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Open Foundation - Australian History
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M E R E W E T H E R A N D I T S B E A C H

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Summary

In less than one hundred and fifty years Merewether and its beach have altered considerably. Dense shrub and sand hills with lush rain forest in the Glenrock area were the home of the first inhabitants, the Awabakal Aborigines. Dr James Mitchell purchased the land in the early nineteenth century and it became known as the Burwood Estate. Throughout the century industry and mining operations were established in the area. Gradually these enterprises ceased and the area became the residential seaside suburb of Merewether. Throughout the twentieth century the beach has strengthened its role as a popular recreational area, producing outstanding life saving teams and some of the world's leading surf board riders.

M E R E W E T H E R A N D I T S B E A C H .

To-day Merewether Beach is a favourite recreation area for local residents. The proximity of Merewether to the city and beach make the suburb one of Newcastle's more popular residential areas. The Merewether of to-day evolved from an area of dense scrub and sandy hills known in the early 19th century as the Burwood Estate. The original estate was comprised of pockets of settlement around a number of coal mines. These settlements grew steadily and in 1885 were amalgamated to form the Municipality of Merewether, the basis of to-day's suburb.⁽¹⁾

The first occupants of the area were the Aborigines of the Awabakal tribe who hunted around Glenrock Lagoon which they called "Pillapoy-Kullaitaran", meaning "The Valley of the Palms". The site was a favourable one in which to live because of the plentiful food supply, fish from the lagoon and ocean and shell fish from the rocks. The small caves and overhangs along the coast provided shelter, a creek provided a plentiful supply of water and the stone in the area was suitable for the making of implements. The Aboriginal peoples' lives were irrevocably altered with the coming of white settlement. Introduced diseases and the loss of hunting grounds led to the eventual extinction of the Awabakal people.⁽²⁾

The first permanent white settlement by convicts and their guards was made in 1804 north of Merewether at the mouth of the Hunter River.⁽³⁾ By 1823 most of the convicts had been moved to Port Macquarie as the growing number of free settlers demanded land. Between 1835 and 1849 Dr James Mitchell purchased the land south to south west of Newcastle and named it Burwood Estate. This later became the suburb of Merewether.⁽⁴⁾

- (1) L. March, A History of Merewether Surf Club 1908-1983, Newcastle, 1983, p1.
- (2) J.F. Grothen, The History in and About Glenrock Lagoon, Newcastle, 1982 p.p. 10, 11.
- (3) J.W. Turner, When Newcastle was Sydney's Siberia, Newcastle, 1980, p3.
- (4) March, A History of, p1.

During the 1840's Mitchell allowed several groups to commence small scale mining on his estate.⁽⁵⁾ In 1851, following the revocation of the A.A. Company's exclusive right to mine coal in the Hunter region,⁽⁶⁾ Mitchell took over the mines on his estate and commenced building a copper smelter works at the northern end of Burwood Beach.⁽⁷⁾ In the same year an act was passed enabling him to have a railway line constructed from his estate to the port.⁽⁸⁾ This facilitated the expansion of mining activities which was followed in the 1860's by industrial and residential development on the estate. Besides the copper smelter other industries included a tannery, a pottery and a clay brick works, all utilizing local coal as their energy source.⁽⁹⁾

Following Mitchell's death in 1869 the estate was inherited by his son-in-law Edward Merewether⁽¹⁰⁾ who constructed his home high on the ridge overlooking the estate. This house is still a prominent land mark in Merewether to-day.⁽¹¹⁾

By the 1870's the influx of people to work in the mines and other industries on the estate began to cause problems. Poor roads and deficient drainage made life difficult for the scattered settlements of Burwood, Glebe, the Junction Racecourse and the Pottery.⁽¹²⁾ In 1876 a group of concerned citizens proposed the formation of a municipality but this did not occur until 1885 when the villages on the Burwood Estate became the Municipality of Merewether.⁽¹³⁾

(5) Ibid.

(6) J.C. Docherty, Newcastle the Making of an Australian City, Sydney, 1983, p8.

(7) March, A History of, pl.

(8) Grothen, The History in, p24.

(9) March, A History of, p2.

(10) Ibid.

(11) Newcastle Sun, 6/5/65.

(12) March, A History of, p2.

(13) Ibid, p3.

