

Name: John Senyard
Born 23/6/1945.

When and where were you born?

I was born in Essendon in June 1945, in the last years of the Second World War, between Victory in Europe Day and Victory in Japan.

Thinking back, even though the war was over, it still coloured the lives of the post-war generation. At school there seemed to be a regular round of commemorative ceremonies: Anzac Day, The Battle of the Coral Sea Day, Armistice Day, Legacy Day. Then there was Mr. Smith, our grade six teacher, who had fought in the war. The curriculum that year seemed to consist of Mr. Smith's stories of his adventures fighting Rommel in North Africa!

There were constant reminders of the war. As little boys we played war games in the school yard; our Art - room paintings were of battles, particularly aerial battles, (I loved drawing planes with swastikas on the wings being shot down in flames and crashing out of the sky); men on the tram and school teachers at school wore RSL badges on the lapels of their suits; my friend Ken Lagastes had a gas mask and would regularly bring it to school and put it on for us to admire.

By the time I hit the senior years of secondary school we were fully aware of the atomic bomb, its annihilation of Hiroshima and the fact that the world was divided into two armed nuclear camps – the Americans and the Russians. I was in Form Five (year 11) during the Cuban Missile Crisis and I remember the terrible feeling amongst all of us that if the Russians didn't back down the world was going to be destroyed in a nuclear war. The feeling of helpless despair was something vivid and real.

Where did you live as a child?

The first nineteen years of my life were spent in Moonee Ponds at Number 6 St James Street. My father was a carpenter and my mother, like most of the other women in the street, was a housewife. Our house was a small single fronted weatherboard, with two bedrooms. The front room was Mum and Dad's and my brother (who is five years older) and I shared the middle bedroom. There was a small garden out the back and in later years my father became an enthusiastic rose grower.

I have a few very early memories: of being taken by my brother around to the corner milk bar and somehow falling out of my pram because he pushed it too fast; of being sick with flu and screaming for my parents after a feverish nightmare in which I dreamt giant spiders were crawling over my face; of the sun lighting up a small pane of ruby coloured glass set behind the old Kookaburra stove that my mother was trying to cook with.

In 1951 I buried a penny in the backyard because in that year my father began to renovate the house. In later years I often had a difficult relationship with my father and there were many times during which things between us were strained. However, I think that his renovation of that house heroic. The whole place had to be virtually rebuilt. The foundations were rotten - so he jacked the house up and replaced them one by one. There was no internal bathroom (we'd bathed once a week in a tub in the outhouse/laundry) so he created one with a bath *and* a shower. He installed a briquette hot water service so we didn't have to boil up the copper for our weekly bath. He replastered and repainted the rooms. He built wardrobes and book shelves. He gave us a new kitchen with a new electric stove (no more gas) and a new laminex kitchen table. It took about ten years, and he worked at weekends and at nights. Now, looking back I am full of admiration for what he did.

The street we lived in was overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon. Next door were Roy and Gert Clarkson (Mr. Clarkson worked as a projectionist for the Country Roads Board, taking films to C R B workers' camps around Victoria.) Two doors up were the Pattisons. I played with -Peter Whitbourne – a boy about my age. My brother, being older, played with Ken and Eileen Delderfield.

In summer we had cricket matches in the street, moving the wicket (usually a fruit box) off the road when the occasional car came by. In winter there was football, although this was not as popular as cricket because the hardness of the metal in the asphalt street damaged the leather covering of the ball. The girls played skipping games, and there were hide-and-seek games, and chasing games such as poison-ball and "tiggy" which any one could play.

This was still the era of home delivery: the baker's horse-and-cart, the ice man's van and the milk man and his horse. Mum and Dad would sometimes send us boys out with a shovel to collect the horse manure to put on the roses. In summer a minor joy was when the ice-man let one of the ice blocks slip from his grappling hooks and smash on the street. Kids came from everywhere to swoop on the pieces, to throw them at each other, or to try to put down each others' back.

