

## **Childhood memories of Vivian Lethbridge Davies, as told to his daughter Rosemary in April 1984**

Vivian Lethbridge Davies was born in 1915 in Essendon, the son of John Henry Davies and Margaret Emma Lethbridge. This is a partial rendering (pages 3-6) of those memories which follow his childhood in family homes in Essendon, Berwick, Heidelberg, Eltham and Murrumbeena.

His home in Eltham was 'Culla Hill' and it came about like this.

When the last Sweeney owner of Culla Hill, Ellen Sweeney, married Will Hooley in 1923 and moved from Eltham to Casterton, her house at Culla Hill along with a couple of acres was leased to John and Margaret Davies, the balance of the land being rented by local farmers, including fifteen acres by Michael Carrucan. Thus the Davies couple, along with their children Owen, Vivian and Frank, moved from Heidelberg to the backblocks of Eltham.

... the corner corner of Rose and Buckley Streets was a laundry and had a "Chinaman" in it. Mr Stewart "had been in the war" (1914-18) and amazed me by unstrapping and removing his wooden leg. Further along Flower Street - towards Miller Street - Mrs Cochrane, a widow, lived with her daughter, Nellie (Aunty Nellie), whose sister, Eva married a Will Davies of Rushworth. Opposite us lived the Chambers family. I sometimes watched Mr Chambers count piles of coins on a table covered with a green cloth. He was a light meter inspector and collected payments as he went.

An older friend of my mother was Mrs Paterson, mother of C.G. Paterson - who had also "been in the war". She had a big brass gun shell for a doorstop, and he had a Military Cross and a big helmet that had been worn by a real German soldier. When I went errands for Mrs Paterson, she would lift up a floor-length dress and take her purse out of a pocket in her underskirt which reached down to her ankles.

While at Essendon, Owen attended St Thomas School attached to St Thomas Anglican church near the Town Hall at Moonee Ponds. I began at Lowther Hall Anglican Girls' School.

My father was an early motorist and I remember his first car, a French "Le Gui", which he kept in a shed or stable a street or two from home. He, Mother and Owen sat on the seat and I sat on a box on the floor in front of them, and moved a brass lever up and down on the bulkhead, or firewall, between us and the engine. Later, I was told the lever moved a valve directing the exhaust through a silencer whilst travelling through towns or by-passing the silencer when on the open road.

Father had a car before number plates were required and told me he was once chased and stopped for speeding in St Kilda Road by a policeman riding a push bike. Originally, driving licences had a new number every year. When they retained the same number permanently, his was 17238.

At Essendon, the Le Gui was replaced by a Ford Tourer (four doors, two seats, and a fold-down hood and side curtains). It had electric lights but no battery, the faster it was driven the brighter the lights became. The rear tail lamp was a kerosene one. Many cars then had kerosene

or acetylene gas head lamps - the gas was made and carried in a device on the running board in which water in a tank dripped onto calcium carbide in another tank.

All Fords up to 1928 were "T" models - with a transmission akin to today's automatic ones. Beneath the steering wheel there were two levers - one adjusted the timing of the spark which exploded the air/fuel mixture in the engine; the other was the throttle (or accelerator). There were three pedals near the floor - the right one worked the brakes on the rear wheels (four-wheel brakes did not arrive until 1928); the centre pedal when depressed made the car reverse and the left pedal when fully depressed put the car into low forward gear and when fully released into the up position, put it in high forward gear. Putting the hand brake on moved the left pedal to the half-up/half-down position or "neutral". All cars then were started by a crank handle at the front - if a Ford left pedal was badly adjusted, the man cranking the engine could be run over as the car leaped forward.

Car wheels had solid wooden spokes with a fixed metal rim. Punctures had to be mended on the spot, removing the tyre and tube with the wheel still on the car. Detachable rims did not come until years later and were a real boon because then one simply exchanged the rim, tyre and tube with those on the wheel and repaired the puncture later.

From Essendon, we went to live at Berwick in a house opposite St Margaret's Girls' School, between the town and the rail station. I went to a State School overflow in a hall halfway up the steep hill and on the south side of the Princes Highway.

Our next home was at Heidelberg, and I think my brother, Frank, was born while we were there, in December, 1920. There was a shop on the south-east corner of Burgundy Street and Lower Heidelberg Road, next door was the residence, then a huge block with a large home owned by a Dr Kenny - and about opposite the Old England Hotel. While we lived here, the ground floor of the present Masonic Hall was built next to us.

