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TTUV News

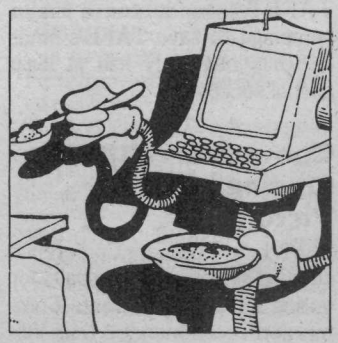
The Secondary Teacher

This is the second time *The Secondary Teacher* has combined with the *TTUV News* to make a joint two-unions issue of our monthly magazines. On another occasion, too, both magazines joined with the VTU to produce the still-popular *Who owns the curriculum?* And last month the VSTA, the TTUV and the NSW Teachers Federation got together with *The Australian Teacher*.

I hope that these joint issues are the pattern for the future. Joint publications have figured in both VSTA and TTUV policies for some time, and currently a Joint Management Committee is meeting to draw up proposals for a combined Publications Unit. From an editorial point of view, we can only gain from pooling our writing resources.

Any fears we had that writers from one division would be uninteresting or even incomprehensible to readers from another seem to be groundless. In fact, state and divisional differences mattered little even in putting together *The Australian Teacher*. They seem not to matter at all in compiling an edition such as this one.

Bill Hannan



Teachers have been sold out all along the line

Recollections of school and struggle in the sixties and seventies

Betty Erickson retired as Deputy Principal of Coburg High School at the end of 1977. She has taught on and off since the forties and was a VSTA activist throughout the action years of the 60's and 70's.
Her recollections of this era are taken from an interview with VSTA Assistant Secretary, *Jim Grant*.

In 1946 I married after teaching mainly in the country and was obliged to retire as this was a condition of employment at the time.

Conditions were pretty bad: classes were very large, control of entry had not been implemented. Staff were very strange indeed, but there was no concerted action of any kind. Teachers used to complain and grizzle a bit, but nothing ever came about. The climate of a school depended entirely on the nature and the attitudes of the headmaster. At Eltham we had a kindly, good headmaster whom the teachers liked and respected and, in a way, this wasn't good, because the personality of a kindly head merely obscured the areas which needed to be rectified. He did try to help teachers who survived as best they could. There was no corporate support. In retrospect it must have been exceedingly difficult for teachers, especially young ones. The inspectorial system was blooming and we had all these remarkably formal visits from inspectors who didn't help anybody very much.

Heavy loads, large classes

I returned to Heidelberg in 1959. It was a big school. The teaching loads were heavy and the size of classes quite alarming. There again the influence of the principal had a palliative effect, because he was a very kind, agreeable, sympathetic man. He didn't do anything to improve conditions because he was an elderly man and I don't think it ever entered his head that conditions could be altered. We had some very strict inspections in those days — some of them quite unreasonable and some of them aimed really at making teachers very unhappy and uncertain. I do not remember any VSTA activity at all. There certainly wasn't a branch.

In 1962-63 I was at Banyule which was a much smaller school and conditions in relation to class sizes were better. There was no VSTA activity. I returned to Heidelberg in '64, took promotion to Heidelberg Girls' School (now called Waterdale High School) and remained there till '67.

First VSTA Branch — animosity

In 1966 we formed a branch at Heidelberg Girls', and as far as I can recollect this is the first branch to which I belonged. The percentage of teachers joining the VSTA was lamentable — I'd say 10% on that staff. Five or six of us would go to statewide meetings. We were not impeded by the principal — a pleasant lady who simply had us sign papers and away we went. That was my first encounter with the divisiveness that arose on a school staff, where one had a number of friends. Our activities in going to these meetings aroused tremendous animosity — which was a little bit off-putting. We began to quarrel fairly constantly with people who had been our friends and, in a way, this was a sort of indirect and perhaps unexpected deterrent to the aspirations of the VSTA. A number of people who were apathetic — they could have gone either way — feared the prospect of the debates and recriminations with which the air was rent.

It was regarded by many that withdrawal of one's labour was something unprofessional and disreputable. This seemed very strange to me as this had been the right of people under authority for centuries. They seemed unable to look at this in its historical context. It was regarded as horrifying that teachers could leave a classroom. You know the arguments — the neglect of children, subjection to physical, moral and spiritual danger. All these things were brought up in the staffroom.

