

Growing Up on Bulimba 1930 - 1950, as told by Dennis Burchill.

My father Joseph James Burchill was born at Bethnal Green London in 1896. At the age of 18 he travelled to Australia to seek his fortune arriving at Coff's Harbour. He was not an educated man and worked as a labourer whenever he could find work. He worked hard and soon made enough money to bring one of his brother's over to join him. With two wages they soon had enough money to bring out more family members, and eventually, using this system, they managed to have the whole family settled in Brisbane. The family consisted of the Patriarch, Charlotte, Sons George, Sidney, Jack, and my father Joseph, and Daughters Rose, Jean, and Lottie.

My father purchased two 32 perch blocks of land in Cowper St. Bulimba at No. 33 and No.29. and proceeded to build a house on No.33. With the family established at No. 33, some of them started to fly the nest. Rose married Bill Lawrence and they also purchased two 32 perch blocks of land at No. 15 and No. 19. They built a home on No.15. Jean married Bill Morrisson and bought the 32 Perch block of land next to us in Cowper St. at No.37 and built a home on this property. Jack married and moved one street up to 41 Shakespeare St. George married and built a house on Wynnum Road at Cannon Hill. Sid never married and lived with his brother Jack in Shakespeare St.

My father joined the Masonic Lodge in 1920, becoming a member of Morningside Lodge along with his brother in law Bill Lawrence. George also became a member of Saint Andrews Lodge about the same time. Sid went against the trend and joined the Buffalo Lodge. My father evidently had the wonderlust and in the 1920's signed on as crew-hand on a tanker and travelled to America. From photos I have in my possession, he travelled widely and at one stage joined the American Army on the 21st December 1920. He also visited Masonic Centers in several towns in America and I have mementoes of these occasions in my possession. I also have photos of him in Paris, so he moved about quite a bit. I have no records of his movements during the twenty's but evidently, on the way back to Australia by ship in 1930, he met my mother. He was thirty-three years of age when he married and my mother was eighteen. I was born on the 6th November 1930 in Brisbane. My brother Joe was born on the 16th March 1932. I only have faint recollections of my mother. She was tall and good looking and this was the cause of much friction. The fifteen year age difference and the fact that my father was out of work, added fuel to the fire and I can remember some very heated arguments. When I was six years old my mother left, and to this day we never heard from her again. My father was left with two boys, six and four, with only casual relief work to bring in some money. At this stage he could have given up and placed us in care, but he would not do this. We did not live in luxury, but I can never remember going hungry.

My father eventually obtained work as a meatworker, along with my uncle George, my uncle Sid and my uncle Jack, as well as my cousin Jack Lawrence. Half the men in Bulimba in those days worked at the Meatworks and the other half were wharfies. The Meatworks employed over 1200 men in those days, and I even worked there for two weeks myself during my school holidays, when I was sixteen. I remember coming home from college one day, and after alighting from the tram at the Apollo Ferry on the Hamilton side, I saw several policemen hiding behind the trees at the game-fishing wharf. Frank Duffield ran a launch service from the Game-Fishing Wharf to the Meatworks several times a day and he was about to berth at the wharf with the afternoon shift of workers, when one of them spotted the police. The next minute there were about forty white parcels of meat floating down the river. The metalworkers, who all carried gladstone bags, were dumping the evidence of their crime and when the ship berthed, all the bags were empty. The fish and crabs couldn't believe their luck!

Growing up in Bulimba in those days was one big adventure. All the streets were dirt tracks with no formed gutters, except Oxford Street. In 1936, Cowper Street consisted of nine residences. From Apollo Rd. on the right, the first house was at No.15, which was owned by my uncle Bill Lawrence. The next was our house at No.33. Next door at No.37 was my Uncle Bill Morrisson. At No.43 the Ross family lived. At No. 51 was the Dean's, and at the end at No.55 lived the Smith's. On the left side at No.8 lived Miss Renton. Opposite us at No.36 lived the Booth's and next door at No.38 lived the Sharrock's. Cowper St. in those days did not extend through to Harrison St. The street finished at No.55 and a deep gully ran from the bottom of Harrison St. to the corner of McConnell St. and Byron St. where it connected to the river by a large underground pipe. When the king tides arrived, the gully would flood with about three feet of river water and we would have our own private swimming pool three feet deep by three hundred yards long at the end of the street. Our back neighbour in Byron St. was the Fabian's and next door was a vacant block of land. We could walk from our property straight to the river, a distance of about 100 yards. The Wakefields lived on the river bank and this became our second home. There was a large mangrove tree on the river bank with a rope tied to its upper branches. You could take off from the bank and swing way out into the river before letting go. Where the army camp is today was a large tea tree Swamp. This extended from Apollo Rd. down to the river. We would leave home after breakfast, spend the day in the swamp, and return home when the sun went down. The swamp had a section that we called the floating grass. This was a deep pond covered by thick grass that grew on the water and strong enough to walk on. Occasionally a horse would come down to the pond for a drink, put his foot on the grass, and finish up in the pond. The police and a rescue crew would then arrive and spend several hours recovering the horse from the pond. The swamp was also the home of many different types of snakes as well as all types of water birds.

