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MEMORIES OF FROG HOLLOW

A School Ahead of its Time

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MEMORIES OF FROG HOLLOW

A School Ahead of its Time

On the south-west corner of Wood and Lindsay Streets today, in 1990, there is a park-like area of open space. You can still see the signs of the small creek which once flowed through the site although now there are not as many trees along its banks as there once used to be and the two rustic bridges made of local wood which once crossed it are no longer there. When May Day celebrations have been held there in the past few years the organizers have turned the park into a beautiful scene of flickering candles, music and dancing.

Further up the slope stands a rambling building with the dark cream paint peeling off in places. Yet, if you look closely on the wall which abutts onto Wood Street, the words *Darwin Primary School* are still visible under the paint. Today the free-standing sign says *Darwin Education Centre*.

Yet, if you wander down the slope from the present education centre there are signs of former building foundations and perhaps you will notice what looks like a broken stone and concrete rubbish bin partly filled with dirt and with small trees and grass growing in it. This was the 'Wishing Well' at Frog Hollow, the temporary school built to house the senior classes which had no rooms in 1951 when the rapid growth in the school numbers meant that the Cavenagh Street site of the Darwin Higher Primary School was not big enough. Federal Parliament had approved the building of a new high school at Bullocky Point but in 1951 it was still in the planning stages and students needed to be housed.

At this time all education matters had to be referred to the South Australian Education Department in Adelaide, 3000 kms away. It seems that today many businesses, banks, etc. are centralizing 'down south' also but at least the technological communication is faster if not cheaper. In 1951 however, it could take up to 14 hours to fly between Darwin and Adelaide in a DC3 so decision making in Darwin was affected by both time and distance from the head offices. When I returned to Darwin as a teacher in 1956, my employer was the South Australian Education Department and a rumor around at that time was that a batch of

correspondence from Darwin sent 3 years earlier, had just been found! The decision to allow teachers the same rental rebates as the other public servants in Darwin certainly did take at least three years to be approved and, although the rumor was probably just that, it must have been extremely frustrating for those in administrative positions in Darwin at that time.

School accommodation was a case in point. On the 21st May 1946 the Darwin School was reopened after World War II with 69 students. My two brothers, sister and I enrolled nine months later. A tropical house on high cement piers and a rambling old 'Queenslander' built in the late 1800's were our classrooms. The site was the previous Woolworth's car park between Cavenagh and Wood Streets. By 1948 post-primary classes had been established. A year later in 1949 there were already 525 students with 48 in the high school classes and students could study up to Year 10, then called Intermediate, at which level they sat for a public exam. In 1949 the Darwin Higher Primary School produced its first school magazine. Also in that year Grade 7 formed its ministerial 'cabinet' of 16 students with portfolios such as 'health', 'dusting', 'speeches', 'flowers', 'sport', 'ink', etc. In 1990 I believe about half of these 'Ministers' (or Opposition Members) still live in Darwin.

The Queensland style house which was used for high school classes, although lovely, was old so by 1950 five temporary classrooms and a laboratory had to be built. But student numbers continued to grow very rapidly and it became necessary to build a temporary building across the road on Wood Street and further down the slope from the Darwin Higher Primary School. Increased numbers could not wait for Darwin High School to be built although it had been approved on paper.

And so Frog Hollow came into existence in 1951 to house one hundred and twenty Grade 7 to Leaving students, now referred to as Year 7 to Year 11. In the 1950's a student needed to pass the '*progress certificate*' to go onto high school so that Grade 7 could have been year 7, 8 or even 6 for some students.

On reflection during its short time, I believe Frog Hollow was a school ahead of its time.

The site itself created a lovely atmosphere. A small creek lined with tall eucalypts and other smaller trees wound its way from the Wood Street side and disappeared across McMinn Street, probably through pipes as McMinn Street was higher than ground level. Where it went didn't seem important at that time. The main focus was McMinn Street itself as it formed a high boundary to the school and it was everyone's ambition who played 'rounders' to reach McMinn Street on the 'full' with a good hit. One gained a great deal of respect from students at Frog Hollow for achieving this feat and even the teachers who joined us for our games at lunchtime tried to meet the challenge. However by placing a fielder on the boundary near the road many a slogger was caught out, never to achieve their ambition and the prestige it carried.

The building in which we studied was a rectangular tin shed on concrete foundations. The end walls had no windows or louvres but the longer side walls were basically all louvres so that we could see the beautiful grounds and breezes could pass through freely. Inside, half height partitions divided the building into four sections, but in essence it was an 'open plan' school. The caneite partitions held notices, pictures, etc. and drawing pins which had many uses. Students sat on padded chairs at individual desks which had flip tops for storing books and also had the usual hole for the ink-well, hence the need for 'ink' ministers in Grade 7 to sort out the issues arising from distribution, delivery, pollution problems and the inevitable quality control associated with the use of liquid ink.

