

Carolyn Brent
Open Foundation
Australian History
Wednesday 7 p.m.

Transcript of interview with Carl Parrott, a winchman who
has worked on the Newcastle waterfront for thirty years.

"My name is Carlton George Parrott and I would like to talk about my experience on the Newcastle Waterfront during my working life of the last thirty five years. I started on the wharf, November 1945, after discharge from the army and I worked shifts from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. or 9 p.m. till 7 a.m.-two shifts only during the day and employed when ports were busy only, and when ships were in. No work when ships weren't in. No money during the slack periods but I had to follow the industry otherwise I could be deregistered."

"The government registered everyone and you had to be a member of the union. At that time the union picked the men who they wished to work on the wharves with them and you had to be nominated by a working member and seconded by a second member. A government authority, called the Stevedoring Industry Commission which included a union rep, controlled the pick-up of labour to different jobs; for instance to different ships."

"The authority also maintained a roster which gave every man a fair share of the jobs available on a numbered clockwise rostered system. Prior to the war there was no roster and many men were picked up by the will of the ship owners. Many men were left without work for weeks and when the ports became busy they were reluctantly picked up to work. They got the crumbs of the job. Wartime conditions and the Curtin Labour Government made it compulsory for rosters to be adopted in all ports and it gave the men a much fairer share of the work."

"In the port of Newcastle some jobs were easy. For instance loading steel and pipes. They were not very strenuous jobs. Other types of jobs were very hard. In those days most of the loading was done by ships gear. This had a limited capacity so the loads were small, two tons being the average, and when it got below decks it had to be placed into position and this was a dangerous and hazardous job. One little mistake could cause a lot of injury and everyone depended on the skill of the hatchmen and winchmen on the deck. If they pulled the wrong rein then someone would get hurt. However, remarkably there weren't as many casualties as you would expect considering the way the work was done and the speed up methods that were often tried to get the cargo in the ship and get the ship away as soon as possible."

"Some work apart from steel was very hard. For instance, phosphate ships and sulphur ships came in regularly. This bulk cargo material was used in the production of fertilizers. It all had to be shovelled into tubs and unloaded in this manner. But round about this time grabs were introduced which made the job easier. The difficulty would arise when the ship was three parts unloaded and the rest would have to be shovelled into tubs. The shovelling of this would take longer than the bulk of the cargo which had been taken out by the grabs. It was a hard and hazardous job. Conditions were dusty. The ships were seldom more than ten thousand tons and they were the old style with plenty of obstructions down below as they were not built for bulk cargos.

"Apart from phosphate and sulphur there are other types of cargos such as bagged potatoes and bagged goods, general cargo in cases which all had to be loaded onto trays or unloaded onto trays or into slings to be taken out or into the ships and this would all have to be man handled and carried to the position to load.

"All hard and strenuous work, especially in the summertime and at night. Occasionally on a rush job you worked from twelve p.m. till eight in the morning. Fork lift trucks did operate to carry the cargo up to the hook that came out of the ship to take the cargo on board or to unload the ship. No mechanical gear was used below in the ships hull at that stage. Later fork lift trucks were introduced into the ships hold. This made it possible to position the cargo in the remote position of the hatch. Prior to this hook ropes and drag ropes were used to roll the cargo or drag it into the wings of the ship. If the rope broke it would take hours to rectify the mistake.

"Problems with fork lift trucks down below at the start of their introduction was due to the ship not being designed to facilitate them. Bolts or angle iron sticking up from the floor made it impossible to get the cargo where you wanted it. The management would push to get the ships filled and would order the men to take risks which caused a lot of friction. The men achieved a lot with their go slow exercises as a protest. It was very effective; worked more than it didn't. Well worth the trouble and over the years we earned as much, if not more, than

anyone else in an unskilled job. Even with some strikes which gained a lot of hostile publicity in the local and national press.

"The ships became larger and more specialised and more suitable for the working of mechanical equipment below decks. The surface to work on became smoother and easier to manipulate the forklift trucks and other mechanical gear. This facilitated quicker loading and less danger to the people involved.

