

Ballina in the, 1950s; the halcyon days, by Roger K.A. Allen

As a former child citizen of Ballina and student of the Ballina Primary School I am delighted to write about Ballina in the 1950's, having published an illustrated autobiography, *Ballina Boy; a child's odyssey through the 1950s* which encapsulates my childhood as the son of a Ballina GP.

Now 63 years old, I work Wesley Hospital, Brisbane as a Thoracic and Sleep Physician, but those five years in Ballina I regard as the most evocative period of my life; a veritable Tom Sawyer life along the banks, not of the Mississippi, but one of the longest navigable rivers on the sea-board of NSW, the Richmond River. In Greek mythology, the halcyon days ('αλκυονίδες) were fourteen days in midwinter when the sea calmed enough for the kingfisher ('αλκυόν) to build her nest on the ocean, and time enough to hatch her young. Thus, this wonderful time in Ballina was for me my halcyon days.

The fifties were also halcyon days for Australia after the dark days of WW2 and then the Korean War, and before the tectonic shift of the sixties with the influence of television, women's liberation, changes in societal mores, the Cold War and space race, the repealing of the White Australia Policy, the end of colonialism and the chronic festering sore of Indochina. It was a period when social and domestic stratification remained much as it had always been. Women were mostly prevented from working once married, men expected their dinner when they got home, wool was a pound a pound, Bob Menzies had always been PM, Rosewall and Hoad dominated world tennis, as the "baggy green" dominated cricket for a decade.

I turned four the week we arrived in Ballina in the spring of 1955, with my sister, Kathy born on the same day. As the surgery adjoined our house, from a young age I was exposed to humanity vomiting, bleeding, wheezing and dying as our living room was a holding bay when it got busy. In this time before Medicare and patients paid in shillings or a perhaps for an operation a guinea (21 shillings), and sometimes in kind; fish, crabs, prawns or a quart of cream Mum churned into butter with her Mixmaster. Telephones and cars were not a given, and thus bicycles and "Shanks pony" propelled the town, country kids got the school bus and few were driven to school.

The extraction of fish bones from throats was an inconvenient after-hours job for my father who I think could identify both species and length of the fish by the object removed. He used glass syringes, cat gut soaked in disinfectant, steel needles he sharpened again after sterilising in his steamer and Mum made up bandages at night. He developed his own x-rays at the hospital dark room with its orange lights and little steel clothes pegs to hang the wet films, delivered babies, took out tonsils and appendices, gave anaesthetics with ether dripped on a Schimmelbusch mask, did basic pathology in his surgery with a

haemoglobinometer, tested urine for protein by boiling it and adding acetic acid and did “micro-urines” to diagnose urinary tract infections.

I went to the local primary school of foot, along unmown grass footpaths of *paspalum* lined with deep storm-water drains filled with sedges, moss, tadpoles, small fish and other creatures aquatic, with these filling with the high tide and in storms, the whole town was an ocean until the next low tide with water clearing as if Moses had cast his staff upon the waters. We listened to the Argonauts on ABC radio in the late afternoon, every kid knew who Phidias was and about Jason and the Golden Fleece. There was no television, but at night we played card and board games, listened to the gramophone and were happy.

The society of the town was divided by the Catholic/Protestant fault-line which led to jeers between children, chants and derogatory comments about “conny-wackers” and “proddy dogs” while patients tended to gravitate to doctors along the same sectarian divisions except when they wanted the Pill. There also existed a third miscreant, possibly the majority, who just went fishing, letting piscatorial parables wash over his head as he cast his rod, rolled a smoke and contemplated the meaning of life.

