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Australian History

Thursday 10-12

ORAL HISTORY

DOCUMENT, Summary Essay

Colin Johnston: Interviewee.

Essay Topic: The Growth of High Street and a Family Business

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OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

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Signed *Cecil A. Jeunissen*

Date *11/8/89*

Interviewer *Gloria Higginbottom*

My name is Gloria Higginbottom, the date is the eleventh of August, 1989 and I am about to interview Mr. Colin Johnston of Johnston's shoe store, Maitland.

Question: Mr. Johnston just a few questions to begin with, 'ah' would you like to tell me when and where you were born?

Answer: Well, it was on the seventh of June, 1917, at my parents home in 'Ruperstone' Stuart Street, Lorn, Maitland.

Question: Ah, where were your parents and grandparents born?

Answer: Well, my father was born in Maitland, and he died in Maitland, and no doubt I'll do the same thing. My mother was born in Hinton, and she died in Maitland. My father's parents; his father was born in scone, and his mother was born in Maitland. My mother's parents, her father was born in Ireland. He came out here with a family of thirteen and he was the youngest and the only boy. If I can interpolate a little story here that, back in Ireland they said, supposed to have said to his parents when he was born, which one of his sister's does he look like, and they said we don't know we havn't looked at his face yet (laughter) but 'ah' and then my, his wife was also born in Hinton and they come in here settled in Hinton, and they were farmers down there at 'Rosemount'. (interjection Oh, that's lovely).

Question: Would you like to tell me a little bit about your childhood memories, and where you went to school?

Answer: Well I've got lots of childhood memories, perhaps I can go back to before I went to school. I was one of the, not in the initial stages of Nillo school, but my father had a lot to do with the establishment of Nillo school and infants

school in Lorn, only first and second class before you went on to primary. He was the chairman of the Lorn Progress association who were responsible for the establishment of that school in Lorn, and a few years ago they celebrated their sixtieth anniversary. Well I think I was in the second or third class to go there. But I do remember a bit earlier than this going round to Lorn park and watching my father play cricket. He brought a couple of teams up here from an old school friend of his who was a very famous Australian cricketer named Charlie McCartney, Maitland born and acknowledged as being one of the greatest cricketers Australia has ever produced, and I can remember very well indeed, being in 1922 it was, as a matter of fact, watching them play at Lorn park and I've been an avid follower of all sports that were played in Lorn park ever since. In fact my mother, she used to worry about me. People would say to her, has Colin got a girlfriend 'oh' she said, him, this was when I, as I say she was starting to worry about me, she said Colin's going to marry Lorn park, that's who he'll marry. (Laughter) I never quite got around to that; instead of that I married Maisie June Card, who's now carrying the basket into the bedroom, (laughter) in 1951.

Question: Um, and did you go to school at Maitland Boys High School?

Answer: Yes, two years at Nillo, and then went to Maitland primary school, went through the various third, fourth, fifth, sixth class. I've got some great memories of that, some of the teachers that were there, some wonderful teachers, especially a chap named Pat Cunningham. I copped plenty of cane from Pat in fourth class, but he was one of the greatest

men that I've ever known. I never ever worried about getting the cane from him whatever I got it for I deserved. But I do remember one thing about him, he had left the school, for another school, He came back later as headmaster of the primary school at East Maitland, he died far too young, and I became dux of Maitland primary school, of the girls and the boys, and Pat Cunningham wrote me a letter of congratulation and he also put in an annual report which I've still got, shows a good spirit in sport. (Tape was stopped for a moment.)

Question: I believe you mentioned earlier that you went to school with a chap that had been awarded a Rhodes scholarship, Walter Hughes?

Answer: Yes, yes, Walter Hughes and I started in Maitland High School in first term of 1929; we were in the same class we've been, although not closely associated, because he's spent most of his life, most of his working life anyway in Maryborough in Queensland, but he was, he's a remarkable man he became a Rhodes scholar, We kids at school we tipped him to be a Rhodes scholar when he was in second year because he was so brilliant academically. We had about five fellows there, I won't mention their names, but they all thoroughly deserved to be dux of Maitland high school in the various years as well, but Hughes always beat them, yet you never saw him reading a book, he just knew it, and he could, he was a great cricketer, great footballer, great sportsman of all sorts and he thoroughly deserved his Rhodes scholarship. Recently, it may be of interest to you they made him, only a couple of months ago at a, what do they call that ceremony? The a graduation ceremony at Newcastle, they conferred upon him an honorary degree, a honorary doctorate in engineering

and he was absolutley thrilled, because he was originally a Newcastle boy; he travelled to Maitland every day, to go to school, and he was absolutely thrilled about having this latest honour thrust upon him.

