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SUMMARY OF TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW OF MRS. JOAN HICKS OF BELMONT SOUTH by Karen Hicks on September 11, 1989.

I interviewed Mrs. Joan Hicks in her home at Belmont South. She has lived in the area since 1945 with her husband and two sons. Mrs. Hicks recalls the early days when her family would walk from Belmont to Marks Point along an old Army road and they would be accompanied by groups of small children.

At that time there were few houses present and small businesses lined the foreshore hiring out boats for tourists. Fishing was a favourite past time and the fish and prawns were plentiful. Every weekend would see the lake foreshore alive with people and the bay would be dotted with small craft. It was an inexpensive and enjoyable day out.

Where the motels now stand was only vacant land and the Gunyah Hotel was the closest public house. It was well patronised with men brimming over out on to the pavement, the clamour prior to six o'clock closing was a sight to be seen, grown men fighting over getting to the bar for a final drink - this hour was known as the 'Pig Swill'.

Two problems that Mrs. Hicks encountered when she first arrived; one was the 'snow droppers' - the local gypies stayed at Cane Point caravan park and would help themselves to local washing. The other problem was the noise of thunder Mrs. Hicks heard every day, yet it was never followed by a storm. She was soon to find out it was an aeroplane propeller used to cool down the bread at the local bakery just down the street.

This bakery owned by the Thompson family started in the early 1940's. They originally used wood burning ovens and employed only a dozen men. The years have seen many changes to the business, they have expanded and become Newcastle's largest bakehouse who employ over two hundred people. In 1977 they moved premises to Belmont North and soon after this the firm was purchased by Tip Top Bakeries. At the present it is situated at Gateshead and is being managed by the grandsons of the original Mr. Percy Thompson.

Corner shops have played their part in the history of Belmont South and have been kept in steady business with the flow of

summary of transcript continued.....

tourist through the area. Other employment was gained in local coal mines or Newcastle steel industry. Government transport was the only way to go to work and was reliable but overcrowded. The Oasis Motel opened in 1950 and was a frequent retreat for for honeymooners and tourists. Now three motels line the short strip of highway through Belmont South and are always full. Belmont Lagoon was a place of enjoyment with an abundance of wildlife and fish. Prawns bred there and would flush into the lake via Cold Tea Creek. Children could then net them before they entered the lake. A decline in wildlife has come about with the installation of an air shaft in the middle of the lagoon; this has upset many residents. Another landmark progress has brought is a sewer treatment works on the beach at Belmont South, this does a lot for the aroma left lingering in the air especially during the summer months. Sixty houses and townhouses have been built in recent years near the cemetery and the noisy inhabitants of this estate are blamed for the increase in crime and rabble rousers in the area. But even with these unpleasant changes to this normally quiet suburb according to Mrs. Hicks, she will live at Belmont South until her dying day.

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH MRS. JOAN HICKS

- Karen Hicks

I am in the home of Mrs. Joan Hicks of Belmont South who has lived in this area since 1945.

Question 1: Mrs. Hicks can you describe Belmont South when you first arrived?

Mrs. Hicks: Yes, my husband and I lived in Belmont at the time of our arrival here which was in late 1945. There was an old Army road from George Street to Belmont South beach and despite being very hazardous to negotiate we went along that way many times to the beach. We were generally accompanied by several small children from the neighbourhood. We also walked from Belmont to Marks Point beside the highway as far as Belmont South and then along the lake foreshore on to Marks Point. At that time there were very few houses compared to the present time. Of course there were more trees, more boat hire places were in business then. Cold Tea Creek had a few hire boats moored there, private boats were also moored there.

There weren't any motels about 1953 and where the the motels now trade there was vacant land. After the motels were built the district acquired more tourists from interstate as well as all over our state, and the Gonyah Hotel was a very busy spot. The six p.m. closing time was then in force which made the hour before closing time a complete chaos. That hour was called 'The Pig Swill' with many men clamouring for drinks before they had to leave. The pavement outside the Gonyah was thick with men downing their drinks and then scrambling for more if they could reach the counter again. Maybe the big men had the advantage over the smaller fellows.

answer to question 1 continued.....

