

GAI SHELTON

Australian History  
Wednesday Evening Class.  
Local History Assignment

The 1930's Depression: Australia - The City  
and the Country.

7th September, 1988.

'Unlike bushfires, droughts and floods, the Depression was something intangible - an abstraction, brought about by events that happened elsewhere'.<sup>①</sup> This perhaps sums up the suddenness of the crisis which struck Australia with full force in 1929, reaching its peak in 1932. The boom of 1925 - 1929 was one of the greatest investment booms in Australian History. Australia was a producer of primary products and a market for capital. Her economy quickly responded to boom conditions for the same reasons her economy reacted with such dramatic suddenness to the 1930's Depression.<sup>②</sup>

Prime Minister, Scullin, immediately after his appointment, was faced with the budget crisis for the six State Governments, as well as the Commonwealth. Sharp falls in wheat and wool prices in early 1929, and the fall of export prices by 50%, contributed to the severe financial crisis.<sup>③</sup> Between the financial years of 1928-1929, 1929-1930, the National income declined from 640 million pounds to 560 million pounds. Unemployment increased dramatically. By 1933 nearly one-third of the bread winners were unemployed. The unemployed clamoured for work and relief in all capital Cities.<sup>④</sup>

Depression times produced deep fears and divisions within the working class, creating resentment and jealousy, splitting the unemployed from the employed.<sup>⑤</sup> The homeless took to the Sydney Domain. They took refuge in caves and under protected shelter in wintry weather and as soon as it was fine, the police moved in to clear the domain, as what a sight these beggars would present to visitors. Men took off into the bush, travelling by foot, bicycle or by horse. Being on the move helped to keep body and soul together. The quietly desperate often appeared at the back door in rags with a suitcase of combs and shoelaces, anything in exchange for food. Hunger was a common problem.<sup>⑥</sup>

Some government assistance was available for those in need. An applicant had to have been registered at the State Labor Exchange for at least 7 days, and must declare that he has been unemployed for at least 14 days

- 1) C. Flowers. New South Wales, Sydney 1981, p.182
- 2) L J. Louis, The Depression of the 1930's, Melbourne 1968, p. 18
- 3) M. Clark, A Short History of Australia, New York 1987, p.224
- 4) Louis, The Depression of the 1930's, p.1
- 5) Clark, A Short History..... p.224
- 6) Flowers, New South Wales, p. 182

and ~~is~~ without resources which he might use for support.<sup>(7)</sup> The applicant attends assigned depots on a regular day and hour, and having declared his destitution and continued unemployment, he receives coupons relative to his scale of need for the fortnight.<sup>(8)</sup> Old age and invalid pensioners and Aborigines, were not entitled to relief as their pensions were regarded as sufficient for their needs.<sup>(9)</sup>

The Wheat Farmers were left to fend for themselves. They were the worst hit, left with debts they couldn't pay. Earlier droughts and low yields contributed to the 1930's final drop, however, good crops in the 1930's would have compensated for the previous years losses, had there not been the collapse in price.<sup>(10)</sup> While some farmers severely experienced the comings of the Depression, others went on with their life. In Gresford, a Country town in the Hunter Valley, town folk were busy raising money to hold celebrations for the towns 150th Anniversary, and then ready to build a School of Arts. They appeared unaffected by the proposing depression.<sup>(11)</sup>

The majority of people in Newcastle were employed as miners. For many in Newcastle, unemployment was a way of life before the Depression, particularly for the unskilled.<sup>(12)</sup> Throughout the 1920's heavy Newcastle Industry attracted a floating population, but failed to absorb it. The unemployed started assessing their situation, realising that the crisis at hand would not resolve for quite a while. They needed to decide on priorities for food, clothing and makeshift housing, while they waited for the Economy to improve.<sup>(13)</sup>

Newcastle's Industrial structure presented difficulties for 2 significant groups, youth and women. In the mines, youth made up 10% of all employees and as the Industry declined, Newcastle citizens decided to create a Scheme for the young unemployed. The Newcastle Young Citizens Association was formed to keep youths occupied and their 'minds clean'.<sup>(14)</sup> They were to be occupied with classes in gardening and poultry and with organised social evenings. For Australia, not just Newcastle, World War II of the

7) A. Birch & D.S. McMillan, The Sydney Scene, 1788-1960, Melbourne 1962. p.293

8) Birch & McMillan, The Sydney..... p.294

9) ibid.

