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Dates for your diary

Our 1st AGM: Tuesday 22nd April, 7.30-9.30 pm, Morrison House.

Anthony McAleer will speak on the history of the Lilydale Atheneum building. Saturday 24th May, venue to be confirmed.

We're incorporated!

Our incorporation has come through, so we are now the Mount Evelyn History Group Inc. Congratulations, everybody.

Passing of a Mt Evelyn identity

Elizabeth 'Tot' Stevens nee Falkingham, 29/10/1918 – 6/11/2007

Elizabeth (always known affectionately as 'Tot') was just nine months old when her parents, Albert Joseph and Florence Caroline Falkingham, moved to Mt Evelyn from Clifton Hill in 1919. The arrival of the family saved the primary school from closure, as their school-age children boosted the number of pupils to 18.



A young Tot Falkingham standing on the railway track at Mt Evelyn.

Tot grew up with her nine brothers and sisters in their home, 'Bark Rest', in Fernvale Rd (renamed Falkingham Rd in the 1970s). The dirt-floored bark hut stood above the old water race at the entrance to Quinn Reserve.

Although Tot left Mt Evelyn in 1948 when she married John Stevens, her heart remained here till her last days. In fact, she claimed to be Mt Evelyn's oldest resident and no-one could tell her otherwise. She was thrilled to speak at the launch of the second edition of *Tracks to Trails* in 2001 and held her audience enthralled with stories of picnics at the Recreation Reserve, the Do Drop In, the school and the railway.

Tot's wedding dress was handed down in the family. Her daughter-in-law Robyn wore it in

1971 and daughter Sandra in 1972. In March 2007, Tot's granddaughter Patricia wore the 59-year-old dress at her wedding. Amazingly, the dress fitted all four women, the only variation being a few centimetres in height.

Tot loved life and was always on the go, the first to arrive at any family function with her famous honey cakes and always with a smile, proud to be the matriarch of the family. In 1983, when brothers Doug and Len died, it was decided to hold a family reunion every year. November 2007 was the 25th reunion but sadly Tot had passed away five days earlier. As it was always her big day of the year, the reunion went ahead. The family shared anecdotes of Tot's life, with much laughter and many tears.

As a surprise on her 89th birthday, her family took her for a trip on Puffing Billy. Tot insisted that her grandsons lift her up so that she could hang her legs over the side of the carriage like the kids. That was the last day the family spent together. Tot died a week later.

Tot passed away peacefully on 6th November 2007 at Knox Private Hospital. She is sadly missed by her son John, daughter Sandra, their families and the extended Falkingham family.

From Lorraine Fairweather



Tot Stevens in later life

Flower farming in the Dandenongs – Janice Newton’s talk

Janice’s talk covered three themes: first that, like the roots of a begonia and other Rhizomes, flower farming is difficult to pin down to a particular place; second, the idea that flower farmers were struggling selectors, and last that the ultimate success of flower farmers was linked to tourist and grower interest in viewing the beautiful flowers.

Flowers have been cultivated in Victoria since the earliest days of settlement as an expression of the settlers’ British heritage. Janice’s talk focused on the flower farming experience in Mt Evelyn and Silvan. Mt Evelyn selectors known to have grown flowers commercially included Blyth of Bythswood (Westhill), Thornton who grew marigolds in the Fernhill Rd area and William Winstanley, who grew flowers and fruit trees on his block beside Olinda Creek. An idyllic description of Winstanley’s garden contrasts with an account of a court case when his wife Annie sued him for failing to support her for 18 years. Flower farmers faced problems of drought, fire, flood and pests. Their failure rate was as high as 90%, yet they succeeded in establishing the industry.

Major Edward Keziah Major established Major Money’s World Famous Gladioli Gardens in 1919 and developed a magnificent display of flowers for the public. Many men who worked for the Major and other large growers went on to establish farms of their own. The flower growing community developed links throughout the district, to other parts of Victoria, interstate and overseas. During the war the Kenneys’ son rented land on which he grew carnations, stocks, sweet peas and gladioli and ‘sold them to the Yanks’. John ‘Jock’ Marshall, who arrived from Scotland in 1925, also worked for the Major while converting his own farm from fruit to flowers.

Dutch migrants arrived after WWII and specialised in the tulips that had been part of their heritage since the seventeenth century. Cees Tesselaar settled in Silvan in 1945 on a site that immediately appealed to him for its beauty. He founded what became the largest family-owned bulb farm in Australia. John Koolmees took over Major Money’s trade name and established a second farm. The Broersons arrived in 1951 and sought out a ‘European’ customer base by calling at all the houses with white lace curtains.