In its early days the municipality was still dependant on the mines and related industries for employment. Life, however, was not all work. By 1901 the municipality boasted twelve hotels, nine places of worship and numerous halls such as the Mechanics Institute and Temperance Hall which were available for meetings, dances and concerts.⁽¹⁴⁾ Public schools were located at the Junction and Merewether West, both having been built on land donated by the Merewether family. A Catholic school conducted by the Sisters of St Joseph was situated at the Junction.⁽¹⁵⁾ Bands and choirs abounded in the mining community which had a large Welsh population,⁽¹⁶⁾ as evidenced to-day by the names of several of its streets.

During this period the beach increased its importance as a recreational facility but, by law, bathing areas for male and female were segregated. Men bathed in the Gulf, south of the present baths and women and children selected a safe spot directly in front of the present surf club. This area was (and still is) referred to as "The Ladies".⁽¹⁷⁾

At the turn of the century there was a marked downturn in the demand for coal resulting in the closure of several mines. While there was a population drift away from several suburbs in the region, Merewether offered land for subdivision resulting in an influx of new residents.⁽¹⁸⁾

Mixed bathing was allowed at the beach in 1907. This was timely as in that same year the traditional mens' bathing area was closed as it became the sight of the outfall for the first sewerage system.⁽¹⁹⁾

(14) J. Windross (Ed.), Federal Directory of Newcastle and District 1901, Newcastle, 1901, p98.

(15) B. Gorden, C. Moore, K. Browne, Merewether and Saint Joseph's 1876-1976, Newcastle, 1976, p5.

(16) Docherty, Newcastle the, p 15.

(17) March, A History of, p4.

(18) Docherty, Newcastle the, p108.

(19) March, A History of, p4.

That same year, following a shark attack a public meeting called for government assistance for better facilities at the beach. In 1908 this resulted in the formation of the Merewether Swimming Club, the forerunner to the present Merewether Surf Club.⁽²⁰⁾

Over the next fifteen years beach facilities were gradually established. These included a promenade along the beach front and the first clubhouse which was opened in 1923.⁽²¹⁾ These recreation facilities shared their beach front position with the Glenrock railway line.⁽²²⁾ Coal trucks using this line were hauled by an unusual shaped steam engine called the "Coffee Pot". Its odd shape was the result of alterations made to its structure to allow it to pass through two tunnels in the beachside cliffs originally built to accommodate horse drawn wagons.⁽²³⁾

IN 1928 the first baths were constructed on the water's edge and became the venue for the Merewether Ladies Swimming Club races.⁽²⁴⁾ The use of the beach was extended by the installation of lighting in 1929 and in 1931 the ladies swimming club established their own club house on the beach front.⁽²⁵⁾

The year 1928 saw the rezoning of Merewether to a "residential only" area thus ensuring the transformation from its mining and industrial background to a seaside residential suburb.⁽²⁶⁾ By now the Merewether Municipality had become an extension of suburban Newcastle⁽²⁷⁾ and a tram service linked the municipality with the city.⁽²⁸⁾

(20) Ibid, p5.

(21) Ibid, p12.

(22) Grothen, The History in, p27.

(23) Ibid, p30.

(24) March, A History of, p12.

(25) Ibid, p 123.

(26) Ibid p3.

(27) Docherty, Newcastle the, p11.

(28) Ibid, p12.

The people of the municipality were hit hard by the depression which resulted in an unemployment level of thirty three per cent.⁽²⁹⁾ Merewether was one of the first areas to offer employment under the Emergency Relief Scheme. This scheme was used to construct the present ocean baths and the concrete roads which abound in the area.⁽³⁰⁾

During its first thirty years the Merewether Surf Club, after recovering from severe membership losses during World War I, grew into one of the leading surf clubs in the Newcastle district.⁽³¹⁾ The club again suffered loss of members during the Second World War but these were replaced by members of the ladies swimming club for patrol duties.⁽³²⁾ Beach activities diminished during the war, carnivals were suspended and the surf pavillion was used by the armed services.⁽³³⁾

Following the war years recreational use of the beach increased, the Glenrock rail line was no longer in use and the tunnels used by picnics to walk to Glenrock were sealed in 1945.⁽³⁴⁾ The current surf club house was constructed in three stages between 1966 and 1980,⁽³⁵⁾ by this time surf board riding had become a major pastime and to-day the beach is frequented by large numbers of board riders throughout the year. The Merewether area has produced some of Australia's finest surf board riders including three times World Champion, Mark Richards.

The release of mining land in the hills surrounding Merewether resulted in the expansion of the suburb through the 1960's and 1970's.⁽³⁶⁾

(29) S. Gray, Newcastle in the Great Depression, Newcastle, 1984, p84.