The first non-Anglo Saxon families appeared in the street in the late 1950s early 1960s when I was fifteen or sixteen. They were Italian and very friendly (Unfortunately I forget the family's name, but I remember that they had a son about the same age as me called Giuseppe.) One evening I was walking past their house and they invited me in. An afternoon tea of beautiful cakes and pastries was spread out before me. Apparently at sixteen years old I was regarded as an adult because I was poured a glass of fortified wine and invited to, "Drink up Johnny". In fact I was invited several times. When I came home I skipped tea (as we called dinner) and I dragged myself straight into my room and straight to bed.

Basically alcohol was a novelty in our house. Dad would have the very occasional bottle of beer and Mum would have a glass of sherry at Christmas time. We never had wine and never drank spirits – although Mum kept a bottle of brandy for cooking. Tea was the standard universal drink for adults, although in the late fifties early sixties – I'm hazy about the dates – instant coffee became a popular novelty.

Meals were predictable. Lamb chops with potatoes with peas and carrots were a staple. We had roast lamb on Saturday and cold roast lamb with salad on Sunday. My father was fond of offal so we would have occasional meals of heart, kidney and liver. (His favourite was tripe – which I detested and which Mum would make for him every Thursday night ready for when he came home late from working over-time). Steak was expensive and we had it mainly in stews and (rarely) steak and kidney pie. Home made desserts were always part of the meal (except for Sunday when we would have a brick of ice cream from the local milk-bar). I remember sago and rice puddings and - my favourite - bread and butter pudding. Fruit salad was common or canned peaches or pears.

Toward the end of the fifties our eating habits started to change. This was the time when the old style grocery stores disappeared to be replaced by the supermarket. In Essendon's Puckle Street it was called Silman's Supermarket and my parents loved it; they thought that being able to walk up and down the aisles and to choose the items you wanted to put in your basket was the high-point of modernity. The supermarket carried new and fascinating foods, and Mum and Dad (particularly Dad) were keen to experiment. We tried and fell in love with blue Gorgonzola cheese. We even had caviar in little jars from Hungary and, at the risk of turning into Soviet style communists, we found that we were hooked!

Also towards the end of the fifties we bought our first electric refrigerator. This also gave us a wider range of foods: frozen chickens, frozen peas, frozen berries and, best of all, ice-cream (usually home made). We also bought a mix-master and Mum, released from the toil of hand beating, experimented with a whole range of new cakes and biscuits.

Where did you go to school?

When I was five years old I began school at Essendon State School, Raleigh Street Essendon. I had already attended a kindergarten in the local Anglican Church Hall, so going to school was easy. My first teacher was Miss Raglan, tall thin and dark-haired. There were about forty of us and we sat in rows with two to a desk, boys on one side of the room, girls on the other. We learnt the Alphabet (“Recite after me, ‘A says Apple’”), Arithmetic (“Say after me, ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$ ’”), Health and Hygiene (“Wash your hands after going to the toilet, brush your teeth after every meal”), and we sang (“Twinkle, twinkle, little star.”). After six months we were reading (“The Hobyars”, “The Billy Goat Gruff,”) and we were writing, at first on slates with pieces of chalk, then with pencils and paper and finally with pens with steel nibs dipped in ink from the inkwell in the desk. (What fun it was to dip a girl’s pigtail into the inkwell, and what a lot of fuss if you got caught – stand in the corner and wait for the principal to give you the strap. Not that it ever happened to me! Oh no, I was a good little boy!) I liked school and learning was easy. My father had begun to work as a carpenter – cabinet maker at CSIRO at Fisherman’s Bend. At night he would tell us stories of the drying cabinets and specimen cupboards he built and the scientists for whom he built them. He was an entertaining story teller, and could make the people he worked for come alive for us. When I was little and people asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up I said, “A scientist.”

Essendon State School is next to the Essendon Football Ground. Our school sports were held on the football oval; in Grade Six our classroom stared out onto the grey fence that surrounded the football ground. Being born in Essendon and going to Essendon State meant that you were automatically and without question an Essendon football barracker. I remember in First Grade our paintings, when not of Messerschmitts and Spitfires, were of Essendon footballers. This was the era of John Coleman, Essendon’s charismatic full forward, and his figure in the black and red jumper with number 10 on the back kicking footballs through goal sticks dominated our artistic imaginations.

