

MEMORIAL

Alderman Simon Peter Depena J.P. (1889-1964)

RON RATHBONE PRIZE 2017

Examining the story behind the naming of Depena Reserve, Sans Souci.

Leonie Bell

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Cover photo: “Four Times of the Day”, detail from panorama on Depena Reserve amenities block, depicting Depena Reserve, designed by Steven Vella, 2008

Photo by Leonie Bell

MEMORIAL- Simon Peter Depena J.P. (1889-1964)

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Memorial

NOUN.

‘A statue or structure established to remind people of a person or event; Intended to commemorate someone or something; a record or memoir’ ¹

There are numerous ways for a council to memorialise its most prominent citizens for their civic achievements. A select few are lucky enough to have a statue erected in their image, others a simple inscribed bronze plaque on a wall or plinth. Sometimes an award or scholarship will be offered in their name, or a building or auditorium will be dedicated in their honour. Many councils name a park or public recreation area after a prominent local identity.

The expectation is that the person’s achievements will be remembered forever, but time erodes memory. After a few years those who knew the person die or move on to other localities and the memory of the awardee dissolves into thin air. All that is left is an entry in a street directory or a sign on the building façade or park entrance stating its nomenclature, but revealing nothing more about this once locally-famous person.

This work seeks to explore the stories behind one such name that adorns public space in the Bayside area, and to restore his deeds and philanthropy to public memory.



Alderman Simon Peter Depena served the community on Rockdale Council from 1928-1937

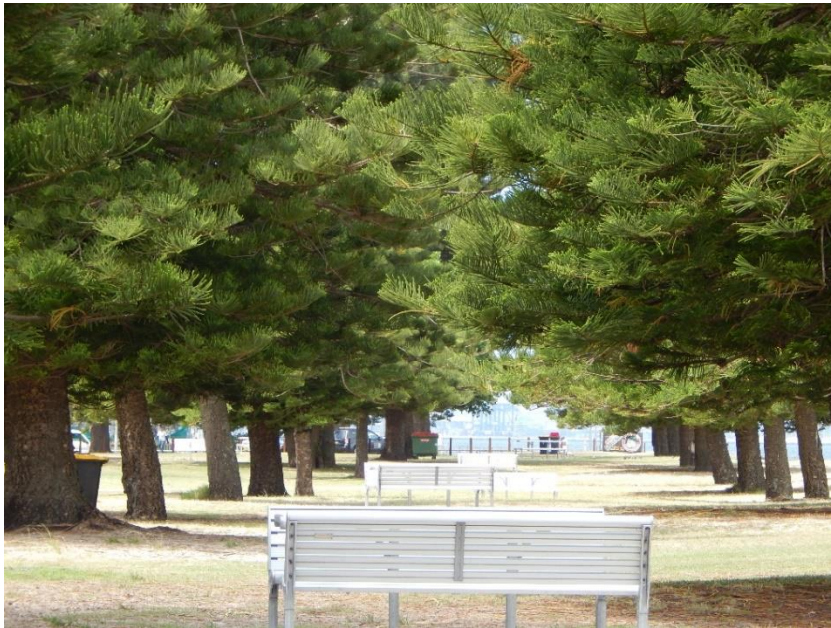
Photo: Mark De Pena

Peter Depena Reserve

A memorial to Alderman Simon Peter Depena J.P.

The reserve is named after prominent Alderman, Master Builder and sporting identity Simon Peter Depena, known to all by his middle name.

Having previously knocked back the opportunity to purchase parkland from the Shady Nook Estate, Rockdale Council purchased a parcel of land from the Norman Estate in 1930, bounded on the west by the creek and the north by Russell Avenue, with the idea that it would provide superior picnicking facilities. This added to the existing Cook Park which stretched along the sea front from Cooks River to the Sans Souci Ferry at Rocky Point.^{2 3}



Peter Depena Reserve 2017, Photo: Leonie Bell

Peter Depena described the purchase in a 1961 interview;

“This was my pet baby. It was my idea to resume the land. With the loss of Shady Nook, the ratepayers did not want to lose this block. The agitation was strong but there was no money. However, the council agreed to leave the matter to the ward aldermen and we successfully proposed the land be resumed and the £4,500 cost met from the Brighton Bath profits”.⁴



Sols Refreshment Room and Fish Inn at Dolls Point Park (Peter Depena Reserve), circa 1950s

Photo: Bayside Council Library

This addition to Cook Park was formerly known as Dolls Point Park, until August 1961, when Rockdale aldermen voted to re-name the area Peter Depena Reserve in honour of the man who had been instrumental in its creation. The reserve was in the process of renovation, with a new kiosk and picnic pavilion in construction, and the time was ripe to christen the rejuvenated park with a new name. The pavilion was also accorded the name Peter Depena, while the trendily designed kiosk with its distinctive, geometric tower was called Dolls Point Kiosk. The dedication plaque and signage describing Peter's contribution to the area has since been removed.⁵



The Mayor, aldermen and leading citizens attend a tree planting ceremony at Brighton-le-Sands 6 August 1932. Peter Depena is just visible at the rear of the crowd, identifiable by his dark complexion.
Photo: Bayside Council Library

Located in Russell Avenue, Dolls Point, near the site of the late Peter Depena's home, the park features extensive grassy bayside areas with BBQs, playgrounds and picnic shelters, and is popular for group outings. Over the years, it has been the site of many family picnics and exuberant Australia Day celebrations.



1961 Construction of the Dolls Point Kiosk on the site of the newly re-named Peter Depena Reserve

Photo: Bayside Council Library

Character

Peter was the kind of member that every sporting organisation or club loves – someone who was never content to be a passive onlooker, but threw himself into the organisation heart and soul, always available to fill a committee position or organise a fund-raising event. He was deeply community minded, campaigning for improvements to local infrastructure long before being elected to Rockdale Council in 1928. Alderman Depena was a skilled orator who could carry an argument with aplomb in a debate or public meeting. He was a prolific letter writer, and the St George Call newspaper is full of his 'Letters to the Editor'. He was a man of openness, integrity and public spirit; the ideal local councillor.



Depena Reserve 2017 Photo: Leonie Bell

Peter was a solid, reliable citizen, renowned for his modesty, honesty and good character, which was considered 'beyond reproach'. He once declared that his aim in life was to be "honourable and just to all". He was always ready to offer advice and assistance to those who solicited help. He was a handsome man, once described as energetic, a straight-goer and a ball of energy.

One reporter contrasted his foreign appearance and his character; 'as dark of feature as he is white of heart'. Another journalist at the Sun newspaper attributed his good nature to his triumph over racial discrimination; 'his charm of manner, a winning personality, an integrity beyond question, and a flair for oratory have helped Alderman Depena to overcome all those prejudices and become possibly the only "colored" (sic) alderman in the State.'^{6 7 8 9 10}



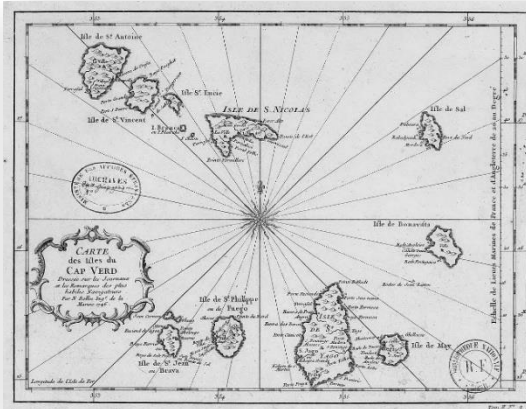
1969 Sailing at Dolls Point Reserve, Peter's favourite pastime
Photo: Bayside Council Library

Parents

Simon Peter Depena, known universally as Peter Depena, was a local lad, born at home in 22 Park Road, Sans Souci (variously described as located in Ramsgate, Scarborough, Sandringham or Kogarah) on 19 June 1889, reputedly the first male birth registered in Ramsgate. His parents were recorded on the birth certificate as Agnes Smiley and Inelmo De'peni. At other times his father's name was recorded as Ancleno, Aneleno, Auselius, Anselmo, or Anselm De Penas. Since it was so frequently mispronounced and misspelled, Peter's father eventually decided to anglicize his name to Samuel, but his family and friends knew him as Anselm.^{11 12}

Anselm was an illiterate labourer and market gardener, born about 1855 in Kingston (possibly the name of a plantation rather than a village), on

the island of St Jago (Santiago), Cape de Verde, 620 km off the West coast of Africa. He was of African descent, but allegedly became a naturalised British subject.^{13 14}



An early 1746 map of Cape de Verde Islands

Graphic from Wikimedia Commons¹⁵

While some of the Cape de Verde Islands are flat and sandy, the majority are jagged volcanic peaks perched in the Atlantic Ocean, uninhabited when the Portuguese discovered them in 1456. A colony was established in Santiago in 1462 and it became a trade hub between Africa, Europe, and the Americas, where African slaves were exchanged for manufactured goods.

Although the islands have always been arid, suffering from cyclical drought and chronic water shortages which severely limit agriculture, they produced cane sugar, rum and bananas for the European markets. Their most profitable business was the slave trade, which was centred on Santiago for three hundred years. In 1853, around the time of Anselm's birth, a slave uprising occurred, which was suppressed with a great deal of bloodshed. Slavery was finally abolished on Cape Verde in 1878. As a result of this infamous trade, the population is either of African descent, or a mixture of African and European known as mestiço or Crioulo.

Anselm's father is described on his death certificate as a planter named De Pena, but his mother is unknown. Was he illegitimate? It may simply be that Anselm never discussed his parentage with his children, but alternatively, could he have been the offspring of a Portuguese sugar plantation owner or manager and his servant or slave? The surname certainly sounds more Portuguese than African. On the other hand, De Pena was a common surname on the islands, most of the population was racially mixed mulatto, and only 5.8% remained slaves by the time of his birth. It is an interesting speculation, but must remain just that— a speculation Perhaps we will never know, but it is certainly a possibility.¹⁶

^{17 18}

There was widespread emigration in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Perhaps Anselm left the islands due to lack of work and the economic decline that followed the demise of the slave trade. Possibly he was affected by drought and famine, which plagued the islands. Like many Verdean expatriates, he could have sought work as a seaman, or alternatively, undertaken manual labour in Africa or the New World of the Americas. Instead he migrated to Australia sometime around 1883, where he met his future bride. Family tradition has it that he came out on a collier, jumping ship in Western Australia, where he moved around to avoid the authorities for six months before making his way to New South Wales.^{19 20 21 22 23 24}

His English spouse Agnes Jane Smiley was born in Ireland, in County Antrim, around 1861, but spent her childhood with her parents and siblings in England in the village of Meal Bank, Scalthwaiterigg, a small village 4 miles east of Kendall, Westmoreland, by the banks of the River Mint. This is an area of the Lake District, described in John Bartholomew's 1887 Gazetteer of the British Isles as a landscape of 'mountain, moor, and fell, intersected by deep winding vales, traversed by numerous streams.' Scalthwaiterigg's population in 1870 was a mere 504 people residing in 89 houses, but people from the surrounding areas flocked to work in the mills, which were the major employers after farm labouring. Scalthwaiterigg featured a corn factory, a snuff manufacturer and woollen mills, where Agnes and her sister were employed.^{25 26 27 28}

These mills, situated by the banks of the River Mint, were powered by water wheels and steam-driven beam engines. They varied in size of operations, but one Kendal woollen mill owned by J.J. & W. Wilson was extensive, with dye houses, drying rooms, bleaching rooms, hot and cold presses, baling machines and a 2,350-square yard (1,964 square metre)

spinning and weaving room. Their 500 workers produced travelling rugs, tweed cloth, linings and blankets.²⁹

Agnes was a single young woman, living with her mother Ann, sister Sarah Jane (1861-1946) and brother Thomas (1859-1942), a farm labourer. Their father had passed away some time before, and their widowed mother died from chronic bronchitis in 1884. With no other family remaining but a brother James, who had long since left the family home, no doubt the three perceived a great opportunity opening up for them in the colonies. Working hours in the mill were long, with only Sundays off work. Stringent restrictive factory rules and regulations constrained the life and happiness of the employees, and the manual labour was dangerous and arduous. Surely life in Sydney would be better.

Labourers, factory workers, Irish Famine orphans, and domestic servants like Agnes, Sarah and Thomas, were actively recruited with low priced 'bounty' tickets to Australia, private schemes such as that organised by Caroline Chisholm, or with government assistance schemes, where the government would pay part, or all, of the passage as a loan which would be repaid from their wages. Many defaulted on the repayments, so eventually free assisted passage was offered.

