

RYDE LIBRARY SERVICES



City of Ryde

## COMMUNITY LIFE

Library – Oral  
History  
An Interview with  
Neville Skinner

November 2010



## An Interview with Neville Skinner

**Interviewee:** Neville Skinner

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As a young photographer I used to take photos of gravestones by moonlight on long time exposure. There was a mixture of shops, there was a library, it was not a chatty place I don't know how they made a crust.

**Q: You're talking about a little old private lending library rather than a Council building?**

Oh yes it was a private one. Then there was Dick Martin's hardware store and my dad and Dick Martin they were very, very friendly. Then there was a lolly shop and then there was a barber shop and I think his name was - - - . That was a dreadful place, it was dark and gloomy. Bearing in mind this was the depression, there were a lot of young males out of work and they used to just stand around in there and smoke. And so it was all tobacco stained and the walls were covered with the pictures of boxers and racehorses.

Then there was the paper shop. They were good sticks, they were cheerful blokes, and then over Victoria Road there was a tram line. Across Victoria Road there was St Anne's.

There was a menswear store on the corner and I think subject to correction that was called Dave's, I think it was called Dave's. That was the only shop on that corner. There were other shops going down towards Argyle Avenue. Then, the Town Hall was there - - - - ground floor premises in the Town Hall, and there was a Town Hall basement before you got to the start of the school paddock. And I can give you recollections of the Town Hall basement if you like.

**Q: Yes, I'd love to hear that.**

Well it was during the depression. And one personal insight there was that my parents always paid cash. Dad was a qualified technician. He was never out of work. He used to talk about Irishman's rises when his salary was cut. And so there'd be a 10% on top of his salary. I think that in the long run his pay was probably reduced 30 or 40%. Nevertheless they always paid cash. We didn't have a black book and plenty of kids used to go down to the corner shop with a black book, where what they bought was entered in there and then one fine day maybe the shop keeper got paid. A lot of the shopkeepers simply had to allow them to run up bills because it was a very grim time. But



my recollection then was - they'd be sitting in the sun with their backs to the wall - sitting on the footpath, there might have been 40 or 50 men dressed in dyed Army tunics or greatcoats. Why they were dyed - - - instead of just the original Khaki I don't know. But they were handouts to unemployed blokes. And they were sitting there waiting to be called to go in and collect their relief coupons because a lot of food was sold in exchange for food coupons or to collect the dole and so on. I presume they got money, I don't know because that was all a closed book to me.

**Q: Or to wait for relief work?**

Oh possibly it could all have been to do with relief work.

**Q: So what street was this? They were sitting on the road -**

- Tucker Street.

**Q: Beside the Town Hall?**

Yes Mr Heap's chemist shop on the left. And the Town Hall basement, which was where this administration was done.

**Q: Do you remember having any feeling, you know - did any of them look like people that might frighten you as you walked past? Or did you realise they were just ordinary every day, could have been, you know just -**

- my overwhelming impression was pity. Because we knew people. I didn't know many of the families at that stage. But we did know people who were out of work.

**Q: When you said your father got pay reductions, did he also get reduced in time. Some people had 3 weeks on and one week off. That was quite common.**

I don't remember dad being rationed. I think I would know if that had happened.

**Q: What other memories do you have of this hard depression time? Do you remember its impact perhaps on children, people that you knew personally?**

I mentioned that dad, that we were always able to pay. I think it was a point of - it wasn't skite, it was a point of self respect that they paid. And we, my brother and I always had shoes, we never went to school bare footed. We'd like to have gone barefooted. In fact it was a badge of honour to stand on your toes in the tar when it was bubbling. But we always wore shoes to school but I would say 50% of the kids went barefooted because they couldn't afford shoes. So that was a personal reflection. I do remember a lot of relief work and I also remember fellows coming door to door. I can still visualise even



when I was walking down to West Ryde station to go to high school, there was relief work going on there. I used to go along Thorn St and many of the streets of Ryde and I think this happened also with Beryl, it is called Malvern St now because the street had 3 names. Simplified now. And the road base was broken sandstone which was brought in with horse and drays and it was broken up and there were many of those men working there, white collar workers. Breaking that up to make the road base [inaudible words]. But it was a common sight. I remember Frankton Avenue more - - - than Morrison Road. There were men coming to the door with battered old suitcases selling minor items of haberdashery, elastic, buttons, safety pins and that sort of thing. And I know they went to Beryl's place too and I had it from Beryl's mother that she always did her best to buy a shillings worth of something and my mother used to buy untold quantities of elastic and buttons.

