

# State Heritage Areas of South Australia



## Stories of 'Greater Port Adelaide'

contributed by Wendy Takos

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*Wendy Takos is a Port Walks volunteer for the Port Adelaide Visitor Information Centre. The following story is one of a number she has written for her personal history. It contains memories of the Port Adelaide, Semaphore and Outer Harbor areas and includes many references to places and activities within what is now the Port Adelaide State Heritage Area.*

### A PORT SIDE VIEW

I was born in South Australia in the country, at a place called Taillem Bend. It was a town that was an important railway junction from around 1925 through to the 1970s, when road transportation expanded and the long freight trains were no longer used as in the heydays of the 1940s. These days it is more a 'refresher' or 'pit stop' for travelers going interstate or on journeys to the South East etc. My father was a railway man all his life and was transferred in late 1957 to Outer Harbour.

We lived in one of the three State Heritage listed cottages (railway owned then), once again alongside railway tracks. Each day I travelled to school via the train which still travels the same route today on the Outer Harbor Line to the city of Adelaide. Sometimes we changed trains at Glanville Station Junction to board another as the trains filled with early morning passengers. I went to Woodville High School in 1958 through to 1960 and it was at the Woodville Station that I alighted from and rejoined daily. Woodville Station was another Rail Junction where passengers alighted to catch other trains such as the Grange and Henley lines, which I did in 1961 when I worked at Phillips Electrical Factory at Hendon.

I also worked in Semaphore in late 1961 and 62 at Mullins Bakery that was situated on the right hand side of Semaphore road between the two hotels (The Semaphore & The Federal). Semaphore in the 1960's was a place where many people liked to holiday or simply to wander the beachfront where sideshows and rides were set up for all ages to enjoy. The bakery shop was extremely busy in summer months when the Broken Hill Campers came to stay at sites mainly in and around Largs Bay. Each day they flocked to the beach, swam and generally made their own fun, a welcome diversion from the hot and dusty homes they were used to. Around Christmas, coloured lights were strung along the foreshore and the beach end of Semaphore Road, and concerts were held in the Rotunda by the Palais. All this added to an atmosphere of fun and excitement.

The trains ran from Glanville up the centre of Semaphore Road to almost the end of the road back then and were filled with people eager to sight and smell the sea air. During my lunch break I would wander down to the beach most days to sit and watch the activities being partaken, at other times I would head up and down Semaphore road popping into a shop every so often. By this time I had met my future husband and until he purchased a car he used to bike over Jervois Bridge a couple of times a week to see me and we would stroll hand in hand down to the beach as well.

On weekends we went to the movies on Saturday nights in either the Semaphore or Port Adelaide theatres depending on what was showing. I can remember before we met also catching the train to Port Adelaide and in those early days of television, households who could not afford their own set often watched screens set up in a couple of shops near Black Diamond Corner. There were also popular dances held in the Semaphore Palais or the Port Adelaide Town Hall. The dances were either Rock and Roll style at the Palais complete with popular artists or the more sedate Waltz & Military Two Step at the Town Hall. As I was only young my father did not favour dance halls in any way and really I only attended one or two in both halls unbeknown to him.

In 1963 and 64 I worked in Port Adelaide at a supermarket and so it was that again I travelled to work five and a half days a week to work, via the train. Most shops, except Milk Bars opened from 9am to 5.30pm weekdays and 8.30 to 11.30am Saturdays and were closed at all other times. Even hotels had 6 o'clock closing in those days which included Saturday. Jobs were very plentiful in the 1960s and indeed if one did not like the work you simply changed. Living along side train tracks in my early and teenage years and catching trains daily gave me a love of trains and even today I still like to travel anywhere on them. My father (as mentioned earlier) and two of my brothers worked all their lives for the South Australian Railways.

I would board the train at "Yerlo" (a small three wooden step-up siding) the first stop from Outer Harbor Station each day and sit by the window. From there I could see any outside scenery and activity that occurred along the journey that took about 30 minutes each way. The train stopped at a number of stations to pick up or set down passengers depending whether it was coming or going to the city. Once we left Glanville Station, the next was Ethelton and it was from there that I loved to look out of the window at the Port River reaches and mudflats. The sea air, salty yet tangy, the breeze wafting in, giving all inside a longing for a day off perhaps to go wandering along the nearby shores. And as we crossed the bridge, if the tide was low you could see the old iron hulks of the shipwrecks jutting out of the sands and marshes that surrounded them. A quick fleeting wave was given to the boys who hung bare-chested out of the windows of the Sugar Factory as they too waved and enjoyed their glimpses of a pretty girl or two. This, I was told from my brother's mate was a much needed diversion from the hot iron interiors they worked in. (The Sugar Refinery of 1891-1986 has since been demolished).

