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OPEN FOUNDATION AUSTRALIAN HISTORY (Wednesday Class)

Oral History Research Project

- Summary
- Essay
- Transcript of Taped Interview
- Signed Permission Slip

SUMMARY

Maitland Show, one of the oldest shows in Australia has experienced the changes affecting its community and Australian society in general. From its beginning as an agricultural gathering, it has prospered into an event recognised throughout Australia. The Maitland area, once a bustling farming district, is now diverse in its occupations with agriculture and industry existing side by side. This fact led to changes in The Show with the inclusion of a greater range of exhibits, eg. the latest electrical developments, designed to keep pace with technology. The Show has maintained its agricultural base with the continuance of traditional exhibits such as farming produce, equestrian and stock events. However, some changes have occurred, such as the growing number and heightening influence of sideshow operations, to accommodate the changing social demands of a commercial, leisure orientated society.

MAITLAND SHOW - HISTORY AND CHANGE

The first Maitland Show was held on May 14, 1844 and is regarded as 'the oldest provincial show in Australia'¹ and its organisers, the Hunter River Agricultural and Horticultural Association, (H.R.A. & H.A), are 'one of the oldest show societies in the Commonwealth'². The growth of The Show and the changes that accompany such growth reflect the changes in not only the farming community of Maitland and its surrounding areas, but also the changes in society in general, be they technological or attitudinal.

The early shows were held at various venues including 'the yards of the Albion Inn, West Maitland'³ (now the site of business houses opposite the current Galtons building), 'Harbottle's paddock near the Victoria Bridge'⁴, the Jockey Clubs West Maitland Park and finally the Albion cricket ground and adjoining lands, purchased by the prospering Association, where the shows have been staged ever since. These shows reflected the livelihood and main concerns of the area and its inhabitants. Settled in the 1820's, the area had been cleared of the valuable cedar forests leaving extremely fertile acres to be used for the growing of various crops and the raising of livestock.

Early show days were agricultural meets, indeed the original Association, the predecessor of the H.R.A. & H.A., 'the Hunter River Agriculture Society formed in 1842'⁵, was established "to develop the resources of the Hunter River district and to promote the interests of the agriculturalists and grazier". The produce exhibited showed the diverse range of crops and products produced in the area, such as cheese, butter, wheat, maize, leaf tobacco, oranges and wines. Stock included various cattle breeds, sheep, swine and horses. A large feature of these early shows were the annual ploughing matches which contributed greatly to the continuing success of the shows, however, there is no evidence that these matches continued after 1891 - perhaps they fell victim

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to change. Another victim was "The Arch of Produce" an 'emblem of agricultural energy'⁶ which

'composed of bales of hay and millet built to a certain height; then stacks of pumpkins, grammas and melons ... a second edifice of dull-green lucerne hay and golden cobs of corn ... spelling ... "Welcome to Maitland Show".'⁷

was a remarkable feature for many years, sadly missing in recent years.

With the continued growth of Maitland and its environs and the advent of industries of a secondary nature, such as soap factories, candle works, flour-mills, foundaries, quarries, farming implement manufacturers etc, it was inevitable that the nature of The Show would change. Whilst retaining its agricultural foundation, exhibits of non-agricultural nature such as furniture, electrical appliances and motor vehicles all combined to present the modern day show. Maitland businesses such as A.S. Meahan & Co. and later Galtons Ltd. presented furniture exhibitions, Wilks & Co. displayed refrigerators, electrical stoves and other electrical appliances and various motor vehicle companies exhibited their vehicles. These exhibitions were visual evidence of modern times and changing technology.

In earlier days the emphasis in life was work and the events at the shows of yesteryear, such as the ploughing matches, stress that fact whereas at the shows of today events are of a more leisure orientated nature eg, lady and gent rider, jumping etc. This change is obvious in the more commercial spheres of The Show, namely the areas of sideshow operations and sample bag sales.