Question: Um, would you like to tell me what Maitland was like? I believe there were trams.

Answer: Oh, yes there were trams alright. I remember riding on them, when I was going to primary school, but they probably in mid 1920's that they ceased operation, being replaced by buses, but in those days of course there were..Maitland itself, which used to be known as West Maitland and East Maitland. East Maitland was the town, that was the government town, but West Maitland grew up willy nilly. The cedar getters, this is the story that, as I understand and it sounds logical to me, would camp on the river bank at West Maitland and they'd take their load of cedar logs the next day down to Morpeth. They would unload there, collect their own supplies for the next few months and come back, and to save making a new camp, they would set up in the one they'd left the night before in the banks of the Hunter river in West Maitland, and then the famous, probably with a question mark, or notorious if you like, Molly Morgan started her business there and the town began to flourish and High street, as is to-day, with the possible exception of the addition of the mall in November 17th 1988, was just a bullock track, and it's still a bullock track, but East Maitland did not develop commercially until the last few years with Lawes street going ahead and with the Green Hills shopping complex, but at the same time it's been accompanied by a huge growth in population,

and I don't think I'm mistaken in saying that Maitland is now the fifth biggest city in N.S.W. and I don't think that's a fact that's known or appreciated by too many people, cause we're so close to Newcastle, we're dominated by them and in fact it's probably even fair to say in the not too distant future it will be a satellite suburb of Newcastle, but I'll tell you what, it will be a pretty strong and distinguished suburb if that happens. But my earliest recollections of these matters, there were full blown municipalities in East Maitland, West Maitland and Morpeth. They all had their own mayor's and local government setups. There was Bolwarra shire council and there was Lower Hunter shire. Well at last just after the war they amalgamated the lot and that was one of the best moves that's ever been made in the district, because there pulling together now as Maitland instead of being, well, feuding suburbs so to speak.

Question: And your family started a business, I believe over a hundred years ago, did they?

Answer: Yes, my grandfather and grandmother, apparently they had been in business in Tamworth and flopped, they'd been in business in Newtown because their two eldest sons were born there, and then they decided to come to Maitland in 1885 to set up a shoe store. Well that worked, and we're still there which we're very proud and pleased about. Ah, the story is that my grandmother, although my father was the youngest and he was born in that same year, 1885, ah, she had to raise the three boys, they lived over the top of the shop, and then to supplement the families income, my grandfather became representative on the road, going travelling throughout the country of N.S.W as a representative for McMurtries, they were

the largest retail, ah, manufacturer's and Wholesalers of footwear in the state, and that of course, was to supplement the family income, so it's my grandmother in the family that always been given credit of having established the retail business of Johnstons in High Street, Maitland. She was supposed to have been the business women.

Comment: Women power once more, you see.

Mr. Johnston: Women power, yes even then in those days.

Question: They've been four generations there, now have there?

Answer: That's true, we're in the fourth generation now.

Question: I believe you've been an alderman on the city council?

Answer: Well, yes, I always had a desire to go into local government and my father always used to tell me no, you can't mix local government and be in business at the same time. In fact I was approached several times prior to standing and because of my fathers wishes, well I always said no I won't stand, but now I very much regret it, because my career in local government was pretty late in life, and I think I spent eight years there and i enjoyed it very much indeed, and I can say in those eight years that I never had experienced any of the troubles that my father might have expected, you know, phone calls in the middle of the night to fix a pot hole or something like that. I think I could count the number of phone calls I had on one hand, so that there was not trouble from that point of view. So in that respect, although he was a great man, my father, was generally right I think he was wrong in this one.

Comment: Well you proved him wrong.

Question: I believe you have been awarded an M.B. E.?

Answer: Yes, I was lucky enough to do that, an honoured

enough to receive it back in 1977. It was given to me because I'd been a long time administrator and player in cricket and I'd been in all sorts, apart from loval government, all sorts of community efforts, for instance, in 1949 I happened to be the president of rotary when the big flood of that year occurred and I offered my rotary services to the town clerk Mr. Stan Dunkley who was in my humble opinion the best town clerk we ever had, and I did the job then and then when the really big flood came in 1955, well I simply took over as treasurer, then again and of course there have been many other lesser ones.

Question: These flood were the ones that inundated all the shopping centre of Maitland weren't they?