The Port Adelaide Station where I alighted was a fully enclosed tinned area built high above the ground, it was like entering a tunnel when the train pulled alongside the platform. It is much the same station as today minus the enclosure and with the same steps either side leading down into the street below. I don't think I ever felt unsafe back then even when we traveled at night to go to the movies although I am sure we generally did so with friends. My father never owned a car and I didn't obtain my driver's license until I was 21 years of age and so you can see a train or sometimes a bus was the travel mode or you walked.

The Supermarket, called "Don Waterman's" where I worked at Port Adelaide was on the corner of Butler Street and Commercial Road. From the train station I would walk towards the Port River up Commercial Road, past (on the right) Smith Motors, the beautiful steps of the Congregational Church built in 1868, and the sometimes pungent smells of the Balm Paints factory (old Dulux Site or now where new apartments are to be built) to my workplace.

On the left hand side, in those times, was a Hardware shop, and a couple of other rather dingy looking ones, then the old produce market building which I think housed the EWS department (where the new Customs House is today). (My father-in-law worked for the EWS in the 1960 & 1970's). The white smoke of the flour mill "Harrisons" (which is still there today) drifted skywards and somehow you knew today like any other day it felt good to be going about your daily rituals. There was a garage along there too, which was about opposite the church.

Colin Slatterey was the boss of the Supermarket in my time, he was a fair but very strict and hardworking person. Supermarkets today are much bigger than this one was but it still was run along similar lines with perhaps five aisles up and down the store. We girls (I guess they are called checkout girls today) were expected to fill shelves ourselves when the shop was quiet. One person stayed at the front at the registers and when it got busier she would ring the bell for help and one of us would leave our shelf packing to go and assist. We rotated this amongst us without too many squabbles. We were stationed at the front of the stores along similar lines as today's supermarkets with wooden checkout tables where customers placed their goods and we manually pulled them along.

In those days we memorised prices to a great extent, the variety and range not as extensive as today. We took turns at one of, I think, four or five registers at the front each assigned to our own due to the fact we were responsible for our own till moneys. The old registers were like the old typewriters back then, and a paper price trail was extracted. This did not detail items as per today, and of course you added up and gave out change. If your money drawer at the end of the day was short we were told it would be deducted from our wage packet at the end of the week. I think we had an allowance of 10 to 20 pence shortage but this was not expected to be a daily habit. I can remember being £1 short one day and was very upset to think that I had made such an error. I searched the floors and underneath the register, almost in tears, when by luck I found the note behind the drawer itself, I was so relieved.

We also cleaned the huge plate glass windows at the shop's front with soap and water about once a month and swept the front footpaths daily as well as the store aisles. A couple of young lads employed also in the back of the shop helped with heavy lifting and customers' bags (brown paper grocery bags) were carried to the customer's car. Several times a week or even daily Mr. Slattery would send one of us up to a nearby opposition shop to check their specials. That shop was on the same side of the street before Ezywalkin's (the Ezywalkin building is still there today, it is now an art studio). In those days specials were displayed on cards and hung on the windows.

It seemed to me that sugar was THE item everyone bought every week and that specials all seemed to hinge on sugar's price. However tea, butter, washing powder such as Rinso, flour and jam were other staples in demand. The window display cards and advertising specials on our shop windows were changed daily or fluctuated according to the oppositions' that we reported on. (I think there was a Woolworths Store later on where Cash Converters are today but that was not very successful and closed. Arndale and what was known as a "Shopping Town" with many shops under one roof as today's major shopping centres are, opened in 1963)

Our one-hour lunch breaks were spent wandering the nearby streets and shops, window-shopping, after all that was the only time that we could purchase clothes or shoes etc due to our own work hours. (Late night shopping in South Australia was introduced in 1977.) There were one or two dress shops on the left-hand side of Commercial Road and of course Ezywalkin's was the best for shoes in the Port.

My favourite dress shop was in the shops near Black Diamond Corner. The name "Laines" comes to mind, and from there I bought several dresses, rope and lace petticoats that were so popular in the 1960s. This shop was on the left-hand side of Commercial Road in the Central Building. I had "everlasting" laybys at these shops it seemed, as that was the way we bought things we could not outrightly pay for. Also in these shops were a Men's Hairdresser (where my husband had his hair cut) and a Haines Chocolate Store, yummy and so handy to the theatre, (the Ozone Theatre was where the Port Mall is today). Just the other side of the theatre in St. Vincent Street was a Coles Variety Store (my younger brother worked there and indeed still works for Coles). This was almost opposite the Port Adelaide Town Hall. A little further along was the "Mayfair" Cake & Bakery Shop, it still holds a name in business today. This was where my own wedding cake was purchased.