Under the Bounty system, an agent would interview prospective immigrants before agreeing to provide passage to Australia. On arrival in Sydney they would be interviewed by the Immigration Board, and if they were considered suitable, the agent who had arranged the passage would be paid a bounty.^{30 31}

Eighteen months after the death of their mother, the siblings decided to voyage to a new land as assisted migrants. Agnes and Sarah now

described themselves as domestic servants to meet the requirements of the scheme.³²

The trio sailed from England on 25 June 1886 from the Port of London to Plymouth. They continued south via the Cape to Australia, on the 2,039-ton coal fired vessel S.S. Port Pirie, carrying 595 passengers and crew for an 85-day voyage. This was no pleasure cruise, but a challenging journey in cramped accommodation, shared with hundreds of English, Scottish and Irish workers bound for the Antipodes, each hoping for a fresh start in a land of opportunity. The ship was a mere 353 feet (107 m) long and 39 feet (11.8 m) wide. The first-class saloon was 'very handsomely fitted and furnished' for 35 full-fare paying passengers. However, she also carried 61 married couples, 196 children, 21 infants, 122 single men who were predominantly labourers and tradesmen, and 252 single women, who were mostly domestic servants to service the needs of the colony.

To keep themselves entertained on the lengthy, monotonous voyage the passengers performed in concerts, played deck sports and attended Divine Service every Sunday. The journey became a little more exciting when they encountered two storms in the notorious currents of the Southern Ocean, but the weather was generally mild.

There was an alarming outbreak of chickenpox on board, with 30 passengers catching the contagious disease. Four infants died as a result of contracting the illness. Agnes and her siblings arrived in Sydney on 17 September 1886. After spending so long at sea, the trio must have felt frustrated when the immigrants were quarantined on board at Watson's Bay for another three days, while their clothing was washed and disinfected and the ship fumigated.³³

From 1848—1886 many migrant women passed through the immigration depot at Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney. Thomas, Agnes and Sarah most likely disembarked at the George Street wharf in Sydney and walked up dusty Macquarie Street to the Barracks, feeling both apprehensive and excited, wondering what kind of a place they had landed in. The town was much larger and more spread out than Kendall. Passing the porticoed buildings of Sydney Hospital (today the Mint Museum and Parliament House), they would have arrived at their destination, a three-story brick structure, with a gold-faced clock. From the outside, the building had an



elegant Georgian façade that belied the austere conditions they would encounter inside. Agnes and Sarah would probably have been accommodated for a day or two in a simple timber floored, open dormitory room, together with all the other young girls with whom they had shared the voyage.

Hyde Park Barracks Immigration Depot, designed by convict Francis Greenway (left) Photo: Leonie Bell

In the mornings, employers arrived at the depot to hire young domestic servants. Because they didn't understand local wages, the sisters and their ship-board friends were ripe for exploitation. They may have been employed at a lower rate of pay than local girls, but as yet they wouldn't have known enough about local conditions to make a judgement. Besides, they probably didn't have much money with them and really needed to start work as soon as possible, to pay back the debt from the assisted passage.

Three marriages

Nothing is known of her early employment in the colony, but we do know that Agnes was successful in her quest for a new life. Just over two years later, Agnes and Anselm married in St Pauls Church, Kogarah, on 7 December 1888. They moved to Park Road, Ramsgate, where Anselm set up a modest market garden to provide for his family. Agnes must have found the flat, sandy, forested swamp area around her new home near Botany Bay quite a contrast to the misty peaks and dry-stone-walled, lush green valley pastures of her youth.^{34 35}

They were very early settlers to the area, first recorded in Park Road on their son's birth certificate in 1889, and later in the Government Gazette dated May 1898. Rugleno Samuel Depeno is listed in Sands Directories as living in Park Road from 1900 to 1913, and A. De Pena (or A. Depena) from 1915 until his death. The most likely explanation is that Samuel is the anglicised version of Anselmo, and he probably dropped his first name for simplicity.³⁶

The dirt expanse of Park Road was not in a particularly good state of repair. It was so rutted that in 1907 Anselm and two neighbours complained to the council that carters delivering goods were driving their horses and carts on the footpaths to avoid the huge potholes. It was a dark road on a moonless night, lacking a streetlight.³⁷

Agnes's brother Thomas married Mary Corwell in 1889. They had a son, Thomas Lawrence (1890-1976), in Hurstville, before moving to Valley Heights in the lower Blue Mountains, where they looked after the gate crossing the railway line at Karaba (now Warrimoo) and Thomas worked as a railway fettler. Fettleers maintained the rail tracks.

The fettleers would often camp by the side of the rail line in white canvas tents. Thomas and his workmates were able to obtain food supplies from Mr Casey, who opened the Valley Heights Store in 1910, running a canteen for the men constructing the double line from Emu Plains to Valley Heights. Passengers on passing trains would toss their used newspapers from the train window for the fettleers to read.



Thomas Smiley with his sister Agnes Jane Depena

Photo: Mark De Pena

Fettleers worked in conjunction with the gangers, a skilled position requiring the men to ensure that the tracks were level, measured both horizontally across the two railway tracks and longitudinally along the length of the track. The ganger earned between 9 and 12 shillings per day and worked with a team of 4 fettleers. The fettleers did the heavy work of clearing ballast rocks from between the sleepers. The rail was then lifted with a jack, while the ganger crammed in the small stones called 'chippings' under the sleepers, using a pick-like tool or the end of a shovel.^{38 39 40 41 42}

Today this work is undertaken using multi-million dollar machines and implementing stringent safety precautions, but Thomas was engaged in dangerous work. Newspapers of the time contain dozens of reports of men who slipped and jammed their foot under a rail, or who dropped a 40-foot (12 metre) length of rail weighing 80 lbs (36Kg), crushing bones

and amputating toes. The clang of blue metal ore on the shovel could mask the rumble of an approaching steam train, and Thomas would have needed to keep a sharp ear for trains while working on the line, particularly as a delayed train could mean they were not running according to the timetable.^{43 44}

Thomas' gang conveyed goods and men up and down the line on a railway tricycle, a unique contraption that at first sight, viewed from one side, looked like a bicycle, albeit with large fat wheels that fitted over the railway track. On closer inspection, you could see that a bar was attached to the frame, extending across the sleepers to the parallel track, and a third wheel travelled along this rail. Initially they were constructed of timber, and in later decades from metal. The noise of the tricycle travelling the rails sometimes obscured the sound of an approaching train, and often fettlers were forced to leap for their lives from the machine, which would be smashed to matchsticks. No doubt Thomas would have known Albert Gibson, who received severe head wounds and concussion in a 1923 accident which involved the collision of a tricycle and a goods train at Katoomba. Albert was relatively lucky. Sometimes the men didn't hear the train unit it was too late. Railwaymen euphemistically termed this being 'overtaken' by a train.⁴⁵

It was there, slaving away in the icy chill of the winter mornings and the scorching heat of the summer sun, on the Emu Plains to Mt Victoria section of the line, that Thomas met his future brother-in-law Frederick J. Crothers, who was also a fettler on NSW Railways. Thomas earned 7 shillings per day. His friend was a far more experienced railwayman who had commenced his railway career at the age of 18 and worked on the tracks until he retired 42 years later. Consequently, Frederick earned the princely sum of 7 shillings 6 pence per day.⁴⁶

Once a year the railways would organise a family picnic for several thousand rail employees, the joyous crowd boarding special steam trains to reach the venue. They indulged in consuming copious food and drink, dancing, and outdoor games such as tug-o-war. Thomas and his mate Frederick loved to compete in the friendly races at these events. In their early fifties, they were successful in the 'middle age race', but as they inched towards retirement the friends good-naturedly competed in the 'old buffers' events.^{47 48}

Thomas Smiley survived the dangers of his profession, dying in Penrith in 1942 at the age of 83, leaving an estate worth £430. His obituary in the Nepean Times described him as a 'picturesque old gentleman, kindly disposed, and during his residence at Valley Heights had won the admiration of all. He was a constant worshipper at the Springwood Presbyterian Church'. His wife Mary preceded him, passing away in 1930.

^{49 50 51 52}



Valley Heights Railway Station circa 1910. Photo: Blue Mountains City Library

Agnes's sister Sarah Jane married her brother's friend Frederick, the young railwayman from Penrith, in

1896. The Crothers family lived in Henry Street Parramatta where she was kept busy raising four young sons. Her only daughter died shortly after birth. The family was well-respected by the local community. Sarah was widowed in 1927, and died at her son Cecil's Penrith home on 19 June 1946, aged 84 years.^{53 54 55}

Early days in Scarborough

Western Botany Bay was settled for thousands of years by the Bediagal and Kameygal people of the Darug nation. As Sydney expanded across the Georges and Cook Rivers, the first white settlers began to build farms and homes in the region in the 1850s, displacing the indigenous population and ransacking their food sources. They encountered large areas of forested, freshwater swamp. Today less than 7% of the wetland remains. For over a century it was progressively drained and filled in with waste and loose fill, and even in Peter Depena's day the draining of the swamps remained an important local issue.

The countryside was abundant with native fauna, including kangaroos and wallabies, bandicoots, waterfowl, echidnas, fish, and shell fish, all of which were decimated by the 1930s. There were also dangers for the early settlers from ferocious tiger snakes, and the irritation of flies and mosquito bites.

The majestic forest timbers of 40 or 50-metre-high turpentine and ironbark were progressively logged to construct homes, wharves, railway sleepers, boats and bridges. Dolls Point was original called Strippers Point, denoting it as an area where the timber cutters stripped the bark from the logs in the 1830s. Today there is only a small clump of this original vegetation to be seen in the Hawthorne Street Natural Area near Tonbridge Street, preserving 180 species of vertebrates and 250 species of native flora. The park showcases the type of Coastal Sands Swamp Forest and Kurnell Dune Forest vegetation which would have been prevalent when Agnes and Anselm moved to Sans Souci.⁵⁶

Much of the land was owned by land developer, businessman and politician Thomas Holt, who built a grand house called Sans Souci-

meaning 'without a care' - which was later converted into a hotel by William Rust.⁵⁷



Hawthorne Street Natural Area, a precious remnant of the bushland which once surrounded the settlements of Western Botany Bay.

Photo: Leonie Bell

St George Parish of West Botany was renamed Rockdale in the late 1880s when Anselm and Agnes moved to the area. It was subdivided into three administrative areas called Wards. Rockdale Ward was located north of Bay Street extending to the Cooks River, comprising mostly swamp land and muddy mangroves, with mudflats separating it from the Parish of Botany. It featured a sewerage farm in the area now known as Kyeemagh. There was a small settlement near Arncliffe Station on the Wolli Creek

side of the railway line; another around Rockdale Station and a cluster of houses near today's intersection of Bestic Street and General Holmes Drive at Brighton Le Sands. A third estate was located near the Saywall's Swimming Baths at the end of Bay Street. The baths were built by Thomas Sayward, who also financed a tram line from Rockdale Station to the baths in 1885, which also serviced the nearby Moorfield Racecourse, and the Brighton Hotel, on the current Novotel site.⁵⁸

The most populous area was Arncliffe Ward, which lay on the western side of the rail line, bounded by Harrow Road, Bexley Road and Wollie Creek.

The De Peni's lived in Scarborough Ward in Park Road, which ran between Rocky Point Road and Frederick Street. This ward was bounded on its northern end by Bay Street, its western perimeter defined by Rocky Point Road. It extended south to Sans Souci and Rocky Point. When Anselm and Agnes moved there, kangaroos and wallabies could still be seen leaping through the bush, although in diminishing numbers as the years wore on.⁵⁹

Their first child Simon Peter Depena was born in 1889. The family increased when Peter's brother David was born two years later in 1891, and his younger sister Clarice Leith was born in 1894.^{60 61 62}

Agnes and Anselm remained the rest of their lives in their Park Road home, where Anselm made a living as a market gardener and they kept a few cattle. He died at the age of 78 in 1933 after a long, debilitating illness. Peter's father had struggled for 25 years with spastic paraplegia, a progressive weakness and stiffness of the legs. Cause of death was a cerebral haemorrhage which he had suffered 18 days previously.^{63 64 65 66}

Anselm was well-known and had been held in high regard by the local community. Today we might shudder at the well-meaning but racist compliment of an alderman, expressed at the Rockdale Council meeting following the funeral. Extending his sympathy to the family, he condescendingly declared that Anselm was 'one of the whitest men ever in the district.'

