

ABOUT PATRICIA FREI

Resident of Canberra with family connections to Acton

Born: 1947, Canberra

Maiden Name: Patricia Jones

My name is Patricia Frei, and I was born in Canberra in 1947. My father was Mervyn Jones, who began as assistant manager of the Civic Theatre from its inception in 1935, and rose to be the general manager of both the Civic and Capitol Theatres (cinemas). Both cinemas are now demolished.

Dad's father, and my grandfather, Major (later Lt.-Col.) Harold Edward Jones, lived at 28 Balmain Crescent in Acton. Harold was appointed the ACT's first Chief of Police, the position beginning in Canberra on 1 September 1927, and one that ran concurrently with his primary employment as Director of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch, operating from East Block, (now the National Archives of Australia). Both positions came under the Attorney General's Department.

D.R. Tate, the builder of the timbered residence at 28 Balmain Crescent, purposely built the house for the Jones family, as it was required to take my grandfather's large billiard table, trucked to Canberra from Melbourne where they were living. My grandmother, Millie, and her two sons, Alan and Mervyn, moved to Canberra three months later, in December 1927. Their father was staying at the Hotel Acton, so the rest of the family moved in with him as 28 Balmain Crescent was still under construction. The family finally moved into their new house in January 1928. The couple's only daughter, Beryl, was in South Africa visiting an uncle at this time, so when her brothers arrived at the new house they rushed inside to choose their bedrooms, leaving the one nearest the bathroom for Beryl, since, they said, she spent the longest time in there!

My grandfather did not talk about his work, and it was only after his death that the family realised what 'secret' work he actually did. They remembered how the family was woken up at various times during the night, but didn't know their father held the codes for communications to and from London, and he was the only one who could decipher them. The people visiting the house were couriers requiring him to decode or code these communications so they could be passed to the Prime Minister or his ministerial staff. The family never asked their father who these people were; they just assumed they were from 'the office'. One of my memories of my grandfather is of him driving his black Austin, his hat in his hand, stretched out of the driver's window, waving to someone he knew, and calling out their name: 'Hello, Mr (or Mrs) So-and-so!' Everyone knew him, and they often said, with affection: 'There goes the Major!'

My father first attended Telopea School and when the Boys' Grammar School opened, his father moved him across to that school where he became one of the school's foundation day students. A few of the Acton boys went with him to Grammar, and they used to walk home from the school to Acton. It didn't take them long, as few houses had been built and it was mostly unfenced paddocks, so many short cuts were possible, even across the Molonglo River.

I can remember driving with Dad in the 1950s to the Department of the Interior at Acton. It was housed in a small green and cream administrative building. Everything inside it was brown. You fronted up to a large timbered counter, spread between the walls. I couldn't see over it. Above the counter was an iron grill. We went there to pay the housing rent, because everyone rented in those days (except those who were building up in Mugga Way). People were also very class

conscious – even in Acton. They associated with their own class, and it took a long time for these barriers to break down. Public servants and their families associated very little with the working class and their families. It was the way Canberra was planned – working class in the suburbs of Ainslie and Kingston, upper public servants in Blandfordia (Forrest). Surprisingly, my father used to play with the Acton boys who lived ‘down the hill’. Growing up, as I did in the 1950s, Canberra was particularly anti-migrant and still anti-working class. I can remember being told by my mother not to go anywhere near the hostels – or Westlake. When volunteering at fetes and other school funding programs, other mothers used to ‘warn’ Mum, a Sydney girl, about the people living there. They had little or no substantiation to any of their claims. It was my father that used to drive us through Westlake and some of the other temporary camps, as he knew many of the people living there. Most people in those days were patrons of the two cinemas, the only place, besides the Albert Hall, where you could find some entertainment.

I remember going into Civic wearing white gloves, white ‘bobbie’ socks tucked inside black court shoes, and a full skirt, gathered at the waist, topped with a pretty blouse. It was quite an occasion and we took an inordinate amount of time because everybody knew each other and you were required to dress well – and neatly!

During the 1950s, there was a little movement in the housing industry as public servants gradually moved to Canberra. The Second World War was very much a living memory and funds and workers for a new city were limited. Migrants, such as the ‘Jennings Germans’, enabled housing construction to continue. They constructed our government house in Yarralumla – a full brick abode, made with the red bricks from the Yarralumla brickyard. Then during the 1960s, the defence personnel, with their families, arrived in Canberra and house construction moved rapidly as they had nowhere to accommodate them.

I feel Canberra remained a country town until the end of the 1950s. Then, for example, our school uniforms arrived by post from Sydney. Mum ordered them from a catalogue and when they arrived, some three months later, she virtually had to re-sew them to fit us because we'd grown so much! I can well remember Mum sitting at the dining table with her portable Singer Sewing Machine in front of her, making us clothes, as most mothers in those days did. She also knitted our jumpers for winter, and they were beautifully warm. I too used to make my own dresses – and suits! These days, with the many and varied shops Canberra now has, I have no need to do so. Canberra is now a city, with its own light industries, businesses, and many varied sports and entertainments. It is still a public service city, but is also thankfully, a multi-cultural city. The old class distinctions have well and truly disappeared, and many of us, today, laugh at what went before.

Patricia is a keen researcher of the history of Canberra and the Queanbeyan district and has published several articles on various topics. Some of her publications include: *Canberra, the City on the River: The Austrian Migrant Experience* (2005); *Calamities, Fatalities and Realities: Local and Regional Anecdotes from ‘The Golden Age’ 1860-1864* (2005); *Historical Indexes of the Canberra/Queanbeyan District*, [4 x CDs] (2006), and *Mervyn Jones and the Capitol & Civic Picture Theatres, Canberra* (2008).