

WESTLAKE. 1954 - 1961.

By

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My story of Westlake began in April 1954, a memorable month and year in Canberra, because the Petrov Affair was making all the headlines, and the severe frosts were early, but for me it was equally as important, because it was also the same month and year that marked our arrival at "Number 23 Westlake". We were among the last of the W.W.2. Eastern European Displaced Persons, or D.P.s, as we were known then, to be settled there and we found that almost 25% of the inhabitants of Westlake were, also



"New Australians". Our new home sat on 6 x 6, concrete piers, a dark green painted weatherboard cottage. Internally, the ceilings and walls were also made of weatherboard and painted with a high gloss finish, in a predominantly creamy/beige colour, the newspaper sheets were laid out under the lino, which covered the huon pine floorboards. A tin corrugated roof and a high hedge at the front, completed the picture of our home, and it was typical of the 57 or so other homes in Westlake. The suburb, or settlement of Westlake, was situated behind the American Embassy. The only sealed bitumen road into Westlake began from State Circle and then went along Perth Avenue, up and over a crest and then dipped down into a hollow that was naturally formed between two hills, east and west. This incidentally, was to give Westlake its nick-name of "Snatch-Holla". The road wound its way past every house in Westlake and loosely scribed a figure '8', as the entry and exit points, were one and the same road, all-be-it with a few side tracks and short cuts located at strategic spots around Westlake. The surrounding hills were reasonably timbered and were providing an ideal bush setting for the suburb.

My parents loved the rural setting of Westlake, my father in particular, because it allowed him to keep ducks, geese, hens, pigeons and rabbits. It reminded him of his rural home in the Ukraine. For my mother, coming from the city of Odessa, also in the Ukraine, it was a place of contrasts, this place seemed far removed from her own large city upbringing and European lifestyle. But to her, this home was better than any that we had had so far since arriving in Australia. My mother knew that it was a more permanent place to finally settle down and begin the task of rearing children and starting a new life, in a new land.

On my first morning in Westlake, I woke up to a very still, frosty morning. I could hear dogs barking everywhere, roosters crowing here and there and I noticed that the hills around us were busy with the morning

sounds of birds warbling, calling or singing, this was something I hadn't been used to. I didn't know that we had so many varieties of birds in Australia, but it all seemed to fit in with my new environment. The first things that I could remember my parents commenting on, that the house a relatively straightforward design, simple and effective, as was the layout of the various rooms and the basic but functional utilities. The heating was via two fireplaces, an open one in the lounge room and the other in the kitchen. The kitchen fireplace consisted of a wood burning 'Canberra' brand cast iron stove, with removable top plate rings to control the degree of heat required to cook the meals. This same kind of technology furnished the bathroom\laundry area, a chip burning boiler, was the heart of the laundry area, along with two cold water taps and a concrete clad double water bowl. The water was heated in a removable copper bowl, which in turn was part of a cylinder made of heavy gauge steel and was reminiscent of a 44gallon drum, both in height and diameter.

Water was added to it by either a hose attached to the nearby taps or by using largish saucepans, equally, the saucepans were used to transfer hot water to the washing machine, if need be. The chip heater was located at the base and this was quite adequate to heat up any water inside the copper bowl, which had a capacity of about 8 gallons and was used as much to supplement the electric hot water heaters meagre capacity of 2 gallons. The cast iron enamelled bath tub stood on four legs and was excellent for soaking dirty clothing and nappies overnight, as well as for having a bath in. With the size of our family, the chip heater was constantly in use and was mandatory in providing enough hot water for the bath tub.

In the winter we loved to have our baths in the laundry\bath room because it was always warm from that chip heater. The toilet was a problem because of the need to go outside the house to go to the toilet. After some cold months in the house it was decided to cut out an entry through the laundry wall to the toilet by removing one of the ripple corrugated iron sheets from the wall and the result was perfect! Dad had made up a curtain divider and placed a bolt and lock on the laundry door and this ensured privacy, whenever the toilet was in use, equally, when the bath or laundry was in use, it was a long wait to use the toilet. When this was the case, especially at night, my brothers and I developed a new interest, this was called Stargazing, while simultaneously relieving ourselves against the side fence.

The back yard was large enough for my parents to plant a vegetable garden and for my father to construct various birdcages, chookpens, duckruns and the dog kennel, and still leave room to hang out the washing on the 'T' framed clothes line, without fouling any trees or plants.. Soon after we had moved in, the new fruit trees were planted, and in the newly dug up vegetable patches the various seeds were also planted.

Being a largish family, the dividends every summer were fresh and cheap vegetables making it both healthy and economical.

I had mentioned earlier, that my first day was a memorable one, now it was going to be more so, because on that day and the rest of the week that followed, I had met first two of the local 'toughs', Ray and Laurie, and had been introduced to a ritual known as, fight first-wrestle on the ground-then sit down and introduce yourself! In that order!. This meeting started at "Menzies Dump" and finished under the lamp post at "Sykes Corner". I had now, 'met' Ray and Bill Johnstone, Laurie and Lance McCauley, on that first day and in the week that followed, I had met the rest of the Westlake boys. Freddie and Ronnie McCauley (distant cousins of Laurie and Lance), Eddie and Reggie Jackson, Tommy Wilder, Johnny Gregory, Lawrence and Trevor Haines, Ian Campbell, Peter Strudwicke, Brian Carne, Leslie Menzies, Tommy Maxwell, (who was deaf and dumb), Eugene Lewkowicz, Gary and Phillip Purtell, Alex Jesaulenko, Brian Burke, Johnny Walters. I in turn, introduced my younger brother Peter to the boys, but when I told them my name, which is, "Vladimir" or "Vovka", they would simply screw up their faces and would ask again, what?

