

## **PAT NESS**

*Pat was born on 7 February 1935*

*This interview was conducted on behalf of the Middle Park History Group by Annette Robinson at 10.00 am on October 19<sup>th</sup> 2015, at Pat Ness's home 39 Langridge Street, Middle Park*

### **Family History**

#### **My Mother's Family**

My grandfather on my mother's side was born on board ship at Port Jackson as it sailed into Sydney. He eventually made his way to the Victorian goldfields, where he met his future wife.

They were married in Bendigo. His surname was Miller and he had come from a milling family in Wales. His father was tragically killed when a wall of bags of wheat collapsed on him.

He too was the youngest in a large family of about 12 or 13 children.

My great grandmother's family were English, the Walters.

#### **My Father's Family**

My father, Steven Donnelly, and in fact all Dad's side of the family came to this side of Melbourne from Carlton, my mother's side from East Melbourne.

They were of Irish stock on Dad's side. Of Dad's parents, the mother was Anglican and the father Catholic, a mixed marriage it was called. She was from a Dublin family of Anglicans, and my great grandfather was born in the Gorbals, in Glasgow. It seems clear that they had emigrated to Scotland during the Irish famine.

My grandparents met at Sailors Falls near Daylesford and married there. Apparently it was customary for boys to take the father's religion, and girls the mother's. I knew I had a lot of cousins, who were of the Catholic faith, but I also had a lot of uncles and cousins on my mother's side who were Anglican, in fact three of them became Anglican clergy!

As it turns out, my grandfather's family comprised 12 children, and my grandfather Alfred was the youngest. There were a lot of older brothers and then quite a few younger girls. The older boys refused to take grandad to church with them so it was left to the girls to take him with them. Hence simply by a chance of his position in the family he turned out to become an Anglican!

My father's father Alfred Donnelly came to Melbourne when he lost his job in Bendigo. He had worked with his uncle in a gold mine in Bendigo but was sacked because of his support for Chinese miners who were demanding better pay and conditions. He was advised that as a result of his stance, he would never be able to find work in the mines in Victoria.

Unbeknown to them at the time my mother's grandfather and my father's father had worked alongside one another in Daylesford.

Alfred Donnelly did have trouble finding work in Melbourne, but eventually found employment as a tram driver.

#### **My father**

My father Steven Donnelly was the 3<sup>rd</sup> child in a family of seven. He was born and started school in Daylesford, but when his father was sacked the family moved to Melbourne and he continued his education at school in Carlton.

He left school before the age of 12, given an exemption to the normal rules of staying until 12 years of age.

His older brothers had been identified as those who would remain at school (two of them eventually became Anglican priests).

My grandfather suffered periodically from what was termed “miners’ lung”. The family was very poor, but Dad was allowed to finish school and go to work.

After a brief and undistinguished period as a French polisher, Dad got a job as a telegraph boy. He served in World War II, and went back to the PMG after his war years. His career at the Post Master General’s Department (PMG) lasted until he was 50 years of age, when he took his superannuation and bought a shop in Middle Park.

### **Middle Park**

Dad was well known in Middle Park as having the shop at 42 Langridge Street, and in later years another shop around the corner in Park road.

While he was working for the PMG, he worked at two other jobs on Saturdays to supplement his income. One with a shoe store in Flinders Street in the city, and then when the doors closed at noon, he would head down to Middle Park.

### **Ru Peel-Walker**

Somewhere along the line Dad had met a fellow called Ru Peel-Walker, a huge Maori man who was a well-known Middle Park identity. He ran the SP bookie operation at Middle Park Hotel, and Dad had the job of “cockatoo’ i.e. keeping an eye out for police! I’m not saying that there was an arrangement with the police, but they were never shut down, or had any trouble. Dad loved it!

Ru’s brother Des also came over from NZ to join his brother. He was also a large Maori fellow who loved to drink and have fun.

I can remember Dad telling us that the local Sergeant (possibly Ron Taylor) had a very simple method of handling any potential troublemakers. He would give them a swift kick up the backside!

Ru Peel-Walker had tremendous physical strength. Once when the car he was driving had been in a bad accident, he was able to bend the steering wheel and free himself from the vehicle. Actually it was injuries sustained in this accident that eventually and gradually took Ru to his grave.

Both Des and Ru were heavy drinkers. Ru and his wife Maureen had a most beautiful daughter Suzanne, of whom they were very proud.

They lived in Park Road, just around the corner from Langridge Street, near Harold and Isabel Arthur (Harold had played football for Hawthorn) and Joe McDonnell. Joe lived at 56 Park Road next to the block of flats which have recently (c 2012) had a makeover.