"At the B.H.P. they erected a couple of luffing cranes. They could lift up to ten tons and it could be placed in most places in the ships hold but it would still have to be rolled into the wings. The cranes at the B.H.P. made the work easier. Eventually they had six cranes.

"On Queens wharf work continued up till the late 1960's and then it died off. The ships they loaded at Queens wharf had to use their own gear and load in the old fashioned way.

"The worst cargo to handle was wool. Double dump wool bales would weigh from eight hundred to a thousand pound. These would have to be placed in the ship hatch by man power. To lift this the men would have to stick hooks in the bale and lift together. If they didn't one person would get the weight and he would become injured. This practice went on for some time until the workers were able to ban the manufacture of double dump bales and all the bales were then dumped single dumps, five hundred to six hundred pound which could be easier handled by the men. Sometimes these would have to be lifted three high in a way they were stored in a ship to make use of all the available space. You had to be fit to do the job.

"When only half the hatch was used it meant the construction of dangerous brows, sometimes forty to sixty foot high in an effort to get the required number of bales in a given space.

"The next most strenuous job was mineral sand. Substantial amounts was shipped from Newcastle in German and Dutch ships. The sand, rutile and zircon from local beaches, was packed in one hundred weight bags and placed on the shoulder and packed in the more remote areas of the hatch. Eventually this work was done by fork lift truck and the pallets of sand would come in and be stacked, pallets and all, which made the job easier but cut down on the men employed. The same could not be done with wool. Some sand was loaded bulk in later years.

As time went on the container ships made their appearances. With containerization the number of ports where cargo was loaded or discharged was cut down. For instance sailing time was more important to the ships owners than time spent in port. The idea of cutting down on the ports meant that if a cargo of forty ton was loaded into a container, then the container could be put on a motor truck or rail truck and taken to its destination. Whereas before, a ship might have to go to four or five ports and have the cargo unloaded in small lots slowly and then reshipped to different ports throughout the country. The theory of containerization was that if a ship sailed from London to Sydney it would unload the lot and return to London. This meant a drastic repercussion to the labour force and even in ports where it cost nothing for labour, for instance Africa and India, they still constructed container terminals.

"Together with container ships came the roll on ships which took containers as well but meant that apart from using container cranes to take cargo on and off, which were expensive to build, the roll on ships had open sterns or bows where they dropped ramps down and vehicles could run off and on the wharf placing cargo where required in the base of the ships. The event of hydraulic operated gear made all this possible. Ramps could be raised or lowered by hydraulic power to a degree that would have seemed inconceivable in the first years after the war.

"Ships got larger and larger from ten to twenty thousand ton to forty thousand ton and to sixty thousand ton which caused some bother with the loading of steel. The cranes could not reach across the ships. At the B.H.P. a very dangerous practice began. Skids were used, made from railway rails welded in the shape of a H and this would be placed down below with one end sticking out into the wing of the far side of the hatch and eight tons of steel would be placed onto the top of the skids. Then a crane would be attached to the end of the skid and it would be slowly raised so the steel would slide. If the steel didn't fall straight hours of work would be involved to correct the error.

"Looking back on the turn of events and the way things went from a casual job with no paid holidays and the right to transfer

between ports, which a lot of people used to take advantage of. The owners didn't mind this because the men were chasing the money and would go to ports that had seasonal work and not only that, it suited the men who stayed in ports because it meant more work for them rather than go away.

"The event of attendance money relieved the job a little, even though in the first place it was only twelve shillings a day which later went up to three pound a day and that was before permanency which meant guaranteed wages and other benefits that came from it. Attendance money first came about and then we were able to win paid holidays which in the first place was for a period of two weeks. Of course you would have to fill in so many working days in the twelve months before you got your two weeks holiday. If you didn't appear for work in this casual job you might only end up with one weeks holiday. Later on holidays increased and we even achieved long service leave. Being casual workers it was a first. It resulted from strikes, struggle and negotiation. It was limited long service leave at the start with a lot of penalties but never the less this was improved later on. We got more holidays and sick leave and superannuation, eventually permanency and a guaranteed wage.

