

BERT YOUNG

Early in December 1938 I was staying with my grandmother in Munro Street, Coburg.

Mum and Dad had taken our outboard-motor boat to Paynesville on the Gippsland Lakes for a short holiday. I was eleven years old and was with 'Big Nin' (Dad's mother) and her second husband 'Pop' Cron. I was to sit for the entrance examination for the Brunswick Technical School at the old Central Brunswick State School during that period.

The Brunswick Tech had an intake of 200 boys per year – all from Grade 6 in schools mainly situated in Brunswick and Coburg.

I arrived at the school in Albert Street along with hundreds of others on the appointed morning, and was stunned to see a school building that looked like something out of Charles Dickens.

The earliest Victorian State Schools were built in the 1870's after the 1872 Education Act came into force. The Brunswick State School was built on a one-acre site in narrow Albert Street just east of Sydney Road in 1877. It was surrounded by small run-down houses.

When we went inside the whole place seemed dark and dingy with badly-worn wooden desks and **open fireplaces** in the classrooms. After most of us were seated, two Chinese boys were brought into the room. I had never seen a young Chinese person before – I had only seen the occasional Chinese market gardener and most of them were old.

Our school at North-West Brunswick had been built on a five-acre site only two years before I started, and had central heating provided by hot water radiators, and the contrast with the Brunswick school could not have been greater.

The examination subjects were English and Arithmetic and I did well enough to into Form A (25 students) for the start of 1939. Johnnie Edwards was the only former schoolmate from North-West Brunswick in my form, but one of the Chinese boys from the day of the examination also made it.

He was Bertram Wae Young (known as Bert) and he became my best friend for many years.

Bert was always small, but neatly built, with a flattish face and was unmistakably Chinese. He was good at all subjects at school, including sport, and popular with everyone.

He lived in a house on the north-east corner of Park Street and Fleming Street, Parkville with his parents, older brother Ken and older sister Elizabeth or Margaret. The brother and sister were students at Wesley and 'McRob' respectively when I first knew Bert.

(Note about the accompanying photograph: Bert Wae Young, November 1955, Harold Street, Middle Park, c. November 1955, courtesy of Museum of Chinese Australian History (Chinese Museum). Reproduction rights owned by R.Lew-Boar c/o CHIA: <http://www.chia.chinesemuseum.com.au/objects/D003387.htm>)

Mr Young was a big, heavy, jovial man with grey bristly hair cut short, and Mrs. Young was quite small and thin with her hair pulled back in a bun. Mr Young was head of Tim Young and Co. a wholesale fruit and vegetable business at Victoria Market.

Their house, though not excessively large was one of the best in Brunswick. It was architect-designed, built in about 1930. The architect's small pen and ink perspective drawing was framed and hung in the Hall. There were two or three bedrooms on the ground floor and another two upstairs opening off the large billiard room in the attic.

The back garden was roughly square with a brick garage in the far corner and a canvas-roofed carport over the concrete paved driveway off Fleming Street. In the centre of the lawn was a raised goldfish pond about 6 feet x 4 feet with a hinged wire mesh cover. The goldfish were mainly red or yellow, growing to about 9 inches long. This garden was shielded from Fleming Street by a high fence of dressed and lapped timber palings oiled to finish nearly black. Bert would paint this fence every year with sump oil.

There were two cars, a 1930 squarish hard-top black Packard of the style used in the TV show 'The Untouchables', and a 1937 Dodge sedan which was kept in immaculate condition by Bert. Every Saturday he would wash the Dodge, blacken the side walls of the tyres with boot polish and top up the radiator with distilled water. The older Packard was only for rough work or to go shooting with Mrs. Young's brothers, taking their two big black dogs – one was a pointer.

I never went shooting with them, but Mr Young and his brothers-in-law were also keen fishermen and Bert and I often went with them to Kerferd Road pier, Albert Park. We would get there at about 8 or 9 o'clock at night and stay for three hours or more fishing mainly for barracouta. The barracouta were about three feet long, as thick as your arm and supplied with long, needle-sharp teeth on upper and lower jaws. Instead of using bait, I think we had a small strip of red cloth attached to the hook, and the fish if they were around, would attack savagely. They had to be handled very carefully after being landed on the pier.

