

Some reflections of early Canberra – Electrification, Swimming and Schools

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Editors' note: The following are just a few extracts from an unpublished paper by Audrey Harvey entitled 'Public Works and Personal Recollections.'

The electrification of Hall

A very important history of Canberra should not be overlooked – electrification of the rural areas within the Territory. In 1939 the Hall Progress Association wrote to the then Department of Interior requesting consideration be given to connecting Hall to electricity. The Naval Wireless Station at Belconnen was electrified and it was suggested a single phase line be extended from the Wireless Station to Hall, servicing the Ginninderra Wool Shed, Ginninderra Post Office and the old Police Station. The number of prospective consumers (apart from the school and houses departmentally owned) were twenty to thirty.

Lack of water was a problem and a deputation from Hall waited on the Honourable S. Foll, Minister the Interior. In 1941 there were approximately 160-170 residents living in the area and during the previous two summers it was necessary to cart water and travel to Queanbeyan for a 'bath'.

One mother, with five children, whose husband was in camp, had to cart water in buckets from the Hall Showground. Families seriously considered moving into Ainslie, thereby occupying houses formerly allocated to Public Servants. However, the majority of the blocks were freehold and residents were reluctant to leave.

In 1941 Mrs McCauley wrote to the Department:

Just a line to ask if you would be kind enough to help us poor strugglers at Hall to get water and light and sanitary carried out. We appealed to Mr Foll until we got fed up with his promises. Our folk has [*sic*] to work hard to earn a bare existence and if we had water we could give the workers vegetables to eat. The water is laid to Belconnen and the electric light lines are only half a mile from the town so we women are hoping this won't fall on deaf ears. Nearly everyone voted for Labour [*sic*] here, so pleas do something for us.

By 1948 servicing was under way and properties such as Fairview, Wattle Park, Gledeswood, the Church and School Hall were connected.

Swimming

From 1925 to 1930 with public servants shifting from areas such as Melbourne, where there were beaches to cool off in summer conditions; in Canberra they were faced with treeless plains, houses and buildings far apart from each other, unsealed streets – and the dry hot summer. Swimming holes were to be found in the Molonglo River, Cotter or the Murrumbidgee Rivers for those with transport. The road to the coast was a tortuous route and as a safety precaution the *Canberra Times* published details of routes to be followed.

Allegations of pollution pushed the citizens to clamour for better swimming conditions, which the Federal Capital Commission could not accommodate. Members of Parliament living in Canberra for long periods of time helped the final push for a swimming pool through the Parliamentary Committee on Public Works.

In 1929 a question was asked in the Senate:

Is it a fact that thousands of pounds have been spent to provide golf links in Canberra: if so, will the government erect swimming baths for the lower paid servants of the Commonwealth who for financial reasons are unable to take up golf?

Sir John Butters replied:

Continual agitation for kerbs and gutters, a moratorium on rates and rents, reduced pastoral rents, free noxious weed cutting, reduced city rents, and cheaper recreation, is giving Canberra the name of a place where the residents are always wanting something for nothing.

However, the FCC did come up with two suggestions, one, a cement based pool above river level near the power house, the second, a larger earth concrete pool using river water near the Acton flats. This was deemed too expensive as water would have to be pumped from the Cotter River.

In the 1920s a popular swimming spot was Acton, beneath the Bachelors' Quarters. Acton was a relatively strong administrative and domestic centre. However, it was the Power House site that was developed as a swimming site. It had limitations for swimming, let alone swimming carnivals. Murky water, often most unhygienic, muddy river banks, a river subject to flooding and an overall pastoral atmosphere. The huge pipe forming the basis of the diving tower was a small bonus for the swimmers. It carried warm water from the Power house cooling system to the river and swimmers could find warm patches of water near the outlet. There is no record of temperatures available, but the warm water must have assisted algae growth.

By 1929 a sub-committee for Public Baths had been formed, various sites were contemplated; the preferred site within Waratah Park, now known as Telopea park was decided by the Civic Administrator, with work commencing in July 1930. [The 'Swimming Pool, or as we know it today the Manuka Pool, was officially opened on 26 January 1931]¹ A small anecdote – when the site was being excavated some lads from Telopea Park School sneaked in to have a look, found some fossilised trilobites (extinct arthropods) and took them home. After parental discussion, Gough was allowed to keep them – signed by Freda Whitlam!

Schooling

In 1910 the effective educational facilities consisted of just over a dozen scattered and fairly primitive bush schools run by the NSW Government, catering for an attendance of less than 250 children. By the end of 1912, the Commonwealth agreed that NSW would supply the manpower and administrative machinery, while the Commonwealth would be responsible for salaries, maintenance and erection of the buildings.

The need for better schooling was not lost on all residents, for example, John Murray, the local baker, looked to the 'probability of a fairly large population settling her in the near future.' However, World War I held up development and it was not until 1921 that the FCC came up with a plan, recommending the erection of two primary schools, one the Ainslie Primary school, an advanced secondary school and teacher housing, with a technical college to follow shortly after. With the appointment of Mr Cecil Henry as headmaster, the Telopea Park

¹ See "Who's Going to be First Today?" The oral history of Manuka Swimming Pool, by Margaret Park, *Heritage in Trust*, Spring 2006

Superior Public School opened in October 1923. The initial enrolment was 50 pupils with an increase of 120 pupils by the end of that year.

Secondary education in the ACT suffered in the Depression years. Finance was short and the Commonwealth was reluctant to take formal responsibility for secondary schooling in the territory. Secondary education was still regarded as the prerogative of the elite and, remained with private schools to a large extent. Hence Telopea Park was given the status of Intermediate High School.

However, by 1938 the Canberra high School was under way and in 1940 it enrolled students on purely academic grounds under a new selective system. Telopea Park began to cater for secondary students with broader qualifications and needs. In the late 1950s the much criticised selective system was abandoned and it was decided that High Schools should serve all the needs of students in their particular area.