**Q: So there was no attitude that they were a nuisance coming round?**

No, oh no. I think there was a general feeling of sympathy. I know that there were young men. They would have been 20 or so that used to hang around Ryde. The term that was used for them was 'louts'. And in Balmain they were supposed to be real tough guys. But I think it was all fairly innocent. And I don't remember anything like the vandalism that you see nowadays. There was certainly no graffiti. There was a lot of breaking in, a lot of houses were empty. A lot of them untenanted and so even as kids we used to steal fruit, we had fruit trees of our own, but it was all an adventure. And so there would be broken windows. There was a bit of vandalism that used to happen on New Year's Eve. People used to paint the numerals showing on New Year on garages and on cracker night they used to blow up letter boxes. Put on a bit of atmosphere

**Q: Basket bombs.**

Oh yes (Laughs). Hooked on gunpowder (Laughs). We used to make our

(Laughs) -

**Q: Did you ever get caught doing any of these misdemeanors?**

Oh yes we were sprung down on the bottom of Regent Street. We were very strong on billy carts, but they were a terrible encumbrance if you were chased by someone whose fruit was pinched and my brother got caught once down the bottom of Regent Street and couldn't climb over the fence because he had this sort of cart thing with him.



**Q: Did you and your brother make billy carts by yourselves, or did you get help?**

I don't know that dad would have helped but he had a workshop. Being a technician - he wasn't really much of a carpenter but there were always tools, there was always a workshop and it became a life form interest doing - well I'm skilled in word work now, though it wasn't my job. But dad used to bring home big packing cases from the - made of pine because the PMG used to import batteries from America in beautifully made pine packing cases and so we made those and obviously dad used to find the money for us to buy the wheels but we made them up ourselves. Ours had brakes on them. Foot operated brakes. We were fairly cluey when it came to that sort of thing and in fact we'd been on a holiday once up to St Albans to get rabbits. So we thought we'd tan the rabbit skins and we had fur upholstered seats in our billy carts. But they went rotten because we hadn't tanned them at all. (Laughs).

**Q: So that was just you and your brother trying to tan the rabbit skin?**

Yes, yes.

**Q: Some of these misdemeanors. Did you ever have the indignity of being caught by a policeman doing anything?**

No, no. There was a poor old half wit who used to hang around Ryde. He was congenitally deformed. There was a fair amount of congenital deformity in my day.

Yes. And he was treated with good fairness. He wasn't dangerous. But he always used to threaten us that the slaving dog will get you. I don't know whether the slaving dog existed or not. But I suppose - we used to scale on the trams. I've even scaled down as far as Weavers Loop and I never got caught. We used to pinch fruit, used to blow up letter boxes. But I think they were the only illegal things we did.

**Q: When you were talking about, there was a lot of congenital deformity around the area, do you mean a lot of people were mentally and physically disabled people, walking around?**

I can remember the kids at school. The grossest abnormality I can remember is a lad whose fingers were fused on one arm and on the other one he didn't have a hand and one leg was grossly shorter and the other 50% longer than it ought to have been and so he scrambled along a bit like Quasimodo in Notre Dame, a hunchback. **[Music overplay]**.



**Q: We are talking about people with deformity. Would you have been aware of people who had childhood polio much as a child?**

Yes. Polio, it was called infantile paralysis. It came about in those days and in fact a fellow I chummed up with at high school was the brother of a close pal of Beryl's she chummed up with her in secondary school. Their name was Brett. He became an internationally renowned marine artist. But Judith Brett had polio. And I think that she was house-bound. I never met her.

**[Tape break]**

**Q: Now what other things would you like to tell me about your early memories in the Ryde area? Perhaps some of your leisure activities?**

Yes. There were a number of status symbols amongst boys. To be able to throw stones a long distance and very accurately. I think I was a pretty good shot. There was a pal called Ernie Rogers he could throw a stone over the top of some of the bunya pines that used to be in the paddock on the corner of Morrison Road and Church Street, but that was a point of pride to be able to do that. I've mentioned it was a point of pride to stand on the tar in your bare feet and not cry out. (Laughs).

We had hobbies - we were all members of the league of bird lovers but we all used to collect birds eggs and there was a hierarchy in birds eggs, sparrows eggs were the lowest but then you got up into the, things like Willy Wagtails, but I used to collect eggs without a second thought. I robbed the birds nests in other words and we used to blow the eggs. In fact robbing sparrow's nests - there are a lot of trees around here but I've never seen a birds nest around here. Perhaps it's all been changed. But the sparrows used to build nests of grass in the tall trees and we would climb trees, even bunya pines which would scrape the skin off you. But we carried eggs down in our mouths. And anything else that would be in the nest. And that was a hobby. I looked after my collection and I had them in boxes with cotton wool and that sort of thing.

