

SUE BROWN

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Lecturer: Margaret Henry

Thursday 10am-12 noon.

REGIONAL HISTORY TOPIC

"A Background to the establishment of Cessnock and an insight to the enterprising spirit of long time resident, Marjorie Brown"

The City of Cessnock and the fossil fuel, coal are synonymous. Cessnock is a coal town and has been referred to as the capital of the northern coalfields. But its beginnings are not connected with coal or its discovery. Instead, they go back to the first free settlers in the Hunter Valley, before Professor Edgeworth David proved the existence of the rich Greta seam in 1886, upon which Cessnock grew and depended for its prosperity and existence.¹

The opening of the Great North Road in 1831 was a boon to the new settlers around Wollombi and Lagune. A new village, centred around an inn, was formed on John Campbell's land grant of 2,560 acres (granted in 1826)² called "Cessnock Estate". The new village was a staging post on the road from Maitland to Wollombi and also served as a local centre to winegrowers who had settled in Pokolbin.³

The discovery of coal at a workable depth marked the beginning of the real importance of Cessnock and surrounding district. The south-east corner of Cessnock Estate was on coal bearing land and a bore was sunk in 1892⁴ by George Brown. Other boring plants became established and soon the whole field had been chartered and preparations made to begin mining. The high grade bitumous coal of the Cessnock field won large markets and the centre of coal mining activity shifted emphasis at Newcastle to Cessnock. The first large mine opened in 1903 and during the next 15 years, eleven other mines opened.

Initially the growth of Cessnock was slow. By 1903 with the promise of coal mines opening, a land boom started which lasted till 1923⁵ and in 1926 Cessnock Municipality was proclaimed,⁶ taking in the smaller villages of Aberdare, Neath, Bellbird, Hebburn, Pelaw Main, Stanford Merthyr and Kurri Kurri. (These smaller villages were formed around the newly established mines.)

But the municipality was only just established when it entered a long period of unemployment, poverty and despair. The first indications of a world wide economic downturn struck the coalfields and Newcastle earlier than other areas. Coal mining companies faced with declining and highly competitive markets asked the mineworkers to accept a 12% reduction⁷ in wages and lowering of conditions. The miners refused and the men were dismissed in February 1929⁸ and the mining industry fell idle for the next 16 months. This period was known as "the Lock-out" and before it was over the country was plunged into a world wide depression.

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1. W. Bloomfield, Cessnock 1826-1954, Cessnock 1954. p.54
 2. Ibid, p.13
 3. M.T. Daley H.V. Research Foundation Monograph 25 , Newcastle 1966, p.:
 4. W.Parkes, J. Comerford, M. Lake - Mines Wines & People New.1979,p.173
 5. Bloomfield, Ibid,p.61
 6. Daley, Ibid, p.3
 7. Parkes, Comerford, Lake Ibid, p.196
 8. Ibid, p.196, also Daley Ibid p.3.

Jack Lang, Premier of New South Wales wrote:

"One of the fallacies about the Depression is the widely held view that it started with a fall in wool and wheat prices. That is not so....The first impact occurred in the coal industry.....I registered the first mass misery and suffering seen in this country for a third of a century."⁹

Troubled times has been part of the coal mining history on the coalfields. Most notably, the Bellbird Disaster of 1923 with the death of 21 miners, the 16 month Lockout 1929-30 incorporating the Rothbury Riot in 1929, and the strike of 1949.¹⁰ The coalfields has never been able to occupy their pre World War II position. The introduction of mechanisation and change of emphasis upon the hard coking coal of the Illawarra fields to the soft coking coal of Newcastle field to meet the needs of the crucially strategic steel industry.

The industry was facing a dilemma. Which way to go? Underground mining is labour intensive and expensive to operate and with declining world markets, new markets and coal reserves extracted more cheaply, needed to be found. Development in the Paxton/Ellalong area using a technique called 'long-wall mining' and the opening up of Open Cuts in the Singleton/Broke fields, recreated a booming industry until again in 1986, Japan, the largest imported of Australian coal, forced lower prices resulting in mine closures and unemployment.

