



voiceprint

Newsletter

of the New South Wales Branch
of the Oral History Association
of Australia

13

August 1997



*... is a
... of
... as the result
... interview
... means of finding
... the past by asking
... of people who*



Voiceprint is the newsletter of the NSW Branch of the Oral History Association of Australia and is published quarterly

ISSN: 13224360

Issue No. 13 – August 1997

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Editorial

While we the editorial team were putting together this newsletter, and drinking our fourth cup of coffee, we were discussing why we actually joined the OHAA. We also commented on the growing number of names on our new members' list. We realised what a diverse and interesting group we are! Just amongst the four of us around the table, we discovered we had a lawyer whose interest stems from the need to hear in different ways, one who is especially interested in the therapeutic impact of listening, another is a writer exploring issues of identity and our fourth member is concerned with fostering empathy in school children.

*All of us spoke of the importance of listening as part of real communication. We felt that this not only enriches our understanding of others, but of ourselves as well. We would love to print your reasons as to why you became oral historians and joined OHAA. Drop us a short note to include in future **Voiceprint** issues.*

In this issue we have continued along the lines of this discussion by bringing you other oral history perspectives that you might enjoy reading. We were excited by the wide range of new publications that we have reviewed.

Also included is the next stage of Norman Mitchell's story. We are growing very fond of 'Dad' whose view on life is so positive. We will miss him when his story comes to an end. Perhaps some of our readers have a family member's story to share with us when that time comes?

Many municipal libraries are building up oral history collections now too. It is gratifying to know that oral history is beginning to reach a wider public. We would also welcome some notes on these projects for our members. Any librarians out there with a few spare moments to drop us a line to print?

*Increasingly in this fast moving world, just stopping to listen seems almost a luxury. Among our membership there are many approaches in dealing with the problem of the ever increasing encroachments on our time. This is your Association and **Voiceprint** is your newsletter. As oral historians we all know the value of constructive listening. We all share a commitment to building a more meaningful future by reconstructing the past. We invite you to share some of your professional experiences with all of us.*

Katja Grynberg & Ruth Wilson

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New Members from May to August 1997

We are so fortunate to have such varying talents and interests among our members. Welcome to these new ones! The number of our members in the country is growing – we are so pleased that oral history is alive and well outside the cities too.

In our new membership application form we now include an 'Interests' inquiry so that we can enlarge our initial acquaintance with our members. Renewing members might like to fill this in as well and we'll update our records. We look forward to hearing from you!

Vicki Zvargulis

Public servant

Erica Henessy

Retired – interested in current affairs and history

Neil James

Writer/historian

Jilli Streit

Writer/anthropologist

Judy Young

Freelance journalist

Susan McLean

Freelance historian/curator

Eva Scheinberg

Project coordinator, former Sydney Director of Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation

Dennis Hill

National Parks and Wildlife, interested in Aboriginal history

Namgyel Dukpa

Student from Bhutan, interested in oral history in the classroom

Pauline Curby

Consultant historian

Mary-Jill Johnston

Assistant to Member of Parliament

Farewell and Hail!

We thank **Margot McKenzie** our retiring Treasurer for the devoted four years she spent with the OHAA (NSW) Inc. and we welcome **Berenice Evans** who has taken up this position already. We thank her for coming to our aid so swiftly and look forward to our time with her.

me reducing the number of snails, which I ate!).

We became very friendly with the Bockmans who lived next door. Dad said that Ray and Joy Bockman were very good to us at that time (and both families have kept in touch until recently). Mum and Dad's second child, Susan Elizabeth, was born thirteen months after myself. Things became a little more crowded then and, as Pop was still a problem, it was with a sense of relief that our family finally moved out about two years later.

Our new home was an army hut at Hargrove Park – pretty rough, but at least we were on our own. My own earliest memories are of the blocks of ice that were delivered by the iceman, and the times I collected golf balls for Dad when he practised golf on the other side of the railway lines. By the time we were living at Hargrove Park, Dad had left Grace Brothers and taken a sales job with Merchants, at Darling Harbour.

After Merchants, Dad joined an agency called Greens and formed a close friendship with a fellow workmate, Darryl. Dad and Darryl have been life-long friends and still see one another often, despite Darryl having moved to Maroochydore several years ago. Dad's new job included a company car – a Morris Oxford. His next company car was a Holden.