Sideshows were once colourful canvas affairs with sideshow attendants, their 'raucous voices ... shouting the merits'⁸ of attractions such as the Pigmy

People, the Fat Lady, Jimmy Sharman's Boxing Team and 'knock-em-down' stalls. Today however the emphasis is on the ever spreading fast rides with their flashing lights and twists and turns providing momentary excitement at a price, with the older style tent shows confined to 'sideshow alley'.

The original sample bags were just that - sample bags with companies producing the bags to introduce their products. Companies such as John Bull with their various flours and spices, Cadbury with their chocolates and Tafe and Allen's with their sweets. Although designed as advertising vehicles, these original bags lacked the commercial aspect of the present-day bags that contain not only the producers' samples but also miscellaneous items such as comics, puzzles, water pistols etc - anything to entice the buyers.

Despite the various commercial aspects of The Show, the ring events still prosper with many nationally recognised competitors returning year after year, however, many exhibitions have diminished over the years, notably the agricultural produce exhibitions. These displays once filled large pavilions easily but now they share pavilions with other exhibits such as gemstone and mineral displays etc. This is perhaps due to the change in the Maitland district as a whole. It is no longer solely a farming community. Its proximity to the large industrial city of Newcastle, the nearby wine growing areas and coalfields have given Maitland a different perspective in relation to industry, commerce and leisure.

These different perspectives are also accompanied by the different attitudes of people within, as well as outside, the area. Leisure is very much a priority in today's society with the quest for entertainment being answered by first television and movie theatres and now elaborate fun parks with their various themes. Once The Show was the highlight of the year but now many of the

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attractions that shows offer can be found at fun parks that are always open and this diminishes the attractiveness of The Show for many people outside the agriculture and equestrian spheres.

Maitland Show is a study of continuity, (missing only flood years and war years), growth and change. Its commencement as an agricultural show in an agricultural area led to prosperity and recognition throughout Australia. It has maintained its agricultural base despite technological change and the diversification of local occupations. The Show now exists in a society very different from the work orientated society of its birth. More commercial entertainment is now presented in conjunction with the traditional attractions in this era of "Leisure in the Age of Technology".

FOOTNOTES

1. Maitland Mercury, January, 1933.
2. Maitland 1863 - 1963, Oswald Ziegler Publications P/L, Sydney, P.44
3. Maitland Mercury, January, 1933.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. T. Hickey & W. Lawson, Maira of Green Hills, Sydney, 1950, p.124
7. T. Hickey & W. Lawson, Maira of Green Hills, Sydney, 1950, p.124-125
8. T. Hickey & W. Lawson, Maira of Green Hills, Sydney, 1950, p.125

Ibid

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TRANSCRIPT

Australian History Open Foundation Course Oral History Project.

Interviewer: Jane Guy

Interviewee: Mr Bob Johnston

At 13 Tocal Road Bolwarra Heights, on July 31, 1988 - concerning his memories of Maitland Show.

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What are your earliest memories of Maitland Show?

I can remember back as far as 1930, I was about five years old. We used to go down to the show of a night time. I would go down with my Mother and Father then of a Thursday it's a half day holiday for Maitland plus a full day for the schools, we'd go down for the full day with my Uncles when they had their horses down there, their draught horses down there in saddle.

Was the show an event for children or was it a family affair?

Oh well, it was a bit of both. You could say it was for family and children, well yes every family used to come down there or ... not every family but most families used to come down there especially of a Saturday afternoon with their picnic lunches and basket lunches and spread their table cloths out on the grass and they'd have their picnic lunch or picnic lunch and picnic tea which was right up till ... oh I suppose about ten, fifteen years ago that used to happen, but not so much lately.

Was the show the highlight of the year in Maitland?

Oh yes! Certainly it was the highlight of everyone, the shopkeepers especially, I mean they'd come in with their specials, Johnston's, they'd come in with 'get your new shoes to wear to the show' or Galtons and get your clothes, a new suit or new trousers and shirts and so forth for the show and nearly all other places for frocks and so forth, they'd be advertised in the Maitland Mercury for the show.