As mentioned already, drawing pins were used for many innovative purposes. A popular use for them was as a plait restraint. Many girls with long hair wore their hair in plaits so could not feel them being pinned to the slats of the back of the chairs on which we sat. It was only when we would stand up and the chair would come with us and laughter could not be contained that we knew it had been our turn to be 'pinned'. One student well known for his innovative use of drawing pins is today a well known business man.

The fliptop desks were also useful not only for storing text books, but for other uses on special occasions like April Fools Day. In April it was usually still the Wet Season and the intermittent screams identified the desks where green frogs had been placed. Some students, especially the very well organized ones, knew without looking where to find the text book they needed just by putting their hand under the desk cover. The school timetable made it very clear on which stack of books to place the wet, soft, green frogs and it was only the lack of cooperation from the frogs which led to screams occurring after the first lesson period. It was surprising how, after hearing the first screams, many students appeared to have forgotten items necessary for the first lesson and desk tops rose to the vertical position while teachers' voices rose in protest as it was a rule that everything a student needed should be ready before the lesson started.

Frog Hollow was an open plan school long before the concept was formally introduced into education. The dividers which separated the classes were movable and reached a little above head height with a gap of about 70cms to the floor. Not only was this good for airflow in the building, but it also meant that interclass communication could be carried on via aerial messages sent on paper gliders. Perhaps today there could be mayhem as to be noticed is the aim in many facets of life, but in the 50's at Frog Hollow the recognized skill was in timing the sending of the 'message' so that its departure was unseen and its arrival was also unnoticed by the teacher. The message sender had to visualize what was happening at the destination and coordinate it with the activities in the sender's room. Messages could also be sent under the partitions. The challenge was to do it unnoticed. Much spare time was devoted to experimenting with the aerodynamics associated with design and weight of paper.

There were also other perspectives to this open planning and I would like to quote 'Freddo' from the 1951 school magazine where he reported on his visit to Frog Hollow with its 120 students at that time:

'Before I left I visited the Museum, where specimens of all were displayed in one room. This I learnt, was known as the 'Torture Chamber'. It sounded to me like Bedlam as I tried to understand the languages which sounded something like this: *In 1770, Captain Cook put it on the Credit side. If one straight line stands on 4480 square yards - Hamlet was the villain who - asked for a cease fire in Korea - quaderat nil desperandum. I love to listen to the 50 million frogs with-Double Entry.*

Nevertheless there were advantages to the building. The open planning allowed a free flow of air and, as long as the walls were mainly louvres, you could sit in class and look out at the lovely trees, red poinsettias, many coloured crotons and the general greenness all around. At one time Robert Tudawali, the Aboriginal actor in the film 'Jedda' was the gardener. This news passed around on the grapevine so we kept an eye out for him as we marched each morning from assembly at the Cavenagh Street site to Frog Hollow. We saw him as a 'real' film star and those were the days when we used to go to [the] open-air Star Picture Theatre in Smith Street and, in the interval break, race to Chin's Shop to buy Fantails and avidly read and get read to us the filmstar information on the yellow and blue lolly paper around each chocolate caramel.

Another reason why the view from our classrooms was so beautiful and relaxing was that one of our long time teachers, Harry Parker, was in charge of the forty Grade 7's at Frog Hollow. Not only was Mr Parker a keen cricketer and the owner of a car with a dickie seat used for transporting the privileged to the Esplanade Oval on sports afternoons, but he also had green fingers. Everything grew for him. Gardening was the 'subject' on Friday afternoons for his class, and it was their labour which produced the brightly coloured garden beds, rockeries, fruit trees, rustic bridges, bouganvillea archway and the Wishing Well. These workers were sometimes referred to as the 'serfs' and Mr Parker, the 'Squire', and there was lots of leaning on spades, but the end result was a natural environment pleasant to work in.

Because of the sloping nature of the site, steps were built by the 'serfs' in strategic places and, as we were environmentally conscious in those days, we used local recycled products whenever possible. Two of the stronger 'serfs', Meaney and Bonson, were given the job of breaking up the thin cement floor of a nearby unused building to use in making the steps. One day we almost had our first two cases of workers compensation. Struggling with the heavy loaded barrow of cement blocks the pair had, with great difficulty, just manouvered the overweight barrow onto Wood Street from the Cavenagh Street school site where the

broken blocks were. To their horror a truck appeared over the rise. It bore down on them. Knowing what was most valuable, they saved themselves. The irate truck driver stopped just in time, shouting at the two serfs to remove their load from in front of his vehicle! Sometimes the serfs felt that few really appreciated the sweat that went into making Frog Hollow the lovely site it was.