Peter's reply was gracious and affecting;

'I did not realise it before as I do now, that I have lost one of the best friends I ever had. It was a wonderful honour to see a large representative crowd at the funeral, bearing testimony to the poor dad's popularity. He was a braver man than ever I will be. For years, in greatest suffering, he fought out to the end, one of the bravest things I have ever known. He had a cheery smile of welcome, and no one was ever refused assistance who went to his house, and in conclusion, I can simply say I have lost a great old dad.'⁶⁷

The Obituary published in the St George Call described him as a pioneer resident of Ramsgate who was;

'beloved by all who came in contact with him, was well-known by his many acts of kindness to those in need. Always a hard worker, the older residents of Rockdale bear testimony to his honest principles.'⁶⁸

Anselm was buried at Woronora Cemetery. His widow passed away 30 December 1941, leaving an estate to the value of £533. Her ashes are buried beside her husband's body, beneath the grass of an unmarked grave, sprinkled with the purple blossoms of a nearby Jacaranda tree.^{69 70}

Ethnicity

Due to his mixed heritage, Anselm and Agnes's son Peter was dark skinned, and sometimes referred to in the newspapers as 'coloured'. He was raised in the era of the 'White Australia Policy' when racial discrimination was rife. However, as Tony Ohlsson points out in the Royal Australian Historical Society Journal, not all proponents of a White Australia did so out of hatred for black people. Some politicians feared that if wealthy landowners were to import cheap labour from China and India to ease a temporary labour shortage, a sub-class of oppressed and vulnerable people would be created, separated from wider society by culture, language and custom. It was thought that black or Asian immigration could lead to the long term social and economic detriment of the colony. Proponents of this view considered that unregulated, indentured labour was slavery in action, if not in name, as was later proven in the case of the Queensland Kanakas.⁷¹

As a result of this contentious policy, there were very few non-Caucasian residents in Australia in general, and the St George District in particular. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australia's population in 1888 was 3,672,800, with just over a million residents in NSW. Sydney's entire urban population in 1889 was 381,730 persons. The 1881 census states that 60.8% of the population was born in Australasia, with an additional 33.39% born in the UK. Immigrants from other British Possessions were a scant 0.51%. Subtracting the remaining European and American immigrants, this leaves a total of 3.42% of the Australian population who were non-Caucasian.⁷²

The Rockdale community contained a small minority of Chinese market gardeners. Additionally, there were indigenous Australians, who were gradually forced into shanty camps at Blakehurst and Sans Souci, on the site of today's St George Motor Boat Club.⁷³

Unsurprisingly, there were very few men of African or Afro-Caribbean heritage in Australia, the most well-known being the Jamaican convict Billy Blue (1767-1834) who was transported to Sydney in 1801. It is easy to see why Peter and his brother trained in the gym with the two well-known African American fighters Sam Langford and Sam McVey. The four men must have felt a kind of kinship and shared experience as outsiders.

Racial discrimination can take many forms. Olga Duggan, an early Souci resident, recalled that Peter received the nickname Pelaco, named after a famous brand of shirt. One company advertisement featured a grotesque sketch of a black indigenous man wearing a Pelaco shirt with the line "Mine tinkit they fit".⁷⁴

For a dark-skinned man of African heritage, life would have been quite challenging at times in this predominantly European environment, yet Peter Depena was to prove that with dedication, hard work and generosity of spirit, anything was possible.⁷⁵



Kyeemagh Market Gardens. Many Chinese immigrants worked in the gardens. Anselm's market garden would have looked similar to this plot. Photo: Bayside Council Library

Education

Peter's first school was Sans Souci School, which opened in 1885 and was known as Sandringham School for many years. When Peter approached the school on his first day he saw an unlined timber structure with a tin roof. It was situated on a two-acre (8,000 square metres) block of land dotted with wattle trees which had been planted by the students on Arbor Day, an annual tradition. There was also a cricket pitch, which would have been great fun for sports-loving Peter. The enclosed verandah of the school building operated as a hat room and wash room, but there was no town water. The water supply for the wash room was a large square water tank attached to the rear of the building. The teacher's residence was located adjacent to the schoolhouse, surrounded by a white picket fence. It featured a small front garden planted with a selection of trees, and five steps led up to the front verandah.

When he entered the single classroom, measuring 24 feet (7.3 metres) long and 16 feet (4.8 metres) wide, he was directed to sit at a 10 foot (3 metre) long wooden desk, perched on a hard, backless bench seat, squashed together with ten other infants. His teacher, Marion Gaudrey, was a recently qualified teacher, having been appointed to Sans Souci School as a pupil-teacher in 1891. She had been employed in a full-time training role for four years, teaching the children in the classroom, while receiving an hour or so of instruction in teaching from the Principal Teacher each afternoon when the students had left for home. Most pupil teachers were employed when they were 14-16 years old, so it is highly likely Peter's teacher was less than 20 years old.⁷⁶

The older children were at the other end of the room, taught by Montague Wyatt, who had been appointed Principal the previous June. He was about 30 years old and recently married. The room was quite crowded, as there were about 95 students enrolled, although on average

only about 70 arrived for class each day. By the time Peter graduated from elementary school, the student body had increased to about 144.

The classroom was heated by a wood fire in an open fireplace, fuelled by firewood which the children scavenged from the bush en-route to school each chilly winter morning.

The teachers frequently reminded the students to sit up straight, as good posture was important. His class commenced at 9.30am and finished at 4pm, which was a long time for the small children to sit erect on the uncomfortable forms. The infants would frequently fall asleep with fatigue, their little heads resting on the desks.

Peter's school year comprised four terms, with a four-week holiday at Christmas, one week in Easter and two in Winter. In 1903 this was modified to four weeks at Christmas, and one week each at Easter, Winter and Spring. Students were arranged in classes 1 to 5, based around a set of graded reading material. Generally, it took more than a year to complete each grade. The recommended durations were eighteen months for Class 1; two years each for Classes 2 and 3; one year each for Classes 4 and 5. However in practice these recommendations were often exceeded. Peter took ten years to complete all five levels.⁷⁷

Peter studied the 'three Rs', reading, writing and arithmetic. He was issued with a slate and slate pencil for writing exercises, which involved copying letters and words. Later when he moved on to Class 2 he received a copy book to replace the slate. Using a pen and ink took practice, as it was always a struggle not to smudge the black ink on the page. The teacher was fond of asking the children to copy proverbs into their copy book, which had the dual purpose of providing instruction in both writing and moral guidance. When he had developed a reasonable vocabulary, Peter was required to improve his spelling by writing out passages dictated by the teacher.

He also studied geography by drawing maps, illustrated with key physical features and major towns. When Peter commenced school, Australia was still a British colony, so it was natural that history lessons concentrated on learning the dates of the reigns of the British kings and queens. In a nod to Australian history they were taught about the journeys of Australian explorers such as Burke and Wills.

Discipline and patriotism to the British Empire were emphasised during Cadet Corps sessions. Both boys and girls marched briskly around the playground in exercises which were laid out in the British Army textbook. The boys then drilled with wooden rifles. However physical fitness could also be fun. Principal Wyatt organised a Swimming Club in 1894. No doubt Peter and his class mates, many of them in bare feet, would have eagerly traipsed past the cow paddocks and surrounding bushland to Sans Souci Swimming Enclosure, to splash about in the bay. As a bonus, swimming club members left class early one day per week to train.⁷⁸



**Sans Souci
Swimming
Enclosure
1912,**

**Photo:
Bayside
Council
Library**

Many of Peter's fellow students were the children of servants, fishermen, or gardeners like his father. Although there were some middle-class children attending the school, class distinction saw some parents send their children to Kogarah School rather than suffer the indignity of their offspring associating with the common working classes.

Sans Souci Public School did not offer tuition in the higher Classes 4 and 5, so Peter progressed to Kogarah Superior Public School, where he enjoyed swimming with the Kogarah Public School Swimming Club. The children's swimming carnivals were both competitive and fun. They competed in serious championship relays and freestyle events, but also enjoyed the antics of novelty races, such as the quaintly named 'Searching for the North Pole' or 'Catching the Duck.'^{79 80}



San Souci Public School. The boys carry wooden rifles for drill practice.

Photo: Bayside Council Library.

Kogarah Public School opened in 1870 and became a Superior Public School in 1891, until 1912, when the school system was reformed. A Superior School combined primary and secondary school education. Unlike a High School which featured specialised university-trained teachers, the Superior School teacher instructed the students in all subjects. Superior Schools were first formed in 1881 and by the 1890s when Peter was attending school, there were 64 Superior Public Schools in NSW offering further studies for those who had completed the elementary school course. The *Public Instruction Act* of 1880 compelled parents to send children to school for a minimum of 70 days per six-month period from the age of six. Since schooling was only compulsory until the age of 14, most boys of his age considered there was no need to progress beyond elementary school, or at most completed two years of secondary education, before moving on to full time work or trade training. High Schools were still a novel idea, and very few students attended these institutions, which were primarily aimed at university preparation. There were only four High Schools in Sydney in 1905.^{81 82}

Peter's grade 4 subjects were now reading, writing, dictation, arithmetic, Euclid (geometry), object lessons, history, geography, singing and drawing. As he moved to his final year this expanded to include mathematics, Latin and science. Peter passed the Junior Commercial Certificate in 1905, aged 16, and was presented with his certificate by the NSW Governor, Admiral Sir Harry Holdsworth Rawson K.C.B.^{83 84 85}

He commenced training as a carpenter at Sydney Technical College the following year. Peter showed great promise in his woodworking skills, passing the second-year examinations in carpentry with Honours. His illiterate father Anselm would surely have been proud of his son's educational achievements. He may not have been quite so proud of his other son's behaviour.^{86 87}



Sans Souci School about 1895. Peter Depena is centre in the front row.
Photo: NSW State Archives and Records⁸⁸

David Depena

Peter's younger brother Dave shared his brother's love of sport, particularly boxing and horse racing, and enjoyed cycling as a youth. Dave Depena was a brawny man, as might be expected of a boxer. Peter and Dave trained with African American boxer Sam Langford. For years afterward, people would recall that Dave once fought the famous Les Darcy in the ring. His prowess was well known in boxing circles as a featherweight who was 'as full of energy as a fighting cock'.^{89 90 91}

Dave punched strenuously, like a hurricane, hard and fast. He was once described a 'nuggety little chap' and a 'clean plucky little boxer', but he could also be a pugnacious fighter. In one bout, he was disqualified for persistently adopting rough tactics in the clinches, delivering forbidden kidney punches, and disobeying the-referee's orders to break.^{92 93}

When Dave Depena retired from boxing around 1916, his passion for horse racing led to a short-lived career as a pony trainer, but trouble, and his boxing career, never seemed far away. If it wasn't something to do with the horses, it was his penchant for getting into a fight. He was a gambler, and once when called upon to substantiate an alibi in Darlington Court, he stated that he clearly remembered what he was doing on that particular date, because he had 'struck a double' at Rosebery Park races. The pony training didn't last long and eventually in mid-1925 he obtained work as an iron moulder's labourer.⁹⁴

Dave's consumption of alcohol frequently found him in trouble with the law. Peter would have been proud of his younger brother's boxing prowess, but it must have been deeply disturbing, if not humiliating, to the celebrated alderman, when David's activities were reported in the press.

