

PART TRANSCRIPT OF TAPED INTERVIEW WITH MR ALF SARGEANT 4.9.88

SUBJECT OF INTERVIEW: CHANGES IN NEWCASTLE'S EAST END

INTERVIEWER: JILL DOREY

MS DOREY: My name is Jill Dorey. On the 4 September 1988 I interviewed Mr Alf Sargeant who's lived in Newcastle all his life, some 70 odd years, and particularly in the East End of Newcastle. He first lived in Beach Street and met his wife who lived in Parnell Place and they've been married now for 52 years. Mr Sargeant worked at the steelworks during the war, he was apprenticed as a bricklayer on the town hall when that was built in 1927-28, and he has a long association with swimming. He was one of the first surfers in Newcastle and has trained quite a few Australian champions.

MR SARGEANT: Well I suppose you'd want to go right back to the beginning. Well we, both the wife and I, we lived in Parnell Place and Beach Street. And of course there's been many a difference to the Beach Street area. They've changed the park and the big old pole that's in the middle that was one of the first pillar's in one of the post offices or something and they took it away at one stage and rewound it round again and put it back up again. Well then after that the park was extended as you can see up there now which I think is unnecessary because on account of the traffic one way coming in and one way coming the other way so the traffic's going to converge into Beach Street.

Well now during the big blow, the Sygna over here, you can see it from the verandah there, about fifty years previous to that we had another big blow just as equally as big as that and that long terrace you can see there, (in Street) belonged to the navigations people and all those, the majority of them there they all belonged to that lifeboat you can see up in the forts. Know the Victoria up there? Well that night in particular I went out to the breakwater and the ..... towed it out. As soon as they got outside they were left to their own resources. That particular night there was a boat called the Euralla and it was washed ashore on the ..... same as .... a bit further. Well up in the forts it blew the great big shed over that belonged to the Army up there, blew it on its side and this big post here, you can see the two storey there, it lifted the roof completely right off and blew it up

to Parnell Place. I reckon it was equally as big as the one we had that one. The night of the Sygna our place here I got up at half past two in the morning and it was going whrrrr and you'd hear it thump down again so I got out with six inch nails I thought I could knock it down but I couldn't do anything with it. I do think that was the bigger one of the two of them. I've seen some big ones there.

Then from Parnell Place, we had the tramway up there, that used to be the old steam trams and where the travelodge is there, that was a series of sheds for the different, well they used to house the carriages in there and they had about four or five pits there for the old steam locos. And of course we had two of the said engine drivers lived at that row, but uh, that used to be terminal up there, they'd come from there and instead of going around the loop which they did later on, later on they had the lifting trams that come up and they used to go around the back of the sheds then down round past the beach front. But these used to come around and just take off from there, they had a big old shed there just where the trams come out and if you've been to Gordon Avenue did you notice there's a tram front there and a roll of honour well that was in the shed up there too and that was where the said trams were actually started from. Well then for a while, the trams went round the back of the sheds till they rectified it. Well then they used to go down past the end of Telford Street and down the middle of Hunter Street, well that was the tramway. Well I guess they got rid of that and you know that the trams went away and over here (Zaara Street) we had the power house and that was on for years and years and then the only way you could drink beer when a 'nor easter was blowing you had to keep your head down otherwise you got it full of grit. When I come here, you couldn't open your windows here you'd get a shovel of dirt every morning off the verandah. Everytime there was a strong 'nor easter it was very bad. I reckon the eye specialist, it was good business for them it didn't matter who you were filled up your eyes with the whatdoyoucallem.

Well then we got down to...

MS DOREY: So you've actually lived in Newcastle for about 50 years is it?

MR SARGEANT: Oh I'd say now just on 70 I've been up this year, this end of town.

MS DOREY: Mostly up in this East End area?

MR SARGEANT: Yeah. Well down to the swimming pool down there when I first started swimming they didn't have the shed one end. Actually they didn't have both the shelter sheds up.

