

Lorna Boyd interviewing Josephine Leis on her life during the depression.

Introduction: Today it's Thursday the 17<sup>th</sup> August 1989, my name is Lorna Boyd and today I'm going to be interviewing Josephine Leis about the depression in Newcastle, and also the change in her life moving from Singleton to Newcastle.

Lorna - Josephine, could you tell me a little about your self,

Josephine - About myself, well I'm 82 and I've lived a pretty quite life really, I was married when I was 21, but in the days before that when we were living in the country we had a big farm and we all worked hard, we all had to do everything, milk cows, go down the farm and pick pumpkins, drive lorries up to the factory places to get them unloaded and everything and ah, it was a pretty hard life, we were pretty well organised, mum saw to that, we had to do the milking, we used to milk about 70 odd cows every morning and afternoon.

Lorna - And how many of you were there to do seventy?

Josephine - Six of us used to do the milking, one used to stay at home to do breakfast for when we were finished and then one would do the this week I would be stationed on to do the house and the next week the cooking and then one sister would always do the gardening with mum and one sister the sewing with mum, mum was only small, very small well not really small but short and ah it was well organised dad used to see to that, he'd kick you out of bed at half past five in the morning whether you wanted

to or not (laughter) and this brother that's five years older than me he was my idol, because after that it was all babies, like I was the youngest of, eldest of 7 there was 6 under me, and I used to have to do for them as they came along, every couple of years there would be another baby somewhere along the road, and in those days, I can still remember every afternoon you had to go and make mum and dad's bed up and put the little baby cotton pillow in the middle, and make it ready for the little baby, the baby always slept with the parents then. They didn't have cots and things like they have today but they say all these dangers with babies but if they realised that the babies slept with the parents in those days, I can still remember those little filled pillowslips in the middle of the bed you never thought anything of them lying on them in those days but (clock chimes) now you have to take every precaution in case of . . . . .

Lorna The baby suffocates.

Josephine Yes the baby suffocates or something but we used to my brother and I were in a band, I played the piano and he played a cornette, and we had two others and we had another girl and we used to play for dances, we used to ride perhaps a horse seven miles to a dance, and play all night and then ride home again.

Lorna You must have been exhausted.

Josephine Well you didn't think about it in those days, you didn't think about being exhausted or tired you know, or those sorts of things but ah we enjoyed it, it was simple fun but it was good fun, you know we used to get a guinea a night for playing.

Horna - How long did you do that for Josephine

Josephine - For about um, I left school, I got a bursary and I went to college but I was only there for twelve months I was only 14 when I went home. I had to go home to mind the babies, and ah on those days you just did what you were told, you didn't say you wanted to go on to be a university student or whatever, you just did what ever you were told, well ... on a farm with all these kids, I couldn't be at college, enjoying college life when, mum had to be up to milk and then come home and get the kids ready for school an all this sort of going on.

Horna - What was it you were actually doing at college, was it music you were looking at.

Josephine - No it was school college, I only got to first year, when I left, because there was ... future in it if I stayed on but I couldn't stay on. I just lived there all that time we used to, go and play the other girl and I, I played one dance she'd play the other dance and we'd have half of a each laughs but we never seemed to think about that we never thought about that then and well this brother he was terrific I was never allowed to dance with anyone who had a drink or item or anything like that if he saw me he'd always say to me when we would go now if so and so asks you to dance and I know he's been drinking just say you're engaged and I'll come up and pick you up so I wouldn't have to dance with this whoever it was, but which I think is terrific you know for a brother and I mean many a night I had a boy to take me home in a sulky with a horse and he'd have a girl to take home in a

horse and sulky and I'd have to go with this chap and wait at the gate till he'd if you think about it now the things that could have happened to you in that time at waiting at the gate till he came back from his girl and we used to do that and we had our own tennis court and they'd have their own cricket match and everything like that and it was all just simple fun but it was good and we used to have on Sundays at weekends they used to come up from Newcastle, as we got older they used to come up from Newcastle and my husband he had a car.

Hanna - And was your husband from Newcastle?