The development of Local Government in Cessnock paralleled the boom and bust times of the coal industry and mirrored just as turbulent times. The Shire of Cessnock was proclaimed in 1906¹¹ with George Brown as Shire President and James R. Scott as Shire Clerk. Scott was a colourful character and was accused of being unfit for position of Shire Clerk. After his short career ended, Scott was elected as a Councillor and President of Cessnock Shire. Many confrontations ensued. One particular incident told by Councillor John Brown, is of Scott being determined to have a decision he made agreed to by the Council:

"One Councillor moved a motion of dissent from a ruling made by President Scott. At this point Scott pulled out a pistol (he was a collector of guns), laid it on the table and asked "who is going to second the motion?" The resolution lapsed for want of a seconder."¹³

Scott did not last long as President. In February 1925 he locked himself in the council offices and would not allow staff or councillors to enter. A side window was forced and the main door opened with Scott instructing police to arrest the intruder but Scott himself was

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9. Parkes, Comerford, Lake. p.197

10. Ibid, p.272

11. Ibid

12. Ibid

13. Ibid

14. Ibid, p.272

overpowered. Councillor John Brown convened a meeting which carried a motion that Councillor was not a fit and proper person to carry out the duties as President of the Shire Council. Consequently, John Brown was appointed as administrator of Cessnock Shire during 1926 and administrator of Kearsley Shire during 1927. After much agitation, Cessnock was proclaimed a Municipality on November 1, 1926.¹⁵

John Brown's career in local government extended from 1917 to 1950, being either President or Mayor for 16 years during that time. He was the first mayor of Cessnock and is said to have made the greatest contribution in local government in Greater Cessnock.¹⁶ He was awarded an O.B.E. in 1957 for his services to local government. After leaving Cessnock to retire at Coal Point, he became a Councillor for some years and President of Lake Macquarie Shire Council.

The tradition started by John Brown was carried on by his son Robert Brown, who was elected to the Council of the Municipality of Cessnock in 1953 and continued uninterrupted service until his death in February 1981. Robert Brown also served the City of Cessnock as Mayor for 11 years and he was the first mayor elected by popular vote.

The amalgamation of the Shire of Kearsley and Municipality of Cessnock in 1956¹⁷ into the Municipality of Greater Cessnock (proclaimed City of Greater Cessnock in 1958) saw the Council moving to the forefront of local government activity in Country Councils, regional organisation and innovation. Under the leadership of Robert as Mayor, the Council established Allandale Hospital, Cessnock Corrective Centre, Yawarra Boys Home, NASA Air Training School, Alcan Smelter and Gas Works (now demolished), industrial development in the Kurri Kurri area and public amenities such as community halls, parks and libraries.

Majorie Barnes became part of the strong, community-minded Brown family when she married Robert on April 17, 1935. She had earlier realized a childhood ambition when she opened her first business, a milk bar, at the age of 19, in 1931. The depression was ever present but through hard work the business grew. Robert Brown helped out in the business and when there was sufficient money generated to pay two wages, they were married. Together they owned and operated several businesses until their retirement in 1974.

Marjorie and Robert Brown have proved through their enterprising spirit confidence and loyalty to the Cessnock community, that a town can survive through adversity. They have won the respect of that community. This being evident with Mr. Brown's high percentage of votes when challenging the Labor candidates in blue ribbon Labor seats. Through

15. Bloomfield, Ibid, p.66

16. Parkes, Comerford, Lake, Ibid. p. 273

17. Ibid

their hard work attracting industry and promoting tourism and helping out in the community, they have enabled the City of Greater Cessnock to grow and prosper into a place where residents are proud to live.

B I B L I G R A P H Y

- BLOOMFIELD, William. CESSNOCK 1826-1954. Cessnock 1954
- DALEY, M.T. HUNTER VALLEY RESEARCH FOUNDATION
MONOGRAPH 25. Newcastle 1966
- PARKES, W.S., COMERFORD, J. MINES WINES AND PEOPLE, Newcastle 1979
LAKE, M.
- SMITH, Graham ED. KURRI KURRI 1904-1975. Newcastle 1979
- WALKER, Alan COALTOWN. A SOCIAL SURVEY OF CESSNOCK
Melbourne, 1945.

Marjorie Brown (nee Barnes) was born on 23 December, 1912 at South Cessnock and she has lived all of her life in Cessnock. Married in 1935 to Robert Brown, they had four children, all are surviving. An ambition to have her own business materialized at the age of 19 years in 1931 when Mrs. Brown opened her first business, a milk bar. Mr. Brown helped out in the business and when it grew enough to support two wages, they were married. They then worked together through several different businesses until retirement in 1974.

