

Mim Vallen

The first thing I remember about my school years is my first lesson. It was handwriting. First of all, I had to write lines of crosshooks and "o"'s on a slate with pencil, then lines of 'cat' and then the 'cat sat on the mat'.

I was born in a house behind the Council Chambers and in my room was a beam which had been used for hanging convicts and was built by convicts. My playroom was actually a gymnasium and I was allowed to do whatever I liked, so long as I had safety mats underneath. This ability later led to my becoming an acrobat.

I attended Newcastle East from 1946 to 1953. All of my brothers' and sisters attended Newcastle East. I lived only a short distance from the school and walked there.

In the mornings we had to assemble in lines according to class; face and salute the flag, then sing "God Save the Queen". There were no excursions except when Royalty or V.I.P.'s came to Newcastle East, each of the children were given bags to put their lunch in and then we

marched down to King Edward Park. On the anniversary of Captain Cook we made hoops with paper flowers and had a maypole dance.

As a child, money wasn't like it is today. I remember that people didn't spend as much because they didn't have as much. Instead of notes they had half sovereigns and sovereigns made of solid gold. You did pay taxes and the council said that Newcastle was everyone's property, so you couldn't litter at all.

The school supplied everything; books, ink, desks, teachers, that the students needed.

The subjects studied were reading, writing, maths, social studies, sewing, woodwork, geometry and mental mathematics. My favourite subjects were History and Physical Culture, for no particular reason.

During class, talking and notepassing was strictly forbidden. Desks were the same as they are now, except for the inkwells in the corners. The monitors filled the wells in the morning. I don't remember anything bad about school.

The school didn't have a canteen but you could bring a packed lunch or go home. I usually went home. Later on though the school supplied a cup of milk.

The school celebrated Anniversary Day, Wattle Day, Show Day and Labor Day.

Punishment for the boys was working in the school garden. They didn't have detention.

I don't remember ever being really naughty except for once when myself and my best friend climbed the cliffs at Newcastle Beach. We got sent to the headmaster for that.

There weren't any school uniforms until later and they were only for senior classes. All of the uniforms were the same; with ties, headbands and hatbands showing what school it was. Everybody's hat had to be sprayed to keep nits from coming into the school.

Mother Goose rhymes were often sung. Hopscotch and marbles were the main games played. The only sports played were football, cricket and netball.

School went from 9:30 a.m. until 12:30p.m. and then 1:30 p.m. until 3:30pm. My first teacher was Mrs. Carol. Everybody had to wash their hands before school and at lunch their hands were also inspected. The school library was free and everybody could borrow books.

The boys did woodwork whilst the girls did cooking. First we put on our aprons, which were made from sugar bags. Next came scrubbing the table and hands; then the cooking. After, you scrubbed the table again, then ate what you made.

We had half yearly and yearly exams. In sixth class your exams showed whether you went to junior high school or high school. Occasionally you had surprise dictation where you read the main article in the newspapers and then had it dictated to you.

They often had spelling bees when each class would line up along a wall, and if you had spelt a word wrong you had to sit down. I didn't have to sit down until late in the game, as I was a good speller and reader.

When the first electric lights came out, the boys

were fascinated at how you could just flick a switch and the light came, on so they flicked all kinds of things at them.

Many of the clothes were made from recycling old sugar bags. Skimmies covered the neck and met the bloomers at the waist, they were buttoned at the back. Boys wore knickerbockers and lace-up boots, whilst girls wore bloomers and button-up boots.

My favourite day at school was sewing day. Our class knitted socks for the war.

Billy carts were very popular, and if you got enough coupons you could go to the grocer and get one for free. My brothers had three of them. There was no school swimming but you could go to to the beach before school.

The first theatre in Newcastle was in Watt street.

Originally you could walk from Stockton across the river. The transport included trams, horses and buses with stairs leading to the top. Steam trains travelled up and down Scott street. They used to have draft horses pull along Hunter Street to cut down on the dust.

There weren't many bicycles in Newcastle, so a lot of people walked everywhere. Once when transport had a strike, I walked from Newcastle to Wallsend for a church service.

Once when my father went to Newcastle East School he was very sick for a long time. When he got better he would stand at the school gate and look at all his friends. Until, that is, the headmaster saw him a couple of times, and then ordered some boys to go out and make a human box around him and then march him back into school, and the boys did just that!

Newcastle had a Paddy's Market that I went to often. A lot of people came from Sydney as well.

There were a lot of sailing ships in the harbour and on weekends you could go on trips.

My grandfather and father were sweetmakers, and they passed it on to me.

Once my grandfather made a huge model of a boat out of lolly, and a boat's Captain came into the shop and bought the boat because he recognised it as his.