Josephine - Yes and well a lot of our friends were down here, my sister in law, brother and they used to come up on a Sun, Saturday afternoon, sometimes and stay all night we'd have a houseful of people all night and on Sunday you'd have to get the starched tablecloth out and put it on the table oh when I think about the things we had to do mum wouldn't have sat down to dinner on a Sunday without this starched tablecloth on and ah, then the people would all stay and play tennis and then stay for tea again, and we'd have twenty or thirty for tea at night and all gather round the piano and sing and dance it was just like really like a party when you think back on it but those were hard times on those days.

Hanna - And was that about the early twenties then.

Josephine - Oh yes when the depression came and we had an influx of people out of work from Newcastle came up there as they had no work down here, my brother, and his mate all came back up and lived up at our place, but we managed, poor old dad well

he used to cut trees down to feed the cows and that on as things were bad and he, I don't know how we managed I think back now and wonder how we survived, we didn't have any money like I mean we didn't have anything like when I was married I had a nice box mum saw to that I had a nice lot of things but I didn't have any money, I didn't have a penny of my own when I was married, not a penny, it wasn't a matter of putting so much away or anything like that she would buy things but she wouldn't give you the money, I don't suppose she had any, pardon me, she had bills in the shops she could get whatever you wanted, I don't suppose she thought I'd never had any money, I didn't, I think to this day I was just a wait really (laughter) but I had a big flash wedding you know and everything and we came to Sydney, the first time.

Interruption from Mr Heis and required to move room.

Josephine When I came down here my husband lived here and his family and ah (that's going on isn't it - tape recorder) it was like me coming out of a cocoon coming down to these people, well I knew them but I never lived that sort of a life, you know they used to have drinking parties and all this it was all so new to me and they used to really make fun of me because I was so, they used to think it was great to, make a joke of me, and well anyway then the depression started and ah we had one of Aussie's brother, sister and her husband and two children come and live with us, they didn't get any money in those days

when they were on the dole just ration tickets you know tickets

Horna Was that for things like food and linen  
Josephine Yes, they didn't get any money, I think they might have got a little bit money but it wasn't much but my husband was reduced back to ah, his wages cut back, well they were practically nil you know, we were getting wages, we were getting money to buy the things they would didn't get on the dole, my brother in law said he went and mowed a whole grass, yard for some people and they gave him half a loaf of bread, that was his pay. We managed we had two little children my sister in law and husband and they all lived with us and they used to get a coal supply, the council or whatever used to supply them with coal, and we didn't have a fire we had . . . . in those days it was a radiator or whatever it was but these people could get a coal allowance so they said that we should shift into another house where we had a fire and we could use the coal then, which we did

Horna And where abouts were you living at this point?  
Josephine Mayfield, and we shifted into another house which had a fuel stove and you could cook and use the fire for heat and that and ah, they kicked up a fuss and we kicked them out, or left or something or probably had a fight 'cause she was a very hard sister to live with, with the things she used to do in the house, I can complain about that but she was, but that was the things we had to do.

Horna So like how many of you were living in the house  
Josephine Yes they were living in the house

Hanna Yes, how many were living in the house

Josephine There was four of them and three no five of us that would be nine but you didn't, but the sister in law used to go to tennis and, iron the kids clothes every morning and didn't do anything about paying the electric light or that, she'd use up the electricity and always had them perfectly dressed but didn't matter what expense it was to set the clothes and everything ready for them, but anyway we survived it, I mean, we shifted to another house, I don't know why we shifted to another house, they came with us to the other house too, no that was the house with the stove in it, and well (?name) he's always been very fastidious about things, he had a lovely hose and those kids dirty and dreadful too they'd climb the gum trees and run through the bedroom with windows along the front and they'd jump through the windows onto the beds wreck them they were dreadful and one day they got a tomahawk and cut his hose in two (laughs) any you know all those sorts of things and when you go back and think about it how it happened and, it's brother when the depression came he had nothing either, but in the country you didn't seem to have money to spare and anyway I can't remember having any money, and he didn't have money, and ah he made up his mind he was going leave home that, I'm going off track now I'm back on the depression, and he went away and all he left Newcastle with, um Singleton with, was the shop he had a grudge against and five dollars that's what he left home with and well you wouldn't know the extent of his money to this day, he just worked and worked and worked and then he got married and, had eight children, and eh, he well worked all through till he made his fortune.

and he lives up in New Lambton in a big flash house now.

