



voiceprint

Newsletter

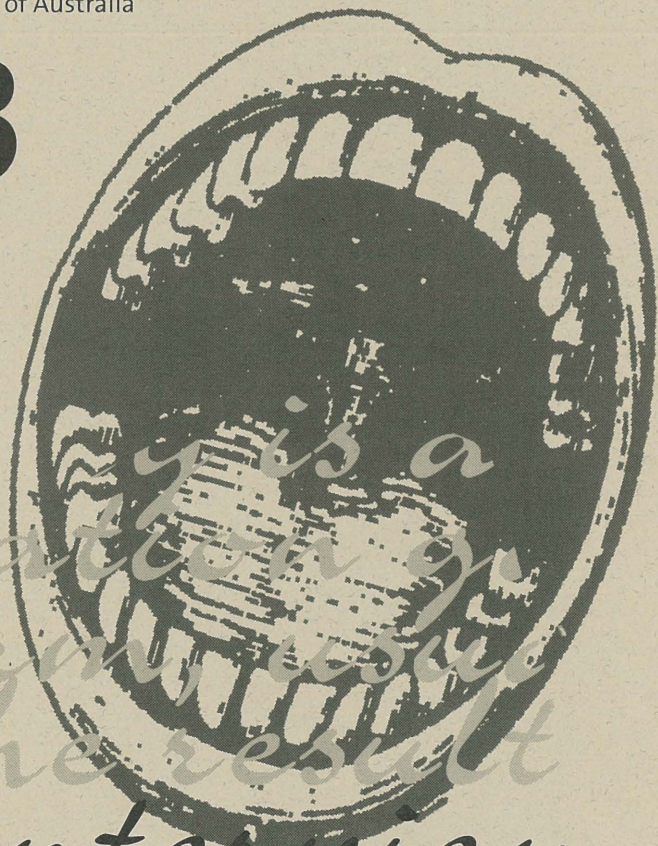
of the New South Wales Branch

of the Oral History Association

of Australia

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February 1995



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Editorial

*A new **Voiceprint**, and with it a new editor. Firstly I must apologise for the delay in getting this copy out. A dose of the 'flu decided to linger and impersonate consumption— serves me right for being a non-smoking, bicycle riding healthy person. I did have visions of taking permanently to my bed in a lace nightie surrounded by attractive young things reading Wordsworth, but unfortunately I'm on the mend so I'll have to make do with introducing myself to you all.*

Hi, Donyale Harrison. Pleased to meet you.

There, that wasn't so bad.

*I'm sure that I speak for everyone in thanking Stephen Rapley for his fine work in the first two issues of **Voiceprint**. I hope to carry in a similar vein. As usual articles, book reviews, notices of upcoming conferences and projects are welcome, as are letters and requests for assistance. Please address all correspondence to **Voiceprint**.*

*This issue of **Voiceprint** looks at three new projects being worked on by Association members. John Rich introduces the Computronics Project that the Computer Museum Society has devised. I talk about the Goat Island Oral History Project, currently being run by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, and Rosie Block writes on the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation.*

The Shoah Survivors Project is that rare thing, a project of great significance which actually has real money and commitment behind it. Steven Spielberg is to be congratulated on setting up this Foundation. It is timely indeed in the face of the revisionist propaganda which has again surfaced over the last few years. Through the testimony of these courageous men and women we hear of a world which must never be forgotten, nor repeated.

Donyale Harrison

Contents



News:

- | | |
|--|----|
| Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation | 3 |
| Interpreting Goat Island | 5 |
| Oral History of the Computers in Australia | 10 |



Reviews:

- | | |
|---|----|
| <i>2001: A Report from Australia: A Report to the Council of Australian Governments by the Centenary of Federation Advisory Committee</i> | 11 |
|---|----|



Diary:

13



Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation

Inspired by the Survivors who gave their accounts for the making of Schindler's List, Steven Spielberg has set up the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. He is the chairman, and it is dedicated to collecting an archive of videotaped interviews with those who have survived the Holocaust. He believes there are some 50 000 survivors still alive worldwide and, in his larger than life tradition, he is hoping to interview them all.

