

Fishing for great stories from Fletcher Jones



Anne Skepper Van Bakel back at the scene of the “crime”, where as a little girl, she was caught red-handed trying to fish coins out of the wishing well at the Fletcher Jones Gardens, Warrnambool. These stories are now being collected as part of a social history project.

By Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]
T[/dropcap]hey are words that will send a chill into any child’s heart who is up to a bit of mischief: “Oi, what do you THINK you are DOING?”

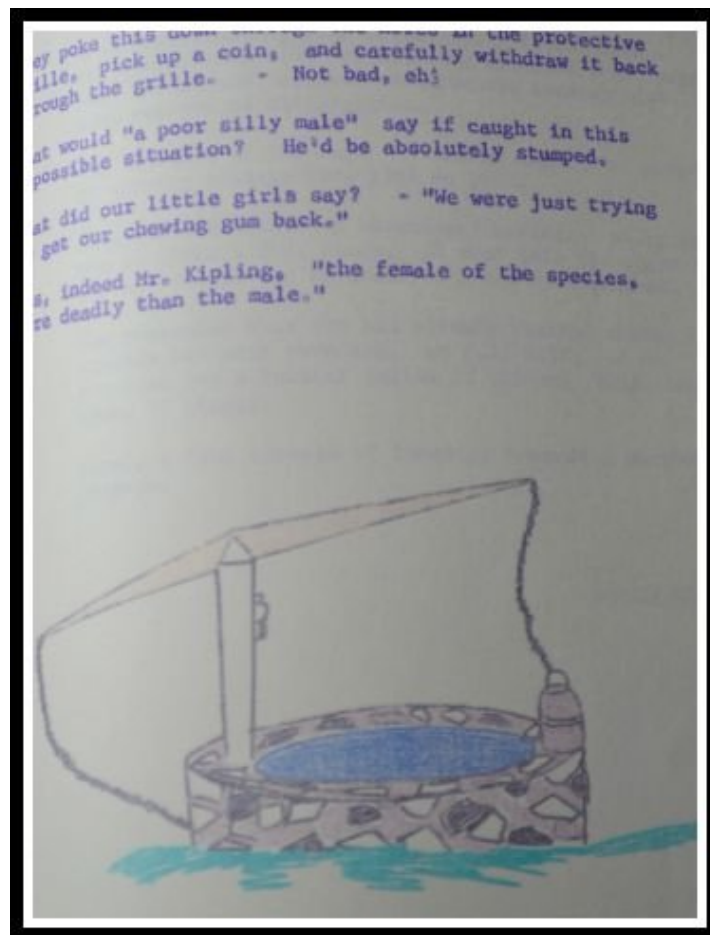
Anne Skepper van Bakel still remembers the sound of the booming voice, and what she was “doing” was leaning into the wishing well in Warrnambool’s Fletcher Jones gardens, helping

her older brother, **Bob Markwell**, as he tried to pull the coins through the protective grid using a sharp stick topped with a lump of chewing gum.

"As if it was ever going to work," Anne says, laughing at the 44-year-old memory of getting caught red-handed by Fletcher Jones worker **Allan Jennings**.

The pair, however, came up with the perfect excuse as to why they were both "fishing" in the wishing well, which is still a feature in the garden's today and is still used to collect money for charity.

"We told him we were trying to get our chewing gum back!" Anne laughs.



The daily dispatches at Fletcher Jones, written by Eric Tonkin, captured all manner of happenings, including the wishing well

“incident” which caused great laughter.

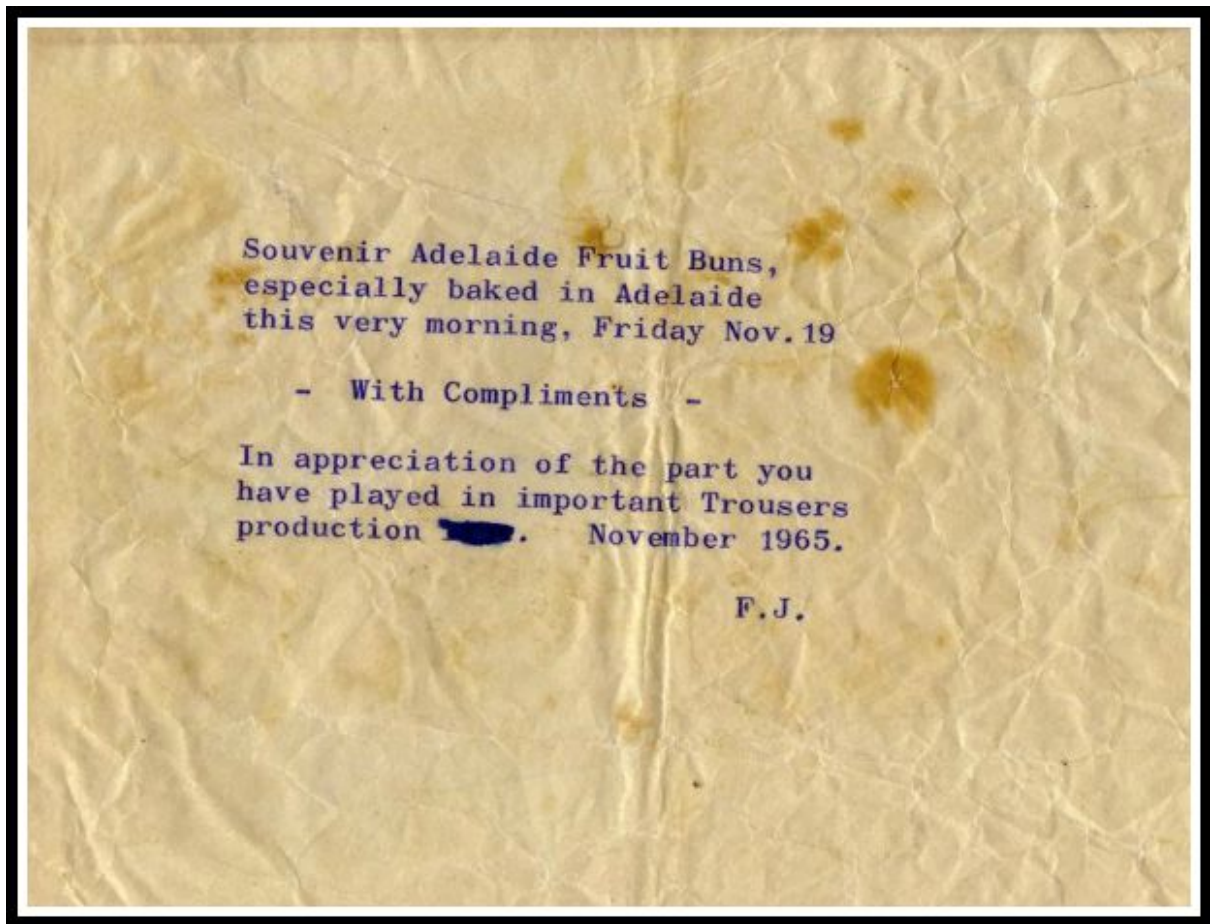
[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]N[/dropcap]either Anne or Bob managed to retrieve either a 20 cent or 10 cent piece which, in 1971, was enough to buy a sizeable bag of lollies and maybe even a pie from the Flaxman St milk bar about 100m down the road.