After the first year of Infant Room (known then as “Bubs”) my memories of primary school are hazy. I remember Monday morning assemblies, the flag raising and the swearing of the oath of allegiance (“I love God and my country, I honour the flag, I serve the queen and cheerfully – or was it chiefly? – obey my parents and the law.”). Then the boy playing the kettle drum would march us into our classrooms.

I remember drinking little bottles of free milk that the government provided in the belief that milk would make us grow up healthy and strong. I remember listening to the School broadcasts – mainly Social Studies – quite a highlight of the day because we could put down our pens and just sit and listen. I remember reciting, almost endlessly, our “times tables” (“Once twelve is twelve, two twelves are twenty – four ...”). I remember reading “The Wreck of the Hesperus” and was there a Henry Lawson story as well, “The “Drover’s Wife” perhaps?

The Empire was still a force in our lives back then even though the sun was very rapidly setting on it. There was the annual Empire Day when we were all given medals with the King’s head on, and little Union Jacks and, best of all, a little bag of

lollies. (By the time I'd moved on to High School Empire Day had become Commonwealth Day and the handouts of lollies had ceased.) When George the Sixth died we all got a commemorative medal.

Best of all was the coronation of the new Queen. Mum and Dad let me stay up so the family could listen to the coronation on the radio. Then a few weeks later, the whole school was taken into town to see the Coronation Film. What a treat!

Next year the Queen actually came to visit us. Essendon State School is close to Mount Alexander Road, in those days the main road from the (Essendon) airport to the city.

On the day of the Queen's arrival we were all lined up along the side of Mount Road armed with little flags and fully drilled about how to behave – to cheer when the royal car came past, to wave our flags and to never, ever to run on to the road. And so after a seemingly interminable wait she swept past. Did I see her? Did she wave at me? Of course she did.

There was a welcome to the Queen at the MCG soon after. Boys and girls from very school in Victoria were massed on the arena and were supposed to present some sort of choreographed salute to the Royal couple. I remember being dressed in white shorts and shirt and going to a rehearsal, but of the day itself I remember nothing. The other great occasion of my primary school years was the Olympic Games. My friend Neil was a more adventurous character than I was, and he organised a day at the MCG. We stood for most of the day - we couldn't afford seats - but we wormed our way down to the front of the old Southern Stand and watched the track and field events. We saw mainly heats and I can't remember any great performances. The thing that strikes me now is how easy it was back then for two eleven year old boys to walk up to the MCG, get admission and spend the day watching the best athletes in the world.

After Essendon Primary I went on to Essendon High School. Secondary school enthralled me – the way we moved from room to room for different subjects and the fact that we had new subjects to learn: Maths instead of Arithmetic; Science instead of Health and Hygiene; History and Geography instead of Social Studies. We were also allowed to choose a foreign language: French or Latin or German. I chose German. By Form Four I had discarded the idea of being a scientist. I struggled with Maths and was more than happy to drop the subject and to take up History, Geography and English Literature. By Form Five my career was set. A recruitment officer from the Education Department came to talk to us and better still to offer us bursaries if we promised to become teachers. I took up a bursary (which was for about fifty pounds) and after Matriculation I signed up for an Education Department Studentship. My burning ambition was to go to university – I loved study - and the Studentship offered me the way. It paid my university fees and it gave me a weekly allowance of about ten pounds. It wasn't a huge sum, but without it my parents would have struggled to support me. With the studentship I was able to actually pay board at home and to be fully self-supporting. The only catch was that as a condition of the Studentship I had to agree to work as a teacher for three years, and to agree to go to any school that the Education Department decided to send me – anywhere in the State no matter how remote and isolated. Amongst university students these conditions were seen as onerous and they earned the Studentship the nickname of "The Bond".

Outside school what activities were you involved in?

My mother was very religious and a lot of my life outside school hours centred on the church – St Thomas' Anglican Church Moonee Ponds. I went each Sunday to

Sunday-School (held while the adults attended church) and so regular was I that year in and year out I won the attendance prize. From about the age of ten I sang in the St Thomas' choir, first as a boy soprano then, after puberty hit, as a tenor and finally as a bass. Being a choir – boy meant attending practice once a week and going to two services, morning and evening, on Sunday. As a result by the time I was thirteen I was steeped in both the Bible and in Anglicanism. I won the E.D. Puckle Prize for Scripture twice in a row and I remember going with my mother to the bookshop in St. Paul's Cathedral to choose for myself a beautiful leather-bound Book of Common Prayer as my prize.

