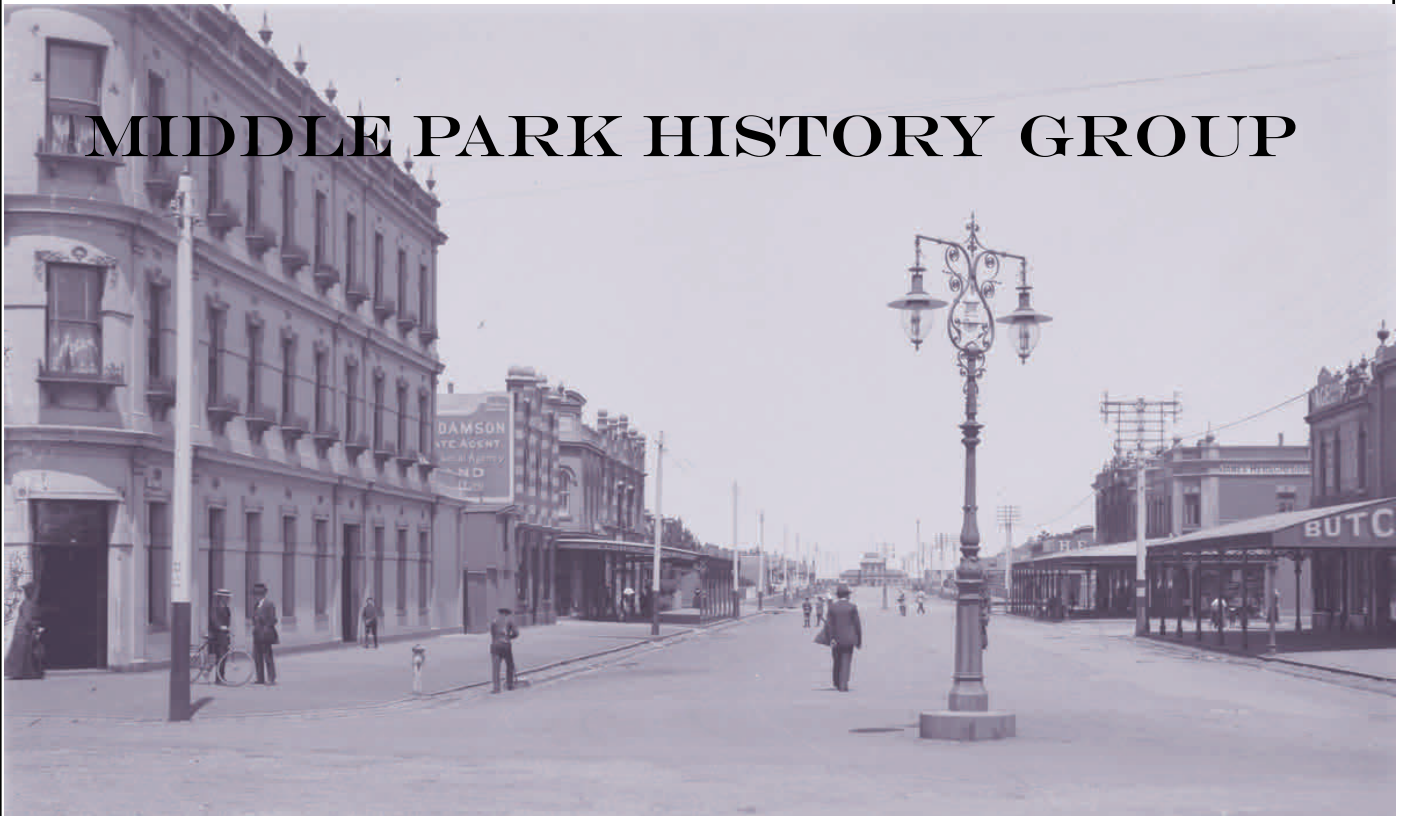


# MIDDLE PARK HISTORY GROUP



## Editorial

The MPHG met in person at the Middle Park Primary School on 3 May 2021. It was rewarding to see a good turnout.

The newsletter features two articles from local residents. One features memories of life at Middle Park “Central School”. The other is the second of a series by one-time resident, Vincent Kane.

The newsletter relies on Sonya Cameron for its report on what was happening here 100 years ago. This time a newspaper article reports on something that would not be seen today.