Now this permanency was also connected with two year contracts with the ships owners. Every two years we would have our representatives talk with the ships owners and make contracts for the working conditions for the years to come. This cut out a lot of industrial strife and guaranteed us our conditions for two years ahead of the contract date.

All through these years the union played a very large part and the membership on the waterfront was always union concious. They went to regular stop work meetings and just about everyone on the job talked about events and were conversant with what was going on all the time and they debated things while they were working and this was an everyday business in the thirty odd years I was on the waterfront. The discussion was helped by the union which put out a newspaper every month called the Maritime Worker. It kept the men informed on what they intended to do or what they had achieved and if they ever had anything of importance they would give notice of stop work meetings to come and what

you might have to vote on or to decide. In my opinion this sort of activity was the basis for making this industry a decent place to work.

"The worst elements in society seemed to be congregated around the waterfront. The ship owners seemed to like this. They only worried about getting the work done by anyone at all and to get good conditions meant that the average bloke trying to raise a family often worked under stress and was at a disadvantage. In my opinion the waterfront seemed to relish in the customs and conditions of the last century. However, we prevailed and it became a good place to work. The attitude of the ships owner and his idea of getting the work done to his satisfaction and getting the job speeded up was to employ people who had some standing in the community as fighters and football players with a reputation for being physically powerfull. They were used as standover men. This was very prevalant in Sydney. Employed as foremen, their attitude being that they would call out the allocations for the jobs on the ships and when you started and what you had to do. Best not to cross these people. It was a type of intimidation. It was successful up to a point but in the end it didn't prevail. These men didn't get as much work done as the better types who met the men on their own level. Their loading books showed a difference as the men would work more for these people than the standover men.

"With the event of modern conditions, larger ships, technical advantages, machines etc, the work force dropped in Newcastle from eight hundred to one hundred and fifty. That's the figure at the present day. This situation would have occurred in all ports. Redundancy payouts started on the waterfront superseding other areas where this now occurs.

"A lot of waterfront hotels and places felt the effect of this business eventually. They weren't doing the trade or getting the business they used to. Especially in Carrington, Wickham and the main street of Newcastle where it was easier to get across the road from the wharf to the hotels, and dinnertime between shifts etc. This became noticable and if one walked down the waterfront today you can see a lot of empty space that is no longer used. It used to be very busy. The traffic that rolls in and out

of the Wharf road is nothing to what it was twenty five years ago. In my opinion the main impact and the biggest shock to the waterfront industry was the event of containerization and roll on ships together with the technology advances in the heavy lifting gear plus the size of the ships. This brought about a huge change in the way ports operated.

"Nothing was given to waterside workers. Everything of value that I received had to be won by some sort of struggle. The job was always dangerous and nerve-wracking. Some men left the job a few days after joining, alarmed at the obvious danger of the job. Throughout my years of experience we used the navigation act to our advantage in dangerous situations. It was often the last word in safety. The navigation officer had his office in the customs house and was a government employee. He would have to make decisions on the safety of the ships gear, cranes, derricks, winches, wire ropes, shackles etc. Also the affect of rust on these items and his word was final. He could be called in whenever the men doubted the safety of their working equipment. Some of the ships that came into port and still do by the way, should have been used for naval target practise years before. They were real rust buckets."

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Wednesday 7.p.m.

Summary of tape on research project. The Stevedoring Industry
on Newcastle waterfront.

Carl Parrott started work on the waterfront shortly after the war. He was employed as a winchman to load cargo onto the ships. To obtain work on the waterfront you had to be nominated by a working member and seconded by another member. Carl remembers the conditions and workload to be strenuous and dangerous.

In the early years after the war all cargo was manhandled. Fork lift trucks were introduced but they were not able to operate in the ships hold as the ships were of the older type with obstructions in the hull, such as angle iron and exposed bolts.

Many cargoes were loaded from Newcastle as well as unloaded. Phosphate and sulphur which came in on German and Dutch ships was very labour intensive to unload. The cargo had to be shovelled into tubs. Grabs were eventually introduced to take the bulk of the cargo leaving the rest to still be hand shovelled out.