It took a little while to get used to each other's nuances but in the end it was a case of realising that we were all in the same boat, that is, we were from largish families, our folks relatively poor, and that no one was more special or gifted than the other, all of us were equal. Right down to the holes in our strides and bare feet! Also, every one of us was referred to by a nick-name and this was so often used that we sometimes didn't know who we were referring to in a conversation, unless the further identifying nick-name was used. These nick-names are too descriptive to use openly.

I quickly learnt that some of my new friends were too young for us 'biggies', and so, a friendship developed with the 5 'wild' boys closer to my own age. My parents called me and my new friends "Windwalkers", because only the wind would blow us home, and only the wind knew where we were at any one time. These "Windwalkers" were, Ray, who was a very game, sensitive and serious type, came from an extended family of 8, go to Sunday School at the old Westlake Hall. Laurie, who was the eldest of the boys in his family, was always a very likeable, but a very nervy, cautious and cagey kid, but was game enough. He too, would go to Sunday School, every now and then. Freddie and Ronnie were brothers and were as game as anyone I had ever met. They came from a family of early settlers in the Canberra region and both had a very down to earth approach about everything. I don't think they were too interested in Sunday School. I and my brother also had attended Sunday School and I didn't mind a little religious instruction in my life, in fact I quite enjoyed the biblical stories and the used to save those little religious pictures, that were handed out at the end of the day. The Salvation Army had turned me and most of gang into pure and

unadulterated little angels. And so it was, that the main gang members became Ray, Freddie, Ronnie., Laurie, Eddie, and myself. None of us owned telephones and so we used to front up to each other's house and call out from the street, sometimes we'd be chased away by annoyed parents, but mostly, we were invited inside to wait for our friend.

I was introduced to the Snatch-Holla 'street' dictionary of the finest, colourful language expressions that one could hope to learn, these expletives were often used to describe life's little foibles. In addition I learnt many other 'skills and arts' that were deemed a necessary part of the normal 'Snatch-Holla education' process, these skills that included tree cutting, starting 'burn-offs', 'shopping for things', roof rocking, window smashing, name calling, fighting and wrestling, billycart racing, comic swapping, hopscotch, making bows and arrows. catapults, using Air rifles and .22 rifles, riding bikes, swimming, rafting and canoeing, and living like a nomad and making money from golf balls.

I admit to having at least one peculiarity, to me, my education was very important and my current school, Telopea Park Primary School, was important to me too, if only so that I could learn to read and write in English, and to do my arithmetic--- (which was handy to know when selling golf balls to the public), to write letters, especially when forging parents notes to the teachers, when one of us was going to have a 'sickie'. It was also mandatory, if we were to read and understand written instructions when starting up tractors at the sandwash and of course, be skilled in telling knowledgeable and 'believable' lies.

School ground fighting seemed to follow us around, I think it was because we were considered to be lesser people than our peers, or maybe our addresses said it all, whatever it was, we were able to sort out the 'misunderstandings' without too much fuss. Though we had excelled at many Athletic events, it always seemed to be a hollow victory for us, given that the teachers would treat us with some degree of contempt, in the normal school classroom environment. Maybe, again, it was because we were from Westlake, or "Snatch-Holla" as Freddie once stated to a teacher, clearly and with conviction. These were the formative years of my life and that of my friends.

Because Westlake was central to the main layout of Canberra we had almost equidistance to the main shopping centres such as Civic, Manuka, or Kingston, then shorter distances to Parliament House, the Royal Canberra Community Hospital, the Royal Canberra Golf Club and to the various Embassies surrounding us not to mention Bob Menzies and the 'Lodge' nearby so that we were in a pretty good spot as nothing was too far away to travel to and not too tiring for the dogs to run around. Dogs were a part of living in Westlake, no self respecting gang member would wander around Westlake or anywhere else, without his dog in tow....never.

Most of Westlake's grocery needs, were served by weekly visits of the "Mobile" Supermarket, which was an ex- passenger bus, and the "grocer man", who would visit at least once a week. This was in addition to the daily needs of fresh bread and milk. The bread was delivered by a the bread man and his horse drawn "oven", and the milk was delivered in the early evenings or very early mornings, by milkman filling the saucepans, that were left on the top step or, on the veranda, attached would be a note telling him of the quantity required that day, and he would pour out the milk with a ladle measuring to the nearest half-pint. The Ice-man would deliver the blocks of ice for those with 'ice-chests', this was usually every few days or so. To us the most important visitor to Westlake was the Ice-cream truck, the truck being an old converted Blitz Wagon, had many a good spot to grab of and get a 'free' ride around Westlake, not to mention the chance to pinch lollies. In those days, the vendors didn't allow credit, as cash only, was the preferred method of payment. But I'm sure that they did keep a 'list'. Alternatively, we would sometimes go to the Capitol Hill Hostel canteen and buy emergency supplies of butter, sugar, lard or more bread.

Oddly enough, most Canberrans were not even aware of our suburb, or of its location on the map, and those that did know, dismissed us as being from 'that place' or from the 'slums', either way, we weren't sure if it was a blessing or a curse to have an address in Westlake in the 50's. It mostly appeared that we were discriminated against, and no one wanted to be caught or seen associating with us. We felt the sting and hurt from some people who should have known better, especially some teachers, just the same, we were encouraged by the better educated and more mature people from our school environment, encouraged to strive for and to achieve our goals, to excel in anything we may have put in our mind to do. I never forgot the kindness and the encouragement to do better for myself, I know the others had also responded in the same way to this act of kindness, no matter from whom it came or under what circumstance. We would escape to the river every other chance we had, to put the classroom behind us.