(30) Newcastle Morning Herald, 27/8/55.

(31) March, A History of, p11.

(32) Interview with Alice Ferguson, 18th August, 1989.

(33) March, A History of, p14.

(34) Ibid, p3.

(35) Ibid, p150.

(36) Newcastle Morning Herald, 13/4/61.

The population is continuing to expand to-day through the construction of medium density housing in many of the original settled areas.

In less than one hundred and fifty years the area has progressed from natural beach and bushland to an industrial area and then to a pleasant seaside residential suburb. With the cessation of mining and copper smelting in the Glenrock area, the recent extension of the sewerage outfall and the proclamation of the valley as a state recreation area, the opportunity now exists for a small part of Merewether to be at least partially restored to its former natural beauty.

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TRISH PATTENDEN

MEREWETHER AND ITS BEACH

SUMMARY OF TAPED INTERVIEW WITH ALICE FERGUSON
ON THE 21ST AUGUST, 1989.

Today Alice Ferguson is a well known Merewether identity who was born in Berner Street in 1909. At the time of her birth Merewether was at the beginning of its transition from its mining and industrial origins to a residential suburb.

As a small child Alice remembers her brother cycling to his job at a local pit. Alice can also remember the unemployed coal miners who were victims of the slump in the world, demand for coal at that time and the consequent closure of several mines. She recalls seeing these men struggling to make a living by selling ice from door to door in the neighbourhood and home made ice cream at the beach.

Her life has largely revolved around Merewether Beach. At an early age she regularly accompanied her brother, who was a lifesaver, to Merewether Beach.

Alice quickly learnt to survive in the surf and she recounts several incidents which centred around the surf. Once a friend was attacked by a shark and several times Alice was involved in surf rescues.

Alice attended The Junction School where she remembers the only sport played was vigaro. At that time a pottery was in operation opposite the school. The children often watched the owner, Mr. Hughes, making pipes.

At age twelve Alice moved to Broadmeadow school where she was often involved in training other children to participate in concerts to raise money for pianos and radios.

Alice has been a life-long member of the congregation at St. Augustine's, the Anglican church in Merewether. This church which was built on land donated by the Merewether family celebrated its centenary in 1989.

Although the church has survived, other landmarks such as the chinese vegetable gardens in Frederick Street have ceased to exist.

The young people of Merewether have always had an attraction to the beach. Alice was a founding member of the Merewether Ladies Swimming Club. She recalls how its members and the members of the Merewether Surf Club celebrated the opening of the Ocean Baths, by the then Mayor of Merewether.

One of Alice's fondest memories is of the "Coffee Pot" train which daily carried coal to Newcastle. On its return journey the local children would often ride in its empty coal trucks thus securing a ride to Glenrock Lagoon where they would happily swim. School, church and family picnics were held at nearby Burwood Beach.

Besides the beach and swimming Alice's other great love has been the theatre. As a young child she performed in The Junction School concerts at the now defunct Star Theatre at The Junction.

At the age of twenty Alice commenced teaching swimming. Over the last sixty years she has voluntarily taught thousands of people to swim. Money she has raised in her many swimming and theatrical ventures has been donated to charity. Alice was awarded the M. B. E. in 1964 for her services to the community.

TRISH PATTENDEN

TRANSCRIPT

MEREWETHER AND ITS BEACH

ALICE FERGUSON INTERVIEWED BY TRISH PATTENDEN
ON THE 21ST OF AUGUST, 1989.

Interviewer Trish Pattenden interviewing Alice Ferguson at her home in Merewether on the 21st of August, 1989. Alice Ferguson is a well known Merewether identity who has voluntarily taught many children and disabled people to swim, for these services she was awarded the M.B.E. in 1964. Alice where were you born?

Interviewee I was born in the next street, in Berner Street, from where I live now.

Interviewer So you've lived in Merewether all your life.

Interviewee Yes all my life. I only shifted two hundred yards from one street to the next.

Interviewer In what year was that?

Interviewee Nineteen hundred and nine.

Interviewer Nineteen hundred and nine. Where did you come in the family?

Interviewee I was the baby, I was a change of life baby really.

Interviewer How many brothers and sisters were there?

Interviewee I had two sisters and one brother.

Interviewer What did your father do for a living?