Ships became larger and more specialised allowing the use of mechanical gear below decks. The B.H.P. erected luffing cranes which could easily reach across the hatch allowing the cargoes to be placed where required. At Queens wharf the cargo had to be loaded in the old fashioned way. This continued up until the late 1960's.

One of the worst cargoes to handle was wool. It was packed in double-dump bales which weighed between eight hundred and one thousand pounds. The men would all gather round the bale and lift together with hooks. If they didn't lift together one man would get the load and injuries would occur. Eventually the workers were able to demand the decrease in size of the bales to single dump bales which averaged in size between five hundred and six hundred pound. Sometimes these would have to be lifted three high to be able to be stored in the ships hold.

Container ships soon made their appearance. They had an enormous impact on the waterfront and the workers. The idea behind these ships was to allow less time in the ports thus quicker transportation of cargo. Roll on ships were also introduced at this time. The bows or sterns of the ships were able to open and drop ramps so that vehicles could be used to load and unload the cargo.

The ships grew larger, from ten thousand to sixty thousand ton. This created a problem with the loading of steel. Skids, made out of railway rails and welded into the shape of a H, were placed end up into the hatch. The steel would be placed on top and cranes would lift one end causing the steel to roll into the hold. This was not only dangerous but also time consuming for if the steel fell the wrong way many hours would be spent correcting the error.

With the changes container ships brought, life soon changed on and about the waterfront. Local hotels and public places were forced to close due to the drop in the workforce from eight hundred men to one hundred and fifty. Nothing came easy to the men on the waterfront. They had to fight for everything they achieved; permanency, regular wages, holidays and superannuation. The work was hard and dangerous and full of stress as often standover men were used by the ships owners to intimidate the workers.

Conditions improved but the men still had to call on the navigation act when they doubted the safety of the job. Many of the ships that came into port, and still do, were nothing but rust buckets suitable only for naval target practise.

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Open Foundation
Australian History
Wednesday 7-9pm.

Research Project.-Stevedoring Industry in Newcastle.

Research a project on an aspect of regional history.

In 1797 Lieut. John Shortland discovered a channel behind a 'clump of an island'. He entered a broad river estuary dotted with small islands and shallow, winding, channels. One hundred years of engineering, planning and dredging changed this area into a deep water port. 1. Newcastle harbour soon became a commercial port and with the coming of the shipping trade came the need for waterfront workers.

The early days of the waterfront were one of conflict and struggle. As early as 1890, during the stirring days of the maritime strike, one hundred and twenty six sailing ships were tied up three and four deep in Newcastle harbour. 2. Many of the wharfies immigrated to Australia in search of a better life, determined to resist poverty, tyranny, class privilege and persecution. As far back as 1884 they struck in sympathy with seamen. 3.

These men were prepared to fight for their cause and none more so than Jim Healy. He was elected leader of the Waterside Workers Federation and was a man who was never thought of as a union boss. He developed the democratic strength of the waterside workers to make the federation 'one of the most powerful guardians of Australian living standards and liberties'. 4. He worked to improve the conditions for waterside workers all over Australia.

In the days after the second world war many men returned home to seek employment on the waterfront and the port of Newcastle was no exception. The conditions at this time were poor and the work was hard and dangerous. Many men only lasted on the job for a few days, too frightened to stay on after witnessing the risks taken to load the ships. Ship owners were generally hated by the men on the waterfront due to their bullying tactics to get the ships loaded. 'The gap between employer and employee was as wide as from here to the moon.' 5. Time spent in port was time wasted to the ship owner and they were always pushing the men to work harder and to take unnecessary risks to load the ships.

