

The Yallery

After school I would race home, grab a quick snack, collect my dog Louie and head up the road to the 'Yallery'.

The Yallery was central to the bush area that was my playground. The locals named this unique part of Mosman Park the 'Yallery' because of a wide, yellow sand track that ran from the top of a very steep slope down to the edge of the Swan River 100 metres below.

October each year brought a flock of migratory rainbow bee-eaters to the Yallery to breed. They would dig a small, round, tunnel up to a metre long into the yellow sand banks that ended in a larger nest chamber for their young.

Rainbow Bee-eaters are an aptly named little bird, being a spectacularly coloured green and blue with rusty red under their wings.

A friend and I decided to dig into a nest chamber and photograph the young. It must have been beginner's luck because we dug roughly a metre in from the entrance and found the chamber first try. The nest contained five, small white eggs so we fitted a piece of glass to the side of the hole and covered it with a Hessian bag to keep out the light.

I did manage to get a couple of black and white shots of the babies on my little Kodak Instamatic 110 camera but they weren't much chop.

Another regular visitor to the rocky, river shore near the Yallery was a little stint or sandpiper. They were mostly solitary little brown and white birds with heads that regularly bobbed up and down as they picked at tiny creatures amongst the limestone rocks.

My bothers and I spent endless summer days down by the river making Tarzan swings in the tuart trees; cubbies in the bushes; caves in the limestone cliffs and underground tunnels in the yellow sand. We also made canoes from corrugated sheets of tin held together with hot tar that we'd collect from the roads. We paddled across the river to Point Walter but sometimes the waves from passing boats swamped us and the canoe would sink to the bottom of the river.

During visits a bit further around the river at Rocky Bay we'd find pieces of cane along the shore that we could smoke. It wasn't really that pleasant and after a while your lips and tongue would swell up and sting for several hours.

Apparently the limestone from Rocky Bay was originally used to build the Fremantle groynes and some of the buildings in and around Perth.

The CSR Sugar Refinery also operated at Rocky Bay where some of my friend's fathers were employed as truck drivers. A friend and I went down to the sugar refinery and asked a few of the drivers if we could go with them. We found one that agreed – possibly because we would help them unload the bags of sugar.

The trip down Stirling Highway was so much fun as we waved to passing cars and played amongst the hessian bags of sugar on the back. Arriving at Peter's Ice Cream Factory we helped the driver unload some of the bags. A matronly looking lady asked us if we'd like to have a quick look around and she led us into the factory. Then she asked what sort of ice cream we would like. We each selected a flavour and were given a cone then we were ushered out quite quickly. It was the best ice cream I had ever had. It was so soft and

creamy and nothing like the hard, frozen, icy cones we would get at the local shops.

Not far from the sugar refinery was a rubbish tip, stockpiles of sulphur and a thick, red sludge-pond of some toxic-looking waste that we stayed well clear off.

I also recall seeing a man with a leather bag walking around one of the factories shooting feral pigeons that nested in the rafters.

Exploring around the river was always interesting as there were birds, fish, little crabs, animal skeletons, caves, or things washed up on the shore. Some homes close to the river would leave their wooden, clinker-hulled row boats down on the shore or hidden in the bull rushes. We would borrow a boat or canoe and go for a paddle – it was fine as long as nobody saw you.

We would swim from Chidley Point to Blackall Reach and jump off the high limestone cliffs. We made cobbler traps from chicken wire, gings from forked sticks and bike inner tubes. To catch fish we made tin kylies and gidgies from sharpened wire prongs tied to broom handles. We lit fires in the limestone caves and cooked spuds over the coals. Collected honeycomb from bee hives and mussels from the wooden jetty pylons. We even gathered grapes, figs and mulberries growing over neighbour's fences from the back lanes.

Sometimes we would have food fights but most of the fruit was made into jam. My mother also made homemade ice cream and ginger beer.

The Coombe in Mosman Park didn't have a sealed road down to the river and there was only a single shack with an old hermit living there known by the

local kids as 'Old Tom'. I vaguely remember visiting him one day with one of my elder brothers.

The limestone cliffs opposite Old Tom's house were quite sheer and there was a big beehive in a small recess near the top. It was far too dangerous to try and climb the crumbly limestone. Then you would have to contend with thousands of stinging bees so we threw stones at the honeycomb to dislodge it. By the time it hit the ground the angry bees had dispersed and it was safe to retrieve the waxy honeycomb.

The jetty was a major draw-card after school and on weekends it's where you would find kids of all ages playing 'push and shove' off the jetty and doing 'bombies' on each other. We would throw huge, orange man'o'war jellyfish at each other or drop them down the girls' bathers.

We had competitions to see how far you could swim under water with just a single breath, or who could do the biggest 'bombie' off the corner jetty posts. Plenty of kids suffered minor injuries as a result of being thrown off the jetty or by slipping on the wet planks, getting splinters or being cut by barnacles on the wooden pylons.

When we fished off the jetty we often caught blowfish and little gobblyguts. The blowies were a nuisance because they always took our bait and hooks. Sometimes we were lucky enough to catch edible fish such as Yellowtail or Tailor.

There was also a wooden springboard in the adjoining bay about 50 metres from shore that served as a magnet for the local kids. The board was about three metres high and perfect for doing bombies on each other and on the

jellyfish. Sometimes we would do a 'tin man' on the jellyfish with our arms stiff at our sides and legs straight with toes pointed down. Masses of bubbles would explode to the surface amongst mangled pieces of orange jellyfish.

In the Swan River we taught ourselves to dog paddle, until we were old enough to attend primary school swimming lessons, lining up to duck dive and swim between the teacher's legs. We also attended swimming lessons and training at the Crawley and Claremont Baths often competing not only with each other but also with the jellyfish, the waves, the weeds and the barnacles.

Further around at Chidley Point before they built the golf course there was a huge tree swing in a tall tuart tree. This was one of the best swings around as the ground dropped sharply towards the river and the rope was thick and strong. It was quite exciting to swing right out over the prickly, hovea bushes towards the river.

Almost every time we went to the swing, older kids that we didn't know were there and they would dominate the area for ages. We had to wait for them to leave or we had to move on and find somewhere else to play.

Opposite the golf course there was a wood-shute or slide made of timber boards that went all the way down the steep hill to a small hospital building. Trucks dumped the wood at the top of the hill alongside the road and the blocks would be pushed down the slide to clatter and bang all the way to the bottom.

My brother sat on a block of wood and tried to slide down the chute but he had to jump off as he was gathering far too much speed. He was quite embarrassed later when the doctor had to extract dozens of splinters from his behind.

The wide, yellow sand track that ran down to the Swan River and once was known as the Yallery has virtually disappeared. However, much of the surrounding, natural bush from the Mossies Jetty around to the Coombe and Chidley Point still survives today. The very steep decline to the Swan River made construction of houses almost impossible and it is now thankfully a reserve.

And every October the beautiful, green and blue rainbow bee-eaters return to dig their nests in the yellow sand banks.