

Photos: Cole Bennetts

History with a difference at Tuggeranong Schoolhouse

BY TEGAN OSBORNE

After years of use as a private residence, the Old Tuggeranong Schoolhouse in Chisholm is about to be reanimated by a committed local historian.


Elizabeth Burness is set to bring the old schoolhouse back to life, giving tours and talks on the history of the building and the people who lived there.

The schoolhouse will be opened to the public as a museum for the first time for the 2011 Canberra and Region Heritage Festival. Elizabeth has filled the house with her own collection of historic clothes, artefacts, homewares and furniture - all of which will be on display to visitors.

'The school children will be coming through - it's just so exciting,' she said. 'I'm sharing my collection and my passion for the past.'

Visitors to the schoolhouse will get a glimpse at what life might have been like in the early 1900s. And Elizabeth is a highly qualified tour guide.

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Elizabeth Burness has filled the Tuggeranong Schoolhouse with her own collection of historic artefacts.



Historian and storyteller Elizabeth Burness outside the historic Tuggeranong Schoolhouse which will open for the first time as a museum during the Canberra and Region Heritage Festival this month.

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She has worked as a teacher and a museum education officer, and has a knack for making history fun through storytelling.

The Tuggeranong Schoolhouse was built in the 1880s and was used as such until 1939.

A number of school teachers and their families lived in the building, but the family that lived there the longest by far were the McGees.

Schoolmaster Frank McGee and his family lived in the home attached to the Tuggeranong Schoolhouse from 1898 until 1927.

The McGees had seven children, whom they managed to cram into the tiny home.

‘Where did they fit these seven kids? It’s unbelievable,’ Elizabeth said. But what makes the McGee family’s story most remarkable is the academic success of one of their sons.

James McGee, who was schooled in Tuggeranong until he was 12, went on to win scholarships to the University of Sydney and Cambridge University, where he eventually became a professor of nuclear physics.

Professor McGee was one of those who helped pioneer the science of television in Australia.

Elizabeth said it’s amazing that someone from such a humble background went on to become such a learned scholar.

‘You just cannot imagine,’ she said. ‘How did he become this stellar person?’ In 1939 with just five students enrolled, the school was finally closed.

Now listed on the ACT Heritage Register, the Tuggeranong Schoolhouse was used as a private residence until its restoration by the ACT Government in 2009.

The schoolhouse is still in remarkable condition, and Elizabeth is looking forward to sharing its stories with Canberrans.

‘When you sit in one of those desks, you can look at the window and see almost identically what they saw 130 years ago,’ Elizabeth said.

In preparing the schoolhouse for its new use as a museum, Elizabeth has selected items for display that reflect the history of the house.

‘They lived through an era in which everything changed, and that’s the phenomenal thing about this house,’ she said.

The Old Tuggeranong Schoolhouse at 34 Enid Lorimer Circuit in Chisholm will be open as part of the Canberra and Region Heritage Festival, on Sunday 10 April and 24 April from 10am to 4pm.

Then from June onwards, the schoolhouse will be open to the public on the second Sunday of every month.

Entry is a gold coin donation. Call 6161 6383 for more information.