

HEALESVILLE REVISITED

Healesville is a country town of great significance to older VRWC members as it was the venue of a fondly remembered yearly race and weekend stay. The famous **Melbourne to Healesville Relay** was first held in 1938 on July 16th, starting from the YMCA boatshed on Alexander Avenue and proceeding east through Lilydale to Healesville over a distance of 38 miles, with relay legs of 2 miles each. The second scheduling was in 1939 when it was held on July 1st. With the war then intervening, the relay was not held again until 1946 when it reappeared with a changed date – it was now to be held over the King's Birthday weekend in early June. The relay walk normally started around midday, arriving in Healesville in the late afternoon. Bush walks were scheduled on the Sunday and the Monday and social activities were held on the Sunday evening.



1947 Healesville Relay – the mayor of South Melbourne hands the baton to Alex Philpott to start the relay while club president Alf Robinson looks on. On the right, Philpott finishes his leg and hands the baton on.

The following details of the 1951 weekend was taken from the Minutes of the Annual General Meeting:

About sixty people including members, their friends and children enjoyed this popular weekend outing. Once again all enjoyed the slapstick brand of entertainment. The efforts of the Draught Horse Ballet were well appreciated by members of the audience, although plaudits are modestly claimed by the writer for having trained it so efficiently for five minutes on the tennis court the morning prior to the concert. Members are reminded that this is an outing they should strive to attend., it is cheap from a cost point of view, it is an excellent opportunity of getting to know other members better, and you can relax as you wish for two whole days. Make this year's Kings Birthday weekend a must on your programme of outings. Members who can sing, dance or in any way help to entertain are asked to support the committee in this regard.

The Healesville relay of 1952 saw two teams competing with Ray Smith and Frank McGuire as opposing captains. Normally only 2 or 3 teams competed as the club was not all that big in those days. The photo below is quite historic



and shows Ted Allsopp about to start. The photo also includes Ernie Ryall (club auditor), Ray Smith, Mabel Robinson, Bert Gardiner, Vic Sharp and Alf Robinson. This particular photo is from the early 50s but the exact year is unknown.

The relay events were very popular with big crowds following the action. The Goble family and Frank McGuire arranged the bookings at the Woodstock guesthouse and the entertainment was excellent. Various vehicles were commandeered to ferry the masses.

In 1955, because of the increasing traffic, the event was changed to a 10-mile handicap walk with an associated teams race and was raced from Coldstream to Healesville. It continued in this format for a number of years until it too fell victim to the times. Alan Lucas explains

The last time the race held was in 1964 and I remember it well because I won the handicap (90.26 for 10 miles in my second season at 16 wasn't too bad on a hilly course). The reason it wasn't held in 1965 was that we couldn't get enough people interested in staying to take up the accommodation. The traffic would have caused problems before much longer although it didn't seem to too bad at the time. Driving the road now I shudder to think of the things that we did then but I guess that it was a different world.

A feel for the weekend can be glimpsed from the following reminiscences which Marie Lang (nee Goble) wrote for our club history book some years ago

Not all Saturdays were spent at the rowing clubrooms, because races were sometimes held at other venues. I always loved the relay race to Healesville. We all travelled in a furniture van and the walkers carried a baton to the mayor of Healesville, containing a message from the Lord Mayor of Melbourne. Later this race became a handicap event, Coldstream to Healesville. This event always took place on the Saturday before the Queen's Birthday. At the completion of the race we all went to stay at an old guesthouse called Woodstock. What fun and games we had there. Many a romance began and ended there. Mum not only had to sell her footy doubles but she was the person who allocated the rooms. She had to please parents but also the young ones who wanted to be as far away as possible from the "oldies". She usually managed to please everyone, but of course I was very young when I first went there and had to share a room with my Mother and Father, which was not so good. On one occasion a dear man, whom my Father affectionately called that "scoundrel Gaylor" put epsom salts in the tea pot. The only person he told was my Mother who had the good sense to abstain from drinking tea. Apparently there were queues at the toilets all night.

The simple entertainment we had there on the Sunday night with the boys dressed up as girls for a ballet, and the sketches which were so corny and yet so funny, and people like Frank McGuire doing his shimmying act to "I wish that I could shimmy like my sister Kate" are things that I will never forget.

Just a few weeks ago I was sent a whole swag of photos from one of the Healesville weekends of the early 60s by Gary Field, the eldest son of VRWC life member Ralph Field. Gary and his brothers Ross and Bruce had attended as youngsters and luckily for us, Gary had recorded lots of the action on his camera. The photos and negatives have stood the test of time well and, with a bit of help from the professionals, he has sent a CD of snaps to us from America. I put Barb and Bob Gardiner to work on identifying the people in the photos and a small selection are reproduced below.



Quiz time – Lindsay Fortune (Robinson Hall), Bob Gardiner (Albert Park), Ray Smith (Sledge Hammered) and Alan Hancock (Parsley Carrotty)



The Cabaret - Frank McGuire, Alan Hancock, unknown, unknown, Colin Fraser, unknown



The choir - Bob Gardiner, Lindsay Fortune, unknown, Irwin Saunders, Colin Fraser, Les Hellyer, Norm Goble, Frank McGuire, Ray Smith, Ken Saunders, unknown, Gavin Breen

All I can say is, you wouldn't have got me in that cabaret!

Tim Erickson
14 September 2010