One night in 1943 we had been fishing for some time and the night was quiet and very cold. Suddenly there was the sound of an enormous crash back at Beaconsfield Parade. Although the street lighting was reduced for the 'dim-out', we could just make out the Dodge car parked about 50 yards on the St Kilda side of the pier and we suspected that someone had crashed into it. Bert and I started to run down the pier when one of the men behind us shouted "Take the bike!" I tried to stop and go back but my heel slipped on the wet planks and I cracked the back of my skull on the solid decking.

With an aching head I grabbed the bike and caught up with Bert back at the car. Although the road was very wide and there was no other traffic, another car had run into the back of the Dodge and the driver was staggering around on the road, quite drunk. The back of our car was extensively damaged and I think we must have gone home by taxi.

Most other nights on the pier were less exciting, but I would tend to doze off while sitting on the heavy timber edging with my legs dangling over the water 10 feet below. I often wondered what would happen if I toppled in!

I always rode a bike to the Brunswick Tech – a distance of a little under two miles. The first bike was Dad's old 'Preston Star' which he had repaired and painted black for me when I was about nine. In 1940 I would have been about twelve, and decided to renovate the bike again. I painted it red and thought it should have a name on the sloping bar to give it a professional look.

There was a bike and hobbies shop in Sydney Road near the big Brunswick Presbyterian church and I went there to buy the individual letter transfers to make up the name. Luckily I had not decided on a name, because due to the war they had only a few odd letters left from those imported from England earlier. I must have spent half an hour in the shop trying to make up words – I needed two sets of the white letters – one on each side of the bike. The selection seemed impossible for a while, but I eventually hit on the word SHELL. I am sure I was the world's first and only owner of a Shell pushbike.

Bert's family wouldn't let him have a bike in the first year at the Tech, because they thought bikes were dangerous, but when he did get one we rode everywhere together.

It was Bert who introduced me to model aeroplane making. He had the Chinese hands that I came to know so well in several of our draughtsmen many years later – the fingertips were as small as a woman's.

These fingers were ideal for delicate work whether in drawing, lettering or model making. I thought I was good, but Bert was better. He made several flying models, the last one being driven by a small petrol motor.

I only made two – both flying models powered by long strands of rubber extending the full length of the plane and concealed in the fuselage. Normally you would hold the plane in one hand and wind the propellor with the other hand until you had the required tension for launching. This winding by hand was a slow and tedious business until Bert came up with a brainwave. This was to use a Stanley hand-drill to do the winding. This reduced the time from several minutes to about 20 seconds.

We usually flew the planes at the Royal Park Psychiatric Hospital, on the land which is now being used for the Commonwealth Games Village. In our day we would go through a wide gateway and along a curved driveway to a secluded cricket oval with a few brick buildings scattered about. Except for the oval the whole area consisted of lawns and European trees, so that from inside it looked like a small peaceful corner of England.

We would take the planes to the oval and fly them on Saturday or Sunday mornings when there was no wind. There would be very few people around and nobody seemed concerned that we were there.

Bert liked the design of the Spitfire fighter plane and built two of them. The first was a small display model with about 12 inches wingspan, mounted on a slightly curved wire support fitted to a lead base. The other was a flying model with a 3 feet wingspan

and all details true to the real plane. It was not easy to build a copy of an actual plane and get it to fly, but Bert's did.

My first plane was fairly ordinary, but my second, called an 'Ibis' flew very well.

At that time we also designed and built model yachts. These were made of timber with calico sails which our mothers must have made, and sheet metal keels weighted with moulded lead along the bottom edge. Directly opposite the front of the Young's' house there was a long, dead straight and very steep road (Oak Road) which ran south and turned at the bottom to continue through Royal Park as Manningham Road to join up with Flemington Road. In later years Oak Road was incorporated into 'Turana' Juvenile Detention Centre and a new road called Oak Street was built further to the west.