The opposition was not confined to the older women, although they really were virulent, but young teachers were also indisposed to enter the stall.

They were frightened because schools had been so quiet and teachers had been . . . well, so damned hard-working — that they really had never had time to do much about anything. The younger women were a bit intimidated. A lot of old bogies were resurrected about how you could be sacked and how you could be brought in to the Department and so on and so forth — a lot of rubbish, really. Young teachers of course are sometimes extraordinarily naive, and when they were told of these hypotheti-

PHOTO: PONCH HAWKES

cal horrors that lay in wait for them, they were naturally enough a bit indisposed to enter the fray, and we found ourselves a fairly embattled little group, which wasn't very nice because in a girls' school the women are usually fairly homogeneous and friendly. All of this took a toll: who wants to go to school each day and enter into these fearsome discussions with people to whom one is really in many ways quite attached? I think this was widespread — this feeling on the part of the VSTA people — that they were getting to be a bit of a disreputable race apart.

In many cases these people were not radicals, they didn't have a deep commitment to unionism. On the whole they were not aligned to the Labor Party at all. They were people who felt in a very proper way that the conditions in the school were just not good enough. I think their activities were almost apolitical. In a way you might say that their activities were highly professional in that they felt that the conditions in the school should be improved.

Writing reports in the train

In a school like Heidelberg High, with about 900 students, conditions were extraordinary. I had a very big form. I lived at Thomastown in an abandoned residence attached to the Primary school (the headmaster had found superior lodgings) and this was an old condemned house. But it wasn't too bad, it was waterproof, and all that sort of thing. We used to have some very good parties there — it was a very big old house. I travelled from Thomastown to Bell station by train. It was such a tight squeeze — we had term exams, they were very big classes, we were given two weeks from the commencement of exams to breakup date. At one stage I think I taught say, six or seven classes — all this correction had to be done, an enormous amount of recording, and the report books to be written.

'Teachers used to complain and grizzle a bit but nothing ever came about.'

I had one class of about 40. I was running so close to the deadline that I had to write the report books in the train — as I was travelling from Thomastown to Bell station I was writing reports. I knew the children well, and all that sort of thing — I was writing reports with tremendous speed and some ladies were sitting opposite me in the train who said: 'Just look at that woman — scratching off those reports with never a thought in her head — is that the way children are treated?'

At another time I had to write all my reports on a doctor's waiting room because I'd got some damned complaint — hives or something — and I had to go every day to the doctor. I was so close to the deadline that I had to take all the report books with me and write them out in the doctor's surgery.

I did correction every night except Friday. I was pretty short of money, salaries weren't so good then. I had to coach all the weekend to pay the rent, and I was diligent — not so much through fear of any repercussions — but because I was attached to the kids. I was very hard-pressed when I lived at Thomastown because I had a lot of travelling to do and three small boys in the house, and very large classes. I taught a Form 5 which did an external exam and the students were from the Housing Commission area — really their future depended on whether or not they could get through these exams.

I very seldom went to bed before two o'clock in the morning (it was lucky for me that I didn't require a great deal of sleep).

When correcting clear thinking, I used to have to bend the brain a little bit, not being by nature too bright — and when I would be washing up the dishes I'd have a clear thinking piece pasted on the wall above the sink, and to this I would devote my attention while scraping away at the dishes. And then again, of course, you worked in the train, you corrected essays on the bus, you found little spots in the school where people wouldn't be looking for you and you corrected as well as you could.

Teachers have been sold out all along the line . . . continued

You took a lot of extras. You might at one stage take four or five a week. And there was a little bit of a racket attached to that, although I feel that I am speaking with some degree of audacity. The senior master at Heidelberg High gave out the extras, and in the Science Faculty there was a group of very strong-minded and, no doubt, very competent men who would not take extras; they said their work was consumed by the arrangement of experiments and things. So the women got practically all the extras at Heidelberg — and then, of course, we got 75% of the men's salary.

If you could maintain discipline (which is a relative thing anyway) you automatically got some very unmanageable classes. So your life on the whole was made up of all these negative matters, that it was no doubt that when we had occasion we took our pleasures very violently. We used to have staff parties that were very funny indeed.

