

Regional History:-

Mr James Arthur Latham's Family History in Newcastle
and the Hunter. - Their Involvement On the Water
And Their Worthy Contribution Towards Our Regional
Growth

Lecturer: Margaret Henry

Open Foundation Course: Australian History (Thursday)

Student: Andrea Keirs, 76 Freyberg Street,
New Lambton Phone: 57-3409

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Summary

Mr James Arthur Latham's family history is full of achievement, ingenuity and generosity. Mr Latham's recollections go back to when his great grandfather was transported to Australia from England as a convict, right up until the present date. It is apparent that all of the family was involved on the water. Some of his relatives built boats, others sailed steamships to transport goods, some fished and others used the waters for enjoyment such as rowing regattas and sailing regattas. His family befriended many people, and assisted them with food during the Depression. They also organised regattas with the use of their boats to brighten up the lives of those people who lived in the grips of poverty. Mr Latham's family certainly did play an important role in the Hunter.

Mr James Arthur Latham who was born on the 18th December 1911 in Mayfield, (kindly granted me an interview concerning his) family history in the Hunter, and their contribution towards the improvement of the morale and health of the people who lived along the river during the depression. Mr Latham's family have all been involved in boating on the waters of the Hunter region, whether it be for the purpose of carrying, fishing, racing regattas or sailing regattas. Certain members ^{of the family} were also involved in boatbuilding. Their lives have always been closely tied to the water.

Tracing back to the beginnings of his family in Australia, we find that his great-grandfather was a convict. On his release in 1835 he built boats in Clarencetown and moved on to Stockton to build forty to fifty tonne ketches. They were mostly used to carry materials such as logs of timber from Lake Macquarie and the northern rivers for trade. He managed to build one of these ketches every two years. Several of them went overseas to Malaya and islands in the north. This business continued until 1891 when he died. The most recent of the boats he built was called the "Laura", which was inherited by his daughter Hanna. She continued running it until 1906 when she sold it. In the early 1800's, steamers were a common sight on the Hunter. Coal was a very popular resource to transport, and The Hunter River Steam Navigation Company was one of the very successful pioneers of its time. They would have been competing with Mr Latham's great grandfather for work in his lifetime.

Mr Latham's grandfather had two brothers. One was a produce merchant who sailed his paddle wheel steamer up and down the Hunter River, buying produce from the farms up the Hunter, and bringing it down to the markets. One that

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he built himself was fifty tonnes and it hauled goods from the Hunter, Port Stephens and around Lake Macquarie. Later he acquired a steam tug, and then had a steam boat built which he used to assist him in trading various goods. This steam boat was wrecked on Morona Point. When he grew older, he gave up the steam boats, and he became involved in ship watching and doing other work around the harbour.

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Mr James Arthur Latham's grandfather was Mr Thomas Latham who was born at Millers Forest, Hunter River on 21st May 1852. This gentleman had been at sea since 1867, and on 10th March 1884 he applied for a certificate of service as a Master of a Harbour and River Steamer. His vessel was called the "Pinafore".² He was originally involved in farm work and occasionally rode as a jockey. When he was twenty-two he became interested in prospecting and bullock driving for several years. Returning to Newcastle he entered various pursuits. They were mainly on the river and coast and they included limeburning at Stockton, oyster dredging and boatbuilding at Port Stephens. He had a contract for loading Wallaroo steam packets at Port Waratah chutes. He later skippered several ferries which were owned by his brother and then skippered the "Laura" which ran from Port Stephens to Botany Bay with shells. Mr Thomas Latham was well known in aquatic circles, and pulled in several sculling matches. He also sailed the eighteen footers Eclipse, Planet and the Star against the prominent sportsmen of his day.³

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Mr James Arthur Latham's father came from a family of seven members, and they were all from Stockton. His youngest brother died during army training, and his three other brothers and his sisters were all very proficient in rowing. One of his sisters was recognized as the Australian champion in

single sculls. One of his brothers was an extremely good rower. He was known and respected as a winner. If he ever raced and came in second or third, everyone present knew that it was only to let another person receive the prize money.

Mr William Thomas Latham was Mr James Arthur Latham's uncle. He was always interested in sculling, sailing and rowing with his brother Samuel. He rowed in outriggers double sculls, singles and mixed doubles. He also helped to organise many regattas on the Hunter River, Port Stephens and at Munge Brush. ⁴ Newcastle's first regatta was held on 2nd April 1845 which was a sailing match for a silver cup. The local scribe stated that the days sport gave work to the builders and smiths, and a days holiday to the townsfolk.

The regattas that he organised were on the weekend. He provided four twelve foot dingies which were very difficult to row to provide amusement and occupy the young men. William Latham was a member of the Belmont Sailing Club and the Hunter River Club. He conducted a boat hiring business at Soldiers Point and Mayfield. The business at Mayfield originated in a creek which was behind where the smelting works was built. In 1914 the business and family was forced to move upstream when the B.H.P bought the property and forced them out. The whole area was filled in with sand and the area was rebuilt. Only one channel remains there now. He trained the present Mrs T. Bennett who was then known as Miss Phyllis Hughes. She became the champion rower of the single sculls in the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie in 1923 at the age of eighteen. Although she retired many years ago, she was reported thirty-six years later to be the undefeated champion ^{in what was}

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Mr Latham's grandmother was the sister of Ben Thoroughgood. Mr Thoroughgood was the heavy boat champion of Australia. His sister, Mrs Latham was fifty-seven years of age with thirteen children when she and her son, at the Hunter River Professional Sculling Club Regatta (held at Newcastle on New Years Day 1918) won the final of the mixed double sculls. In the previous year of 1917 ^{she} her and her son won the final of the mixed double sculls on the Parramatta River and in 1906 she won the ladies double sculls championship with her friend Emily High on the Parramatta River. One of her sons was Australian Champion for twelve consecutive years.

