

VALE

PAT PETTIT

(OLIVE PATRICIA MEIKLEJON SCHILLING RISCHBIETH PETTIT)

13-5-1920 - 5-12-2007

HOLT PETTIT

-24-11-2007

Olive Patricia Pettit nee Schilling was born in 1920 in Richmond to migrants who had arrived from England the year before. She was the eldest of four girls and as a youngster was regarded as very attractive, bright and sporty: "a clever girl who could have done anything". Patricia went to schools in Williamstown and trained as a secretary. War broke out when she was still a teenager and although her pilot fiancé was killed in action, Pat met and married a young scientist John Rischbieth. While living at Williamstown they had two children, Patricia (1945) and Nick (1949); moved to Maribyrnong in 1950 and had their third child David in 1959.

They were not in Maribyrnong long before Pat and John were involved with local and environmental issues. Raising awareness of the need for some organization that represented the interests of the community in 1957 the Maribyrnong Residents Association was formed. Pat was the first secretary; John also served in that position later. Early issues involved local industries that were abusing the river - using it as a sewer and Tracey's Speedway and dog-racing track - enterprises that were out of place in a residential neighbourhood. MRA had some successes in making Maribyrnong a better place to live and the river more of a community asset. Nobody dumped their waste in the river after MRA was on the case.

After struggling with alcoholism and depression, John died in 1972 and Pat was left with a 13-year old at home but coped well. A few years later Pat, through Parents Without Partners, met Holt Pettit; himself widowed and with two children Quentin and Fairlee.

David recalls "He (Holt) was the first one to knock on the door both wearing a suit and bearing flowers. He was arrogant and opinionated, but also intelligent, charming, well educated and a gentleman. In short, he was a good match for mother, although I don't think any of us would have agreed at the time. Their relationship and marriage was to last thirty years, so I guess the proof is there for all to see". Pat and Holt were married in 1979 and lived in family home in The Esplanade. They were an attractive and argumentative pair; they were also great pals, who travelled a lot together overseas and around Australia; they went on numerous bird watching camps and also really enjoyed gardening.

They were among the pioneers in having a "native" garden and continued to be actively involved in community and environmental affairs. In 1981 when the riverside site of Humes Pipeworks was proposed for "development" Pat and Holt had the foresight to fight to have the land preserved as open space. At that time Holt was Vice-president and Pat was Secretary of MRA and after a protracted campaign, "Pipemakers Park" was created. The best of the buildings were preserved, now housing the Living Museum of the West. Realising that river Maribyrnong needed some community 'champions' Pat and Holt with a group of like-minded friends in 1986 created a nucleus of what soon became the Friends of the Maribyrnong Valley.

In the new FMV, Pat was, quite predictably, the first Secretary and driving force. The first few years saw some notable achievements by the group. Book, Birds of the Maribyrnong Valley which not only aided the identification of about eighty species to be found in the region but also provided considerable background information for the bird observer and lay-person. Holt had a major input, providing some entire chapters.

The educational video "The Other River" provided information in a form that could be used by schools, community groups and the wider community to gain a better appreciation of the river valley and its history and particularly its role as a community asset.

Then, in collaboration with local historical societies and municipal councils, FMV under Pat's guidance created a series of historical signs depicting features of historical significance at locations between Brimbank and Footscray. Fifteen were installed but only a few survive today.

Even after Pat took a back seat in FMV, her spare room remained its archives repository. Her contribution to the group was recognised by her receiving its first Life Membership.

Ill health dogged both Holt and Pat in later years. Pat, declining into Alzheimer's, was supported by Holt until they both needed constant medical care. Holt died on 24 November 2007 and Pat eleven days later. In the space of two weeks the community lost two stalwarts of the environmental movement and community awareness. Friends of the Maribyrnong Valley had lost two founder members, heroes and dear friends.