Most of my Latin and English lessons were held outside. There were about four in the Latin class and our teacher, Miss Truesdale, had found an interesting text for us, 'Latin for Today' with its pictures and stories about life in Rome. Our classroom was the seat under the milkwood tree at the entrance to Frog Hollow. We shared it with a frilled-neck lizard who listened in from a higher branch. It seemed to show its interest by sitting so still we thought it may have been dead. Our interest in Latin was maintained by encouraging us to translate the words of modern songs of the time into Latin. Just as new words enter languages all the time, so we increased the Latin vocabulary at the same time as we reinforced its grammar. Latin may have been a 'dead' language but we used it 'communicatively' wherever possible. At the present time the 'communicative approach' is the most discussed theme in the teaching of languages.

How the Frog Hollow experience contrasted with my last year of high school in Adelaide at an academically recognized girls' school which catered for girls from the country. The stone buildings of the Adelaide school were interesting historically, but the small windows let in little light and air and the views were usually of a nearby brick wall. Except for a small patch of grass and a few small trees in the front, the rest of the grounds were paved. Latin became a series of 'war' texts! Of course they were useful as the teachers were closely involved with setting or marking the State exams and my memory served me well on the final exam paper - but the love for learning allowed at one's own pace in small classes in a physically lovely setting as I'd experienced at Frog Hollow was not on the agenda.

In Year 10 at Frog Hollow I was lucky to have a teacher of English who enjoyed not only literature but also nature. Our English classroom was a bench under the trees along the creek. So Shakespeare was studied, read and rehearsed by the creek. At age 15 one can learn to enjoy this playwright but it wasn't always easy to get 'into the mood' each time a lesson was scheduled. Our teacher, as a nature lover, usually wore her binoculars around her neck and we were quick to remind her if, for some reason, she didn't have them. That year we were to stage '*The Merchant of Venice*' so, under the shady trees, on bended knee in the dirt and leaves, Shylock (now a Darwin real estate man) could be seen begging for his pound of flesh to be spared. The Duke, a former Darwin doctor, played his part well, but sometimes the grin on the face of the kneeling Shylock reflected the mood of the day. It was then that someone would suddenly 'discover' an interesting bird, animal or insect in our outdoor classroom. "Look Miss, there's an interesting bird up there!" And so we created the diversions in keeping with the class mood and the English teacher, in allowing this, showed

a sensitivity to the affected factors associated with learning. At the end of the term the play was produced and we all appreciated the applause. It was an effort but wasn't 'hard work'. And so the lines such as

*The quality of mercy is not strained
it droppeth like the gentle rain...*

remain to recall English outdoor classes in our open-air setting at Frog Hollow.

Term exams, end of year exams and public exams were part of the education system during my Frog Hollow days. To ease the strain of these exams, the 'Squire' and his 'serfs' had built a Wishing Well in traditional style on a small rise in front of the classrooms. Pieces of it still can be seen. There were some small shade trees there with benches beneath them where students sat studying or 'discussing' in their free periods. The Well itself was too deep to reach to the bottom with your arm and, as exams drew near, more and more coins reflected the sun from the bottom as worried students threw them in and wished for the right questions. As a means of raising school funds I don't think it was very successful however. There were probably students prepared to wet more than their arms!

Because the student numbers were low compared with the subjects needing to be offered for public exams, all students in public exam classes had free lines. The 'Intermediate' or Year 10 class had about 15 students so teachers were able to give individual help during the subject lessons as classes were small. I recall that one week I was trying to work out which day to have as a 'rest' day but, because the timetable differed each day, there was something worth coming to school for: sport, double maths, double geography, double science or double 'free'.

Once however, about half the school did disappear. These were the years of the Korean War and ships like the *Bataan* and the *Warramunga* called into Darwin. One day one of the warships was in port so about half of the Frog Hollow students took the afternoon off. The decision to go created a real dilemma for those who were school prefects. Next day a special assembly was announced. We knew it meant trouble. The old Queenslander where the Headmaster had his office stood near a huge milkwood tree on the site of the former Woolworth's carpark between Cavenagh and Wood Streets. The building was supported by posts about 6 feet (78cm) high and, on the Wood Street side, was a verandah with two sets of stairs leading up to it.

It was on this verandah that assemblies were conducted and, from a height, staff and students made announcements to those assembled below, standing in lines near the huge milkwood with mistletoe growing on it. It was also here that public canings took place. And here it was that we were all summoned after the unauthorised visit to the ships. I recall

prefects being put to shame verbally but the end result was that there were organized school trips to visit the ships after that.

