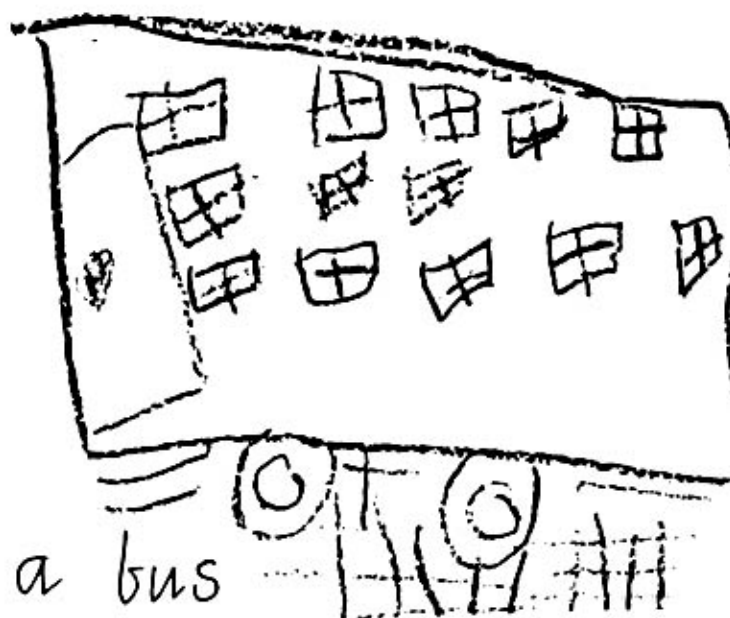


childhood - lived forty odd years ago in Melbourne - had a distinctively Australian flavour, and I wonder if I may proffer some memories.

There was an idiotic game called 'jumps' that came into season periodically and was played fanatically until squelched by parents, teachers or the laws. No one *jumped*. Two players held a rope between them, stretched taut, at a height. Another player approached with mincing, fancy steps, often as varied and perhaps unconsciously imitative of the approach of the slow bowler at cricket until within kicking distance of the rope. The maiden then stopped abruptly, whirled about, tossed her legs frantically like a goat leaping backwards over a chasm. If she brought the rope down, she was still in the game and got another go. 'Front-ways' jumps were absolutely tabu; but there was allowed a still more elaborate something called the 'American back-kick.' (I think the 1914-18 war brought the Americans into our provincial ken.) The American back-kick was rather like the original 'jump', only taken at cracking speed and finishing in a whirl-cum-spring that lengthened the casualty lists and tended to cause the intervention of authority - ostensibly on the grounds that we were making unlady-like display of 'great legs.' Traffic must have been incredibly light and passers-by tolerant, for I remember this game played usually with a rope that stretched half-way across a suburban road.

*Marbles* - alleys, to us - was informal enough then; and played by both sexes, though in strict segregation. Girls played girls; boys played boys. (A forerunner of adult behaviour? We are frequently charged with huddling into male and female groups at social gatherings, and showing an ineptitude for more general mixing.)

Again it was the public footpath, or the 'ashfelt' garden path, or even your mother's dining-room carpet if you could get it - any smooth surface - that did. Every child owned a Tom Bowler, a large blue bowling alley; a dozen or so firing alleys - 'commonies'; and an agate taw. During the First World War we had a particular 'moz' - jinx - that we employed against opponents. If you were mentally guarding a particular alley that seemed in danger you swung your hand over it in small arcs, and chanted: 'Under the Kaiser's hoo-oof!' You felt reasonably safe after that. Why we chose the Kaiser in preference to Kitchener or the King remains a mystery. As far as I know there was not a drop of German blood in the district. Towards the end of the war we developed another 'moz', this time against the said Kaiser. Three times a day you were



expected ominously to mutter:

'The poor old Kaiser's dead!  
He died for the want of bread!  
They put him in a coffin,  
He fell through the bottom,  
The poor old Kaiser's dead!'

(Ersatz coffin bottoms even then!)

I had a most obliging male parent. I remember his thumping the breakfast table heartily each morning as he pronounced this with me.

A surf-free, sharkless beach and hot summer climate developed good swimmers pretty young. I don't think I remember any healthy child who could not swim early in his life. On our beach we felt a terrible contempt for the 'foreigners'; poor, misguided creatures from suburbs on the other side of the Yarra who came on public holidays, hoping to spend a pleasant day at the sea-side.

We showed off hatefully, rushing into the sea to show our paces in the dog-paddle, our endurance in the deadman's float, 'Look at me doing the over-arm', we screamed in extreme cases. We were (we believed) smartly attired in 'Canadian' bathing-gowns - two piece affairs that would have wrecked the proportions of a Helen - and frilled rubber caps with a gap cut out in the frontal pleats to

facilitate vision. We laughed openly at the foreigners who, with naivete, often sent their children into swim attired in a holey old singlet, fastened at strategic points with unsightly safety pins. 'Y' silly galoots' we hissed at these unfortunates, if they separated themselves sufficiently far from their parents.

After a swim everybody bought a piece of gingerbread, leathery in texture, atrocious in flavour, but by some unwritten law, to be preferred at this moment above greater delicacies. There was some theory that it 'sustained' you better after sea exercise. The sexes were sufficiently emancipated to swim together in the 'open'. But if you wanted to go into the baths you found there were hours for 'ladies' and still longer hours for 'gents'. You made yourself hideous with witch hazel cream that turned, under the influence of salt water, to a white paste across your nose and cheeks. This in deference to your already ruined complexion.

Mussel-gathering from the piles of the baths was popular and profitable. Mothers and aunts were ready buyers of a good haul. Billies and other crude utensils for boiling mussels were handed down in families like old grudges..

At the first breath of the 'change' - the switch of the scorching northerly to a cool southerly wind - the entire child population streamed away from the beach. 'Ghosts from an enchanter fleeing ...' were not in it. Sunburned, cheeky, indomitable at one minute, we scurried off the next in droves, with shrunken egos and lips rapidly turning blue. That race for home and mother must have been caused by something more than the dramatic drop in temperature. Some buried tribal memory perhaps.

Any stomach ache, from that caused by acute appendicitis, to mild indigestion, tended to be blamed on the 'tiger's claw'. The 'tiger's claw' used to be called in by children to cover symptoms of a guilty conscience. The remedy for this was senna tea, drunk to the dregs; or, incredibly, powdered charcoal blown down the throat.

We 'struck our breath' to prove veracity, and swore the unbreakable oath by placing together the tips of our middle fingers. We said 'me' for 'my', and called our dinner 'tea'.

There were some 'counts' that I think may have been an Australian variation on familiar themes:

'Eena-meena, ming-pong,

ting-tong!

Yousa-vousa-vackatoo,  
Vee, Vie, Vack!

and

'Lady, lady touch the ground,  
lady, lady, turn around,  
Lady, lady, point your toe,  
Lady, lady, out you go!'

You went, too. You were 'he'. Never 'it' or 'she'.

Forgive me if all this is redundant. May I wish you all success in your research?

Yours sincerely,

(Mrs.) Isabel McLennan



Illustrations for this issue are by Madeline Lemar

