A Brief History of Parramatta High School  
1950 - 1960

The 1950s were prosperous, exciting times for Australians. As Australians emerged from the war years there was a sense of optimism and a firm belief that Australia was a blessed if not lucky country. Indeed the term “lucky country” had been coined by one of Parramatta High School’s students, Donald Horne (although Donald’s time at the school was a less than happy experience and his use of the term “lucky country” was intended to be at best ironic).

Nonetheless, a glance through the Parramatta High School Phoenix magazines of the 1950s and stories gleaned from the many reunions that have taken place in recent years confirm that the students of Parramatta felt fortunate, if not privileged, to be attending the school on the hill that stood by the great highway. “It was wonderful for me...The sheer academic brilliance of the school was what I loved – great esprit de corps” wrote Ron Cridland.

John Coombes said “The school engendered a sense of innovation, even perhaps radicalism” with a “strong school spirit and an equally strong larrikin element” whilst another student, in contrast, described the environment “looking back as a very restricted one”. Jean Bull probably sums it up best “It was place we were all proud to attend. There was certainly good school spirit – we felt special and privileged to be there”.

Although Australia's cultural ties in the Menzies years were still very much to Britain, this would very soon be challenged by an influx of American culture. Rock 'n' roll hit our shores, causing a sensation and allowed American attitudes and culture to quickly penetrate Australian society. The stars of 1950s cinema, television and rock 'n' roll were a great source of inspiration for Parramatta teenagers, if their reminiscences from the time are any indication. Janneke Bajema recalls standing on the desks and dancing while singing the Davy Crockett song. Josephine McIntosh was part of an impromptu “Rock Around the Clock” concert led by Lynne Ferguson one wet Wednesday afternoon until old “Sarcy”, Miss Mackaness, the girls’ supervisor, stormed in and put a stop to it.

Some Parramatta High students may have been infatuated with their American rock 'n' roll idols, imitating their hair styles and fashions, but the extent of this imitation did not extend to school photos nor to school dances for that matter where “party frocks, distinctive hairdos and make up were to the fore” for the girls and “a new suit, shirt or at least tie” for the boys. Dances were held three times a year in the Parramatta Town Hall – “old time dances to an old time band” – piano, drums and saxophone, “where school uniformed caterpillars and ugly ducklings transformed into butterflies and swans”.
The students no doubt put into practice dance steps, Pride of Erin, Barn Dance, Waltz, Quick Step and the like, learnt at school in the Gym or at Stan Wright’s Dancing Classes in the School of Arts on the corner of Macquarie and Marsden streets on a Tuesday afternoon. There were some concerns about the venue of the Town Hall, however, because it was next to the pub and on one particular occasion some students slipped out the side door for a beer. This was overcome in later years, however, by “trained attack teachers at every door of the Parramatta Town Hall”. Geoff Rush gets an honourable mention for organising a few dances and Stan Shadwell refers to “a couple of non-sanctioned dances where we bought our own rock and roll records to play”.

No doubt the formidable Miss Mackaness had some say in the play list for official functions. Ray Osmotherly recalls “There was a new dance that came in called “Ballin the Jack” which involved a few wriggles, which shocked Miss Mackaness and was banned after that”. Many students mention with affection also the dance/socials that followed the Canberra High and Katoomba High visits. The girls generally seemed much more enthusiastic about the socials especially the dances- the boys it seemed preferred “the cadets” which rates more mentions in their recollections especially the annual camp to Singleton. A big drawback for after-school social interaction was the distance many students travelled to and from school – any event in the evening had to be completed with sufficient time to escort the young ladies home and be back before the last train at 11pm.

The staff at Parramatta High was not enthusiastic in their encouragement of interaction between the sexes and the demarcation established in the 1940s (the bucks and does line) continued in spirit, if not physically, into the 1950s. Hanna Helder recalls a line drawn across the playground to keep the boys and girls apart. Jean Bull confirms the strict separation of sexes. Everywhere is the overriding presence of Miss Mackaness who had the girls so quaking in fear that few contemplated dalliances with the opposite sex. “I think she would have had the boys and girls in different suburbs if possible”.

Misdemeanours included not having a hat and gloves on in public, having holes in gloves (black ink was a useful camouflage apparently) and having a too short uniform. Deslee Meeth had to write out 100 lines for wearing two left handed gloves. Those who risked romance ran the gauntlet of Sarcy’s gimlet eye, backed up by her moral police, the prefects. Jan Russell dared to walk to the station holding the hand of a young swain. The next day she was called
onto assembly for public humiliation for such a brazen act! The young man appears to have escaped attention. It was with mixed feelings, then, when Miss Mackaness retired in 1957.

Parramatta High students were nothing if not resourceful and persistent in matters of the heart. Mal Dennett refers to opportunities for “social development” on sports days. The ISCF appears to have provided some opportunity for social interaction with mixed debating teams and discussions. Certainly there was significant contact between students outside of school with birthday parties, community and Church socials, general dating and the odd serious romance. Extra-curricular activities sometimes brought some students unstuck.

Don Napper recounts the story of one precocious student, Frankie Clegg, a part-time waterside worker and excellent footballer who was later shot by an enraged husband. On the topic of unrequited love, Rick Behrens also fondly remembers his first kiss with Robyn Dillon - “Where are you now?” his heart-felt cry.