In July 1925, a drunken David Depena punched the proprietor of a Pitt Street wine bar, and one of his employees, for refusing to loan him money. He was fined £2 in Central Police Court.⁹⁵



Peter's brother, 20-year-old boxer Dave Depena

Photo from St George Call, 14 October 1911⁹⁶

In November 1925, he assaulted a man in Pitt Street, demanding he give him two shillings, and was subsequently brought up on charges of assault

occasioning actual bodily harm. He was back in court in February 1926 and again in November on similar charges of assaulting an acquaintance near Tattersalls in Pitt Street. The February charge was proved but he was acquitted of the latter event. Unsurprisingly, the dispute concerned the payout from a gambling bet.^{97 98 99 100 101}

Dave was convicted in December 1930, in Redfern Police Court, of printing betting slips and conducting an extensive, lucrative illegal betting operation on the Warwick Farm horse races. He was fined £30 in lieu of three months jail for the tipping competition and a further £10 or 40 days jail for printing thousands of betting tickets.¹⁰²

A large crowd gathered in great excitement on Pitt Street, Sydney, in 1933, when aggression turned to punches between David and a sailor. Once again, he was convicted of riotous conduct.¹⁰³

While Peter Depena became a successful businessman, his brother was a labourer who turned to contracting. Unfortunately, he did not share his older sibling's business sense. Dave went bankrupt in 1951, owing money to Hastings Deering Pty Ltd.¹⁰⁴

Eight months later, Dave was struck with a sudden, mortal illness. He died in hospital at the age of 59 on 19 September 1951 and his ashes were buried in Woronora Cemetery.¹⁰⁵



Moorfield Racecourse was not far from the Depenas' home. It operated from 1888—1961. James Cook Boys High School and Moorefield Girls High School are located on the site.¹⁰⁶

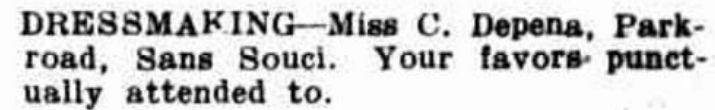
Photo: Bayside Council Library

Clarice Leith Depena

Peter's little sister Clarice lived with her parents in Park Road, offering her services as a dressmaker through advertisements in the local newspaper.¹⁰⁷

Indian herbalist Bhand Chand Shergill Munshi was living nearby in 1060 Rocky Point Road in 1927, just a few doors down from her brother Peter. Bhand was born about 1877 and had run a boarding house in Adelaide in 1917 before moving to Newtown in Sydney about 1919. It is uncertain when they married, but by 1930 Clarice was living with her husband at 5 Park Street, near her parent's house. Her spouse moved out of the family home in the mid-1930s and Clarice relocated to her parent's house. He died intestate in 1952 in Ludhiana, in Punjab state, India, aged 75.^{108 109 110}

After the death of her father in 1933 Clarice continued to look after her mother, until Agnes died in 1941. Clarice was in no hurry to vacate the home in which she had grown up with so many happy memories. Clarice did not move on until the fifties, when she relocated to Carlton, eking out a living as a shirt-maker and machinist. She retired to Kirrawee in the sixties, briefly returned to Sans Souci in the seventies, but died at Sylvania Heights on 10 July 1977, aged 83. She is buried in Woronora Cemetery.^{111 112 113}



DRESSMAKING—Miss C. Depena, Park-road, Sans Souci. Your favors punctually attended to.

Advertisement appearing in the St George Call, 1914

Lillian Irene Royall

Peter met and fell in love with local teenager Lillian Irene Royall, who was born in December 1896, the daughter of Frederick Charles Royall and Lucy Catherine Islip. When Lillian was a toddler the family lived in Gosford, where her father worked as a saddler in 1903. Lillian experienced the devastating loss of her mother in 1908 at the age of 11 years old. Lillian was a lone child, with no brothers or sisters to share her grief. Frederick Royall and his daughter had only each other for support,



but times were tough for her father, who was engaged in a rapidly vanishing profession. As the new century progressed and increasing numbers of people owned cars rather than horses, he was forced to abandon his skilled trade to find other income streams. Following Lillian's marriage, with no family to care for, he was free to move wherever work was available or the whim took him. Frederick moved to Kalgoorlie about 1916 and then Gippsland, where he worked as a barman during the twenties.^{114 115}

Lillian Irene Royall. Photo: Mark De Pena

Returning briefly to visit his daughter in 1929, Frederick applied for one of 28 positions at Brighton-le-Sands Municipal Swimming Baths and Dressing Sheds, responding to an advertisement in the local press. In today's modern age of Human Resource departments, we find it curious that the Rockdale Council Aldermen were expecting to choose the

successful candidates themselves. To their horror, 400 people applied, and the council chambers were awash in reams of paperwork. Clearly one council meeting offered insufficient time to consider the virtues of each resume, let alone make a choice. A Special Meeting was convened to discuss the problem. Peter Depena was seen to have a conflict of interest and the councillors requested he absent himself from the selection process. It was eventually resolved to appoint only the Baths Manager, who would then personally interview and select his new staff. The aldermen gave a sigh of relief that they didn't need to sift through 400 applications after all.¹¹⁶

It seems Frederick was unsuccessful in his application. He took up an opportunity as a watchman (security officer) in Newcastle for a couple of years before finally returning to Rockdale, where he initially lived in Premier Street as a caretaker. Around the mid-1940s he moved into his son-in-law's property at 1130 Rocky Point Road, Ramsgate. Although the old age pension had been introduced in NSW in 1900, he continued to work into his seventies as a cleaner, until his death in 1954 aged 81.¹¹⁷



Brighton Baths, 1931

Photo: Bayside Council Library

Marriage and family

In April 1914 twenty-four-year-old Peter married Lillian Irene Royall, who was five years younger than her spouse. Consent to the marriage had to be obtained from the Registrar General, as she was underage. Following in his parent's footsteps, Peter and Lillian married in St Paul's Church, Kogarah. Peter looked debonair in his three-piece suit with starched collar, white bowtie and gloves, and a white carnation buttonhole. Lillian wore an elegant full-length dress, overlaid in sheer fabric, with a ruched bodice and long sleeves gathered at the wrist.¹¹⁸



Peter and Lillian were married in St Pauls Church, Kogarah, as were his parents Anselm and Agnes

Photo: Leonie Bell

Just a few months after their wedding, Britain declared war

on Germany. Australian volunteers were immediately called upon to fight for the 'Mother Country'. They were required to be 6' 6" (198 cm) tall, and a minimum age of 20. Both Peter and his brother Dave were the right age to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force, but probably not tall enough and definitely not the right colour. The 'Instructions for the guidance of enlisting officers at approved military recruiting depots' issued in 1916, stated that 'Aboriginals, half-casts, or men with Asiatic blood are not to be enlisted – This applies to all coloured men.'

As the war dragged on, it soon became apparent that Australia could not meet its commitment to Britain to supply men for the war effort. At the end of 1915, Prime Minister Billy Hughes promised Britain 50,000 more troops – in addition to the 9,500 per month being sent as reinforcements for the 60,000 Australians already overseas. Compounding the difficulty, the population rejected conscription by a narrow margin in two referendums in 1916 and 1917. The government was forced to relax not only the height and age restrictions, but also the racial bar.

In October 1917, a new military order stated: 'Half-castes may be enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force, provided that the examining Medical Officers are satisfied that one of the parents is of European origin.' Exact numbers of indigenous aboriginal men who fought in the war are estimated to be around 1,000, but the figure is uncertain, as race was not usually noted on the enlistment papers, simply 'dark complexion' or a similar description. Several hundred Chinese also signed up for overseas service.¹¹⁹

By this stage, Peter had begun a family and was settled into his sporting and business endeavours and his new home. It is understandable that although he was now eligible to enlist, he resisted the renewed call to arms. Neither he nor his brother went to war.

Peter and Lillian's first daughter Irene C. was conceived in 1914, tragically dying at birth, as did second daughter Beryl J., who was born in 1922, dying in infancy the same year.^{120 121 122}

A son, Peter Joffre, was born at home in 1915, delivered by Nurse Winchester and Doctor Binns. Peter was 26 years old, and Lillian a teenage mother at 18. Second son Neville Frederick was born 7 June 1918. Another brother Laurie David followed on 31 March 1919. After a ten-year gap, there was one final son, Raymond George, born in 1929.¹²³

^{124 125}

At the age of 18 Peter already owned a block of land in Sans Souci, which is recorded as experiencing flooding during wet weather in 1907, and he lived in the Scarborough Ward of Rockdale most of his life, moving from his parent's Park Road home to 1130 Rocky Point Road, Sans Souci on his marriage. The property remained in the family ownership, while Peter and Lillian briefly moved to a house named 'Camden' in Campbell Street, Kogarah, from 1916 to 1919, then returned to Rocky Point Road for a decade before purchasing a family home at 156 Russell Avenue, Dolls Point. They briefly considered buying Primrose House at the end of the street; the elegant two-story structure built in 1891 by James Eve as the Scarborough Hotel. Peter decided Primrose House was too expansive for their needs, as it featured accommodation for 40 people. ^{126 127 128}

Russell Avenue was a gracious tree-lined thoroughfare. Peter's two story, nine room, residence was located on a large half acre block with 120 feet frontage (36 metres) and stretching to 200 feet deep (61 metres). It featured a grass tennis court, which was perfect for entertaining and hosting social days and picnics for the many associations and sporting bodies he was involved with. ^{129 130 131}



Russell Avenue Sans Souci, 1914
Photo: Bayside Council Library



Simon Peter Depena and Lillian Irene Royall on their wedding day, 8 April 1914
Photo: Mark De Pena

Boxing career

Peter loved sport of all kinds. He was a popular lightweight boxer who began entering amateur boxing matches around 1910, turning professional on 21 June 1912 at the age of 23, when he faced London fighter Young Sullivan for 20 rounds. Peter was the first 'coloured' boxer to appear at the Star Stadium, Wollongong in December 1912. The following year he faced opponent Franz Barrett in a Wollongong match which displayed stamina and 'gamenous' from both parties and resulted in a win by the boy from Ramsgate over 20 hard-fought rounds. His sparring partner was African American Sam McVey and he trained at the Stroud Gym with another African American fighter known as 'The Boston Tar Baby', Sam Langford. He rose early each morning to run on the sands of the Botany Bay beachfront near his home, and trained again at the gym in the afternoon after work.^{132 133 134 135 136 137 138 139 140 141 142 143}

Although he retired from professional boxing around 1916, he was always ready to don the gloves for a good cause. A benefit concert was held in 1930 to aid St George residents who were suffering from the effects of the Depression, many of whom were homeless and living in squatter's camps by the beach. Alderman Depena went three-rounds with Professor Russell, 'Champion of Scotland', as part of an entertaining, eclectic program of popular vaudeville acts, wrestling and boxing in the Rockdale Town Hall.¹⁴⁴

Top: Sans Souci Beach 1915, where Peter trained each morning
Photo by Joseph Brokenshire, courtesy of Bayside Council Library

Bottom: 1930 The North Brighton Unemployed Camp, in the sand hills along Cook Park at Kyeemagh, to the north of where Cooks River now enters Botany Bay. Photo: Bayside Council Library



Peter the carpenter

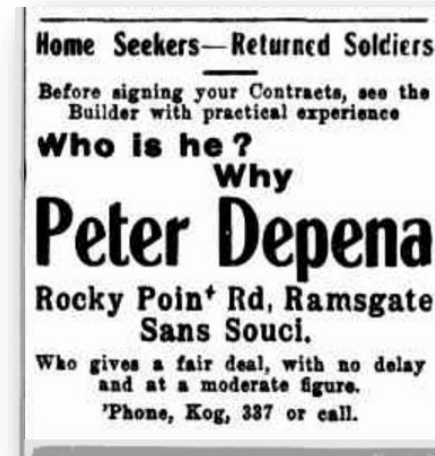
Peter's early boxing career was concurrent with his more conventional work in the building industry. He was keenly interested in woodwork and became apprenticed to a local carpenter at the end of 1905, working while studying carpentry part-time at Sydney Technical College. Unlike today's schoolchildren who expect to take off a gap year, Peter finished school on Friday, and started work on Monday, earning a first-year apprentice wage of 2/6- (two shillings and six pence i.e. 26 cents) per week. The standard length of apprenticeship in this period was seven years and his salary would have gradually risen over this period.^{145 146}

Carpentry was hot, sweaty and hard physical labour. There were no power tools, no nail guns and no electric saws. The hardwood timber frame of a typical suburban house was hand-sawn. The structure was assembled and nailed with expert blows of the hammer. No doubt the fitness obtained through Peter's boxing training was beneficial to his trade work, but training after a day's work on the building site must have been exhausting at times.

On completion of his trade apprenticeship, Peter began life as a journeyman in a modest way, offering basic building services, but gradually increased his skills and knowledge, working his way up to become a highly respected a Master Builder. In 1917 Peter was installing fly screens, doors, and shop fittings, running a small tradesman's business from his Campbell Street home in Kogarah. Two years later he was operating from the corner of Rocky Point Road and Park Road, offering his services as a contractor specialising in shop and office fittings, fly screens and doors, fibrous ceilings, plastering and tuckpointing. Tuckpointing is a highly skilled job involving removing and replacing crumbling and missing mortar between stones, blocks and bricks. This prevents further

deterioration due to moisture penetrating the failing joints and compromising the whole structure.^{147 148 149 150 151}

By 1921 he had moved up to building homes, advertising his building services to a target market of returned soldiers. His marketing motto was decidedly no-nonsense, and rather lacking in flair; 'Who gives a fair deal with no delay at a moderate figure'. The slogan later became 'Personal Attention Always. Honesty, Civility, and Attention,' as he expanded his services to include drawing plans and preparing specifications.^{152 153}

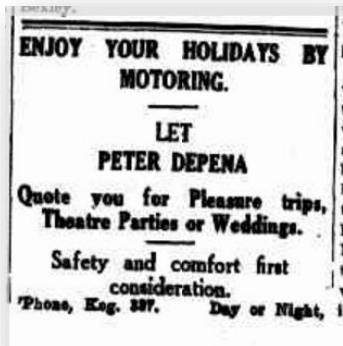


Advertisement for Peter Depena's building services
Photo from St George Call, December 1921

Innovative business ventures

Most people travelled in the inner Sydney region by tram. For longer distance trips, the steam train was the main form of transport. Car ownership was very low and until the 1950s was predominantly in the realm of the upper middle classes. Deliveries were mostly undertaken in horse drawn carts until the 1930s, although businesses increasingly owned motor driven vans. In Sydney in 1923, a traffic survey revealed that 39.2 % vehicle movements were by horse-drawn vehicles, 33.8 % by car and 27 % by motor van or lorry. In 1920 one in 55 people owned a car. By the end of the decade this increased to one in eleven.