Sydney is the first city outside the United States and Israel to have invited the Foundation team to conduct their training sessions. For the size of the Jewish community there are more survivors here in Australia than anywhere else in the world other than Israel.

The Foundation training team were very touched and encouraged to receive the warm welcome and cooperation afforded them from the very beginning, both by the Australian Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and Descendants, and the Sydney Jewish Museum. They had no trouble in reaching their goal of 100 trainee interviewers. In fact they had late applicants banging disappointedly at the door.

Held at the Jewish Museum, the actual training was a model of efficiency, information and inspiration in well regulated doses. The two principal trainers, Dr Paula Draper, Canadian historian, and Darlene Basch, Los Angeles psychotherapist, held these two perspectives in trim. Professor Colin Tatz, Director of the Centre for Genocide Studies at Macquarie University, gave a superb historical background to the Holocaust. Agnes Seeman of the Australian Institute for Holocaust Studies gave an interesting introduction to the Institute's own oral history project with survivors – the Twelfth Hour Project – with over 200 interviews.

The program also included addresses given by individual survivors. The last session, of two full days and a whole evening, involved tag – team interviewing. Ten of the trainees interviewed one survivor. Our wonderful narrator scarcely missed a beat as the interviewer changed. Nevertheless she was responsive to the new questioner as soon as a question was asked.

She had managed to stay with her mother and sister throughout the period of the camps – from Terezin to Auschwitz

and beyond. During their short stay at Auschwitz they were given no underclothes, and she told a detailed story of how she tried to 'organize' a pair of knickers. Yes, she did achieve knickers eventually after two weeks of deprivation – red satin which hung down to her knees and entirely lacked elastic, but her comfort was regained!

I have carried out my first interview. It is strange at first to interview with a camera, a camera operator and assistant in the room. My interviewee had that very week sent his hearing aid to be repaired, so that we had to experiment to find a comfortable voice level from me.

In my ears it felt like shouting for two hours! But what was much more important is that what I really heard was a wonderful story of survival from a small ghetto in Poland, thence to the Lodz ghetto, a brief 8 day stay in

Auschwitz, and on to two labour camps. Liberation meant a return to Lodz, marriage and a family. However, an increasingly hostile and anti-Semitic Polish community prompted him to leave for Australia in 1951 where his wife's mother and sister were already living.

At the end of the interview his two sons joined him on camera, as families are encouraged to do if they wish. They are looking forward to receiving a copy of the videotape because their father has never told them the full story of those times.

Why is he telling it now? He feels deeply that the world should know what he experienced so that the historical record survives him— and in the telling he feels that he is also able to pay tribute to all of those who did not survive.

Rosemary Block Curator of Oral History,
State Library of NSW.

Interpreting Goat Island

Discovering the histories behind an Historic Site

For three months in 1835 Bony Anderson¹ was chained to a stone bench on the south east corner of Goat Island. The bench is still there, carved into the rock that covers much of the island. If you look closely you can see where the bracket for the chain once was. Over the intervening years many other people have sat there, looking across the harbour to the City: the Foremen of the Magazines, various Harbour Masters, Water Police, firemen, mariners, shipwrights, blacksmiths, engineers, other workers and their families. Of late I've been sitting there a lot. But when we bring visitors to the Island, and take them on tours past the bench, the story they hear is that of Bony, and how his lack of escape skills had him locked to a rock.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has been managing Goat Island since mid-1993. Since May 1994 we have been conducting tours of the Island, focussing on the Colonial Powder Magazine precinct, and the attendant Barracks. There are 21 pages in the tour script, which talks almost entirely about the European history of the island, due partly to the dearth of published Aboriginal History, but also to the European background of most guides.

