

OPEN FOUNDATION

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

WEDNESDAY, 7 - 9 PM

REGIONAL HISTORY RESEARCH PROJECT

ZARRA STREET POWER STATION

by

LOUISE PARKER

6TH SEPTEMBER, 1989

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

1989

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permission to LOUISE PARKER

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Signed CL McLenan

Date 21st July 1989

Interviewer LOUISE PARKER

From the time electricity was first put to use, it has proved to be an adaptable, efficient and widely sought after source of power for domestic, commercial and industrial needs. A vital role in the supply of electricity to Newcastle and surrounding districts was played by the Zarra Street Power Station which began generating in 1915. Over the following forty five years, the generating capacity was increased as the need for more electricity increased until, in 1959, reduction of Zarra Street Power Station's power producing capacity began.¹ Resolution 21923 by the Electricity Commission on 25th February, 1976, retired all remaining equipment and buildings.² This was greeted with delight and appreciation by the people of Newcastle who, amongst newspaper headlines such as "Goodbye to Old Smokey",³ saw the demolition of the Power Station as being essential to the re-development of the east end of Newcastle and the harbour foreshore.

Empowered by the Government Railways Act of 1912, the Department of Railways began generating electricity in 1915, in a temporary building on the site in the east

1. Terry Wall. Power for the Twentieth Century: Public Electricity. In J. Armstrong, Ed., Shaping the Hunter. Newcastle. 1983. p 140.

2. Unpublished manuscript supplied by the Electricity Commission of New South Wales.

3. The Sun. 9th April, 1976.

end of Newcastle where the Power Station was soon to be built. This temporary generating station supplied power to the railway stations and yards and also⁴ supplied the coal cranes at Western Basin, Carrington.

In view of the large growth in demand for electricity, the electrification of the tramways and the supply of bulk power to Newcastle City Council,⁵ the Railway Commissioners completed the building of the Zarra Street Power Station in 1920. The Railway Commissioners were able to supply cheap electricity due to the Station's close proximity to coal supplies, an established rail system and water. For example, in 1922, the Council purchased 15.2 million units from the Railways at .77 pence/unit but generated at their Sydney Street Power Station, 1.4 million units costing⁶ 1.80 pence/unit. This cheap electricity attracted several large industries to the Newcastle area, notably among them was Commonwealth Steel, a company formed by three Sydney firms and the Newcastle foundry of Goninan⁷ which commenced operations in 1919.

4. Wall. Power ... p 139.

5. Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners Advocate 1st July, 1926. p3.

6. Wall. Power ...p. 140.

7. John C. Docherty, Newcastle: The Making of an Australian City. Sydney. 1983. p. 36.

The Power Station was also successful in being able to supply this cheap electricity without major problems or industrial disputes.⁸ The workers at the Station shared a camaraderie which encouraged co-operation between both the workers and the management. During the Great Depression, rather than dismissing workers, the Railway Commissioners had the workers lay-off one week in eight,⁹ which was certainly preferential to losing their employment.

By 1940, generating capacity had increased so that the entire Hunter Region had it's electricity supplied by the Zarra Street Power Station. A transmission line linking the metropolitan systems with Zarra Street was built and put into service in 1940 owing to emergency war-time conditions and, by 1945, the northern trans-¹⁰mission line was upgraded and extended to Kempsey.

As if to prove the Power Station's importance to the region, during World War II, it became the target of Japanese I21 Submarine attack at 2.15 a.m. on 8th June,¹¹ 1942. Although no damage to the Power Station was

8. Transcript of interview between C.C. McLennan (interviewee) and L. Parker (interviewer) dated 21st July, 1989. p 5.

9. Transcript p 6.

10. Unpublished manuscript supplied by State Rail Authority of New South Wales.

11. G. Hermon Gill. Royal Australian Navy 1942 - 1945 Canberra. p 78.

sustained, the management instituted a number of precautions to ensure the building, plant and employees' safety. The Railway Commissioners installed large cement casings over all machines, these were so solid they now form part of an ash dam which is currently used by Eraring Power Station. In addition, the Power Station was blacked out at night-time and the workmen had to perform their duties using gaslight torches.¹²

Approximately one week after this incident, a gunner on Shepherds Hill fired upon something he thought he saw in the harbour, unfortunately one of the shells ricocheted and blasted out a corner of the Power Station.¹² Again, no serious damage occurred.