Most children had a father or uncle who had been in “The War”, most had fishing bags which were ex-Army haversacks or gas mask bags, many kids went to school in bare feet, and Norco issued free of charge a delightful variety of flavoured milk with ice on the crates every morning at Little Lunch unlike what I later had in Brisbane. Teachers used chalk and black boards, and from brown paper scrolls hanging from the blackboard we recited tables like Buddhist monks each morning, along with forays in mental arithmetic or “mental” to challenge the dyslexic. Chalk and dusters were favourite missiles used by teachers for errant students, while more disobedient girls had their legs slapped and boys got “the cuts”. At the back of the school was the playing field called “The Back Paddock” separated by a dirt service lane and obligatory storm water drain I once fell into, only to emerge brown and green. We played Red Rover, football in winter and cricket in summer and girls did boring stuff.

Every street had a lane behind for the utilities; the “dunny cart” and the garbage truck as we still had creosote-blackened “pans” which held about twelve gallons for toilets. Our “dunny” which was located at the back of our car shed was inhabited by a large green frog well fattened on flies and cockroaches, and beside which was a tin of sawdust to disguise our donations. As visits to the unlit toilet at night were regarded as scary on account of nocturnal fauna, Dad and I usually had competitions to see who could hit the fence while we relieved ourselves on the back lawn.

As there was no vet, the locals thought my father was a “soft-touch” and as result we often found kittens in sugar bags thrown over our back fence. In our garden was an aboriginal kitchen midden from antiquity, comprising millions of pipi and oyster shells clearly eaten *au*

*naturel*. We had an incinerator, that indispensable adjunct to modern living, in which pus-soaked or bloody bandages became burnt offerings along with anything made of carbon my father could find in a day before the ice caps started melting. We also had a rusty 44 gallon drum of beer bottles my father called "dead marines", reserved for the Scouts and every year we gave the garbo and the dunny man a bottle of beer which then was what we'd now call a "Tallie" as bottles only came as big and stubbies and cans were unheard of except for toilets and powdered milk.

The town was also divided into predictable social strata; blue collar including fishermen, white collar, aristocrats, landed gentry and at the top, dairy farmers etc. The most valued people in town were the three doctors, the hospital matron, the headmaster of the new high school, and that of the primary school, the school inspector (akin to an agent of the NKVD), bank managers, the pharmacist trained in cryptography and doctor's hand-writing, and the local clergy who appeared on Sunday except for the priest who liked a beer. The police had a close working relationship to the doctors for obvious reasons and I am not sure if there was a lawyer in town. As if to prove that power rested in the hands of the proletariat, the mayor was the chief "sanitary" or "dunny man", Mr Munsie, a consummate politician who had mastered the art of taking shit from people without giving it back.

Sunday was swimming at Shaw's Bay, then quite deep and treacherous, where I nearly drowned, or at the surf beach where there were Life Savers, ice-creams and girls. Although my father liked the surf, he always wore black lace-ups much to my embarrassment and read Homer in the original on his beach towel while imitating a lobster as others read the form guide or the comics. My mother used to take me to swim in the rock pools at Shelley Beach once I could swim and there, with my goggles, I discovered the wonders of the deep.

Beyond the sea wall Smithie had once spotted, was a constant procession of trawlers and whale chasers armed with harpoons heading to and from Byron Bay where the sea was red, with its shark infested waters beneath the kilometre-long jetty, laden with the striped black and white carcasses of hump-backs languishing ignominiously on a flat topped railway trucks, while the acrid smell of boiling blubber could be carried for miles with a favourable breeze.

Lake Ainsworth with its diving tower and tea-coloured water was a favourite with children and the Boy Scouts (I was in the Cubs) while we often saw Canberra Bombers on bombing runs at Evan's Head. I wore a dark navy shirt with long sleeves with IST Carinya on it and my uniform made me look more like one of Mussolini's Black Shirts.

Money was in pounds, shillings, pence and half-pence and an order at the tuckshop across the road from the school required a slick mind and your wits about your lest you be short-changed. Weights, measures, distances were all in Imperial, with ounces, pounds, gallons, quarts, pints, acres, rods, rods, chains, yards, feet, inches, stone, pounds and ounces with

timber in super-feet while medicines were in minims, grains and ounces. There were no calculators, and in high school, slider rules but good students, accountants and bank tellers could calculate in their heads in milliseconds while most floundered except for bookies.