Interviewee Well in the old days he was a butcher, and ah, he went away on a boat and they got shipwrecked near the New Hebrides and he was only married and I was only a little kid and his hair turned white because they were three weeks out in the open in this boat which turned his hair grey, and after that he worked for the City Council and built the track around to the Bogey Hole and also that nice little garden plot beside Nestles in town off Darby Street, he built that.

Interviewer Did your mother and father come from Merewether?

Interviewee No, I think Mum came from Tasmania originally.

Interviewer What did most of the men in Merewether do when you were a young girl?

Interviewee Well we didn't have much, there was football, Souths was still going in those days because my husband eventually played for Souths you know. They had Merewether Cricket Club, I think they've been running for about sixty years and ofcourse

the beach, most of the families in Merewether were poor there was only the likes of the Merewethers and all the big shots that had money, none of us did we were very poor you know.

Interviewer Do you remember many men working in the mines?

Interviewee Yes, my brother did, but ah, I can still see him going to work of an afternoon they used to go I don't know what kind of shift you'd call it but about four o'clock, he'd be going and riding his bike you know, he'd get his little lamp on the front of his helmet and that. He worked there for many, many years and eventually he turned up he was a shunter on the railway thats where he died at Wallerawang. He got abscess in the ears from being out in the cold, it was snowing and they took him to the big hospital in Sydney, he was there for about nine weeks we were watching him die and he died of mastoids. He was only thirty two.

Interviewer What did the men do once the mines shut down in Merewether? Did they find other work?

Interviewee Oh some sold coal and some sold ice you know they used to go around with a dray, sell these kind of things, but some sold ice creams in the street, you know they had home-made ice creams and all kinds of things especially at the beach there was lots of little innovations down at our beach you know they'd make things and sell anything for a quid to try and survive really.

Interviewer What were your earliest memories of the beach?

Interviewee Well, I was about two, I suppose, my brother he was a life saver at Merewether Beach, he used to take me down. I was his shadow they used to call him Oodnadatta and me Little Oodnadatta I was black as the ace of spades and he was a lovely big tall fellow with black curly hair, beautiful black curly hair. He'd go out on a shute, I'd go out with all the boys, they all taught me to shute the breakers, I'd go out get a shute, never think of sharks we just got a shute and came in. And when I was sixteen I was just working at the theatre, I hadn't been long at the theatre and I got a beautiful shute in and I rode it all the way and I ran into Sergeant Ray, he was our local Sergeant of Police, I ran into his stomach and I broke every tooth off, in those days you couldn't get anything backed up or anything. I had to get them all out. We had a, I think most people would remember Leo McMahon he was a dentist, he

used to charge a shilling a tooth, oh he was a murderer, oh he just, you know, nothing was sacred you know, he'd just hawk it out you know, so I got all these teeth out and then I got false teeth and I was never sorry, I wouldn't have my own teeth for quids.

Interviewer Who taught you to swim?

Interviewee Well when I was a kid I more or less taught myself because I'd go down with my brother or my father to the beach it was a matter if you didn't go in, didn't get in the water you sat on the beach at an early age you know. Same with my piano playing I only had two lessons when I was six years old.

Interviewer Did many women go to the beach in those days?

Interviewee Oh yes there was always crowds of women you know. One thing I remember just after I started work I was down the beach with a chap called Teddy Pritchard and Wally and he said, we were swimming, there were only three of us on the beach because at the theatre at that time there were shows at night, I was able to go in the daytime for a swim see, so he said "last back lousy" so home we rushed and when we came back over the thing, the sandhills there, there was Teddy with a shark on his bottom coming out of the water coming out of the water Teddy Pritchard, and we rushed down and we were mad you know because we were only seventeen, and the shark was about that far from us taking his bottom off, and his thumb and so we dragged Teddy out and because we got an ambulance, there was only one phone in Merewether at that time, that was at Meighans the pub on the top, the old two storey wooden building, so they came out and got him, I didn't think he'd live the night out but he did. So when I went to work that day, that night I said to the boss, "can we have a concert for him to get money" because I knew times were bad, he'd need help. So the boss let me have a concert on the Sunday night, all the people that were in the shows gave their services you know. It was threepence, sixpence and a shilling and I think we made about eighty eight pounds, which was alot in those days because a lot got in for nothing. You know, there was their way in.

Interviewer Was the beach a very dangerous place in those days? Do you think?

