

GROWING UP – THE HIGH SCHOOL YEARS

I went to Selborne College, just as my father had done. It started badly. We were given a choice between Latin and Bookkeeping, but had to do both for 6 months. My parents were convinced you needed Latin to go to university. That proved to be wrong. I really needed bookkeeping in later life, but the teacher on hearing that I intended to drop his course and do Latin, immediately turned unhelpful and a bit threatening so I did very badly. I was not alone. Other than Hannibal's elephants I hated Latin too and changed instead to art, which did do me some good. I was very interested in physics and did fairly well, but could not cope with chemistry. I flunked the fortnightly tests. And got caned for that at the headmaster's office. And through fear of being caned, then failed again and the cycle continued. Fortunately I managed to creep through other nicer subjects and got a matriculation exemption that got me university entrance.

I liked art. We had a human skull called George. He changed name across the years. And so did his colour. We also had a human skeleton that I think was meant for the biology class, but perhaps they had by that time got a plastic replica to play with. I did not like woodwork classes very much. My hands ached when using chisels with only our hands and I dropped it. But of our several art teachers, one stands out – Tony Grogan. He would do a regular cartoon, The Blots, in the Daily Dispatch and we were often his inspiration. While demonstrating a woodwork lathe, the tie of the teacher had got caught in it drawing him closer. The incident appeared in the Blots soon afterwards. The frantic teacher calling for a chisel to cut his entangled tie free. The boy standing hesitant and asking what size of chisel to pass to him for that particular task.

We at one time had a small timid maths teacher called “Mole” who wore glasses. He was actually quite a good teacher, but was bullied by some of the pupils. One one occasion he substituted for the science teacher but in his own classroom. His meths burner erupted and he had burning liquid all over his desk. I remember him being mocked and even being picked up and shaken by someone. It obviously threatened his future there, but after a few years away I understand that he returned a stronger better man.

We had green chalk boards by the time I started there, but under them could be seen the traditional old blackboards painted onto the walls. All the desks were richly carved with initials. The headmaster “Bones” Barker swooped around in a black gown before assembly. His replacement when he retired, John Stonier, was more progressive and wore his gown all the time. I named him “Batman” and others started using the name too. He introduced an overhead projector to the school; initially just one. A modern piece of equipment. We had been using, mainly for art lectures, an old, but marvellous invention, the epidiascope. You could put absolutely anything under the lens that would fit and it would project it onto the screen. The problem was that it needed a darkened room and that led to mischief or pupils nodding off.

We had both good and bad teachers. One with a whiff of alcohol on his breath when he gave us extra maths lessons in the evening. He was called Dronkie. A much respected English teacher, Mr Benyon, used to tell us about his war experiences in Italy. He had taken a watch to be mended in a small rural village he was posted to. Years later he managed to go back as a tourist. The locals remembered him fondly and he got his watch back.

Asthma was always a problem and I used to take in sickie / croc notes for PE regularly.

I was rubbish at sport, but did hockey and rowing. Hockey on the salted surface of the pitch near where we lived. The salt was second hand and had bits of animal skin in from the abattoir. I enjoyed rowing on the Buffalo River much more. The old clubhouse on the east bank was 3 floors high with a training tank on the roof. I used to climb up the drain pipe to open up from the inside if no one

else was on hand. It was shared with two adult clubs. Club rooms in the upper levels. Boats and changing rooms at the bottom. A new club was to be built across the river and our eldest daughter started rowing from there.

We used to go horse riding at what claimed to be a riding school on a farm owned by a butcher out on the Macleantown Road. He would pick up the kids from a collection point at the top of Old Transkei Road in his large open bakkie (pick-up) and we would sit in the back holding on for dear life. While we waited to be allocated horses, we would invariably have a fight hurling dried cow pats at each other under the bluegums. Formal instruction was meagre. We were almost always taken for rides into the farmland which was mainly bushveld. I usually got allocated a piebald horse called Savage and would be reminded that he got his name for a reason, but I got on well with him. I never actually fell off, but a loose girth strap could mean finding myself at bumpy speed slipping around until I was able to stop and get it tightened. Most horses have a habit of breathing in when it is initially saddled up and the girth strap must be checked again before setting off. On another occasion I found myself walking up a narrow donga (eroded gully), my feet on each side with the horse squeezing below me. I did see others fall off. Some of the foolhardy riders would get the horses to jump fences or gates. Sometimes successfully. Sometimes the horse stopping short at the last moment. Even though we were young there was no attempt to curtail a horse that decided to gallop across the rough terrain. I can't remember wearing a protective riding hat at this time. I learnt how to hang on there, but little else. Being SA, tasks such as caring for a horse, mucking out and saddling up were allocated to farm staff.

From there we progressed to a much more sedate proper riding school in Beacon Bay, that of Miss Cranshaw. We actually learnt to ride as well as care for horses and tack. Even how to muck out. And we had to wear proper riding hats. Sometimes there were sleepovers in tents there. We could pick enormous pineapples straight from the fields. Once breakfast of coffee and bacon cooked on the spot was had after a few kilometres of riding along the west bank of the Quinera River to a point near where we years later build our house. We sometimes went for long rides along the east bank of the river all the way to Bonza Bay Beach. Some horses would be nervous of the breakers. Others exhilarated by the sea air and broke into a gallop. That though was quickly curtailed down to a safer pace by those in charge. This same scene of a ride on the beach was experienced and even the same riding stables were used by the 25 year old Princess Elizabeth on her visit here while on a tour of the Commonwealth just prior to hearing of her father's death.