MS DOREY: Over at Nobby's?

MR SARGEANT: Newcastle baths.

MS DOREY: Newcastle, right.

MR SARGEANT: So what they did then they had a ramp from the top road used to go over and take all the equipment instead of going down the hill took off the level there straight over to there and then they put the two sheds there. Well uh, they had (going into swimming again) they had towels in there and they eventually got rid of the towels they cut them down and then they next step they altered the baths to a metre in one end instead of being a hundred wide, .... then by fifty metres. So they dug that out. Then on the corner here we had the old soldier's baths. You'd notice out on the point there is a formation of rocks go round? Well that was called the soldier's baths.

MS DOREY: Just below the fort there?

MR SARGEANT: Ummm. Well just at present its deteriorated out right back to zero. Before they put the road right round there, the road used to terminate down the bottom here of Beach Drive, down that way that's where there was no more road going that way whatsoever that used to be a lovely little beach down there, what they called the Cow... (Cariole?). But when you went along to the soldier's baths the rocks were oh, three times bigger than what they are now, was a great big, actually it was a good sized pool you could swim in there and right on the bend there used to be an old wooden dressing shed. That was where people got undressed in there. Well then later on they put the road around as you can see there then, I think the hitting the whatdoyoucallit created a ... and tore all those rocks right out. It used to be a good place for fishing, but uh, a lot of people swam there for quite a long time then halfway along between the soldiers baths and Cariole there was another formation, a little beach in there. People used to come down from the top road there, the one that goes round the back of the forts, there was always

a set of steps going down. The people from Ocean Terrace that faces the sea used to always come down there. Down here, where I said the road finished, there used to nothing else there for a year or whenever it came about those fancy fairs. They used to have them just at the end of the baths there and we went there for years and years.

MS DOREY: What like a folk-type thing was it?

MR SARGEANT: They had all sorts of things down there. They even had beauty competitions. I remember one of our fellas in the surf club he got dolled up as a girl there, he finished up he won it (laughs). A fellow named Stan Steven. He lived in the terrace over there. Its funny how the years have gone by, I can tell you every name that went from the bottom of the whatdoyoucallit, I think there was 16 places there, I could tell everybody's name.

MS DOREY: In this street? (Stevenson Place)

MR SARGEANT: In the terraces that face down Nobby's Road, the navigation terraces. They were the McKeys, McFadgens, McFarlanes, anything that had a Mac on it they were in it. Only a couple of outsiders, there was people named Joe Thorpe and who else was there? Joe Thorpe, and Dougie Williams. They were the two ones there that didn't have a Mac in front of them. It was unusual, McClam, McKey, McKay. It had them all. I don't think there's any of the old ones left. Well then, down where they've just done that little bit of a road going down there, you notice they've just finished .... again.

MS DOREY: Down to the roundabout there, the foreshore?

MR SARGEANT: Yeah, you can go around this end here now and up the other end as you go down, well at the end of that road there there was a chap he had a market garden there at one stage and it just shows you how the value of the land goes. He sold that block of land for forty pounds and they put a two storey place and a cottage on it for 40 pounds. Its different now.

Up this end of the town, of course the tugs was down here and of course that wharf used to be a wooden wharf went all the way right up to the navigation department. Occasionally there would be sailing boats tied up down there and the tugs there now, a couple of them were paddlewheelers.

MS DOREY: Really!

MR SARGEANT: Yeah. Oh bigger than the William the Fourth you see going around. Bigger paddles than that. Of course the ones that went to Sydney, I think it was the Newcastle, she had a paddlewheeler too on the side.

MS DOREY: Any they were tugs Were they?

MR SARGEANT: One was a tug and one was, we had what they called the Hunter River Steamship Company and that used to go down every night, and uh a cheap trip, you got on board at 11 o'clock and you woke up in Sydney Harbour at about six in the morning. Ten bob. Ten bob it was, a dollar you could say now. You used to get in your bunk and go off, of course we used to go down for the surf carnivals on the boat. You come home and you're fresh for the next day. It was a good trip.

