back, like a little place where you would keep the luggage.

In those days I used to go on the tram that came under the viaduct and turned into Canterbury Road. I also used to use the train a lot, where the light rail is now along Canterbury Road... it was one of those trains with the little dogboxes. I used to go into the city to shop. Mantons, Ball and Welsh, Payne's Bon Marche, Buckley and Nunn

(now David Jones), Foy's... there were so many department stores in those days.

I can remember a murder... and I can remember the Herald boy calling out 'Murder, Murder!. And I can remember coming home one night during the brownout and there was a man coming along behind me. When I stopped to cross the road under a street light he said do me, "Can you tell me where so and so is?" and I said, " No, I don't live around here... I was frightened because it was just after the Leonski murders (1942). That was something so unusual at that time that murder... I remember I was coming home from somewhere with Chris and we went past Bleak House and then we learned later that about half an hour after we walked past the woman was murdered....

I have never had any desire to go back to Middle Park to live... I loved being there when I was young but I have loved living here too... and the beach is so beautiful...



88 Page Street, Middle Park



345 Richardson Street, Middle Park



167 Mills Street, Middle Park