Equipment and housing were basic and many farm houses lacked power. Flower farming regularly involved 10 to 14 hours’ work or more per+ day by both husband and wife and sometimes the children. The contribution of women was crucial. Mrs Tina Marshall’s diaries record the hours she spent on the various tasks, still with energy left over to go through the housework ‘like a cyclone’. Where family cooperation broke down or the wife died young, the farm usually failed.

Jacobus Bras regards the large orange tulip ‘Holland’s Glory’ as his favourite flower because it reminds him of the Dutch flag and because of his heritage and expertise in growing tulips. ‘It’s still in your blood so to speak.’ Perhaps emotion about flowers and heritage have helped sustain the flower farmers in our area and, with the long hours of work by husband and wife, helped this little pocket of small farming survive.

From: J. Newton , ‘Flower farming in the Dandenongs 1901-1970s: small holder success and aesthetic values,’ *Victorian Historical Journal* 77:1, 2006:66-84.

Bishop’s: interim heritage protection rejected

Yarra Ranges Shire Council has rejected a recommendation by its Planning Department to seek interim heritage protection for Bishop’s old service station. The report recommended applying for interim protection for the old shop and the concrete pads that sealed off the petrol bowsers, citing ‘local significance as an example of a fast disappearing number of buildings representing the general and commercial development of the region in the interwar period’ (SYR Agenda, Feb 08). The decision clears the way for demolition.

When the History Group was approached for background information, we confirmed that the shop was significant but did not insist on any heritage status. Given the poor

state of the building, it is unlikely that preservation would have been practical. The developer has offered to install a plaque acknowledging the significance of the site.

More about Mr Low

In our February issue and M2 column we mentioned Mr Low, the market agent who established Mt Evelyn's first greengrocers in the shop that later became Bishop's Service Station. We were delighted when Low's daughter-in-law, Mrs Nancy Low, contacted us.

Nancy told us that Low moved from Silvan when his land was acquired for Silvan Dam, which seems to date his arrival in Mt Evelyn to the second half of the 1920s. He bought a block on the corner Louisa and Irvine Streets. A cottage on the block was moved to the York-Monbulk Road corner and became the fruit shop. So the old shop/dwelling on the Bishop's land has yet another point of interest, as one of many relocated buildings in the town.

Low built a new house on his block and this later became the Newton family home. Janice Newton writes, 'Low's house was actually our old house... left hand gully side of Louisa... that was our home from 1950 I think till about 1971'. The house, which still stands, is a white weather-board house with verandah, on the north-west corner of the intersection.

Nancy met her husband, Bob Low, when she came here during the polio scare of the 1930s. She still takes an interest in Mt Evelyn and reads the M2, which a friend forwards to her.

Produce Store demolished

Another of our old shops gone! The Mt Evelyn Garden & Produce Store beside Mt Evelyn Primary School was demolished recently, after standing empty for some time. Jean Edwards writes, 'We used to call it "Ray Reid's" but it was Olney's in the 70s and has a history going a long way back.'

The History Group was not consulted over possible heritage status for the Produce Store and its demolition occurred without a squeak from the press. Quite different from Bishop's, where the Shire sought our input and the local papers reported the Council's decision. The rumour of Woolworth's interest in the Bishop's site seems to have stirred the possums.



The Produce Store shortly before demolition. Photo Jean Edwards.

Interim protection

Where a site has no heritage overlay, the Shire can obtain interim protection through an appeal to the Planning Minister. Interim protection allows time for the heritage value to be properly assessed. Now that we understand the process better, we'll bear it in mind in case of future threats to our historic buildings. Our remaining older-style shops dating from the inter-war period are Top of the Town (Pet Supplies, former Bakery), Mosquito Blue/Beautiful Bellies (former milk bar, under threat if the Safeway development goes ahead), the former Post Office in Birmingham Rd (no longer a business) and possibly the milk bar next door (similar structure to the old PO but hard to date because of the brick and iron cladding).

Melba unveiled

History Group members were invited to the unveiling of John Kenney's portrait of Dame Nellie Melba at the Lillydale Herb Farm on 29th February. The portrait, which shows a mature Melba wearing a mauve gown and long necklace, captures the diva's majestic presence. The painting will be on permanent display at the Herb Farm.