Waiting in deputation

Sometimes if we felt very hard-pressed, we waited in deputation upon the headmaster. I remember waiting in deputation because I had an English Form 6 of 48 and I felt that my powers were not sufficiently great to pilot 48 of them through the exam. So we waited on the headmaster who assured me that he had, during the war, taught a class of 72 at Form 6, so therefore why did I feel that I should complain?

We did make a bit of a move on the staff when there was something impossible going on, and usually (although the occasions were rare) we swayed the situation in our favour. For two terms this group of 48 was broken down and then in the third term the person who was helping me went on leave so I had the 48 for third term.

It was sad in the Commission schools

In the schools in which I taught, which were nearly all Commission schools, the parents had such grave problems in relation to hard physical work and large families and poverty, that they took no interest in the matter at all. It was rather sad in the Commission schools — I think that's probably because the children were so completely dependent upon us. For example in sixth year for the first time at Heidelberg we said the students should have a swot vac, I think they were given 10 days. Then we discovered that a number of the poor parents, not knowing what on earth was going on, had sent these Form 6 students to work on the assumption that they weren't working at school so they had to go and sell papers and that sort of thing — it was sad, really. We did assemble as many parents as we could get hold of because we had to explain to them why the students were at home for 10 days, and a great many students sought permission to come and study at the school and rooms were made available for them because they couldn't study at home — there were babies, and little children — their conditions were very bad.

Berated by the butcher

On strike days it was a bit 'hairy' as they say. At Heidelberg Girls' school, 1966-67, we supported the VSTA stoppage. I live in Heidelberg and I know a lot of Heidelberg people including all the tradespeople. When I would appear in the street, maybe half past three, or much earlier than I was normally to be seen, I would meet a great deal of criticism, especially from the butcher.

When I would go in to get my rather meagre allowance of meat — the butcher, who would know from the papers of course, that there was a strike — would upbraid me and accuse me of great lack of professional dignity and indeed would get so excited that on strike days I used to declare it a meatless day. There was a lot of public animosity, and this was fuelled by the newspapers.

'I had to coach all weekend to pay the rent, and I was diligent . . . because I was attached to the kids.'

Press misrepresentation

In the sixties we were grossly misrepresented in the papers: headings were always negative, and the letters in the papers were almost universally condemnatory. These attitudes were very discouraging; they undermined people's confidence. I would think that the Executive of the VSTA in the '60s had a really uphill battle to keep the situation moving.

It had a delaying effect upon the expansion of the VSTA, because teachers were really intimidated in many almost intangible fashions. They weren't precisely intimidated by fear of retribution from the Department, because that was rightly regarded as a fairly empty threat — but they were really intimidated by the general atmosphere of hostility and adverse criticism.

This was a dichotomy that nobody gave a damn about. If you went on strike you were a renegade professional. If you didn't go on strike you were just really a sort of a second-class citizen anyway; fairly poorly paid, not highly regarded (although really I suppose being highly regarded is just a matter of relativity). The loss of personal reputation in one's local community, the fact that there were such divisions in the staff of a school, the very adverse attitude of the newspapers (I don't remember much about television and radio because I never really had time to worry about those very much) — in the '60s these were very serious handicaps, and I would say that they deterred quite a number of people from joining the VSTA which they probably would have done really for their own survival, for the sake of their skins, if there had been a more rational climate.

I've never thought that the improvements effected by the VSTA weighed very much with the parents, though I'm speaking from a very limited background, from just the few schools in which I taught. I thought, though, that the teachers began to appreciate the very concrete improvements brought about by the VSTA. But somehow I never thought that the parents grew very involved. It could have been that the parents in the Commission schools didn't have the opportunity.

1968-74 — intense VSTA activity

I transferred in 1968 to a school with a very young staff. I was so much older than everybody else at the school that I was regarded as quite ancient.

Conditions were not nearly as bad as they had been at Heidelberg on account of the growing influence of the VSTA. VSTA class sizes weren't entirely implemented, but we never had classes of 58 as I had taken previously.

The allotments were another issue altogether. At first we had a headmaster who adopted fairly reasonable attitudes in that he didn't threaten the staff or take any action other than insisting that a sheet be signed in his office. But he didn't remonstrate with the teachers — although the fact that the young teachers had to enter his office to sign this sheet of paper was rather frightening to them — but there were enough of us on the staff to cheer them up, and we had a very effective VSTA indeed and actually it was needed. Most of the action was statewide and we didn't suffer any grave impediments.