Answer: Not all of it. I well remember I still lived in Lorn, after we got married, we' were married in 1951 as I think I might have said, we lived in Lorn, we were there for four years, the family was starting to increase, we only had a two bedroom very nicle little place but only two bedrooms and ah' we just couldn't get over the bridge, the Belmore bridge into High street and I lived, my wife Maisie she came out, she was pregnant with David, son David at the time. She went to stop with friends at Bolwarra and I stopped at home, in the place where I was born, in the parallel street to where we lived, and in our house we managed to get half an inch of water but still the same damage and trouble caused as if you'd had six feet, and I stopped with my parents, who also had another friends of their stopping with them and you could see.... I knew where our shop was in relation to their place, and I thought, oh well, she's flooded got to be six feet of water in there, so you can imagine my surprise and joy when the first time you could get across to Maitland, was it wasn't flooded

at all. It turns out we're on pretty well the highest spot on high street(good heavens). Although if you drive along High street you think its perfectly flat, but if you stand outside the front of our shop there now, you can look to the west and you can see there's a good six feet fall, which is very surprising(very) and there was the approximately the, a triangle, I used to call it the flood free triangle, which was from say, Church street to Bourke street, along High street and down to about where Penders used to be, that was flood free, so then and I can remember another little incident that might be of interest. I drove over that day, and when I found everything was right as far as we were concerned, well I had a movie camera and just went round taking shots of various spots that might have been of interest, but when I went to go home, drive home, they wouldn't let you drive across the Belmore bridge, there had been a sudden rise in the river and it had prevented traffic going across it. So I walked home. Well it took two or three days before the river went down again and I could get back, In the meantime they'd started dropping food parcels on this flood free area of High street and they were dropping right in front of our shop, where I'd parked my car, and of course there were hundreds and and hundreds of other cars there, taken the opportunity of parking there and I thought oh, gosh, one of these parcels has to go through the roof of the car, but I don't know what happened from that day to this, but I'll always be grateful to them and I'm sure thousands of, or hundreds of other car owners who were parked there would also be grateful that the people that were living in High street, and there were hundreds of people in the upstairs of the various buildings, the hotels

and so on, had lived therethroughout the flood, and they'd got together with six or eight people, this is what I imagine anyway, and lifted every one of those cars onto the footpath under the shop awnings, so I just, expecting the worst I again got a very pleasant surprise and just simply drove over the gutter and came home.

Question: People of Maitland are like that though aren't they?

Answer: Well, I don't know. I suppose they would do it everywhere, but I've often thought there must have been a leader, somebody said come on, let's pick these cars up and they were just picked up, but I've never known who it was. (Comment, that's interesting)

Question: And just going back a little, you've been a sporting man, I believe you've had quite a lot to do with cricket?

Answer: Oh, yes, well I mentioned earlier at Lorn Park they played rugby union and cricket at Lorn park, so all the Lorn kids used to go round to Lorn park and they played cricket and rugby union. I've often thought that if they played tiddlewink and draughts at Lorn park, well, then I'd have been a tiddlewink and draughts player, but they were good enough to call the pavillion, after me, the new pavillion there a few years ago, the Colin Johnston pavillion for which I was very honoured.

SUMMARY OF TAPED INTERVIEW

with

MR. COLIN JOHNSTON, 11th August, 1989.

Mr. Colin Johnston is the head of a family business that has been in operation in High Street, Maitland since 1885 Johnstons' shoe store. The family, Mr. Johnston says have always given the credit of the maintaining of the first store to his grandmother, Sarah Johnston who managed the business, while her husband travelled throughout New South Wales as a representative for a leading shoe wholesaler, McMurtries.

Mr. Johnston was born at home in 'Ruperstone' Lorn, a suburb of Maitland. He has spent all his life in Maitland and has many fond memories of his schooldays which began at an infants school in Lorn. He went to primary school at Maitland, travelling on the trams that ran the length of High Street, until well into the 1920's. Mr. Johnston has retained the memory of his fourth grade teacher Mr. Pat Cunningham for over sixty years. His secondary schooling was at Maitland Boys High, and he relates the story of a school friend, Walter Hughes who became a Rhodes scholar.

Mr. Johnston tells the story, as he understands it, of how High street, the main street of Maitland, which was previously known as West Maitland began as a bullock track and is

emphatic in saying it is still a bullock track, because of its narrow aspect and the way it curves.