Safety was always an important consideration to the management, but accidents did occur. One accident actually resulted in the death of an engineman by the name of Eric Dodds¹⁴ when a turbo-alternator blew up on 30th June, 1945¹⁵

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12. Transcript p. 8.
 13. N.M.H.A.M.A. 23rd February, 1973.
 14. Transcript p 8.
 15. Unpublished manuscript S.R.A.

The Electricity Commission Act of 1950 empowered the Electricity Commission of New South Wales to acquire Zarra Street Power Station from the Commissioner for Railways. One of the first tasks of the new Electricity Commission, throughout New South Wales, was to maintain, operate, improve and extend power stations and systems.¹⁶ But Zarra Street was not further up-graded and technology surpassed the Power Station which was once the pride and joy of Newcastle Aldermen.¹⁷

1959 saw the advent of Wangi Power Station and the beginning of the reduction of Zarra Street Power Station's power producing capacity which finished in 1969.¹⁸ During this time, the Station was mainly used to boost supply in times of peak load.

In June 1971, it was announced that Zarra Street Power Station would be demolished.¹⁹ This decision pleased the local residents who had referred to the Power Station as a "decrepit eyesore"²⁰ and the "East End's Smokehouse"²¹ The residents' complaints were well founded, for, as it was reported in the local press,

16. Electricity Commission of New South Wales Report for the Period Ended 30th June, 1952. p 9.

17. N.M.H.A.M.A. 29th November, 1922.

18. N.M.H. 8th July, 1969.

19. Wall. Power ... p 140.

20. ibid.

21. N.M.H. 25th July, 1970.

soot from the Station seeped right into houses²² everywhere. It was in curtains, lounges and carpets.

In addition to the pollution problem, residents and the Newcastle City Council wanted the Power Station site included in the Newcastle East Redevelopment Project. On 20th February, 1976, it was announced in the press that the Power Station site would be released for²³ inclusion in the Redevelopment Project. The 3.2 hectare site would be used to provide recreational parkland and medium density housing. Some would now argue that the housing development is not a great deal less an eyesore than the Power Station was.

Prior to the demolition of the Power House, Professor Parker from the Faculty of Architecture at Newcastle University made a call for a study of the potential of the Power Station's buildings, admitting they were unsightly in their present form but looking to rectify that and provide a community facility. It was joked by the workers, at the time, that it had better acoustics²⁴ than the Opera House. However, demolition did²⁵ commence on 5th September, 1977.

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22. Newcastle Sun. 8th January, 1975.
 23. N.M.H. 20th February, 1976.
 24. Sun. 26th October, 1976.
 25. N.M.H. 6th September, 1977.

As if in testimony to the skills of the builders of the Power Station, it did not "go down without a fight". It took one year to demolish the buildings and four attempts to bring down the 200 tonne coal hopper. Demolition was completed on 25th August, 1978 and the site cleared one week later.²⁶

Zarra Street Power Station went from its early beginnings in 1915 with a generating capacity of 2.5 megawatts,²⁷ through an extremely large increase in demand for the supply of electricity, to have a generating capacity of 77.5 megawatts in 1950.²⁸ Technology over-took the Power Station but the camaraderie of the workers throughout its 60 years lifespan is still alive today. Once every year, the "boys" from Zarra Street get together to reminisce and be re-united with old workmates.

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26. N.M.H. 26th August, 1978.
27. Wall. Power ... p 139.
28. Electricity Commission Report

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Unpublished Manuscript supplied by The Electricity Commission of New South Wales.

Unpublished Manuscript supplied by The State Rail Authority of New South Wales.

OPEN FOUNDATION

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

WEDNESDAY, 7 - 9 P.M.

REGIONAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT OF TAPED INTERVIEW

WITH

MR. CLARRIE McLENNAN

RETIRED MECHANICAL FOREMAN FROM ZAARA STREET POWER STATION

BY

LOUISE PARKER

ON

21ST JULY, 1989

Transcript of a taped interview between Mrs. Louise Parker (Interviewer) and Mr. Clarrie McLennan (Interviewee) on the subject of working at Zarra Street Power Station in the East End of Newcastle from the 1920's to the early 1960's. It was recorded at Mr. McLennan's home at 17 Morris Street, Mayfield West, N.S.W., at 10.15 a.m. on Friday, 21st July, 1989.

L.P.: My name is Louise Parker and I am a student of the Department of Community Programmes at the University of Newcastle. As part of my local history research project, I am interviewing Mr. Clarrie McLennan on what it was like to work at Zarra Street Power Station in the East End of Newcastle from the 1920's to the early 1960's.

Could you tell me your full name please?

C.M. Clarence Currie McLennan.

L.P. And your date of birth?

C.M. 16th of August, 1897.

- L.P. Where were you born Clarrie?
- C.M. Oh, well I was born in Newcastle, but I'm just a little bit hazy as to the suburb.
- L.P. When you started at Zarra Street Power Station in 1924, what were your wages like?
- C.M. What were the wages? Well a tradesman's wage was about three pounds two and six per week.
- L.P. Was that easy to live on?
- C.M. It wasn't easy, but you could get by on it. In fact I got married on three pound two and six a week. But, things were very cheap then, tram fares were, I think, one penny per section and a loaf of bread was tuppence halfpenny a loaf - delivered to your door! And in those days of course, oh well they used to deliver, rabbito's used to go around the suburbs, and you could get a rabbit for about one and sixpence, and Chinamen used to come around with a pole across their shoulder and a big basket with, you know, needles and cotton and women's underwear, and men's underwear, singlets, underpants and all that sort of thing.

They used to go around, oh, a couple of times a week to different houses. I know my mum used to have one Chinaman come, you know, for handkerchiefs and all that sort of thing.

L.P. How did yourself and your workmates get to the Power Station?

C.M. How did we get? Oh, by bike mainly, some had motor bikes, and I think oh, maybe one or two had cars, I am not sure about that, but mostly by pushbike.

L.P. What did the East End of Newcastle look like then?

C.M. Oh well it was ah, ... oh well it was just termed as residential, you know houses, not so many as what there are now of course, but, oh yes it was just purely residential, one or two corner shops, sort of thing.

L.P. And, what did the Power Station supply its power to?

C.M. What did they supply power to? Oh it was supplied to the City Council and they distributed it all around the area and then, of course I don't know what year the trams started but we supplied power to the trams. But mainly to the City Council.

L.P. Was Zarra Street big compared to other Power Stations in New South Wales at the time?

C.M. Oh, I am not quite sure about that but I don't think it was quite as big as Bunnerong or Ultimo, they were the other two Stations in Sydney.

L.P. And how would you describe the working conditions at the Power House?

C.M. Oh they were good, ... excellent.

L.P. Clean?

C.M. Oh yes, yes, oh yes they had cleaners, that sort of thing, that used to clean it every day and bathroom attendants who used to look after the showers and all that sort of thing, and the bathrooms, oh yes it was good conditions.

L.P. Did you enjoy working there?

C.M. Oh yes. I think everyone did; everyone that worked there.

L.P. So there was a high level of comradeship between the workers?

C.M. Oh yes.

L.P. And I understand you did some sports there.

C.M. Sports? Oh yes, we had a cricket team, tennis teams, oh yes, used to play in the competitions, in fact we won the competition one year, I think I have a photo in there, about 1927 I think we won the district competition.

L.P. Were there many industrial disputes? Did you have many strikes?

C.M. No, didn't know what a strike was.

L.P. So you got on quite well with the management.

C.M. Oh yes, yes, oh yes.

L.P. About when do you think industrial disputes would have started? Did they start in the 50's or 60's at all?

C.M. Oh no, I can't remember them ever having an industrial strike at the Power House.

L.P. And what year did you retire in?

C.M. 1962.

L.P. You retired from the Power Station didn't you.

C.M. Yes.

