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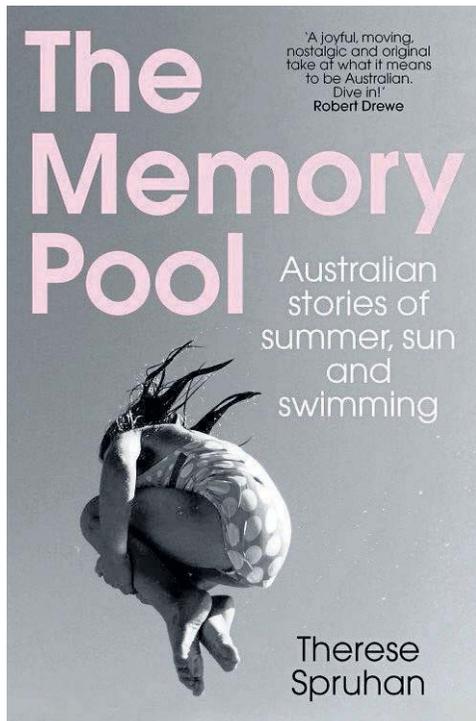
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# Merv's memories of Manuka Pool

There was no swimming pool when Merv Knowles, then five, moved to Canberra in 1928. Three years later, Manuka Pool officially opened and he was one of the first to dive in.



**W**hen we arrived in Canberra from Melbourne in 1928, the only swimming we had was two swimming holes on the Molonglo River, one near the Kingston Powerhouse and one at Acton. Dr Cumpston, who was the director-general of Health and lived near us at Forrest, had the water tested at the Powerhouse and said, 'My kids are not going to swim in that.' So, he and Dad (Sir George Knowles, who in 1932 became head of the Attorney-General's Department) decided to get organised to get a pool. They wanted a 55-yard pool and in the original plans ... but when the Depression got in the way the government wanted to reduce the size. Dr Cumpston, Dad and other public servants involved in the pool campaign got into a bargaining situation with the government but it didn't do them any good. They decided on 33-and-a-third yards - 100 feet in length and 40 feet wide

- and we ended up with six lanes instead of eight. It was officially opened on 26 January 1931, but my sister Jean and brothers George and Lindsay and me, and the Cumpston kids, were allowed in for a swim a couple of weeks before it opened. There was only one dressing shed completed then - the boys' one - so they let the boys in the two families swim in the morning and the girls in the afternoon. At the official opening we all gathered just outside the pool. There was nothing around it, no lawn, no fence, just a paddock, so the pool entrance looked rather grand in that stark environment, like a much smaller version of Parliament House, completed four years earlier. The words 'The Swimming Pool' were inscribed in block letters across the top of the cream-coloured brick building, and on either side of the glass doors were columns like smaller versions of something you'd see in ancient Rome.

I was eight and I remember it as a great day as we finally had somewhere good to swim. Arthur Blakeney, who was Minister for Home Affairs and lived on Mugga Way, not far from us, performed the opening and then we were all allowed to swim. The pool was set up in a way that you went in through the entrance into the boys' or girls' change rooms, and before you entered the pool area you walked through a footbath with a shower over the top. You couldn't come into the pool any other way, so fair enough, we were all washed before we got in. We had all the Causeway kids at the pool and they weren't always bathed. The Causeway was down behind the railway station at Kingston where all the working-men's places were. They worked in the printing office, the Powerhouse and around the Kingston shops and like us their kids all went to Telopea Park School just near the pool. There was only one school then and some of the kids



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from the Causeway used to come to school without shoes.

When the pool opened at the beginning of October each season, there was a tradition to be the first in the water. It involved a lot of push and shove and jostling and when Scotty or Davis, whoever was running the place at the time, flung the doors open, there'd be a rush and we'd race in to see who could hit the water first. I usually got beaten by my big brother, Lindsay, who was faster than me, but I still made it first about four times.

In those early days of Canberra, everyone was looking for something to do outside work and school hours and on weekends. The pool was the social centre where the young people met to swim, sunbake, dive and socialise. There's a book called *That's Where I Met My Wife: A story of the first swimming pool in the national capital at Canberra*, and I think a lot of that happened in those days. It was definitely the place to be in summer and sometimes they'd have to close the doors for a while when they couldn't fit in any more people.

I used to swim in the morning, first thing before we had breakfast, and then sometimes at lunch and then back again in the afternoons after school. There would be 200 kids there after school. We all had lockers so

we could leave our gear there. In the 1930s and 40s there were rules on the types of swimming togs you could wear. Men and boys couldn't go topless - you couldn't just have trunks. I had a set of trunks with a belt and a zipper and I could put the top on with the zipper if I was swimming at Manuka; if I went down the coast to Narooma where we had a house, I zipped off the top.