The presentation in February by Dr Sophie Couchman on local architect, Mee How Ah Muoy, has generated interest. According to Max Nankervis the plans the Ah Muoy-designed house printed in April’s newsletter was never built. The initials of the names of the six houses designed and built by Mee How Ah Muoy at 18–28 Nimmo Street, reprinted on page 2, spell out his name.

My apologies for the late delivery of this, newsletter number 39, and the inability to distribute printed copies of the last four issues to libraries and individuals.

*Gary Poore*

**MIDDLE PARK HISTORY GROUP Inc. PO Box 5276, Middle Park 3206**

Email: [middleparkhistorygroup@gmail.com](mailto:middleparkhistorygroup@gmail.com)

Website: <https://Middleparkhistory.org>

Newsletter editor : Gary Poore

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## 100 years ago : Ugly Man Competition!

*Sonya Cameron*

The annual Old Buffers Carnival was always held in Middle Park on the Queen's Birthday long weekend in June and the local paper, *The Record*, always reported on the activities. For the 1921 carnival a new event was introduced – The Ugly Man Competition. Such an event would not be considered 'politically correct' in the modern era, but there were no such scruples then.

It is not recorded who won this competition but a spokesman for the winning side of the football match, South, declared that 'our side have won a conclusive victory, asserting for all time our pre-eminence in the field. All the honors must rest with us in every event with one exception — that of the ugly man competition. The distinctions which conspicuousness in that competition gives our opponents they are welcome to.'

Article reproduced from *Record (Emerald Hill)*  
11 June 1921, p. 4

### UGLY MAN COMPETITION.

TO:  
NOMINATIONS FREELY  
WITHDRAWN.

In connection with the fancy dress football match played at Middle Park on Monday morning, a novel competition, an ugly man contest, was continued. This subsidiary event had been going on for some days. In the window of Mr. F. Greig's confectionery shop was displayed a grotesque painting by Mr. Mee-kin bearing an invitation to the public to nominate a person for the distinction of being the ugliest man in Middle Park. A condition of the competition was that 1/- had to accompany each nomination, the proceeds to go to the South Melbourne blind appeal. When a resident was nominated, his name was posted conspicuously in the window, to remain there till he learned of the prominence given to his facial charms, or want of charms. Naturally his friends responsible for the nomination of a citizen never bothered to consult him in the matter. All the victim could do was to withdraw his nomination, an operation only allowed by the nomination, at an expense of 1/- of somebody else.



## Middle Park Central School – a pupil’s view 1944-1947

### *Josephine Smith (née Peden)*

I did not live in the catchment area for what was then the Middle Park Central School. My home was in the suburb of Garden City where the local primary school was the Graham Street, Port Melbourne School. Port Melbourne had many blocks of public housing and that school was known as a rough place. The private home owners of Garden City felt themselves superior to their nearby Port Melbourne neighbours. So it was that my mother arranged for me and my younger brother to attend the more socially acceptable Middle Park Primary School. We travelled to and from the school by bus. My mother took us to the bus stop each morning and met us there on our return.

I started school in 1944 aged 5 in preparatory grade – the Bubs. Classes of nearly 40 children sat in rows of desks facing a blackboard – a space in each desk for the ink well. When we were old enough, we dipped our pens into the wells to write – pressing lightly on the upstroke, more heavily on the downstroke. In a front corner of the room there was an open fireplace. The teacher sat at a desk near the fire. We children were not so fortunate. Each winter I developed chilblains in my cold toes.

I liked all my class teachers. I am not sure I remember their names; Miss Edwards in prep and grade 1, Miss Clark in grade 2 and Miss Moore in grade 3. Miss Edwards, a white-haired lady, was particularly kind, Miss Clark was pretty and I respected Miss Moore. However, I was in fear of the Infant Mistress, Miss Jennings.

Every morning we gathered in the playground, or inside, in the assembly area, where we were addressed by Miss Jennings. Because it was war time there was a shortage of teachers and retired teachers were brought back into service. I suspect that was the case with our Infant

Mistress. She seemed very old, to me, her hair grey and wiry, her face red, her stomach protruding. She was always dressed in a navy blue, uniform-like dress and tucked into the belt of her dress was a leather strap. She wielded that strap on many children.