The golf links which provided me and the gang with so much fun and money was our personal playground, the Molonglo river was also our swimming pool of choice. We could swim or raft down river, canoeing or 'logging' anywhere we wanted to go up river or down. 'Logging', was the art of retrieving a log and then sitting, or laying astride it, and paddling around the river, it was a very useful and preferred way to travel at times. At first, our days on the river were spent exploring the entire length of the river from the nearby Black Mountain Peninsula/ Yarralumla weir, the western most region, to the Causeway/ Kingston Powerhouse , eastern most region, in between these regions, we had explored, canoed or rafted, or logged, our way under Lennox Crossing bridge , under Commonwealth Avenue Bridge, and under Scott's Crossing Bridge until we reached the shallows of the

'Causeway' behind the Power House. We didn't venture further than the Causeway.

To be even near the Molonglo river, during the '1954\55', school Christmas holidays, was a brave act in itself because the parents of my friends, threatened to 'skin em alive' if they ventured within a mile of the river, after all, it was infested with crocodiles and water snakes and if that wasn't enough, the whirlpools would suck you down and drown you! I was blamed for breaking those rules and 'taking' my mates down to the river. I know that at the beginning I was even cursed for ever having arrived in Snatch-Holla. Curiosity was then and still is, my biggest weakness. I simply followed that instinct and asked if the others wanted to find out what was 'over the hill', they would reply positively, not wanting to be seen as scared by the others, as I knew they would, and we all discovered the same things together. The mystery of the dangerous river was well and truly exposed now and no longer 'taboo'. This was terrific, real terrific! Freedom! The world was ours! We were going to live forever and never grow old! Hello "suspension"! We have arrived!

Being without wealthy benefactors, we found out very early, that we could find and sell golf balls to golfers on the course or sell to the pro-shop and make a few shillings, sometimes even a few pounds. We made quite good pocket money in those days, enough to buy ourselves smokes and go to the matinee pictures, and still have enough to help our parents with money for some essentials and at times, even enough to buy footwear, clothing, or an item for the house. Our parents used to make sure that we looked our radiant best, before allowing us to go the matinee picture shows. Our hair would be combed and parted! our clothes clean and pressed. Then, and only then, were us 'little angels' allowed to venture out. Sometimes someone older had to be responsible for us at these times, and Ray Brien was always agreeable to the requests from the mothers, he was about 2 years older and therefore more mature and less prone to be involved in any mischief. Before we even crested the hill on our way out, we were 'lighting up' our Ardaths, when Freddie or Laurie, would do the 'drawback', the coughing could be heard back down the road and in the hollow.

The 'suspension' was named by someone because of the suspended bridge which was originally in place, about 150 yards upstream from our 'suspension', before two floods had washed it away. The suspended bridge was constructed to allow the golfers to continue the game, from the 3rd green to the 4th tee, but after the devastation of the flood waters, for the second time, a new 'Pontoon' bridge was constructed using 44 gallon drums fastened by hoop iron to bearers which in turn supported the bridge. Minor flooding was never a problem for the new bridge even though it would separate from its anchor points, this happened more by design than ineffective construction methods. Rather than say 'suspended', someone in Westlake had coined the name 'suspension', and this was the name that

stuck to our playground and meeting place. I think if we had called it by any other name it wouldn't have been the same, we spent more time at this spot than all other places combined. It was the be-all end-all for all of us, a kind of Mecca. The river, was our everything and we loved it then as much as we loved life itself.

The 'suspension' was also the area where golfers would tee off on one side of the river and hope that their balls would land on the 15th green, crossing the river as it went, but not all golfers were that confident and pretty soon many a ball would drop into river. We learnt to tread along the river bed and search for golfballs with our feet and then pick them up by spreading our big toe and the next toe and forcing the toes over the ball, the ball would jam itself in between them and we would simply raise our feet up to our hands and retrieve the ball from between the toes, then either place inside our swimming togs, if we were wearing any, or throw it onto the bank.

Because the seasons of the year didn't really matter to us, and earning pocket money did, we would search for balls in the middle of winter and in doing so would emerge from the water, after about 15 minutes, all purple and shivering uncontrollably. It would take some time for the numbness to wear off and as we thawed out around a fire. The fire which we would normally start before going into the water, was needed to warm up as quickly as possible, this combination of freezing and then thawing, was an accepted ritual and very necessary in our line of business. We would huddle around the fire, and sometimes 'sit' in it, as we would be discussing the next move in our search for balls, always through loudly chattering teeth. To this day we don't know how much damage we may have done to our health, because of the winter excursions into the Molonglo.

Through the 1955 year, we were getting to be like the characters out of Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' and not surprisingly, because we were actually living this wonderful life. We were escaping from the hardships that our parents were facing daily and could put it all behind us for a while. Though we were becoming very experienced with all types of adverse conditions on the river, and would even cross the Molonglo while it was in full flood, we were always in absolute awe at the sight of the Molonglo river in full flood, to see it like this was really something else. But despite that, we would nevertheless paddle our tin canoes down the swollen river, or catch a drifting log and 'ride' it to get to the otherside, sometimes to the gasps of the crowds that would gather to view the flooded roads, especially at Lennox Crossing. To us the rains always meant that the river would soon swell and eventually, flood and tear away our canoes from that 'secret' spot, along the river and usually up stream of the suspension, here the rope was tied at least 6 inches below the water line so that the knot was hidden from view. The canoes were always tied up to tree roots and then we would sink the canoe, so as to hide them from view. This was an effective strategy and we never had a canoe stolen from us, but the might of the river

in flood, was something we just had to accept, and so if we thought we could beat the floods, we would round up the gang and pull our canoe or canoes out of the swollen river and take them up the bank and hide them under branches of willow trees and long grass. On a couple of occasions this was not far enough up the bank, and we had lost our canoes to the floods.