A problem that we encountered coming to Belmont South was the 'snow droppers'. We soon learnt not to leave our washing on the line overnight because of the transient gypsies who seemed to be able to stay overnight or several weeks at a time at the caravan park. Eventually the police met them north of Newcastle and escorted them through to the other side of Catherine Hill Bay. And all the side streets were gravel surfaced and the dust from passing traffic had to be seen to be believed. Sand trucks used our street to get to the beach and they were a constant dust maker. During my first few days at Belmont South I kept wondering about the thunder and no storm, eventually I soon learnt that the local bakery used an old aeroplane propeller to create air to cool the bread before slicing. The noise was so loud that you couldn't hear anyone speak unless they roared. That was it.

Question 2: What was the main highway like and how much traffic used it?

Mrs. Hicks: For starters the Pacific Highway was only two lanes in those days. Of course there was far less traffic as not as many people owned motor vehicles. Big trucks were not as prevalent but the buses were always crowded. My husband had to get up early to go to work in Newcastle and afterwards at the B.H.P. steelworks. I started work at a clothing factory in Newcastle in 1947 and had to stand on the inward and outward journey almost every day because of the popularity of government transport. The Belmont Train was running then but as it only operated three times a day, it did not coincide with shift workers rosters. It did take a load of school children however. Belmont High School was not built until the early 1950's therefore the students were forced to attend Newcastle schools.

answer to question 2 continued.....

All this added to the conveying of passengers to and from the city. Later on as cars were used more by workers and the buses were a little less crowded. Most men didn't like taking their cars into the heavy industries because of the heavy ash fall-out of the B.H.P., so the Port Waratah buses were still a popular mode of transport.

Question 3: What local work was available for the residents in this area?

Mrs. Hicks: The main local work available were the few pits operating in the vicinity of Belmont. The original Thompson Bakehouse was only small and was run by the present day Thompson's grandfather - Percy Thompson senior. They used wood burning ovens and employed ten to twelve men and then in 1959 Percy's son Colin built the Pro Rol Bakehouse in the side street originally called Ada Street which in recent years was changed to M^CEwan Street. Colin's nephew Garry, started the pie bakery business in the original bakehouse of Percy Thompson Snr. in the 1960's. I went to work part-time at Pro Rol in 1970, there were not many people employed there then but 1974 Colin's sons bought out Fielders Newcastle Bakery. This move increased the work force from about fifty to two hundred personnel. In 1977 the bakery moved to premises on the highway at Belmont North. Shortly after that they were bought out by Tip Top Bakeries. Since then they have moved to Gateshead. The Thompson Bros. now manage this bakery for Tip Top which is the biggest bakery in the district of Newcastle.

Question 4: Tourism was prominent here, where did most of the tourists come from?

Mrs. Hicks: The main tourists in those days used to come from the Cessnock and surrounding coalfields area. The

answer to question 4 continued.....

miners had a Christmas break of three weeks and they came mainly with their own tents and stayed at Cane Point. Some were able to rent fishing cabins or shared houses with other families. The whole place was like a beehive with all the activity around the lake. There were quite a few people from the Sydney area who flocked to the lake for the Christmas break, as well the fishing was the main recreation. There seemed to be more fish around then; quite a few people hired boats as well as launches. Many different schools and organizations came to the point for picnics. Everyone bought their own food and spread it out on rugs and the kids enjoyed themselves immensely. Everyone took part in the foot races and other sports. They all ate until they felt uncomfortable and were happy to get in the buses for the return jounies.

Question 5: How crowded did it get?

Mrs. Hicks: It got very crowded on the point and day trippers always lined the foreshore. They came from every where in the surrounding district in those days to enjoy time at the water. Children went swimming and paddling, men fishing and also there were speed boat rides. There were canoes for hire and were quite inexpensive for children to hire for half an hour to an hour duration. The water being cleaner and shallow there was much activity for families with small children. One could sit and watch the tiny ones paddling without worrying unduly about their safety. My children swam and paddled there at the foreshore with their friends almost every afternoon in the summer. Their father bought them a boat which they used after school and at weekends. They occasionally caught fish. Their pet dog was a Kelpie cross called Rover who

answer to question 5 continued.....

always swam behind the boat. Whenever we went to call the boys home all we did was look for the boat with the big black dog swimming behind it.

Question 6: When did the local corner shop open up?