I always loved swimming - you're weightless, it's relaxing and I enjoyed seeing how fast I could get to the deep end. My brother Lindsay held the record for swimming the length in under 16 seconds. I could never get under 17 seconds. I always swam in lane one or two; they were considered the boys' lanes as they were on the side of the pool where the men's change rooms and sunbaking area were. The two sunbaking areas were totally enclosed and while I didn't spend too much time in them, I'm suffering today because of



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Mervyn (Merv) Knowles pictured in 2017 at the age of 94 at the Manuka Pool. **Picture: Karleen Minney.**

the sun. We also had a diving tower, which they pulled down because of the insurance risk, but I wasn't much of a diver. I left that to Owen 'Crusty' Taverner, who was also a champion swimmer and later managed the pool, followed by his son 'Tav'. We had a good range of divers at the pool in the 1930s and 40s, including Bobby Baker. He was from the north side of Canberra, which early on was a big distinction. There was Ainslie, Braddon and Reid on the north side and Barton, Manuka, Kingston, Griffith, Red Hill and Forrest on the south side.

We all belonged to the swimming club - my two brothers, my sister and me - and for a period Dad was the president of the club and later patron. We had Wednesday night carnivals and a full range of championships and water polo. During the time when my brother Lindsay and Bill Dullard were vying with each other, it would be nothing to have 300, 400 people for the Wednesday night

carnival. Lindsay was a good swimmer. He was club champion and he became Sydney University champion and All Australian Universities Swimming Champion where he knocked 14 seconds off the 400 yards inter-varsity record. I was expected to be as good, but I never was. I was club champion twice, in 1940 and 1941, but that was because the big boys like Lindsay were away at the war.

Lindsay was a bonzer older brother and a good bloke. He did an Arts degree at Sydney University and then said to Father that he wanted to fly. By the time World War II came around he was a fighter pilot. He was just 24 when he was killed in aerial combat with a German Messerschmitt fighter over Libya in 1941. He was one of nine from the Manuka swimming club and water polo team who were killed in the war, including his swimming rival Bill Dullard. They are all remembered in a plaque at the pool that was hung in the foyer in 1947 and restored



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in 2018 thanks to the Friends of Manuka Pool and a grant from the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

I thought we did a lot of training but it was nothing compared to today. Three lengths were a hundred yards and a mile was 53 laps. But I left the mile swims to Lindsay, who used to say he could go as fast as he wanted. It was just a question of how much he trained, which they've all proved since. I had the embarrassing situation one year of winning the men's 400 yards and the girls were two seconds faster than me. I remember one classic 800-yard race I competed in. I started the evening by having a game of water polo, which was half an hour or more, and lo and behold I then had to do an 800-yard swim. Len Major was my rival. Len went to work for 2CS and had a career in radio, but he swam along with me till about 400 and then he disappeared. At the end of it I said, 'What happened to you?' and he said, 'I got tired.' I said, 'But you hadn't played water polo,' and he said, 'No, but I still got tired.' He just stopped so I won that race.

I loved water polo and was captain at one stage. We used to train at 5.30pm when it was all peace and quiet. Just before the war this fellow came to the pool while seven or eight of us boys were throwing the ball around. This fellow dived in and said, 'Give us a chuck.' We threw him the ball and it came back like a rocket. So we threw it to him again and it went somewhere else like a rocket. We got talking to him and it turned out he was George Molnar, the political cartoonist. His cartoons were brilliant. Anyway, he said, 'You chaps shouldn't be in the water,' and we said, 'Why not?' He said we should be in the two sunbaking areas learning to catch the water polo ball one-handed and throw it one-handed. So we did that for a while and then we asked him if he'd like to be our coach and he said yes. I believe he learnt to play water polo in his home country, Hungary. He was exceptional. He could get high out of the water up to the lower part of his hips because he was so strong in the legs underwater.

I really loved water polo practice and working on my ability to catch a ball with one hand and flick it one way or another or back where it came from. We were not

allowed to use two hands, except the goalie. For a while we had Tim Ingram as goalie, who did all the tiling of the four steps in the corners of the pool. He was apprenticed to his father Adam, who did the tiling of the whole pool. Tim was six feet two or three and had arms that stretched from one side of the goal to the other, a great asset for stopping goals. Sadly, his youngest brother Ian was one of the nine from the pool who were killed in World War II.

I managed to keep out of trouble most of the time when I was at the pool. The managers were pretty strict, and there were all sorts of signs around the pool saying what you could and couldn't do, including one that said, 'No spitting and running', so you could walk and spit! I was only little - under 10 stone - still am, but at one stage I had a support role as an honorary inspector, which involved being a bit of a policeman if people were doing the wrong thing. Everybody in Canberra in the 1930s, 40s and 50s went to the pool - all the kids and teenagers from the north and south sides, some of the parliamentarians, the public servants and the working men and their families - as it was the only place to swim until the Canberra Olympic Pool opened in 1955. I was there morning, noon and night during the season with all the water polo team and all my mad friends. It was home to me and I still love it today, nearly 90 years on from the opening day.