I went to a school in Cape Street, Our Lady's College, using a lane which has since become a short dead-end street and is between the hotel and Burgundy Street. It was here we had an Edison "diamond disc" phonograph, the forerunner of long playing records. It used a diamond chip for a needle and the records were 5/16 inch thick with very fine grooves very close together. We also had a wireless set with an aerial of enormous length and a loud speaker. VIM was the only broadcasting station in Victoria, owned by the Government, and broadcast mainly in morse code to shipping but had one program a week of music for twenty minutes each Tuesday.

At school with me was the Finn family whose father had a hotel at Templestowe and ran the bus service between there and Heidelberg, using a drag - which was a horsedrawn four-wheeled vehicle with many rows of seats and a fold-down hood. The Melbourne to Heidelberg (and Hurstbridge) railway was still operated by steam trains. It was here we became patients of Dr Evan Littlejohn who, with his brother, Charles, had begun a practice in a house in Ivanhoe. He was our doctor and, in later years, a very good friend until his death.

I remember the Heidelberg area being sewered - by men who dug a shaft in the road every 15 feet, or so, and then tunnelled from shaft to shaft - all earth, pipes and materials was moved in one-horse drays and all of it dug and moved by men - picks, shovels and one-horse scoops.

Next, we moved to Eltham, our effects going in two big horse-drawn vans - Owen rode in one and I in the other. It was quite dark when we arrived at the junction of Heidelberg-to-Eltham and Mt Pleasant Roads. The van drivers decided the hill up past the cemetery was too steep for two horses so, taking the two from the van I was in and adding them to the other van, they all went up the hill without me. But instead of returning from the top of the hill, they went on two miles to our new home. By the time they returned I had been rescued by people in a nearby house - eight years old, almost; and alone in the dark! At Eltham we were two miles from a tiny town, on a farm, "Culla Hill", now known as "Sweeney's" and then owned by a Miss Sweeney.

We had a dam, a cow, hens and geese, and were half a mile from the Yarra River. Local people paid to graze stock on the 100 acres. The house was in two parts - thirty feet apart. One section was living rooms and the other older part was two rooms - a kitchen and a dairy. The older portion was built of unshaped stone with an iron roof, and inside was whitewashed and had ceilings of whitewashed, tightly stretched bags. I remember a tiger snake falling from above the ceiling one day onto my mother as she worked in the kitchen. The living section was weatherboard and brick with a slate roof and on the east (road) side was a verandah which has since been incorporated making it a much larger home.

The earlier kitchen section has long been demolished and so has a weatherboard laundry with a wooden shingle roof. Some distance away, a brick stable in which we played has become part of a much larger shed building. House lighting was by a "hollow wire" system - a tank of kerosene on the verandah was connected by a very small diameter copper tube to lamps in various rooms and air pressure in the tank, supplied by a tyre pump, forced the fuel to the lamps. Our water supply (from the roof) was held in an underground tank made of bricks - it was not a well but a storage tank. (There is one beside a house in front of your Whittlesea home, on the south side of Paddock Street - look for a brick dome cemented over, on the west side of the house.) Father put a cylindrical tank above ground, fitted it with a water pump and connected it by piping to the kitchen and bathroom. Each day, I hand-pumped water into the iron tank, compressing the air in it until a gauge registered "65", and the compressed air forced the water through the pipes for another day.

I often rode a pony, "Dandy", into town for mail and supplies. The telephone came to the Rutler home just across the road and the railway was electrified as far as Eltham. There was almost no town and what there was was between the Bridge Street crossroads and the present hotel. Sweeney's Lane officially ran to the Yarra river but was fenced across between our house and Rutler's, making it appear to end there. Scouts sometimes made a camp beside the river and, across it from our place, was a large orchard. We had no neighbours other than the Rutlers and going into Eltham, the nearest home was on the corner of Bible Street and Dalton Street (which is no longer a through road).

My father drove into the city each day, delivering me to Our Lady's College at Heidelberg and Owen to Ivanhoe Grammar School, and collecting us on his way home. At the top of a hill on the road to Melbourne there was a gate across the road, almost where the Montmorency Ambulance Station is now, and this was opened and closed from the car by pulling on a rope connected to the gate latch.

In 1924, Murrumbeena was our next home at 732 Dandenong Road, in a brick house opposite Alma Street, and in an open area for to the north was all un-built-on open country. There was a lot of empty unfenced on our east and west and we kept a cow tethered on this. At first I

attended the State School but for several years went to St Anthony's School where Chadstone Shopping Centre is now. This was attached to a Catholic convent on the corner of Castlebar and Dandenong Roads, which also had an orphanage and home for wayward and unwanted girls, a steam laundry, a farm and an orchard. It was at this school that I learned more than at any other, from the "old Time" sisters who spent their lives devoted to helping children - much as nurses of another period devoted themselves to their patients. Owen went to Caulfield Technical School (now Chisholm Institute of Technology) and Frank to Malvern Grammar ....