In 1952, our family moved into a real house – a two bedroom brick Housing Commission cottage, in Milburn Rd, Gymea. It was a very handy location, being only a five minute walk to the shops and train station. Four years later Mum and Dad's third child, Peter Anthony, was born.

Dad has always been interested in sport, and is a natural sportsman himself. I remember playing tennis against Dad at Kangaloon, while on holidays at his niece Nola and her husband Clive's place. I was 15 at the time and had played competition tennis for 6 years. It was the first time Dad had picked up a racquet. Dad led me 5-0 and 40-15 before running out of puff and losing in a tie-breaker.

His participation in the more active sports was curtailed somewhat as a result of the problem with his ulcers. After the war, there was no more hockey, football or cricket! Instead, Dad concentrated on playing golf. He never had a golf lesson in his life, being self-taught.

Dad joined Beverly Park Golf Club in 1946, with an 'A' Grade handicap of 8. In 1958 he transferred to Cronulla Golf Club, where he achieved a handicap low of 6. Dad was an 'A' grade player for all of his 50 years in golf. His golfing highlights included two holes in-one, (on the same tee) at Cronulla – the second in very good

company while playing with professional and Australian-ranked golfer Ted Ball. Dad won numerous 'monthly medals' at Cronulla, and represented Cronulla RSL in 'A' Grade pennants for a number of years.

Golf served Dad well in business circles and he played mid-week many times during his working life, at courses such as 'Bonny Doon' and 'St. Michaels' (two of Dad's favourites). Dad's profession as a sales rep fitted in nicely with his golfing lifestyle. However, Dad said "I always made sure that I finished my work first before I played golf." His golfing partners over the years were people who came from all walks of life Doctors, dentists, other sales reps, world class golfers (Ted Ball, Bruce Crampton), and even a State of Origin Rugby League Coach (Jack Gibson). Among his good friends were Charley Tite, Bob Nelson, Andy Manzi and Bill Burm.

Mum and Dad were occasional spectators at some of the big golf tournaments. At one such tournament – the Australian Open, held at Manly – Bruce Crampton spotted Dad in the gallery and came over for a chat. Bruce asked Dad if he still stuck his pipe into the top of his golf sock before playing a shot. (Dad had given up smoking by then and, in doing so, reckons he saved himself thousands of dollars over the last 20 years.)

Eighteen holes of golf became a bit of a struggle for Dad over the last couple of years and finally, in August, 1995, he had to stop playing altogether. His handicap was then 16, which was very respectable for someone 76 years old.

Dad will be well remembered in golfing circles for his smooth swing and straight hitting. It was said that the only time he ever strayed from the fairway was when he had to have a pee in the bushes!

When his golfing days ended Dad took up lawn bowls. He joined Sylvania Bowling Club, and now plays two or three days a week. Dad enjoys the competitive side of the game, and wins more than he loses. He also enjoys a social beer between ends and at the end of the game.

Bob Mitchell



Your editorial committee has reviewed a number of publications which reflect some of the many varied ways that oral recordings may be used to assist in the production of a written record. These particular publications 'speak' of a natural disaster, the changes of a particular place and the influence of this place on those who live and work there. Another publication documents the beginnings and the growth of a multi-million dollar industry and oral interviews have been used to bring life and interest to a more formal history. We hope you will find interest in these publications.

Down The Bay, The Changing Foreshores of North Sydney

Compiled by Lianne Hall, Published with assistance from the Australian Foundation for Culture and the Humanities. Available from North Sydney Council – \$14.50.

Down The Bay, a collection of stories from the Stanton Library Oral History Program, is more than a book about the changes on North Sydney's foreshores. It is a narrative made up of family stories from the early twentieth century. The voices speak of a different time frame and a different pace of work and leisure. The inclusion of Harold Cazneau's remarkable photos, help bring the 'sunshine and shadow – fog and mist' of this world, to life.