The old Queenslander [building] was familiar to those from Frog Hollow because this was where we had been housed until our temporary accommodation had been built across the road at Wood Street. The building was T-shaped and the high school section was the large room which jutted out facing Cavenagh Street. It had wide verandahs on three sides and overlooked the school tennis courts where Lew Hoad had, on one occasion as an 18 year old Australian tennis star, held clinics. To the west of the tennis courts was an old Darwin house with its slatted wooden walls and push-out slatted wooden windows where, in the late 50's, I taught a Grade 5 class. On the other side of the tennis courts stretched the long 'Sidney Williams' hut, used as a classroom building with the science laboratory on the end which we still used when housed at Frog Hollow. We also had a long walk up to the library which was still in the old Queenslander building. There was an incentive in the library however. Inside were comfortable cane chairs for reading, but the 'piece de resistance' was the cane lounge. There was always a rush for this and many a rash promise was made by the students in exchange for 15 minutes of reclining comfort! Later the library was moved to the building which became the Darwin Primary School. Again the bouganvillea winding and flowering along the stairs leading to the library added beautiful colours to the learning environment.

The best known bouganvillea, however, flowered in purple-pink over the archmesh archway which welcomed students and visitors to Frog Hollow. Here hung the sign announcing the school's name. It was polished Territory ironwood which, some say, took three weeks of solid sawing to cut! Once through the archway the path divided into two, one each side of the huge shady milkwood tree, home to the frilled-neck lizard who listened in on Latin classes. Immediately to the left on a little hill stood what looked like a small cottage but in reality was the toilet block, located there probably to overcome drainage problems. However, surrounding the building were tall colourful poinsettias which drew attention to themselves rather than to the building.

Another point which disguised the fact that Frog Hollow was an educational establishment, were the banana palms. These palms were planted on the principle 'As ye sow, so shall ye reap'. Because the Grade 7's planted them, so they were the class which shared and ate the fruit when they ripened, much to the initial envy of the other classes. It was only a minority who actually enjoyed working with shovels and picks!

As home to students, Frog Hollow's life was shortlived. By 1956 the building was being used for woodwork and domestic science classes. Even so, Frog Hollow's marvellous ambience still drew students out-of-doors. I was told of a dressmaking teacher who, on giving her restive class an invitation to 'concentrate quietly on the task at hand or go outside', ended up with an empty classroom. When given the choice, the contemplative

setting out-doors always won.

But, for a few years after its opening, it seems to me that the students who attended the school were taught along educational principles often exemplified by some private and parent directed schools of the present time. At Frog Hollow we had the advantage of small classes where the teachers had time to get to know their students. Timetables were more flexible with extra-curricular activities valued. The importance of affective factors in learning was recognized both by surrounding the building in a park-like setting and by involving students in the reaping of rewards.

Time was allowed for reflection, a necessary condition for learning to take place, both in the timetable and in the attitude of the teachers towards a more relaxed perspective on learning in general. We did have uniforms, exams, homework, timetables, bought textbooks, etc., those outward signs of more rigid educational programs. So it may not be so much what you do rather than how you do it which may reduce the mental scarring that goes on in the name of much 'education'.

Those aspects of school life which bothered us like exams weren't abolished. Another perspective of 'positive thinking' in the form of the Wishing Well was given to us. The creek needed to be crossed when flowing so we were shown how to use local timber to build rustic bridges. Admittedly the hardness of the wood meant that perhaps a tonne of nails had to be purchased before enough went into making the structure sound, but we learnt a lot about Territory wood in the process. Uniforms weren't compulsory but we helped design them to be simple enough to be sewn by students if necessary and they were practical, so we tended to wear them.

There were three main reasons why learning at Frog Hollow was such a pleasure.

- ◆ the attitude to time was more relaxed,
- ◆ nature was part of our school life and
- ◆ small class sizes meant that interpersonal relationships were important.

Frog Hollow still remains to me a place where these principles were not just preached, but were believed in and practised.

I found this wonderfully evocative story of learning at Frog Hollow in our files. I have edited the document to a small extent but I do not know who wrote it. I would love to hear from anyone who may have some knowledge of the author or who might like to add to the story as a former student or teacher at the school.

*Yvonne Forrest
Editor*



GRADE 7 CABINET, DARWIN PRIMARY SCHOOL, 1949

Back row:: Cossie Blyth, Dennis Mellett, Jenny Forster, Alison Miller, Margaret Angeles, Isaac Brown,
Wendy Secrett, Bill Hickey, Cedric Chin

Seated: Irene Topmakoff, Don Bonson, Jocelyn Wu, Greg Greg Dehuil, Rae Quin Noy, Don Chin, Lynette
[unknown surname]

*Photograph from Irene Hill [nee] Topmakof
in the files of the Historical Society of the Northern Territory*