Interviewee Yes well our beach is pretty dangerous, about four or five years ago, I swim at the end of my road a lot, just down here see. But ah I was with my girlfriend we'd taken our lunch and we'd just come out, it was a beautiful day, a hot sunny day and she said "that Japanese girl", there was a Japanese girl and her boyfriend they looked like University students which they were I found out later. She just jumped in the water, I said "there's a rip she's going to be taken out to billyho" so she said "go out and get her" I said, "Oh God". I was seventy five at the time, "gosh I'd kill myself going out there", so she said "you're the only one with ability". So I dived in and went out and got her. Well, she kicked me, I've got lumps still off my face, kicked and screamed and shouted and I couldn't bring her in the actual way you save anybody. I just had to pull her in on her back the best I could and she floated around and I got her in and got her to the shore where she put her little hands together and said "sank you, sank you very much". Her boyfriend was still with my girlfriend watching the proceedings and he never said thank you, kiss your feet or nothing. He just grabbed her hand, took her up the beach and sat in the sun.

Interviewer I suppose you've probably seen a lot of rescues in your time down there?

Interviewee I've done a lot too. I've had a big rescue there one day just off the side of the rocks there and I didn't know how to get the person in. They got so upset, arms were flying out and so I just knocked her on the chin and knocked her out, but it was Nita Cook by the way, she lives two streets down, she would have drowned otherwise. But they get so upset floundering and that drowns them more than, really more than the actual drowning.

Interviewer So you really learnt to swim as a matter of survival, but did children, when you were little have swimming lessons at school?

Interviewee Oh no, that was never thought of. No.

Interviewer You just went down because....

Interviewee The only sport we had at Junction School was vigaro.

Interviewer And was that boys and girls together?

Interviewee Yes.

Interviewer Boys and girls?

Interviewee Yes, vigaro, the only sport we ever had down at Junction school.

Interviewer How long did you go to Junction school?

Interviewee I went from when I was five until I was twelve. We had to leave then and go to the new school At Broadmeadow which was a high school just opened up, which only had four walls into a classroom nothing else. And I spent nearly all my schooldays, I teach dancing, I teach singing, I teach music, teaching kids for concerts. And then every Friday I'd have a threepenny concert to try and save up enough money to get a wireless or a piano for the school. I bought every piano and every wireless in that school, otherwise we'd never had nothing. It's a wonder I was educated at all because the teachers would say "oh you'll find Alice behind the toilet teaching kids to dance or something you know something with a few shillings to buy something with". So thats how I spent most of my time.

Interviewer So you spent a lot of time swimming and a lot of time dancing and playing the piano.

Interviewee Well you see I've taught, our church twenty five years I did a concert every year for St. Augustine's Church of England. And I put it on about every October and it was always a great success. My own pupils, I used to teach every Saturday morning if I wasn't working you know. And I'd teach this show take me all year to get ready, they'd come from all over the place to see it. It was a bright little show. No one lousy, just bang, bang, bang, one ballet after another one song, you know

Interviewer Did you go to St. Augustine's when you were little?

Interviewee No, well from when I was four until I was nine I went to the little church on the hill up here. Park Street, Methodist, the only reason being, that the trams, my mother thought I was too young to cross, to go to St. Augustine's. Until I was old enough to have a little sense I went there and I've been to St. Augustine's, I'm eighty this year since I was nine, that's seventy one years. I work there as a server, I serve there every second Sunday.

Interviewer It's a hundred years old now, St. Augustine's.

Interviewee Yes we had our one hundred years birthday about three months ago. It was a lovely time you know. We had wine tasting, we had all kinds of souvenirs, we sold tea towels and spoons and Draytons made wines for us with our special label on and this kind of thing. I used to go every day and sell.

Interviewer Did many of the old people from Merewether come back?

Interviewee Yes we had the whole hall done out as a memorabilia. I've got eighteen albums, I've got about thirty, but eighteen albums, I'm a real one that kind of hangs onto things, if I saw your photo in the paper I'd put it in my album. You know anyone I know and I've got all these, and all the ballets. I've done for St. Augustine's all the people who came from far and near, some from South Australia, West Australia and they had a look at the photos, "oh that's me a little kid at the ballet!" they'd say, but it was really a lovely time. We had our big dinner in town at the Town Hall and it was lovely, there was about four hundred there. It was a really nice night and a friend of mine Pat Woodward, she got buried on Friday, I said to her when I went in, I hadn't seen her, she lived up in Woodward Street, that's funny her name was Woodward. She was a school teacher, and ah, I said "Pat what have you got that cap on your head for?". Because I didn't know she had cancer, and she said "I've got the big C". I said "take it off", and her hair, she'd had that micro stuff and her hair was about an inch, just looked like the urchin crop, she looked real nice. I said "leave it off, it looks real nice on you", and I've just got to ring her husband after. They left here and went to live at the Bay, Nelsons Bay you know.