Eight pages deal with the convict history (Jan 1833-Jan 1839 when they were building the Magazine, Cooperage and Barracks), eight pages deal with the Magazine complex buildings and history (1836-1885), two look at the Water Police occupation of the Island (1838-1865), one talks about the 1900 epidemic of bubonic plague in Sydney, and its role in setting up the Sydney Harbour Trust, which later became the Maritime Services Board. These two organisations, who ran their operations from Goat Island from 1901-1993, have two pages devoted to them.

It is hard to compete with sandstone and convicts, especially when you don't have the added glamour of the phrase "One hundred and sixty years ago...", but the fact is that for a majority of the Island's European history it has been used as a centre for port services by the Trust and the MSB. There are far more buildings remaining from this period than from the earlier usage, and from a purely pragmatic perspective, the services the Island provided during this century were in many ways more important than its colonial uses. Two pages just didn't seem adequate.

It seemed that Goat Island was another victim of that peculiar view of history which states that the older it is

the better. This dictum, along with its by-law concerning the primary importance of big, preferably stone, pieces of architecture, had governed Goat Island history writing in the past. Admittedly there was precious little of that, the Island had mostly been used as a Government facility since European colonisation, and so records tended to be very much on the official side. The major source used by NPWS when writing our tours was the James Semple Kerr text Goat Island². This text is best described by its subtitle, 'An analysis of documentary and physical evidence and an assessment of significance.' As such it is a very thorough work, but it is not (nor was it ever intended to be) a real history of the Island.

It appeared that no such history existed.

Instead we had a series of official documents and some left over interpretive notes from the Maritime Services Board which were not really suited to our National Parks perspective. In addition there were a series of fairly dry reports and papers which had been put together over the years mostly by the MSB and Sydney Harbour Trust. These were never intended as interpretive documents, and so tended to be specialised and non-anecdotal. A common complaint from our tourists tended to be that there was a great deal of information about the buildings on the Island, but very little about the people.

Goat Island, which had been a working Island since 1830, had become an Historic Site.

The sandstone magazines and corrugated iron shipyards were spoken of in terms of their architecture, and their designers and costs. There were no stories about the people who inhabited those buildings, none about who planted the banana trees, and no explanation as to why the timber amenities block was called Rancho El Shito³.

In January 1994 I was employed as a tour guide by Sydney Harbour National Park. It was thanks to this work that I became interested in the idea of an Oral History of Goat Island. Often a member of the groups we took around would mention 'I used to live out here as a child.' or 'I worked here from '45 to '60, down in the Shipyards.' It seemed that there were literally hundreds of stories of life on the Island walking around out there. We began collecting names and phone numbers, and soon they were coming thick and fast from the guides, from other NPWS staff, and in particular from Senior Ranger Robert Bird. When the idea of recording an oral history of the Island was put forward we were fortunate in having a Senior Ranger who was not only enthusiastic, but extremely well connected.

Unknown to me Robert Bird had already set up an Oral History Project⁴ in the very early days of the Island's being

managed by the NPWS. It was on a smaller scale, and different in intent to the project we envisaged, but it demonstrated the commitment of the NPWS to the idea of oral history, and non-Colonial interpretations of Historic Sites.

The earlier Project made it clear that there was a great deal of knowledge to be gathered concerning Goat Island. Despite only interviewing 6 personnel from the Island, Biskupic and Wright had uncovered a series of stories that both explained many of the Island's facilities and added to their interpretive possibilities.

Biskupic and Wright were not the only oral historians to have worked on Goat Island. There were a number of others who were regularly mentioned by historians and MSB workers alike. Margaret Reid's extensive work on Sydney Harbour's maritime History was often referred to by the MSB visitors to the Island. At the time of writing I was still trying to get in touch with Mrs Reid, although I must confess to feeling rather minnow like when I think of meeting her.

