

Growing up in Surrey Hills: Christmas 1960

Gill Bell

'The north wind is tossing the leaves...'

The childish voices drift from the classroom opposite. This will be our grade next year. In our Grade four room we are busy making paper chains to decorate the room. We concentrate on cutting the pastel-coloured paper streamers to length and glueing the loops of chain together. Mr Sutherland pins the finished chains round the room and we admire our handiwork.

Outside in the school playground, swirls of yellowish dust drift on the warm breeze, and the leaves of the eucalypts release their pungent scent. Soon we will be ushered into the Great Hall to watch a film. It is to be 'Bush Christmas'. We have seen it before but we have a high tolerance for repetition. We anticipate the scene when the children try eating snake for Christmas dinner. It is our cue to shriek in delighted horror.

The movie starts. We watch as the children are released from school for the summer and race to their lift home: not a car or even a bicycle, but a horse for each child. The flickering grey and white images on the screen and the jaunty music somehow evoke an idyllic Australian country town in high summer.

After the film comes to a satisfying ending, we return to our classroom to farewell our teacher and classmates for the summer. It seems very poignant to me now that we are never again to meet in the same place or in the same group.

However, as we say our goodbyes, we are full of anticipation. Shouldering our empty satchels, we set off for home through the sleepy suburban streets.

On a secret signal cicadas begin their exuberant shrieking. The air seems to vibrate with the sound. The occasional red flowering gum street tree makes a sumptuous scarlet display. The summer gardens we pass are full of colour. There are pink and purple fuchsia bells hanging in clusters. Lavender and rosemary give off fragrance in the hot sun, while in shady corners hydrangeas bear extravagant clusters of pink flowers. The air is full of fragrance and the sun is warm on our backs as we walk confidently into the future stretching before us.

The very next day, Saturday, is one of the most exciting events of the year: the Christmas party given by our father's company, Challingsworth, in Burnley. The Challingsworth Works Christmas Party deserves capital letters!

In the afternoon our family piles into our green Zephyr to make our way to St Bartholomew's church hall in Burnley St near Challingsworth. Our little brother is cuddled on Mum's lap in the front seat. This is not yet considered a crime! We are wearing our Sunday best; Dad has on a sports jacket and tie, and Mum is wearing a full-skirted cotton frock and a Sunday hat.

We stop at the dark red brick church and take our seats in the hall, which is echoing with the excited chatter of many boys and girls. There will be games and food, then Christmas carols in these innocent days

We feast on fairy bread, chocolate crackles, lamingtons and - an unparalleled treat - soft drink! However, the most exciting part is still to come. As we take our seats again, we hear the distant jingle of bells ... and can that be the sound of hooves? We crane around to the back of the hall and catch a glimmer of light in the gloom. Then

Father Christmas himself appears, bearing a lantern. He makes his way to the front of the hall. We are awestruck. An assistant begins to call out the name of each child in turn. It is a long list. In these years of post-war baby boom we are many, but Challingsworth is a generous employer.

‘Gillian Craig!’ Father Christmas hands me a squishy wrapped parcel with my name written on it. It contains a fat felt bunny. I love it!

As we drive home, I rest my hot forehead against the car window. I am utterly content. Magic has happened here tonight, and now the whole of summer stretches

Photo: a still from the film *Bush Christmas*