Ingenuity and adaptability were two pre-requisites that we all had, we could make something out of nothing and in Snatch-Holla, everyone wasted very little, so, to make anything at all, things such as wooden rifles, pistols, bows and arrows or elaborately styled billycarts, we would often walk off to the nearby building sites, or to the rubbish dumps and scavenge for anything useful. The main dumps were at Barton, Constitution Avenue and at Black Mountain. We would walk to these dumps dragging along our billycarts and our dogs in tow, sometimes we'd be gone for hours and hours but we believed the 'finds' were always worth the time. I would borrow my father's equipment and construct or make virtually anything my heart desired.

I also owned a full size 28 inch mans bike that my father bought for me for 5 pounds, a year earlier, when I was 8 years old, and I would ride it to Ainslie Public School from our home in Turner, by putting one leg through the frame and pedal in an offset fashion. But here in Snatch-holla, the others didn't have a bicycle and so it was easier for me to leave it at home and walk around with the gang, than for me to ride, but before too long, we all soon graduated to bicycles and with this new transport, came much more freedom and mobility and we could scout around the whole of Canberra, we could now go further to get into strife, we used the bikes to that advantage. Nothing was hidden from us, we had been to all of the scenic spots of Canberra and then some places we shouldn't have been to, such as the field firing range behind the Airport picking up empty cartridge cases and cartridge belts, playing around with 'spent' mortar shells, or running along the top of the Cotter Dam collecting the 'trays' and 'zacs', and on rare occasions, a 'dina' or two, that were caught on the mossie growth along the top of the dam. I still shiver when I think back to that particular time. The bikes had allowed us to have the streets of Canberra at our fingertips, adding another dimension to our activities. It also started us on a 'borrowing' spree that didn't really stop for some time.

Because the bicycles were our main source of mobility and because of the frequent use of our bikes, reliability was paramount. In order to keep our bikes in Tip-Top condition we were required to 'shop' for parts, mainly at the nearby Capitol Hill or Hillside Hostels. On occasions our own bikes would be stolen from picture theatre bike racks, presumably by others in dire need of the best kept and up-to-date bikes in the area. Thieving from us was always considered a heinous crime that was punishable by public hanging at dawn. No other lesser penalties could be considered. But by the passing of time, we would eventually 'rebuild' our bikes into better and more sophisticated machines, with dual tail-lights and twin dynamos running

three headlights and even front and rear lighting power isolation switches, and mirrors that were fixed onto our handlebars. We pioneered many of the innovations that were showing up on bikes years later, many years later in fact. We had made much better machines and now to keep them, we would invest in padlocks, or combination padlocks, whatever was available when we went 'shopping' at Coles or Woolies, in addition sometimes, even the dogs were left in charge, chained to the bikes.

Sometimes the Police were required to enter Snatch-Holla, searching for stolen items, they would, to quote their own comments to us, 'hesitate' to come to Snatch-Holla to search for anything they suspected of being stolen without first being absolutely certain of their information, because of the risk of having their vehicles damaged or being abused or assaulted by the locals. Only on rare occasions, when questioned by Police, were we at a loss to explain our well maintained bikes but mostly, we could always prove that we had the capacity to earn big money down at the 'links' and 'buy' the bits from schoolmates or other kids around town. Receipts were strange little pieces of paper that we kept in our pockets after having forged details. We could always deny knowledge of the whereabouts of the person who had issued that receipt.

As a boy, I had a particular fascination for Aircraft and I would invariably find myself at the Fairbairn/ Canberra Airport, wanting to look at the Airliners coming in or taking off, or having a good look at the Tiger Moths and Chipmunks parked there, on one visit to the Airport, we had spotted a captured Japanese Betty Bomber, complete with its military markings and paintwork. It was parked at the R.A.A.F. Airbase and we could almost touch it, my curiosity was driving me in to such a state, that I just had to have a good look at it. One day we all decided to have a close-up look at that plane and agreed to cross the airfield from the Airport side, to the R.A.A.F. Airbase side, by the direct route of crossing the runways. After watching the skies to make sure there were no aircraft in sight, we began to run toward the Airbase side and in particular toward the 'Betty' Bomber that was parked at the northern side of the base.

We hadn't gone halfway when suddenly a striped painted black and yellow W.W.2 jeep appeared, it had a sign attached to its rear with the words 'Follow Me', painted on it. The driver leaned out of the jeep and ordered us into the back of the jeep and to get in quickly. We piled in and as he drove off at a fast rate, thankfully toward the R.A.A.F. base, he wanted to know what we thought we were doing? I had explained about the Jap bomber and he said he would take us to it and then take us back to the civil Airport. He also warned us that we were lucky that the Police weren't called as we were trespassing on military property.

We had spent a good 30 minutes climbing through that aircraft and I enjoyed the whole experience so much that I wanted to take this plane home. I had imagined myself flying it without too much fuss and as I sat in the cockpit, my imagination engulfed me. I was now flying on a mission to a secret jungle landing strip and was keeping an eye on my instruments and then glancing out of the window searching the sky for enemy planes. Because the Aircraft was angled back onto its tail wheel, the nose was aiming at the sky at about 10 feet from the ground, but I imagined that I was actually at 10,000 ft, and still climbing through the clouds, I didn't want the experience to end, not ever. For my mates the experience was only so-so, for me it was the real thing. All too soon, the airman returned and ferried us back to the Airport side. I have never forgotten that experience.