Selborne College still had a twinge of colonialism in it. The Earl of Selborne in England was a patron and came one Founders Day. On another occasion Douglas Bader, the famous WWII fighter pilot came. That combination of colonial tradition and memories of war were still pervasive. We were expected to practice and then sing at full throttle WWII songs modified to mock opposing sports teams. Rugby matches against Dale High in particular could be most vehement. Attendance at song practice was compulsory. I found them repulsive am pleased to say that I never actually sang.

But that was only part of it. School cadets could be found in many white schools. For me much marching about in khaki uniform with an ancient rifle. For some, a role in the brass marching band or shooting club (with air rifles). At Founders Day once a year we took part in the handing over of the Key ceremony around the School War Memorial. Sadly this had names added to during the border war in Angola.

We once stood as guard of honour along Oxford Street for President Swart when he was given the Freedom of the City. There were public events in the evening and my mother got to dance with the president.

Schools at that time did not have a canteen, only a “tuck box” manned by pupils and selling very little. Morning breaktime could be spent sitting around chatting, playing a game or catching up on homework for the next classes. Breaktime lunch was usually sandwiches or similar prepared by ourselves or our mothers. But we could buy hot pastries or ice cream from vendors with appropriate hot or cold containers on their bicycles. A trick was to nick very small quantities of mercury from the science lab and rub it onto brass coins so that at a glance they looked like much larger denominations of nickel coins. That way we could buy even more ice cream. The ruse didn't last long. At lunch time I walked the several blocks to our Selborne home and then back again.

Break time games could include footsy. This involved standing with the feet just slightly apart. Pen knives (most of us carried knives – to sharpen pencils!), or darts would be thrown so that they pegged into the ground about a shoe width to the side. At each successful upright knife or dart, we would then move the nearest foot up to the it. Progressively standing with our feet further apart, until we fell overs. Or our nerves gave in first. Naturally some knives and darts went right through our shoes. Eina.

And there was always someone who brought snakes into school. Not me.

My maternal grandmother's sister, Daisy, lived in London at this time. Once a year we would phone her. To do this we had to pre book a long distance call. Then when we made contact there was much confusion as we shouted to be heard and because of the slight time delay. Party lines in rural districts were still common in SA. Our parents had friends on a farm down the coast. The phone could ring and they would answer or not according to the number of rings the telephonist gave eg tring tring or tring tring tring. Anyone on that circuit of phone line could hear anyone else's calls. When it was suspected that someone nosey was listening in, all sorts of fictitious stories would be added to the conversation such as being pregnant again or cows on the loose. Perhaps a joke or too. Just sometimes the suspicion of an intruder on the line would be proven by the daft rumour coming back around or, if there was any degree of guilt in their part, a click as their phone was put back. Or perhaps a giggle,

In 1957 the Soviet Union launched its first Sputnik. The launch of Sputnik 1 shocked many Americans, who had assumed that their country was technologically ahead of the Soviet Union, and led to the “space race” between the two countries. As SA sunk into a fear of anything Russian, this was very disconcerting. Well at this young age, not for me. And I actually saw it. There was a horse racecourse where Stirling High School is now. On an almost cloudless evening my family joined several others in this open area relatively unaffected by house and street lights too look for it. And there it was. While seeing satellites is nowadays frequent on any cloudless evening (evening in Scotland), it was a new experience then. And when the first Telstar, a telecommunications satellite was launched in 1962 there was great excitement. It even inspired some great music - https://www.last.fm/music/The+Tornados/_/Telstar

My father had bought a large new fangled stereo speaker radiogram in a sapele laminated case on spindly '60s legs. It had a gramophone on which he played dire LPs. But he also used to search the various wave bands on for the click or beep of satellites circling above. Sounds that simply seemed to assist in tracking back then, but which are still included in many a sci-fi movie as ubiquitous with space adventure.

Then in 1969 the first moon landing was made by the Americans, clearly outdoing those Russians. We listened to it on the radio. A day or so later we were in the cinema to see rushed footage of it. I had collected many newspaper cuttings of the event and even got postcards on request from NASA. I still have that in a black notebook. People all over the world watched the moon landing live on TV. Not in SA. TV was only begun in 1976.

TV had been resisted for years by the government concerned about liberal ideas from overseas permeating society. But it eventually arrived. Over a long period we simply had test patterns and then still pictures submitted by the public. Although I missed it, my father appeared in one of them in his scout's uniform. TV sets were still expensive, or at least not yet considered essential. Some people got them immediately. Others put it off. Asking friends round to watch TV was common. Seeing a taxi pull up outside a shop displaying TVs turned on was also common. A benefit of this long delay in getting it had the benefit that the SABC went straight into the state of the art technology. But the state of the nation was something else. This was the peak of the apartheid era. Broadcasts were initially in English and Afrikaans. Imported programmes carefully vetted such as for examples of racial freedom; examples of able and bright Negroes US sitcoms; even too many bare mid-drifts avoided. Black programmes eventually got included. For years we saw embarrassed looking women toy toying in black choirs. Those of world standards and sometimes world fame still excluded. A cynical planned means of presenting other races as inferior. This was to all be proved very wrong, but years later.