10) ibid. p.29

11) People of Gresford, Gresford 150 Years - 1829-1979.

12) S. Gray, Newcastle in the Great Depression, p.13

13) Gray, Newcastle .... p.17

14) ibid. p.29

1940's solved a majority of the youth unemployment situation of the previous years.

As for women, the Industrial structure had long presented problems for those who needed to work. The depression only made things worse. In 1930, a public meeting with the Lord Mayor was conducted to discuss the problem of food and shelter for unemployed females. However, a destitute woman or girl was automatically suspected of immorality and for that reason, women in the situation hesitated to speak up. Domestic service was a major alternative to unemployment amongst women, resulting in somewhat obvious exploitation, -home, shelter and a little money in return for domestic service.<sup>(15)</sup> The community was not overly concerned about the unemployed, assuming that the women's problems would be corrected as soon as the men were again working and able to marry.

The Labor Government with Prime Minister Scullin, had no firm answer to the Crisis. In the early 30's, with National Income figures still falling and the numbers of unemployed swollen, Scullin invited, Sir Otto Niemeyer from the Bank of England to Australia, where he would analyse the Country's situation and present his analysis to the premiers.<sup>(16)</sup> Under the influence of Niemeyer, the Premiers undertook to balance their budgets and not use borrowed money for unproductive purposes.

The response was spelled out in the Premiers' plan, there would be an emphasis on balanced budget, lower public service wages, rise in domestic borrowing, devaluation by 25%, raising of tariff barriers. Recovery started in 1933, when a marked improvement was seen in the Economic situation. An improvement in world prices and restoration of the Public's confidence in the Government. This was partly due to the dismissal of Lang in Sydney. The NSW Premier, J.T. Lang, was a common man, disliked for his communist tendencies and unpatriotism. The Federal A.L.P. disliked his ideas as unethical, thus when he was creating trouble between State and Commonwealth, Sir Phillip Game, NSW Governor, intervened and sacked Lang on the charge that he had counselled public officials to defy the Commonwealth Government.<sup>(17)</sup>

15) ibid. p.31,32

16) Clark, A Short..... p.225

17) F.Alexander, Australia Since Federation, p.114

In Newcastle and the Hunter Valley, the Industrial recovery was rapid. In 1933, business had begun to pick up and Newcastle was considering further extensions, and it was then that the first manufacturing branch stores were established. In the Maitland area, the depression eased gradually. However, trade and building figures increased dramatically, by the mid 30's and the number of cars owned by residents were continuing to increase and change the appearance of the roadway. A Bus company had replaced the tram service by the mid 30's. Small farming areas such as Tenambit were becoming residential. The weekly market day conducted by local auctioneers was becoming less important as more and more produce was being transported to the large wholesale markets in Newcastle and Sydney. <sup>(18)</sup>

The Depression affected Australians in different ways. It left scars on those who suffered most acutely, the working class, the poorer farmers and especially the unemployed. The decade of 1929 - 1939 was a period of purification taking place in Australia. <sup>(19)</sup> The memory still runs deep, with people having learnt many lessons through the widespread distress and hardship of the decade. This was a crisis in Australian History leaving the Nation with Economic, Political and Social consequences. <sup>(20)</sup> The people lived through years of mass hunger and poverty such as they had never previously known and hoped never to experience again.

18) A History of Maitland. p.52

19) Alexander, Australia.....p.114

20) ibid. p.113



TRANSCRIPT:

Interview: Mr. William Tickle of Dungog, Williams/Hunter Valley area.