[Editor’s note: Maureen and Ru Peel-Walker lived at 40 Langridge St]

### **St Kilda junction**

Growing up, and during the war years we lived with my grandparents near Nelson Street, right at St Kilda junction in an upstairs flat. My grandparents still lived there when they put the freeway through (Dandenong Road).

We were close to the famous Taipan Café, and from my window I could watch as the crates of live ducks and chickens were delivered. The kitchen hand had the job of getting them ready for the

pot. He would tuck each bird under his arm and deftly cut its throat! He would spend most of the morning getting them killed and plucked ready for cooking.

I also remember all the beautiful fresh vegetables and greens arriving at the café.

Mum, Dad and I moved to Middle Park to live when I was about 15 years old. This was when Dad bought the shop in Langridge Street. They used the main bedroom and the smaller room behind that as storage for all the long-life goods that were sold.

Roo who had run the business couldn't manage it any longer, so Dad bought it from him. Dad was looking for something to do after leaving the PMG. Mum had perhaps had her first operation for cancer at this time.

I had to help every Saturday, as Dad was still helping with the SP bookmaking.

### **Community Life**

Dad knew nearly everyone in the suburb back then. He belonged to the RSL which had its club rooms over in the park. Mum and Dad used to go to dances, and Dad was involved with the Old Buffers' football match and parade which was a big event in Middle Park. There was also a big Old Buffers' Christmas party.

He also played cricket, and was a good spin bowler. All five of the Donnelly boys were good at sport. Their father used to discourage them from taking on wicket keeping, as it would ruin their hands for bowling. Dad took five wickets one day, but his average was about three per match.

Dad was a member of the committee who saw the need for and organised the building of the South Port Nursing Home. He was particularly keen on the installation of a bar at the home, so that the oldies who had enjoyed a beer or sherry could continue to do so.

Dad was later a resident of the home and died while there. Bob and I used to work as volunteers and enjoyed serving the residents a refreshing beer or other drink. I recall one lady absolutely crippled with arthritis, who loved her late afternoon sherry and would quietly ask if she could have a second one. The residents of South Port were not in the "high care" category as many at that residence are now.

Dad bought this house in the early fifties. It had belonged for many years to an Irish family with quite a few children. I recall a photo of a very young Daniel Mannix with golden blonde curls, hanging on the wall.

In order to buy the house, one of his brothers loaned him the two thousand pound deposit required. This was the brother who, after quite a successful career in business, became an Anglican priest.

Two thousand pound was a lot of money back then.

### **Dad's Shop and Nearby Businesses**

Our shop was a typical mixed business of the nineteen fifties. It had a milk licence and this was a big part of its success. A lane down at the side of the business made it easy for milk deliveries.

Dad was quite a good entrepreneur, and he built the business up. He installed big refrigerators for frozen vegetables and meat, and of course ice cream was a big seller. He also sold a full variety of sliced meats, many of which he prepared himself on the premises.

He never sold fruit or vegetables, as he didn't want to compete with Paddy Walsh around in Park Road, who had the greengrocers business.

In Park Road at the corner of Fraser Street there was a group of shops. Right on the corner there was a grocer's, then adjacent to that in Park Road there was Paddy Walsh the greengrocer, then Laurie Delaney's butchers shop.

At this time Mum's health was not good, she had had a second operation for cancer. Dad also had a hernia operation, and a massive skin graft to his face as a result of skin cancer.

They had had the shop for about 7 years, and no longer had the energy to run a small business which had to be open to customers from 6.30am til 9pm.

Mum and Dad decided to take a well-earned holiday and went on a cruise to Japan which they thoroughly enjoyed.

### **Children**

At this time I was starting my own family. Bob Ness and I had met while we were teenagers at school dances and we were married in 1956.

My first child Catherine arrived in May 1961. Mum and Dad had scheduled their cruise to Japan for after the baby's arrival. We rang to give them the good news, but were unable to reach them. After several unsuccessful attempts, my grandmother who was the first to come and visit me in hospital explained that it was the Warrnambool races and they were in Warrnambool. Dad did always love anything to do with racing!

After the holiday Dad had a variety of jobs, including working with a scaffolding company. He was blessed with an entrepreneurial spirit, and always enjoyed the company of his clients and colleagues.

### **Entertainment**

There was a Scottish couple who were friendly with Dad who lived just around the corner in Paterson Street. They were a lively pair who had been in the entertainment business.

When the black and white minstrels came to Australia on tour, Jock threw a welcoming party at his home and Mum and Dad were guests. Jock played the piano accordion. If Jock and his wife came to any parties or dinners at our house there was always music and lots of laughter, a bit too much for the neighbours I think.