Today there are 18.4 million vehicles in Australia for an estimated 24.4 million people. In 1921 there were only 33,214 vehicles in New South Wales. Peter perceived a business opportunity. He owned a Baby Austin, a Dodge car and a Model T ford with a galvanised iron roof. In addition to marketing wedding car hire services, he offered customers the novel, luxury alternative of chauffeur driven excursions to the countryside by motorcar. ^{154 155 156 157}



Advertisement appearing in St George Call 1923

Lillian also enjoyed driving, and according to family lore was the first woman to drive over the Blue Mountains in the Baby Austin, although there is a competing claim that Lady Sholto George Douglas, formerly Mrs. Mendelssohn Pickles, of Sydney and Leura, was the first. ¹⁵⁸

One motorist of the period described the road;

'The drive through Penrith and over the Blue Mountains, passing through Katoomba and on to Mount Victoria, is very enjoyable, although some very high altitudes are reached, and careful driving on the mountain cuttings is necessary all the time.' ¹⁵⁹

The family collected a large quantity of interesting geological specimens on this trip, but the vehicle was not very powerful uphill. The car stuttered its way upward until finally they had to jettison the rocks one by one to lighten the load and make it over the top of the hill. ¹⁶⁰



Lillian Irene Depena with her children Peter Joffre, Neville Frederick and Laurie David

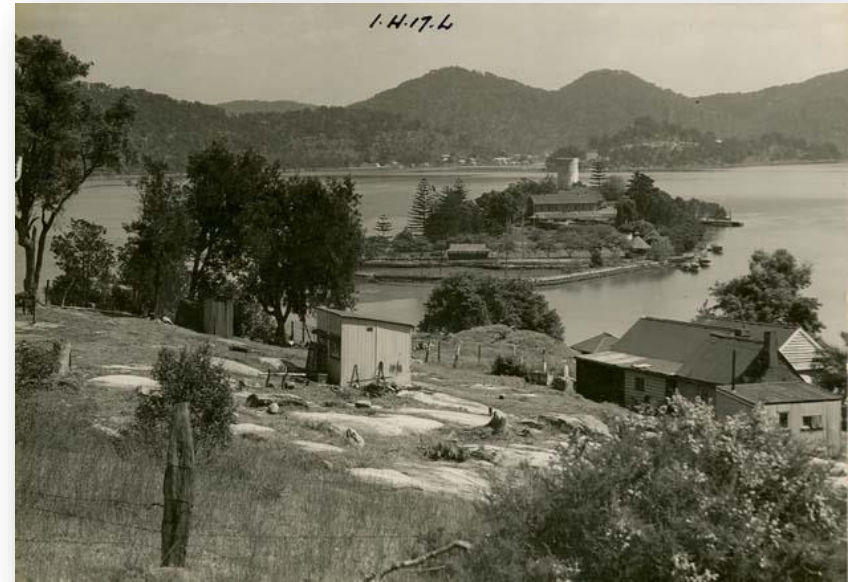
Photo: Mark De Pena

Illness

Apparently, Peter developed a problem with over consumption of alcohol, although this is not explicitly stated in the newspaper notice where he publicly thanked his medical staff for their assistance. Did he feel peer pressure to participate in drinking bouts at the pub with his mates? Perhaps he had felt pressured by the rough and tumble of life in the professional boxing circuit and the constant need to win. Possibly it was the pressure of starting up in business. In 1922, he decided to resolve his problem and spent some time in Brooklyn Hospital. ¹⁶¹

It is fortunate that he entered the institution in its early days, which at this stage was an asylum for alcoholics. Situated in a remote location on Peat Island on the Hawkesbury River, 56 km north of Sydney, this facility for the mentally ill and the inebriated was opened in 1911. An asylum should be a place of refuge for those who are vulnerable, but in its latter years the hospital developed a fearsome reputation for brutality, torture and suicides. It was a true Bedlam that was eventually closed when the last patient left in 2010. ^{162 163}

His stay at Brooklyn Hospital was brief and Peter resumed his life and increasingly successful business with vigour.



Brooklyn Hospital, Peat Island

Photo: State Archives and Records NSW ¹⁶⁴

Peter the Master Builder

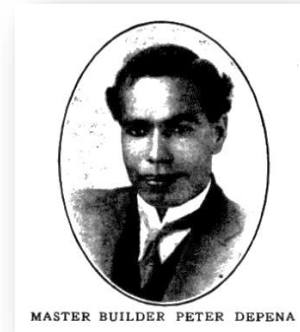
Peter's construction business continued to be highly successful. He joined the St George Branch of the Master Builders Association and was elected Junior Vice President in 1928. The Master Builders Association sponsored prizes for students of Carpentry and Plumbing at Kogarah Technical College, and Peter was only too pleased to introduce his colleagues to his former tutors. ^{165 166}

He was popular with his staff members, staging an annual employee's picnic for the 30 men who worked for him, to which he invited several business associates. In 1926 he hired three buses to transport them to Sublime Point and down Bulli Pass in the Illawarra for a splendid celebratory meal at Mr Kolle's Family Hotel in Bulli. Returning via the Royal National Park along the rustic, dirt track of Lady Carrington Drive, they arrived at Audley. This was the perfect spot for staging a friendly game of cricket. The men pitched and batted with gusto until the ball went over the boundary – in this case landing irretrievably in the Hacking River. Remaining undeterred, this was not to be the end of the day. They all proceeded to Peter's house in Sans Souci and partied on till midnight. Surely there cannot have been too many employers who so generously invited their workers home for tea. ¹⁶⁷

He also volunteered his Russell Avenue house and extensive gardens for the benefit of the North Scarborough Progress Association for a fete in 1930. Fortune-tellers, dancing, tennis, music and races for both adults and children enlivened the gala picnic which attracted 300 revellers, who raised £32 for local community causes. ^{168 169}

As a builder, he was a practical man, accustomed to the exertions of physical labour. Consequently, he was only too happy to organise and participate in a working bee to beautify Cook Park at Dolls Point in 1930. The council had insufficient funds to pay unemployed men to do the job.

Moreover, if they had spent money on parks there would have been substantial criticism that other infrastructure projects like roads were more important, as parks were considered a luxury item. Peter was to be seen swinging an axe along with other civic-minded residents, clearing the overgrown scrub in the park, attracting the admiration of residents who could see their alderman at work on their behalf. ¹⁷⁰



Master Builder Peter Depena
Photo from *Construction and Local Government Journal* 1928 ¹⁷¹

Peter exhibited great courage when working at the Mortlake Gas Works in 1936. A colleague fell across an electric cable in what was potentially a lethal accident.

Despite the threat of electrocution, Peter hauled on the man's collar to drag him to safety. He received a shock up his arm, numbing the limb temporarily. He later admitted,

"I am lucky to be alive. It was an awkward position to be in. If I left the man there, he would have been electrocuted, and if I grabbed hold of him, I might have suffered the same fate." ¹⁷²

Of course, Peter was no saint. Presumably he was so busy with his carpentry business, council duties, campaigning and philanthropic work that he failed to lodge tax returns in 1936 and 1937, for which he was fined £50 in 1939. ¹⁷³

Peter the sportsman

There was more to the man than hard work. He loved sport in any form, particularly sailing and water sports, in which he first appears in the records around 1907. During his apprenticeship studies, he joined the Technical College Swimming Club and St George Swimming Club, winning several races. He went on to hold various committee positions in sporting clubs; Manager of Sans Souci Football Club, Social Secretary of the St George Junior Football Association, Vice-Patron of Scarborough Life Saving Club, and Patron of the St George Ladies Cricket Club. He competed with the Rockdale and District Cycling Club, enjoyed playing billiards, and remained a keen boxer.^{174 175 176 177 178 179 180 181 182}

In 1907, he became a founding committee member of the Pastime Club, which was a social club for young men, meeting Monday and Thursday nights at a local hall owned by hotel proprietor Mr Frater, where the boys could expend their energies donning boxing gloves, tossing rope quoits over a wooden peg mounted on a base, attacking the punching balls, gaining aerobic fitness with skipping ropes, and playing Bobs. This popular tabletop game was played with one black and six white balls about an inch (2.5cm) in diameter. Players scored points by using a wooden cue to propel the black ball into a white ball, attempting to knock them both into a series of pockets on a horizontal timber frame placed at the far end of the table.^{183 184}

Peter's father came from an island nation, so perhaps the sea was in his blood. Sailing was his passion and he had been sailing on Botany Bay since approximately 1910. By 1921 he was a highly-experienced sailor and was elected Chairman and Umpire of the St George Sailing Club. By 1926 he held the position of Rear Commodore. He was elected unanimously as Vice Chairman of the St George Sailing Club in 1931, eventually rising to Commodore. He was appointed a life member in 1986. One journalist

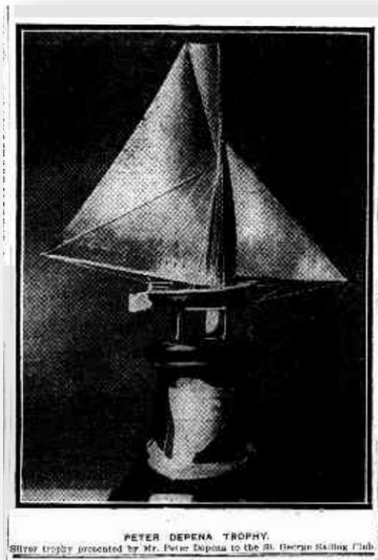
alleged that 'While Peter sits as an alderman, sailing on Botany Bay will never die.'^{185 186 187 188}

In January 1929 Commodore Depena and fellow sailor Alf Polidore, Vice President of the St George Sailing Club travelled to Western Australia for the Interstate 16-foot Sailing Championships. They thoroughly enjoyed the 2 ½ day rail journey across the Nullarbor on the Transcontinental train, which they considered most luxurious. On arrival in Perth they were received very favourably by local club members. In fact, their hosts kept them so busy socialising, they commented that there had hardly been any time for sleep. Disappointingly, the NSW clubs had only sponsored one boat for the event, compared with Queensland, which had raised the funds to send three boats. Regardless, the trip was deemed a highly memorable success.^{189 190}



St George Sailing Club, Riverside Drive, Sans Souci, 1956. The Hughes Boatshed was purchased in 1927 for a clubhouse. The club has since been re-sited twice. Photo: Bayside Council Library¹⁹¹

Peter was generous with his patronage and in 1921 presented a magnificent trophy, in the form of a yacht, to the St George Sailing Club. This trophy was awarded for many years. He also donated prizes for various fundraising events for both the St George Sailing Club and the Ramsgate Amateur Swimming and Lifesaving Club.^{192 193}



The silver Peter Depena Trophy
Photo from the Arrow newspaper 1921

He won the Ramsgate Billiard tournament in 1924, watched by 80 members. Peter encouraged billiards club members by presenting trophies on several occasions, not only in his official role as local alderman, but as a lover of billiards. He proclaimed that to win in billiards a player needed 'the right temperament', a quality he possessed in abundance.^{194 195}

Peter was involved with the St George Junior Football Association as early as 1909, actively participating in fundraising social activities, and became President of the Ramsgate 'C' Grade Football Club in 1923. His generosity to up and coming sportsmen was further demonstrated when he sponsored a gold medal for the winners of the First-Grade Competition.^{196 197 198}

Peter was talented with all ball games, including those of the bowling green, representing Rockdale Council in the Local Government versus St George Bowling Club annual bowls competition in 1929.¹⁹⁹

There was great anticipation for a special event at the St George District Amateur Athletics Club carnival to be held at Hurstville Oval in February 1936. The club invited aldermen from local councils to run a relay race, where teams of four aldermen had to run 75 yards each, to win a pennant which had been sponsored by the Leicagraph Photo Company. Kogarah, Rockdale, Bexley, Hurstville and Sutherland aldermen were at fever pitch in anticipation of the competition for the prized championship pennant. Bexley Council even postponed its meeting so that the councillors could attend the event. As usual, Peter was on the team representing Rockdale Council. Always an optimist, Peter reportedly joked that he was already preparing a space in the Rockdale Council Chamber for the championship pennant, to which a Hurstville alderman replied, "Over my dead body". Alas, several members of the Rockdale team tripped and fell mid race, smashing any hope of winning. Consequently, Alderman Norman Guess dropped out of the team, but the remainder were willing to train for the next event, a swimming carnival at Enfield.^{200 201 202}

When the St George Amateur Cycling Club held a benefit at Hurstville Oval in 1937 to aid the St George District Ambulance, naturally it was Peter Depena who was deputised by his fellow councillors to represent them in the half-mile bicycle derby for local aldermen. Dignified Kogarah councillors declined to participate, stating indignantly that the aldermen would 'look ridiculous' on bicycles. In contrast, Rockdale Alderman Norman Guess considered that 'Aldermen were definite drawcards in such events as had been proved in recent local carnivals.'^{203 204}

After the Alderman's Bicycle Race at Hurstville Oval, Peter dropped himself into hot water at the next council meeting, when he

mischievously declared that Hurstville's parks and the public square at Hurstville Station were more beautiful than Rockdale's beaches and parkland and therefore council should increase its expenditure in this regard. This prompted vigorous discussion in the chambers. Mayor Beehag indignantly pointed out that they had spent £100,000 on parks in the last six years and that it took time for the plants to mature. In a decade, he declared, Scarborough, Arncliffe, Gardiner and Barton Parks would be in wonderful bloom.