MS DOREY: Not too rough?

MR SARGEANT: Oh, occasionally it was rough. They had the Hunter, the Gwydir, then the Newcastle. There was another one called the Namwar but she went off the run. But the Newcastle there, and I went down once on the Gwydir and God it was rough that night. But then you used to go out Saturday afternoons excursions. They'd go from here down to Redhead or it might go up to Nelsons Bay. I can't tell you much more about up here. Of course with the tabloids down there we had a big two storey place called Pippity Park. It used to be a hospital. You know at the end of Zaara Street, the travelodge there? Well that used to be a private hospital called Pippity Park. And of course when we were kids we used to run past it, we used to be frightened all the time, we reckoned you could see ghosts in there (laughs).

There hasn't been a great deal of change coming up here, only just what they've done recently now.

MS DOREY: With the foreshore? That was just all railway land?

MR SARGEANT: Almost what it is now. Down on the horseshoe beach, they had, the breakwater there I call most of .... in the harbour side. At one stage I reckon it must have been at least one hundred yards long from the point right in. Gradually the sand has just come up and filled it up, filled it up now and I suppose its only about ten-fifteen yards out. That's all on the inside - what they call the wave

trap. But halfway along, in those days they had a wharf there which was called, they've got a name for it, the Powder Wharf, of something, anyhow they used to come in there with a lighter and any like explosive would unload off there, then take it up off Fullerton Cove, up there, so it was away from the town area. They used to unload it on this little particular wharf there. Cooks Hill surf mob they had a boat similar to the one you can see up there (at the Fort) Victoria so what they did one night, they tied it up to the wharf there, it was alright, but the trouble is they tied it up underneath the water so when the tide came up, the next morning she was just like matchwood. Smashed to pieces.

And then, during the depression years all that, you can see its all been done over now, nicely grassed, that was just one mass of tin huts and houses and even down under the sand, they dug down. People without ..., the depression on.

MS DOREY: The unemployment and ..

MR SARGEANT: You couldn't get a spot down there, it was absolutely full of people. They gradually went out of the road and left the oval a bit bigger and they used to play a bit of cricket down there. Then after they got rid of that, the navy took over and I did my naval training down there and we used to have it marked out like the ship size there and up there then they had a big long room called the torpedo room on the same oval. After it was all cut out, the airforce took it over, and now its reverted back to the Council. So its had a few occupants.

MS DOREY: Right, this is down on the foreshore, in that area?

MR SARGEANT: Yeah, on the horseshoe beach side. They've certainly made a good job of it down there now.

MS DOREY: Yes, a big difference. During the war, you were in Newcastle all during the war? What was it like living here?

MR SARGEANT: Well, it was funny. I belonged to the fire brigade over here, a volunteer before I joined the permanent. I was down in Cooks Hill for ten years down there. Over here the first time we had a bit of a raid, it was funny I, no that's right I was at the steelworks. I was working over there at that particular time, I was driving a crane. And anyhow, during the night they shelled over there.

MS DOREY: On the harbour?

MR SARGEANT: From the Japs, threw them in over the harbour and hit the steelworks. My father-in-law he was in charge of this particular mill, what's called the platen bar mill. So I had a load of steel I was carrying from one mill it was like a transfer, from that side, come through the building, then I'd pick it up and take it down the stackheap. It was all plates. So anyhow, I'm coming along with a load of plates on and I looked out the window and all I could see was a heap of star shells coming all the way up the line, it made it as light as day so I just dropped my load down over the side and I said, hey come and have a look at this. I said have you rung up the office yet. He said yes, he said he thinks its just a publicity stunt. And we'd no sooner said that than the next minute it went (whistles) bang! and you ought to have seen the flame or the spark it threw up when it hit the dump. They dropped two there. So we had to get down below in case they threw anymore over and it was very fortunate because were they coming in the same direction, there was these great big steel pipes that carry gas about that high (approx 4 ft) and if it had hit one, it would have blown the hell out of us. So we stopped down the shelter all night and the next morning they said oh Newcastle's been blow to bits up the top of town and I'm thinking how are they going to get on up here tonight. I had a good shelter in the backyard.