Interviewer I suppose a lot of the old families from Merewether have moved now because there has been a lot of development with flats and home units.

Interviewee Oh yes its sad. Its sad when I go along, I haven't got a car but now that I've got a sore leg this last six months people take me to church and some take me down to the beach. I teach swimming, I start about October. I get a lift down and a lift home otherwise I wouldn't get there you know, it takes me an hour with a stick to walk down there.

Interviewer So you can see lots of changes in Merewether?

Interviewee Oh yes, all the old places you know. I know where I was born down the next street, just before the time I had my trouble I was coming past there and a young chap said "oh are you interested in this place", it was a little pink home, dear little house, I said, "yes that's where I was born" and yet I lived four doors along, I moved from there too. Its still there, the green house where I lived and Allan and I lived with Mum around there until we got enough money to pay for our house. We built this home for one thousand pounds and we lived with my mother until such times as we had enough to pay for it and get into it.

Interviewer You were saying about the trams and your mother wouldn't let you go to St. Augustine's because she was frightened of you being knocked over by a tram. Did the tram go into Newcastle from Merewether?

Interviewee Yes, the same place as our buses run now, down there up Scott Street and the tram depot was up the beach where the buses are now you know.

Interviewer How did you get to school? Did you walk to school to The Junction?

Interviewee Yes it wasn't far it was only like two or three streets to get there.

Interviewer Was the pottery still down there when you went to school?

Interviewee Yes the pottery was opposite our school and Mr. Hughes the chap that owned it he was a great favourite of all the school children. He used to give all the children a little ball like plasticine, pottery, we used to make things on it, you know. We used to sit there for hours after school watching him make pipes and things, you know.

Interviewer Were there many shops down at The Junction then?

Interviewee Oh only Scullys, Scullys was the main thing, it sold ice cream and different things for lunches, you know and bread rolls and things like that but there weren't many. Devers they've just finished that was a shoe shop down there where the Hot Bread shop is, Devers.

Interviewer Were there many shops in Merewether itself?

Interviewee Oh for years there was one down at the end of our street Harris, Mr and Mrs Harris had that for years. The one up here near our paper shop up here that used to be our Lord Mayor of Merewether used to have that, Mr Norris, Roy Norris. He used to have a paper shop, you know lollies and things he sold.

Interviewer Could you remember the old gardens where they grew the vegetables?

Interviewee Yes, it was in the next street in Frederick Street. I was a tiger when I was a kid, we were that poor. I used to pinch vegetables out of the chinese garden and I'd run like blazes home to give mum to make a stew. The Chinese "ah! ah! ah!" chasing me along the pier. I can still close my eyes and see this poor old Chinese chap but I turned out I was a, he used to call me "Aleece" I turned out a good friend of his.

Interviewer I believe you were one of the founding members of the Merewether Ladies Swimming Club?

Interviewee Yes I was.

Interviewer Can you tell me about the opening of the club house? Down at the beach.

Interviewee Oh it was lovely, we had the lady Mayoress and everything there and of course we all took our little bit of food that we could take, very few were wealthy, we all came from poor families, but it was a lovely little club house, a shower one end and I bought an old piano. That piano when we had high seas one day I was down there at the baths, I love swimming when its high across the baths you get a shute right across, and I went down to see the club room first. I used to clean it out and wash it out you know. All of a sudden I looked and there was the piano floating out in the surf, in the front of the shed. Three priests had just been for a swim and I said "please help me get the piano". So we got the piano in and I got a truck and put it down in my garage down in the next street, you know, but it was never that good because the water had go into it and made it croak, you know.

Interviewer Can you remember the first swimming races down there? I suppose they were in the old pool.

Interviewee The old pool yes. Oh yes, I remember because I did such good times, I had a good dive see and I could just about dive three parts across the pool and swim two strokes, get a good turn and back again. You know I had wonderful times only for the simple reason that it all consisted of good turns and good dives you know, in those days. But down the other pool it was fifty across and a hundred long, they were the proper dimensions for a swimming pool but we had some wonderful races, there's been some good times done there.

Interviewer What sort of costumes did the girls wear in those days?

Interviewee Oh we had blue woolen costumes, half way up the thigh to there and two lemon, our colours were blue and lemon you know. What ever you like to call it blue and gold really, they had two stripes around there, they had a nice little neat little neckline with wide straps, you know. This was coming on when we built our shed, because we had to have these lovely little, we thought they were lovely at the time, costumes at the time.