Balls Head Bay, Berry's Bay, Lavender Bay and Neutral Bay were the foreshores and the bays where these boat builders, coal lumpers, marine engineers, bridge

builders, and timber merchants lived, worked and often spent their leisure time. Many of them were involved with building the Harbour Bridge and Luna Park. Their oral histories underline how fast this area has changed commercially and residentially. Not only the landscape was altered but rapid technological shifts, mean that expressions and words themselves are often not recognisable today. However, within the context of these stories, words such as "auxiliary hoppers", "careening", "chute hands", and "oyster coves" come alive again. Places have a strange rebirth too. We learn that Wollstonecraft Bay was known as Kerosene Bay, and Neutral Bay had been declared a 'neutral port' for foreign ships to take on water and supplies.

Many of us remember the joys of Luna Park and can almost hear the shrieks on

the ferris wheel and ghost train ride. Jack Sullivan worked there till 1952. He was involved in construction and maintenance and adds a different dimension to the fun park.

Oh, time was nothing. You just worked. The sun would come up and the sun went down and you just kept on working. That Hopkins, there – I don't know, his poor wife and children, he never saw them. He'd be there at eight o'clock in the morning and he'd still be there at half past eleven, quarter past twelve at night and that'd be seven days a week. That was his life – him and Atkins – that was their life.... And today I go down there and say, 'What beautiful view'. And I worked there – one foot in the water half the time.

The Harbour Bridge is another icon for all of us. Charles Brown who worked on the Harbour Bridge, thinks of it like this:

there was a great deal of pride amongst the men that worked on the bridge. [Pride] that they were part of the team that was responsible for building one of the greatest engineering feats in the world....You would never fail to be impressed by its magnitude, its structural beauty and by its majestic appearance.

Lianne Hall has compiled pages that reveal memories of Depression days

when people lived in 'humpies'. We read about when the unemployed "tidied up Balls Head....and eventually got into the pool and built it... They got these rocks and rolled them out and then they finished up making a rock pool, which was nice. Then later on, years later, the Council came down and they improved it again... But the original pool was built by the relief workers."

In "Down the Bay" we get a glimpse of mateship as we go back to the 1920's and 30's with the 18-Foot dinghies. Crews of up to sixteen men would sail these boats on Sydney Harbour and their story is told by some of the tradesmen and labourers. It was a working man's sport and Don Barnett remembers how his grandfather would "put a vice on the kitchen table of a night during the week and make up the various blocks that you had to have for the boats then. He'd shape them at night. And we'd be all sitting there, looking at the way how he was doing it".

Work traditions also made for strong family ties. Bruce Ambrose is the fourth generation of gas engineers. His grandfather and three uncles from Dundee, Scotland, were the catalysts. "I was interested in gas before I learnt the ABC and that's all I ever wanted to be. And I did the same as my Dad and qualified the same as he did." Albert Groom's fondest memory is "the very fact that all the time I was there, I was with my own family, my brothers and we

worked as a team... My sons are now running the business...They're still doing the same work" as ship engineers and marine repairers. The Merideths were boat builders, designing and building the first diesel engine in Australia. Family names such as Stannard and Halvorsen are also synonymous with boat building. Down the Bay's pages echo the unassumingness of men from humble beginnings who become captains of industry and its chapters reverberate with labourers who talk of amazing

courage so matter-of-factly. The book reminds us of the importance of human attachment that we in today's fast lane seem to have forgotten.

All these narratives add dimension to Sydney's history. These memories add colour to North Sydney's extraordinary human tapestry. You will find this gem at North Sydney's Stanton Library or from North Sydney Council. It's great value at \$14.50 and they'll post it to you for an additional \$2!

Reviewed by Katja Grynberg

Cotting On – Stories of Australian cotton-growing

By Siobhan McHugh, Hale & Iremonger, 1996. ISBN 0 86806 597 8. \$29.95.

Siobhan McHugh received support in this project from the Australia Council.

Siobhan McHugh has produced a very extensive history of many aspects of cotton growing in New South Wales. This history commences with the story in the Namoi valley and then in turn looks at development of the industry in the Gwydir, Macintyre and Macquarie valleys and on the Darling around Bourke. Along with the documentation of the development of cotton growing McHugh presents an extensive record of the development of the water supply and the various irrigation systems used by

the cotton growers. As well as water the use of chemicals has been another component which McHugh found inextricably linked with the cotton industry and therefore has been extensively dealt with in this book.