Mrs. Hicks: When we first arrived here the local corner shop was already in existence so I don't know how long it was before that and it was run by Mrs. Thompson Snr. who sold a collection of varied goods. There was another shop in existence, then situated on the foreshore. Both businesses were kept very busy with the influx of weekend tourists. At that time the children could get a bag of lollies for six pence and the bag was filled to the top. For a few years a hair dressing salon was operated in my daughter-in-laws present abode on the highway apparently it was not a very profitable business as it closed after a short time. And there was another shop which closed recently and is now a residence only but that one opened a lot later than the '40's.

Question 7: The Oasis Motel, can you tell me when did that open?

Mrs. Hicks: The Oasis Motel opened in the late '50's and was locally referred to as the 'Honeymooners' motel. Motels were few and far between in those days, so we thought it was great having one built here on the lake. It was well patronised by locals as well as holiday makers. Several years after it was built there was an horrific wind and hail storm which lifted the complete roof from the motel and deposited it across the highway on a residents' fence. It was a terrible experience for the said resident. Luckily no one was injured but it was one of those cliplock roofs that can be undone. I know of one couple who were married in Adamstown and caught the bus after their

answer to question 7 continued.....

wedding reception out to Belmont South to spend their honeymoon at this motel, see how reliable government transport was then.

At one stage a pilot started an air joy-flight business on the lake next to the motel, but residents complained because of the noise level so he had to move his business up north. Today the motel has been renamed the Squids Ink and one of its first owners was present Mayor Ivan Welsh.

Question 8: Was there much wildlife in the area?

Mrs. Hicks: In the 1940's there were many more birds in and around the lagoon. Coots, red-bills and wild duck could be seen in abundance, then I remember one episode of a shooter potting off at wild ducks indiscriminately despite the Police Station being where the Tech College now stands. Of course he was caught red-handed and fined £5 which was almost a full weeks' wage. There was a draught during 1946 and the lagoon dried up into two very small shallow pools. The smell of decaying fish wafted across the whole vicinity. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when the rains came and washed the smell away. There were prawns breeding in the lagoon and these would flush out into the lake via Cold Tea Creek in accordance with the tides. My boys and many others thought it was great fun netting them before they got too far into the lake. These days are gone, unfortunately. Now we see hardly any bird life and there's no sign of any prawns in the lagoon in the prawn season. The main factor of loss of wild life and prawns was the installation of an air shaft by B.H.P. for the John Darling Colliery. In their infinite wisdom they created an eyesore slap bang in the

answer to question 8 continued.....

middle of the lagoon in 1981. Although the pit was closed in 1987 the eyesore remains and has been grossly vandalised, the gates have been bashed down and even garbage deposited around the public reserve. When walking on the beach there are other hazards in the shape of tank traps which were installed there during World War II. They were supposed to have been removed years ago but they are still there and very dangerous, especially when you are walking around near where the John Darling thing is.

Question 9: In recent years a new sewer works has been placed on the beach at Belmont South, what is your opinion of this?

Mrs. Hicks: The local residents including myself have been left wondering 'why us!'. The smell on a bad day is indzscribable and we all shut our doors and windows. Of course the big joke this year was the Open Day at Belmont plant. We were invited to bring a picnic lunch of all things! Out of curiosity I went but definitely left the picnic lunch at home. We were given many colourful brochures in the operation on the processing of waste products which was an eye opener. I was accompanied by my grandchildren who delighted in asking why lifebuoys were hung around the walls. And when I explained this was a precaution in case the workers fell in, my oldest granddaughter stated that she would not wished to be saved thank you very much!

At one stage I took up a petition to find out why the smell was so atrocious, the Progress Association took up the cudgels and found out the reason. There had been a leakage into the sewerage system due to diesel oil leaking in the pipes. The bacteria was all killed. It took many weeks for the diesel

answer to question 9 continued.....

to disappear and have everything back to normal. We occasionally still have the awful stench when a sou'easter is blowing but never as bad as the diesel episode. Even though I thought one would have to be dead not to smell the stench, there were some people who said they couldn't smell anything.

Question 10 : How do you feel about living at Belmont South these days?