One thing that was now starting to pre-occupy our thoughts, was the lure of the Machine, Tractor, Car or Truck, we began to pay particular attention as to how they were started and stopped, how to select a gear and how to drive them around the paddocks, in the case of the Tractors, or around Westlake in the case of my dad's Pontiac Straight Eight. The Tractors were mainly "Fordson" Tractors and "Chamberlain" Tractors. One afternoon in 1956, Peter Strudwicke had shown me how to start these machines and stop them again. These machines were used by the sand and river gravel mining companies and were always parked well away from the public view, by the 'sandwash', a bend in the river, or further down river towards Corkhill's Dairy. The long and dusty track distances to the 'sandwash' would serve as an early warning to us, should a truck make its way towards us, the clouds of dust would be our early warning system, and alert us of the intruder, while we were 'busy' riding the Tractors up and down the track.

When someone was approaching us, we would 'kill' the motor or lower the loading bucket into the sand and stall it deliberately and run for the river and swim across fully clothed, to where our bikes were hidden, then hop on and shoot through as fast as we could peddle, always in the opposite direction from Snatch-Holla and usually towards the A.N.U or Acton, up past Kaye's Dairy and the Racecourse, we were never caught. But we were very lucky because those big uncovered rear tractor tires could have easily caught clothing and dragged us down, even when the gang was standing next to my seat, they would touch the tyre ribs and pull their hands back quickly.

Freddie, and I had on a few occasions driven vehicles around Westlake, he, would drive his father's Diamond 'T' ute or in one case, a 1927 'Whippet', and I had taken my old mans, 1938 Pontiac Chieftain 'straight 8', for a burn around the street. Once I had about 4 others standing on the running boards of the 'Ponty', while I drove up and down the street in one gear, luckily for me, my father was too drunk to know about it. I still don't

know how the others on the running boards, hadn't fallen off on to the roadside, after I had panicked and swerved to miss a dog barking at us, on the road. But a bigger fright was yet to come! I was sure that god must have been smiling down on me.

One clear and frosty night, while my father was visiting Rays family at Acton, I had 'borrowed' my father's panel van and drove around Acton and onto the golf course, without any lights switched on so as not to be seen. It must have been gods will again, because I was showing off in the vehicle, and doing broadsides, doughnuts etc, all on the frosty slippery grass greens of the golf course. Little realising that the inertia of these wild spins and slides was carrying me ever closer to the sudden drop of 2 or 3 feet, straight into the sand bunkers. One slip into that particular deep bunker and I would have rolled the machine over and run the risk of injuring Ray, his sister Gayle and myself, not to mention the damage to the vehicle. I know with certainty that had I wrecked my father's vehicle, my life would not have been worth a sunburnt zac.¹ The full shock and horror of the previous nights exploits came home to me with a devastating realisation, the following morning, as I surveyed the damage and the wheel marks on the putting green, only 5 inches from the edge of that bunker!. The effect of seeing how close we had come to totally destroying everything that night, has to this day never left me. I decide to stay with the bikes for a good while longer after that episode in my life.

Acton was another place that we were starting to hang around, especially the Hospital Fruit Garden and the Acton Racecourse. Behind the Royal Canberra Community Hospital, were the vegetable and fruit gardens, Ray, Freddie, Laurie and I would scale the 6ft high fence and go on a 'shopping spree', grabbing any fruit and vegetables that were easy to snap up and then make off to where we had hidden our billy-carts, usually behind the Acton pine trees. These types of raids usually happened at night and to me it was a bit of a game, because the floodlights had kept the orchards and gardens clearly visible, but lighting also creates shadows and this was reminiscent of those "Prisoner of War", escape films. Ray and Laurie would see the connection of our activities, while Freddie thought that this was childish. No matter what we thought of it all, we came away with some pretty good fruit and vegetables which we would bring home.

The racecourse was also a magnet to us because of a chance visit to it after the days races were over. On that occasion we had found a 5 pound note and two ten shilling notes laying around amongst the torn up betting slips, this find always encouraged us to come over after a race meeting, and to scout around looking for anything that may be lost, particularly cash. During one such visit to the racecourse, we came up to the

¹ Zac = sixpence

'Canteen' stalls and were surprised to find the doors unlocked and the windows fully open. Being a long hut clad in corrugated iron, it was quite hot inside but that didn't stop us from going in deeper and scouting around. Like any good 'Windwalker', that is presented with an opportunity, we took everything with both hands. Soft drinks, Peanuts and Potato Chips, some Ice-cream 'Buckets' and searched for cash that may have fallen to the floor, but nothing else was found and so we took off for the safety of the suspension, drinking and eating as we went. We had kept this new 'shopping centre a secret for a long, long time until one day , someone started to lock everything up and so our source of 'good' food was turned off.

On another one of my memorable trips away from Snatch-Holla, this time on my bike, was to the rifle range at Campbell, it had been snowing most of the previous night and had continued that morning. By lunchtime, it had stopped snowing and Ronnie and I had decided to 'explore' the snow scenes around town. We set off and about an hour and a half later, we found ourselves at the Rifle Range opposite the suburb of Campbell, with the rifle range facing the Southern Side of Mt Ainslie. It must have been snowing heavily in this area because the snow had not melted, was fairly deep, about 9 inches or more, and it was bitterly cold by virtue of the fact that it was in a continuous afternoon shadow on that side of the mountain. Ronnie and I had ridden our bikes through the snow, skidding our wheels in the mud as we went, pretending to be in all-wheel drive. We rode up to the Target mounds, the only exposed and very wet area, and began to pick out copper jacketed .303 bullets out of the wet, clay mound.