1. John Armstrong, Shaping the Hunter, Newcastle, 1983, p11.

2. Newcastle Morning Herald, August 1938.

3. Rupert Lockwood, The Story of Jim Healy, Sydney, 1951, p15.

4. Ibid, p16.

5. James Gaby, The Restless Waterfront, North Sydney, 1974, p13.

A variety of cargo was loaded and unloaded, and still is, from the port of Newcastle. Fork lift trucks were used to move cargo up to the hooks so the cargo could be loaded onto the ships. Phosphate and sulphur ships came into the port regularly and the cargo had to be shovelled into tubs to be unloaded. Eventually grabs were introduced to take the bulk of the cargo although the rest still had to be hand shovelled. 6.

The worst cargo to handle was wool as it was packed in double-dump bales which weighed between eight hundred and one thousand pounds. The men would all gather round the bale and lift together with hooks. If they did not lift together one man would take the load and the result of the exercise could end in injury. These heavy bales would have to be loaded three high to fill the ship's hold. Long and loud protests from the men eventually lead to the bales being reduced to single-dump size which weighed between five and six hundred pound. 7.

Eight hundred men were employed on the Newcastle waterfront before container ships were introduced. The State Dockyard in Newcastle built their first container ship in December 1958. Shipping companies had to move with the times or fall by the wayside. 8. The container ships had a dramatic impact on ports all over the world, including Newcastle. The idea behind them was a simple one. Instead of the ships calling in at many ports to load or unload cargo, container terminals allowed them to decrease their ports of call to one major port. The cargo would then be transported by rail or road to its destination. 9.

In December 1970 Newcastle was included in the ports of call for Roll on-Roll off general cargo services between Australia and the west coast of North America. This service would benefit importers and exporters in Newcastle and replace motorships operated by the Pacific Australia Direct Line service. 10.

6. Carl Parrott interview tape with C. Brent, 7.7.88

7. Ibid.

8. Newcastle Morning Herald, 25 March 1961.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid, 3 December 1969.

The benefit of the Roll on-Roll off ships was due to hydraulic equipment whose function would have been inconceivable in the early days of the waterfront. These stern loading ships with angled ramps allowed cargo to be moved on and off by trucks and fork lifts. 11.

With the introduction of these specialised ships came a dramatic drop in the workforce. Employees in Newcastle waterfront dropped from eight hundred men to one hundred and fifty. The drop in the numbers of men employed on the waterfront greatly affected the local hotels and public places. Many were forced to close, especially in Carrington, Wickham, and the main street of Newcastle. These places were frequented by the men in their meal breaks between shifts. Empty spaces along the waterfront tell the tales of the past when Wharf road was swarming with workers and busy traffic.

The working life of the waterside worker was hard and stressful. Through strikes and negotiation the men were able to achieve many benefits. They went from being employed as casual workers with no benefits to getting attendance money with paid holidays and long service leave. With a lot more struggle they were able to achieve more holidays, sick leave, superannuation and guaranteed wages. 'In the period till Newcastle became a permanent employment port on March 10th 1969, watersiders worked an average of 26.9 hours a week. With permanency the number registered fell from 643 to 561. 12.

Nothing was given to the waterside worker. Not only did they have to fight against the poor conditions their job entailed, they also felt they had an enemy in the ship owner. He was uncaring towards the safety of the waterside workers and used a variety of methods to get the ships loaded. One method was to employ men with a standing in the community of physical strength; football players and fighters. These men were used as an exercise in intimidation to get the men to work harder and faster for the benefit of the ship owner.

11.Ibid, 6th June 1970.

12.Ibid, 7th March 1978.

This was more prevalent in Sydney although it did occur in Newcastle. In the end this method did not prevail as the loading books showed that more work was done for the better type of foreman.

The union played a large part in the Newcastle waterfront. Their members attended stop work meetings and talked about events conversant with what was going on in the industry. The union put out a paper called the Maritime Worker which kept the men informed on what was going on. The effort of the union helped make the industry a decent place to work. 'One of the fascinations about stevedoring was that every job was different, every day brought a different set of circumstances.' 13.

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Tape interview with Carl Parrott with C. Brent, 7.7.88.

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permission to Carolyn Brent

to use this interview, or part of this interview, for
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for the use of other bona fide researchers.

Signed C. G. Parrott

Date 7-7-88

Interviewer CAROLYN BRENT