MS DOREY: You did, you had a shelter built in the backyard? And what was like, an Anderson shelter?

MR SARGEANT: Yeah, well just against the fence there, it would fall into the fence. And we had cushions down there and what I was doing (laughs) all the kids around here I used to give them threepence, that's what six cents? for every sugar bag they could get. So they were pinching them from everywhere so I had to look for sand to fill them up to the top.

MS DOREY: Over the top of your shelter?

MR SARGEANT: Over the shelter.

MS DOREY: Was that a standard thing, were there many people that had shelters in their backyards?

MR SARGEANT: Oh, there were a couple but of course they had the concrete shelters beside. But this was quick and lively, you could get down there out of the road if

you couldn't make it. Anyhow I said to the wife how did you get on? Course, the younger brother he lived up in Beach Street with his aunty, he'd run down to see if she was alright because I was at work and on the way down he got halfway across the park and one lobbed into there and hit the top end of Alfred Street. The old wooden place there, you can see where the shrapnel hit it at different times. But he continued on, came down here so I said to her when I got home, how did you get on last night? She said oh, I got in the back room and pulled the blind down (laughs) you've only got to sneeze in this place and it shakes. She got in the backroom and pulled the blind down.

Well the next night, the following Sunday I was here and it was just on dusk and a fellow by the name of Jordan, he was the warden up here and I said what's doing and he said oh well, I don't know he said but you could go around to the fire station and see what's doing. So I went over there and they said we'll put the bells on if anything happens. I said to her, now if anything happens, you just get straight in the shed down underneath there. And then on went the bells so I said go on, down you go and I went around and instead of stopping up here with her I thought any bit of trouble happened, we careered out to Dawson Street Cooks Hill, and it finished up, it was a kitchen on fire, so that was alright, we fixed that up. And on the way back, the town was in darkness. Well those two bridges down there in Scott Street that people there go over the line, they've been renovated now, the old ones there, they were absolutely saturated with people watching what they were doing. This place up here, Scratchely, they were firing that way and Fort Wallis over at Stockton was firing that way. Well there were tracer bullets going all ways, you could see them going out to sea and God knows what. This crowd up here (Scratchely) they swung the big gun around, or got it around a bit and they depressed it but it didn't go down deep enough, and it hit the top of the powerhouse and took at piece off ..

MS DOREY: Zaara Street powerhouse?

MR SARGEANT: Yes, about there from the front door and the top of the power house .... So I said to Billy Newbiggin, that's Bobby Newbiggin's brother, he lived in the two storey place up here, I said, he was on night patrol, I said what happened over night? He said oh, we thought we saw those midget subs in the harbour, and they were trying to fire in the



harbour and what it was he said, well, we went all  
night and all we could see was porpoises!

(CONTINUES) .....

JLL DOREY

OFC AUSTRALIAN HISTORY TUESDAY 1 - 3 PM

DATE: 6 SEPTEMBER 1988

RESEARCH PROJECT:

The settlement and development of Newcastle  
and particularly the Newcastle East area.

The discovery of Newcastle and the subsequent decision to make use of it as a convict settlement led to the creation of what is now one of Australia's major industrial cities and producer of coal. The change and growth of Newcastle since its discovery in 1797 by John Shortland has been rapid and dramatic. Where once there existed a small penal colony, there now exists a sprawling, many-faceted industrial city.

The early landscape of Newcastle made it an ideal penal colony and greatly inhibited expansion due to the expense of filling the land which was marshy and had poor natural drainage.<sup>1</sup> The rich coal deposits in the area made it an important township to the colony and the existence of a harbour, although poor in comparison to Sydney harbour, meant that the coal could be easily transported to Sydney.

