

Chapter 9

The Human Face of the School



“Women of the School”. One of two photographs thus far located of an official attempt to obtain a photographic record of staff of the ANU. Some 32 photographs were taken (November 25 1955).

Back (L to R) Lily Velioniskyte, Margarita Strautmanis, Margaret Lyons, Barbara Shanahan, ?, Joan Douglas, ?,?

Front (L to R) Sheila Miller, Ruth Ludigkeit, Isobel Robertson, Thelma Moxey, Lorna Wright, Hilda Halpin (? from the Purchasing Office).

The white-coated contingent were “the microscope girls”, Barbara was Mark Oliphant’s secretary, Isobel was Ernest Titterton’s secretary and Lorna was secretary to the Laboratory Manager, Ron Purchase.



The companion to “Women of the School”. A somewhat random group mustered from loiterers and passers-by (November 25 1955).

Back row (L to R) Trevor Ophel (NP), Keith Carter (Geophysics), Tony Bull (NP), John Carver (NP), Tony Brinkley (NP), Keith Lokan (NP), Stan Wilson (Purchasing Officer).

Front row (L to R) Jack Blamey (PP), Ted Irving (Geophysics), John Warren (Visitor to NP), Ron Edge (NP).

Social Life of the Fifties

The bush capital could be a lonely place during the early fifties. City slickers from Sydney and Melbourne loved to remind locals that Canberra was “the only cemetery in Australia with lights”. Even that was only true until the street-lights were turned off at midnight. Civic Centre on a Sunday evening was deserted and depressing - the Blue Moon Cafe was virtually the only establishment likely to be open. Until the latter part of the decade, six o’clock closing prevailed for the hotels, though enlightened NSW, and thus Queanbeyan, introduced extended hours (10 pm) somewhat earlier. There was one restaurant in Civic, the unpretentious Gloucester, located above the original Commonwealth Bank on London Circuit. Sometimes in desperation, students would cram into a car (some affluent students actually owned almost reliable transportation, others made do with veteran models) and drive to the bright lights of either Yass or Goulburn for a mixed grill at one of the highway cafes.

There were two movie theatres, the Civic in Mort Street and the Capitol at Manuka. They alternated films week about, limiting the choice somewhat. The local Canberra Repertory group flourished in the cultural desert, with ANU personnel prominent always in the audience, and sometimes in the cast. A number of students from the School became involved backstage where their technical expertise was useful with lighting and the construction of props. The association had mutual benefit - there was always a party somewhere after the Saturday night performance. A technician from the Electron-

ics Unit, Algius Butavicius, also joined the backstage set. Later, after training with the National Institute of Dramatic Arts, he went on to become a successful professional producer.

Sport was a useful source of social contact. In the mid-fifties, the ANU had a basketball team that competed week-nights at Duntroon, the only indoor court in Canberra. With a sprinkling of Fulbright students from the US, the team had a modicum of skill, but lacked fitness. The first ANU cricket team played in the Saturday sub-district competition, starting in 1956, with Ted Irving from Geophysics and Tony Bull, Don Gemmell and Trevor Ophel, all of Nuclear Physics, amongst its stalwarts. On Sundays, social matches were played with other School members - including Fred Barker, Eric Massey, Gil Lea, Bob Whelan, Ted Flinn (a Fulbright student in Geophysics) and Martin Dunwoody participating. During the winter months, social tennis was popular on Saturdays and an informal ANU team - boasting such a formidable doubles combination as Richard Woolley and Ophel to provide a blend of guile and youth, played matches on Sunday mornings. In either 1956 or 1957, an ANU soft-ball team was formed to take part in a Sunday afternoon competition.¹

Such activities did not fit well with the rules of University House where, until the mid-sixties at least, all single students had to live. A strict dress code of jacket and tie applied for dinner on week-nights (there was a be-gowned High Table, complete with Latin grace). Sunday lunch was an occasion to which residents often invited guests; other



Mark Oliphant distributing presents at the School Christmas party of 1954. Others in the photograph are (L to R) Don Davies, Billy O’Neill, Jimmy Edwards, Paddy Lalor, Mrs Massey, Pat Owen, Harry Owen and Jacky Reynolds.

