

A Waterside Worker & His Wife - Bill & Molly Lowrie

The early days

Bill was 22 (a wharf labourer) and Molly was 20 when their first child, Eileen, was born in 1916.

They were both born and raised in Port and South Melbourne and this is where they lived all their lives, except of course when Bill went to war.

Bill was away when Eileen was born, having embarked for the Middle East and Europe in September 1915

He fought in World War I in the 60th battalion in the trenches of France and Belgium where he was awarded a Military Medal and attained the rank of Sergeant – clearly he was a good soldier

Bill was also a good footballer – he played 10 games for St. Kilda in 1914 & another 9 games in 1915 before going away to war. Two of Bill's brothers also played league football.

When Bill sailed away on 10 September 1915, Molly was left at home to have her baby & wonder whether Bill would ever come back to them.

He did come back and went back on the wharves to work and to play a few more games with St. Kilda in 1919 and 1920.

Family life

By the time of the waterfront dispute in 1928, Bill and Molly had seven children under 12 and another one on the way.

My dad, Billy was 8, Eileen was 12, Molly was 6, Johnny was 3, Nancy was 2, Lorna was 18 months, Betty was a small baby and Patsy was “on the way”. Bill and Molly had also lost two of their children as infants. Frankie, Shirley and Margaret came along later as did another child who died as a baby.

Life was very tough for Bill and Molly. Port Melbourne was very different to the Port Melbourne of today. On a wharf labourer's wage & with work unreliable, they could not afford to buy a house. Just finding enough money for food for all of them was difficult. They lived in rented slums (or “confined and blighted housing” as the houses of Port Melbourne were described by the Slum Abolition Board in the 1930s)

Many times, they could not even afford to pay the rent and would do a moonlight flit to another house, taking their beds, the ice chest and the kitchen table they owned with them. They could not afford chairs, so sat on packing cases or tin cans.

Many of the houses had no electricity, relying on gas lights – you put a penny (or a washer) in the meter to keep the lights on or to have gas for cooking. These houses all had 2 bedrooms. Most Port Melbourne people had large families so the houses were extremely overcrowded. The one toilet and wash-house (and copper to wash in) was out the back

When they weren't at school, kids played out in the street from dawn until it was time for bed. There was no room in the house to play. It was rare that the children had shoes and, if they did have, then they wore them and wore them until there was no sole left. You could hand down clothes, but you couldn't hand down the shoes – there was nothing left to hand down.

Bill and Molly and the kids seldom went to bed with a full belly – food was meagre. Often the kids would go over to the Lever & Kitchen's soap factory during the workers' lunchbreak in the hope of getting some food. The workers were very generous to them and they would come back with half a sandwich or some biscuits or fruit they had been given to tide them over until tea time.

Molly worked hard to keep her family safe, to keep them warm, to keep them clothed and fed and to instil in them the values she had grown up with – to stay loyal to your loved ones and your community, to do the right thing by others and to work hard.

Bill was the provider. His wages from working on the wharves were the only thing between them and total destitution. These wages were not enough, but they were all they had. The good life was a long way off for Bill and Molly.

Fighting for a better life

Bill and all the other waterside workers were being used as work horses and being paid a pittance for their hard work in the worst of conditions. Rats crawled over cargo and dust went up their noses and down their throats from God only knows what. In the rain, in the cold and in the extreme heat, they had to lump huge bags of cargo on their backs. The wages they received in return were not enough to even house or feed their families.

Wharf labourers were injured, killed or just worn out and their wives and children wore rags and went to bed hungry. And that was if you got work!

The men on the waterfront never knew how much work they would get from day to day. There was no such thing as permanent work on the wharves. You went down to the beachfront and looked to see if there were any ships coming in.

You worked when the ships came in – that is if you were lucky enough to be “picked up”. The men had to front up to the “pick up” where a ship owner's representative would pick out the men he wanted by pointing at them. “I'll have you, you and you – the rest of you can go home.”

No wonder then that they were union men. Most of these men had been to war. They came home with nothing, except broken bodies and broken minds. They got no thanks and little recognition for what they had been through. Now they were being worked to

death by organisations that had no regard for how hard life was for them and their families. They decided that the only thing to do was to fight for a better life.

These people were ordinary Australian people, decent, hard-working men and women, with the same hopes and aspirations for their children as we have for our children.

In Australia today, we believe that, if we work hard, then we will be able to provide for our families – we will live in decent homes and be able to give our children enough food. We will be able to care for our children's physical needs, their intellectual needs and their spiritual needs. Our children will get a good education and be able to build a good life for themselves and their families.

The difference between then and now is that, for working people in 1928, it didn't matter how hard they worked, they could still not provide for their families. Life was a constant struggle just to survive. There was no hope for a brighter future unless they fought for it.

The values of Bill and Molly

It's funny how as a child, particularly of my generation, no-one tells you anything much, but you still grow up knowing what your parents' and their parents' values are.

