THE CITY OF GOSNELLS AND HER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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By early 1978 Perth was geared into History mode. The WA Sesquicentenary celebrations were less than twelve months away and Channel Seven television even featured a daily countdown to the 150th of 1979. The “black duck” 150th logo had been used on WA Government envelopes since late 1977.

Gosnells had attained City status a few months previously in July 1977, the 1880s Liddelow Homestead had been refurbished for community use and the Gosnells Council (administration and elected councillors alike) figured that the area needed an Historical Society of its own.

On 21 March 1978 a notice was placed in the West Australian calling for a public meeting on 22 March. Object: the “formation of an historical group”.

At this meeting Mayor Ray Harris gave an introductory speech emphasising the need for a Historical Society for the City of Gosnells. The suggested Historical Society would be in charge of the envisioned formal museum.

There was already a semi-museum at the Liddelow Homestead, but no formal group to manage it. In short the Homestead was essentially a storage place for items of oxidised agricultural equipment. Miss Elizabeth Willis from the WA Museum (WAM) explained that the Liddelow Homestead could be a recognised museum under the Museums Act.

On 19 Apr 1978 there was a follow-up meeting, which was written up in the minute book as a Meeting of the City of Gosnells Historical Society. Office bearers and Committee members were appointed at this meeting, with the minutes recording, “It was agreed that the primary concern of the Society would be in the documentation of the history of the district, and to conduct any research to this end”.

One member, a Councillor, indicated that in the near future the City would be engaging a professional historian to write the official history of the district, and that the Historical Society “should consider the future of the Wilkinson Homestead which was built in 1912”.

Work proceeded. Most of 1979’s labours were public profile events associated with the WA 150th. Council had just purchased the old St Munchin’s Catholic School complex on the Albany Highway and generously offered to refurbish the presbytery for use as a Headquarters by the Society. Collecting was done. Old photographs were copied, and new ones taken of old homesteads and landmarks.

Initially the collecting was ad hoc. Old and unwanted items that were no longer used, but which had been kept in storage by members of a generation habituated by the frugality of the Depression years, tended to be discarded in the general direction of the Museum. Chaff cutters, single-furrow ploughs, crosscut saws, petrol irons,
treadle sewing machines, kerosene tins, pre-metric kitchen scales; they all piled up in multiples. In the early 1980s many landowners lost their riparian pumping rights to the Canning River, and old Lister pumps were suddenly offered in quantity.

But among all that stuff were some genuine treasures that were more than relics, they were 3D illustrations of aspects of the history of the local community. Many of them came with stories that made them much more than obsolete utilitarian objects.

School visits to the Museum collection were arranged, essay competitions run and staff went to training sessions organised by WAM.

As a general rule there was virtually no animosity between the Historical Society and Council. This was essentially because the Society was a product of Council, and was heavily nurtured by it.

Generally any community group contains strong personalities at the top and conflict can sometimes arise. There was only one major ruction within the Society, but it was a big one and occurred in September in 1979. Fortunately some of the major combatants resigned, and things proceeded in relative peace for over thirty years.

The Society became an Incorporated Body in 1983, with a constitution declaring that any material or monies collected by the Society be vested with Council on dissolution. However there seemed to be an informal understanding that material was being collected on behalf of the community at large (which is represented by Council), but managed by the Society. With the expansion of the City’s Heritage Services staffing in the early 2000s this was made less blurry with the formal vesting of all historical material garnered by the Society with the City.

With Council’s commissioning of an official history of the area by Cooper and McDonald in 1985 membership swelled. Material collected by the Society formed the nucleus of the research for the book, and the Cooper and McDonald papers in turn became the initial core for the current Local Studies Collection.

As the Liddelow Homestead was used by art & craft groups the Society sought premises where they could be more autonomous, and be the sole users without disturbing the activities of other folk. For by now members were fielding complaints from other facility stakeholders regarding the noise from groups of schoolchildren or yet more rusty things on the lawn outside.

Council was approached about refurbishing the 1912 Wilkinson Homestead, now owned by Council, as a museum. This was done and the new Museum opened in April 1988. The official history of the municipality, *The Gosnells Story*, was launched in the same month. Thank goodness for Commonwealth Bicentennial grants.