Lorna - Did he manage to get work okay during the depression.

Josephine - Pardon

Lorna - Did he manage to get work okay during the depression

Josephine - Yes, he went up to Queensland into the sugar cane and ah, he worked up there and he married this girl, she was a nice girl and ah he was eighty five the other day, how old am I, no he must have been eighty seven he was yes eighty seven.

Lorna Well he's still a young thing then

Josephine - Yes he's still a young thing but he's not really well, but he's got his family's around him but then we went on from there when we got married and then the other depression came on that was when this family came to live with us.

Lorna Did you come down to Newcastle in the first depression during the early twenties?

Josephine After I was married yes, I was married in nineteen twenty eight, we were married in twenty eight.

Lorna Was the first depression earlier than that?

Josephine Yes it was earlier it was thirty two I think the other depression came, yes now they were living with us when John that's my only, one son he was 59 the other day, that brought it back to thirty, yes thirty two when the other depression was but it wasn't oh well there was no one working then walking around and that no work, no money no food, no clothes.

Lorna Did you find the depression during the thirties harder than the one during the twenties?

Josephine Well I did because in the twenties I wasn't responsible for anything, I was back on the farm then and I, everyone just dug in and did whatever they could, in those days but then in the thirties, well that when the trouble

well it wasn't trouble it was depression, everyone was on it not just picked out families, it was just general but it was pretty severe then, 'cause you didn't have any money but you still had to live.

Horna

So what were the biggest problems for you trying to raise a family at this time

Josephine

Yes, keep the rest of the others outside the family too you know sort of had to help them because, all my ages were all married and had children and we all got by anyway, but we never had much pleasure or anything we didn't go anywhere or do anything, my husband would play bowls all the time, never stopped doing anything, still doesn't do anything but that's what I think is the hard part about it as I was saying the other day, he retired when he was sixty five I'm eighty two and still going, but that's part of life, anyway if you can accept it as such but then I've got a lot of pleasure out of the grandchildren and now I've got great grandchildren, I've only got three children 2 girls and a boy and now I've got eight grandchildren and seven great grandchildren.

Horna

which is a lot isn't it.

Josephine

Yes it's a lot when they get together but we've had nothing but birthdays in the last fortnight, everyone's been having a birthday and you can't give one ten dollars but not the other, you just don't do that you know you're got to keep up with them.

Horna

Can I ask you going back to when you first came down to Newcastle what did you find were the biggest changes between living in the country and living in town

Josephine

Everything

Horna

Everything?

Josephine Yes it was dreadful, because you didn't have the things you wanted to have you know I didn't have a home, you were living with somebody like that sort of sharing things with somebody all the time but, it was a different sort of sharing to what you had at home but I didn't like the, didn't like the city life at all, it was all so new 'cause I'd never been in a city only in Singleton and you couldn't call that a city, course it's better now, better now I believe but I've never been up there for years although we were always going back up again, but ah a lot of my family well, my sisters up there and all her family but she's in a home.

Horna Were there problems then with accommodation, and trying to get accommodation?

Josephine There was for some people but I always managed to get, you see we went to Melbourne about 1935, when dad died and we were over there for about six months and we had to change house again and we were living in a rented house and I decided it was time we struck out and bought something for ourselves we couldn't live forever in a rented house and never own it.

Horna So were you in Melbourne during the 1930's as well

Josephine Yes nineteen thirtyfive

Horna. And did you find it much different to living in Newcastle

Josephine Yes it was different altogether, I loved Melbourne, been back a few times since then, I really enjoyed that six months in Melbourne, it was when the Duke of York came out here

Horna Was he the only member of the Royal family or was the queen there as well

Josephine. I can remember we went out to see the parade

and they had these feathery hats on and John said why's he got a feather duster on his head for (laughter) he thought it was funny you know seeing them all with these funny hats on, and the fleet was in and we took the kids over to see the fleet, Mary was only 5 then and Margaret 3 and we took them to the fleet and it was so crowded you know, a hundred people or more all trying to get off the boat, and when you look back on it which is a fair bit now, but we had three children and only the two of us to get them off the boat and the chap was alongside of me and he said I'll take the little girl for you I never thought about it I just let him pick her up and walk down the steps with her and when I got down the bottom I couldn't see her.