Mrs. Brown's business was established at the height of the depression, but this did not deter her. She borrowed money from an uncle and was given six months credit from wholesalers. Eventually, through long hours and hard work all the money was repaid.

John Brown, Mrs. Brown's father-in-law had been involved in local government since 1917 and continued until 1950. He served as Mayor or Shire President 16 times and was awarded an O.B.E. in 1957 for his services to local government

Robert Brown entered local government in 1953 and served uninterrupted until his death in 1981. He also served as mayor for 11 years.

Together, Robert and Marjorie Brown attempted to revitalize a city left in such a desparate state after the recession of the 1920's, the turbulent mining industry, depression and World War II.

Cessnock's economy virtually rested upon the fortunes of the coal mining industry and as a result suffered many highs and lows. During the 1950's and 1960's, Cessnock Council lead by Robert Brown, attracted industry and business to the town. The Council also undertook a building programme and city beautification. To attract tourists to Greater Cessnock, Council and vigneron banded together and formed a Vintage Festival Committee and held the first Festival in 1963. The tourist industry has since boomed and the foresight shown by the early committee (under the leadership of Robert Brown) must be acclaimed for their inniative.

Through the involvement of John and Robert Brown in local government, Marjorie Brown had lead a varied, busy and interesting life. Operating a business, raising four children, together with demands of being Mayoress, involved a hectic schedule. Marge states that she and her husband only wanted to help the community and what they accomplished was for the good of the city. BEing in the public arena gave them the opportunity to meet visiting dignitaries such as Governors, Governors-General, Prime Ministers, and according to Marjorie, who is an ardent Royalist, the most memorable event was being presented to Queen Elizabeth II. Marjorie Brown has seen many changes occur in Cessnock since her childhood. Some good, such as the emergence of a more independent woman, industry and tourism becoming established. Some negative changes has been the loss of the 'help each other' concept of the depression years and lack of care facilities for the aged.

Marge and Bob Brown fought against the 'ghost town' label applied to Cessnock and all of the life worked towards making the city a better place.

MRS BROWN: I'm Marge Brown, I was born Marge Barnes on the 23rd December, 1912 at South Cessnock and I've lived in Cessnock all of my life and I, at this stage I don't think that I will ever leave. And in the beginning my father worked in the mines which we had our ups and downs and, with the mining industry but having a good father and a good mother we survived. We didn't do without a great deal. But then as time went on it was always my ambition to have my own business which at the age of nineteen I did just that and after that we were in several businesses.

INTERVIEWER: Q. When did you first meet your husband Bob?

MRS BROWN: A. 1930 I met my husband, in 1930, I was married in 1935. He entered the business with me and we worked together then from then on and later on through the Labour Party he became involved in Local Government. He was in Local Government for many years and later became Mayor and as Mayoress it gave me the opportunity to meet a lot of interesting people, do a lot of things for our community through that position and I felt privileged to be able to raise a lot of money for different organisations, as Mayoress of Cessnock for eleven years.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Bob's father, John Brown, was also involved in Local Government wasn't he?

MRS BROWN: Yes my late husband's father was Mayor of Cessnock for many years so I suppose it was a sort of family tradition that we were always interested in Cessnock and what happened to Cessnock, we were never ever accepted the fact that during the Depression and bad times that we would ever become a ghost town.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Now that's something that has been muted on many occasions, I recall as a child in primary school in the late 50's, headlines in the Eagle was 'Cessnock's going to become a ghost town'?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes, no we were determined to never let that happen to Cessnock. So being in Local Government my husband and I decided that we would run vintage festivals, we had the vineyards here and nobody was doing very much about them and they weren't doing very well either.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Cessnock's virtually been a one industry town hasn't it?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes for many, many years it was just coal and then we realised the worth of the vineyards and so the Mayor and Aldermen of the City got together and started to run vintage festivals.

INTERVIEWER: Q. I think the first one was it in 1963?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes it would have been about that time and we started off the vintage festivals and that was not only good for the town it was good for the vineyards as well and it put them on their feet and on the map.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Now getting back to John Brown's, your father-in-law's involvement in Local Government, did you have many dealings with him in Local Government prior to Bob's involvement?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes I attended a lot of functions with him because there's always a big demand, a big call on the Mayor's time and I did attend with my father-in-law on a lot of social functions.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And Local Government back in the 20's, 30's and 40's what's your impression of it, you know compared to these days?