If any of her audience in assembly showed signs of inattention she would roar, ‘Who wants to go to the office?’ The office was her room in the school where she strapped naughty children. At home, my mother also talked about ‘the office’. It was the place where our father worked and it was a treat to visit him there, so Miss Jennings’ question puzzled me, but I had more sense than to take up her invitation.



*Josephine Peden, aged 6*

In assembly we sang patriotic songs: *We are such fortunate children/ born in this beautiful land/ where blossoms fair/ perfume the air/ and all is wondrous and grand.* And ending with no trace of irony: *there is no place like Australia.* And: *There'll always be an England ... Red, white and blue/ what does it mean to you/ surely you're proud/ shouting aloud/ Britons awake/ The Empire too/ we will depend on you ... There'll always be an England/ and England shall be free/ does England mean as much to you/ as England means to me?*

Another time when we were supervised by Miss Jennings was when our class teacher was away. The alphabet was written on every blackboard. Miss Jennings instructed us to copy the letters into our exercise books and then queue at her desk to show her our efforts. If our work was satisfactory, we were sent back to our desks to copy the alphabet again. If it was unsatisfactory, we were strapped on our open palms before returning to our desks to try again. I remember us waiting in the queue, licking the palms of our hands for it was said that made the strap less painful.

Miss Jennings frequently came into our classrooms to recruit a monitor to do some task for her. This was regarded by us as an honour – a reward for being well behaved. My one and only experience as a monitor was not a success. Miss Jennings came to our Grade 1 class and selected me. She gave me a jar and told me to fill it with water. I went to the drinking fountain and filled the jar, while she went back to her office. Sadly, being a 'good' girl, I did not know exactly where the office was. I hurried backwards and forwards between classrooms spilling water as I went. Eventually I found the little corridor to Miss Jennings den. By now the jar was only one third full. 'Come' she said. We went back to the classroom. Miss Jennings stood in the doorway, holding the jar aloft. 'I told this girl to fill this jar and look what she gave me,' she announced. I crept back to my desk in shame and Miss Jennings selected another monitor.

On one occasion when I was in Grade 2 the Infant Mistress came into our class and said words to the effect, 'You can tell what children will be like when you meet their parents. That's a bad one,' she said, pointing to a child, 'and that one and that one. When you meet their parents, you can tell.' Then she paused, 'That one,' she said, pointing to a boy called John Glass, 'He's a bad one but he has a very nice mother'.

There was no school uniform in those years, but my mother made me wear a navy tunic which 'didn't show the dirt'. I admired the girls whose clothes and hair styles were modelled on those of Shirley Temple, an American child film star. The girls wore 'Shirley Temple' short skirts my mother called 'bum freezers'. I wore fleecy cotton bloomers under my hated knee length tunic. My hair was cut in a bob, parted on one side and tied with a ribbon. The Shirley Temple hair style consisted of sausage curls all over the head.

Once, worn down by my pleas 'to have curls', my mother put my hair in wet rags. When the rags dried out and were removed, I looked in the mirror and was overjoyed. I thought I looked pretty. 'Awful,' my mother said and I never 'had curls' again.

Once a year there was an excursion to the zoo and on that day I was able to wear one of the pretty dresses my mother made for me.

Another unhappy episode with my hair was when I became infected with head lice. Was it kerosene my mother put on my hair as she ran a fine tooth comb through it?

The great thing about being in Grade 3 in the junior school was that Miss Jennings was left behind and the headmaster was said to be a nice man. I liked Miss Moore, our teacher. Her motto for us, written on the blackboard was: 'If a thing is worth doing it is worth doing well.'

Some of the girls in my class, who looked like Shirley Temple, took elocution lessons outside of school. Sometimes they performed in class the pieces they learned, in order to speak with a

correct accent: *Ten o'clock the spelling lesson's just begun/ Johnny threw an inkwell just for fun/ hit the teacher's ear with an awful splat/ she turned around and said, Who did that ...* Aged eight I admired this enormously.

We were visited from time to time by an old man for religious instruction. Miss Moore sat in the class while he taught. One day a girl named Wendy put up her hand and said, 'Can I go to the lavatory?' The old man stammered and was at a loss. Miss Moore gave Wendy permission to go and after the class was over she told us that the correct thing to say was, 'Please may I leave the room.' One way and another we were learning to become well spoken.