PHOTO: PONCH HAWKES

But in 1974 the headmaster, who had been a very experienced and quite a well respected man, left the school and then we had a stand-in headmaster and a stand-in senior master . . . the whole year was spent in a series of guerilla campaigns in which, towards the end of the year, the staff *did* prevail to a very marked degree, but really because it was almost unanimous in its efforts to improve conditions. We quarrelled violently about allotments, there was no attempt to arrive at any general opinion; we were subjected to a quite regressive attitude on the part of these two caretaker people, in that orders were given to us of such a curious and antique nature that we felt we had almost stepped back into the nineteenth century. It was a rather violent year but we tried to safeguard the children as much as we could, because the children came from violent backgrounds and we didn't want them to feel involved in too many altercations in the school. We struck in the purely local manner. No other school was involved because it was a grave problem in this particular school which we had to solve ourselves. We did report our activities to the VSTA, and indeed we were well supported by them. We tried to interest the acting Principal and the acting Senior Master in negotiation with the VSTA officials who came to visit us but it was a campaign that we had to conduct ourselves.

'It was regarded by many that withdrawal of one's labour was something unprofessional and disreputable.'

We felt that we were in the midst of an enormous drama, as I suppose we were, because negotiations were so completely impossible with the headmaster. We felt that we would have to take him by surprise on a great many occasions to lower his confidence. However, our branch president was a lay minister, and he found in the testaments a great many affirmative and stirring calls to action and these he would type out. I feel my information on biblical matters is very meagre — shall we just invent one and say, 'The Lord said to Abraham, go out and mind the flock' or something like that: this piece of paper would be sent around and then we would know from this affirmative and religious proclamation that we were about to leave the school. We would excuse ourselves from our classes, making no comment to them at all, saying 'Well, I'm sorry now I'll have to leave you'. We didn't set work or anything like that. When this activity first occurred, the children were so stupefied they couldn't understand where we were going — I think they thought a mass epidemic had hit the school — and then we would enter our cars, about 30 cars or so, and drive very slowly and solemnly about a mile to a church hall which had been made available to us and we would not communicate with the principal at all because there was never any point in communicating with the principal, so we would all just leave the school, like so many nomads and repair to this church hall, and then the principal of course found himself in a very severe dilemma because he didn't know where we had all gone. I think with a school of about 550 children only about three teachers would remain. We would gather up there — not without some degree of hilarity — but we would conduct a formal meeting and we would make resolutions and try formally to couch our grievances and present them to the acting principal.

Now in the meantime the Principal of course found himself in a situation of severe anxiety I presume, and so after it became apparent to him that the school was not able to operate, he would send the children home. And then we would know that this was happening because some of our members would be cruising in the vicinity of the school so after the children had gone home we would report

back for duty. The headmaster was at first inclined to order us out of the school and things of that nature, but our behaviour was decorous. We would present to him the formal motions that had been passed at this meeting and seek to negotiate with him and try to explain our grievances. This of course came absolutely to nothing but we went through the formality. Then we would sit in our staffrooms and correct work and prepare lessons and things of that nature, and — all of this, I might say, made a most inflammatory situation. We were reported on all occasions to the Education Department. I recollect that we got some minor messages from the Department, somewhat threatening in tone; we didn't reply to them, didn't take any notice of them. Our salaries were docked but we always made a point — there was no time-book then of course (that had been done away with) — of entering in our minutes the exact time at which we returned to the school prepared to teach.

On other occasions when we would depart, to vary the procedures a little the headmaster would assume that we would be coming back about 11 so he would keep the children and then we would not come back at all. So eventually the children had to be sent home. You can imagine that he grew very stressed. Eventually the children welcomed our activities from purely self-interested motives since they had days off and that sort of thing, and would cheer us wildly as we left the building.

