

Conversation with Garry Griffin 17 September 2019

By Andrew Lees

Today three old timers had a talk at Bluecross Nursing Home in Ivanhoe. The conversation was about Yarra Flats Park in the mid to late 1900's.

Garry Griffin is 84 years old and a resident in the home. He has, however, lived in Glenard Drive next to the park most of his life and was instrumental in the revegetation of the Yarra Flats south of Banksia Street in the 1970's through to the 90's. He was a forester by trade.

John Merory was also heavily involved in the revegetation of the flats and was President, for over 30 year from the early 80's, of the Riverland Conservation Society which is the vehicle used for most of the enormous achievements made in restoring sections of this area to a semi-natural environment.

I am the current President of "Riverlands" and I have lived in the area on and off since I was 5 yrs old.

The main purpose of the conversation was to record Garry's recollections of the flats in the 20th century and what he and the Riverland's society did to revegetate the area. He is vague about the dates of things but other records of events help me to place things in a reasonably timeline.

The discussion was largely limited to the northern section of the current park.



For much of the mid 1900's the flats were farmland - mainly dairy. There was Fleming's farm just south of Banksia Street and Smith's farm further south with the farm building just south of the Mosman Drive intersection with The Boulevard. (Where the big old oak tree still stands today).

Garry relates that the billabong just to the South of Banksia Street (now called Banksia Street Billabong) was the best of the billabongs in the area. It regularly had water in it from floods and from stormwater coming down from around Glenard Drive. It was treed and had nesting swans amongst other birdlife. There were small fish in the water. It was popular with bird watchers from around Melbourne. Garry recalls raising the level of the riverbank at the outflow from the billabong to increase the water retained in the wetland.

The Flemings then sold off the land containing this billabong (in the 60's?) which was then destroyed by excavating soil from it to perhaps a depth of 8 feet. I assume that lots of Melbourne's gardens still contain this rich loam soil. The resultant hole was then filled with "clean fill" that was not very clean. Large pieces of concrete etc went into it.

After this the area would hold water for only short periods after flooding.



Garry swam in the river and canoed a lot along it. He recalls that there were long water grasses that you could swim through. The water was clean enough to see through it swimming underwater. There were sandy river banks. He recalls seeing platypuses reasonably regularly - especially while canoeing. He also remembers there being lots of Tiger snakes and water birds including Nankeen Night Herons. Garry has never seen rabbits in the area.

I certainly spent a lot of my childhood swimming in the river also and I also recall it being cleaner than today with sandy banks.

Garry remembers the largest flood he saw went over The Boulevard just south of Banksia Street and around the gasometers that were located there then.

John remembers that in the late 70's early 80's there were various groups trying to preserve the area and revegetate it including the Warringal Conservation Society. The amalgamation of two of these groups formed the Riverland Conservation Society in the early 80's.

Alan and Anne Bumbry were instrumental in saving the area from a freeway that was planned to be constructed right through the middle of the flats. Alan did a lot of planting in the park.

The Annulus Billabong (though not called this initially) was the main focus for their efforts around 1980.

It was originally an ox-bow but it was converted into an annulus by excavation. A channel was also dug from the billabong south to the river to lower the entry to it for floodwater.

Revegetation was largely done with River Red Gums that Garry propagated from local seed himself in his own back yard. They flourished when planted out. There were also some wattles planted - one of which was *Acacia decurrens* which was a native of NSW. Unfortunately it has been somewhat of a nuisance since but most of it has been removed now. However, as Garry says there was not many native species available then and you had to take what you could get.

A couple of windmills were put up to pump water into the billabong from the river but Garry felt they were not successful.

Garry remembers that The Annulus would usually hold water for a few years after flood events which is my recollection also.

There were again swans nesting in the reeds of the billabong.

Another revegetation area that Garry and John worked on in the late 80's was in The Peninsula which is adjacent to McCubbin Street and my old stomping ground.

They employed two methods here - planting of seedlings and "free seeding". This second method involved plowing furrows and then putting seed into the furrows. This worked well and the area is a dense forest today. You can still see in places that there are lines of trees.

Manna Gums were added to the species planted. Park Ranger Glen Jamieson was mentioned in glowing terms. Might try to track him down??

I ask Garry what he thought was the most important element leading to the success of their efforts. He felt it was very important to have a clear vision of what you want to achieve.

I finally asked Garry if he had any knowledge of indigenous history of the area.

The answer was no but he did mention that when the road was put into the current carpark in the early 80's he fossicked around in the excavated soil and did find a couple of indigenous artefacts including a stone axe. However, no one in authority was interested. Garry was hoping that a find like this might have stopped the large carpark being put in.

We might complain today about lack of resources for conservation work but clearly things have changed an enormously for the better over the last 60 or so years. Today we are prepared to spend big money on preserving wetlands and indigenous heritage.

I think we are much more interested in what makes Australia Australian.