We had no physical education classes. Boys and girls played in separate sections of the playgrounds. At recess time, lunch time and before school, boys in the infant school joined hands and walked around chanting: who'll – play cowboys and Indians – who'll play. Any one who wanted to join them took hands at the end of the line until there were enough boys to play. Girls in the infant and junior school played hopscotch, games like oranges and lemons and skipped with ropes.

There was no school tuck shop. Boys and girls brought their lunches to school and ate in the shelter sheds – rectangular metal buildings, open facing the grounds, with a bench lining three walls. Boys sat at one end, girls at the other. All food was eaten in the shelter sheds, nowhere else in the grounds. My mother had pinned to the back of our kitchen door the recipe for 'The Oslo lunch' – a healthy substantial meal I disliked. Often I was sitting alone in the shelter shed

slowly digesting the food while all the other children were playing. Happily for me, my mother tired of having to throw away all I had not eaten, and after some years made me lunches that were less healthy, but were at least consumed. Across the road from the school was a milk bar where we could buy toffees with hundreds and thousands on top, for one penny each. My mother gave me permission to go there as long as I did not spend more than a penny. I carried two pennies every day to pay my bus fare.

The school did not have a library but we were fortunate to each have a hard back copy of The School Reader with stories, poems and illustrations. There were editions of the Reader for each grade of the school.

With chilblains, head lice, Miss Jennings and her strap, my tunic, my hair style, my first years of school had their difficulties but I became skilled for my age in reading, arithmetic and writing – the basics, perhaps all that could be achieved in those straitened times. I remain grateful to my teachers who worked in those stressful war years and with the remaining huge classes in the years after the war.

In 1948 our family left Garden City and my brother and I left Middle Park Central School. Today in 2020 my grand-daughter, Ella Strangward, is a student at Middle Park Primary School, as the school is today, where there is a wide curriculum, a library with many books, physical education, French and music. Her teachers are called by their first names and class sizes are in the twenties. She is enjoying her formal education.

## Vincent Kane

### Part 2 : The War Years

We were well aware that there was a war going on in the Pacific but of course knew nothing of the details. An anti-aircraft battery was placed in Albert Park, not far from the Bowling Club and only minutes from the Middle Park shopping centre. It was fired once, for practice, but not again. Residents and shopkeepers were told in advance of the intended firing and I can remember we all awaited the event with varying degrees of anticipation, anxiety and apprehension.

From time to time we would see unfamiliar aircraft flying overhead - we discovered later that they were American. Once or twice we managed to find our way on our bikes to Essendon aerodrome and identified Liberator bombers on the tarmac. We also saw the first test flights of the Australian designed Boomerang fighter through the hedge surrounding the airstrip at Fisherman's Bend. The engine had a distinctive high pitched whine and in test flight, the aircraft looked fast and nimble, but it turned out to be no match for the Japanese Zero fighter.

It was about this time that Tom was considered for enlistment in the armed services. His telegraphic skills and experience were thought to be useful, possibly in the RAAF, but to our disappointment, he failed the medical. High blood pressure was the problem. If he had been accepted for service, it might have been a turning point in our fortunes.

The war did influence our behaviour to an extent. John thought we should have an air raid shelter, so on one Sunday when both Tom and Kitty were away, we dug a big hole in the backyard, big enough for two people and put the earth into a number of empty sugar bags that Tom was keeping in order to claim the four pence refund from the wholesaler. We thought it would be a useful shelter against possible

Japanese air raids, but Tom was not pleased.

The arrival of American military forces in strength was a big shock to Australians, none more so than Tom. Early one morning, he was asleep in his usual place out on the balcony above the shop, while Kitty and the boys were asleep in adjacent bedrooms. Suddenly Tom rushed into Kitty's bedroom, put the light on, and exclaimed loudly 'The Japs are here!' Kitty, showing greater presence of mind, said 'Well, put the light off or we will all be shot'. After a few minutes of fear and indecision, Tom ventured downstairs to find Richardson St full of American troops en route to bivouac in



Tom's bedroom on the balcony of the shop

Albert Park. They had bailed up the milkman and commandeered his milk, and were now turning their attention to the fruit shop next door.

It emerged later that their troop ship had pulled into Port Melbourne earlier in the evening and for fear of Japanese air raids, the troops had disembarked immediately. Tom refused to open the shop for the Americans, and went back to bed.