Mrs. Hicks: Belmont South is a thriving metropolis compared to what it was in the 1945's. We now have three motels along the small strip of highway which are always booked out particularly during the warm weather. The foreshore of the lake has been reclaimed and made into a parkland. There are seats and a barbecue facilities. Lots of travellers stop to have a break in their journey and have a barbecue or picnic lunch. Being the only place between Sydney and Brisbane where the water is so close to the highway, it makes it a very popular place. We still have one corner shop and a pizza place. There's an all night service station in operation. Now that this is a busy area, it has finally got its first set of traffic lights installed which has been a great boon to all and less accidents. There has been a complex built where the old bake house operated. Very quiet after all the noise and the bustle of years ago, just people living there instead of business going on. After filling in swampland near our local cemetery there have been sixty houses and townhouses built for the Department of Housing. This has caused a lot of distress to me and other residents as the crime rate has increased tenfold. We have many idiots riding around the back street on their motor vehicles.

answer to question 10 continued.....

Screaming and shouting goes on all hours keeping people awake and frightening older people like myself. I think they take a delight in being offensive and yelling out obscenities and local residents from cars as they , to the local the local residents from their cars as they speed madly around. I enjoy living in this area apart from the few who make life a misery for many. Every time I am asked by old friends if I still live in Belmont South I always reply "YES".

REGIONAL HISTORY

RESEARCH PAPER

ESSAY

A BACKGROUND TO

BELMONT SOUTH

Belmont is a monument to both missionary failure and pioneer zeal. Along with it came the opening up of Belmont South as a leading tourist attraction of Lake Macquarie. The growth of the area was very much the direct result of the provisions of the New South Wales Land Act of 1861.

Bahntahbah mission station at Belmont became the first European habitation at Lake Macquarie. It was settled by Reverend L. E. Thelkeld in 1825 who chose this location because of the large Aboriginal population and it was close to Reid's Mistake where the Aborigines of the area would hold their rallying.¹ The mission only lasted four years and stood where the present Gunyah Hotel is now situated. It had a commanding view of the lake, the sea and Belmont Lagoon, the latter being the main habitat of the Awabakal tribe due to the abundance of food.

In the middle of the lagoon now stands a mass of metal sheds and equipment to operate an airshaft which was put in place in 1981 by Broken Hill Proprietary Limited. It was built to alleviate the airflow problem in the John Darling Colliery which opened in 1925 at the back of Belmont. What it has accomplished is the decrease of wildlife including the prawns and fish that used the lagoon as a breeding ground. The pit was closed in 1987 but the eyesore still remains. Nestled in a small corner of the present workyard surrounding the airshaft is a small bronze plaque inscribed with the Aboriginal legend which tells of how the lagoon was formed. Most local residents have never been told the legend or even know the plaque is in existence. The legend "The Tears of The Moon" tells how the sun and the moon who were spirits of equal importance shined over the lagoon. The Sun always showed its full face to the earth but the moon went through different cycles and very rarely got to show his full face. Because of this the moon believed the sun was a stronger spirit and this made him sad. The moon went away and there was total darkness for awhile and when he returned he began to cry, his tears fell to the earth to form Belmont

Lagoon. As the lagoon filled with fresh water the Awabakal people looked on it as a spring of life and came together to celebrate. The moon stopped crying and was happy as he had formed the lagoon and felt important. He could also see his own reflection in it and his importance doubled.

In 1861 came the arrival of Maurice Marks who selected one hundred and eighty eight acres of Crown Land which extended north of Maude Street Belmont. The house he built was called Marksville and stood where Belmont High School now stands. He had an orchard and made a living dealing in fish and local timber which he carted from a sawmill on Mill Creek near the junction of Brooke Parade and Ross Street, to Newcastle.²

Henry Marks, Maurice's older brother settled the promontory of Marks Point in 1876. Here together with another brother Charles, grew oranges and pineapples. In 1885 Henry sold out to Charles and purchased more land north-west of Marksville. Charles Marks was a devout christian and he would not accept money on Sunday for his produce, so people would leave the money on top of the fence post and he would collect it on Monday morning.

John Anderson was the fourth selector to acquire land at Belmont; he took forty acres and named it Anderson's Hill between the present site of Belmont Yacht Club and the Squids Ink Motel at Belmont South. He worked in Newcastle on ship building and started a small business in this line with a Captain Perter Anderson at Belmont. In 1877 he began a regular coach service between Newcastle and Belmont and three years later established the Bellevue Boarding House on Anderson's Hill. A tree lover, Anderson planted Norfolk Pines which are now a Lake Macquarie landmark, one still stands prominently on Anderson's Hill. He also transformed the park at Cane's Point with planting of trees and today it is called 'Belmont Pines Tourist Park', one large pine stands in awe of the rest.

