

Georges River

magazine

Thursday,
October 28, 2010

Back in time

with our kids

P6

**ALL
NEW**

G.B. DAWSON.
Surveyor
139. PITT STREET
1890



Delivered monthly to Lugarno, Oatley, Mortdale,
Peakhurst and Penshurst with your community newspaper

ST GEORGE & SUTHERLAND SHIRE
Leader

Back in time with our kids

Dorothy Walker is a living, talking history book. The daughter of a former Hurstville mayor, Hedley Mallard, she was born in Douglas Haig Street at Oatley and has lived there all of her 88 years. Now she is sharing her memories of what it was like to live in Oatley 80 years ago with a new generation of children through an innovative history project initiated by Oatley Heritage Group.

THE heritage group has organised for Mrs Walker and three other long-time Oatley residents - Jim Nicholson, Joyce Bray and Glenn Stevens - to talk to the children at Oatley Public School about the Oatley of their youth.

Then Alec Leach arranged a walking heritage tour around the suburb for the children.

They saw the now-grassed and -tree-lined median strip in Wonoona Parade East where residents grew vegetables during World War II and gazed down the long line of parkland between Oatley Avenue and Oatley Parade where the original rail line ran before walking down Wyong Street to Neverfail Bay to see the sad remains of the formerly flourishing oyster farms established by the Derwent and Drake families.

From there they walked through the bush along the pipeline to the Como pedestrian bridge and back along the cycle path.

Oyster farming has been synonymous with Neverfail Bay since 1886, when the first Andy Derwent set up

an oyster farm there. Mr Derwent (1854 to 1940) must have been one tough guy because a South Coast historical publication, *The Narrawallee Story Retold*, told of a young Andy sailing a 17-foot sailboat from the Georges River to Lake Conjola and walking back to Sydney, taking only four days to reach Hurstville.

Wyong Street is still home to many Derwents and another oyster farming family, the Drakes, but the once-thriving oyster industry is gone - killed by the QX virus which attacked the oysters in the 1990s.

Mr Nicholson, whose family ran the newsagency in Oatley, talked to the children about the railway, which once ran in a straight line through the present-day park with the station located at the corner of Frederick Street and Oatley Avenue.

The family lived above the shop, near the train station which was important because the newspapers were delivered on the 2.30am train. Old newspapers were sold to the butcher who used them to wrap meat.



Top: Relief workers build roads in Oatley Park during the Depression.

Middle: Oatley Station in 1927.

Bottom: Bathing at Oatley Park before the baths were built.

Right: A young Dot Walker in uniform. Historic photos from Kogarah Council's collection.

The track was moved further east because the trains struggled to get up the steep grade but a large crater marked the spot where the station stood in 1930 when Joyce Bray moved there with her family.

Times were tough during the Depression and Joyce's father worked shelling oysters from 7am to 7pm for 2 shillings and a bottle of oysters. Earning the 10 shillings to pay the rent each week involved the whole family, she said.

Like everyone else she went to school in bare feet and waited along the train line with other children hoping the drivers would throw them lumps of coal which they could use to warm the house in winter.

Mrs Bray greatly enjoyed talking to the children about her youth in Oatley. "I could've talked for hours," she said. "And I was surprised at the response I got. I was talking about learning to write with pen and ink when one little boy put his hand up and asked: 'Were they quill pens?'"

"I'm not *that* old."

Dorothy Walker was actually born in Oatley and has lived there all her life except for her military service, manning the searchlights at Bronte

during the war. She remembers when the baker did his rounds in a horse-drawn cart, walking to school at Mortdale to save the penny fare on the bus, swimming at the Oatley Baths (her father was one of the founders of the amateur swimming club), visiting Silvester's Castle and, when she was older, hiking to Burning Palms in the Royal National Park.

During the Depression men on the dole were hired for "relief work", cutting roads through the rock in Oatley Park. When finished, the lookouts and roads were named for Hurstville Council aldermen and officers which is why the main road through the park, Mallard Drive, bears her family name.

As part of its program to promote the teaching of history, Oatley Heritage Group has invited local primary pupils to enter a history project on aspects of life in Oatley in the 1800s, 1900s, 1930s, 1950s, 2000 and 2010.

Co-ordinator Rodger Robertson said the pupils' research could be presented in a variety of ways - as a diorama or a three-dimensional model of an Oatley icon, such as the Oatley clocktower, a research project into local flora or fauna or industries such as oyster-farming, a poem or a letter written from the viewpoint of an earlier inhabitant or a PowerPoint presentation on the changing face of Oatley.

Mr Robertson said the heritage group was also keen to expand the history program to other schools in the area.

What the kids said

Jake: "I've always wanted to know what Oatley was like in the past and now I know lots of information like, for example, that Wyong Street was the first street in Oatley to have tar on the road."

Jessica: "I learnt the name of the famous oyster family, the Derwents, and that oysters were farmed in Never fail Bay. It was called that because the water never failed. Unfortunately, the business closed because the bay became polluted and the oysters were affected. As we walked, we came to a giant water pipe that carries water all the way from Woronora Dam to Penshurst."

Lyric: "Mr Nicholson spoke about what Oatley was like when he was a boy. He said where the park is now was where the railway line was before. His family owned a newsagency and he used to deliver newspapers. He told us when he was a boy he could see Como from his window."

Georgia: "Mr Nicholson is turning 90 this year. He knows a lot about Oatley and how it's changed. He was one of the first to ride the electric train from Oatley into the city."



From left: Jack and Dorothy Walker, Heritage group history project co-ordinator Rodger Robertson, and Oatley pupils Natasha, Jemima, Sophie, Matilda, Ian and Edward.