Mark Oliphant looking on at the start of the wheel-barrow race (circa 1962).



residents were expected to be respectably dressed to provide proper tone. Dinner for the basketball team was always a problem - it would be kept hot for them in a small kitchen area until they returned long after the set dining period. This meant that the team invariably faced an unappetising, dried-up plate. One night, the team got back early for whatever reason and joined the residents in Hall, still wearing their uniform of skimpy, bright green, taffeta shorts. The Master was apoplectic. For long afterwards, that night of shame tarnished the good names of team members. Again, when one of the cricket games was on campus, resident team members appeared for Sunday lunch in cricketing whites. Thereafter, University House prepared lavish picnic hampers for the cricketers on condition that such barbaric behaviour was never to be repeated. Regrettably, students from the

A group from the Ion Diffusion Unit among the spectators at the School Sports Day. The unfinished Menzies Library is in the background (circa 1962).

In the foreground are (L to R) John Lowke, Malcolm Elford, Jean Rees, Cathy Crompton, Helen Crompton, Bob Crompton, Nath Gascoigne, Nick Gascoigne, Bill Butterfield and Sue Gascoigne.



School were always prominent in the so-called “rowdy element” that clashed with House “traditions”. Here also though, they became valued citizens when movie projectors and sound systems needed to be set up or repaired.

School Activity

The Physics Social Club was formed in the early fifties to provide some social activity for pioneers of the School. Regular Saturday night functions were held in the tea-room of the Cockcroft. They were well-attended, mainly by technical and workshop staff and their wives, but also by a fair number of academic staff and students. The annual Christmas party was the highlight of the club’s annual calendar. Mark Oliphant always enjoyed such occasions, distributing unusual gifts accompanied by florid presentation speeches. Sometimes Tony Brinkley provided topical parodies for well-known Gilbert and Sullivan tunes. The party of 1960 is described in Oliphant’s biography. The “someone” who had written “The Director’s lot is not a happy one” was of course Brinkley, while the tall staff member, who received a hat with a red light on the top to stave off low-flying aircraft, could only have been Fred Barker.

Another early Christmas tradition was a cricket match between the “Poms” and the Australians of the School. These were played on the last working afternoon before the Christmas break. They were light-hearted events. Everyone had to score before being dismissed and retirement was mandatory after a batsman scored twenty runs. After a few years of such matches, the would-be cricketers of the teams faced them with increasing lack of enthusiasm. Bowlers became frustrated as batsmen flailed wildly at ball after ball trying to hit a boundary as their first runs. In the process, they would be bowled out time and time again or would refuse to run singles. Finally (probably 1960), it was decided to play a “proper” game. Inevitably, that turned out to be the final match. Few of the School showed up to watch, whereas in the past everyone was expected to, and rain prevented a result. The Social Club Christmas parties faded away as well.

Thereafter, Christmas usually meant a keg of beer provided by the Director. Given the variety of technical skills in the School, it was always surprising to find that the tapping and extraction of beer from those kegs were not amongst them. Invariably, the serving counter would be adorned with rows of jugs

filled with foam. Soon, individual sections started to organise their own festivities.

Some years on (probably 1962), the School organised a mid-year sports day with foot-races, relays of various types and the like. Presumably, the intention was to engender some of the old School spirit. Though successful enough, it was not repeated.

School “traditions” were not the only ones affected by changing times. In those early days, open house parties were common at Christmas time. One (and sometimes a second also) staff member of Nuclear Physics held an annual open house during the Christmas break. Almost all members of the Department and their families would come - on one occasion more than a hundred attended during the course of the afternoon. By the mid-seventies, different life-styles that emerged with increasing affluence and as young families became teenagers, led to attendances at open houses converging rapidly toward zero. A tradition of almost twenty years had to be abandoned as more and more of the School spent Christmas at the coast or elsewhere.