Members of the Society, mostly retirees, curated the Museum and ran educational programmes, winning the R&I Bank Museum Education Award in 1990. They also ran historical bus tours open to the community and established the Mason-Bird Heritage Trail, which wended along Bickley Brook and into Carmel.

School excursions to the new museum were popular and many hours were spent not only conducting them but preparing up for them and cleaning up afterwards.
Scone making, doing laundry with a washboard and washing dolly and a session in a recreated classroom were all on offer. In the words of long-serving President Margaret Lefevre, “we had fun”.

While members of the Society did receive training at sessions run by WAM there were inevitable old-lady type things that were done. Data recording of items was often brief because “everybody knew”, and photographs of houses identified solely by the occupant’s surname later had to have their locations identified via the use of old electoral rolls. However some problems were also solved in an old-lady type fashion that was both quaint an effective. In the mid-1990s there appeared a new attendee whose numerous proposals all boiled down to the purchase of a personal computer which would be based at his home. Eventually our elderly Treasurer phoned him up and said “We know what you’re about. Back off or I’ll tell your Mum.” We never saw him again. He was in his fifties.

As both aims of the Society, the history book and the Museum, had been met by 1988 membership fell suddenly. New blood tended to offer themselves as volunteers at the Museum or at the Library’s Local History Collection, which began in 1991. This was because while the Society provided much of the labour and initiative the actual infrastructure was provided by Council, who gradually trickled in trained staff. With younger volunteers and people wanting to “do things” gravitating to the Council facilities of the Library and Museum this left the Society effectively as a social club of elderly locals having regular monthly meetings with a guest speaker and a roll call of old locals who had died since the previous meeting.

However it should be noted that this group provided a valuable intelligence network of local contacts. If any old local knowledge were ever needed then staff could be directed to the right person to ask, even if they’d left the area decades before. Sometimes the grapevine would contact Gosnells expats, the phone would ring at the museum or library and previously unfindable facts would be forthcoming, sometimes to be followed up with donations of photographs or artefacts.

By the mid-1990s the Society’s President was working in the Local History Collection in a paid capacity (4 hours per week, indexing the Rates books). Shortly afterwards the Local History Librarian was asked to be Secretary for the Society as there were no takers for the position within the Society itself. By this time less than twenty people were attending meetings. The meetings themselves were conducted in the local Senior Citizen’s Centre in a room provided free of charge by Council. This avoided an insurance issue faced by some other societies, whereby the attendance of aged persons attracted a higher premium to be paid by the venue owner.

This marks the point where there was a discernible difference between a council giving a society the means to thrive and putting it on life support. The fact that the major office bearers in the Society were both Council employees also reduced the Society’s potential effectiveness. A municipal employee’s Code of Conduct forbids any form of lobbying that overlaps with their position within Council. The President and Secretary were accordingly prevented from making representations from the
Society to the Heritage Council, Government, Members of Parliament or developers on any heritage matter at all.

By 2011 there were only 14 members of the Society, with an average age of some 84 years. This included a Secretary who was a mere hatchling at 48, thereby bringing down the average. The primary former functions of the Society had by now been taken over by Council and all but several members were by now incapable of volunteering at the Museum. The decision to disband was unanimous, and proposed by one of the longest-term members.

A number of people expressed dismay at the disbanding of the Society. They all had one thing in common; they had never been members or active supporters of the Society. The moral we should draw is that an Historical Society is not an end in itself, but a means to an end.

Of the 14 members at the time of dissolution in May 2011 at least half have since died, with one unaccounted for (he’d be in his late nineties if still alive) and one in a dementia ward. One of the survivors is aged 100.

The list of contacts amassed from members of the society has expanded and is still being utilised by Council’s Heritage Services wing. Useful information continues to be found in the Society’s minute books, the 1,600-odd photographs taken or collected by the Society still forms the core of the City of Gosnells’ historic photograph collection and the many donated items of realia now stock our Museum.

The school visits to the Museum initiated by the Society continue, and are conducted by staff and volunteers. Some of the children who went through in the earlier tears eventually had children of their own visiting, with a third generation soon to go through.