

Carlton: A History

Slums, Spags & Survivors

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University Cafe was one of Lygon Street's first espresso bars and became a meeting place for many Italian migrants in the 1950s and 1960s. Photo: Italian Historical Society

There are few places in Australia with such a diverse history as Carlton. As a new book on the suburb is published today, Arnold Zable recalls the Carlton of his childhood.

In the late 1950s, two housing commission officers, Shaw and Davey, surveyed areas of inner Melbourne - from the vantage of their cars, so legend has it - and declared large swathes of housing to be slums. Their report, which became known as the windscreen survey, recommended a massive program of slum clearance. So began a battle for the survival of old Carlton, with the birth of resident action groups who opposed the scheme, and a new appreciation of what was precious about the suburb.

Those of us who had grown up in Carlton in the post-war years did not need to be persuaded. The Shaw-Davey slum was our playground. We were the children of immigrant and working class parents who were so busy making ends meet that we were free to roam the streets and back lanes that made up our territory.

I moved into Carlton in 1948, aged one. My parents, Polish-Jewish immigrants, paid a fortune in key money for the privilege of renting a run-down, single-fronted Victorian terrace in Canning Street. They had no choice. There was a severe housing shortage at the time because tens of thousands of immigrants had settled in Melbourne. My parents covered the rat holes, patched the cracks in the walls, fixed the leaking roof, and settled in. And their three children took to the streets. There was the vacant lot where we leaned back on abandoned sofas and read comics to the scent of smoke curling from backyard incinerators. There was the sight of the bottle-oh who wended his way down our back lanes. He would pause to allow his horse to drink at the trough outside the corner pub.

There was the faint memory of running numbers for SP bookies who plied their trade in the back lanes.

I recall the carnival that arrived every year in Curtain Square. One year I watched female wrestlers slither across a makeshift rink in front of a throng of excited men.

Everyone had their place. Italian immigrants could make their way to La Cumparsita ballroom on Canning Street, where button accordion maestro, Ugo Ceresoli, held court with the boys of the Mokambo

Orchestra. Jewish immigrants could attend the Kadimah Centre on Lygon Street for a night of Yiddish theatre, or back-lane houses of worship for those who preferred to pray.

The local pubs were bursting at the seams for the last-minute swill. Drinkers would lurch out at 6pm, while those who wished to keep drinking knew the locations of after-hour sly grog shops.

The children of the Harper family outside their Station Street home, late 1880s. Photo: Mac Nicholl.



The children of the Harper family outside their Station Street home, late 1880s.

On Saturday afternoons, when the working week was blessedly over, residents had easy access to the footy. There were two choices within walking distance: the Carlton ground in Princes Park, and the Fitzroy oval, in Brunswick Street. Those who remained at home knew from the collective howls of the crowd when a goal was scored, or when an umpire had made an unforgivable error.

There was also a darker edge to Carlton. A gang of toughs roamed the streets on the look out for "dagos" and "spags". With my dark hair and European looks I was a natural target. One gang showed more discrimination. They knew who I really was. They would grab hold of me, shove my face towards the grass on the median strip, and order me to kiss the ground and say I killed Jesus.

In reaction, I attended a back-lane boxing gym in the upstairs room of a former stable, and flayed at punching bags. I soon gave boxing away when I realised that I could run fast. Better to stay ahead of trouble, especially on the day I was chased down a back lane by a crazed youth wielding a knife.

But the Nissen twins, Henry and Leon, the smallest kids on the block, persisted. They trained with Carlton resident and former middleweight champ, Peter Read, and rose to become, between them, Australian amateur and professional flyweight champions. Henry went on to become Commonwealth champion and the world number three contender. The twins were true Carlton heroes!

A variety of languages has always been heard on the streets of Carlton. Take, for instance, the Gaelic-speaking Scots who decided to procure a preacher in their own tongue. They imported the Reverend Duncan McDiarmid Sinclair to be the first pastor of St Andrews Presbyterian Church. Sinclair, according to St Andrews' Jubilee history, came to Australia because he was grieved at the state of church affairs at home.

Much as I loved, and at times feared, the streets of Carlton, as a child I did not know about its foundations. I did not know that in 1852 Surveyor Robert Hoddle designed Carlton on a grid with wide streets, parklands and squares, an ideal setting for neighbourhood intimacy.

I did not know that while some of his vision was realised, Carlton also succumbed to land speculation and subdivisions that created neighbourhoods of cottages where working class renters were crammed into inferior housing. I did not know of the vision of those who planted oaks and Moreton Bay figs, and median strips with poplars and palms that softened the harsher edges whenever Carlton succumbed to urban decay. And in all my 12 years of education in Lee Street Primary and Princes Hill High, I did not once hear mention of the Wurundjeri people who had occupied the area for millennia.

Carlton has always been on a roller coaster of boom and bust. While South Carlton was a fashionable enclave for professionals and merchants, in other areas the pollution was so intense that one observer

described 1870s Carlton as a place where hundreds of horses, cows, goats and fowls were kept, with ducks filtering the green filth of the gutters through their bills.

The Carlton of 2004 is, notwithstanding the occasional showdown in the back rooms of Italian restaurants, an elegant suburb of renovated homes and fashionable shopping strips. This would not have been possible if the resident action groups in the 1960s and '70s had not successfully opposed the slum clearance programs of the windscreen survey.

There was an irony in their victory, however. Carlton housing has become too expensive for immigrants and low-income Australians. In retrospect, I am glad that at least one substantial area did make way for the high-rise Carlton Housing Estate between Rathdowne and Lygon Streets. As a result, the children of immigrants still inhabit the suburb - Somali and Eritrean teenagers play basketball in Curtain Square - and old Carlton lives on in a new guise.

However, we residents of another era had at least one great advantage over these new migrants. We lived in houses with backyards, and on warm nights our parents would sit on the veranda after a day of work and chat with their friends while their children ran free.

It is my most affectionate memory of Carlton: the cigarettes glowing in the dark, the murmur of quiet talk, and the smell of grass on the median strip as we played epic cricket matches late into the Carlton night. But we could play only one shot well, a straight drive. Otherwise we would have smashed windows on either side. There is always a price to pay for any lifestyle.