L.P. Did the Depression have any affect on your wages?

C.M. Well, in the Depression, the Department didn't want to put any of us off, but they rationed us one week in eight. I think at that time there were about seven or eight of us who were fitters and when our turn come about every eighth week we had to lay off. They didn't want to sack us or get rid of us - we were that used to the work, so they just rationed us, one in eight I think it was.

L.P. So with there being no industrial disputes and the management treating (interrupt)

C.M. Oh no there were no industrial disputes at the Power House at all.

L.P. (Continues) ...and with the management treating the workers so well, it was a nice place to work.

C.M. Oh yes.

L.P. Could you describe the scene on Horseshoe Beach during the Depression?

C.M. Horseshoe Beach? Well there were old tin shanties there, that those destitute fellows that had no job to go to or out of work. They used to come there and sleep there of a night-time, I don't know where they used to go to of a day time, but oh there was quite a row of tin shanties.

L.P. You used to be able to see it from the top of the Power Station?

C.M. Oh yes, yes.

L.P. And you christened it Hollywood.

C.M. That's right we called it, yes, we christened it Hollywood, yes. I don't know who gave it that name, but that was the name it went by.

L.P. Was there any reason for calling it Hollywood?

C.M. No, no, just I suppose it came into someone's head, you know.

L.P. The Power Station had high safety standards but there were accidents weren't there, including one fatality. Could you tell me what happened with that fatality?

C.M. There were several minor accidents, but the fatality was on one of the machines, turbines blew up, a Brush Ljungstrom machine it was. A piece of cast iron, a piece of the stator, was blown up and hit a brick wall and came back down, and this engineman just happened to be in the road of the piece of iron when it came back down, and it took half his head off. Eric Dodds his name was.

L.P. What precautions had to be taken when working at night-time during the Second World War?

C.M. Well, we were only allowed to get around with torches. gaslight torches.

L.P. Was it difficult to work with torches?

C.M. Oh it was difficult, oh yes. But the station was all blacked out during the war.

L.P. In case of air raids?

C.M. Yes, oh not exactly air raids, but there was one occasion where that submarine come off the coast and landed some shells. They were aiming at the Power House but they never hit the Power House, it was due to that that they were taking the precautions of blacking it out.

L.P. And what was the feeling of the workmen after they had been shelled at by a Japanese Submarine?

C.M. What was what?

L.P. The feeling of the workmen, how did they feel about being the target of a Japanese attack?

C.M. Oh they just took it for granted. Just took it for granted, there was no, nothing to be upset, you know they just went about their work, same as usual. And, during the war we had cement cases built over all the machines, they were about nine inches thick, nearly as big as this room.

- L.P. That would be say 20 feet by 20 feet or so.
- C.M. Yes well they fit right over the machines, just in case of an accident or in case they, so they hit the Power House these cement covers would protect the machines.
- L.P. Did you have any safety drills where, if in case of an attack, you had to do a certain thing?
- C.M. No, we used to have a first aid class, one of the men, I think he was the leading storeman, he used to have a class, first aid class, St. John's Ambulance class, we used to hold a class maybe once a week and we all eventually went for our certificates, first aid certificates. But that was the normal practice in the Railways, it wasn't just due to the war, it was just normal practice to have these first aid classes.
- L.P. Did you have anywhere you had to go in case of maybe a bombing or another attack?
- C.M. No not really, no, no air raid shelters or anything like that, no I don't think they were ever afraid of air raids.

L.P. Or maybe another submarine bombing ... you didn't have anywhere to go?

C.M. No.

L.P. Could you relate some of the stories told to you by Murray Davidson, the Shift Engineer who was on duty at the time when the anti-aircraft guns accidentally hit the Power Station?

C.M. Yes well it hit the, part of the number two boiler room and oh there were that many stories, I wasn't on at the time. But (pause) ... I couldn't tell you just what happened, I think it was on one afternoon shift I think it was.

L.P. Did it damage the Power Station?

C.M. Oh yes, a little, yes, never damaged any of the boiler room or anything like the boilers or anything, just the brickwork.

L.P. The Power Station itself, it was built strongly?

