



City of Port Phillip Living Heritage Project  
Edited transcript – Roger Backway  
Interviewee: Roger Backway [RB]  
Interviewer: Sarah Rood, *Way Back When* [SR]  
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## The beach

**SR:** That's what I want to talk to you about, the beach. It seems to be, what you've talked about this morning, a place of getting wood and necessities, but also a place of leisure. Tell me about the average Saturday when you had people come down for the day. How would it start, what would happen?

**RB:** In those days they'd mainly come down on public transport, the tram was down at the end of the street. They'd walk in and they'd all sit down and have a chat and a cup of tea, then it was off to the beach. The kids couldn't get to the beach fast enough. These were people that were the other side of town and they didn't know about seagulls and things like that, and sand. Sand is a commodity, you can do wonderful things with sand. They were all happy days.

50:24

**SR:** How many people would descend on you?

**RB:** Sometimes we'd have ten or 12 people there; two or three of the parents' groups, sisters and brothers.

**SR:** Would you spend the whole day down at the beach?

**RB:** Generally not. They'd go to the beach in the morning, come back - because it was only a five or eight minute walk - they'd come back home and have lunch at home and then back to the beach in the afternoon. They'd all seem to leave late in the afternoon to go back to their places, get home before it got dark sort of thing.

**SR:** And the logistics, the meals and things like that, everyone would bring something? How did it work?

**RB:** I really can't place that. I can remember standing around the dining room table and there was food there. I would suspect that there would be food brought in. Especially in the early days because there was not much spare money around.

**SR:** And this is a really basic question, but on the beach as kids, what did you do?

**RB:** My father would spend a fair bit of time teaching kids to swim; being hoisted upon his shoulders and thrown off; kids standing with their legs apart and other kids diving through their legs.

**SR:** So it was in the water?

52:00

**RB:** In the water, yes. Kids on shoulders fighting one another until somebody fell off. Building sand castles and all the associated things. The beach is never the same from one day to another. The tide comes in, the tide goes out, there's waves, there's no waves, there's clouds, there's sun - it's always different. Sometimes the sand is banked up against the retaining wall. There was a footpath along the top of the beach with the bluestone retaining wall, and of course everybody wanted to get down to the beach as early as possible so that they could get a spot on the wall so that they could lean against the wall. That was the prime spot. Sometimes the sand would be almost up to the top of the wall, the top of the walkway, sometimes it'd be three or four foot down.

The sand moved in and out with the tides, the sand moved up and down the length of the beach with the wind and the tides. I didn't know it at the time but later on in my life it became a very valuable thing to know about the beach. We'll talk about that later, bring it up later on, it's not important at the moment. Sometimes the sand would go right away, you'd go down there and there'd be only a bit of sand to the water's edge and then there'd be clay. This was the base of Elwood, Elwood had a clay base right over, and the sand used to sit on top of it, in and out. Sometimes you'd go down there and there'd be just clay there and you could actually break it off. Sometimes it was quite soft and you could mould it into all sorts of shapes. Kids used to enjoy this and we taught our cousins from the other side of town how to play on the beach. And there were shells, all different sorts of shells to be gathered, and jelly fish, things that the kids on the other side of the river didn't know about.

**SR:** **Have you noticed the coastline change much? Have the beaches changed much?**

**RB:** How much time have you got? *[Laughs.]*

**SR:** **Unfortunately not as much as I'd like.**

**RB:** Ah, yes. The beach would go through erosion periods and there'd be less sand one year than there would be another year. Sand moves consistently. In a storm it can move three foot of sand quite easily, three foot in depth, it changes consistently.

**SR:** **Could you have the same experience on the beach today as you did when you were a kid?**

**RB:** Yes, exactly the same, and people do. Maxine and I spent a lot of time on the beach just walking, and we'd sit - late in the afternoon when we were in Elwood we'd walk to the beach every day that we could. I can remember seeing kids running down to the beach and stopping on the wall, and this is in recent times, and saying, "Look at all the sand!" These are kids that have never seen the beach, and it still goes on today.

**SR:** **So the beach is a huge part of you?**

**RB:** Yes. Do you want more about the beach?

**SR:** **Go for it.**

**55:58**

**RB:** We grew up in Tiuna Grove which is at the northern end of the beach. Summer days, especially the days where there were consistent hot days, and at the weekend,

people would flock to Elwood beach and there would be 100,000 people on the beach. You couldn't get a place to put your towel down to lay down. They'd come on the trams down Glenhuntly Road from Caulfield and Carnegie and everything; they'd come on what we called the Point Ormond bus that used to come from Collingwood and places out there; they could come on the train to St Kilda and then catch a tram to Elwood; Elwood was a mecca.

There'd be lots of people on the beach and they'd bring all manner of things. One of our favourites was going around late in the afternoon picking up all the lemonade bottles of which in those days there was threepence deposit, we'd gather them up and take them to our local - get a couple of bob. That was a good source of income for a kid that had nothing. You've got to remember we didn't have anything. We had the clothes that we grew up in, our school things, a few toys later on, mainly toys that my father had made; the beach was important from that point of view. And later on of course there were girls down there. The beach is a great place for girls. So yes it was an important part of our life.

When Maxine and I married and we went away from Elwood for two years but used to still come back to my parents' place. When we married we bought into Elwood, about the same distance from the beach, but we were then at the southern end of the beach. It's only half a kilometre but it's quite different. The beach was important to us, we used to go to the beach every day. We were down there one day, a weekend, a lot of people on the beach, and the afternoon southerly buster came in with storm clouds and hail, heavy rain, and it was always good fun to watch the exodus off the beach. They'd all leave it until the last moment until it had just started to rain and then everybody would go. The car parks would be jammed up and everybody would be trying to get out, and there'd be people shouting and everything.