But their ingenious attempt was enough to warrant the attention of the late **Eric Tonkin** who, as part of his duties at Fletcher Jones, compiled the daily staff newsletter.

In his recording of the event, Eric describes the culprits as two little girls (young Bob had longish hair) and praises them for their quick comeback line.

“What would a poor silly male say if caught in this impossible situation? He would be absolutely stumped!” he writes.

About 400 of these newsletters have been passed on by Eric’s family to the **Fletcher Jones: Stories from our Community** project that will kick off later this month in an effort to collect the best of the many thousands of community stories and memories around the Fletcher Jones factory, Pleasant Hill gardens and silver ball water tower.



Generosity of spirit: Tim Carlton's bun bag, kept from when Sir Fletcher had fruit buns flown in from Adelaide for morning tea. Image courtesy Julie Eagles/Tim Carlton.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]P[/dropcap]roject coordinator **Julie Eagles** says it is stories that bring history to life and make a community care about its built heritage.

"The strong community connection to the Fletcher Jones site is what has saved it, in the end, [from demolition by neglect](#)," she says.

"There is something very special and very interesting about this site and it is really a part of people's lives – not only from the past, but today – so it is not just about telling a story, but making those connections."

Anne's wishing well story is just the sort of gem that the storytelling project is hoping to uncover when it holds two

sessions at Archie Graham Centre later this month and early September (see full details below).

Another of Julie's favourite stories is that of Sir Fletcher organising to have freshly baked fruit buns flown from Balfours, in Adelaide, to the Warrnambool factory for a staff morning tea. Thanks to her work with former employee **Tim Carlton**, who is now 95, there is even a surviving bun bag to prove it.

The project has also uncovered the little known fact that Sir Fletcher converted a school bus that sat on a beachfront block at Port Fairy and was made available free to staff and their children for school holidays.

"We are now at the point where we are ready to start gathering these stories, to see what's out there, and then we can look at how those stories will be presented," Julie explains.

Ideas so far include an online archive, a book, and an exhibition, while plans are also afoot to install a 6m photographic panel on the side of the Fletcher Jones factory, showing some aspect of its past.



A short video by the late Alex Wilkins which captures factory life. Video courtesy of [Warrnambool Historical Pictures: Alex Wilkins Collection.](#)

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"]A[/dropcap]ne, who has just recently returned to live in Warrnambool, has a few more tales of her own, and says growing up on nearby Barkly St meant almost daily visits to the Fletcher Jones gardens, which “we thought of as our backyard”.

“There was one time when I thought it would be a good idea to take a goldfish home from the Fletcher’s goldfish pond – I really wanted a goldfish,” she says.

“So I wrapped it up in my jumper and ran all the way home with it, but when I got home, it was dead as a doornail. I was so disappointed!”

One of Anne’s best stories, however, is from the day the silver ball was hoisted into the sky in 1967 – an event that changed the landscape of Warrnambool.

“A worker told me that it was going to be filled with Coca Cola and I thought, ‘wow, I’ve got the scoop here!’ so I didn’t tell a soul.

“I then kept going back to see if I could catch any drips, but there was never any drips and there certainly wasn’t any Coca Cola.”

The stories project has been funded by a grant from the Gwen and Edna Jones Foundation and by the family of the late Sir Fletcher Jones.



The stories of the people – workers, families, visitors and all those who have had a connection to the Fletcher Jones site – are now being collected for a new project. Image: Save the Silver Ball and Fletcher Jones Gardens.

[box]What made Fletcher Jones special or interesting? Did you, or someone you know, work there? Bring along a photo or an object or just come and share stories over morning tea – the best stories will become part of a collection and yours could be one of them! Wed Aug 26 and Wed Sept 16 @ 10am, Archie Graham Centre, Timor St, Warrnambool. Bookings essential: (03) 55594892. To keep up to date with this project, join the [Silver Ball and Fletcher Jones Gardens Facebook page here](#).[/box]

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