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MEMORIAL HALL MEMORIES

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04 June 2016 by Wendy Tanner





I recently picked up the program for the next [Bello Winter Music Festival](#), and there, on the cover, were the verdant Bellinger Valley, the giant fig tree near the [Bellinger Backpackers Hostel](#) (the fig tree being the largest living thing in Bellinger), the river, the bridge, which often features in local and national news, when floods cut the town in half, and then the iconic ochre-coloured Memorial Hall, seemingly the only building in town, rising above the greenery.

The Memorial Hall features here in a photo I took of the Mullum Magic Bus at last year's Winter Music Festival:



The Memorial Hall is central in the town, and has been a central part of its life, since it was opened on Anzac Day 25th April 1929. For me personally it holds many wonderful memories. So many festivals, concerts, cabarets, art exhibitions, film festivals, workshops and dances. When my young budding ballerina daughter (now aged 35) performed in the annual end of year River's Ballet Studio concerts, all the dancers and proud parents would sweat it out, in those days before air conditioning was installed. Every October long weekend, for many years, the annual Bellingham Art Prize attracted entries from all over the country. It began with a glittering gala opening with wine and canapes, amidst the colourful canvases and quirky sculptures, with the live classical music almost drowned out by the excited chatter of the "anyone who was anyone" who was there.



As I stood across the road from the hall, during an interval in last years [Reader's and Writer's Festival](#), I looked at this iconic building and thought it deserved a blog post. I put up a picture of it on the Facebook Group "So You Are From Bellingen", and asked people to share their memories of it. Over the next five days, I got a total of 175 comments – which really reflects how much this building featured in the lives of so many of the towns inhabitants, most of them having been here a lot longer than I have.

Here is the photo I took then and posted on Facebook:



Most people had vivid memories of it having been a picture theatre, with Vince Lovell as the projectionist. Vince had been the town's photographer back then too, and many people remember him taking their wedding and baby photos. Many of the archival photos of Bellinghen which can now be found in Bellinghen's [Historical Museum](#), have been attributed to Vince Lovell.

This comment by Robert Braithwaite, was very typical of the responses that appeared "I think Vic Ball had it before Fishburns. Movie every Friday night, and Saturday matinee. Sommerville's Cafe and Lovell's Lolly Shop, were open on Friday nights and Saturdays for drinks and confectionery at interval. Certainly was Bellinghen's hub for entertainment in the 60's and early 70's, particularly for the youth.. good times". Many of the errant youth also confessed to ducking off from the movie to take their date down to the river for a bit of hanky panky (my words, not theirs ;-)). Other sweeter memories surfaced:

Mark Durbidge “I remember having my first kiss there at the pictures”. Rose Callaghan remembers well seeing the movie “Grease” there in 1976 because she had her appendix out the next day. I wonder if the excitement of the movie in sleepy little Bellinghen, brought on Rose’s appendicitis?? Mike Marriott said it was “2 bob to get in” (his mum sent him off with the 2 bob tied in the corner of his hankie).

Ruth Armstrong remembered the first movie she watched there: The Sound of Music. “We got jaffas & thought it was such a treat. Used to buy lollies every Friday arvo after school at Summies with my pocket money.” Other people remembered rolling their jaffas down the sloping floor at the back of the hall and getting into trouble with the organizers who prowled around with torches during the movies.

However, John Bailey topped that. This is his comment: “The Perkins family had it when I first started going to the movies & Fred McFadden was the tosser out if you played up. We would take our shangeyes & if there was any kissing on the screen we would fire Jaffas thru the screen & next morning we were made to stick patches over the holes”.

Here’s a slightly better behaved audience at the latest [Screenwave International Film Festival](#), recently held in the Memorial Hall. Not a JAFFA to be seen (or heard :)).