With so much vacant land in the street, we were able to set up our own cricket pitch and football oval and many an exciting test was played after school. One event that we looked forward to each year was cracker night on the 5th. November. We would start about three weeks before the big event, collecting anything that would burn and gradually building a bonfire that we hoped would provide the biggest blaze in the district. One year we worked extra hard and we reckoned we had the best bonfire that we had ever built. We worked into the dark on the night before the big event and went to bed tired, but satisfied with our efforts. At nine o'clock that night we were woken by the noise of a fire and looked out to see all our hard work going up a day early. It seems the local louts had been round the district lighting all the bonfires so carefully prepared.

It was possible to walk from Cowper St. to Colmslie along the river bank, providing the tide was out. There was a track which ran along side the candle works and joined up with the streets that served the houses at the bottom of Baldwin St. A creek ran from the river up to Lytton road and several pensioner families had built shacks on both sides of the creek. They had also built a bridge across the mouth of the creek, so we were able to proceed. Where the dry dock is today was a large open paddock and a sand-stone cliff. The paddock was the venue for all types of horse events, and the cliff's were always crowded on weekends with sailing enthusiasts, watching the various races. The river bank was covered with sand. We then arrived at the mouth of Perrin Creek which had a series of rocks exposed at low tide, allowing us to cross. Finally arriving at Colmslie, we set about catching a feed of whiting. The fish were quite plentiful in those days.

Pocket money was always a problem, so we set about rectifying that temporary setback. We would walk the river banks from the candle works looking for bottles. Beer bottles were worth sixpence a dozen, but it required a lot of hard work for such small rewards. We were lucky that we had a bottl'o in Apollo Road named Sainsbury, so we didn't have far to take them. By far the best value were the large soft drink bottles, which we took back to our local corner store for a penny refund. I remember that the river banks were always covered with straw sleeves. The beer in those days was sold by the case, with a dozen tall bottles in a wooden box and each bottle protected by a straw sleeve to stop it breaking. It certainly littered the river bank.

Another source of money was to walk the river bank in front of the boat sheds. All the boats in those days were built of timber and had a protective sheeting of copper plate to prevent the timber being attacked by the toledo worm. Once a year the boats were slipped and the copper sheet checked. If it required replacing the whole lot had to come off including the copper nails. This material was left on the slipway and we would turn up with our sugar bags and collect our loot. There was a foundry in Breakfast Creek Road called Barnes Engineering and they would buy any scrap that we collected. The going rate was sixpence a pound for copper, fourpence a pound for brass and twopence for lead. Soon after the war started the yanks stored about fifty plywood boats along the outside fence of the candle works. They were about sixteen feet long, with a bow at each end, flat bottomed, and with a tube in the bow of each end. They were designed to be taken to a river that was to be crossed, placed one beside the other, and a cable passed through the hole in the front and rear of each boat and secured to each bank. A deck was then placed across the boats, thus forming a temporary bridge. Each boat was equipped with an emergency repair kit consisting of an assortment of plywood patches, a bag of copper nails to fasten the patches, a bag of tapered dowells to plug any bullet holes and a hammer to carry out the repairs. They were stored upside down, four high. We recovered the bag of copper nails from each boat and sold them to Lance Watts, the local boat builder, who was having trouble with supplies. This gave our bank balance a boost.

In 1944 I used to caddy at the Royal Queensland golf course. I carried a double which consisted of a golf bag on each shoulder. It was quite an effort to hump this weight around 18 holes, as well as being expected to find all the miss-hits missing in the rough. For this service I was paid five shillings and sixpence, but I had to pay the caddy master one shilling out of this. I often caddied for "Snip" Thompson who was the manager of the Arcadia theatre at Ascot. As well as paying the fee, he would pick up a cigarette packet and write out a free admission to the pictures. As it only cost me one and six to go to the pictures, I sold this ticket to the caddy master for three shillings. As it cost him five and six to be admitted, he was happy and I doubled my money.