The Port Adelaide Visitor Centre today (on the left-hand side of Black Diamond Corner) was the Port Adelaide Police Station back then, which I might add I only once visited. This lovely building, built in 1860, was not the place that people wanted to be seen in or visit due to a general fear of policeman – or perhaps respect for the law was a more appropriate reason back in the 1960s.

On the St. Vincent Street side of the building, built down into the pavement, were underground men's toilets. The toilets I believe were fully tiled (white I assume). I can remember toilets at Adelaide Railway Station being fully white tiled and with that well-known "Phenyl" type smell drifting around you from a woman washing floors there. Another shop that is much remembered by me was "Grahams" Jewelry Shop which was about opposite the supermarket on the corner I think, remembered because it is where my husband and I purchased our wedding bands.

I have always been a great reader of not only books but also magazines and "Williams Newsagents" on the right hand side of Commercial Road and Black Diamond Corner opposite the Port Admiral Hotel gained much of any spare money I might have had. Some days I would buy a magazine and wander down to the wharves where one could sit and watch the many boats that sailed in and out of the harbour. I loved to watch the boats being tied up and unloaded, the shouts of the wharfies, and the seagulls hovering around overhead. Of course I had stopped on my way there at the Ozone fish and chip shop opposite the Police Station to buy my chips wrapped in newspaper. Everyone who was anyone just knew fish and chips from this shop were to die for.

Sometimes the bridge across to Birkenhead would go up, stopping the cars on either side to allow a boat or two to pass under. The bell ringing to announce this or the toot of a boat or tug would only add to the atmosphere of a Port in a flurry of movement and noise. Living at Outer Harbor I was lucky to be able to see all the overseas liners that came in down there and go on board also but that is another story. Here in the Port it was mainly bulk carriers of staple industries such as wheat, wool and coal etc. that tied up at the wharves.

I mentioned earlier that I did not drive until I was 21 years of age but in the 1960s my then boyfriend (later husband) had a Holden FC Motor Car in which we travelled many times around the Black Diamond Corner. In those days the silent cop (that sits today in front of the old Customs House) sat in the middle of the intersection and the rules applied, where you gave way to the right and kept up with the flow of the traffic.

In those days you also had the overhead cables of the Trolley Bus lines and of course people moving about. I don't recall any accidents but I am sure there must have been some as it was unbelievably busy every day. I did not ride much on the buses but can remember the double-decker ones and watching sparks that used to sometimes be seen above where the overhead lines met.

A couple of my favourite buildings in the Port, that have remained special for me even today, have been demolished.

1. The Ozone Picture Theatre – Special perhaps because of how many times I went there particularly in my teen years and had my first picture date with my husband to be. Look through my photos and you will see what a wonderful theatre it was. It had carpeted steps leading into the theatre, (I should know, I embarrassingly fell down them one night), well-decorated stamped metal ceiling and cornices, and the stage, curtains and even stonework were opulent. It was built in 1913 and I believe could sit 1680 people. When full house signs were placed outside. We would purchase our Fantails or Jaffas from the Portonian Milk Bar in the Central Building and be seated by 7.30pm. All movies back then concluded on or before 11pm and of course I was expected home by midnight. In those days Drive-In Theatre's were another place that was hugely popular and the Harbor Line Drive-In on Victoria Road at Osborne was where I have seen many movies (now demolished). You drove into the Drive-In in your own car and stopped next to a speaker box which you then placed on the dash board of your car to listen to the movie. Some people also walked in and sat in seats down by the sweet shop, the best, on a summer's evening to sit out under the stars.
2. The Port Dock Railway Station – Not that I can remember catching a train to this station as I think it was demolished in 1963. It was replaced by some non-descript sort of brick building until the Port Adelaide Police Station was built in the 1990s. My brothers Bob and Kevin both worked at the Port Dock and Gillman yards around that area of Port Adelaide until the 1980s. The original goods shed and some tracks where they either shunted trains or directed them still stand today and are the site of the National Railway Museum. Today it is good to visit the museum and see some of the old trains but just think how much nicer it would have been to have kept the original station with its Bell Tower intact. (See my photos).

The Port has always been known for its maritime and railway connections in my book. I hope that not too many more buildings will be demolished in the future as they are so important to our historic beginnings.

I have a number of favourite buildings standing today and none more so than the old Customs House down by North Parade. I have never been inside this building but have often thought about its many people that have perhaps trod its corridors and passages. This is the third Customs House to be built on this site and was started at the southern end in 1878 when the Port Adelaide Institute was built. This housed the Library, Art Gallery, Museum etc. and would have had many people holding various meetings over time.