Mr. Johnston had a keen interest in local government and served some eight years as a city alderman. He was able to explain that Maitland as it is known to-day, was first a camp site for the driver's of the bullock teams that came from farther up the valley with loads of cedar logs, for the port of Morpeth. He maintains that West Maitland just grew up willy nilly. Maitland as it is known to-day was made up of several different councils, each with their own lord Mayor, East Maitland that was known as the government town, West Maitland and Morpeth. These amalgamated at the end of world war two, which Mr. Johnston feels was the best move they ever made. He feels strongly that Maitland has been dominated by Newcastle and in the near future it could well become a satellite suburb of Newcastle.

He relates stories of some of the major floods that inundated the majority of the shopping centre of High Street, and the fact that their store was one of the lucky ones because it was on higher ground, even though one would think High Street to be completely flat.

Mr. Johnston has been a keen sportsman all his life, both as a participat^r~~er~~ and spectator, and in 1977 was awarded an M.B.E. for services to sport and the community. He also feels that he was honoured by the fact that the new pavillion built at Lorn Park, where he has played sport all his life, was named the Colin Johnston Pavillion.

Gloria Higginbottom

OPEN FOUNDATION, 1989

ORAL HISTORY PAPER

THE GROWTH OF HIGH STREET and A FAMILY BUSINESS,

JOHNSTONS SHOE STORE, MAITLAND.

OPEN

High street, the main street of the town of Maitland began to grow in the early nineteenth century and soon became a thriving commercial centre, which saw many business ventures come and go. One business that has remained and grown with High street is the family operated store Johnston's shoe store, Maitland established in 1885.

The site where the town of Maitland, previously known as West Maitland¹ is situated was a natural choice for a town because it was the junction point of the various trails that led to the valley beyond. It was a camp site for the bullock teams and their driver's that came from further up the valley with their load of cedar logs, and was only one day's travel to the then port of Morpeth where they offloaded their logs, and picked up their supply of foodstuff.

Colin Johnston the present head of the firm of Johnston's emphatically declares..

'High street as it is to-day, with the possible exception of the addition of the mall in November 17th, 1988 was just a bullock track and it's still a bullock track'²

because it is so narrow and follows the original path made over one hundred and fifty years ago. A continuing stream of bullock teams passed through High street daily, making it one of the busiest thoroughfares in New South Wales.

1. John Turner The Rise of High Street Maitland 2nd ed. Maitland, 1989
2. Colin Johnston Interviewed, 11th August, 1989

the people of the Hunter region. The family have acknowledged Sarah Johnston, Alfred's wife as being the business woman in the family, and for the success of their first retail business, because she ran the shop while her husband, to supplement the family income travelled throughout New South Wales as representative for the wholesale shoe firm, McMurtries. The family continued this representation with the firm until the early 1930's. In 1911 when the first motor car was seen in the High Street⁷ there were eleven shoe shops in Maitland, but Johnstons have been the only original shop to remain and grow. In recent years they have opened several branch stores in nearby towns. During the period that was known as the great depression, the then head of the business, William Johnston was able to state that, although business had dropped by over fifty per cent not one employee was put on restricted time or dismissed.

Maitland had two moving picture theatres, The Savoy and the Palace, with the latter built on High Street. People spent many happy hours watching classics such as Hopalong Cassidy, and the weekly serial Rin Tin Tin. On a more serious note was the movietone news that appeared after the interval. Admission to the theatre could be obtained for the princely sum of ninepence, and that was for the best seats in the house! Unfortunately time marched on, and the drive-inn theatre saw the decline of the theatre which closed its doors in the early 1960's.

High street and its surrounds have suffered several major floods in the twentieth century, with the largest in February, 1955 which inundated practically all the shopping centre, with the exception of a triangle, called the flood free triangle by Colin Johnston, where happily for them, their shop is situated. This flood saw the loss of several lives and did so much damage in High street that a proposal was made to relocate the shopping centre, rather than repair it, but this suggestion was dismissed. Considerable work was carried out by the County Planning Service⁸ to strengthen the river banks and divert water away from the shopping centre.

The last decade has seen the face of High street change considerably, with the opening of the large Super K mart, Best and Less, and many other small boutiques and several shoe shops. The addition of the Heritage Mall mentioned earlier by Mr. Johnston has diverted much of the traffic from High street and shoppers can now stroll in comfort through the area.

High Street and Johnston's shoes have grown and flourished throughout the years. Together they have weathered two global wars, the great depression and several major floods. The Johnston family, both past and present have an impeccable business reputation, and the present family are both generous and warm hearted. They opened up their home and their lives to a stranger, to enable this paper to be written.

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