The area around Cowper Street was always quiet, as there was nothing to attract the riffraff to the area. There was only one shop and it

closed at five o'clock. We caught the ferry across to Hamilton if we wanted to play up. We never did anything that would be considered bad. One thing that I remember doing was gate swapping. Most of the gates in those days were made by Dyne and Co. at New Farm and were pretty standard. All the gates were set on two hinges which were a standard distance apart. We would lift the gates from one house and swap them for the gates further down the road. I only hope that they all finished back at their proper homes. We got to know the ferry drivers pretty well and most were ok. One driver called "Soapy Bryant" was not on the top of our hit parade. One night while the ferry was over the other side we doctored his tying-up ropes, covering them with black grease. When he reached out to tie the ferry up, all hell broke loose. Another time we decided to set up an ambush; we armed ourselves with a case of over-ripe tomatoes and laid in wait on the Bulimba side of the river. As he tied the ferry up, we let fly, but he stepped back to allow one of the local ladies to disembark and she copped the full salvo.

After finishing grade seven at Bulimba State School, I enrolled at The Industrial High School. In those days there were no suburban high schools. There were only the private schools that still exist today, and the only state high school was State High at South Brisbane. The Industrial High School catered for boys that were going on to follow a trade. The school was located at the end of George St. were the QUT is today. Also in the same area was the State Commercial High School and the Domestic High School for girls. Our classrooms were spread over an area of about 500 yards, which meant much walking to change classes. The head master who retired the year I started, was Mr. Longworth. His nick name was Zero and there was not a tram or ferry shed in Brisbane that did not have Zero the Hero plastered all over its walls. I remember at that time there was a zoo in the Gardens with various animals and monkeys, but the star was "Jacko" the baboon. He had a big red bottom and used to embarrass the girls from Commercial High by playing with himself whenever they stood in front of his cage. We would grab one of the girls and pretend to hit her and he would go berserk shaking the cage and bellowing at the top of his voice. If he ever got out, he would have killed us.

At the end of the war in 1946, things started to return to normal. The population had been starved of entertainment for six years and the news that the speedway was to restart, caused much excitement. Our local gang turned up at the exhibition grounds, full of anticipation, only to find that 35,000 people were already in the grounds and they had closed the gates. We were standing outside the entrance gates in Gregory Terrace wondering what to do, when a couple of bike-riders arrived at the gate. As bike races were to be part of the program, the gates were opened slightly to let them in. At this moment, all the angry lockouts pushed on the gates, forcing them open and in we went! We made our way round to the Ernest Baines Stand and climbed over the fence into the grandstand, finishing up with the best seats in the house. The main attraction of the night was to be Ray Reville and his rocket car. It consisted of an ordinary speed car with some sort of rocket fitted to each side. I don't think it made the car go any faster, but it certainly got the crowd in! Some of the speedway bike-riders I remember were Keith Gurtner, Dicky Smythe, Vic Huxley and Dave Costa.

Our local gang, which consisted of four or five of the local kids, went everywhere on our bikes. We decided that a feed of grapes would go well, so we rode our bikes down to Myrtle town, where the grapes were grown. Myrtle town was past Pinkenba, and is now buried under the Brisbane Airport. We filled our shirts with the grapes and set off for home. One thing that we hadn't allowed for was the fact that there was only one road into the place, and the farmer was waiting up the road! And we had to pass him to get home. We dumped all our loot and discussed our position. I decided that I would try to escape while the rest of the gang decided to go to jail. I went through a paddock until I was behind the farm house but could go no further because of a swamp. I lifted my bike above my head and walked through the stinking bog, with the water up to my shoulders for about half a mile until I got round the farm and regained the main road. When I got home I raced around to see if my mates were in jail, only to be told that the farmer was very nice to them, told them not to steal his grapes again, and he gave them each a parcel of grapes to take home.

My first venture into full-time employment was working for Kodak. They had a building in Queen Street opposite the AMP building. I was given a three-wheeled push bike with a large box on the front, with a wheel on each side and one wheel on the back, which gave it its forward motion, provided someone was pushing on the pedals. My job was to ride around every chemist shop in the city area picking up films for developing, and delivering the processed prints. The shape of the bike did not lend itself to any fancy tricks, and the telegram boys delighted in riding round and round my humble means of transport as I went about my daily work. Three months into my time with Kodak I saw an add for an apprentice electrician at Laing's Electrical Service at Red Hill. I was lucky enough to secure this job and stayed with this firm for thirteen years. Phil Laing who was the boss of the firm, was one of the finest men I have ever worked for, and the knowledge that I gained there set me up for the rest of my life.

When I was seventeen I made a decision that was to shape the rest of my life. I started a sailing career which introduced me to some of the finest human beings that one could ever meet, but also to meeting the girl who would eventually become my wife. It started a love for the sea that is still as strong today as it was fifty six years ago. The period 1930 to 1950 presented many challenges, most of them I seemed to have overcome, with lots of outside assistance, but those first twenty years proved a solid frame work on which to build the rest of my life.