Hanna That must have been quite frightening  
Josephine. Yes, I thought he'd taken her away but I mean you wouldn't think to do that now, you wouldn't let anyone pick up a child and take them

Hanna Yes times have changed.

Josephine Yes they have, yes that's how much they've changed

Hanna Did you find people more trusting with each other then

Josephine Yes they were, everybody, we'd lived in a flat and one of the flats came vacant and we were right near the beach in Melbourne, and the chap said to us will you take the children down to the beach while I'm advertising the flat cause I don't want anyone to know there's children in the house, so the kids had to go to the beach for the day while the fellow interviewed people for the house, that's the type of things you think of as times change when they wouldn't let any kids into flats but then kids just weren't meant to live in flats anyway, and I saw

more of Melbourne in those days because, the old chap who owned the units took a fancy to Margaret who was, she was a beautiful girl of two and he used to come and get her in the mornings and take her for walks wherever, and Mary went to school which left me with John and I could take him by the hand everywhere as I just had him.

Lorna Yes that would have made it a lot easier for you

Josephine I enjoyed Melbourne, upstairs in that flat with the curtain drawn across it and the beds to one side (couches)

Lorna Did you find problems with money and getting food and things was easier in Melbourne compared to Newcastle?

Josephine Well we were allowed a living away allowance and we had to pay rent out of that but the living away allowance was a big help, but then we had to come back to Newcastle and by that time we had to get three of them off to school and we were very lucky because they all got bursaries

Lorna was that like, like a scholarship now?

Josephine Yes, and they all went to college, the two girls went to Singleton and John to Bathurst my daughter in Perth said mum I don't know how you did what you did, well don't ask me how I did because I just kept going, what I used to do really was borrow money before they went back to school to pay their fees and while they were at school I'd pay that back, so much per week and that was the only way we could manage you couldn't just take that money out without paying.

Lorna Did you ever have to work at all?

Josephine No I never worked, but what I did was I knitted I was a fantastic knitter, I used to keep them in pocket money at school with knitting, I'd get a

shilling a skein and it used to take me an hour and a half to knit up a skein. and I'd get a shilling for that

Hanna So what were you knitting, clothes?

Josephine Yes clothes for everybody, I don't know how many I've knitted for, I never stopped I used to start at 5 o'clock in the morning and knit till 11 o'clock at night as there was no one at home, with them being at school and that was how I kept them in pocket money, with that.

Hanna It must have been hard going

Josephine Well I still knit but I can't see properly but Mary brought me knitting to do the other day but is that still going (referring to tape recorder)

Hanna Yes its still going.

Josephine Oh I'd like to be able to knit but I've got this wretched eye but I'm lucky to do what I can I suppose some people can't see at all

Hanna. You seem to be doing well.

Josephine You've just got to make yourself as the Doctor said don't look on that side its very hard, I keep knocking things over half the time, I don't care the only thing I object to is tall glasses, if anyone gives me a tall glass sure as anything I'll go.

Hanna Back to the depression, did you get much help from your family in Singleton?

Josephine No, well they were still on the farm, you see and they were still living there, until we went to Melbourne there was one married, an other when we were in Melbourne, they were all comparatively young, I was only twenty one when I got married and they were all younger than me and they were sort of living just

the same, they shifted down to Maitland and dad died down there, he never even .... he was only there about five weeks and he just died, but they had to live, mum had to keep the house going with the kids and everything, but they all managed, but we are a very happy family, like we're a united family and the two that died, I was the eldest girl, the eldest of the family anyway, she died about two years ago and one brother he, he had a cancer operation on his leg and had to get part of it cut out, that was thirty two years ago he lived after that but he was in and out of hospital the whole time having pieces cut off his.

Hanna

And the rest of you are all still going

Josephine

Oh yes we're all right, and he only died this year but he loved life, if he was there and a dance was on held be there, he'd have his drink and his races and whatever, he just loved life but he donated his body to the university 'cause it was such an unusual body, cause every time you'd look at him he'd blow up.

Hanna

It seems he had a lot of problems.

