

FRIENDS OF THE MCKAY MEMORIAL GARDENS NEWSLETTER

January

2011

Garden News

Rail Link Authority to impact Gardens

The Friends have recently been contacted by the *Regional Rail Link Authority*. As some of you may know the Authority plans to separate the two rail crossings along Anderson Rd, on either side of the Gardens, from road traffic. They also plan to “replace” the historic footbridge leading to the Gardens over the rail line. Although the planning for these actions is still ongoing it will be very important for us to participate in the process, because both actions have the potential to seriously impact on the Gardens.

The footbridge certainly needs work and if we can have some influence over the design of any replacement it might be to the Gardens' advantage.

The road-rail separation could be trickier. Raising Anderson Rd to produce rail overpasses would be highly detrimental to the Gardens. On the other hand, other alternatives (underpasses, tunneling) might be either neutral or to our advantage. In any case, keeping up with plans for these actions will be an important, and I suspect, large part of our work in the coming

year. We want to hear from anyone who would like to be part of a working party on this issue. Even if you can only offer limited support, any support would be gratefully received. Now is the time to stand up and be counted.

AGM News

There will be no Friends meeting in January. Our next monthly meeting will be February and our AGM will be in March. I encourage people to start thinking about what they might want to put on the agenda for the AGM – please send agenda items for inclusion. We particularly need people to nominate for positions at the AGM.

Citizenship Ceremony in the Gardens

Brimbank Council will be holding a Citizenship Ceremony in the Gardens on Australia Day (26th January). As part of the event there will be a display of historic images of the Gardens (researched by the Friends) and we have prepared a self-guided “Oak Walk” handout, graciously funded by Council, highlighting points of interest in the Gardens. We will need people to sit at a table handing out information. If you are able to help on the day

please contact us at contact@mckaygardens.org

Art Prize winners announced

The Friends of the McKay Gardens Schools Art Prize was awarded on the 17th of October. First Prize in the Senior Photographic Section went to Julie Ung from Marian College. First Prize in the Junior Section went to Seth Buckow from St Bernadette's Primary School. Over fifty entries were submitted from five schools and the art work was displayed for a week in the Sunshine Market Place Shopping Center. The Friends donated \$500 to schools of the winning entrants. The local media also covered the event and the winners were published in the Brimbank Leader. Many thanks to the schools (and art teachers) who participated and congratulations to all the school children who entered.



Junior Art Prize winner Seth Buckow

Oral History Program

The Friends of the H V McKay Memorial Gardens has commenced its oral history program by interviewing Mr Alexander (Lex) Gray, son of the late Harold Gray – Curator of the Gardens between 1939 and 1950. Mr Gray was interviewed at his home in Rowville on 11 Dec 2010 by Dr Russell Smith, researcher and historian, and Melinda Mockridge, a teacher at Sunshine Teaching Unit – both members of the Friends of the Gardens.

Plans are underway to interview others who have recollections of the Gardens including members of the McKay family, council employees, former tennis and bowling club members, members of the church, and others who enjoyed the Gardens.

Audio and video files of the interviews are held by the Friends. People wishing to be interviewed should contact Russell Smith or Melinda Mockridge on 0418 159 066.

Interview with Mr Lex Gray

Mr Gray was born in July 1928 in Kew and was brought up in Forest Hills where his father, Harold Gray, originally had a flower farm. Due to illness, Harold was unable to continue the flower farm and, following advice from his father E W Gray, who was curator of the Kyneton Gardens at the time, he took up a position at Footscray Park in 1936. In 1939, the family moved



Mr Lex Gray, Dec 2010.

to Sunshine and Harold became curator of the McKay Gardens and Lex became an apprentice fitter and turner at the Harvester factory in 1944 at the age of 16. At that time, during the war years, the factory had about 114 apprentices in all trades and 1,700 employees working two shifts.

When he was 19, Lex was selected by Vic McKay, who was in charge of the apprentices, to go to Lord Somers Camp which had an important influence on his life and led to his interest in operatic singing which he undertook part-time while working at the factory.

Lex described the layout of the Gardens, located between the two railway lines on McKay's property, and the curator's house in which he lived with his parents, and two brothers, Donald and Jeffrey. He also described the work his father did as curator of the Gardens and his father's involvement in the Royal Horticultural Society of which he was Chairman of the Chrysanthemum Division. It was at one of the Society's shows in 1950 that he died of a heart attack at the age of 50. The McKay family let Harold's

widow and the boys stay on in the curator's house, rent free until she died in 1974.

In his interview, Lex recalled how his father had played bowls in the Gardens and how the family attended the church where the Rev Frank Sadler was the Minister. The factory workers generally walked through the Gardens and across the railway bridge to work each day, and often went home for lunch or had lunch in the Gardens. In addition to his duties at the Gardens, Harold Gray was a YMCA Officer and was absent from home on occasions attending military camps. During such absences, Lex recalls helping at the Gardens by moving the watering hoses and sprinklers for him. Lex also recalls Charlie Clarke who worked with his father in the Gardens when there were only two workers responsible for maintaining them in the 1940s. The Gardens were well-used and people often walked through them. On one occasion, Harold caught a lady cutting flowers, and asked her not to do so again without asking him first. The Gardens were lit by a single lamp located near the centre, and were generally a safe place to go.



Charlie Clarke and Harold Gray (right), March 1946.