Billy carts were really big in our lives and it's interesting to reflect on the difference between traffic conditions between now and then because you can visualise Parkes Street. We used to seek out a course, so we used to go up to the top of Parkes Street with the billy cart and we would come full tilt down Parkes Street which obviously was tarred by then, and then around into Linton Avenue and right down the bottom. The aim was to see if we could get up to Mr Russell's butcher shop and we never got there. The other hill was to go up to the Ambulance Station on Blaxland Road and come down what is now Melville Street with a slalom and straight across Parkes Street and Linton Avenue and try to get up to the butcher shop. There may have been traffic risks, but I don't think so. So billy carts were very big and we even went for a day's outing now and then right down to Tennyson Road. I suppose speaking of misdemeanors rather than hobbies, I used to wag school.



**Q: Why did you do that? You were bored or you thought there were better things to do?**

It was only on sports days. I don't know that I was - I didn't think much of Meadowbank baths I knew they were grotty, and the beach was under mud. I used to fall in with bad company I seem to have done that a lot in my life, present company excepted. (Laughs). I used to wag school and it was quite a badge of honour but you would shadow the fellows marching down to the baths and hide and watch them as if we were some sort of troops lying in ambush for them. Because I read a lot, mainly adventure stories, there were the Valentines books and so on, and the Conrad books.

**Q: What about Biggles?**

Yes I suppose Biggles had been invented. We used to get comics and I think the comics we got must have been the sort of 'upmarket' ones. There was one soppy one called 'My Favourite', oh god. That was all terribly moral I think, but there was 'The Magnet' and 'Chums.'

**Q: You used to read Conrad? Joseph Conrad? He'd be quite hard for a child?**

Well I remember reading Casper Johns and there was one with the name Jim in it. Was it Lucky Jim? I know Kingsley Amis wrote a book called Lucky Jim.

**Q: Captain Jim I think, they made a film out of it years ago. I think I know the one you mean.**

So there were those adventure stories, that was our main reading.

**Q: And you were trying to read into this, the stalking of the kids?**

It was only on swimming afternoons. Other journeys I made not wagging school, was out to North Ryde. North Ryde was all paddocks except there was a sprinkling of houses along Lane Cove Road and off to the left I forget the name. Other simple little things.

**Q: When you went out there did you go to De Burghs bridge? Friends would do that, walk out there and have a picnic.**

Oh well - - - - - didn't do that of course.

**Q: No and did you raid fruit trees out at North Ryde?**

No, no we didn't need to go that far. (Laughs). There were plenty of them around Regent Street. I mentioned my father was a practical sort of bloke and there was a workshop and so on and as a hobby, naturally I saved stamps, heavens above, is there anything more futile? But my brother and I both made models, there was a myth amongst school kids at Ryde that there was a



bottomless water hole in the Lane Cove River there. But it was so deep that no one had ever been able to find the bottom of it. But we used to go out to what is now the Lane Cove National Park where the weir is and going up to Chatswood, because we always made models. We made yachts and used to sail them out there. And they were beaut, because we used dad's workshop and his tools. And dad made a few of those for us and quite a lot of things, like taking the clockwork motor out of an old clock, and they were very nicely made and dad was very patient about that because one of them - he would actually plank it from cutting out of some softwood, planks about an eighth of an inch thick and all done with a handsaw because there were no such things as power tools. But I made a lot of aircraft models I was potty about airplanes. There was no question as to which - - - game and I joined up. And that really reflected my father having been such an example, he took us out to see all sorts of memorable events in aviation. So we were always making things and as I mentioned, we made our own gunpowder. We would have been at high school then. It's quite easy to make gunpowder, I can still make it. Some of our mixes were very, very touchy indeed and they'd go off if you looked sideways at them.

My brother got whooping cough in his intermediate year and he lost months and months of school and it was still tough to get jobs and the only job he could get from a mediocre intermediate pass, because there is no question, my brother and I we were university material, but it certainly wasn't the custom for the sons of tradesmen to go to university, so my brother got a job in the workshops in the County Council and he was good at metal work and he made cannons and so we used to make cannons and did all sorts of ballistic experiments with cannons and we eventually - my brother blew himself up - and he's still got the marks on his left hand that was shattered (Laughs) and that was the end of that. So there were all these sorts of hobbies and making telephones out of a length of string and two jam tins, which taught us something about acoustics.

**Q: You mentioned before when we were chatting about the pictures. In the teenage years, the things you did then. I suppose you went to the Rialto at Ryde? What are your memories of that?**

It was lovely, it was years before its time. And it's a disgrace it was knocked down to put up that grotty shopping centre. It's a dreadful shopping centre. Most of them are, but that one is crook.

**Q: The Top Ryde shopping centre that is very proud of being the first of those type of shopping centres in NSW, it had its 40th anniversary last year.**

Yeah well if that's something to boast about well o.k., they are welcome to it.



