



INFORMATION NEWSLETTER

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Our May Meeting Who was Bert Edwards, King of the West End? Patricia Sumerling

It was great to have a full house for our History Month talk from historian and writer, Patricia Sumerling, about Adelaide identity, Bert Edwards. Bert was a popular man in his time but is now relatively unknown, although upheld as a legend by the gay community.

Albert Augustine (Bert) Edwards was born in the backstreets of Adelaide's West End in Nov. 1888. Adelaide was not a healthy place to be in those days. Deep drainage had finally been connected just four years beforehand but there were still about 70 chimneys and many unregulated factories polluting the air, and many large families living in close quarters in the poor areas. Patricia showed PowerPoint photos of the west end of Adelaide, bringing to life the reality of the slum conditions experienced by the poor of Adelaide. Bert and his brother attended St Joseph's Catholic School on Russell Street, which has since been demolished. After leaving primary school he worked first at the Victoria Racecourse, where he cooked and sold saveloys to patrons, and then traded in second-hand bottles.

Bert was rumoured to be an illegitimate child of Charles Cameron Kingston, which is possible, as his mother worked as a domestic at that house. However, the DNA tests that followed the exhumations of the two men (and others), in Bert's case proved inconclusive.

When Bert was old enough to hold a lease, he took on a former bakery in Compton Street, near Central Market, and turned it into "Bert Edwards Tea Rooms". Young footballers were the target clientele, there being a two-up school out the back! Bert was also involved with the West

Adelaide Football Club (WAFC) and the Australian Labor Party (ALP). He was very generous toward the young footballers, but expected their loyalty, and their votes for Labor when they were of age!

In 1914, Bert became a city councillor for Grey Ward. His only other Labor Colleague on the council was Frank Lundie, who was Bert's mentor. Bert became something of a local philanthropist but was now outgrowing the tea rooms as his base. In 1915 he became Licensee of the Duke of Brunswick Hotel, which gave him more scope to welcome his constituents and listen to their concerns. As World War 1 was raging and so many of Adelaide's young men had enlisted, Bert filled the void in his life by aiming higher in politics. In 1917 Bert won the State parliamentary seat for Adelaide.

At the same time, he threw in his support behind better wages and conditions for the police force, better city housing, protection of the Parklands and protection for German migrants and their Australian born families. These were Bert's golden years, but they were soon to come to an end.

Bert continued to try to improve the lot of the underdog and was able to bring about many long-overdue reforms to the conditions of children in foster care, children's homes and reform schools, as well as reforms to the cruel and inhumane prison system. Labor won the election in 1924, and Bert contributed to the Probation Act of that year. In all of this he trod on many toes, and his enemies accused him of meddling. When not even his own party stood up for him, Bert resigned in disgust in 1926. Meanwhile, Bert had gone up-market and moved on to the Grand Chancellor Hotel, and also bought hotels at Finnis Vale and Port Victor.

In various situations, Bert had begun to make himself very unpopular with the WAFC, the

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ALP and the Police Force – and in 1930 the latter was handed the means by which to deal with him. An underaged male was accused of abusing a male child, and the young man blamed Bert for “showing him the ropes”. Bert was investigated and arrested for sodomy. The case went to trial in 1930 and Bert was convicted. He was sentenced to five years hard labour but was released after two years and four months for exemplary behaviour. By this time it was 1933, at the height of the Great Depression. With his Brother’s help, Bert took up the licence of the Castle Inn on Hindley Street (since demolished) and made it into one of the most popular pubs of the time. Although he had been in prison, many residents of Adelaide had not forgotten the help he had given them.

Bert plunged himself once more into philanthropic efforts: paying for funerals of the poor, collecting unsold food from the markets and distributing it to those in need, and organising his friend, “Treacle” Fimeri to deliver firewood where needed.

In 1948, Bert was finally returned as a city councillor to Grey Ward. Bert dressed less flamboyantly than before, and caused little controversy, but there were still a few explosive relationships between he and some other councillors.

Bert died in office in the August of 1963. His funeral was one of the largest known up to that time. He had previously donated two properties in Whitmore Square as hostels for male ex-prisoners and homeless men. He left the rest of his estate to the Sisters of St Joseph with instructions to use the money to give “happiness, education and opportunity of advancement in life to children who have been in an orphanage or public institute for delinquent children. Bert’s life-long friend, George Joseph, who he had put through university, filled his place on the council and eventually went on to be Lord Mayor.

It was a very informative talk about a very colourful character, illustrated with many photographs. There is much more to the story, enough for Patricia to fill a book: *Bert Edwards, King of the West End*, Wakefield Press, 2019.

Marion Heritage Research Centre

The Heritage Research Centre is open as normal for 2021, and you are welcome to call us on 7420 6455, email us at heritage@marion.sa.gov.au or drop in from 10am to 4pm, Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. We love meeting new heritage friends!

August is Australian National Family History Month, and the MHRC is hosting an event each week that month! There will be 4 talks on a variety of helpful topics on family history. Watch this space next month for full details, or contact us at the MHRC for more info.

Watch out for all our events listed in the Marion Libraries’ What’s On! brochure, and on the City of Marion/Libraries social media pages.

Marion Historical Society Next meeting:

July 21st

Excursion to Glandore Community Centre

Several of the buildings in the Glandore Community Centre were added to the State Heritage List in 1994. They were purpose-built in 1889 to establish a girls’ reformatory, which was the second in Australia to use a cottage or ‘family’ system. Later the centre became the Edwardstown Industrial School for orphaned and neglected children.

Cathlin Day, the Centre manager, will show us around and talk about the centre’s history.

Time: Meet at the Glandore Community Centre reception building (25 Naldera St, Glandore) for a 10 am start.

Duration: 45 minutes to an hour.

Refreshments: Tea, coffee and biscuits will be available.

Handouts: Information sheets on each building are available for \$1 per leaflet.

All visitors are Welcome

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