Of the other less romantic activities, debating rated highly and, of course, sport on a Wednesday afternoon and representation at CHS level. One girl, although, did make the comment that Thursday sport reports were invariably accounts of how well the boys had done the previous day. The old Cumberland Oval was a venue for cricket with some unusual distractions “I remember Jack Brabham driving around the speedway that at time circled Cumberland Oval while we played cricket. Skipping sport seems to have been a regular thing for some students with a trip to Grace Brothers for afternoon tea or a hand-rolled cigarette at Ian Pedrick’s house a preferred option to an afternoon of sport.

Parramatta High students were keen marchers and not just the cadets. “Every year, we practised marching (in our house groups) ad nauseum, until the big day – sports carnival. We were led by the Royal Australian Engineers Band through Church Street, which was closed to traffic. Woe betide anyone who did not have sparkling white shoes and freshly laundered uniforms”. Several ex-students recall listening to the Melbourne Cup over the loud speaker and classes coming to a halt. Another student refers to Old Nicko, Mr Nicholson, the sports master, listening to the Cup under the school building and the noise distracting the Leaving Certificate students.

Susan Mildwater recounts a lovely tale which contrasts markedly with contemporary “muck up day” stories. “On the final day of school I drove my father’s truck and collected enough hession bags for all the girls to wear one...all the 5th year girls were missing from assembly...and we marched in wearing our hession bags, with such silly banners as “we’ll get the sack for this!”

School musicals especially Gilbert and Sullivan – Jack and Dora Freeman deserve a special mention, were always popular with The Mikado
and *Iolanthe* getting more than one mention. School speech days were a feature - held in the Civic and the Roxy theatres – universally regarded as a wonderful showcase of the school’s musical and choral talents as well as recognising the academic, sporting, and cultural achievements for the year. The School Song was always a high point “Everyone, but everyone knew the words (and tune) to the School Song.”

The arrival of migrants from Europe – the “reffos” or “Balts” as they were sometimes called (How times have changed!) had a huge impact on Australia and this was particularly in evidence at Parra High. Sandra Sherringham recalls her best friend in senior years, Helen Wasylyszn, a Ukrainian girl, who was very clever. Alex Prahov, who came from Russia, later changed his name to George Maxwell. Han Ping and Peter Wong from China ate exotic food from little round bowls. Gil Dryza, who went on to marry Sue Loughry (both prefects in 1955), was a refugee from Eastern Europe and, as well as being a prefect, was an outstanding water polo player and rugby footballer who captained the CHS first XV as half back.

Tom Fleischmann from Czechoslovakia was convinced by mates to say all sorts of terrible things to teachers in fledging English but quickly woke up to the ruse and after leaving school went on to own a large textile company. Many students came to Parra from nearby migrant hostels – Ermington, Dundas and Villawood. Jenny Hillier recalls with affection the accents of the kids from England especially Joan Clapham and “a boy from Liverpool called John? Williams”. One student remembers Carla Kochen, a somewhat attractive blonde who, if the respondent’s memory serves her correctly, “got onto the front page of “People” magazine, I think”. There were students from nearby children’s homes as well – the Masonic Schools at Baulkham Hills and Dalmar homes at North Parramatta.

A remarkable feature of the time was the genuine affection felt by the students for their teachers. Nick names abounded as usual. Cheesy Middleton, Old Nicko Nicholson, “*when his house burnt down the kids donated 1000 pounds*” and Miss Essie Brown, “I treasure her memory”. There were many fine teachers who had all the time in the world to talk to students, in the days when there were no counsellors. Mr “Dishy” Mogenson, the “German teacher dreamboat – sun tan and gold jewellery who had the girls salivating” gets impressive reviews, admittedly not for his teaching. Mrs “Biggles” Blackshield, so-called because of the hair buns covering her ears and “Sally” Butler, renowned for her devotion to flogging that dead subject Latin, were favoured lady teachers.

“Johnno” Johnson- Deputy and Maths teacher, “Gunner” Hodge, “Bullswool” Evans who threw a tantrum every week in the science lab without fail, “Elsie” Austin and “Squizzy” Evans get honourable mentions as well as Mr “Gargoyle” McCutcheon, Mr “Wallaby” Buchan, the rugby playing chemistry teacher and Mr Sinn, the young Maths teacher who some of the girls found somewhat attractive.

Science teacher, Arthur Gilmour, a Parramatta High School student and a World War Two veteran from the Battle of Britain was remembered for his gentle manner and his firm belief
that we “can expect more of our 18 year olds”. Mr Cullen, the Science Master, attached a length of cord to each new duster to prevent theft.

It became a challenge to see what students could do with that length of cord. On many occasions dusters and cords were wound around the teacher’s chair, his desk, wherever it could reach.

The swinging sixties were not far away and already the students could sense that change was coming. At the same time were grateful for the fine education the school gave them and Parra High’s unique status as the original co-educational metropolitan high school:

“There was a native innocence – we were 14-17 year olds – supporting a strong tradition of the only “mixed” High School in the metropolitan area – we felt secure and trusted our teachers and peers”