These were excellent to use as ammunition for our 'Gats'. Ronnie and I had fired a couple of test shots into some tins nearby and the bullets went straight through the tins with ease, "this' It'll do us" we agreed and stuffed the muddy bullets into our pockets and anywhere else we could stash them. Satisfied that we had found most of them, we rode off for home that afternoon feeling that we had a secret that would make us the talk of Snatch-Holla. We hadn't moved very far when we both started to side slip down the muddy mound and we were heading for at least a couple of broken bones before stopping. I dropped off my bike and started to roll and slide down toward the bottom, Ronnie was already at a stop and was getting up quickly, I arrived almost backwards, up against a concrete 'box', or storage bunker, I didn't know which. But as we looked back up the mound which was about 16 feet high, and it was scary to think that we could have stayed on our bikes and probably slammed ourselves into the concrete 'box'. Both we and our bikes were slightly damaged but generally we were O.K., we didn't hang about too long after that and we pushed off for home, wet, dirty, cold, and with slightly bent handlebars and front forks.

Sometimes, during the school holidays, we would ride to the Yarralumla Brickyards and over to the new Royal Canberra Golf Club course

at Westbourne Woods and check things out, so that we kept ourselves abreast of developments in our region. At other times we would make our way to the Yarralumla rubbish dump and search for anything useful, mainly comics or old radios. Though none of us could understand the meaning of those various valves and bakelite covers with wires going everywhere, there was one thing we did understand, crystal radios, and we thought that if we could make them work then surely we could make something out of these radios or at least something out of nothing. We believed we were smarter than anyone in the district. But, the rubbish dump was located in Yarralumla territory, not far from the Dog Pound, about 200 yards away, all of the local toughs wanted their territory to remain exclusively for the use of Yarralumla-ites, so sometimes, to reinforce their claims, a 'Gat' fight was started at the site of the weir and continue on near Corkhill's Dairy Farm.

Our own dogs always sensed when we were involved in battle with someone, and would bravely run into 'enemy' territory barking and snarling viciously, and chase the attackers back toward the dump and across the river. At one of these 'gat' fights Ronnie, Freddie and I had used our 'bullets', from the rifle range, with devastating effect. Luckily for us, no-one was hit but the sight of these projectiles thudding into tin water troughs and making holes in them and watching the bark flying off the trees, was enough to turn the tide in our favour, we also were amazed at the damage we had actually done, to the now leaking tin water troughs and to some of the trees that were hit. We decided to fire the remaining 'shots' into the water or at floating bottles we'd throw into the river. Or if we weren't involved in a 'gat' fight, we would go up to the nearby Dog Pound and let out all of the poor dogs caged inside, they would run barking, yapping everywhere, some of them would follow us, their 'liberators', and we would have to chase them away by sitching our own dogs onto them. We always felt that we had done the humane thing for these dogs.

Back at our own base, in Snatch-Holla, especially during the warm twilight evenings, my parents would lie surely stroll around the street and meet up with neighbours, as did many other couples, while we would either get involved in bike races or a game of cricket, hopscotch, hide and seek or just sit down in the middle of the warm bitumen road and swap tales with the other boys. Comic swapping house-to-house, would be another ritual that we had engaged in every week. The 'comic currency' was 2 recent comics for 1 brand new one, 3 recent comics for a 'classic' and the others were 1 for 1, I enjoyed the social activities with the locals and to catch up on news or pass on the latest scandal in the settlement. Not forgetting to tell of our own 'wild' adventures for that week.

While listening to the various radio programs that were broadcast at the time, we could still play games outside and listen to the serials from someone else's house. Our favourites were the quiz shows and

2CA's Rumpus time, was popular then listen to the more serious night serials at home, such as Captain Silver and the Seahound, Hop Harrigan and Dragnet or Police Files, the rock'n'roll top 40 was another program that was not to be missed or else you would be out of step with everyone else in the community. I followed all of the radio songs religiously, hoping to hear the hottest and latest tracks played on air.

Because my father used to get up very early to go to work, around 5.30 a.m., he would go to bed very early, around 7.30-8.00 p.m., I, my brothers and my sisters, would stay up till late, and whisper to each other, in the darkened lounge room and stare at the lighted station dial, only a couple of inches from our faces, tuning into, 2CA Canberra, 3UZ in Melbourne and Sydney's 2UE, always hoping to hear the latest new hit songs, the Radio Station dial, gave off a soft lime green hue, which was the only source of illumination in the room, cast a intimate glow around the lounge room and seemed to make us listen more intensely than normal, I don't know why, but it did. I could see my brother and my sisters fall asleep with their chins propped up in their hands. I too, would become hypnotized by the soft greenish glow from the radio, and would keep falling off to sleep, only to wake up with a jolt.

One day in January 1957, the gang had decided to build a canoe, like no other we had constructed before, it was to be a canoe that was professional in appearance and would show off our very considerable construction skills. As luck would have it, we didn't have to build one because there was a beautiful canoe already constructed complete with flotation tanks front and rear as well as having outriggers attached to the canoe. It was laying along the side of the Purtell's house. It was partially hidden by overhanging trees and a shrub that almost totally covered it. Not thinking that Mr Jack Purtell might actually use the canoe, we had decided that it was a shame to let something that useful to us, just lay there and rust. One afternoon Eddie, had gone up to the front door and had asked Mrs Purtell for some 'spare paint' with which to paint his bike. Mrs Purtell gladly took Eddie around to the garage and promptly handed him 3 tins of paint that had rusted lids on them but the contents were still in a liquid state. Eddie thanked Mrs Purtell and walked past the house and had carefully surveyed the position of the canoe and how to get out of there.

