



## Wayne Clarke

Member of the Gawler RSL

Interviewed as part of the Gawler Oral History Project.

### **“1950’s. King Street, The Eagle Foundry, Native Water Rats, Gypsies, and The Gawler Memorial Swimming Pool”**

Interviewed by Barry Neylon in April 2018

Transcript of this interview is as follows:

**Barry:** Just following on from our previous discussion. We were talking about King Street. The street in which you grew up. I think you had a few more stories to relate in that area of town.

**Wayne:** Yes Barry. We regarded it as being on the edge of the main town of Gawler and certainly the extremity of the central part of Gawler. King Street was a very busy little area. We lived opposite the Eagle Foundry which was operated by the Thompson Family ... Gordon and Ruth Thompson were running it. He inherited it from his father, David. The origins of the Eagle Foundry go back to 1870. It was well noted for making smaller cast iron items and much of the decorative cast iron lace work around the Town of Gawler, which is now highly prized, was made at the Eagle Foundry. The Eagle Foundry is, now of course, a Bed and Breakfast accommodation and it does provide some affordable accommodation with a bit of history. And it's proving to be fairly popular.

The foundry was actually in operation when I was a young person ... around about 10 or so. My brother and I used to earn pocket money from Gordon Thompson helping at the foundry doing little jobs. He became a very big influence in my life. I always remember a very fateful day in 1956 when Gordon was involved in a very serious accident at the foundry when the furnace blew up ... and Gordon was scalded with molten iron ... and he spent a long time in rehabilitation in the hospitals in Adelaide ... and he did make a remarkable recovery. It was

one of those things at the time. There had not been a lot of experience with serious burns like that ... and he certainly was a pioneer patient in that regard.

We used to go over there and watch the "moulders", as they were called, making the moulds for the cast iron. And we were not permitted to be there on the days that they did the pouring, although, I must admit that we did occasionally peak through the side of the shed and watch what they were doing ... which was very dangerous ... because the furnace was really a great big iron container about 20' high ... and it was lined with bricks inside and the interior of the furnace was lined with a white pipe clay. Probably people may realize about the clay pipes that the people in the 1800's used to smoke their tobacco in ... and that was a very hardy fire-resistant material ... and that had to be lined after every smelting operation. It had to be relined and that was a very hard job and had to be done by an expert. There was a man called Alby Johnson who was the only man left in the Town of Gawler who was experienced enough and was able to do the lining of the interior of the furnaces. The situation was, that when the interior of the furnace was lined with this white pipe clay ... which was sourced from a piece of ground out near Williamstown out near the caravan park ... just up the road from the caravan park going towards the Barossa Reservoir ... it was a very secret job. Every now and again we would go up in a truck and source our pipe clay and keep the location of that very secret so that nobody else knew where it was. The pipe clay ... there was a steel tray that the molten iron ore used to flow out of. There wasn't a tap of any sort to stop it. That entrance to the furnace was filled up with another sort of clay ... and it was just there ... and you could hear the roar of the fire. When they were ready to pour the molten metal, Gordon Thompson would go along with a big long steel pipe and quietly put a hole into this clay stopper and let the molten iron ore roll out. Then the molten iron would be collected in some bucket containers .. they were steel of course ... and then they would manually lift them over to where they were pouring the iron into moulds. The moulds were interesting because as the iron would go into the moulds ... the moulds were always made in two parts ... and as the molten iron would go in it would force a little bit of air out of the moulds. Eventually they would light the gas that was coming out and they would have little fire jets coming out the moulds, and it was quite an impressive sight. Obviously, you can tell by now that I have actually seen it done. But, anyway, that was the process, and everything used to go along until poor old Gordon had a very bad accident and the moulding activities ceased at that time. And he became the Shearer Agent for machinery. He used to be an agent for David Shearer and John Shearer. He was the main source for the farmers implements in the district. My brother and I used to earn our pocket money by painting second hand machinery covering up the rust and things like that. He would say that five pounds spent with us would get him fifty pounds on the implement. So, he thought that was a good deal. Anyway, that was what happened when we lived in King Street.

He also used to have a small farm at Sheoak Log. When I was a bit older, in my teenage years, we would often go out to Sheoak Log and I learnt to drive tractors and I used to

plough paddocks and things out there. It was a great learning experience and I thoroughly enjoyed my time there.

We lived at the end of King Street. King Street actually continued on in a direct route towards Willaston and it was in a straight line to the Willaston Bridge. Now on the left-hand side, just as you went across towards the bridge there was a large park, quite an extensive parkland, ... off of Victoria Terrace as it's known now... known as Essex Park. This park had a magnificent stand of huge gum trees. The gum trees I would imagine to be at least 12 to 15 feet wide and there were quite a number of them. And it was a wonderful park. In 1954 there was a movement afoot to build a swimming pool and this started/commenced and a lot of concrete work was undertaken and the swimming pool foundations were laid down. Then there was a bit of a catastrophe ... we had the 1956 floods and the area got decimated ... the flood did a lot of damage to the river and the funding for the swimming pool was held up ... and it wasn't completed for quite a few years. But I can recall at the time that there wasn't any outrage or objections to cutting down those magnificent gum trees, which in hindsight should never have happened. However, we wanted a swimming pool and that is eventually what we got.