The story unfolds with quotes from many of the people interviewed which allows the reader many glimpses of the life of the growers and those connected with the Water Resources Commission. These quotes from the very extensive oral interviews conducted by McHugh bring many personal experiences of those involved in the industry to life and allow the reader a personal view of many of the people who have played a major

role in the cotton industry during the past thirty odd years.

This book however is not only an oral history record of the cotton industry's development but McHugh has undertaken extensive research which has resulted in a well documented history. An extensive index and notes ensure that this book will provide a valuable resource to those scholars who examine the cotton growing industry in future years. McHugh history records many aspects of the industry and the controversy which has erupted in recent years. Currently there is no resolution to the many problems and controversies which beset the industry. *Cotting On* will I am sure be essential reading for those who in the future continue to research and review the cotton industry, the use of chemicals in agriculture as well as the development of irrigation for agricultural purposes.

McHugh set out to present a social history of the people associated with the industry but her well documented research has resulted in a factual history of this interesting period of Australian agricultural development. The use of many photographs from the pictorial archives of the *Narrabri Courier* and other sources bring considerable visual interest to the book. Both the words and the faces provide interest to the reader.

The narrative does, however, allow the reader to develop a picture of the people and their place in this development. The extensive coverage of the history of cotton in the various valleys, as well as the role of those connected to the water and the chemical industry leaves the reader at times wishing for more details about many of the characters of the book. There is still much to be told about the lives of those who have seen so much change in these river valleys. The story is of course ongoing and especially that relating to the use of chemicals still has many chapters to be written in the future.

From a personal point of view I found the story of the supply of the irrigation water and "the battle" between the irrigation farmers and the Water Resources Commission quite fascinating. So much of this story has a familiar ring to me, as back when this story began I was also involved with irrigation farming (in the Murray Valley) and it would seem all farmers have an independent streak and a certain disrespect for authority! The tension between the irrigators and the water authorities is only one of the social stresses of which this history provides us with some insight. The tension between the American and Australian farmers, the irrigators and the graziers, the employees and the employers, the chemical companies and the people are just some of the stories

relating to social tensions which I feel are waiting to be told in greater depth than has been possible in this broad ranging historical record.

“Growing crops is not really work, it’s enjoyment...”. McHugh’s study presents

an overview of the first thirty years of cotton growing in New South Wales that I hope will encourage others (or McHugh) to tell more about “the enjoyment of growing crops”.

Reviewed by Joyce Cribb

Burnt Out

Experiences of the January 1994 Bush Fires in Warringah and Pittwater
by Virginia Macleod.

Published by The Local History Unit, 1997. Available from Local Studies, Pittwater Library Services, Park Street, Mona Vale 2103. Cost: \$12.00 plus postage and handling \$1.50

“Fire is an integral part of Australian life” is the opening statement in this account of the 1994 Pittwater and Warringah fires. Reading the slim volume made me aware of how deeply the bushfire experience is ingrained in the national psyche, and the extent to which this natural disaster has shaped our national consciousness of how “ordinary” people perform acts of extraordinary courage.

Virginia Macleod, who works for Pittwater Council’s Local History Resource Centre, has produced a document that has value for both its content and its style. The design of the book is impressive. The layout makes it easy to absorb, and the maps and colour

photographs add interest to the well organised written text. Using books, newspaper and journals, unpublished stories, oral histories and public reports, Macleod has underpinned the dramatic events of January 1994 with well researched background material and lucid commentary. An index and a set of notes add to its quality.

The author established the role of fire in the Australian landscape, describing its use by the Aborigines as a protective strategy which posed no threat to human life. The nomadic lifestyle of the indigenous people precluded the risk of being trapped by fires. They simply moved on, unburdened by the need to preserve permanent homes and a lifetime’s baggage. Danger came only with settled existence.

We are provided with a history of fires in the area and also with a brief reviews of the development of fire fighting since the first recorded fire in that locality in the 1890s. The “awesome nature of fires” was quickly recognised by the residents,

especially after the bush north of Newport was burned on 'Black Friday' in January 1939. By 1942 the small local informal groups of citizen fire fighters had been replaced by a formal bush fire brigade. Initially the fire fighting strategies were mainly 'dry' (back burning and diversions), but in time the greater emphasis was put on water tankers and tankers. In the most recent disaster helicopters were enlisted for the release of water bombs, and the brigades were responsible for the protection of 260 square kilometres of bushland.