In addition, many of the people who were involved in Goat Island's History played important roles in the history of the Sydney foreshore. The Sydney Harbour Trust was responsible for cleaning up the Harbour suburbs at the turn of this century after the bubonic plague outbreak of 1900, and one of the

changes it implemented was the provision of medium density housing for its workers. To offset this it set about providing social services for the men and their families, including the first pre-school in Sydney, the Lance Kindergarten at Millers Point. The difficulty of separating the history of Goat Island from the histories of Balmain, Millers Point, Pyrmont and the other suburbs where these workers lived, would be substantial.

Knowing all of this it was with a mixture of excitement and trepidation that I began co-ordinating the project in January 1995. Two major problems faced me, the first was to define the project within manageable limits, with a set goal at the end, and the second was that my background is entirely in English literature. This is a wonderful background for an editor, and even for a waitress, but I must confess to having had only the vaguest idea of techniques and proprieties where oral history was concerned.

Fortunately I then heard the name Rosie Block. I am not sure how Rosie first heard of Goat Island. Certainly we had dealt with the Image Library of the NSW State Library regularly during 1994. But it was the Manuscripts Section who came to the Island for their Christmas party that year. Rosie made the booking, so her name was familiar to me. When the anonymous voice on the phone at the

Historic Houses Trust said to me “Oh, you want to talk to Rosie Block.”, I knew that I would be seeking help from a sympathetic soul.

Rosie proved to be far more than sympathetic. She spent over an hour in our first meeting instructing me in oral history procedures and decorums. When I wrote up my notes on the meeting it stretched to nearly three pages of useful advice and encouragement. It was the encouragement that was particularly necessary. Listening to Rosie’s enthusiasm I began to believe that I really could get it all done.

Admittedly Rosie did exact a form of payment in kind. I joined the OHAA that day, and found myself agreeing to edit *Voiceprint*, and it was all done with nary an arm twist.

That weekend the previously amorphous Goat Island Oral History Project began to take shape. I decided to aim for 12 interviews, and to attempt to vary the occupations of the Interviewees. People who had volunteered for the project, or been volunteered by friends or family, included a former MSB time keeper and curator of the museum; the daughter of one of the Harbour Masters; a Sea Captain who grew up here and would return sporadically as he wandered the world, one of the highly skilled blacksmiths who worked on the Island, and a former Cheer-Oh Girl who performed in Red-Cross Concert Parties

here during WWII. There were shipwrights and engineers, wives and children, office girls and general hands. We felt that there was a real chance to listen to a history made up of people, not Government Records.

At the moment we are hoping to use many of the interviews as part of our interpretive work on Goat Island. In the future we would like to see a book, and perhaps a radio documentary coming out of the project. Of course this all depends on the agreement of the Interviewees, and finding the budget (If anyone has a spare \$25,000 they’re not using, feel free to ring...), but all seems to be progressing well at the moment. Interviews are scheduled from April onwards, and we are planning a large-scale Goat Island Reunion Day in Spring 1995.

Already we have had positive results from the Project. Ex-Goat Islanders seem to be everywhere, and they all want to talk. The snatches of anecdotes they offer over the telephone hint at a wealth of memories, which illuminate many aspects of life in the MSB. There is the former Blacksmith whose degree in Metallurgy gives the lie to the traditional image of the over muscled, monosyllabic giant. There are the women who worked through the wars, and in the office, and kept the social life of the Island running despite all obstacles. There are the children who grew up out here, now parents and grandparents, and tell of

adventuring in the old tunnel, sailing boats on pools of water collected in the rocks, and generally living the life of Riley. Despite the fact that I have been conscientiously refusing to listen to whole stories without tapes/procedure et al (I was paying attention, Rosie), snippets of these lives are thrown into every conversation. Bit by bit I am starting to see a Goat Island that is peopled by these voices, not just haunted with the relics of the magazines and shipyards.