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So the businesses contributed with advertising to get the people in to buy as well as exhibiting at the show?

Oh yes! They used to exhibit at the show, Meahan's, A.S. Meahan and Co. they were one of the biggest furniture people here in Maitland at the time and they always used to have exhibitions down there with their furniture, lounge suites and bedroom suites, kitchen suites and so forth and linos and carpets and ... plus others such as Wilks and Co. going back they were there, they used to have their refrigerators, electric stoves, kettles and so forth and also the Maitland Municipal Council I think they used to call themselves then, had the electric light, they used to have a big showing, a big run of the ... pavilions with all their appliances and so forth, hot water systems and everything ... and also the agricultural people, they used to put in their bit too with their ploughs - hand ploughs, disc ploughs and cultivators and harrows and all the others ... and all that other sort of farm machinery stuff. There used to be a very big showing of that there and in later years there when irrigation came out they had pumps there pumping a few thousand gallon tanks there and they coloured the water as I can remember it green and they'd start the pumps off, it wasn't electricity in those times it was a combustion engine and they'd start it off and they'd be pumping this water in and out of the tank all the time.

Was it mainly a show for local people?

Oh no! No fear! It was one of the highlights of everywhere. A lot of Newcastle people used to come up, they used to run trains specially to come up to Maitland and I can remember quite plainly that through the afternoon and evening the chap on the broadcasting box would say that 'the time was now quarter past three, the next train to Newcastle would leave at quarter to four from High Street Maitland'. The special trains would run up to High Street and terminate there for people to come in to the show.

In your earlier show days how did people travel to the show other than by the train?

Oh well, some used to come in horse and sulky, some came - the luckier ones - they were able to come in their cars and quite a few used to walk, quite a few people walked then ... over from Lorn, walking over from Lorn and other places. Telarah, walking down from there to the show and I dare say Rutherford too but we never ... we didn't go up that way so I mean you wouldn't see, but I know from Lorn going over to Lorn quite a number of people walking over there, and at that time there were quite a number of houses in and around near the showground and then Horseshoe Bend and Maitland itself, a lot of people lived in around there and they'd all walk down to the show.

Nowdays there are a lot of fast food outlets at the show, were there many when you were young?

Oh no, no! Certainly not, but I mean perhaps there may have been a hot dog stand or you may be able to buy a meat pie but the main things were places where you could go in and have your cup of tea and a sandwich or sometimes at odd places there'd be a baked dinner put on. But no there weren't very many places only about two or three.

The sideshows are a big thing in todays show, have they changed much?

Oh yes! The sideshows today as you know Jane ... Oh, mainly these rides, a few rides and 'knock em downs', but in my time there was some 'knock em downs' or knock the doll down sort of thing, there was other sideshows like the fat lady and Jimmy Sharman with his boxing team and the pigmy people and ... oh, other shows like that. It was a tent show and not just rides and that. There were dodgem cars when I was about 14 ... 15 and also boats, electric boats, they'd have a wire netting stretched about 10 or 12 feet over the top of the water and there'd be charges of electricity in the poles that used to go up the back of the boat and on to the netting and used to transform the power down into the motors and used to get the boats going.

Sample bags are also a big thing today, were they big back then?

Oh yes! We always had a few sample bags but I mean not as many as there are today but I mean John Bull he had a big pavilion there are also Tafe Sweets, they've been there as far back as I can remember, Tafe's with their sweets, I mean they're down in Sydney still ... I don't think they sponsor our show now but I mean I know they're down in Sydney. Tafe Sweets exhibition down there is quite good. Cadbury's and other people they used to be there and there might be two or three of those different people together to form one sample bag but also there'd be Hoadleys and those things with their Crunchie Bars and other sweets.

No Spiderman Bags and things like that?