Interviewer They were the club swimmers were they?

Interviewee Yes blue and gold our club, Merewether always been, it still is to this day the men with blue and gold.

Interviewer Did you worry much about sun tan lotion in those days and your skin?

Interviewee No that's why I've got skin like an elephant now, its tough, because I've never had anything on. The only thing I ever put on my skin was Johnson's Baby Oil, thats the only thing I ever used you know. I'd put a bit of that on I'd just go black.

Interviewer Can you remember people who were fair? Did they worry and not go the beach because of the sun?

Interviewee Oh no they all got burnt, no-one seemed to worry in those days they didn't have that same sense of oh, looking lovely you know, we were all just, as a matter of fact it was the only thing we had to do. We had kitchen teas, you know, with a few of the boys in the night we'd have a kitchen tea. And I remember one night and we were down in our club room and there was no boys only all women but the girls, but we all just kept our panties

on and we went swimming with no tops on in the little old pool. You know it was such a hot night we went for a swim. Oh God we used to have some fun, they were such a lovely lot of people, you know.

Interviewer And I believe you raised money for the unemployed through your swimming club.

Interviewee Oh gosh yes we had lots of things. Same as when I was at the theatre you see, it was on then and the boss would let me have a concert and I'd have one and get a few shillings for the um.

Interviewer It must have been a great thing for Merewether when the big baths were built. Can you remember much about that time?

Interviewee Oh yes, that day we had swimming races, we had balloon races. Because we had to organize it all being the club, you know and the Surf Club came in with us naturally but because they nearly always swam in the surf, but we did, we had a really good day. It was full of fun and mostly funny races more than the real ethical swimming races that everyone could do. You know it was chasing balloons and blowing them up and all kinds of funny things we did that day.

Interviewer In those days Merewether was a municipality. Was the Mayor there and the Alderman?

Interviewee Oh yes, they were all there.

Interviewer Did you feel you got more done in those days when you were not attached to Newcastle?

Interviewee Oh yes, they always adhered to anything you told them, if you told them you wanted anything done they were always helpful and that.

Interviewer Did they give you half the money? Did you have to raise a lot of money?

Interviewee Half, half they gave us you know. Like John McNaughton now he's a friend of mine, him and Margaret and a I doubt he'd say no to anything we asked him, he's such a kindly bloke, family of his own and that but I don't think there's much difference in the men themselves, they were all good fellows as far as I was concerned.

Interviewer How have the baths changed over the years?

Interviewee Well they still, I still taught swimming in filth and you know, and all kinds of stuff. When I was young and that pipe, that sewer pipe at the side just as you start to go along, about six foot out there's a nice big rock well before our baths were built that's where I taught swimming. It was all cleared of rocks, there was just that big rock there, many a time there was that much rubbish and stuff.

Interviewer Do you remember the old "Coffee Pot" train?

Interviewee Oh I've got some lovely memories of that. It would go down the end of the street here straight along and go out I suppose about half a dozen times a day. It would go out fill up with coal and come back and all us kids, it would go out empty naturally. We used to hop in this big hopper we'd call it and get in the tunnel where the driver couldn't see us. We'd go out and we'd have a swim at the lagoon while it was filling up with coal and then we'd sneak in between the hoppers and get a ride back, through the tunnel.

Interviewer Did you ever walk through the tunnels?

Interviewee Oh gosh yes, we used to love going through the tunnels.

Interviewer I believe they were shut after the war.

Interviewee After the war they were closed in yes. Because they were getting, you see the side of the cliff down there was beginning to break up so that's why they had to close it up really, you know.

Interviewer Did you go on Sunday School picnics around the Merewether area.

Interviewee Yes, where I thought they fixed the thing up, you know.

Interviewer Glenrock?

Interviewee No just down here where I thought they did all the cleaning up of the sewer, you know there's the big factory out here.

Interviewer Oh yes Burwood Beach.

Interviewee Burwood, yes. Well we used to have our Sunday School picnics there.

Interviewer Was that Merewether Estate land?

Interviewee Yes thats right Merewether Estate.

Interviewer The Merewether family let you have picnics.