Inpectors are only boys

Inspection was always a problem. I remember one day when two boys — I suppose men in their early 40s — came to inspect. I had taught them years ago in Wangaratta and they were very pleased to see me. I had an office at that time, very close to the main office. They weren't venturing on a general inspection; they were in the Principal's office with the door open. The headmaster disliked me very much and always refused to allow me to know anything about anything, but I had occasion to come out of my office door and as he had omitted to close his door, I saw these two men — whom I was quite pleased to see because I knew them very well. I thought that I should put my official duties ahead of my natural inclinations — so I went to the door of the office which the headmaster sought to close but by that time it was too late, and I said to these two ex-students of mine, 'What are you boys doing here?' They were very uneasy indeed? I had an idea that they had come out to inspect a particular teacher, so I said to them 'What are you boys doing here?' I said 'You wouldn't be contemplating any inspections?' At this interesting stage of the conversation the headmaster bundled me out of the office and closed the door very firmly, and there was no inspection of any kind as they left shortly after.

But by the end of the year, I'm happy to say, a lot of our demands were met: our allotment was tidied up considerably. We were a very united staff that year and, indeed, quite a sort of a folklore has arisen among us about our activities in that particular year.

Yes, well then, after I left there I had two very very disagreeable terms at one of the most repressive schools that could ever be imagined in this day and age. I was on long service leave for the first term of 1975, I appeared there for Terms 2 and 3, and the situation was so extraordinary that although I was getting old then, and I had suffered a very very grave family bereavement, I could not refrain from taking quite violent action which didn't avail me very much — it brought upon me the usual load of animosity but by that stage of the game I had decided to retire because I felt that I was turning 60 and I couldn't possibly stay there any longer. We had the most violent arguments in staff meetings, but the teachers (I regret to say) had been so intimidated by the principal that it was rather difficult to marshall a bit of support. The VSTA tried to intervene, but it's quite astonishing to reflect that in 1975 such a school should exist. It had something to do with the pretensions of the neighbourhood: it was a large and lavish neighbourhood, the school was also large and lavish and fairly ugly; the parents were often more concerned with appearances than with realities, and I just thought this was so interesting as a sort of vestige of former times.

'What are you boys doing here . . . You wouldn't be contemplating any inspections?'

Happily for me I was appointed Deputy Principal at Coburg High School at the end of 1975. I remained there for two very happy years because there was a degree of good fellowship on the staff though we did have our tussles — without the bitter edge of earlier days. I never found my role as Deputy Principal in conflict with my VSTA activity.

I felt that the teachers at Coburg were entitled to a DP, a VSTA member, who was prepared to take action, though I didn't really play a leading role at Coburg because I was extremely busy with the children. I'm very fond of children — children always seem to me to be the most important component of any school — and the Coburg students I was much attached to. I must admit I had another reason too, and that was that it was very difficult for me to find myself in true harmony with principals. I have friends among the principals whom I like and respect very much, but their ways of looking at things were different. The students were very affectionate, mainly migrant students — they got me in a bit. I spent a lot of time with them which I really enjoyed, and I spent as much time as I could with the teachers. There were things to be overcome at Coburg as you know; always there is this sort of secretiveness which places barriers between the top echelons and the staff — I don't think I did extremely well at Coburg; I wasn't altogether satisfied with my activities, but however the two years passed away very rapidly. There were 'spates' of discord but generally speaking we kept it down a bit and when I felt I should go out I went.

But then I got to be age 62 and I examined my finances and found that I could survive in a modest manner to which I am accustomed anyway. So I retired.

On reflection throughout my teaching I never found the Department helpful. I knew some of the inspectors quite well and as individuals they were quite agreeable people. The Department always acted only after the teachers had placed upon it extreme pressure. It seemed to me that if the Department had really negotiated over the last ten years, say '66 to '76, '77 — it could have done so with ease and with very constructive results.

I always felt also very disappointed in the role of the Principals' Association. There I think the teachers have been sold out all along the line, because the Principals had the power game in their hands and could have brought about the most remarkable reforms if they had not been so submissive to the Department. I was often in a bit of trouble but I never found that my career or my general wellbeing were undermined. I just felt that teachers had the impression that nothing would be done unless violent action was taken, and I think this is a very great pity. It has presented the teachers to the public in an unfair fashion. Always the aggression appeared to come from them. Yet that was very necessary because the Department had no desire to negotiate and no desire to improve conditions unless pressure was brough to bear upon them. This is a very curious concept of administration.

I hope VSTA members never turn their back on the last 15 years or so. That would not be a good thing particularly in relation to the many gains made by strike activity.