

MY RECOLLECTIONS OF THE WAR TIME EVACUATION OF SOMERVILLE  
HOUSE, OUR SOJOURN IN THREE CENTRES AND THE RETURN AT THE END  
OF THE WAR

On Saturday, 24th January, 1942 a Staff Meeting was being held at Somerville House to discuss what measures should be taken to ensure the safety of the pupils - suddenly the premises were full of generals in uniform.

Then, on Monday, 26th January came the formal request that, from the 1st February for 'the duration' the School was to become the United States' Army Headquarters.

Now began the search for new homes for the Day Girls and the Boarders. Three were finally selected - the Queen Alexandra Home, Coorparoo for those living on the Southside; "Drysillwyn", Auchenflower for the girls on the Northside and "Moiomindah", Stanthorpe for the Boarders.

When the Government decreed that all schools should remain closed Somerville House established, in conjunction with the Brisbane Boys' College and Clayfield College, a comprehensive correspondence course.

In little more than three weeks goods and chattels were packed up at Somerville House.

The Staff worked unremittingly now sorting and packing, typing and correcting correspondence papers. Old Girls and Present Girls rallied round and gave invaluable help.

Packing cases yawned on every side and there were books, books and still more books. In the Boarding School mountains of blankets and pillows, and endless piles of crockery had to be expertly packed. No man power was available!

To add to the turmoil the Americans, being anxious to enter into possession, were everywhere, workmen putting a door here, a window there, partitions somewhere else - and, of course, telephones everywhere.

I was not present for the 'evacuation' but I learnt about it from my sister, Isabel Andrews, who was the Mistress In Charge of the Junior School. I, with my typewriters and Gestetner duplicator went by van to the Brisbane Boys' College. The driver of the van asked me to travel with my machines as he said my presence would avoid his van being commandeered and my equipment disappearing! On my arrival at the Brisbane Boys' College I set up my machines and started the task of typing the correspondence lessons. I used two typewriters - one was an Imperial Portable with a double shiftlock. Miss Jarrett had had it specially equipped with Algebraical indices, Chemistry symbols and French accents.

The male Staff was asked to help by duplicating the typing. One day, when chatting with one of the staff I mentioned that I was worried because I had seen the tiredness of those working at Somerville - often lifting heavy cases etc. - he did not say anything but the next day he, and a group of Senior boys arrived at the Queen Alexandra Home - it was most opportune as the School desks etc. had arrived and these male helpers carried them in and set up the classrooms. Their help was much appreciated.

There was general rejoicing when the Government decided that all schools should re-open on the 2nd March. The Brisbane Boys' College and Clayfield College resumed normally, but the Somerville contingent moved into three new quarters. Thus ended the nightmare - in little more than three weeks Somerville Staff had accomplished what had seemed to be an impossible task, finding three new homes - equipping them as well as evacuating their former premises.

All centres settled in well and proceeded with the usual work. We even held our Annual Speech Days - on the lawn at "Drysllwyn"!

The Staff was divided into three groups. Those who went to Stanthorpe were there for the whole period. Those remaining in Brisbane divided their time between the two centres, spending, perhaps, three days at Coorparoo and the rest of the week at Auchenflower or vice versa. Certain members were selected to stay at one centre, for example, my sister was stationed at the Queen Alexandra Home and Miss Wilson at "Drysllwyn". Miss George was in charge at Coorparoo, Miss Morgan at Auchenflower and Miss Popple at Stanthorpe.

After teaching my afternoon classes at Coorparoo I started typing and duplicating well into the night.

Miss Craig and the Staff, in order to co-ordinate the School work and standards, devised a system which was a modification of the Dalton Plan - all material was sent to me to be typed and duplicated. The system worked so well that, when we returned to Somerville House, all three divisions became one immediately.

My busiest times were when I also had to type and duplicate the examination papers as well as the set work.

Here I would like to record the kindness and help given to the Staff by Mr & Mrs Nash, parents of Irene, who was Dux of our School in 1939.