Macleod's account builds a sense of drama into this record of mounting danger. High temperatures, low humidity and strong winds resulted in the imposition of total fire bans in December 1993. On 6 January 1994 the local newspaper carried the headline: FIRE CREWS BRACE FOR A BAD DAY. The local community was aware that they were "just sitting on a knife's edge". By 4.28 p.m. on Friday, ignition point had been reached. The strong winds blowing from the north west were pushing the fires across the peninsula and smothering the road.

Much of the interest of Burnt Out emerges from the use of personal accounts which describe the events as they were happening, and the feelings of the people whose homes and lives were at risk. These responses were drawn from two sources.

Creative writing workshops, organised by the Creative Leisure Movement to help people overcome their traumatic memories of the fires, resulted in a recreation of both the drama and the terror of the time. One of the survivors tells how the fires came "raging across the ridges", but rejoices that "in true Australian spirit, when the odds are against us, our community spirit is rekindled". And another tells the compelling story of how the houses in Barcoola Place were saved by the residents whose struggles with the engulfing flames are described with such clarity that the tension of the moment lives again.

The other source for the personal reminiscences is the oral history records which were taken to help people come to terms with the aftermath of their experiences. Many of the fire victims suffered a "state of aftershock which made them weep, shake, find it very difficult to make any decisions, feel depressed", etcetera.

Initially they found it difficult to talk about the event. The oral history method enabled them to reflect on some of their most negative feelings, especially on what it is like to be homeless. The therapeutic dimension of oral history as a means of processing some of life's less pleasant experiences has been recognised as a significant contribution to the community health field. It is

important for victims to know that other people are aware of and understand what they have gone through, and verbalising their memories for posterity is a positive exercise that benefits both the person who has suffered and the historical record.

Burnt Out concludes with a discussion of the impact of the 1994 fires on the local community and on the environment.

Among the photographs is a grouping called 'The Beauty of Regeneration', which lands a spirit of optimism to this imaginatively documented and presented piece of local history. The book is especially successful in conveying "what 'ordinary' people experienced and what it was like to live through a certain event or time". If, like me, you recall the oppressive smell of smoke and the drifts of flimsy grey ash floating into gardens many kilometres from the source of the January 1994 fires, you will also engage with the many hidden dramas which were being acted out so close to home.

Reviewed by Ruth Wilson

Diary of Events



Oral History course offered by School of Information, Library and Archive Studies, University of New South Wales within its post-graduate diploma program

The course will examine the nature of oral history; components for effective program design and management including documentary, legal and ethical considerations; the psychological factors influencing the oral history process; interview techniques; transcription and indexing; storage and care of these materials. providing effective access and reference services for oral history materials; and the types of use (private study, publication, broadcast, exhibition, film/video etc) of these materials.

Venue

University of New South Wales, School of Information, Library and Archive Studies, 4th floor, Mathews Building (next to Library). Parking available.

Dates

Friday mornings, 9 am to 12pm from 22 August to 31 October 1997. There will be no class on 5 September or 3 October 1997.

Cost

\$545.00 per participant, with 15% discount for institutions enrolling three or more participants. Course fees cover all instructions, course notes and tutorial handouts, and assessment if required.

Further Details

Please contact Maureen Henninger, School of Information, Library and Archive Studies, University of New South Wales for a course brochure and registration form by telephoning (02) 9385 3589 or fax (02) 9385 3430.

REMINDER:

NATIONAL CONFERENCE, Alice Springs from 3 to 7 September, 1997

You may still be able to attend! For information and registration details, contact Beth Robertson, Conference Convener, Oral History Association of Australia (SA Branch) Inc. Institute Building, 122 Kintore Avenue, Adelaide SA 5000. Telephone: (08) 8207 7349 Fax: (08) 8207 7351

Save the date - the flyers will be circulated nearer the time.

The next **PRACTICAL SEMINAR** will be held jointly with the Centre of Community History, University of New South Wales and the State Library of New South Wales as well as OHAA (NSW) Inc.

Saturday 1 November 1997 at the State Library.

Lesley Heath, Director of the Centre, will speak on literary societies of the 1920s and Barbara Bursill will discuss her interviews with poets.

