



City of Port Phillip Living Heritage Project

Edited transcript – Roger Backway

Interviewee: Roger Backway [RB]

Interviewer: Sarah Rood, Way Back When Consulting Historians [SR]

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Collecting St Kilda's history

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RB: The other thing that we've mentioned, which we should go on with, is I'm an avid collector of antique bottles and we've discussed how this started. The whole area of what we call the Triangle now that used to be called Little Luna Park, and Luna Park, and the O'Donnell Gardens is all St Kilda's municipal tip of the 1880s/1890s before the beach was developed into the way it is today.

In those days St Kilda was a fairly wealthy suburb with big houses and everything and lots of things to throw away. We had previously been digging in the Albert Park Reserve but things came to a head and we got kicked out of there and we were looking for somewhere else. There was a rumour that this tip was under some of the deserted buildings like the old merry-go-round and what have you, and the old Swirl Building was derelict, and we were able to get access to it. These buildings were eventually pulled down when road works went through and widened what is now Jacka Boulevard into a four lane roadway. When the bulldozers came in up came more bottles so we were able to dig in there every weekend, sometimes after work if we had time to, and we got some real treasures out of that. There were a lot of things saved that are national treasures today that would have otherwise been lost and dumped somewhere else.

There had been a timber building there on the roadway that had been the headquarters of the St Kilda Foreshore Committee, and they were apparently responsible for everything that happened on the foreshore from Head Street in Elwood right through to West Beach. They had a secretary there who seemed to sign all the paperwork. This building became derelict and there was a whole lot of paperwork, including letters from the police, and letters of employment for people that wanted to work on the foreshore either with their ponies, or run their steam train in the park, and designs of rides that were to go up in Little Luna Park. This was all left open to the elements and started to blow out the doors when somebody left the door open, and I was able to get some of this stuff and save it. I used to frame it up and used to sell it at the Camberwell Market. I used to frame up pictures of block of flats that had been built around the area, and they were on blueprints which is a method not used now by the architects. I saved quite a few of these things for myself which I had in my household collection. When it came time to move out of Elwood I was having a garage sale and one of our local identities saw some of these and wished to purchase them to donate them to the St Kilda Heritage Department I think it might be called now. And there was a big to-do and they had a celebration of the handover which I was invited to, and I felt pretty pleased that they'd found a pretty good home where they've gone into the St Kilda archives. They'll be there forever hopefully for the next generation or two to see them. So it was an interesting part of my life.

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SR: Is it important to you that the next generation knows what the area was like and the changes that it's been through?

RB: I can only take myself as an example. I enjoy reading all the history books, in fact I've been part of some, and to see what it was like in the old days. It's hard to place the importance on it. Is it more important to know that, or being able to add up what nine times nine is? I've got an immense enjoyment out of looking at the way people used to live. In fact, I've just got a book in here now that's telling me about the early days of our colony; I find it hard to believe that Melbourne was founded in 1835 and by 1840 there was a horseracing club here, namely what Flemington is today. I'm interested to know how that can possibly be that here's a struggling settlement, and you would think the most important thing is where your next meal's going to come from, and here's a group of people worrying about racing horses. I find that quite intriguing. And it's the same thing about St Kilda. I've been involved with the early part, and all the research that I've done has shown me how they used to live, it just leaves me wondering.

It's like Albert Park Lake. We know it as just a body of water now surrounded by a very nice park that they run fast cars around on. In the very early days before settlement Albert Park Lake was part of the River Yarra as we know, and the Yarra used to run through the Botanical Gardens where there's a lake, through Albert Park where there's a lake, down what we now know as Fitzroy Street, and across the large grassy plain to the heads into the ocean. So it's gone through a major change and it's left Albert Park Lake as a billabong of the lake, which is now a lake. In the early days of the colony this was an important place because it became Melbourne's first dairy farm around the edges of the lake. There was water there so they could put their cows there, they had a source of milk.

Later on they boarded the perimeter up and made it a regular edge and it became a picnic spot for the people on the weekends. And of course what do kids do when they're at a picnic and there's an empty bottle? They've finished their lemonade, what do they do? They throw it in the water. On the lake they had model yachts, they had a paddle-steamer there called Lady of the Lake and people used to go out on the paddle-steamer. When they've got an empty glass or an empty bottle, into the water.

In 1982 we were having a drought and the level of the water went down, and the silt was growing up inside, and we found that we could get around in the lake and walk all over the lake. With our feet we could feel all these bottles and it became a big source of finding antique bottles. Because when you go to a tip such as the St Kilda tip that was only in operation maybe for ten years, you found bottles of that era; when we went into the lake we found bottles of a 100 year era. That was good fun. I saw people sitting on the perimeter of the lake waiting for the people to wade ashore and saying, "What have you found?" And they're holding these things up, and I saw \$3,000 change hands just like that one. That's exciting. That's better than being a gold miner. *[laughs]*

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