There was, and still is a Greek couple at 50A Langridge who knew Dad. We've enjoyed their company and friendship over many years.

Dad was always good with children. We called him King of the kids!

### **Asbestos factory**

On the corner of Danks and Langridge Streets there was an asbestos factory which made asbestos gloves. People who worked at the factory were given four pints of milk a day, which Dad supplied from the shop.

This was supposed to minimise the risk of asbestosis, as if drunk it was thought that the sticky quality of the milk would collect asbestos before it could be digested!

This was particularly ineffective, especially as most workers would give the milk to their children. One man in particular, was Bill Slowly and we knew him quite well. He had 5 children including a daughter with osteomyelitis. She was often in the Royal Children's Hospital.

Before the factory was sold and later turned into apartments it had to be extensively rehabilitated.

## **Schooling**

I went to Prahran State School for my early primary education. Then I went to Malvern Central School.

Being born during the depression it was not unusual to be an only child. My parents gave me every encouragement, and were very proud of me when I received a half scholarship for Methodist Ladies College (MLC). This, however still put a fair amount of financial pressure on the family.

In retrospect Mac Robertson Girls High School just across the park would have suited me just as well, but I wanted to go to MLC as my best friend from Malvern Central was going there.

MLC was a three tram trip from Middle Park, and there were frequent strikes. I had to leave home pretty early to make it in time.

Although we did have a car, a 1928 Chrysler with a dickie seat, Dad was too busy with the shop to be able to drive me.

When I turned 18 and had finished school, I went on from MLC to pursue tertiary studies at Melbourne University.

My uncle Alfred had gone to university to study theology at the Theological College. Apart from him and his brother who later became a clergyman, I was the only one in Dad's family to pursue tertiary education. I started studying medicine first, but struggled with the enormous amount of rote learning required back then, particularly embryology.

Medicine had a very small intake, and competition to get in, and remain once enrolled was strong. It was the era of the Colombo Plan as well. I didn't want to put any further financial pressure on my parents as money was scarce. If you failed you could transfer to Science, and then re-apply for medicine.

I had always excelled at mathematics and science subjects, so I decided to switch to Science, eventually majoring in chemistry.

At this time, I was fortunate to receive a cadetship from CSIRO, which meant I had a paid job, and received a couple of afternoons off a week to continue my studies at RMIT. I loved my time with CSIRO, and eventually became a fully-fledged staff member.

I received a promotion and enjoyed the role of operating the infrared scanning microscope, a very important analysis tool. The microscope was used by the CSIRO scientists who would lodge their chemical samples with me for scanning and analysing.

I had to eventually resign from this job, as we were living in an apartment in East Malvern and I was getting home too late, if I happened to miss the last bus!

At this time, the late fifties early sixties, the Government was building schools to take all the baby boom children. I applied to be a teacher as the Education Department was desperate for Science teachers in particular.

When I approached the Department, they were keen to take me on as a maths and science teacher, even without a Diploma of Education.

I started at Huntingdale High school, which was temporarily housed in a large Sunday school while the permanent school was under construction nearby.

We had very little in the way of equipment, so I had to bring in some of the flasks, thermometers, and other items I had purchased for use during my studies at RMIT. I also asked the students to bring in some items commonly found at home, for example Pyrex dishes, corks, candles, glass screw top jars. Snails and the creeper commonly called "Wandering Jew" were also requested! These were used for an experiment that demonstrated that candles floating on corks would eventually use up all the oxygen in a lidded jar.

(Showing that levels of carbon dioxide would rise)??

The students were wonderful, full of enthusiasm, and with no discipline problems. They really wanted to learn.

About this time I became pregnant and unlike nowadays was required to resign. I spent the next seven years having and raising three children.

By the time seven years had passed my qualifications needed to be upgraded. The Independent Teachers' Association (ITA) matched people wishing to teach with schools needing teachers. I approached ITA and was able to pursue my study for the Diploma of Education over two years without fees, whilst at the same time working as a teacher in a secondary school.

My placement was with St Leonards in East Brighton, and the Principal was Mrs Woodhouse.

This was a very difficult time for me, as my elderly mother was very sick at this time, and I had three young children.

I had some very supportive colleagues at St Leonards who knew my home situation, and would volunteer to swap class periods with me, so that I could, on occasions, leave early so that I could visit Mum.

I stayed at St Leonards for five years, but eventually circumstances changed when it became a coeducational college with Richard Cornish the new principal.

As it didn't suit my skills as well as it had previously, I set about looking for a new job, changed schools, and spent the remaining ten years of my teaching career at Kilvington Grammar School.