■ Published by NewSouth Books. \$29.99.

The managers Scotty and Davis were pretty strict, and there were all sorts of signs around the pool saying what you could and couldn't do, including one that said, 'No spitting and running', so you could walk and spit!



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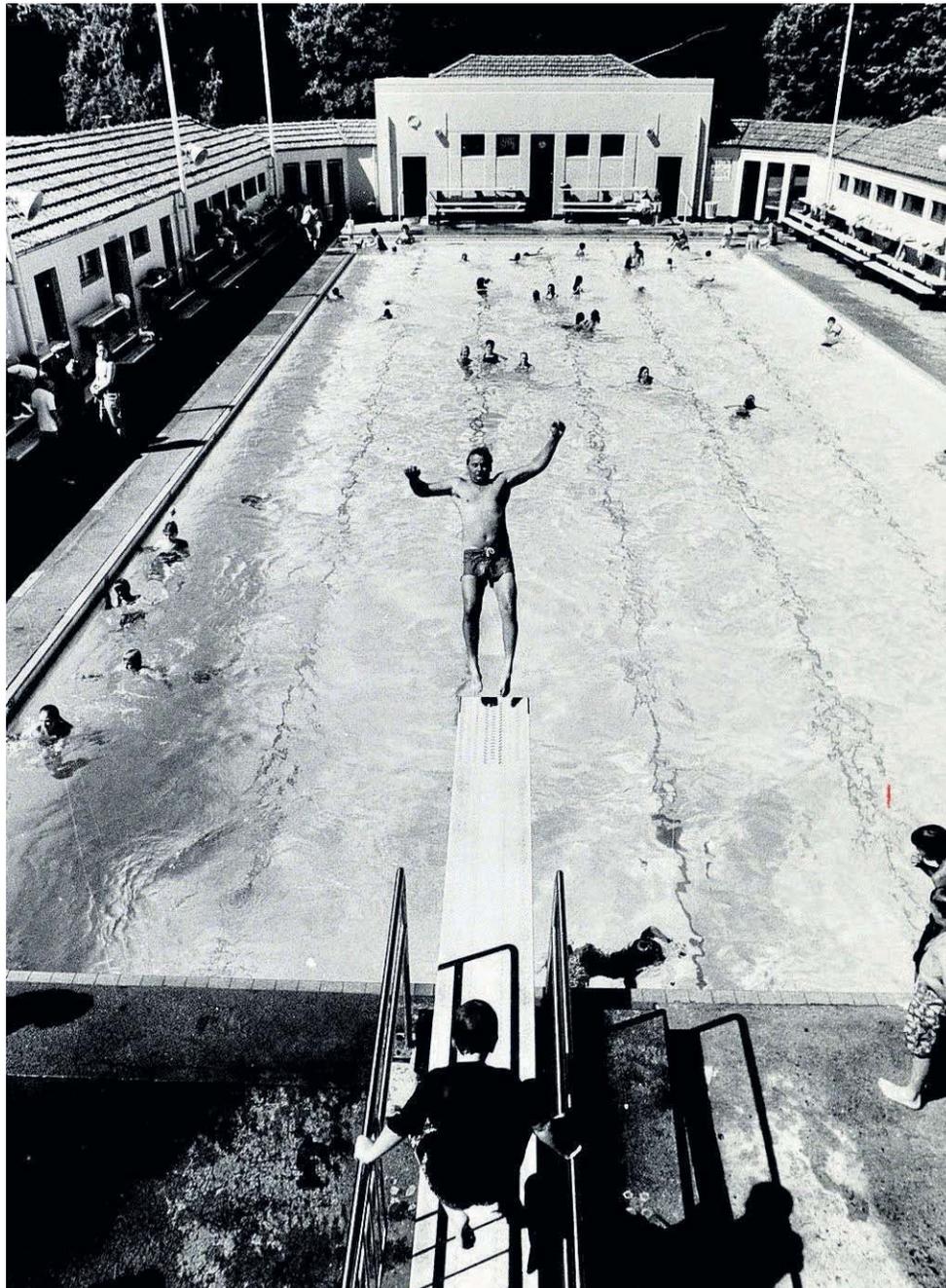
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Clockwise from left: The Manuka Pool in 1991, the year of its 60th anniversary. **Picture:** The Canberra Times archives



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Merv Knowles, 97, pictured earlier this year. **Picture: Karleen Minney**



Historical image of Manuka Pool. **Picture: ACT Heritage Library**