(By the time I was seventeen my mother was dead and I had stopped believing in religion.)

Music practice – the piano – was my other regular after-school activity. I learnt the piano for six years, and each night I practised for at least half an hour. Mum insisted! Tears and tantrums left her unmoved. Every day I arrived home from school and I drank a glass of milk and ate a biscuit or slice of bread and jam. Then I sat down at the piano and pounded out my scales followed by the particular pieces I was learning (usually Czerny and or – simplified – Mozart).

Surprisingly, despite the severity of the regime, I actually came to like music. I stopped playing the piano when I was at University (after Mum had died), but I regret not having taken it up again in my later life.

There is one other activity that featured in my life. At the age of fourteen I joined the Army Cadets at school. Cadet training was held every Friday afternoon and it consisted mainly of marching and drilling. Every year there was a cadet camp, held at Puckapunyal, and also every year we were given old 3-oh-3 rifles and taken to Williamstown Rifle Range for shooting practice. Even though most of us had trouble hitting the target we were exhilarated by firing live ammunition from a real rifle. That afternoon we were almost true soldiers.

(By the time I was seventeen I had also broken faith with the army and I was well on the way to becoming a pacifist.)

When did your family acquire a television? At nights what activities were you involved in?

Before T. V. a typical evening would be dinner at six p.m.

At six o'clock we turned on the radio and listened first to the news then to a serial. We were allowed one serial, and for years it was "The Air Adventures of Biggles." Then there was the washing-up - "Boys, you have to do the washing up. No John, you can not go to the toilet! You have to stay here and wipe up."

Homework took us up to about seven thirty, then we moved in to the lounge room, and we played a game, "Ludo" or "Bobs" but usually cards. I became a tolerable Cribbage player and a good Five Hundred player, although when my brother left to go teaching in the country it was mainly three handed "Crib" that we played. When I was about thirteen Dad bought a dart board, and "Darts" became the craze for the next couple of years. Mum had been a good golfer, and Dad built a mini golf course in the back yard. On long summer evenings we had great fun playing "nine holes" (one hole, nine times around) after dinner.

I went to bed about eight thirty or nine o'clock and after I went to bed Mum and Dad would settle down to read.

My parents were keen readers (my mother in particular) and they were members of Stinton's Puckle Street Library. (There was no municipal library in those days so they paid a small charge for the books they borrowed from Stinton's which was also the

local newsagency.) Dad loved Zane Gray and westerns and Mum was keen on mysteries and romances. She was the one with the more literary tastes. One of her prize possessions was a leather-bound copy of the Complete Works of Shakespeare, and it stood beside her Bible on the bookshelf next to the fireplace.

T.V. came relatively late in my life. I was sixteen, in Form Five (1961), and Mum was often away in hospital. I remember spending one school holiday glued to the T.V., and even now my wife marvels at the number of old black and white classic films that I've seen, all from that period of early T.V. All the same, T.V. was never really part of my childhood; perhaps that's the reason nowadays I can go for days without watching T.V. and not miss it in any way.

Talking of films, one of my vivid memories as a child is going to the cinema. Mum was a keen film-goer. She would put on her good suit, her hat and her gloves and we would catch the tram into the city. Some of the films I remember seeing with her are, "Oklahoma", "Genevieve" and "The Greatest Show On Earth". I have a clear memory of going to "The Regent Cinema" – I can't remember the film that we saw - but I remember the plush red seats in the foyer, the sweeping staircases, and the chandeliers. I also remember one theatre with a theatre organ which popped up near the stage at interval and descended just before the main feature.

After the film we went to one of Mum's favourite eating spots - the Railway cafeteria opposite Flinders Street Station or Coles Cafeteria. Lunch was a salad or a sandwich and a cup of tea (a glass of milk for me). If I was a very good boy she would buy a block of chocolate for us to share. ("Don't eat too much. We'll take some home for Dad and your brother.")