112. Due to the expansion of Lysaughts, Mr William Thomas Latham was put out of business in 1938. His hiring business, which had about thirty to forty boats, was bought by Mr James Arthur Latham's father. He used these boats for several purposes.

42. During 1920 to 1938, Lysaughts brought out many English migrants to run the plant, and they built up cottages on an area which was once known as Frog Hollow and then changed to Rammie Town. Prior to the depression in 1927, the difficult times had already hit people, and many workers were retrenched. The dole was very little in those hard times, and it was barely enough to live on. People lived in tents and humpies. Shanty Towns arose everywhere.

83. Seven days a week Mr James Arthur Latham and his two brothers were sent out by their father to go prawning. They took turns between rowing in the boats and dragging the nets from the shore. Two sculls were used and one man was ashore dragging the nets. They rowed from Mayfield to Raymond Terrace and began prawning on the way back down the river. By the time they had arrived at Hexham, they had already made twenty-five to

thirty hauls. When Mr Latham and his brothers arrived home, they cleaned up and cooked the prawns live at fires which they made down by the river. From Monday to Friday, many people would see the fire and go down to collect the food that was being prepared for them. Mr Latham freely distributed the prawns and fish to whoever asked. During the day, any surplus prawns were given to the unemployed so they could use them as bait to go fishing. The boats were also lent out free of charge. On the weekends and public holidays, the boats were hired out, and the prawns were sold to the working people. Mr Latham's father began to have difficulties providing for his family, so in 1929 he gave away the river business and built a horse team for hauling materials for carrying firewood ^{building purposes and}. His sons took over, and when Mr James Arthur Latham had a severe accident in 1935, his brothers carried the business on until 1938.

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Approximately a century ago there were two well known well equipped rowing clubs in the part of Newcastle. The Newcastle Rowing Club at Bullock Island Bridge and The Mercantile Rowing Club at Stockton. Mr James Arthur Latham recalls two to three boatsheds under an orphanage on the southern bank of Shelly Beach. Lysons' lights closed down and the B.H.P. expanded. With their expansion, they extended and double in size since 1913. This completely blocked off the river and contributed to the silencing of the rowing clubs.

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Mr Latham's family have consistently been involved in the boating industry. They helped in the designing of other boats, the trade of timber, food and coal, along with many other needed commodities. They used their boats as a generous means to feed the hungry people around the rivers of Newcastle and took advantage of the river and boats in

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another positive way as a form of entertainment for the people of the town. Mr Latham and his family have certainly made a worthwhile contribution to the people of the Hunter Region.

Footnote

- 1 G.M. TRAVERS, 'NEWCASTLE + HUNTER DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY JOURNAL, NEWCASTLE, 1950, pg 27
- 2 NEWSPAPER CLIPPING, 'THE NEWCASTLE MORNING HERALD',
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- 3 " " " " " " , 1933
- 4 " " " " " " , 5/5/59
- 5 EM. TRAVERS, 'NEWCASTLE + HUNTER DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY JOURNAL, NEWCASTLE, 1954 pg 54
- 6 EM. TRAVERS, " " " " " " " " , NEWCASTLE, 1965, pg 30

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Summary Of Taped Interview With Mr James Arthur Latham

In the taped interview that Mr James Arthur Latham granted me, he gave me a broad description of the changes in the ecology, business life and social lifestyle that the 'Hunter Region' have undergone through his own personal experience and information passed down to him ~~was~~ through relatives and his own searching out for his family tree. The history of his family dates back as far as the early 1800's when his greatgrandfather was transported to Australia as a convict. From then on, his family tended to use the lakes and rivers of our region for enjoyment, competitive sports, boat building, transporting goods on Steamships, and fishing. His family played a significant role in the transport and boat building business, and they contributed to the uplifting of morale by organising rowing regattas to entertain the people of the day.

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Mr Latham has vivid memories of the events that surrounded his youth. He remembers how his father helped to feed many people during the Great Depression. He did this by providing bait and prawns for whoever may ask on all weekdays. He also lent people boats so that they would have an easier chance of catching fish.

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Mr Latham recalls the rise and fall of certain industries in the Hunter. He notes that our landscape has changed significantly since these industries began to grow. Newcastle once had islands off Stockton which have now been dredged and filled in with sand to create Kooringang Island. One whole river (one of the main ones) was totally filled in.

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A strong bond between the people of Australia, which was called mateship, was very prominent during the Great Depression. People were always friendly and helpful when it was needed. With the population being much smaller, people were also better

acquainted with each other. They had big families when Mr Latham was young, so they used to form teams (one family versus the other family) with their children and have a friendly match of cricket.

Mr Latham goes on to describe the changing face of Crobert Street in Mayfield. He explains how certain houses were constructed and tells us all about the family that lived in Ingall House, and what the true Ingall house was really like.

The interview that Mr Latham has provided is an interesting account of his life, his family members' lives, the changing face of Newcastle and the Hunter Region, and the impact and contribution his family have made on the boating industry and the events that entertained the lives of the ^{starving} victims of the Great Depression.