A day later, Eddie had called to tell me that no-one was at home at the Purtells and now would a good time to 'lift' the canoe. I agreed and we swung into action and stole it from their yard. Carrying it off along the gully at the backs of the houses and down towards the sandwash area. There we sunk it under the cover of the willow trees and then waited for a few days to 'cool' off. Some days went by and all was silent, no mention of the canoe going missing or any other concern by the Purtells, was detected and we further decided to now paint the canoe with the paints borrowed from

Mrs Purtell. We set about painting an American Indian design on to the canoe. then we waited a few more days, and still no questions, we decided to openly row our 'new canoe' up and down the river, it was a big mistake, Freddie, Ronnie and I were returning from a bicycle 'shopping spree' at the Lennox House Hostel, and had made off with the new 'wheel' down to the river where one of us was waiting with the canoe. We tied the wheel to the front buoyancy tank and pushed off silently and under the cover of the overhanging willows, then, merrily rowing down toward Lennox Crossing Bridge, everything went well so far, and soon the pontoon bridge was in view, after forcing the canoe under the low pontoon bridge, we continued down the river, and in no time at all, we rounded the old tree that was positioned in the middle of the river from a previous flooding, and into the suspension with our 'new' front wheel sitting on top of the bow, when suddenly we caught the sight of two figures, there on the bank was Johnny Kaye with a photographer from the Canberra Times.

They called out to us to come closer and be photographed for the Canberra Times, though we were apprehensive about being identified, we decided to slowly and deliberately sink the canoe so that no-one would recognise the canoe, because most of it would be under water and with that in mind, we rocked the canoe to one side until it was swamped and almost 90% was hidden below the water line, but the buoyancy tanks did their job and the photographer took about 3 or 4 shots of what was left above the water line and then they left. We were very nervous about the publication of these photos and I, for one, believed that we would be recognized and the boat identified. Sure enough, the following Wednesday, there we were across the page of the Canberra Times, in our stolen canoe and with our stolen bike wheel, with about 50% of the canoe visible. I was worried that Mr and Mrs Purtell would recognize us and their canoe, I decided the next day, to admit to them, that I had stolen the canoe. My punishment was to return the canoe and then scrape off the paintwork to restore the canoe to its original state. I worked for hours and hours until finally Mr Purtell said he was satisfied with the work I had done and I was now pardoned for the theft. I too was very relieved because my father was not going to give me a hiding at Mr Purtell's insistence of leniency toward me. That episode was a lesson to me and to my friends, and that lesson was, never pinch anything from your own neighbours!

We were now slowly but surely, growing out of these 'shopping sprees' and were concentrating on earning real and honest money at the golf links, we wanted to earn 'serious' money with which to buy, and actually pay for, the items we needed and so a different approach was adopted. This new strategy was to go down to the 'links' after school and scout through the grass, and the wooded areas, searching the entire golf course for golf balls, then progressively save these up for the week-end which would culminate with a last big search in the river at the suspension, this way we had a good

amount of balls to offer and on Saturday afternoon, could sell them in 'bulk' to the Charlie Cowling pro-shop, for reasonable prices and this provided us with plenty of spending money for the pictures, and for our smokes, thanks to Freddie, - 'Ardath' cork tipped, being the cigarette of choice.

Most of the time we would divide the money with our parents and this would help pay for the daily necessities such as Bread, Milk, Butter, Sugar and sometimes even the Electricity Account, I know that 1pound or 30/- was quite a good sum of money to be bringing home every so often. It would give me a sense of satisfaction and achievement to contribute to the family living costs. I think we all did this on a regular basis. For us, to go into the city shopping centres and actually pay for something we wanted, was a completely new experience for us, but we liked the feeling of it and the pleasure of owning something of value without wondering if someone else might recognise their goods, this was very much a preferred way to do business. We were on the road to being 'Honest Johns', and never looked back from that time. Though the lure of pinching fruit, more for the challenge of it, than for the need, was still a little hard to shake off.

Getting older meant that we could go to the pictures at night and with the Civic and Capitol picture Theatres showing terrific Cowboy films, War films, Musicals, Mysteries and Science Fiction, we had plenty to choose from and we patronised these theatres often, at times we would see the same show up to three or four times. I had seen "Reach for the sky", nine times, the "Dam Busters", "The Cruel Sea", at least six times and the musicals "Oklahoma" and the "King and I", eleven times. We enjoyed some very good films and then go home and play-act what we saw on the screen, especially westerns. Late in the evening, when coming home from the pictures, was always a perfect time to pinch fresh fruit from the American Embassy. Sometimes, when there were girls in our crowd, they would disapprove loudly and deliberately so as to draw attention of embassy staff, to what we were up to, we were disgusted at being dobbed in by our 'own'. Some choice expletives were used to describe their actions at calling out loudly and even naming us. Paradoxically, at other times we would all gather at "Number 8" or at "Sykes Corner" standing under the street lamps and talk and talk while feeding on grapes, apples, peaches or pears. No protest was forthcoming from the girls on those occasions even though my sisters would disapprove strongly at my behaviour.

The Country and Western hour used to be programmed on 2CA every Sunday morning at 10 O'clock, these predominantly Australian songs were the ones we'd sing over and over again, The Pub With No Beer, being popular then. Simultaneously, the Rock n Roll phenomenon was well established and by 1958, the girls of Snatch-Holla seemed to be pre-occupied with pop songs and the good-looking male pop artists, us blokes had no chance to be that important to the girls, not that we wanted to be, but nevertheless, something was different whenever the girls were around us.