From 1820 on many free settlers came to the Hunter Valley because of the rich fertile land and this made it difficult for the government to retain Newcastle as a gaol. In 1824, following the removal of most of the convicts, Newcastle was declared a free town.<sup>2</sup>

In 1829 the township of Newcastle extended to what is now Brown Street, the rest was all scrub and sandy flats and the population was approximately 400.<sup>3</sup> At this time the town's only church was Christ Church which was built on "the hill". This church remained until the present Christ Church cathedral was built on

the same site in 1902. 4

Probably the most historic area of Newcastle, Newcastle East, was originally known as "the Sandhills" because of the sand dunes which covered a large area of the early settlement. This area now includes Stevenson Place, Telford Street, Scott Street, Alfred Street and Zaara Street.<sup>5</sup> These sand dunes caused great havoc to the townspeople, and in one instance a two storey building collapsed in Pacific Street caused by the weight of sand piled up against it.<sup>6</sup>

As the sand drift increased, authorities eventually realised the potential danger and barricades were erected along the beach. The land was stabilised with chitter from the mines and many terraces were subsequently built on the once sandy land. By the early 1880's the area was filled with substantial residences and the local newspaper forecast that it would soon be completely built up.<sup>7</sup>

In the Bar Beach area the threat from shifting sand was much greater and eventually 92 acres of land were resumed by the government and totally reclaimed by the planting of trees and grasses. The area affected stretched from Bar Beach to Darby Street in what is now known as Cooks Hill.<sup>8</sup>

By 1871 the development of Newcastle as a coal port led to the need for substantial defence and construction of Fort Scratchley

began in 1880. In 1942, the fort saw action when a Japanese submarine shelled Newcastle.<sup>9</sup> The fort was manned throughout World War II and the guns were fired a number of times in this period.

A hospital has existed on the present site of Royal Newcastle hospital since 1817. The original hospital was replaced in 1866 by funds received from public subscriptions and many extensions have been carried out in subsequent years.<sup>10</sup>

Customs House, built in 1874, was an important building to mariners. The time bell on the top of the tower would drop at 1pm each day to permit them to check the accuracy of their timepieces, essential for navigation.<sup>11</sup> The recent restoral of this time bell has brought back to present day Newcastle an important part of its history.

The establishment of the BHP steelworks in 1913-14 in Port Waratah acknowledged the importance of Newcastle as a major coal producer and the idea of Newcastle as an industrial town was born. Further industries such as the State Dockyard and Goninans were founded and the notion of Newcastle as an industrial town was confirmed. <sup>12</sup>

The area of Newcastle East remained mainly middle and working class from the beginnings of settlement until the present day. The desire to move away from the lower-lying areas to the higher

residential areas such as "the Hill" and Merewether Heights caused the city to spread and the land was subsequently subdivided into suburbs. This subdivision boom occurred mostly in the 1910s and 1920s, and created the foundations of the present city.<sup>13</sup>

Once it became evident that Newcastle was an important industrial centre, land owners realised that distance from the town area was desirable in order to achieve freedom from pollution. Lake Macquarie, which had been a resort to Newcastle people, now became a haven from pollution and Newcastle's suburbs expanded to encompass the Lake region from 1910 onwards. <sup>14</sup>

Newcastle East is of great historical significance due to the fact that it contained not only the country's first mine, but also the first quarry in the Hunter, its first hospital, fort, signal station, lighthouse, and gaol. All these events occurred in the penal period 1801 - 1821. <sup>15</sup>

The restoration of many of these historical buildings has occurred in recent years as public awareness of the importance of maintaining the area's history has increased. The completion of the beautification of the harbour foreshore area has been an extremely successful project as it has not only created an attractive park out of what was until recently unsightly railway lines and sheds, but also retained the historical atmosphere of the area.