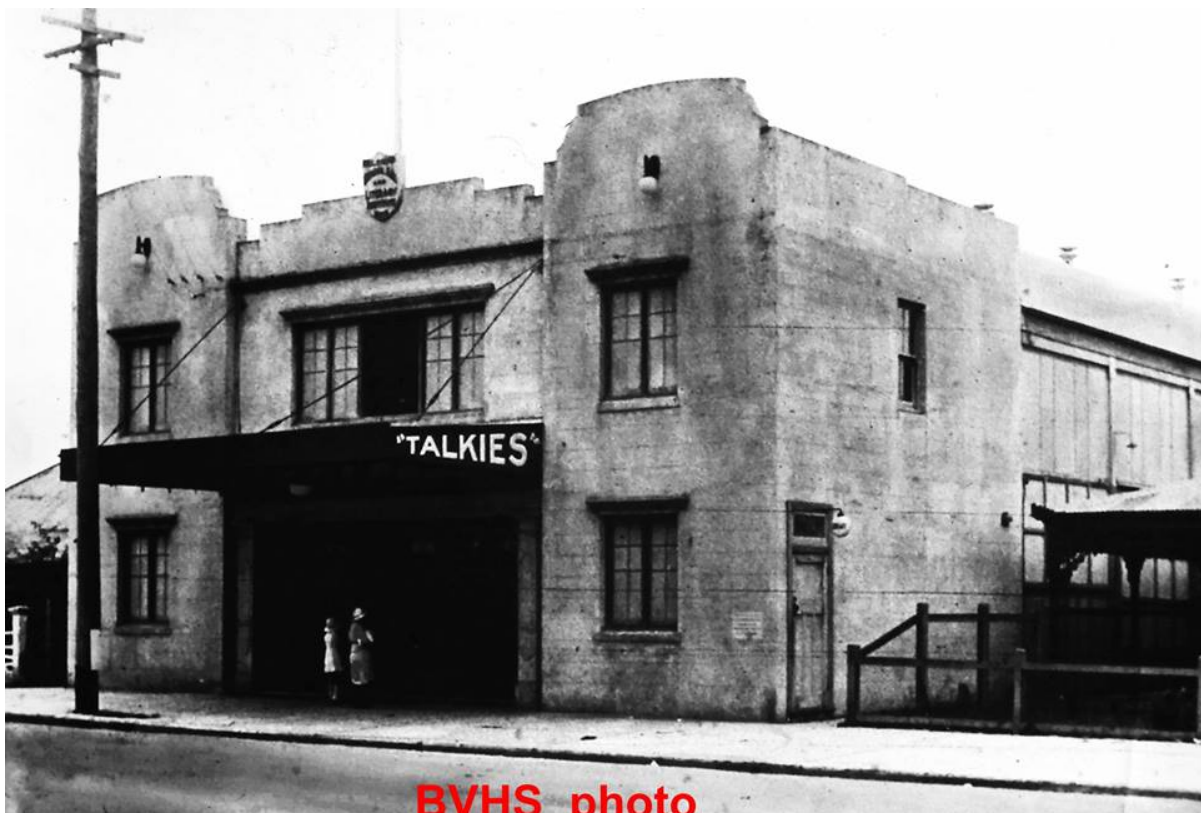
Roslyn Sinnott remembers “being wheeled around the hall dressed as babies when the Sara Quads were born – it was a great big celebration”. Born at Bellingen Hospital, in August 1950, to Betty and Percy Sara, the Sara Quads were the first surviving quadruplets to be born in Australia and put Bellingen on the map. Every detail of their growing up was recorded in many a “Woman’s Weekly” and “Woman’s Day” over the next decade or so.

People shared memories of Deb Balls held there, dances with local bands and musicians, Sunday School and Church Services, discos, High School musicals and Mary Anderson operating a library in the upstairs room. Before the days of zumba and hot yoga, the Memorial Hall was also the place to get fit, with Physical Culture, Gymnastics, Jazzercise, breakdancing classes and basketball happening there over the years.

Tracy Kimber remembered a youth club downstairs run by Marj

Woodbury. "Pretty sure it was open every afternoon from memory. Had little pool table, Atari/vectrex games, drinks and chips and stuff. We used to play games at the basketball courts under what was the RSL back then and hang out. I remember going and seeing Alby Mangles film there too. We had our Deb ball there as well in about 1990. BATS (Bellingen Amateur Theatre Society) used to have their performances there as well".

Belinda Jolley said it was originally a vacant block, which was fenced and became an open-air movie house, before even the hall was built. Silent movies were replaced with the "Talkies" and Bellingen's Memorial Hall moved into the new era, though at the time this photo was taken in 1933, it was looking pretty run-down:



Other memories surfaced of painful dental extractions in Aud COOPER's Dental Practice that was housed in the upstairs rooms in the late 40's. Laurice Lavender said she'd worked as a dental nurse for

Mr Cooper and said that Bert Rodgers had an electrical shop down stairs on the left side. Esme Langridge remembered there were many concerts during the 2nd World War.



The Hall had originally been established as a “memorial” (hence its name) by World War 1 Returned Soldiers, and there is a window in the

upper storey reflecting this early purpose. The Bellingen Historical Society has produced a booklet detailing its evolution.

The Memorial Hall has [an official site](#), where you can find more information about its history and what's coming up there.

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