Essex park also had a large area of parkland which was used by a cricket club, and the cricket club had a cricket pitch there which was very rarely ever used, and after a period of time tennis became a big sport around Gawler with many Churches having clubs, and it was mooted that a lawn tennis club be built. And eventually on one weekend there was a group of energetic entrepreneurs who went down with a grader or tractor and a couple of trucks and magically the cricket pitch disappeared. Shortly after, a surprising feature was that the funding for the Lawn Tennis Club reached fruition and this was a great part of Gawler's entertainment in the late 1950's and early 60's.

The Victoria Terrace was altered and extended after the swimming pool was built to join up with the main road which is now called the Horrocks Highway. It was joined up and then there was a realignment from Murray street past the present caravan park to line up again with the Lewiston Bridge. The area that road extension went through was also a very nice park. It was actually a pine tree park. There were quite large pine trees, but they were all taken down and nobody gave a toss about it. Anyway, the highway was done and now it serves the community as a road.

The caravan park was obviously not there at the time. In fact, it was just another general park land area, and this area was noted in the Gawler district as being used almost annually, but sometimes bi annually, by a group of gypsies .... who arrived mysteriously, unannounced, and they would be there and have nicely coloured caravans and horses and animals .... and they would go around and do little jobs around the town for the families that wanted knives sharpened ... and lots of other jobs they would do around town. The community in Gawler ... the warnings would come out that the gypsies were in town. I don't know whatever they did but they always were looked upon with suspicion and everybody

was fairly happy ... they never stayed for much more than 2 - 3 weeks and everybody seemed to have been relieved when they moved on. I never had any problem with them myself but that seemed to be what the community was all worried about.

Through the area where the swimming pool was built there was a pathway, which still exists to some degree, by the tennis courts where it joins up with the old swing bridge. There was a swing bridge there ... joined up near Panter Street in Willaston ... it's near where the par 3 golf course is. Any way there used to be a short cut that the people from the migrant camp used to walk up and catch the train from the North Gawler Railway station, which is now of course, Gawler Central. It's a wonderful thing how names change!

I was talking recently to one of my friends ... one of the people who came out as a migrant ... and he was remarking about walking over that swing bridge ... not far from this ... and we were talking about the water that was in the river in our day, back in the early 50's and one of the things we mentioned was the fact that there were native Australian water rats in the river area, along the Gawler River. Back in my Father's day he used to say that they would go and trap the rats and sell the hides for hats. They would sell them to a shop that would export them. The skin of the water rats was very water resistant and they made these very expensive top hats which you see in lots of photos of people in the 1850's. And that's what they were made out of. These water rats were in the river in Gawler and there was quite a bit of water in the river. And a friend I was talking to ... we both remarked how we learnt to swim in a water hole called; "The "Tomato", which was just behind the present bowling club. There was a very large expanse of water. Kevin, who I was talking to, remarked how he looked at it the other day and he suddenly realised that the water hole, which he used to think was a pretty big water hole, didn't look so big now that we have grown up. Kevin and I both feel that the water quality of the Gawler River was badly affected when the Barossa Valley grape industry took off. The overflow from the wineries absolutely decimated the quality of the Gawler River.

The Gawler Swimming Pool was actually organised by some people who were involved in World War 2. Obviously when you do some military service they try and make sure everybody keeps fit ... and there were several groups ... and they continued to organise several clubs in Gawler. One was the Athletics Club, which was very well done, and that was organised by many men from the Returned Services from WW2. They also proposed the formation ... the creation of the swimming pool. This pool as I said had very troubled origins, and it was originally financed, I understand, by a grant ... a War Memorial Grant. This grant actually got the swimming pool project off the ground and it was actually known as the Gawler Memorial Swimming Pool for quite some considerable time. Part of the deal to get a grant was that you had to show that it was a Memorial. There were two ornamental gates that were made at the swimming pool and it clearly had on them that they were "The Gawler Memorial Pool". Of course, in later years these things have disappeared. Unfortunately, I sort of feel somewhat disappointed that the memorial aspect of it has been lost. However, the swimming pool had a reunion and I was president of the RSL at the time

and the Gawler Council said to me "would I like to be present at this ceremony?" and I was very pleased to be there ... I think Brian Sambell was the Mayor at the time. I did have a little bit of pleasure in reminding people of the origin of it at that time. I would like them to acknowledge that it was created by the effort of WW2 servicemen and the early efforts of the Gawler RSL.

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