During the war years Oak Road was used several times for the running of 'Soap-box Derbys'. Home-made vehicles ranging from billy-carts to small scale racing cars without engines would compete for prizes, hurtling down this long hill which was ideal for the purpose. Like most functions at this time, the races raised money for amenities for the troops.

At the bottom of Oak Road there was a small natural lake about 40 yards long x 20 yards wide, and we found this was ideal for sailing the yachts. We had adjustable rudders and these could be set to steer the boats in a straight line after allowing for a side wind.

Brian remembers seeing Bert use the lake as a take-off spot for his model seaplane – a replica of a small mono-plane with long floats in place of wheels.

It was Bert who introduced me, and then Brian, to the Boy Scouts. The Scout Hall was a fairly simple building in Weston Street, just east of Sydney Road and our troop was known as '5th Brunswick'. Nearly all scout uniforms were khaki in colour, but ours were very distinctive – Royal blue pants and socks, lighter blue shirt and scarf and standard khaki hat. Quite dashing. I would have been twelve at the time.

We met at the Scout Hall one night each week and spent time learning the usual things like tying a variety of knots and erecting tents. I started at the bottom as a 'Tenderfoot' in the Mopoke Patrol and before long had the job of drawing a mopoke (a type of owl) on a large piece of card to denote our corner of the Hall.

We rode our bikes to the scout meetings, with battery-operated lights fixed to the handlebars, and red reflectors on the back mudguards. Afterwards we would go to a Milk Bar in Sydney Road next to the Town Hall. It was here that I had my first 'malted milk'. I thought it was the best drink ever invented and I still do! The shopkeeper would take a large tapering aluminium container, pour in about half a pint of milk, add flavouring (vanilla, strawberry, chocolate, etc.), a small dollop of icecream and a spoonfull of malt. The container would then be clipped onto an electric mixer for half a minute, and when ready, the 'malted' was drunk through a straw. All this cost fourpence at first, but six months later the price increased to fivepence – still well worth it!

I only went to one Scout Camp. It was at Belgrave Heights, an area that was thick forest at the time. The camp was just for our troop and was on a Queen's Birthday weekend – the first week in June.

We went by train to Belgrave, then carried all our equipment consisting of tents, bedding and sufficient food for three days, on rough mountain tracks for what seemed ages. At last we got to the camp-site, a small clearing in a valley beside a sparkling creek. There were mountains all round and apart from the clearing, eucalypts covered everything.

The only food I had taken was flour, tea and a large tin of apricot jam, so all I ate for three days were tasteless flapjacks made from flour and water, without salt, cooked in a frying pan over an open fire and smothered in apricot jam. These were washed down with black billy tea. I have never eaten apricot jam since!

The nights were freezing cold and every morning the ground was covered in thick white frost. The sun wouldn't appear over the mountains on the east until twelve o'clock and two hours later it was starting to disappear on the other side.

Our tents would have been about 16 feet x 12 feet with scouts lined up for sleeping with heads close to both side walls. The experienced hands had a humorous trick to play on the new-chums. In the middle of the night they would lift the bottom edge of the canvas wall and pull it as far as the victim's neck so that it left his head outside in the frost. It happened to me, but I was not very concerned because the part of me left inside the tent was already numb with cold!

Our scout troop was once involved in a march through the City with many others as part of a function raising money for the war effort. I remember trying to march to the sound of a band down Swanston Street. The road between the tram lines was terribly rough. It had been built from wooden blocks covered with a thin layer of bitumen and this was breaking up.

We were dismissed close to the Shrine and Bert, Don Williamson (who years later went to Europe with Brian), someone else whom I have forgotten, and I decided to go boating on Albert Park lake. We hired a couple of small rowing boats and spent the rest of the afternoon exploring the lake.

I had no idea at the time that my future family would treat Albert Park lake (and Kerferd Road pier) as part of their back yard.