The Methodist Church, I think it was the Coorparoo Church, had persuaded Mr & Mrs Nash to be Caretakers of the Queen Alexandra Home during the absence of the children. I wish to express my heartfelt thanks for their kindness to me, personally.

They had a cottage or flat behind the main building. When they discovered I was in the building on my own at night they left their comfortable quarters and sat downstairs in the building - "It was not safe for me to be there alone" they said. On two very cold, winter nights they brought me a hot meal. Their vigil, at my busiest times, must have been long and tiring because, on several occasions I raced downstairs (We'll lock up, off you go") to catch the last tram from the Junction and, at Woolloongabba, the last tram to East Brisbane, fortunately the tram stopped outside my house.

During the Aid Raid Alarms everyone at the Queen Alexandra Home marched to the shelter under the building, next to the Chemistry Laboratory! To pass the time my sister always had the girls singing. At Auchenflower we had split trenches. I always seemed to be at Auchenflower on these occasions.

The girls coped well with their new surroundings but it, in Brisbane, meant all work - no play or sport. At the Queen Alexandra Home we certainly missed the lovely, shady trees that we had been accustomed to at Somerville. The girls at "Drysllwyn" did have a grass tennis court.

Music lessons could only be given in School hours. It was not considered advisable for children to travel alone after school.

All centres settled in well - we even held our Annual Speech Days - on the lawn at "Drysllwyn"!

In the second year it was arranged that I should go to Stanthorpe for a week to teach my classes there. Oh! that long, tedious train journey sitting in a compartment with Miss Craig and four other passengers!

Miss Craig visited all three centres each week. She must have been very tired of the many tedious journeys, the tax on her time and strength to say nothing of the anxiety inseparable from the responsibility that was hers.

"Moiomindah" Stanthorpe had a lovely garden. The residence accommodated itself very well to our needs - seventy-five were housed therein. We had a cottage nearby as an over-flow and a large garage became class and music rooms.

Being at Stanthorpe for that week was like living in a different world. I stayed in a cottage with Miss Gray and Miss Shaw. The girls were eager to learn about our life in Brisbane so I was seated at different tables for each of my meals and had to answer numerous questions.

"Drysllwyn" was also a charming family residence but the Queen Alexandra Home, with its colourful history, is part of Brisbane's heritage and we, at Somerville, were privileged that our sojourn there added a small section to its saga.

Early in 1945 we said a fond farewell to Queen Alexandra Home and "Drysllwyn".

On the 6th February when the Day Girls returned to Somerville House it was, for some, the first glimpse they had had of their school. The Boarders remained at Stanthorpe because the Americans still retained the Boarding School and the lower floor of the Senior School Building.

We had Morning Assembly along the verandah to the left of the main entrance which was strictly out of bounds. Everyone had to use the narrow back stairs which led out to the Colonnade.

Three army huts, one behind the school building, two down on the running track, supplemented our teaching areas. The Staff kept fit as it was often a race between lessons from the running track up the hill to the building.

Life was happier for the girls as they now had their Sports (which the Americans watched from the top of the hill).

Our swimming pool could no longer be used, so, as I had been given charge of the swimming, I took groups to the West End Baths and early each morning the team and I travelled to the Volley Baths. As the Americans were enjoying their relief periods there I am afraid I, at times, was not very popular, because I asked them to give a clear passage for my swimmers so I could pick the team for the G.P.S. We coped and were successful that year!

The day the war ended the News came to Somerville House to be forwarded direct to 10 Downing Street and the White House.

Some years later an American visited the School and, at Morning Assembly, presented us with the Tic-A-Tape declaring that Japan had surrendered and the war in the Pacific was over. This is preserved in our Archives.

On the 19th November, 1945 the American Headquarters Base 3 moved to Victoria Park and finally all sections vacated Somerville House on the 30th November, 1945.

First Term, 1946 saw Somerville House once more occupying its own home.

JESSIE ANDREWS  
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