Oh no! No not very often, oh, there may have been one or two also Allen's they were another big sweets people with their Steamrollers and I mean you might get a balloon and a rubber in it or perhaps a pencil in it or something, but you know they used to be, oh, about ten or fifteen pents each or getting up to two bob. That was getting a bit dear.

Were exhibitions such as the produce exhibition well attended?

Oh yes! We had quite some big displays of vegetables and that there was ... we used to have the Junior Farmers, they used to put on ... there'd be about four or five Junior Farmer clubs in the area and they used to put on one at one side of the agriculture pavilion, that was always well displayed plus the farmers ... I mean they would come in with their melons and pumpkins, grammas and corn and ... corn cobs you know they might have a best half dozen cobs of lean corn or you might have the best half dozen pumpkins of all the different varieties the same with the grammas, and the quinces and apples ... and there were a few apples that were grown about here, some people used to bring those in. Sometimes there might be peaches left ... some very late peaches or they used to be able to store them somehow and they'd bring those in and honey they had the honey exhibition and ... which was quite good, also hay that

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was another thing that used to take a big pride in here. In fact McKimms, they were one of the big ... not big but one of the main contenders in the bales of hay - they they had three or four bales of hay they kept from as far back as I can remember up until the 1955 flood. They'd take them down to the show and they'd bring them home and they'd wrap them up in bags and canvas and then they'd put them up in the loft, but the '55 flood came and wiped that away.

So were these exhibitions larger than they are today?

Oh yes! Yes I mean a lot larger. Our new pavilion that we put up down there we used to call that the agriculture pavilion and that used to be choc-a-block full.

Right, so its not as full now?

Oh no! No I mean you've got other stuff in it now, I just can't remember what is in it but other stuff is put in it now, other exhibitions, but that used to be packed with ... agricultural stuff and also on the lean-to on the side of it, that used to be filled with vegetables and stuff, with corn and corn stalks, barley and oats, sheaves of oats, sheaves of wheat, sheaves and bundles of sacalene and millet and broom millet, there used to be a fair bit of that grown down around here too.

You yourself exhibited livestock. How did you get your livestock to the ground?

Oh well when I was going down there with the draught horses for the start we used to lead them down, we'd put one horse in the van and we'd lead another three behind and oh that's the way we used to go down there in the van and you see we used to leave them there of a night time.

So you could stable them down there?

Oh yes! There were stables yes, well they weren't big stables but they weren't too bad, but ... on Tuesday's we'd start on Tuesday's to get the gear down there and Tuesday afternoon after lunch we'd get a lot of our gear ready and put it in the van and we'd take two vans down, one to put our gear in it and we'd take a few poles

we'd take down especially to put in front of the horse stalls ... the poles that the show people supplied they weren't quite good enough, or we didn't think they were to hold the draught horses so we used to take our own and leave all our gear down there and there used to be one young boy who used to always be at the shows and he used to come to us Tuesday afternoon and ask if he could sleep in our stall and locker and so well that would suit us pretty good cause I mean he could keep his eye on that and give him somewhere to camp.

What type of events did you enter?

Oh well when I was a boy going to school, might of been about second or third class I think ... I entered a bantam once, that was my first showing at Maitland, then after that I used to go in the riding events and so forth, then I, from then after I left school and came across and had the farm I'd come in with the draught horses and later on with cattle and dairy cattle.

What other livestock and equestrian events were there?

Oh well there was the draught horses and the saddle horses and dairy cattle then also beef cattle with the fat steers and fat vealers, there used to be a very big cattle showing in Maitland with the fat stock here. We were very sorry to ever lose that, but it was a big showing here in Maitland of fat stock. Also jumping it was just ... hurdles with just the ordinary brush jumps and perhaps there might be a few pole jumps and there was always, one of the special things there was the high jump and old Mrs Bruhn from Glendonbrook she used to come down there and she used to ride side saddle in that which is a pretty good event, and they used to hunt, called it hunting, in fours - you'd get singles then there'd be pairs, then threes then there'd be fours which was quite special to see the jumping in fours and I think if we could put something on like that now it might be something special if we could get the fellows to do it.