Personalities of the School

The character of day to day affairs in every organisation is invariably shaped to a large degree by a handful of widely-known individuals.

Of the possible candidates, the five presented have been selected as representative to span the history of the School.

Peter Darling

Peter Darling was one of the pioneers of the School, arriving in November 1950. Between then and his retirement in 1991, he headed the joinery section that built enough office furniture and benches to fill countless warehouses, interspersed with a wide range of general building activities.

A calm and quietly spoken individual, Darling contributed much by way of example, with his superb craftsmanship and ever-reliable efficiency, to establish the ethos of excellence that is the hallmark of the School workshops.

“Paddy” Lalor

Paddy joined the School as a labourer with School

Services in August 1954. He quickly became well-known throughout the School with personality traits to enliven all occasions. Usually he was the archetypical Irish bachelor with a fund of yarns, a liking for a beer or two and an impertinent disregard for position. At times, he could indulge in aggressive polemic to back his self-avowed claim of being a card-carrying Communist, yet at others be a polite and gracious guest who loved children.

Paddy retired in September 1964 and, to the surprise of many, married. Sadly, he died a short time thereafter.

Mrs Pat Ohlmus

Mrs Ohlmus was the gracious and courteous face of the School Administration from February 1959 until her retirement in 1984. She maintained a dignity as Administrative Officer - hence the Mrs Ohlmus instead of Pat, yet treated everyone in the School with warm friendliness and the same polite formality. Students were always Mr or Miss until the day after their degree was conferred, thereafter it became Doctor. Such remarkable feats of public relations, certainly ones that students appreciated, reflected her lively and caring concern for everything going on in the School. The Laboratory Manager's office was run with brisk efficiency, backed by her years of experience and wide knowledge of ANU affairs.

Susie Radovanovic

Susie is surely the doyen of tea-ladies. She ran the Department of Nuclear Physics for some sixteen years from 1976 with firm, but friendly, control.



*Mrs Ohlmus (1959-1984)
(September 1974)*

*Top. Peter Darling (1950-1991)
(July 1971)*



*Paddy Lalor (1954-1964)
"Smoko" in Mark Oliphant's
office.*



Susie Radovanovic (1971-).



Tony Brinkley (1951-1983) in a scholarly pose so typical of the fifties and sixties. The periodic table substitutes for the more usual blackboard filled with complicated equations. The computational amenities of the early days, a slide rule and a Facit calculator, are evident (circa 1961).

She joined the School in 1971 as a cleaner/tea lady. Her cheerful manner and application to duty, backed by loyal concern for the area to which she was attached, quickly became legendary. When contract cleaning was introduced to the School in 1992, the School wisely retained Susie as the day representative, allowing the association with “her” School and “her” department to continue.

Tony Brinkley

Tony Brinkley was another of the pioneers, never slow to remind everyone he was the first member of Nuclear Physics, having arrived in Canberra in April 1951 (strictly speaking, Jack Blamey could claim that honour on the basis of Appendix II). Brinkley served as Ernest Titterton’s research assistant, processing nuclear emulsions and supervising their subsequent microscope scanning, until 1964. Then he became associated with the accelerators, quickly becoming a key figure in day-to-day operations. As a veritable jack of all trades and master of many of them, he did anything necessary, in or out of hours, to keep the accelerators going.

Brinkley shunned outside social activity, yet in the workplace, he was a delightful extrovert and a good and loyal friend to many in the School.

Were it not for Brinkley’s archival concerns, many of the photographs in the present work might well have vanished without trace.

I Ophel in fact “represented” the ANU in all four teams and was also goalie for a local hockey club. Would that such energy had lasted longer!

In a history, false modesty should not prevent mention of his best bowling performance - 7/7.