Belmont South even in those early days became a major

tourist attraction, for so many it was their first visit to Lake Macquarie. Some would come from Sydney to stay at Bellevue House but the majority of tourists came from Newcastle and the surrounding district which was now growing rapidly with the opening of so many coal mines. Picnicing along the lake foreshore, then a bush walk through the blackberry bushes to Marks Point, which at that time was almost bare of houses, was usually the order of the day.³ Children could paddle in safety, the gentlemen could fish while the ladies sat around in their finery taking in the splendid views. The area today along the foreshore is a council park which is reclaimed land, dredged up in 1971. The Lake shore line is fifty metres away from its original position and the trees which grew in abundance beside the Lakes' edge, now only a few remain and these line the existing Pacific Highway.

A ferry service was in place in 1875 between Belmont and Cooranbong, people would then board Anderson's coach to travel to Newcastle.⁴ This made Belmont South easily accessible and with its tranquil setting and good fishing, came the building of numerous holiday homes. These were tiny dwellings usually of no more than four small rooms and they provided prestigious holiday accommodation for the ~~social~~ middle-class in the early 1900's. Many of these dwellings are still in use in Marks Point and Belmont South.

The Sydney to Newcastle rail link was built in 1889 and an ^{the} line was laid out to Redhead to access the colliery at John Darling. Later the line was extended to Belmont in 1916 thus encouraging more growth into the area.⁵

Yachting regattas became a favourite pastime which led to the establishment of Belmont Yacht Club in 1929. Hundreds of people would line the foreshore to watch these spectacular events.

Minimum improvements were made to the road between Newcastle and Swansea and a government bus service opened in 1937. The road was no more than a sand track and the Belmont trading area comprised of a hotel and three shops. The bus

drivers knew the names of every occupant in each house along the route. Communities to the south of Belmont were considered to be out in the bush. Belmont bus depot opened in 1953.⁶

Early industries in the surrounding suburbs comprised of mining, saw mills, ship building, fishing, orchards, vineyards, banana and dairy farming. Today the main Belmont South population works in coal mines or have found employment in the steel industry of Newcastle. The fishing fleets of Marks Point are depleted and the farms that once existed in this area have been turned into suburbia. The only business that was established at Belmont South was the bakery, originally owned by Percy Thompson. In 1959 his son Colin took over and establish Pro Rol Bakery, further down the road another member of the family started a pie bakery. Both premises employed many local residents. The bread bakehouse closed in 1977 and moved to Belmont North under the ownership of Colins' sons. Shortly after this move it was bought out by Tip Top Bakery of Sydney, again it has moved premises to Gateshead but still remains under the management of the Thompson Brothers. The pie bakery closed its doors in 1988 and moved to Gateshead and is still owned by the Thompson family.

The suburb of Belmont South today is situated on either side of a four lane highway which connects Sydney to Newcastle in two hours. The residents are mainly senoir citizens with a gradual influx of Sydney siders. These people are attracted here because of the beauty of the lake and the closeness to industry for employment. Holiday homes are still in abundance and each summer sees the population increase with tourists. It is hard to imagine the early days of Andersons' coach and clean shallow water at the lake edge; now the noise of the traffic is deafening and the lake is polluted and full of weed. No more does the bus driver know names of residents and Lakes Macquarie's biggest tourist attraction is a mere glimpse to passing motorists.

Footnotes

- 1 K. H. Clouten. Reid's Mistake, Lake Macquarie Shire Council, 1967, p 167.
- 2 W.S. Parkes. Belmont - Lake Macquarie 1825 to 1974, Belmont Public School, 1975, p 65.
- 3 P.A. Haslem. When Lake Outings were Really In..., Newcastle Morning Herald, 1972, article.
- 4 L. Nilson. Lake Macquarie: Past and Present, Lake Macquarie Shire Council, 1985., p 17.
- 5 ibid p 17
- 6 ibid p 17

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- Hargraves, G.H.J., The Centenary History of the Anglican Parish, The Anglican Church, 1975.

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Date SEPTEMBER 6, 1989

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