Peter was actively involved in promoting the interests of water sports associations and served on the committee of a swimming club. His disparaging remarks were clearly calculated to increase the likelihood of the council voting agreement with the next item on the council meeting agenda; a proposal by Brighton Lifesaving Club to create terraced gardens and a concrete footpath beside the club premises. The ploy was successful. The councillors voted to fund improvements to the area and to instruct its engineer to prepare a plan on beautifying the beach near the club premises.²⁰⁵

Later that month Peter was voted to represent the council yet again for the Aldermanic Race at Oatley District Amateur Swimming Club in the 50-yard scratch race for St George District Aldermen. It was a busy month for swimming events, as Rockdale Council nominated Aldermen Depena, Barton and Powell as its team in the annual aldermen's relay swimming race to be held by Enfield Council at the Enfield Olympic Swimming Pool on 11 March.^{206 207}

In common with his brother Dave, Peter loved the sport of kings, and was fond of laying a bet or two on the horses. His son Neville would recount how his father would frequently come home from the races and toss a pile of cash on the bed, telling his sons to count the money.²⁰⁸

Peter retired from active sports, but never gave up his fighting spirit. As a builder, he was no stranger to wielding an axe, and took on the challenge of tree felling in 1936 at the age of 46. He threw down the gauntlet to champion axeman, and local butcher, Casey Clissold, at a contest in Hurstville.²⁰⁹



Landscaping works in progress in 1937 to create terraced gardens around the Brighton Lifesaving Club building, following Peter's provocative claim that Hurstville had better parks and gardens.

Photo: Bayside Council Library

Peter the Freemason

Many businessmen find it helpful to establish a network of contacts through Masonic lodges. Peter's father was a life member of Bishop Ridley Lodge No. 259 at Kogarah, so it was only natural that the son joined the same masonic order, rising through the offices to the position of Worshipful Master in 1920. This Protestant Orange Lodge was formed in 1902 by James Robinson, building its membership to around 65 members by 1920, and flourishing until the late 1920s, when its membership age declined. Consequently, they took the unusual step of holding lunch meetings, but eventually it dissolved.^{210 211}



Masonic symbol

Graphic: Pixabay²¹²

The objects of Orangeism were to 'maintain the Protestant religion, and promote its principles throughout every part of the Empire' The lodge met monthly on a Wednesday evening, originally in the Oddfellows Hall in Bryant Street Rockdale, and later in the

Rechabite Hall in Ocean Street, Kogarah. They enjoyed social activities as well as formal ceremonial meetings and sometimes visited or hosted visitors from similar Irish Protestant lodges in the region. There was a serious divide and distrust between many Protestants and Catholics in Australian society throughout the first half of the twentieth century, often fuelled by passionate sentiment from Orange Lodges and arguments over State versus Catholic school education. This even extended to an annual celebration by Australian Orange Lodges of 'The

Twelfth', or Orangemen's Day, an Irish Protestant tradition held on July 12 to celebrate the 'Glorious Revolution' (1688) and the victory of Protestant king William of Orange over Catholic king James II at the 'Battle of the Boyne' (1690).^{213 214 215}

Peter joined a second Protestant Alliance lodge in mid-1921, Sans Souci No. 181, although continuing his association with Bishop Ridley No. 259 until early 1923. The new gathering was formed with 30 members, which rapidly rose to around 80, meeting monthly on Thursdays at Gillons Hall, Ramsgate. This lodge continued until the late 1930s.²¹⁶

Never one to be a passive member, Peter held several positions including Treasurer and Secretary. He also led the Social Committee, organising a variety of fun fund-raising events and parties. He loved to participate in Christmas picnics and sports days, and he was not shy to play a role in a comedic court trial and a mock wedding.

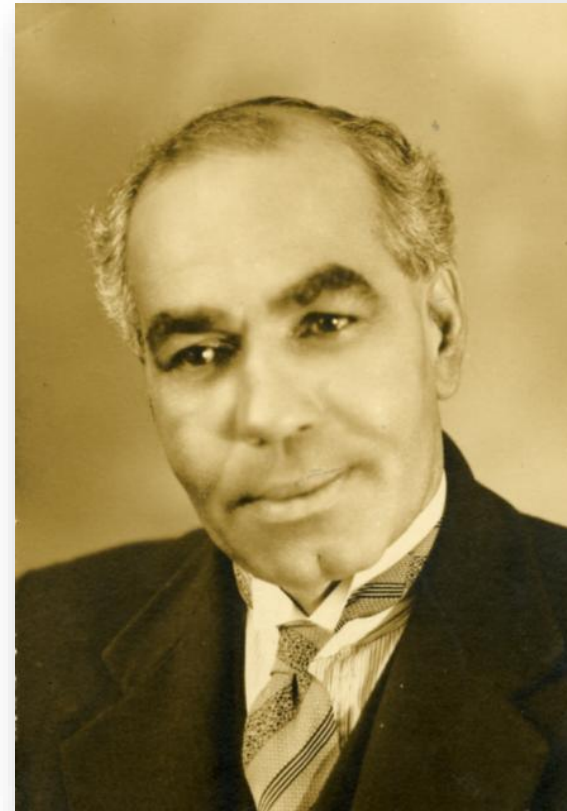
Fun was a simple affair in those days, with adults and children alike enjoying traditional races at these social outings; the egg and spoon race where participants ran the field while delicately balancing a raw egg on a spoon, the sack race in which competitors hopped inside a burlap sack, the three-legged race with two people hobbling side by side with their inside legs tied together, and the obstacle race where runners wove around a variety of objects placed along the course. Then there was the potato race in which eight potatoes were placed two metres apart along a straight line, which the winner collected in a basket, before crossing the finish line, five or ten metres farther on. For the more indulgent there was the bun-eating competition, where buns dangling on a string were consumed without touching them with the hands.²¹⁷

They also played the picturesquely named Cleaving the Turks Head, a favourite 19th century military game designed to demonstrate cavalry skills, and sometimes known as 'Post Practice'. This game should not be

misconstrued as racial discrimination. Peter's picnic races were staged only a few years after the Anzacs had fought the Turks at Gallipoli, and moreover, the Habsburgs had combatted the Ottoman empire in Europe throughout the 16th to 18th centuries. A block of softwood pine timber, fashioned roughly in the shape of a head, was mounted on a slender post. Competitors galloped past on horseback, attacking it with a sword thrust or cut, attempting to 'decapitate' the Turk. While it may seem unlikely that the game at the Depena's house could involve horse-riding, it should be remembered that there was ample room for equestrian sports, as the property was 61 metres long and many people in the area owned horses.

^{218 219}

The whole family threw themselves into the spirit of fun at the picnic events, with gifted orator Peter engaging the kids with storytelling, little Peter Joffre and Neville winning prizes in the race events and his wife Lillian entering the nail-driving competition. She was quite successful in this event, no doubt coached by her husband, who was a renowned master builder and carpenter.²²⁰

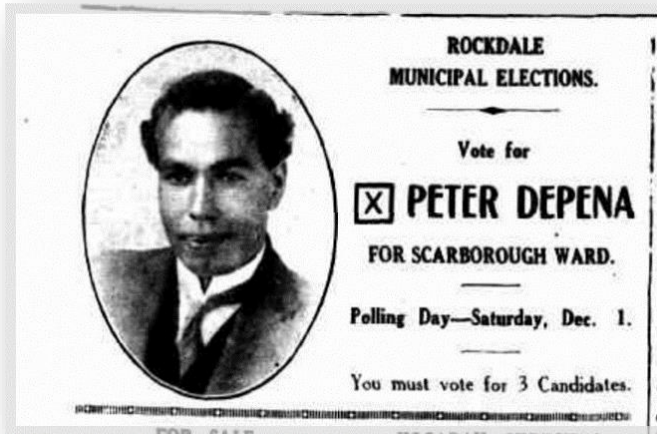


Alderman Simon Peter Depena

Photo: Bayside Council Library

Politics

Peter's desire to help his fellow man resulted in friends pressing him to stand for election for Scarborough Ward in Rockdale as an independent candidate in the council elections of 1925, when he was a disappointing seven votes short of winning, pipped at the post by George Barton, who would later become Mayor of Rockdale. The result was so close that he felt success was in reach and he was encouraged to try again in 1928.²²¹



1928 Election advertising, Photo from St George Call 1928²²²

His key election campaign issues related to ensuring a healthy lifestyle for his constituents. Peter saw the need to press on with the drainage of the swampy areas around the bay, which were believed to lead to health issues. He was also keen to build infrastructure in the bay area, particularly the installation of sewerage treatment works.

This time he was successful, and Peter's name appears regularly in Rockdale Council Minutes as either the proposer or seconder of numerous motions relating to infrastructure improvements, including public transport, street lighting, road surfacing, kerbing and guttering, public amenities blocks, footpaths and tree planting. He was a reliable alderman who rarely missed a meeting and represented the Rockdale council as their delegate to the Local Government Association of NSW.²²³

He maintained an open-door policy, preferring that matters be aired in public at the Council Chamber rather than behind closed doors in committee, and frequently addressed local issues in letters to the St George Call newspaper editor.^{224 225}

Around 1931 a unanimous vote of the council recommended him as a Justice of the Peace. He was no stranger to legal matters, having served as a juror in the Sydney Quarter Sessions for 14 years.²²⁶



Rockdale Council Meeting circa 1930, Peter Depena is seated front row on the right
Photo: Bayside Council Library

Campaigning for modern transport

Transport from Kogarah to Sans Souci had been provided by a steam driven tram for many years. The tram was considered a safety risk and was running at a £16,000 loss per annum. Residents were alarmed In April 1926, when a steam tram derailed and crashed into an electric light pole while travelling between Kogarah and Sans Souci, killing the tram driver.