MRS BROWN: A. Well the people sort of helped each other, there was a lot of self help and there was a lot of people helped each other through these bad times and I think that's what helped us all to get through our lock outs and our ----

INTERVIEWER: Q. The Depression?

MRS BROWN: A. Depression days and of course the war took a lot of our men away, but we carried on just the same.

INTERVIEWER: Q. So Cessnock's fortunes have fluctuated with the coal markets I guess?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes very much so, we were just this one industry town and that was coal and when the strikes were on and the lock outs were on there wasn't very much else to fall back onto.

INTERVIEWER: Q. You said you started the business on your own, how long did you operate the business on your own before your husband became involved?

MRS BROWN: A. Three years.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And did you find much opposition, I mean that would have been, what date would that have been, early 30's?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes, about '32, '31 or '32.

INTERVIEWER: Q. So it would have been not common for a single woman to operate her own business?

MRS BROWN: A. No it wasn't and to be less than twenty years old I took on quite a bit and I was very proud to see my name over the door on my first business, something that I'd dreamed of all my life.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And did you need a lot of financial help to start the business off?

MRS BROWN: A. Well my parents couldn't help because Dad was in the mines and he couldn't help, he done a lot of practical work around, painting and so forth, but I could not get any financial help from them but an Uncle of mine, Dad's brother he was in business here and he gave me a loan and that's what started, and eventually I paid that back to him.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And what type of business was it?

MRS BROWN: A. Well it was a milk bar and confectionary business and we ended up making all our own confectionary, which was hard work. And of course in those days there was plenty of picture theatres opened two and three nights a week and we always had the business open from morning until the pictures come out at night, and back again the next morning.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes they'd be awfully long hours?

MRS BROWN: A. Very long hours. And then I started having children.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes you must tell us how many you had?

MRS BROWN: A. Well I had four children and four strong healthy children which I was very thankful for and I'm very proud of all of them today they've all done very well.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And you worked all the time?

MRS BROWN: A. I worked, in between having children I worked, I even went from the shop one night to have a baby.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And what about, the main concern with working parents these days is child care, which seems to be something that both sides of the political arena are striving for, whether they be Liberal or Labour, in those particular days how did you get on for your children being looked after?

MRS BROWN: A. The two sets of grandparents always came to the rescue. My mother and father and my husband's mother and father were marvellous. They always helped out with the children when they were young.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And what would you feel as a single woman in those days starting your own business, what did you feel would be the major obstacle?

MRS BROWN: A. Well the major obstacle was to get enough finance to keep going. Luckily I got six months credit from all the firms, all the firms thought it was quite a novelty for a young girl to go into her own business and I got six months credit.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Gosh you wouldn't get that these days?

MRS BROWN: A. No. They trusted me and I got six months credit from all of them, which I caught up with, all of them in time. But I would never have managed without that.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And then you said your husband came into the business with you?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes when the business started to grow and got too much for me well he invested into the business and then we worked together. We worked together for a couple of years until it was big enough for us to get married and live on.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And you said your ambition was to own your own business, was it something that you desired for a long time?

MRS BROWN: A. All my life, like children play different games, when I was little all I did was play shops and my dream finally come true.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And all your married life you've been involved with the service industry too haven't you through various businesses?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes we've been in business and I've been associated with the public since 1930.

INTERVIEWER: Q. So that really would have helped, both you and Bob would have been well known to the people of Cessnock prior to his involvement with Local Government?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh yes we were both very well known by this time in the town, having our own business and being with the public. Then Bob became interested in Local Government.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Because of his father's interest do you think or?

MRS BROWN: A. Well yes and to prove to himself he could do it too?

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes to emulate the father?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Of course Bob was a much different personality to his father, I've never met John Brown but my Dad's sister so long working at Cessnock Hospital became involved with him because he was Secretary of the Hospital Board, saying he was a very forthright, very, very strong person and listening to your other children, the older children talking about him he was a fairly dynamic man and what he said went?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes that was quite right, but my husband was

more like his mother but very determined to do the right thing as far as Local Government was concerned.