I can't remember anyone telling me that we were working class and as such we had to fight to make good lives for ourselves – no-one was going to do it for us. I just knew it. I can't remember anyone telling me that we were a union family who understood that working people were powerless on their own and had to join with other workers to improve our lot at work – I just knew it.

I can't remember the first time my father told me that my grandfather and my friends' grandfathers were shot at by the police in 1928 for defending their right to work or that my father and his brothers and sisters were at school and heard the shots being fired. That he and the other children ran across the sand dunes to see what was going on, worried that their fathers had been killed.

This was a story I could relate to. I wondered what I would have done if I had been that kid running across the sand dunes. I wondered what the police had against Port Melbourne people, against union people. I already knew that Port Melbourne people were union people and were proud to be union, but we weren't bad people. The scabs were the bad people – ready to take the work of our men and let our women and children starve to death. I wondered how they could do that. I wanted to be a union person, not a scab.

I could see how hard my father worked on the wharves, how dirty and exhausted he came home. I could see how hard my mother worked – by now most Port Melbourne women went to work. My mum worked and all my aunties went to work. They were good people with good values. I wondered how anybody would want to hurt people like us.

For a kid growing up in Port Melbourne, the story of the 1928 waterfront dispute was the stuff of heroes and villains and my family and the people in my community, my friends

and neighbours, were right in the middle of it. We were the heroes. The scabs and the police were the villains.

In the 1950s when I was growing up, the wharfies were again fighting to improve their lives. Strikes were commonplace, battles were hard fought and victories were sweet. Our community had rallied again for yet another fight.

Looking Back

The events of 1928 were burnt deep into the psyche of Port Melbourne people. The story of the dispute was told over and over to ongoing generations – it is still being told.

I grew up with this story that my grandfather had been shot at by the police in 1928. However, it wasn't until I was at least into my 30s that I learnt that Bill had also won a Military Medal in World War I.

This was a bigger story to our family. It showed us that, for a time in our history, ordinary, decent Australian working people, had everything against them – even the government and the police – and still they fought on against injustice, just as they did at the Eureka Stockade.

It was a pivotal point. It changed us. We did not win that battle, but we were proud of the way we fought and convinced of the righteousness of our cause - that good, decent, hard-working people deserved a better life. The wharfies, Port Melbourne people and the Lowries went on fighting, determined that they would carve out a good life for their families.

Footnote:

Bill and Molly Lowrie had 14 children, 23 grandchildren and many great and great, great grandchildren.

Bill and Molly's son, Bill, was also a waterside worker and a life member of the MUA. Their grandson Bill was Vice President of the MUA before he retired. Their grandson, Wayne, was an MUA member and Union Delegate working at Patrick's during the 1998 waterfront dispute.

Their granddaughter, Gaye, was State Secretary of the Federated Clerks Union and Executive President of the Australian Services Union.

Gaye's granddaughter, Molly, and her grandson, Cameron William, have heard the story of the 1928 waterfront dispute and know that this makes their great, great grandfather a hero. They do not know that he won a military medal.

My uncle, Frankie (who was born in 1931) told me what life was like for him – he was 7 when Bill died. He describes his childhood as very poor but filled with lots of love

Everyone in Port was in the same boat, so being poor was nothing unusual – that was what life was like for Port Melbourne people. Frank slept on the verandah behind a canvas blind with his brothers. The girls slept 5 to a double bed. The houses were cold and damp and there were no sheets on the beds. Coats were used as blankets to stay warm or, if you were lucky, army blankets

When he was sick as an 11 year old (with rheumatic fever), Molly pushed him in a pram from Port Melbourne to the Children's Hospital in Carlton – she had no money for a bus fare let alone a taxi

He worked as a paper boy and the family relied on the money he made for food – his mother would send one of the kids over to the North Port Station where he was selling papers to get a shilling from him to buy food for tea

His mother told him that if he was invited to someone's house for tea he should go, but not to invite them back to their house. There was not enough food to go around

School uniforms were other people's hand-me-downs. The nun's at school used to send leftover food home for them

Often the gas would go out when they were eating tea and a penny would have to be put in the meter. One time the gas went out when they were eating tea. Molly told the kids to stop eating, but Lorna kept eating and nearly choked on a piece of string from the roast lamb.

Because there were not enough chairs, they had to stand to eat and would take it in turns to sit down. If you were working, you got to sit down, if not you had to find what you could to put your meal on to eat.

On "endowment day", Molly would take the kids down to the beachfront and shout them a pie each – this was a real treat.

He described Molly as a beautiful person who everyone loved. She did not have anything to give her kids but her love and she did that in spades. Molly's life consisted of cooking, cleaning and caring for her children. She went without clothes, she went without food – her kids were her life. Frank says that they didn't have much, but they had each other – that was enough.

When Bill died in 1938 (aged 45), Eileen, the oldest child, was married and had moved out of home, but Molly still had all the other kids at home. Billy was 18, Molly 16, Johnny 13, Nancy 12, Lorna 11, Betty 10, Patsy 9, Frankie 7, Shirley 5 and Margaret 2.