It feels strange to talk about a project that has not apparently begun yet, but in many ways the most important thing is already achieved. By listening to the voices of these men and women as they relate their experiences we have found a new history behind that of Neo Georgian façades and carefully mitred walls. we have found a history of people and lives, of debate and accomplishment, of all the tragic, banal, glorious events that make up a lifetime. It is a history that the most perfectly preserved building can never hope to replicate. Now all we have to do is learn it.

Donyale Harrison

Goat Island Public Tours run every Saturday and Sunday. Private tours can be arranged on weekdays for groups of 25 people or more. For more information please ring the Tours Co-ordinator on (02) 555 9844.

For information on the Goat Island Oral History Project, ring Donyale Harrison on (02) 555 9844 or (02) 519 4682 (ah).

- 1 Charles 'Bony' Anderson was transported to Australia as a teenager in 1834 for 7 years after being convicted of "breaking shop windows" and being a public nuisance. He had suffered a head injury as a youth, and it is probable that this affected his behaviour over the years. Certainly he didn't appreciate being brought to Goat Island as part of the work gangs which constructed the Powder magazine Area and Barracks. He tried to escape repeatedly, but was always caught. During 1835 he received over 1200 lashes as punishment, and was then sentenced to be chained to the rock now known as 'Anderson's Couch' for two years. Petitions from the residents of Balmain and the mariners on the harbour saw him removed to Port Macquarie and the Norfolk Island after serving only a part of his sentence.
- 2 Kerr, J.S., Goat Island, Maritime Services Board of NSW, 1985.
- 3 This building once had a chicken run next to it, so perhaps it was from the fowl manure, or possibly the fact that it ended up as a toilet block.
- 4 Biskupic, S. and Wright, C., Report on the Goat Island Shipyard NPWS-UNSW History Project 1993 (private publication).

Oral History of the Computers in Australia

At a recent meeting of the Computer Museum Society it was proposed that a history of the Computer and Data Processing Industry in Australia be compiled to give a structure to the museum and its collection. This history will include computer documentation, written works, oral history.

The history of computers covers a huge range of social and industrial areas and one of the first priorities is to contact and record early experiences of computers and data processing.

A good example of this is the experiences of women who operated early punched card data processing machines in the pre-nineteen forties.

Before computers were available, much data processing was done by punched cards and many people- usually women- spent years of their working lives in offices preparing these stacks of cards which were fed into the processing machines. This way of life was a precursor to the modern computer industry.

While these machines are being preserved, the operating procedures of these offices may be forgotten. The techniques, the protocols, the type of office environment needed to run these machines, all of these are just as much a part of the history as the hardware. This life-style, however, will still be remembered by these now elderly women and is an ideal project for oral history.

In a general sense the history of modern computers moves from these early days through to the modern PC and covers all phases of industry, commerce, and social areas. The computer has impacted on just as many fields as have merged together in its construction. It exists because of academic research, industrial design, R&D, manufacturing, programming, operators, sales personnel, marketing and management.

All of these are legitimate areas for collecting oral history and we invite any person who has such material or who wishes to contribute to contact John Rich on (02) 569 4965. **John Rich**



2001: A Report from Australia: A Report to the Council of Australian Governments by the Centenary of Federation Advisory Committee

Australian Government Publishing Service, August 1994

Essential reading for any historians who want to be forewarned and forearmed as the centenary of federation celebrations take shape and gather momentum! (I must admit that I write as one who can expect to be inundated with requests to help with federation centenary history projects, let alone generating a few myself.)

This 117 page report arises from the consultations undertaken and submissions received by the Centenary of Federation Advisory Committee, chaired by Joan Kirner, earlier this year. Amidst politically-correct sentiments and 'MFP-speak' one can still gain clear indications of the kinds of history projects – and the kind of history – likely to be promoted by governments and supported by funding bodies for 2001.