We weren't Elvis's or Ricky Nelson's nor Tab Hunter's or Johnny Horton's, yet I couldn't quite put my finger on the reason but something definitely was different about the way the girls were being friendly towards us. Anyway the girls were always too scared to go on one of our adventures down by the river, and besides, they would only get in the way of our mateship with each other, to us, they were next to useless. I think.

Still I couldn't deny that they were nice and that my feelings were starting to be affected toward them. I didn't know it then and nor did the gang, that we were growing up and we were actually starting to make allowances for the 'softer' viewpoints they had expressed and I know that I could be sensitive and I was 'hurt' by remarks made by some of the girls about my funny sounding wog name, there were exceptions though, Daphne, Francis and Maria, were always very kind and polite, but all in all, to me girls were an enigma.. Having crushes on the Female Film Stars were the only love of my life and that of my mates, we would fantasise about them all day and would think no more of it. But now we wondered if that was the way to go? Is this the way it's done? We never found out about it in Westlake.

The many adventures that the gang and I had enjoyed and indeed, survived, were so numerous and each adventure had its own special event worth talking about around the campfires that we would light 'up the hill'. In the evenings, we would cart up the hill, the makings for a campfire feed and gather sticks and grass, water, then wait till it really got dark, then light the fire. Sitting around the fire, cooking our spuds in the ashes and making a billy of tea, toasting the bread on forked twigs, we would discuss things that only boys around a campfire would discuss. After a couple of hours or so, after we had talked ourselves out, and after the smell of smoke had saturated our clothes and burnt our tired eyes, we'd head off for home, satisfied that another full day had gone by and we hadn't missed a moment of it. I would sometimes have to sneak in to the house and quickly wash myself to get rid of the smell of smoked clothes and charcoal off my teeth and hands. Sometimes I would have to start my Homework before I went off to bed. As usual, the morning came around way too soon, I was sure that it was 5.00a.m. and that my father had just left for work! But it wasn't so, and so I would cram in the answers at the breakfast table and then rush off to school, or to catch the bus, if it was raining. With a rushed and poorly thought out attempt at completing my homework.

The beginning of the decline in Westlake had started way back in 1956, but like the rest of the gang, we hadn't really noticed until it was one of the gang that was leaving. It was the start of the forced 'relocation' away from Snatch-Holla to other suburbs in Canberra, Peter had already moved to Ainslie, Eddie had moved to O'Connor, and in 1957, Laurie moved to Braddon, then by 1958, Ray had moved to Acton, the exodus was underway and one by one the houses were removed by long semi-trailers

and taken to locations all over N.S.W., and the resulting gaps in the rows of houses was very sad to see and was reminiscent of a neglected country mining settlement that had outlived it's usefulness. In a way it had, but it was very sad to watch it happening. No new families were arriving into these empty homes, only 'Sykes' corner, was still continuously receiving new arrivals. Snatch- Holla. was passing through Canberra's history, and I felt that I too, was also growing up and growing away from Westlake.

By 1959, I was spending more time away from Westlake and travelling by bike, to Braddon, Ainslie, Acton and O'Connor, as much to get out of the dilapidated housing settlement, as to visit the gang. The only other way to meet up, was to go to the pictures, and so we would arrange days in advance as to where to meet. They were understandably reluctant to come back to the now run-down Snatch-Holla to see me or Freddie. I was now growing a little impatient to move and to be relocated to the north side of town, my parents having indicated that they would like to return to the Ainslie, Turner area, because that is the side of town that we first lived in for almost 3 years, and also because most of their friends and my old gang were now living. Finally, after what seemed like 100 years, in January 1961, we were relocated to Ainslie and left Snatch-Holla leaving only Freddie and Ronnie still living there for another year or so, before they too were finally relocated to the Causeway.

We still continued our friendship, but by now we were making new friends and new goals were being set. Our fate was to meet over and over again and as time passes by, the importance of our meetings was increasingly more and more relevant to the memory of Westlake, because as we grew older, day to day routines were taking over our lives. We had not forgotten that some of the best years were enjoyed here and that we had it all, simple lifestyle, freedom, and money, lot's of it, more than we have at our disposal today. When the stories of our exploits are recounted, our own wives and children found it hard to believe that we could live such a wonderful and exciting life. But then, I suppose we always thought that we would live forever and never grow old.

Over the years, we would meet at each other's homes and after catching up on the latest scandals, the conversation would eventually turn to our past, to the river, the golf links, the canoes, the rope swings and the 'shopping trips', the quarry pit, and how we lived through it all and managed to survive the dangers, Ray, Freddie, Ronnie and Laurie and I, meet up with each other and with many other 'forgotten' faces from Westlake, and compare our lifestyles now with that of those days in the 50's. Westlake has been removed physically, but the spirit that hovers over the hills and down into the hollow, will always remain. There is very little evidence of the Westlake that was, at the now landscaped site of what is now officially known as Stirling Park. Sykes's corner and a part of the bitumen road are

still the only visible signs of habitation, now being surrounded by the many Embassies, and all within the borders of the old Snatch-Holla, Westlake, The Gap, by whatever name it was known to others. This is still very, very, desirable property. I have to go on and look forward to the future, but I shall always remain grateful that I had at least the chance to be myself, to be a kid growing up in the biggest backyard I could ever want. I still get a kick out of visiting 'Snatch-Holla' every now and then. I believe that this is a story worth telling to my children because it is all true. If my parents ever knew of my exploits, my life wouldn't be worth a flattened black jelly bean.

I dedicate this article to The Windwalkers of Westlake.

VLADIMIR BONDARENKO

NOVEMBER 1997.