

# In Search of Alice

by Stephen Colliccoat - *April, 2021*

The general area where the Castlemaine football reserve and showgrounds is now located was once familiarly known as 'Camp'. It was here that the first Gold Commissioners in the new colony established a camp, deliberately distancing young troopers from the corrupting influence of sly grog joints, brothels and the often rowdy, hot headed company of the diggers at Forest Creek.

It was at Camp in May, 1864 that my grandmother, Alice Marriott was born. One of four surviving children born to successful orchardist and market gardener, John Marriott and his wife, Jane, she would have initially attended a Common School. These schools were a step up from the early, very primitive Tent Schools, but were mired in controversy, being run by radically different, fiercely protective religious denominations. In 1873 when she was nine, Alice would have been one of 210 students attending the already overcrowded Castlemaine State School No. 119. The new school clearly had glaring faults. The area was one of low repute and the school was situated on low lying ground into which an iron foundry drained toxic effluent. At the same time, the school was part of an exciting new reform, being the first time that children's education in Victoria became free, secular and compulsory. It was certainly a vast improvement on the situation only 18 years previously when only a quarter of children in the fledging city ever attended school and of those who did, most left before the age of 12, the average age of Castlemaine attendees being seven.

The Camp area is, in many ways, an ideal area of Castlemaine. Its slopes offers cooling breeze, pleasant views and it is close to but gently removed from the noisy activity of the main shopping area. Camp must have held pleasant childhood memories for Alice when as a 33 year old married woman, she decided to use the inheritance that she received following the death of her mother to build a home in the area. After 19 years of married life to local blacksmith, John Colliccoat during which time Alice raised nine children, living in houses generally rented from her generous father, this was her first opportunity to build a house that reflected her taste and keen desire to raise the family's pedestrian social status. Former much humbler dwellings included 109 Barker Street and 20 Forest Street.

In 1897, a notice appeared in the 'Mount Alexander Mail' from W.C. Vahland, architects of Bendigo calling for tenders for the erection of a fine brick villa at 45 Bowden Street. Wilhelm Vahland, a German born carpenter made good is now recognised as Bendigo's most renowned architect, being responsible for the design of many of the finest buildings that still add grace and charm to that city. Work included the Shamrock Hotel, Town Hall, School of Mines and Anne Caudie Hospital and even extended to that piece of flamboyant white and gold painted Victorian nonsense, known as the Alexander Fountain that greets visitors entering the city. A powerful and outspoken figure, Vahland had many fiery encounters with the local council, but his imagination and eye for detail was never doubted and the appointment of his firm as architects was a very clear signal that Alice had ambitions far higher than those of her hard working, but one suspects often sullen, reclusive and depressive husband.

The villa known as 'Cooinda' or aboriginal for 'Happy Place' would have been built in two or three years and still stands today. Interestingly, it is still described by estate agents and locals as 'The Colliccoat House'. It was one of the first properties to breach the one million dollar benchmark in Castlemaine several years ago when sold at auction.

Sadly, Alice would have only enjoyed living in her dream home for about four years before she died of breast cancer in April, 1905. Her children at that time would have ranged from the oldest, Alice who was 18 to the youngest, my father Albert who was four.

Two years after Alice Colliccoat was buried in an unmarked grave at the Campbells Creek cemetery, John Colliccoat married Ada Jane Snell, a 40 year old spinster. Ada didn't involve herself closely in the raising of her newly acquired family, that role largely falling to daughter Alice. As a result, my father always felt a deep love and strong bond with his sister to the end of his days. John and Ada Colliccoat are buried in a large, marked grave at the Brighton Cemetery.

We can only speculate what led John Colliccoat to try to sell 'Cooinda' three years after his first wife's death. In 1908 a newspaper announcement of the forthcoming auction described the home as a beautiful brick villa of seven rooms 'faithfully built' being offered, together with a large stable and four room brick cottage situated on three amalgamated blocks of land.

My father would have been seven years old when the family moved to a smaller weatherboard cottage several houses further down Bowden Street, a property that also still stands today.



*John and Alice shortly before their marriage.*

How magical it must have been growing up and playing in that large garden as a child! It was a memory still dear to my Dad when, in the late fifties, about three years from the time of his early death, he proudly pointed out the home to me during the only time that we both visited Castlemaine.