C.M. Yes, yes, when I started, the actual Power House itself was there, well it must have started at least three or four years previous to that, to 1924, because they shifted a generator from Carrington to Zarra Street, but it was in an old wooden building, well when I started there the actual Power House itself was there, that was in 1924.

L.P. But before the actual Power House was built you are saying there was a generator there anyway?

C.M. Oh yes. It was eventually moved from the wooden shed where it was originally put, it was moved into the new building.

L.P. It came from Carrington Power House?

C.M. Yes, it came from a building in Carrington.

L.P. The accidents that happened at the Power Station, were any of them to do with the actual loading of the coal, the bringing of the coal into the Power Station by rail?

C.M. No the trucks used to be shunted up to a siding past the Power House, and then there was a man, and it was his duty then to open as they wanted a truck of coal or something, to lower it down over a grating and the coal then used to go down on to a belt and then it was taken up and tipped into bunkers.

L.P. Was anybody hurt around the trucks?

C.M. Oh no, this is the only accident that I, oh well, there was this chappy who was pushing the truck with his shoulder and someone must have lowered another truck down too soon and he still had his shoulder on the buffer, well it hit his shoulder, I don't know, it may have broken his arm, I can't remember that, but it just pushed his, all his muscle down on to his arm. Frankie Nolan his name was.

L.P. So it was generally a safe and happy place to work.

C.M. Yes, "safety first" was, you know, one of our mottos.

L.P. Were there any pranksters among your workmates?

C.M. Oh yes, well they go on everywhere, yes they had a bit of a joke now and again. Oh yes. Do you want me to relate some of those?

L.P. Yes that would be good.

C.M. There was one case, a fitter was inside the boiler drum dismantling the high and low water alarm and previous to this the boiler cleaners had taken all the lagging off the outside of the boiler drum so that there was just a bare shell. Oh well this fitter and his mate were sent in to dismantle the high and low water alarm and the boiler tubes or return tubes used to come up from the bottom of the big round drum and oh they'd be sticking up through the ... (gestures how far they were sticking up).

L.P. About an inch or so.

C.M. Through the inside of the boiler drum. Well this fitter and his mate were in there for a while and I think his mate wanted to go to the toilet, I am not sure about that, but anyway, this fitter was left in there on his own and the atmosphere was really humid and he got a little bit drowsy and closed his eyes and I think he must have dosed off to sleep. Well that

other fitter, a chappy we nicknamed "blue bottle" or "shells", your dad would know him, he came along and looked in the manhole of the boiler and saw this chappy, this fitter, asleep. Well he said to his mate, "go down to the store and get a seven pound hammer", (laughs) his mate says, "what do you want a hammer for?" he says, "We don't want a hammer on our job." Well he said, "you go down and get one." So anyway, his mate went down and brought this hammer back and he, the fitter, got it and he went around to just about opposite to where this fellow was sitting in the drum, and on the bare boiler plate, he give it a heck of a crack (laughs), well this fitter, in his fright and his scramble to get to the manhole door, oh he tore the knees out of his overalls and he skinned all his knees, (laughs) well, old Lecky couldn't ride even in a tram for a couple of days after that; (laughs) scared the life out of him, oh yes. Oh well the same fellow, in the circulating water, used to go through what they called big conduits, well they were about 8 feet wide and 8 feet tall, you know, they used to go right out to the harbour and inside the Power House they had screens, revolving screens, used to get out all the rubbish that would come in with the water, but in the prawning season there used to be a lot of prawns that would come in with it and when someone wanted a feed of prawns they'd go round and they'd start the revolving screens, and they used to have to stand there, of

course, down below and pick them off the screens, well the revolving screens used to go through the floor above and there was a big opening, you know, for the screens to go through well, when these characters would be down there picking these prawns off, this fellow would get a half a bucket of water.

L.P. And tip it on top of them!

C.M. Tip it on top of them! Oh that used to go on always.

L.P. And I understand that some of the rail trucks that were used by the Power House, when they were given to you to use by the railwaymen, the often had wheat in them.