Josephine

A lot of problems, but apart from that through the depression years we didn't do too badly, I don't know if that's very interesting to you or not, what we've been talking about

Hanna

Yes it's been good, what I've been looking for.

Did anyone who had problems at that stage did they get any help from the churches or anybody else or was everyone to help themselves.

Josephine

You did what you could to help yourself, but not like today, mum never got what we get, pensions or anything, I can never remember my mother getting the pension, but probably she may have, you didn't think

in these days, you didn't think you just did what you had to do and got what you were supposed to get but it's different these days, I think things are made a bit too easy for people today, I'm on a pension I'll admit and I think it's good I can live on it there's nothing to spare on it but you can live on it eh but anyway I haven't done too badly anyway.

Honna Well Josephine I'd like to say thanks very much for giving me your time to do this interview.

Josephine. It was a pleasure to do it for you, I hope it's a success for you for whatever you want to do with it if it's no good just rip it up.

Honna It wasn't Thanks again.

LORNA BOYD

OPEN FOUNDATION - AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

TUESDAY 1 - 3pm

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPHINE LEIS ON HER LIFE  
DURING THE DEPRESSION

Josephine Leis was born in Singleton in 1907. She was the second eldest of a family of seven, the eldest being her brother whom she idolised. Her family lived on a farm where everyone irrespective of their age had to help with the day to day running of it; milking about seventy cows twice a day, picking pumpkins and taking produce to the local factories.

When Josephine was fourteen she gained a scholarship to go to college, but unfortunately she could only remain there for one year as her help was required at home to look after the younger children. "Every couple of years there would be another baby somewhere down the road".

In her spare time Josephine and her elder brother played in a band; she played the piano and he the cornette. They played at local dances after riding seven miles on horseback for a guinea a night. Sunday on the farm was a favourite day as friends from Newcastle would come up to play tennis, cricket and invariably stay for tea.

At twenty one Josephine was married and moved to Newcastle where her husband originally came from. Moving to Newcastle was a dramatic change in her life. She felt as though she was coming out of a cocoon. To her everything about living in a city was different - the way of life and how people lived.

When remembering the first Depression during the nineteen twenties Josephine didn't find life too hard as she didn't have any responsibilities and found everyone just helped each other. She remembers her father having to chop down trees to feed the cows. She found things were different with the Depression of the thirties; no work, no money, no food and no clothes. Her sister-in-law and family came to live with her as they were unable to find work or accommodation. Money was scarce and although her husband was employed, like other workers of this time he had a reduction in his basic wage. Her brother was one of many who travelled to look for work outside the Hunter Valley.

Allowances for the unemployed were few and far between. Families and friends had to rely on each other for help. Josephine's sister-in-law did manage to get a coal allowance but unfortunately they didn't have a coal fire and therefore had to move back home to get the use of this allowance.

In 1935 Josephine's husband got a temporary transfer to Melbourne. She discusses how people in those years were more trusting of each other and more helpful; neighbours would help with the children and she had time to enjoy life seeing the sights of Melbourne and remembers the visit to Australia from the Duke of York.

Although Josephine was never in the workforce she managed to help make ends meet by knitting, getting a shilling per skein of wool, mainly for pocket money for the children at school.

Throughout the tape Josephine mentions how she wasn't sure how she coped with the Depression just that she had to. Although she led a simple life it was fun and she felt life was lucky and good to her.

Hardship was a major factor of the great depression which ran from 1929-1933, although it has been said that Newcastle's depression started a few years prior to this. As the depression manifested itself upon the community, dignity and pride were also at stake as more and more jobs were lost, and poverty started to bite deeper into the community.

Newcastle's chequered history was firstly that of a convict settlement, then as a coal town, although a strange statistic was the fact that 'the 1921 census had shown that less than ten percent of male employment was as miners' 1. This may have been partly due to the volatile nature of the industry, but also due to the fact that a new major source of employment was looming in that of the steel industry, but even this industry had its problems with the spasmodic rise and falls of production. Job stability was always going to be a problem.

In 1928 there was a dramatic fall in the demand for coal, and an attempt to lower its price caused a clash between the Miners Federation and the mine owners which caused the closure of the majority of northern collieries between February 1929 and May 1930. This both directly and indirectly affected all forms of employment in the area. Newcastle also became a focal point for the transient population who were attracted to the industries in hope of work.