Kogarah to Sans Souci steam tram accident 1926

Photo: Bayside Council Library

The route ran from Kogarah Station along Montgomery Street to Rocky Point Road, turning left down Russell Avenue in Sans Souci past Peter Depena's house, then a right-hand turn into Clareville Avenue and continuing along the shoreline to meet Fraters Avenue near the Rocky Point Punt, which operated a service to Taren Point from 1916 until the Captain Cook Bridge opened in 1965 at a cost of £1.6 million. The tram

line then looped around to re-join Rocky Point Road. Aldermen and businessmen from both Kogarah and Rockdale Councils campaigned for electrification of the line, desiring to link it with the existing Brighton to Rockdale electric tram, which would improve the service and bring economic development to the area. Peter was Honourable Chairman of the Tramway Defence Movement.^{227 228}

A 'monster' rally was staged at Ramsgate Picture Show 31 May 1929, attended by Rockdale Mayor E.G. Barton, Kogarah Mayor W. Whitfield, politicians, bankers and 1,300 citizens. Peter Depena spoke vehemently to great applause, calling for electronification of the line. They presented a 3,300-signature petition to the Minister for Railways and State Treasurer, Mr Stevens, on 6 June 1929.^{229 230 231}



Trolley bus at the corner of Russell Avenue and Rocky Point Road, 1950

Photo: Bayside Council Library

Peter subsequently fought long and hard for electrification of the Kogarah-Sans Souci tram line for eight years. He saw the potential for improved transport to promote housing construction on this valuable land. People would be reluctant to purchase property unless there were good transport options. The area was becoming more desirable for development as the swamps between Scarborough Park and Moorfield Racecourse were in the process of being drained and sewerage lines gradually spread through the suburbs. He envisaged that electrification would encourage tourism on the bay, enabling people to access the beaches for recreational swimming. In 1936, he was advised by Mr Maddocks from the Transport Department that electric trolley buses would be a more suitable alternative. They were perceived as much faster, cleaner, more comfortable, noiseless and significantly easier to travel in than both the steam and electric trams. Although Peter had favoured electric trams as the solution to their problem, he was willing to listen to advice, and the council members subsequently voted unanimously to accept Maddocks' proposal.^{232 233 234 235}

In 1937 Peter proposed to utilise the improvements to local transport to create a tourist route from Central Station to encourage day-trippers to travel by modern electric train to Kogarah, take the electric trolley bus to Ramsgate to swim at the baths, returning to Central via double decker bus.²³⁶

Even more exciting was the proposal by the Dolls Point Ratepayers Association, of which Peter was a member, to promote Botany Bay and Dolls Point as the site for the new Sea Plane Base. Imperial Airways proposed a scheme for a sea plane service on the London-Sydney route. A 'Battle of the Bays' ensued, with Rose Bay, Pittwater, Botany Bay, Lake Illawarra, Lake Macquarie and Pindimar Bay in Port Stephens in competition.²³⁷

Peter and his fellow aldermen enthusiastically took up the idea, which would have brought considerable economic advantage to Rockdale, but after consideration by the government and the airline of the relative merits of each site, Botany Bay lost out to Rose Bay. The service from Rose Bay to the UK commenced in July 1938. It was a first-class airfare, costing twice the annual wage of an average Australian worker, and the passengers endured a gruelling 10-day, 30 stop journey.^{238 239}



Peter Depena stands out in the crowd at the opening of Rocky Point Road, the first concrete highway in the municipality, 1 January 1930.
Photo: State Archives and Records NSW²⁴⁰

Administration enquiry

Peter was an inherently honest and conscientious person, leading by example. He expected that council officers behave with due diligence and probity and was not afraid to act to ensure public money was used effectively and efficiently.

There were several shortfalls in the day's takings in 1931, which the Town Clerk, Mr. P. Somerville, could not effectively explain. As the council's chief administrator, it was his responsibility to ensure that the council's financial transactions were accurately recorded. Peter pushed several times for an investigation into the incidents. The council finally commissioned Mr Truman to report into the conduct of the Town Clerk's department. The 1933 Truman Report alleged that the Town Clerk had been incompetent and neglectful of his duties. The bookkeeping staff in the Town Clerk's department had become sloppy. The paperwork was slipping into areas, including the Contracts Register, which had been lost. Some accounting entries had not been updated for more than 18 months.

Somerville blamed the problems on the recently deceased accountant, and his ex-colleague the Deputy Town-Clerk. Peter proposed a motion to immediately suspend Somerville, arguing that although it was painful, they could not afford to be sentimental and must do their duty. Some of the councillors considered this unjust, favouring giving the Town Clerk more time to respond to the accusations. He was subsequently given 14 days to prepare his case.

In fact, the auditors had spotted the problems two years previously, and had made numerous reports and recommendations to the council, many of which the Town Clerk had neglected to pass on to the Mayor. In other instances, council minutes showed that the recommendations which had been discussed in council chambers had been brushed aside.

The audit accountants were angry that the Mayor had commissioned the Truman Report without consulting their company, and then had the audacity to sack them. They were hardly to blame, as they had recommended as early as 1932 that the costing system was ineffective, a new filing system was needed, outstanding rates were accruing, debtors should be prosecuted, and a strong room should be constructed. These corrective measures had been ignored.

The Mayor refuted the auditor's rebuttal as 'evasive' and 'side-stepping the real issues'. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the issue, the council subsequently appointed new auditors and a new Town Clerk, and Peter Depena was satisfied that the ratepayer's interests had been attended to.

241 242 243



Rockdale Town Hall circa 1935

Photo: Bayside Council Library

A healthy agenda

Health was also on his agenda. Peter Depena campaigned vigorously for the creation of Scarborough Park, which for decades had been referred to as “That Swamp”. Today we might consider a wetland an important ecological zone, but in that era, draining the swampland was judged to be a major health issue rather than an environmental one. The new 50-acre recreation area featured cricket pitches, an artificial lake and picnic grounds. The community celebrated its official opening by Mayor Ernest George Barton in 1934 with a picnic, children’s and women’s running races, novelty races and model yacht racing.²⁴⁴

He also worked for the extension of sewerage to the Scarborough Ward, which reached 50% of households in the area by 1934.²⁴⁵

Diphtheria was on the rise in 1937, but had been effectively combatted in Queensland with a government funded campaign. Peter proposed inviting the Director General of Public Health to address the council on the implementation of the Diphtheria Immunisation Scheme. He considered it vital that Rockdale Council actively support the government initiative to immunise all schoolchildren in NSW. The Director General was unavailable, but Dr. Grahame Drew, Metropolitan Medical Health Officer, was deputised to address the eager council the following month. The council were persuaded by the doctor’s arguments and subsequently introduced the immunisation program.^{246 247}



“That Swamp”, Scarborough Park 1891

Photo: Bayside Council Library

A run- in with the police

Peter was a great orator who expressed himself with eloquence and a colourful turn of phrase. On one occasion, after countering the objections of an alderman to a council motion, Peter observed that the alderman in question had "shut up like a George's River oyster" after the interjection.²⁴⁸

He was never shy to put forth an opinion in council chambers. In a particularly rowdy council meeting, he once accused another alderman of being a 'windbag', to which the councillor retorted disparagingly that Peter had spoken on 45 of the 50 pieces of correspondence discussed that evening.²⁴⁹

The council chamber was an excellent place to practice his debating skills. In 1936 the Rockdale Police Debating Society challenged the Rockdale aldermen to a charity debate in the Town Hall and Peter was nominated as one of the team. At the time, his relationship with the police was most cordial. Peter declared that Tom Kinkead was "the best 'copper' New South Wales ever possessed."²⁵⁰

Despite this, he was not immune to saying the wrong thing at the wrong time and occasionally his relationship with the police was strained. In April 1937, he experienced a few problems with some injudicious words spoken at a council meeting, that were reported in the press. Kogarah council was concerned about vandalism and anti-social behaviour and wanted more police protection. To bolster their case, they asked Rockdale to stand with them in their approach to Chief Secretary Chaffey. Peter did not support the appointment of more police to the area, as he considered it would increase tension between the constabulary and the populace. The newspaper quoted him as saying 'More police in the district only make people more bitter towards them'. He further accused the police of 'bullyragging' or intimidation. Perhaps his dark complexion

had excited some racial discrimination by individual officers in the force, although this was never claimed. However, this could be a reasonable interpretation of events, as he did say that it wasn't until he had clarified his name and position as an alderman that the police finally treated him with respect.

No-one asked whether the police officers had behaved ethically. Instead, the police took offence at his remarks and deployed the Chief Inspector and two other senior officers to visit the alderman. One might construe this official visit as another form of bullyragging. In politics, the truth sometimes becomes irrelevant and peace must be preserved through diplomacy, in order to maintain effective relationships. Peter was forced to back-track at the next council meeting. He apologised, declaring that any opinions he had expressed were personal and he was making general remarks rather than accusing individual officers of indiscretion. The other aldermen accepted his apology but disagreed with his stance and voted to co-operate with Kogarah.^{251 252 253}



Police Box on Grand Parade, Brighton-le-Sands.

Photo: Bayside Council Library

On the campaign trail



In 1934 Peter was engaged in campaigning for the forthcoming council elections with fellow builder and Mayor Ernest George Barton, and Alderman Patrick Joseph Quinane, promoting the slogan 'For continuous progress, unity and experience to serve'. During this period, he must have been somewhat stressed when his wife became ill and was taken to hospital, but she swiftly recovered. His colleague Quinane was unsuccessful in his bid for council, but the Mayor and Peter easily won the election. Alderman Barton received the second highest number of votes with 1615, and Peter came a comfortable third with 1412 votes.

254 255

Rockdale Council Aldermen 1928-1931

Peter Depena is pictured on the left in the second row.

Photo: Bayside Council Library

During the 1937 election campaign he promoted himself as 'Dependable Depena', citing a list of achievements in Scarborough Ward including; introduction of the long-fought-for electric trolleybus service from Sans Souci to Rockdale, construction of Beach Drive along the Bay from Brighton -le-Sands to Ramsgate, construction of a concrete road from Ramsgate to Sans Souci, sewerage connections to 65 per cent of the Ward, reclamation of Scarborough Park from swampland, and a successful Inquiry into Town Hall administration practices.²⁵⁶

The St George Call reported in December 1937;

'The Scarborough Ward for Rockdale is also attracting attention between two opposing factions, and one sitting alderman for the past nine years, "Dependable Depena," is again seeking re-election. Peter has resided in the district for the past 48 years and takes the keenest interest in all progressive movements for the Sans Souci end of the district.'^{257 258}

The election was later tantalisingly described as 'one of the liveliest elections ever held in Rockdale', although the account gives no details as to why this was so.²⁵⁹

Prior to the election, the Mayor presented his Triennial Report at the final council meeting of their tenure, sounding a positive note. The report showed that in the last three year of Peter's service as an alderman, the council had achieved major infrastructure improvements including construction of more than 20 miles of asphalt road, 4 miles of ballasted

road, 19 miles of footpaths, extensive kerbing and guttering, the planting of thousands of trees, the establishment of a council-run tree nursery at Scarborough Park, approval of construction for hundreds of new businesses and dwellings, implementation of an Emergency Relief Scheme providing labour opportunities for unemployed men, and comprehensive drainage works to relieve flooding and dry out the remaining swamp areas. Additionally, they had set up school immunisation clinics, offering diphtheria shots to the children of both paying parents and those who could not afford the Board of Health fees.

The Mayor lauded the progressive nature of the council's endeavours, making the area seem quite idyllic;

'When we examine the progress made during the last three years we find that in most aspects we have emerged from the influences of the depression period, and that we have made even greater progress than in the past. As an illustration, we find that the building figures are exceeding those of the book years just prior to the depression, and that the people are realising the advantages we have to offer from the residential point of view. Our seven miles of beautiful beachfront, 500 acres of Park and Recreation area, close proximity to the city, abundance of good building land and comparatively low rate and other features are attracting both speculative and home builders at such a rate that the time is not far distant when our Municipality will be as populous as many of those that now enjoy the reputation of key popular residential parts of the metropolis.

The aldermen of the period need no fear that their gratuitous services in the public interest have been unattended by results which should meet the approval of the ratepayer. I feel sure that they will join me in reflecting on a period which might well

occupy a high place in the history of development of the municipality.' *Mayor Fred W. Beehag* ²⁶⁰

The Mayor could not have been more wrong in regard to Peter Depena, for whom the election result must have been bitterly disappointing. Seven men contested the Rockdale Council election for Scarborough Ward on 4 December 1937. The three newly elected aldermen for the ward received between 1567 and 1521 votes. Peter, who three years previously had come third in the political race, had clearly lost the confidence of the people. He came last, receiving less than half that number, with a humiliating 896 votes. His civic career was over. ²⁶¹

It is not clear why he was rejected. Perhaps people were weary of the Depression years and wanted a breath of fresh air. In any case, change was in the air around the world. Change was also afoot for the Depena family on a more personal scale.



Spreading bitumen on a road in Rockdale, date unknown. Twenty miles of road were asphalted in Peter's final term.

Photo: Bayside Council Library

Winds of change

Although Peter retained his business enterprises, life would have taken a distinct change of direction with the loss of his aldermanic duties. He would have missed the monthly council meetings with its vigorous debate and influence over important local issues. He remained a respected businessman, Master Builder, sportsman and Mason, but the loss of status as an alderman would have been a blow.