As well as the main city theatres there were three "picture theatres" quite near to us. "The Plaza" was the closest, but there were "The Regal" and "The Circle" no more than twenty minutes walk away. As a family we often went to "The Plaza"; I remember being almost helpless with laughter at Charlie Chaplin's "The Gold Rush" and of being earnestly impressed by, "A Man Called Peter".

Saturday was kids' matinee and for six pence we got a serial, ("To Be Continued Next Week"... just as the hero, tied to a log was heading straight for the saw-mill), and a war film (Audi Murphy or John Wayne) or a cowboy film, Hop-a-long Cassidy or Gene Autry being the most popular. I used to love the matinees ("the flicks") and to save up the admission money I would do things like find and sell empty beer bottles to the "bottle-o", or sing at choral weddings at St. Thomas (five shillings each choir boy per. wedding and money to be made on the side betting on the length of the kiss after the minister told the groom, "You may now kiss the bride").

T.V. destroyed the local cinemas. The matinees were early casualties, then the cartoons and shorts that were shown before the evening features then, inevitably, the theatres themselves shut down. A standard joke in those last days of local cinema was of a family ringing up a theatre to ask, "When does the film start?" to be answered with, "When can you get here?"

What other historical events can you remember?

It's odd, but the first time I had a clear memory of world affairs was in 1953 and the death of Joseph Stalin. I was only eight at the time, but there was a picture of the dead leader on the front of the newspaper (we bought "The Argus" – "It's the workers' paper", Dad said.). I remember reading everything the newspaper said about Stalin, but I have absolutely no idea why I was so fascinated by him.

We were a strongly Labour household. We hated Menzies – "Pig Iron Bob" – we admired Chifley and felt sorry for Doc. Evatt ("Such a clever man.") As staunch Protestants we despised the DLP ("Catholic rats"). The ALP split was quite deep in

Essendon and I remember being told not to be too friendly with Mr. Corcoran, the postman, because he was, “a Catholic Grouper”. (Sectarianism flourished during the fifties.)

When I became older I started to attend political meetings, especially at the time of federal elections. By tradition the Liberals launched their Victorian campaign at a public meeting at the Essendon Town Hall. In the 1961 campaign my brother and I went along to hear the Prime Minister Mr. Menzies. I recall that as soon as Menzies started to speak there were interjections from all around the room. This was meat and gravy to Menzies. He pushed his prepared speech to one side and for the rest of the meeting swapped insults and witticisms with the crowd. I realised when I left the meeting that Menzies had managed to launch his campaign while saying virtually nothing of substance.

There is one other oddity I remember from that night. The meeting over, the hall emptied quickly. My brother and I must have delayed a while, because as we were walking down the main stairs I heard someone with a familiar voice quietly talking behind me. I looked back and there one step above me was Menzies with one or two of his entourage.

It is amazing to think now that the Prime Minister could be casually walking out of a meeting, at the end of the crowd, with no security, no different from the hundreds of others who had attended the night!

Putting my childhood in context

I think my childhood ended when I was nineteen and my father sold Number Six St. James Street to move to the country. I moved in to Ormond College and within three years I had gained my B.A. Hons degree and my Dip. Ed. I had fallen in love and had married my wife. Finally I had gained my first teaching appointment and I had moved into a small flat in Royal Parade. My adulthood had well and truly begun.

Looking back over my childhood in Moonee Ponds I realise that my experiences were little different from those of thousands of others born in the immediate post war years. My parents' lives had been shaped by their experience of the Depression and the Second World War. The twenty years from 1930 to 1950 had been a period of uncertainty and change. Now in an era of peace and prosperity they wanted security and stability. They sought for their children a better life, both materially better and intellectually richer, than their own. My father, the carpenter, always said that, “No son of his was going to end up in overalls.” My mother, who had been forced to leave school after Form Two in order to look after her father sick with “miner’s disease”, craved for her sons the education she was unable to achieve.

I consider myself a lucky man. I think that I was lucky to have the parents I did. I was lucky, too, to be born at a time when Australia was starting on a long upward curve of prosperity that lasted from 1950 till 1975 – from the end of Chifley to the end of Whitlam. During those years I was able to achieve my parent’s hopes for me. They wanted respectability. Towards the end of their lives together they secured it, both for themselves and for their children.