C.M. Yes, they were what they called "S" trucks and they had a door on each side, and I suppose when they were getting the wheat out they would open the doors and have to shovel it out see. Oh half the trucks that were shunted up to the Power House for ashes, the previous day or so they may have been carting wheat or something see, we didn't know, but at the end of the pump room there was a landing, oh it would be about four feet wide and go about the width of the boiler-room, when the trucks were being shunted up some of the characters would be standing out looking down to see if any of the trucks had any wheat in see. Well often a truck would go past and there would be a heap

of wheat in the corners of trucks where they haven't shovelled it out. If there was, well these fellows would get a sugar bag and they'd go up to the truck and fill their sugar bag with wheat, those that owned fowls I suppose. Oh yes, that was often the case. There were no special trucks. In latter years, we had lorries would come in and the driver would back the lorries under the valves where they empty the ashes and they'd go straight into a truck, and of course they'd just drive out, we never had trucks then, it was lorries.

L.P. Where did they take the ashes.

C.M. Oh yes, up to the rubbish dump. Oh I think there were odd occasions where the Council used to get in touch with the Power House for them to take ashes elsewhere, but normally they would just take them up to the dump up here at Sandgate. There was a bulldozer up there that used to bulldoze the ashes up on top of the rubbish that was dumped up there.

L.P. Right so they actually used the ashes for a purpose?

C.M. Oh yes.

L.P. When you retired from Zarra Street Clarrie, what position had you attained by the time you retired?

C.M. Mechanical Foreman.

L.P. And how many workmen did you have under you?

C.M. About 112. That included tradesmen and labourers.

L.P. Well thank you very much Clarrie for participating in my report.

C.M. That's alright, it was a pleasure.

L.P. Thank you very much.

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AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

WEDNESDAY, 7 - 9 P.M.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW WITH CLARENCE C. McLENNAN

by

LOUISE PARKER

21ST JULY, 1989

The interviewee, Mr. Clarence Currie McLennan, also known as Clarrie, or "Long Mack" to his workmates, was born in or near Newcastle on 16th August, 1897, which made him nearly 92 years of age at the date of the interview; 21st July, 1989. His mind was still agile, but his health was deteriorating.

Clarrie worked at Zarra Street Power Station in the east end of Newcastle from 1924 when he started as a fitter, to his retirement in 1962, as mechanical foreman. During this time, the Power Station went through extremely large increases in the demand for supply of electricity which resulted in the Power Station having its generative power built up so that, in its heyday, it supplied the whole Hunter Region and further afield through the State's transmission system.

In addition, during this time, two major events occurred: The Great Depression and World War II. Clarrie's experiences of these events are remembered clearly and phlegmatically. For instance, he tells of being laid off one week in eight during the Depression, which caused financial hardship, and of the destitute people who then lived in "Hollywood" which was a collection of tin shanties on Horseshoe Beach.

During World War II, a Japanese Submarine shelled the Power Station in June, 1942, it caused no damage and also appears to not have greatly worried the workers for, as Clarrie put it, they "took it for granted" and "carried on with their work". But it was due to this attack that the management instituted more safety precautions such as first aid classes, and blacking out the Power Station at night. This required the men to work with gaslight torches, which proved difficult.

Working conditions at Zarra Street Power Station, generally though, were excellent. Clarrie related how there was a high level of comradeship between he and his fellow workmates. They even had tennis and cricket teams. In addition, the Power Station management were very concerned with safety. There were accidents, but not many that were serious, and only one fatality.

As Clarrie points out, in most work situations, there are always the jokers and pranksters. Some amusing anecdotes, including one about a fellow who fell asleep on the job, are told. He gives a picture of working a Zarra Street Power Station as one of co-operation between management and workers, efficiency and as often being enjoyable. Strikes and industrial disputes were not known to him.

Clarrie demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the operation of the Power Station. For instance, he describes how the coal was brought in to the Power Station and how the ash was taken away. At retirement in 1962, Clarrie was a mechanical foreman with approximately 112 tradesmen and labourers within his supervision.

Clarence Currie McLennan passed away suddenly on 12th August, 1989, 4 days prior to his 92nd birthday.