I have a friend who worked inside the Customs House in the late 1950s. She recalls the place was a regular hub back then for all the shipping and custom-agencies. "It was a wonderful place to work in", she said, "and there was always something big happening." I think she meant that every day was different. She remembers what was called "The Long Room" and "The Switchboard Room" on the ground floor of the tower section that gave access to the flag-raising area. When I happened to wander past I used to think what a magnificent building it was and often wished I could peek inside. I wish I had known my friend back then.

St Paul's Church of England was where my sister was married in 1961 and the Congregational Church was where my cousin was married around the same time. Both churches have so much history related to them not to mention their stonework and leadlight windows. Out back of the Congregational Church is a round rotunda-shaped room that I believe was once used as a schoolroom. Many of my ancestors were members of both churches, my grandfather actually sang in the choir.

I mention only one hotel, which is probably remiss of me being so many hotels abound in the Port but, as I mentioned earlier, in the 1960s you were not allowed to drink until 21 years of age and therefore did not usually go to hotels. However my father was a drinking man and as a family I can remember meeting up with my Aunt and Uncle inside in what was known as the family area. In there we younger people were served with raspberry drinks with ice, which was a real treat. This took place in the Port Admiral Hotel, although Dad favoured the Semaphore Federal Hotel most Saturdays as he caught the train to and from there. My brothers, no doubt because in later years they worked at the Dock, would have had a much wider tale or two to tell of many pub episodes in the Port.

Over time I moved away from the Port and it was in 1998 that my husband and I moved back to live at Royal Park. I have redeveloped my kinship and passion for the area through researching my family history and through my volunteer work as a tour guide of the now State Heritage Area precinct.

I have uncovered some interesting notes on my Great Great Grandfather, George McKay and Great Great Grandmother Mary who arrived at "Port Misery" in 1838. (See my notes on Port Misery, this was about 3 kms. west of the Port today). George and his wife at one time (in 1849 until 1876) lived just behind Henry Wemen's Sailmaking business on Lipson Street in Jane Lane. They lived in what was one of four little cottages in the street. Late in 2003 a team of Flinders University of South Australian Archaeological researchers commenced a project on the area and the housing site. The digging was supervised by Archeologist Susan Briggs whose team unearthed many household items and even a fireplace. (I have a few photos and articles to support this).

It is known that my Great Great Grandfather was very involved in early shipping in the Port. His Obituary in 1883 reads - "Captain George McKay - we have to notice the death of Captain George McKay, at the advanced age of 82 years. This gentleman was one of the oldest Portonians living, and a colonist of 45 years. For many years he was engaged in developing the coastal trade of the colony, and was succeeded by his son, Captain Griffith McKay. He was a respected member of the society, in which he lived, and will be mourned by a great many in Port Adelaide". (Source: The Adelaide Observer 26 May 1883, Page 4 & 29, State Library of SA). (I have a separate history of this in my family history files).

My Great Great Grandfather and his son were involved, owned and sailed many well known ketches, cutters and schooners, such as Kangaroo, Annie Watt, Lillie May, Ruby and Percy, and the steamers, Ceres and Juno. They would have known other well-known persons such as the Yeo and Le Messurier families of Port Adelaide, as indeed they are mentioned in my history notes.

George, from 1844 to 1873, was listed in The Directory of Residents of Port Adelaide District as a Sailmaker, Shipmaster. I recently obtained an Indenture for his son Griffith, this is an apprenticeship for a period of 6 years (1864-1870) at Henry Weman's Sailmaking business in Lipson Street. This important piece of paper has my Great Great Grandparents, their son and Henry Weman's signature adorning it.

Today is it any wonder that the list of some of my favourite streets or places in Port Adelaide has grown. Henry Weman's sailmaking business, Lipson Street, Jane Street and the adjoining Calton Street. Go stand in Calton Street and look south towards its stone buildings complete with over hanging woodbeams, note the narrowness of the street and you too may see into the past.

Today as I wander this area as my ancestors have in the past, I know that of course things have changed but I am sure that as I wander I think about them and others and try and imagine what it was like for them. I wish they had left some of their reminiscences of their times here as indeed I am endeavoring to do so now.

Did they have a Portside view like mine?

In closing – a poem I penned in July 2004.

*Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, three words with so much meaning so true,  
For it's from our yesterdays that our fore-bears started, to plant the seeds of a tomorrow so new.  
Today those seeds need to be nurtured and tended, for their beauty and wonder for all to behold,  
Without the dreams of a better tomorrow, today would pass with barely a nod from a soul.  
Tomorrow, people can look back with wonder, on the likes that surely have been,  
The greatest gifts we can leave to others, are the seeds sown from the past, by our own historical means.*