I don't think I lasted more than about eighteen months in the Scouts. While I have always liked their ideals and believed that their activities are wonderful for other people, it didn't suit me. I have always preferred to do things my way, alone or with a friend or small group, and am not comfortable if I am expected to fit in with teams or large numbers of people.

Because of our common interests, particularly in making model planes, I spent quite a bit of time at Bert's house. Bert was as Australian in his ways as I was, but there were quite a number of Chinese items in the house, including paper lanterns, folding fans, incense sticks and 78 r.p.m. Chinese records.

I still had a sense of smell at this time and I can remember the subtle smell of the incense in Bert's room when he occasionally lit a stick just for fun. The incense consisted of a thin sliver of bamboo about ten inches long which would have been dipped in a gum mixed with aromatic herbs. It would be stood in a jar and set alight, burning gently for some time, with a wisp of white smoke.

The records were of Chinese orchestral music and we both thought they were dreadful. There were high-pitched sounds from what must have been stringed instruments, accompanied by drums which sounded like people hammering on tin cans.

The highlight of these visits was to go upstairs and play billiards. The Billiard Room formed the main part of the attic storey and was quite spacious.

The billiard table was about seven feet long and Bert taught me to play billiards and snooker. It was then, at the age of twelve, that I decided to own a billiard table myself some day! As an alternative to billiards we would put the wooden cover panels on the table and play table tennis. Bert was good at all these games.

Bert's place was nearly two miles from home and sometimes when we were to spend several hours together, I would be invited by Mrs. Young to stay to lunch. I can't remember the family using chopsticks – I think the cutlery and the food was very similar to that which we had at home.

In our final year at Brunswick Tech Bert and I both won Senior Technical Scholarships which covered the first three years at the Melbourne Technical College and supplied us with allowances from the Commonwealth Government. We were in different buildings at Melbourne Tech and as time went by we saw less and less of each other because we were each so busy, and unfortunately we drifted apart.

In about 1979, I realised that it was forty years since we first sang 'Forty Years On' in Social Hour at the Brunswick Tech and I tried to find Bert. I knew that he had taken a job years before doing Aeronautical Engineering at the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation, but his family was no longer living at 212 Park Street. I looked up the Young family business and found it listed at the Wholesale Fruit and Vegetable Market in West Melbourne. I went to the Market in Footscray Road and spoke to a Chinese worker at their premises. He said he had heard of Bert but didn't know how I could contact him.

I was very busy at the office at the time and had to drop the search.

In May 2005, with Janet's help I sent letters to nine B. W. Youngs in the eastern states of Australia asking if any of them might be Bertram Wae Young – the best boyhood friend I could ever imagine.

The letters only produced one response – a note from another B. W. Young in NSW who said he wasn't my man, but wishing me luck in the search.

Then in July Janet told me about a weekly column in the Herald-Sun called 'Connections' in which people (for a small fee) could publicise things like school reunions or ask for information on lost friends. I put in a small ad. asking for information on Bert.

Nothing happened for more than a week. Then I had a phone call from Neville Whaley, a life-long friend of Bert. He said he had been in South Australia and had been contacted by his wife when she read the paper.

He said Bert lived in Balwyn after getting married, and he gave me the names of his four children.

Bert had died about six years before, while practising his golf swing in his garage.

Neville had regularly gone shooting and fishing with the Youngs over many years, including fishing from the Walshes' local pier – Kerferd Road, Albert Park.

He also said that Joy (Bert's sister) had married a chap called Lionel Loy, but she and Ken (brother) had also died. It must have been nearly a month later that I got a phone call from Lionel Loy. Someone else had seen the item in the paper and had contacted him.

Lionel confirmed everything that Neville had told me.

I was quite happy. It was good to know that Bert had led a happy and healthy life right to the end.

(Note about the accompanying photograph: Bart Wae Young, November 1955, Harold Street, Middle Park, c. November 1955, courtesy of Museum of Chinese Australian History (Chinese Museum). Reproduction rights owned by R.Lew-Boar c/o CHIA: <http://www.chia.chinesemuseum.com.au/objects/D003387.htm>)