As not everyone had a car, to our front door came legions of vendors; milkmen, initially delivering pouring milk into the white enamel billy we left on the front stairs and later in pint bottles, the green grocer with a blue T-model Ford with a tray on the back and a set of swinging scales, the baker and also a pie man who also came to the school, and the butcher delivered, and doctors did home visits. On Sunday the Salvation Army drove around in the afternoon with a brass band on the back, enticing reflection and repentance with “Amazing Grace” and “Nearer my God to Thee”, as kids on bikes or billy carts followed behind like blow flies behind the dunny truck.

As a form of penance I was forced to visit the dentist near our house as “chewie” (PK Chewing Gum) and boiled lollies were added sustenance after school. The dental drill turned as slowly and noisily as a cement mixer, causing one’s whole head to vibrate while dental injections were only administered for base cowards or for tooth extractions. The edentulous were all too common as even people in their twenties had all their teeth extracted, so poor was dental hygiene in those days before fluoride and floss.

Up the road from us was the picture theatre to which we flocked on Saturday afternoons and sometimes saw visiting shows like the puppets called the Tin-Tookies. I remember hiding behind the seat when I saw Fantasia with my father as I was horrified by *Tyrannosaurus rex* eating a triceratops. Further upstream was the “Co-op” where trawlers and fishermen brought in their fresh fish, prawns and oysters, the latter coming in tall thin bottles with a cork, one of which my father had to extract from a man’s bottom. Fish was wrapped in newspaper that universal covering also used in fish and chip shops and cut up into squares as dunny paper so that one’s nether regions could feature the latest headlines or Sunday comics.

Boys had crystal sets to listen to the cricket, played in trees, fished in creeks, siphoned up yabbies, disappeared til dark and lit fire-works. At Guy Faulks’ Night on the Fifth of November and for weeks leading up to that, empty drink bottles were traded for threepence and three pence bought more gunpowder than once under the Houses of Parliament and a gob-stopper to boot. Rockets whizzed into the night sky, landed on rooves, and Kathryn Wheels, spun concentric circles of excitement on back fences sometimes catching them on fire and all in memory of the martyrdom of St Kathryn whom I thought was named after my sister.

The barber’s shop complete with red and white striped poles in River Street was for only for men and boys, the younger of whom sat suspended on a wooden slab over the chair’s arms. These last refuge from the gentle sex sold tobacco products, sundry, fishing gear, sundry,

knives, sundry and we all read Pix which in the 50's borderline pornography showing well-endowed women in tight tops, while the phone rang repeatedly as the barber surreptitiously took bets as the clandestine SP bookie in town. The razor was sharpened adeptly with a leather strop and although no one knew about hepatitis B, C or HIV we all knew about VD. Brylcream or Macassar oil lubricated our "short back and sides", and later Mum's anti-Maccassars, while bodgies slicked their hair back with plastic "bug-rakes" in the flat or their palms, and only Americans, sailors, bodgies and other social detritus had crew cuts.

Across the road in River Street, the red floor of the butcher's shop was covered in saw-dust, with a transected unfortunate red gum in the midst on which he chopped, hammered, cut and sliced the skeletal remnants of unfortunate beasts, with pristine carcasses stamped in official blue hanging from hooks on a curved steel band leading to the cold room. The butcher bedecked in his classical livery of blue-striped apron, carried a host of knives in a tin and wood scabbard on his belt, sharpening them on a steel, while he welcomed all customers by name, complementing women for looking so young, while everyone was trained to like tripe, lambs fry, sweat-bread, kidneys, brains, sausages, as lamb chops and steak were too expensive, and chicken was only for Sunday lunch and Christmas. No one ate lungs or testicles except Greeks and there was only one in town and he owned the milk bar.