INTERVIEWER: Q. So the Labour Party nominated him, how was the Local Government structured when Bob went into Local Government, was it in wards as it is today?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes, yes it was in wards but we didn't, we wasn't always as Cessnock City Council, we had two councils here. We had the Kearsley Shire and that was closed down and my late father-in-law John Brown was put in there as Administrator for a few years and then Kearsley Shire and the Cessnock City Council was amalgamated then and it became one.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Why was the Kearsley Shire Council closed down, was there any untoward happenings or?

MRS BROWN: A. Well they could never seem to agree. They could never agree on what Council should do what so they finally decided, the Government decided that one Council could run the area.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Now Kearsley Shire encompassed the outlying areas of Cessnock plus Kurri, was that right?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes. Kearsley Shire was mainly the outlying areas and Cessnock City Council was for the city.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And can you remember the year that the two Councils were amalgamated?

MRS BROWN: A. No I couldn't remember that, that was way back in Frank Dean's time, he was Town Clerk then.

INTERVIEWER: Q. I think it was in the middle 50's or 60's because I can barely remember it going through primary school as a child. And Bob always represented this ward here where you now live, ward five or?

MRS BROWN: A. No we were in business opposite the hospital and he stood for that ward for a certain time and then when we came back here to King Street to live he stood for this ward and won it again.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Now he was involved with the Labour Party for a number of years, he then left the Labour Party, the whole family left the Labour Party. How did he do at the next election, he was reinstated I believe?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes he didn't miss a term, he was reinstated as an Independent and the only way why he left the Labour Party was because he wanted to be able to make up his own mind at Council meetings, he felt the people put him there and he wanted to be free, as an Independent, to speak for the people and do for the people as he wanted.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Not caucás like they do these days?

MRS BROWN: A. No not to caucás and be told what to do.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Well of course the last State elections has shown that a lot of people, now that we have eight Independents in State Parliament, a lot of people are fed up with party politics?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. So it's going to be very interesting to see how they perform?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes. I think once you're put into Parliament or Local Government you're there, the people put you there and I think you feel, or you should feel that you represent them.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Up until Bob's death he'd been in Local Government twenty seven years?

MRS BROWN: A. Twenty eight.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Twenty eight years?

MRS BROWN: A. Twenty eight years and eleven----

INTERVIEWER: Q. Eleven as Mayor?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And his father had twelve years as Mayor?

MRS BROWN: A. Mayor yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And he was actually awarded an O.B.E.?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes he had an O.B.E. for his work for the community and he was also the first Chief Executive Officer at the hospital. He got our hospital, Cessnock Hospital going in the beginning.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Actually would you mind just elaborating on that point because I find that extremely interesting?

MRS BROWN: A. Well there was no hospital here, everybody had to go to Maitland by a horse drawn ambulance too, as we had no motor ambulances but in the early days the men contributed through the mines to the hospital and he worked in the mines himself, went up after work to work in the hospital until it was big enough to support him and pay him a wage and he left the mine and become a full time Chief Executive Officer at the hospital.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes on the clock they gave him when he retired it said forty four years?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes forty four years and up till now, we have just got our third Chief Executive Officer, so there's only been two others.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And what year, can you remember the year that he may have gone into that as a full time occupation?

MRS BROWN: A. Well the day of the Bellbird disaster.

INTERVIEWER: Q. September 4 it was, 1923 I think it was.

MRS BROWN: That was the day he left the mine and went to the hospital full time, on the day of the Bellbird disaster.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Now what types of jobs, you know you obviously had to support Bob in his role, it would have been a joint decision for him to go into Local Government, so having had that bit of experience with his father you really knew what you were letting yourself in for?

MRS BROWN: A. Well yes but he was so keen to do it I went along with it and I was never sorry, I met a lot of interesting people and had the honour of being presented to the Queen, both of us, which was unexpected.

INTERVIEWER: Q. You've been an ardent royalist, that must have been a very proud time for you?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh yes. That was quite unexpected. At a garden party in Government House in Sydney one afternoon, the Queen and Prince Phillip was there and we was just called out of the crowd to be presented. We were very honoured about that.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And what type of question, I mean we always like to know the types of comments that she makes, what did she ask you?

