

Hats off for Elizabeth's memories

Social historian, storyteller and Tuggeranong Schoolhouse Museum curator, Elizabeth Burness, has long used her remarkable collection of 19th and early 20th century ephemera to educate and entertain thousands of schoolchildren.

More recently, in what has proved to be a well-received development supported by a number of ACT nursing homes and care facilities, she is using the same objects to add some joy to the life of local senile dementia sufferers.

Elizabeth, who has worked at Melbourne's National Gallery and at the Australian War Memorial as well as in schools in Victoria since 1974, said it was remarkable the way many elderly people reacted when confronted with objects from their youth.

"I do presentations for groups of men and women," she said.

"The women are very attracted by the clothes and the hats while the men enjoy the practical things such as woodworking tools.

"I recently showed a mens' group a [reaper's] sickle and they were very excited. 'We all had one of these [when we first set up house in the 1950s],' one gentleman said. They used them to trim grass."

Vintage clothes are her passion. "Nothing, in my view, equals the thrill of tangible history," she said. "Things that can be touched and felt, like clothing, as well as seen.



Old Tuggeranong Schoolhouse Museum curator and storyteller Elizabeth Burness has been working with Alzheimer's patients. Photo: ELESIA KURTZ

Social history can be evoked by an 1880's man's suit, a red waist coat or a pair of dainty ladies shoes."

Elizabeth's massive collection of

period treasures has been accumulated over decades and is now housed in the Old Tuggeranong Schoolhouse.

While few, if any, of the objects would fall into the priceless or even very valuable category, they have all been selected because

they have a story to tell.

"I came here [to the school house] in 2011," she said. "The building belongs to the ACT Property Group. They had an empty building and I had the collection. It's been a marriage made in heaven."

While the large collection of dolls and shop mannequins that populate the old school and residence are mildly evocative of a Vincent Price movie they have a job to do.

"The dolls and the dummies allow me to externalise the stories [I am telling]," she said. "They help bring the past to life."

Many of the objects in the collection, which includes old furniture, books, magazines, clothing, tools, homewares, school texts, letters, cards and other ephemera, have actually been donated by people who have come out for a visit.

"They'll turn up and say 'I've got this, can you use it?'" Elizabeth said.

Recently restored by the ACT Government, the Old Tuggeranong Schoolhouse evolved in its current form between the late 1870s and the 1920s when the bathroom and laundry were added. It operated as a school until 1939 and was used as a private residence until 2009.

■ The Tuggeranong School House Museum is open from 10am to 4pm on the second Sunday of every month.