In a day before supermarkets, Ernie Clarke's grocery store was a Ballina's version of a Damascus souk awash with everything from dog biscuits, Keen's curry powder to Citronella. There were myriads of tins, condensed and powdered milk, open-mouthed hessian bags of sugar, flour, dried soup mix, rolled oats, spices, tea chests opened with fine paper linings protecting the Ceylon tea wafting around the shop, big jars of boiled lollies, drums of molasses which was good for your bowels, bottles of chicory when only Yanks drank coffee, butter in boxes and large cheeses in cheese cloths and everything was weighed on a variety of scales that varied from the hundredweight stand-on black iron monster, to those coping with ounces of cheese. Olives, feta and salami were not sold as they were only eaten by dagos.

The pub and other further down the street was on the corner and that was where Dad bought beer and sweet sherry, where women were not allowed in the public bar and aborigines who lived in tin shanties along the river upstream, well out of town, were not admitted unlike cane cutters who came for a skinful, looking just as black, with the night sky glowing red with fires, and black "trash" falling all over Mum's washing. Aboriginal kids did not go to school as the whole fragmented community hung on the societal fringe and the banks of the river which their Bungjalung People had inhabited for eons, but now attracted disdain, pejoratives, flies, grog and disease.

All along the river from just beyond to River Street was not just an RSL but a hive of activity. Downstream end was the pineapple cannery and a soft-drink bottling factor while upstream

there were trawlers and other river boats moored, leaving rainbows of diesel in the water, slipways, the Fish Co-op and the creek beyond which we used to play on in rowing boats after school. There was a long line of high wharves, with some missing planks and from which we kids used to fish for butter bream and sometimes see octopus or water rats down below. The whale chasers with their harpoons covered in canvas used to moor here, with their rusted streaks down their bows, heaving and groaning to the river's swell from the north-easter blowing incessantly all summer.

Barges carrying sugar cane, cedar, produce and river boats turned the river into a veritable highway of Das Kapital. The far bank was an inhospitable no man's land of trees and mangroves while further upstream, the river was criss-crossed by car ferries with their gossamer threads of steel hawsers rising from the river like magic, as the horizontal wheels pulled the far bank closer. When the tide was low, all dreaded driving up or down the steep steel ramp in a day when cars used to stall and some were still started by a crank handle and my mother had the same anxiety about driving up that steep winding road to the lighthouse at Cape Byron, where more than one car had fallen into the fatal sea.

A drive to Brisbane also could be lethal especially up the Burringbar Range in a day before seat belts, wide roads, firm edges and bypasses. Indeed, the man who saved me from drowning perished soon after on his very road. Not long before we left Ballina, my mother learned to drive in a day when most women didn't and although she worked as nurse in the surgery all day, she learned to play golf and my parents had a richer social life than she ever had later in Brisbane.

There are many more things I could say about life then. There were the floods in 1956 and later, in Northern NSW, the Geophysical Year, the solar sunspot activity, Sputnik, the Melbourne Olympics, the advent of the Salk vaccine for polio, the Ballina Easter Parade, the speedboat races and water skiing on the river each year, the curse of silent cops at every intersection, the new high school, and my liberty as a child to do things after school, play in creeks and to go hiking off on our own.

The advent of television, the kidnapping of Graham Thorne and the complexity of the modern age in my opinion killed off the innocence of childhood, the simplicity of life and introduced American culture and mores to our lounge rooms. Suddenly we felt a little envious and also a cultural cringe as things American seemed "cool" while Australia, its accent, culture and history seemed "daggy". Chips Rafferty sounded boring when compared to the cowboys on Gun Smoke or Bonanza. It took us decades to see Australian movies again, Australian TV shows and feel proud of the completed Sydney Opera House. We, as both a nation and a town had become a part of the wider world and in the process, lost our innocence and those halcyon days were gone forever. The riverfront of Ballina is now a just a boardwalk dominated by an RSL overlooking this quiet river that to me speaks eloquently of its sadness.