MRS BROWN: A. Well the Queen, oh she was very gracious and she, but I noticed that afternoon that she addressed all of her conversation to the man, she recognised me and we shook hands and I done my curtsey and, but she was very interested to hear about Cessnock, very interested and wanted to know the population and what most people done for a living and we talked for quite some time.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Gosh she really should have asked you because you'd probably be able to give her more information. Bob might have been able to do it on a Council side but you know you really need to ask the woman how much the grocery bill is each week and what's available?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes. But no she, it was a great thrill that afternoon.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And can you recall any other people that have impressed you, you would have met a great number of people over the years?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Who sticks in your mind, besides the Queen, whether they be international or Australian?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh well we had met most of the Governors and Governor Generals, well that's very hard to say because there was a lot of, especially men, in those days that were very interesting and I met the Catholic Bishop and he was very nice, a very jovial chap to talk to, he was receiving debutants that night and I met him. We also run a Mayoral Ball for funds for the town here and we had Sir Eric Woodward here, he was the Governor of the day then.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Because I remember meeting Gough Whitlam in '74, '73 or '74 when he came to town for the vintage balls?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes Gough Whitlam had been here several times and Margaret Whitlam and he was very easy to get along with.

INTERVIEWER: Q. A very striking man?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes. We had a bar-b-que the next day for lunch and Gough insisted on taking over the bar-b-que and cooking the steaks.

INTERVIEWER: Q. It's always nice to see a personal side of these people because we only ever see them in their formal roles?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. They do tend to be human after all?

MRS BROWN: A. Well they are, they are and most of them had families and liked to talk about their families too.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Getting back to your role as the wife of an Alderman and as the Mayoress what types of, a lot of the functions must have been mundane and boring and the wardrobe you would have had to have had?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes. I still have most ---

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes it's great dressing up for the grandchildren you realise?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes I've kept them and the grandchildren use them for plays and things like that at school. But, oh well we always had to attend balls and all official functions and anything that was on in the town. The opening of Alcan, Alcan started in our time and my husband played a big part in getting Alcan here.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes I do recall that, I listened to an interview that he gave Reg Horner and he was saying, you know from what I can recall and from what other people have said in the area I think Bob was very instrumental in getting Alcan to come here because he went to the State Government

did he not to get the electricity charges dropped so that would attract them here?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes that's so.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Is that the time that he was also on the Board at Hunter Valley County Council wasn't he?

MRS BROWN: A. Well yes he was on the Hunter Valley County Council and that helped them with their electricity of course they had to have concessions and Bob helped get that fixed up for them.

INTERVIEWER: Q. In your role were you ever recognised as an individual or were you just the appendage to Mr Brown do you feel?

MRS BROWN: A. No I was recognised a lot of times as just me.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Do you think that was because you were in business on your own and you showed yourself to be an independent person?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes. I have been an independent person ever since I was about nineteen and we used to laugh, my husband laughed when all this womens lib was talked about and he said you've been liberated all your life, he said there's not much new about that. So I was interviewed, I was recognised as a person, as myself in my own right.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Recently there was an article in the local paper, in the Herald that one member has suggested that their wives be given an allowance from the Government on top of their own allowances because of the work, the amount of work that she has to do being a member's wife, so I thought well that's one step in the right direction, it might be a financial benefit but also too it's recognising her role and the role that the wife plays?

MRS BROWN: A. Well she does, she plays a big part. But in the beginning in the early days Aldermen in Cessnock or anywhere, on Cessnock Council were not paid anything, they had no allowance whatever, not even a phone or anything and it was a lot later in life then that the Councils were given an allowance and, but that didn't stretch to my clothes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. No, it was fortunate that you had work?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes I had worked and I had my own business and of course I didn't stay in the milkbar we went onto different other businesses and grew and got larger businesses and ended up with a newsagency.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Looking back over the years that you've been involved in Local Government you would have seen a lot of changes, for the better or for the worse, what do you think has been the major changes?

MRS BROWN: A. Well I think the major changes have been the role of women. I think the women now have learnt to stand on their own two feet, which they should always have done of course. But I've seen a lot of changes in the workforce, some for the better and some not so good. There has been a lot of changes in education and everything.

INTERVIEWER: Q. As far as the operation of Council goes and the sorts of things that your husband tried to achieve for Cessnock can you think of a few things that happened in the time that he was involved on Council, some of the new industries that may have come to the area, apart from Alcan?

MRS BROWN: A. Well we had an industrial site down around Kurri, he got that, a lot of land from the Government and it was called this big industrial site and the people that wanted to come there and conduct their businesses, not businesses so much as factories and warehouses and that, they didn't have to buy the land, they just, if they paid a dollar, they had to pay something, they couldn't just get it for nothing they had to pay this nominal fee and some just paid a dollar and some have done very well for their dollar.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes it's amazing the number of businesses that are still there. In my work capacity I had to pick up some ad copy last week from that area and I was amazed at the number of businesses that are still operating from there?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes. See that was a good thing for the area to have an industrial site, to try and keep them together.