As the depression continued, it became increasingly difficult to operate contingency plans to help the needy, as most of the relief supplied by organisations like the Salvation Army relied heavily on public donations, and with the vast majority of people on the poverty line these donations were becoming increasingly rare. The government provided 'food rations'; it has been described that many found to obtain food in this manner was both humiliating and degrading. The food rations were enough to get the bare essentials to survive on, and were just enough to prevent malnutrition.

Evictions became common and makeshift housing camps appeared throughout the city. These camps were set up in areas of crown or public land where most could live rent free or else pay a token amount to the land council. The shelters in the camps were made from any materials that were usable and available, kerosine tins, canvas, old timber, anything. These camps were scattered throughout the area—Adamstown, Carrington, Waratah, Stockton and Nobby's beach; 'most people in the camps considered themselves sufficiently permanent as to offer the camp's address for electoral registration'<sup>2</sup>. To some moving into the camps brought security in the form of removing the anxiety caused by the worry of meeting rent payments. Many camps also had a camp committee which maintained the discipline in the camp and encouraged the self respect of the residents. Some members of the community regarded the camps and their inhabitants with disgust, as it was presumed their presence was enough to downgrade the area's respectability.

An emergency relief scheme was introduced by the state government in May 1933. This was to enable men to work for a stated number of hours for the local council, therefore earning more than the value of the food rations that were given. This brought a slight improvement in the living standards of some but not to the majority.

Unemployment was not only confined to men; women and youths were also seriously affected. Kay Daniels mentions that in documents relating to the depression it was suggested that beliefs were, as long as a servant problem existed there was no such thing as unemployment for women. The situation for women was serious in that the government relief system for women was almost none existent, and for a single woman to admit she was unemployed automatically meant she was suspected of being immoral, and therefore a great many of women's needs were not admitted. In 1931 the problem of unemployed youths came to a head and a Young Citizens League was formed in an attempt to keep

them occupied; classes were ran in various topics like gardening and poultry. This idea was so sucessful it spread to other areas of the state. The effects of youth unemployment were never fully rectified during the thirties and unfortunately World War two came and solved that problem world wide.

Throughout the early thirties many were worried that the governments relief system would break down, and the establishment of a variety of organisations was attempted to help the unemployed should that occur. The most successful in Newcastle was the unemployed workers' movement. The movement was active in assisting with food and clothing distribution, and also had support meetings at its many branches to help with the boredom and feelings of despair. Their work was remembered by Vera Deacon as they helped with the installation of a tap in the centre of the camp in which she was resident, which in a way became the camp newscentre and therefore improved life for those living in those circumstances. Although the Unemployed Workers' Movement was the most sucessful of the organisations, its membership of 2000 was a small proportion of the unemployed, which in Newcastle was estimated to be about 8500 in the 1933 cengus 3. It was thought that the main reason for its lack of sucess was its projected communist image.

Compared to other cities such as Woolangong, protests in the Newcastle area were few and far between, and the violent clashes which occurred elsewhere between employers, employees, the unemployed and authorities were not apparent. This was thought to be due to the Novocastrians claiming ' what depression we've always been depressed'. The most noted event in Newcastle was the Tighes Hill eviction on the 14th June 1932 in which a large proportion of the community were involved. Over 1000 people gathered for when an eviction order was to be served, a fight broke out with both civilians and police being injured.

Thirty men were tried for assault and obstructing the police, and many problems evolved as the trial progressed as the jury had difficulty in finding who was to blame.

Families struggled throughout the depression in Newcastle; their somewhat passive acceptance of the situation was probably due to the Novocastrians' experiencing hardship as a way of life for so many years, and in their own way were able to survive where others had not.

FOOTNOTES.

1- An evil long endured by Sheilah Gray from The wasted years ed.  
by Judy Mackinolty P58.

2- Newcastle in the great depression by Sheilah Gray P20

3- I.b.i.d. P29

4- An evil long endured P 74.

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- The Wasted Years Judy Mackinolty.
- Australia Since Federation Fred Alexander, Melbourne 1980.
- Australia's Women Kay Daniels and Mary Murnane, Queensland  
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