Interviewee We always used to go out there for Merewether picnics, sometimes our school, Merewether Junction School, we used to have all our concerts at the old Star Theatre. In the old days there was a place called the Star Theatre there. We had pictures on of a Saturday afternoon and night and then everytime Junction School would have a concert because we didn't have a real big hall in our school and we'd have it there. I remember one year I was singing "In the Little Red Schoolhouse" and my pants fell off, you know they were only like knickers in those days, I was determined I was going to sing this song, I sang "In the Little Red Schoolhouse" and I picked me pants up and I walked off the stage. I got a very good clap.

Interviewer That must have been a riot.

Interviewee Oh gosh it was beautiful and we had a lot of pantomimes in those days. There used to be a lot of men, I just can't think of their name off hand, they used to produce them and after school so many kids would be asked to go and I knew I was always Robin Hood. These things we used to have some lovely pantomimes you know.

Interviewer Did children mainly find their own entertainment in those days?

Interviewee That was all we could, as I say all we had, was out there to have the picnics, out at the sewer pipe, go to the lagoon, at least once a week you went to the lagoon and you had to go through the two tunnels to get there, which was exciting, we used to think that was beautiful going through those tunnels.

Interviewer Did many families go on picnics during the weekend?

Interviewee Oh yes, that was at the lagoon because its near kahibah there and there were little waterfalls, it was quite a pretty, but now its lovely with the Scout movement out there. Its always been a happy place. But see we always lived from one six months to the other because we always had carnivals, each club in Merewether was always the 25th, Anniversary Day, or the 26th January. It was never allotted that was it. We used to sit

on the sides on the sandhills and barrack for Merewether.

Interviewer Did they have big crowds in those days at the carnivals?

Interviewee Oh yes we did, you know, where you'd pay a dollar now you would be lucky if mum gave you a penny or three pence. They just juggled a little thing around.

Interviewer Did you start swimming lessons when you were a teenager?

Interviewee I started when I was twenty, teaching. And I was fifty nine years, until I was seventy nine last year.

Interviewer That's wonderful.

Interviewee Yes, I taught, the press worked it out, twenty two thousand people.

Interviewer You've taught to swim.

Interviewee Yes thats kiddies, schools, all kinds of people you know, sub-normal, deaf, dumb, blind, you name it.

Interviewer I suppose adults are hard to teach?

Interviewee Yes, well thats how I started the club down here of a Wednesday. I still run it. Thirty years I've had it, called Merewether Mothers' Swimming Club and I teach them to swim and we pay a few bob each week and we give that to charity at the end of the year. We give about a thousand dollars a year to charity.

Interviewer Thats wonderful, and you were always Captain of the Girls' Swimming Club.

Interviewee Yes there's never been another Captain only me, fifty, and we went into liquidation, we couldn't get enough people interested. I run the club of a Saturday morning, the boys, and then we ended up all forces together. You know boys, girls, grandmothers, grandfathers, they all come down and watch their kids swim. Its quite a big one now, we've got about one hundred and eighty swim every Saturday morning, starting at about October.

Interviewer What happened to the Merewether Ladies Club House?

Interviewee Oh it got washed away love.

Interviewer Was there a bad storm?

Interviewee Yes.

Interviewer Can you remember the very bad storm in 1974?

Interviewee Yes, I lost my garage, I had a beautiful big garage a wooden one too, very strong. And I went down to the beach one day. Oh thats another thing I forgot to tell you that was interesting, when my husband was alive, thats over forty years ago we went down, we used to go for a swim every morning. If it was a hot night we'd sleep on the beach all night in those days. But we went down this morning and all over there were shafts of rock that had been unearthed by the big seas and we went and had a look. I said, "thats coal" and so he hurried home, we were only at the end of the street and he grabbed a little pick and that and some chaff bags and I picked all the coal out and filled all these bags. My mother lived in the next street and we got some for her. We had an open fire place then, so I filled all these bags of coal and after we finished he said "oh God love I wonder if it will burn", you know after all the trouble we went to get. You know what? In about half a day there was every truck in Newcastle and Merewether getting this coal, they all heard about it on the grapevine. It turned out it had all this white salt over it. But it was lovely, we had many nice warm winters, because we had that closed in last year, lovely winters because the salt made it burn nicely.

Interviewer So there is still coal around in Merewether?

Interviewee Oh still, after a big storm you go down there. You can hardly walk on our beach, it all comes up I don't know how, the kids play around, it forms little pools of water under this high rock shelf, so its still there.

Interviewer Well thank you Alice, that's been very interesting.

Interviewee Oh that's alright.

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Signed Alice Ferguson J.P.

Date 21.8.89

Interviewer P. J. Pattenden