Beyond the novelty of the shop, and the excitement of the war, there was plenty to keep us entertained. There was a picture theatre in the shopping centre, in Armstrong St just down from the pub. It was very small, and quite old. It was called, colloquially, 'the bughouse'.

It had an unusual feature in that each seat in the back row was wide enough to accommodate two patrons. I can recall sitting there with my mother on one occasion.

Further along the beach front approaching St Kilda there was a busy entertainment area, headlined at the far end by the Palais, in those years a venue for dances, Luna Park and Acland St, famous for its cake shops. There was also a live theatre on the upper esplanade, known as Earls Court, featuring artists like the Parker Sisters who patterned their performances on the famed American trio, the Andrews Sisters, and a comedy duo known as 'Izzy and Aussie', whose script today wouldn't pass the racist test.

The Parker family lived near us in Harold St. Mr Parker and my mother were usually among the small congregation leading the singing of the Benediction hymns at Mt Carmel Church of a Sunday evening. Probably through that association we received complimentary tickets to attend a matinée show at Earls Court on one occasion.

On the lower esplanade of this entertainment precinct, on an area called the Catani Gardens, all sorts of sideshows prospered. On Friday evenings, and throughout Saturday, they

entertained visitors, mainly servicemen with their girl friends, and others who had moved to Melbourne because of the war.

We children never had money to spend on sideshows but just to watch was entertaining. Our favourite shows included the one where patrons fired at moving targets with a pea rifle, and another one where a gentleman sitting on a collapsible seat would tumble into a tub of water below if the softball you threw scored a bulls-eye.

The Government introduced food rationing in the early 40s. Ration books were issued - butter, sugar, tea and meat were rationed. This had a direct and positive effect on the operations of the shop. One positive for us was that because butter came in a block of 56lbs, encased in grease proof paper, and inside a wooden box, there was an allowance made for the bits of butter that were 'lost' in extracting the bulk amount from its packing. We benefited from that, and passed it on to the customers as well.

With meat rationed, the sale of rabbits increased greatly - although they had the title of 'underground mutton', they were not rationed. A firm called Bodleys, with a processing factory located on the Yarra where Southbank is now, was the major distributor in Melbourne for 'dressed' rabbits for the table. Once a week the salesman would call at the shop with a quantity of skinned rabbits laid out on a large wooden tray, their insides exposed to show their freshness, which was apparently determined largely by the appearance of their kidneys.

My mother made sure she was present when the salesman came because sometimes there would be a hydatids lump visible on the carcass which my father might overlook. My mother would pick over the rabbits and reject any that were not perfect. The salesman would just smile and say 'OK, that's one for the cooker' - whatever that meant.

## MPHG news

Our last meeting on Monday 3 May 2021 attracted a substantial audience at the Middle Park Primary School. Dr Judith Buckrich spoke on women's rowing in Australia with special references to Albert Park lake.

Unfortunately, during these unsettled times we do not have another meeting scheduled. For 2021.

### President's Report

Recently the Port Phillip Cultural Heritage Committee, of which we are a member, was debating the fate of a giant World War One German cannon brought home as a treasured souvenir by the ANZACs and showcased in Alfred Square from 1919. Apparently this 30 foot monster once fired shells a distance that could reach Geelong. It was removed in 1942 ironically as it was feared that it could make our foreshore a target for Japanese bombers. The cannon, now in Caribbean Park, Scoresby, has been seeking a possible new location. Should we bring it back to its 1919 home in Port Phillip? Some argued no — that this 11.5 ton machine was a symbol of death and destruction and had no place as a modern memorial. Others of us argued the yes case that the Diggers brought this armament back (not easy) precisely to show us the horrors of war that they faced and that we the citizens should never forget. The no case won. Our discussions illuminated the wider debate in Australia about monuments, particularly colonial ones: what should we keep and what should we discard? I like to think monuments about controversial events remain useful because the historical debates that they provoke are important to the ever-changing views of ourselves.

Meyer Eidelson

### Your MPHG committee

President:	Meyer Eidelson
Vice-President:	Vacant
Secretary:	Vacant
Treasurer:	Sonya Cameron
Liaison officer:	Diana Phoenix
Committee members:	Abramo Ierardo, Gary Poore