Peter owned several houses in the Sans Souci, Ramsgate area. In the January following the elections, Peter decided to sell his home at 156 Russell Avenue, Doll's Point, Sans Souci. It is described as 'A GOOD HOME OR INVESTMENT. Two-storey House, nine rooms, and conveniences. 120ft frontage, 200ft deep. Grass tennis court. £1250.'²⁶²



Advertisement appearing in the Sydney Morning Herald 1938

In March 1939, he advertised a second property in Ramsgate, comprising a six-room residence, shop, garage and workshop. It's possible this was the 1130 Rocky Point Road house, but if so, it did not sell. Number 1130 was leased to a tenant, Alfred Morris, for four years from 1940, and retained by the Depenas until at least 1954.^{263 264}

Clearly the Russell Avenue property at number 156 did not sell as soon as Peter expected. His sons Laurie David and Neville Frederick are listed on the 1943 electoral roll as residing there, while Peter and Lillian moved to a rental property at 177 Russell Avenue, until the owner made a court application to eject the tenants in April 1944.^{265 266}



Property advertisement appearing in the Sydney Morning Herald 1939

The Depression was behind them and perhaps the family felt better times were ahead, but war reared its ugly head. Laurie David took up boxing in 1938, but it was a brief career. Like so many young men before them, Peter's sons were eager to fight for their country. When World War 2 was declared, Laurie David enlisted in service at the Arncliffe enlistment centre, stating a birthdate of 31 March 1919. Younger brother Neville Frederick was underage, but stirred with the fires of adventure. He declared his birthdate as 7 June 1919, although in reality, his birthday was in 1918. Obviously two brothers could not have been born 3 months apart. If their subterfuge was to be successful he could not enlist at the same depot as his older sibling, so he enrolled at Paddington Barracks.^{267 268 269}

One can only imagine the scene at home when they announced the news to their parents. Peter and Lillian must have worried incessantly with two sons going to war. They would have been comforted that their youngest son Raymond George was only ten years old and remained at home,

while eldest son 24-year-old Peter Joffre, who had recently completed his electrical apprenticeship, did not sign up.

Both brothers survived the war. Laurie married his wartime bride Jean Boyce in Newtown in 1940. They lived for some years around the corner from his parents' house, at 7 Malua Street, Dolls Point, later moving to 11 Primrose Avenue, Sans Souci. He was employed as a storeman packer until the mid-1950s, then commenced trading cars in the sixties. The family moved to Tweed Heads, opening a car dealership in the 1980s. Laurie David passed away 24 October 2005 at the age of 86.^{270 271}

Neville Frederick married Betty Phyllis Tatham in 1955, and they moved to Port Hacking Road, Caringbah. He was a skilled tradesman, following in his father's footsteps, working as a carpenter. The family lived in a garage on the site for 16 years while he built the family home. Betty suffered a fatal, massive heart attack in 1995 and Neville died in 2009.^{272 273}

Peter and Lillian's youngest son Raymond George became a carpenter like his esteemed father, although later he diversified into aluminium work. He married machinist Grace Cavan-Love in 1960, and lived near his parents at 39 Russell Avenue, Dolls Point. Grace died in 2007, while Raymond died two years later, a mere seven weeks before his brother Neville.^{274 275 276}

Peter Joffre, their first-born son, pursued a career as an electrician and moved to Empress Street, Hurstville in the 1940s when he married Annie Scott Lamb Gibson. He died in 1967, aged 52, a brief three years after his father. His wife passed away in 1996. Annie and Peter Joffre's ashes were both placed in the Woronora Cemetery Rose Garden.^{277 278}

Post-war, Peter and Lillian relocated at the end of the decade to their original property in 1130 Rocky Point Road, where Lillian's father resided with them briefly before his death in 1954. Still, they must have been

fond of the beautiful tree-lined Russell Avenue. After his father-in-law's death, Peter purchased another Russell Avenue property at lot 23, number 126. The family had grown up, married and moved on. Peter and Lillian downsized to a more modest affair than their previous property at number 156, although Lot 23 was three times the size of their old property, at 408' x 190' (124 m x 57 m). Their new home was a red-clay-tile roofed, double fronted fibro cottage with four rooms, kitchen and offices. The double garage and laundry had corrugated fibro roofs. The property was valued at £6,500 in 1964. Today the area has been completely consumed by mediocre seventies and eighties unit blocks. No evidence remains of their original elegant family home or the later purchases.²⁷⁹



Photo from The Sun 9 September 1934

Death

Peter had arteriosclerosis, or thickening of the arteries. It is unknown whether he was aware that he also had an abdominal aneurysm. Aneurysms can develop and grow for many years without causing any signs or symptoms, until the final catastrophic moment when they rupture. When it ruptured on 6 January 1964, he would most likely have felt a sudden, severe pain in his lower abdomen and back, coupled with nausea, vomiting and constipation. He would have become light headed and his skin would have felt sweaty and clammy. The internal bleeding would have led to shock, where his blood his pressure dropped so low that his vital organs could not get enough blood to work efficiently. He was taken to St. George Hospital Kogarah, where he died twelve hours later at the age of 74.^{280 281}



**Peter Depena Memorial
Plaque, Woronora Cemetery
Rose Garden. Inscribed 'In
loving memory of a dear
husband and father Simon P.
Depena. Died 6th Jan 1964.
Aged 74 years.'
Photo: Leonie Bell**

He was survived by his wife, and sons Peter Joffe, Neville Fredrick. Laurie David and Raymond George.

His widow survived another 25 years. When Lillian suffered from senility in her latter years, her son Neville took her into his home. There were numerous minor incidents indicating the onset of this insidious disease.

On one occasion Lillian appeared in the lounge room doorway, inexplicably holding a saucepan of water, asking the assembled family, "Are you ready?" although she didn't quite know what they should be ready for. Soon after that it was decided that she needed the care of a nursing home. She died at the age of 89 on 30 January 1986.²⁸²

An Anglican funeral service was held for Peter, and his ashes are buried in the Woronora Cemetery Rose Garden, together with his wife's ashes. For such a prominent man, his memorial is a modest 8 cm aluminium plaque, mounted on a light brown stone, huddled amongst hundreds of similar plaques beneath the blooming rose bushes. It seems such an insignificant memorial for a man who achieved so much in life. It is therefore fitting that an expansive park should also bear his name, in the suburb where he laboured so long for the common good of all its residents.^{283 284}



'Sunset', from "Four Times of the Day", panorama on Depena Reserve amenities block, designed by Steven Vella, 2008. Photo: Leonie Bell

Conclusion

During his lifetime, Peter Depena was an inspiration to those around him. He showed that vigorous campaigning for improvements to the local town or suburb can reap far-reaching benefits for all citizens. He participated in life to the full, demonstrating generosity of spirit. Peter was an enthusiastic example of the benefits of volunteering in local organisations; benefits both to oneself and to the wider community. One of his constituents claimed that,

‘Alderman Depena is certainly the first male child to be born in Ramsgate and I will go one further, he will be amongst the last to die as far as memory is concerned.’

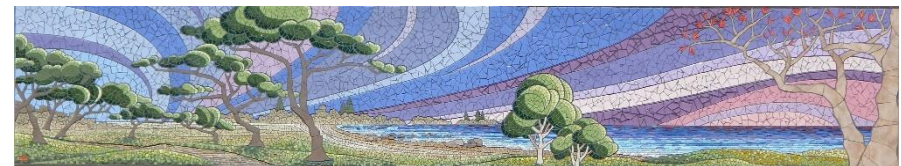
And yet, it would seem that memory of his achievements has faded with time. It would be a shame for Rockdale residents to lose sight of his shining example.²⁸⁵

Understanding the achievements of our past can lead to greater understanding of who we are as citizens, and our place in the world today, both on a local scale and as Australians. Altruistic citizens like Peter Depena can continue to inspire us in the modern world and we should strive to maintain their memory.

The signage in Depena Reserve, memorialising Peter Depena, was removed due to its extreme dilapidation. Bayside Council is currently reviewing its signage strategy in view of the September 2016 amalgamation of Rockdale and Botany Councils.²⁸⁶

It would be edifying to erect signage at sites that are named for local heroes, to explain their achievements and role in society and why the building or park is so named. It can only be hoped that the Depena Reserve signage will be restored and in future when Bayside Council re-

names a park or reserve, or creates a new public recreation area, there will be a well-documented background story and on-site signage recording the citizen’s good works. Only in this way will their memory and deeds be preserved for future generations, inspiring others to follow their selfless examples of community service.

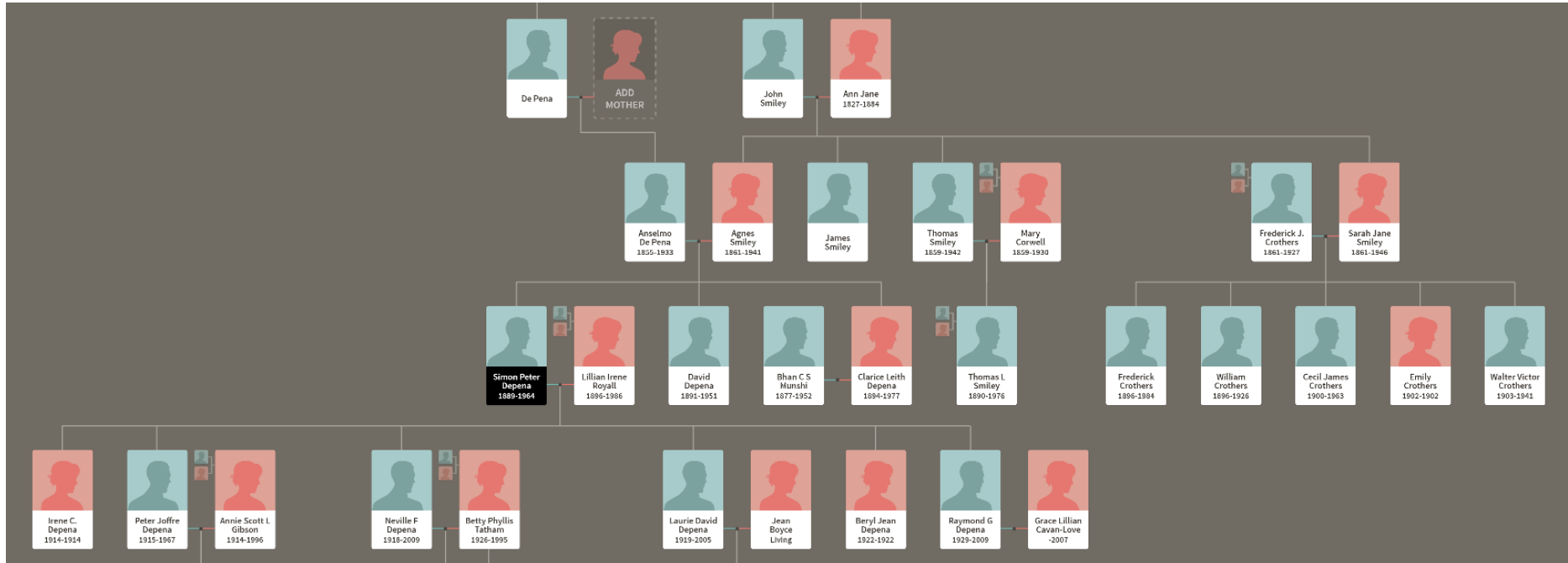


‘Dawn’, from “Four Times of the Day”, panorama on Depena Reserve amenities block, designed by Steven Vella, 2008

Photo: Leonie Bell

Appendix 1

Depena Family Tree

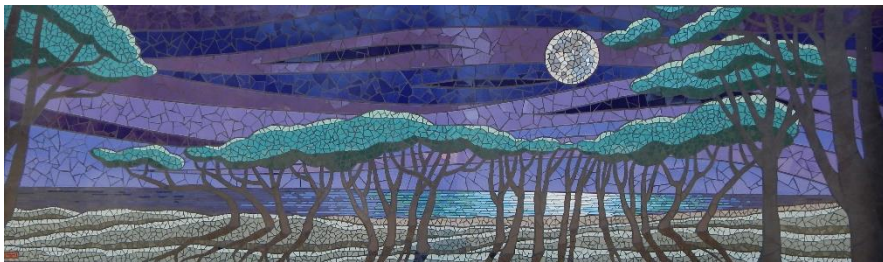


Tree graphic created by Leonie Bell

Acknowledgments

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I would also like to thank Peter's grandson Mark De Pena and his sister Coral their generous assistance in providing family photos.



'Night' from "Four Times of the Day", panorama on Depena Reserve amenities block, designed by Steven Vella, 2008

Photo: Leonie Bell

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