Subject: Depression of the 1930's

Interviewer: Miss Gai Shelton, Open Foundation Course, 1988.

Q. When were you/did you first come to the Hunter? and Why Farming?

Well I was born in 1916, that was as you all know the early part of the 1st World War period, and I can't remember anything of my life until the early 20's. At that stage I started School at the age of 7 which was the starting age at the time. It was necessary for me to ride a horse from where I lived at a little area called Sugarloaf to Dungog Public School, which was a distance of almost 4 miles, and that had to be done everyday which was rather a hardship.

One thing that did come into my life which was to affect me right throughout the whole of my life was in 1924, March 1924. I contracted the disease at which at that time was known as infantile paralysis which later became Poliomyelitis. That effected me in such a way that I was bed ridden for a long period of time, and it effected my schooling, so much so, that I didn't resume school until the next year, which was 1925 and that was rather interesting because during my period of being bed ridden there was a School built in our little community at Sugarloaf and where I was going to have to ride the required distance to Dungog, I had the rest of my primary schooling at Sugarloaf School until 1930 when I became high school age, but that again was delayed because of the fact that it was necessary for me to have an operation on my right leg which was effected by infantile paralysis, and it was an operation which necessitated the transplanting of tendons and this took place at Lewisham Hospital at the end of 1929 and again my schooling was delayed and I wasn't able to commence my secondary Education at Hurstville Central School until the latter part of March 1930, and during that period of course, as we know was the early part of the depression years. It was then that I learned that life in the City was somewhat of a hardship because of the fact that there were so many people out of work and the poverty that did exist at the time was just absolutely hard to explain. I did attend the School for 3 years and during that time I can remember vividly of people coming begging at the door and asking for a crust of bread in order to relieve their hunger and such things as people going around and trying to buy bottles to resell and selling clothes props and various things went on, and as I said earlier, the beggars in the street was absolutely, well you wouldn't really believe it until you witnessed it.

And then after my schooling days, there I did my best, but at the time it was only the top scholars that really were given a chance because your education standard had to be very high in order to pass your Intermediate Certificate in those days, and the result was that I just failed by a very small margin, I passed in 3 subjects and the fourth subject which was necessary for me to gain a pass, I was just under the percentage required and they failed me in the intermediate.

Q. So did you go to School in Sydney? After your operation you stayed down there?

After that I came home, I did start a period on the dairy farm which my parents owned and because of my disability and the fact that I wasn't able to get around as a normal person, because of the affected Polio in the right leg.

Then I started off in a Business Career in about 1936, when I started in the retail trade of that time which was in mercenary and sporting goods and so on and I carried on there for a number of years and conducted a business, then again hardship set in and War broke out again in 1939 when the majority of my customers, the young boys of the town and district, enlisted and fought for the country and the result was that the bottom fell out of the business and it was necessary for it to close down, and in 1942. I was married in 1940. Two years after we had our first child, a daughter, and then the subsequent years as time went on, we had 6 children, 4 girls and 2 boys. We had to go through all the various hardships relating to married life and especially during the early 40's. It was necessary because of the war at the time, for me to go back to the property and assist there as a dairy farmer. I carried on there for quite a number of years until the early 70's when I did semi retire and came to live in Dungog and after that I had various positions in the town, one of which was the Secretary of the local Bowling Club and I carried on there for a period of ten years and now we're living in retirement. But there is one thing that I would like perhaps especially to mention is the fact that as well as my disability through Polio I have been effected very much by Arthritis and this has effected both my knees and it was necessary for me to have a knee replacement a little over 4 years ago in my left knee, which I call my good knee, not my Polio knee,



that proved to be very successful and then some two years later, after a lot of careful study and X-rays and what have you, I had the second replacement in my right knee, which is the polio one. It was a very complicated operation which proved to be highly successful, so much so that previously to that I used to have to walk with the aid of walking aids and walking sticks and so on, but now I can get around without the use of these sticks and this has been and meant so much to me and now I am more or less living a normal life and this is due to the skill of a surgeon, Dr. Lindsay Laird, who did so much for me. But if I'd like to give my life over, I don't think I would change it, I've been so happily married for 48 years and with our six children who all live very close to us, we spend a lot of time together and we know that as we are growing in years the care and the attention they are giving us, is really God given. I don't know how far we are going to go as far as the rest of our life is concerned, but I know that we will be cared for during that time.