One concrete announcement is that every schoolchild will be presented with a CD-ROM of the federation story as a memento of the anniversary. It will be distributed in 1996 as part of the educative lead up to 2001. There are also recommendations about the production

of feature films and drama series, as well as small 'bit sized' chunks of history for television (a la Bicentennial Minutes).

Other proposals endorsed by the report are much more ambitious – and vague. One calls for all Australians to contribute to a 'Domesday Book' ('the information would be collected and stored locally, but the power of modern communications could create the links to bring the parts together in a unified whole'). Another, emanating from the National Library, suggests that everybody in Australia on 1 January 2001 have their photograph taken ('the images would then be collated and stored under the auspices of the National Library of Australia and through the local public library system.')

Both of these proposals, and others of a similar scale, enthuse about the invaluable sources that will result. One can only assume that equally ambitious proposals for adequate staff and funds to cope with the generation and care of such massive amounts of data will also be emanating from the currently cash-strapped, skeleton-staffed library system.

There is a proposal for a history of Australian public administration, endorsed by the Hon Kim Beazley MHR, Minister for Finance – and therefore a

likely starter? The actual development of the National Museum of Australia (the national museum you have when you haven't got a national museum) also gets strong support.

Oral history is referred to several times, and three projects 'which caught the imagination of the committee' are outlined: a 'Two Up' series of interviews with young Australians who will come of age in 2001; an 'Across Generations' project for school children and elderly members of a different community; and 'Century Up'- interviews with Australians who were alive on 1 January 1901.

The above are only a few of the events and initiatives referred to in the report. There are also suggestions and recommendations about festivals, debates, lectures, reprints, preservation of key documents, citizenship studies, and local keeping places for Aboriginal materials as well as many other matters with a less direct 'history' connection.

The report discusses administration and funding issues, drawing heavily on the lessons learned in 1988, but only in theoretical terms. There is no address to send those funding submissions to yet!

But quite apart from matters of self-interest, 2001: A Report from Australia should be read and discussed by historians so that we can be prepared to play a role in informing and shaping the historical aspects of the centenary celebrations. It certainly supplies much

food for thought for the executives of professional historian's associations across Australia- and raises just the kind of important issues that the proposed national organisation of professional historians should get its teeth into.

2001: A Report from Australia is readily available from the Commonwealth Government Bookshop, 32 York Street, Sydney \$14.95. (Telephone: (02) 299 6737). The Sate Library of NSW also has a copy for reference.

Beth M Robertson

Reprinted from the Association of Professional Historians Newsletter No 51, November 1994



Sites: Nailing the Debate. Archaeology and Interpretation in Museum

Museum of Sydney, Sydney, 7-9 April 1995 c/o Historic Houses Trust
(02) 692 8366.

Oral History Practical Seminar – with a focus on editing

OHAA (NSW), 3 June 1995, Contact Rosie Block (02) 230 1697.

Public History Conference

Professional Historians Association,
Call for papers by Friday 21 April 1995.
Working titles for the three sessions are
1) Reflections and Remembrances,
2) Issues in Practice, and 3) The Future.
Trades Hall, Millers Point, Sydney, 24
June 1995, Contact by phone or fax
(02) 481 8390.

Redefining the Norm: Gender, Sexuality and Ethnicity in Museums

Museums Australia Annual State
Conference, Australian Maritime
Museum, Sydney, 1 September 1995.
Contact Helen Trippa (02) 55 2777.

Words at Work

Oral History Association of Australia
Biennial Conference, Launceston
Tasmania, 8-10 September 1995,
Contact Jill Cassidy on (003) 37 1392
or by fax (003) 371 117.

Women and Labour

5th Annual Conference, Macquarie
University, Sydney, 29 September-1
October 1995. Contact (02) 850 8861.

One Day History Seminar on Gender and History to Farewell Barbara Caine

University of Sydney, 13 May 1995. Contact
Penny Russell (02) 351 2362