**Q: At the time did you ever think it was awful it was built - (overtalk).**

- we moved back to Ryde in about 1949 for a few months and then had this house built, so we came here in 1959. But the pictures were really important. Not movies, pictures, to us as young people. It must have been when I was walking home from the - - - - guild down to Franklin Avenue that I walked along Hope St and the Rialto was being built and I've always been interested in building, we come from a family of builders and architects. I walked all over that while it was being built, climbed all around it, into the projection rooms and backstage and so on, and I think that would have triggered off my interest in building construction. And then you could walk down from the tram terminus, you go down Parkes Street which was really tame, or you could go down through the Chinamen's gardens, and they were fairly neglected by then. But there were the dams along the way, so they were full of, you know, tadpoles and frogs.

**Q: The dams of the Chinese?**

Yes, it was tiered, it wasn't really terraced you know, like those in Indonesia. But there were about three dams about 20 ft square or something like that. They would have been filled only with recent rain water. How the Chinese got the water out I don't know but they used to water their gardens with two enormous watering cans with a yoke across their back. One either side. So you'd walk down there and I don't ever remember being chased by them but there were lurid tales about kids being chased by the Chows.

**Q: What era are you talking about then?**

Must have been 1934. I think they were disused by then.

**Q: But the Chinese weren't still there at that stage.**

Oh I think they might have gone. Well you can probably get from the archives the date of the construction of the Rialto. And so you could walk down there. I know that my heart was in my mouth, I've got recollections of trepidation. By contrast to England where it is a crime to take a short cut through a paddock unless there is a public footpath, you took shortcuts through private land and if it was a vacant house well you went through it without thinking. I don't think I ever walked through the Messrs. Longs orchard up the top there, I think that I struck back to Parkes Street before I got there.

But the Rialto was an enormously enlightened building. It was elegant, its beauty was pretty much the centre of social life for many adults in Ryde and it was certainly a centre of our social lives because we spent our early teens in a church atmosphere. We belonged to the church.



**Q: What church are you talking about?**

Ryde Meadowbank Presbyterian. We belonged to the Fellowship Tennis Club. It wasn't that we were cliquey at all but we were pretty self sufficient. And so the routine was to have tennis on Saturday afternoon and go out to Gussie's and book the seats and go to the pictures at night. And we used to do that - we hadn't paired off. After a while we had paired off (refers to Beryl. You and I paired off didn't we dear?) but I don't remember - - - .

(Beryl contributes). 'Cause we went to the pictures separately the girls and the boys and paid our own tickets, didn't we? But we certainly met there.'

Neville: We stuck together.

Beryl: Yes and we went our separate ways home.

**Q: So the tennis club was the centre of social life. (Inaudible mixed conversation).**

**Q: What are your memories of Gus Bowe? He was a real character in the Ryde area.**

In recent years (Beryl: A nice man.) One of your subjects said to us recently.

**Q: What do you mean? One of the people I've interviewed?**

Yes, or one of your volunteer interviews. 'Did you know that Gus Bowe was gay?' (Laughs)

**Q: (Laughs) Yes that's what people keep telling us. (Laughs).**

Well we were all pretty innocent.

**Q: (Laughs) You probably didn't know there was such a thing. (Laughs)**

No, no. But it was a big deal. My parents didn't go to the pictures very much, and Beryl's parents used to go down too, I think it was called the Royal at West Ryde. But we can think of the parents of kids we went to school with who regarded it as the high point of the week, not only going to the pictures, but to be greeted by Mr Bowe. 'Good evening Mr Bowe'. (Laughs) It's terribly sad really. He used to wear a dinner suit. You entered down a flight of steps into a forecourt, the foyer was beautiful, there were fountains, a box office over to the right hand side and Mr Bowe would stand there. And I seem to remember that the two bob seats were 1/11d halfpenny for the seat and a halfpenny for tax. But there was no tax on the 1/6d seats where we used to go unless we went with - and I don't think it happened very often, but a mate of ours - because we had no money at all - but we used to have to go on the 'bobs' when Bill came with us because - I think he was too lousy anyway - nice bloke but still has the first quid he ever earned. So we used to have to go



in the 'bobs'. There were wonderful social customs about that. Not that I ever took Beryl into the two bobs, because Beryl and I weren't - - - then, sweethearts when I joined up. But you know - I disappeared from Ryde for years - but you would see young blokes bring girls in and they'd go out at interval to buy a box of chocolates (laughs) one and sixpenny chocolates in amongst in a brown paper bag (Laughs). It was a status symbol I think to be able to do that. Put them in a box of Winning Post or Old Gold. But it certainly was very important to us and we liked the flicks. And I know that many of them were corny but we were very impressionable because we were both fond of music and to go to a Nelson Eddy and Jeanette McDonald!! - on the way home from the pictures I used to do my Nelson Eddy voice. (Laughs). But we did love music. The newsreels were great and it was very important.

**END OF INTERVIEW**