Q. Could you just go back a bit to the Depression. How did it compare in the City to the way that the people in the Country coped? Do you think there was a way emotionally that they coped better?

Yes I think people in the Country did cope better because of the fact is that people during the Depression seemed to flock to the Cities, thinking they were going to get a lot of relief. There was of course at that time, what they call the dole periods. And these dole periods at that time, was not the hand out money, but the hand out of food. And the people flocked to the Cities because they used to go and join these dole queues and food became available and they thought they'd be looked after better in the city, but that very often didn't prove to be true because the people in the Country were more of a, I don't know how to term it, probably a lot closer. And when people came and asked for food, and especially on the land where we were, that we always seemed to have something. There was always something in our garden we could give them and relieve them. The number of tramps we had on the road was absolutely astounding because we happened to live in an area where there was a connection to the main road and the number of men mainly that used to carry their swags on their back and with their billy can dangling. They use to call on us and beg for food and that sort of thing.

But I think that life in the Country at that stage would have been easier than it was in the City because of the fact that the people used to seem to work together and seem prepared to help one another more than what they did in the big cities. Because in the Country, everyone seemed to know everyone, where in the Cities, it was a bigger populated area and the people didn't know each other as well.

Q. Well, you've practically covered my questions, so we might just leave it at that.

Mr. William Tickle was born in the Williams Valley in 1916. His first memories are from the early 20's when he stated school at the age of seven (7) and had to hide on a horse, from his home at Sugarloaf, for four miles to attend Dunlop Public School. At that time of being bedridden, a school was built at Sugarloaf, so in 1925 he resumed his schooling at Sugarloaf for the remainder of his primary years. In 1929, Mr. Tickle's high schooling was delayed as he travelled to Sydney to have an operation on his pector infected leg. He attended High School for (3) three years there and during that time he noted the obvious effects of the Depression. Mr. Tickle remembered seeing beggars in the street, and people coming to the door begging for a crust of bread to relieve their hunger. People would try better to rent and would try to sell clothes to those who opened their doors to them. When comparing the way city folk coped during the Depression to country folk, Mr. Tickle explained that it was much easier for the country people. People flocked to the cities thinking that they would get out of rural from the dire straits, which was reality only the bare out of food anyway. People believed that they would be more cared for in the cities. This very often proved not to be true as country people were more of a close-knit community, and were

SUMMARY

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 O.F.C.  
 Med. Evolving

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 old tramps, with their sward on their back and billigan  
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 the pantry or in the garden to relieve their  
 hunger.

after being in Sydney, Mr. Tickle came home to  
 Sutherland hoping to resume his work on the Daisy  
 Farm, however his lack of mobility caused a  
 major change from farmer to a business career.  
 In 1936 he opened a mercantile and sporting goods  
 store in Dunbar. In 1939 at the start of the war,  
 the young men of the district, his best clientele,  
 enlisted, thus resulting in the closing down of the  
 store in 1942.

Mr Tickle was married in 1940 and had a large  
 family of 4 girls and 2 boys. After the closing of  
 his store, he went back to Daisy farming with  
 his family.

In the early 70's, Mr. Tickle retired and came to live in  
 Dunbar, where he became Secretary of the Dunbar  
 Bowling club, this position being held for the next  
 10 years. Mr. Tickle's family had grown and  
 supported one another through what was to be a  
 dream come true - to work with no aid. Mr.  
 Tickle underwent two total knee replacements  
 and in his fully capable of working unaided.

Life in the Country earned much easier than life  
in the city, as people learned to work together and  
were prepared to help one another.