#### FOOTNOTES

- 1 J Docherty, Newcastle: The making of an Australian city, Sydney, 1983, p 2
- 2 Ibid, p 1
- 3 W Goold, The Growth of Newcastle, Newcastle, 1985, p 7
- 4 Ibid, p 47
- 5 J Turner, Photos of Old Newcastle, Stockton, 1979, p 19
- 6 W Goold, The Borough of Newcastle, Newcastle, p 28
- 7 J Turner, Photos of ..., p 22
- 8 W Goold, The Borough ..., p 31
- 9 P Cox, H Tanner & M Walker, The Hunter Valley, Melbourne, 1978, p 26
- 10 Ibid, p 29
- 11 J Turner, Photos of ..., p 27
- 12 J Docherty, Newcastle the making ..., pp 34-36
- 13 Ibid, p 77
- 14 Ibid, pp 95-96
- 15 J Turner, Photos of ..., p 19

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Walker, M                      The Hunter Valley, Melbourne, 1978
- Docherty, J                      Newcastle: The making of an Australian  
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- Goold, W                         The Growth of Newcastle, Newcastle, 1985
- Turner, J                         Photos of Old Newcastle, Stockton, 1979



UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

1988

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Signed ASargeant

Date 4/9/88

Interviewer Doney

SUMMARY OF TAPED INTERVIEW WITH MR ALF SARGEANT

DATE: 4 SEPTEMBER 1988

INTERVIEWER: JILL DOREY

OPEN FOUNDATION HISTORY STUDENT 1988

On 4 September 1988 I interviewed Mr Alf Sargeant of 31 Stevenson Place Newcastle. Mr Sargeant has lived in the Newcastle area and particularly in the East End of Newcastle for some 70 odd years.

In my interview with Mr Sargeant I particularly asked him to concentrate on the East End of Newcastle, and to give me an idea of what the town was like during his youth and early adulthood, his memories of wartime Newcastle, the depression, and changes that had occurred in the East End up to the present time.

Mr Sargeant has a long history of swimming and has trained a number of Australian champions. This involvement with the Surf Life Saving Association goes back many years and he was in fact one of the first surfers in Newcastle.

In the interview, Mr Sargeant gives details of how the streets around the East End have changed, and how there was once a tram depot in Parnell Place. He remembers the community spirit which prevailed and speaks of how no one ever locked their doors.

He describes the ocean baths and how the beaches, both Nobbys and Newcastle, have changed. Mr Sargeant gives many details on the harbour and the tugs which existed many years ago. He talks about two paddlesteamers, one of which was a tug, and the other which travelled from Newcastle to Sydney as a passenger ship.

The harbour foreshore area in the time of the depression was full

of tin huts, Mr Sargeant remembers that you could not walk through the area due to lack of space. People even dug into the side of the sand hills for shelter.

During the war Mr Sargeant worked in the steelworks driving a crane and recites the story of how they were shelled by the Japanese. He also had a bomb shelter in his backyard and he would pay young boys threepence for each sugar bag they collected filled with sand. During this time he was also working with the fire brigade and travelled to all the hospitals in the area giving safety lectures and precautions on what to do if they were bombed.

Mr Sargeant recalls the night during the war when Fort Scratchley and Fort Wallis (Stockton) were both firing over the harbour at what they thought were Japanese midget submarines, but turned out to be a school of porpoises.

During the depression Mr Sargeant started his apprenticeship as a bricklayer which is his trade, and he worked on the construction of the Town Hall for two years as an apprentice. He tells of how his name, along with all the builders who worked on the Town Hall, is in a capsule in the foundations and told of how all workmen involved with the building of the Hall were invited to the official opening dinner. He mentions the fact that his grandfather was involved with the building of Christ Church Cathedral.

On the tape Mr Sargeant talks about the marquees which would regularly set up in Telford Street and hold variety shows. All the surf clubs would go and some members would perform in the shows. In alternate years there would be a tent show opposite the Royal Newcastle Hospital.

Mr Sargeant's gift of story-telling and extremely eloquent descriptions of past Newcastle life, made this subject fascinating and the interview effortless.