So some of these events don't run now?

Oh, no hunting now, hunting is olympic jumping what they call olympic jumping and

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that's different. With hunting they'd have, oh, (counting) one, two, three, they might have half a dozen jumps right round the ring and now they have about eight or ten jumps you know about quarter of the area of the ring.

What were the prizes like for these events?

Oh, pretty big prizes then, for corn or vegetables and that you'd get two and sixpence for first prize (laugh) and that was you know ... that was money. Some got five shillings and then the dairy cattle and horses and that I mean you might get a pound or thirty shillings ... and ten shillings for second and five shillings for third plus the first, second or third ribbons. Of course there was the championships and there was never any special money put on for those at those times.

Were other exhibition events in the ring for spectators to watch?

Oh yes, yes! ... Like I said there's the jumping and there's the ... one of the specialities was the buck jump and that used to ... that was a very good thing. You'd have maybe one or two horses for a night and that used to come on at ten o'clock and they'd bring this horse out led behind one horse - the buckjumper was led out then he'd be blindfolded and the saddle was put on him and the flank rope and the fellow would get on him and they'd let him go see and he used to buck all round the ring. You might get one or perhaps two of these of a night, but then ...

That was the rodeo of the day?

That was the rodeo of the day in those times.

And you had the woodchop and things like that?

Oh yes, wood chopping that was one of the big features of Saturday afternoon, always put on Saturday afternoon like it is today. Saturday's the day for the woodchop, and ah, we had some good events and oh, I mean cause there was only the axes then we never had a relay chop like we have today and the saw and the ... axe and of course now I mean they have the chainsaw and now they have post splitting see which is quite spectacular.

And the fireworks still existed?

Oh yes! That was on Thursday and Saturday nights that was ... used to have a good showing of fireworks cause the show that time used to go from Wednesday to Saturday. Wednesday night used to be shut with four days and three nights. The show used to go on Wednesday night - there would be no ring programme, but you could still go down there and look. A lot of people used to go down of a Wednesday night to go round and look at all the exhibitions and that.

So people spent a fair bit of time at the show when they got there?

Oh yes! Yes they used to spend quite a bit of time at the show.

And they sort of sat around the ring to watch the events?

Oh well, I mean like there is today you get some that did and some that didn't and those that were really interested in the ring they'd sit on the ring and wouldn't move but some sorts would come and went sort of thing.

How does Maitland show compare to other local shows?

Well it was known as the show of New South Wales or in fact of Australia. It was the best outside Sydney. That's what it was known as, perhaps it may not be quite so good today but we think it is.

And what changes do you feel have had the greatest effect on the show over the years?

Anything that sticks in your mind?

Oh well, the event of T.V. I think, I mean that's one of the big things and also the parks and fun parks that are round the different areas. I think they've all got a big thing in why people don't come to the show. They can go, but in our time you went to the show and all these different rides would be there for you, you know, but today well you can see them anytime and go and have a ride on them anytime, see and also in those time the cars, there used to be a big showing of cars and you could come and if you were going to buy a car you'd nearly go and buy it at the show.

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And now there are so many car yards.

Oh yes, different car yards, but I mean there were still four or five car places you could by cars at but I mean you would go to the show and you'd look through the cars at the show but you know today well its done on the street.

So now there's too many other things competing?

Yes, that's what it is ... the fun parlours and also the pictures I suppose that's got a bit to do with it too, I mean you can go to the pictures any day of the week but those times I mean you know perhaps Wednesday and Saturday nights ... if I remember rightly I think about the only times the pictures were on ... on Saturday afternoon.

Well thank you very much Bob for you views on Maitland Show.

Ok.

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1988

I, Robert P. Johnston give my

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Signed R. P. Johnston

Date July 31, 1988

Interviewer Jane S. Guy 