INTERVIEWER: With the towns of Cessnock and Kurri being the two major centres in the greater Cessnock City Council area have you found there's been much animosity between the two?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh yes, my word.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Because the greatest thing is for Cessnock Rugby League to beat Kurri Rugby League team.

MRS BROWN: A. Kurri could never accept the fact that they were part of Cessnock.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And that stems back from the Kearsley Shire Council days you feel?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes, Kurri was Kurri and they would never accept the fact that they had to come in and be part of the Cessnock area.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Do you think Cessnock being in the State electorate being dominated up until this last Government election as a Labour seat in a blue ribbon Labour seat and also in the Federal sphere as a very strong ALP seat, do you think that has helped Cessnock or has it been to its detriment?

MRS BROWN: A. In the early days it was good but not so much over the last ten or fifteen years.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Gauging the advancement of Maitland as a city area you know we can sit back and compare the two can't we because Maitland probably in the last fifteen years, ten years at least anyway has been a swinging seat and Cessnock's always been so. And do you think that over the years that the Cessnock City Council and their Aldermen have gained more for the area or do you think they've worked with the State and Federal Governments or do you think that they've really had to work very hard for what has been achieved for the area?

MRS BROWN: A. They've had to work very hard to get anything for the area from either State or Federal Governments but we still need a lot. Cessnock is such a big scattered area, we have 750 square miles in Cessnock which is a big area to maintain and a lot of the other cities, like Maitland and a few other cities around about they may be big in population but they're not, they're very small in area compared to Cessnock, which takes a lot of maintenance.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes there's been a lot of new shopping centres, or a couple of shopping centres that have been built in the last couple of years so retail is still coming to Cessnock but even as a child growing up here I can always, particularly when Green Hills, Big W at Green Hills opened it always seems to be that you can't buy it in Cessnock you must go out of town and shop and I think it's still prevalent today, with myself working in the newspaper industry the shopkeepers are still complaining that this thought, line of thought with the local people still prevails?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes there's still a lot of people going out of town to shop but we must remember that we still do have a lot of people come in from other areas to Cessnock and we hoped, my husband and I we hoped when these big shopping centres came here that they would, that would bring people into the town from up around Branxton and Singleton and Greta and those places, we thought for the people that were going out we hoped that there would still be a lot come in to compensate for that.

INTERVIEWER: Q. With regard to people shopping out of the area do you think that they went to Maitland or would they have gone to Newcastle or a bit each?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh a bit of each, I do think that Green Hills did take a lot of business out of Cessnock.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Getting back to Local Government you had a lot of pluses, what were some of the disadvantages of being in the public eye?

MRS BROWN: A. Well you always had to be aware of how you looked and what you said and but you see I had a lot of, on my side because I was born here and I grew up and knew

everybody, knew everybody, two and three generations of people and, but I always felt quite at ease with our guests and our visitors that came to the town.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Were you called on very often to make formal presentations or speeches?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh yes quite often, quite a lot. It took a lot of getting used to but then you sort of get not quite used to it but you sort of learn to handle it a bit better as the years go on.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Would that have been mainly to womens groups or would you have spoken to mixed groups?

MRS BROWN: A. Mostly womens groups and I used to have what we called an 'at home' in the town hall about once a month and that raised a lot of money for the, we'd have it for a different organisation every month and that raised a lot of money.

INTERVIEWER: Q. The conduct of the Aldermen these days as compared to their conduct thirty or forty years ago, has that changed, their attitudes?

MRS BROWN: A. Well yes I haven't had a great deal over these last few years, I haven't had a great deal to do with Local Government, we've been out of that for some time now but I think they've still got a lot to learn. I still think that you can never stop learning, if you want to make progress you've got to keep learning.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes they seem to be more trained and to have a much more rounded education when they go into Local Government but I still think that the respect is not there from the people these days as to what it could have been years ago?

MRS BROWN: A. No, no that's quite true but I think our Aldermen, the Aldermen we have on the Council should be educated in some way. There's a lot more attached to Local Government and running a Council, Council is big business and I often say our Aldermen should have a little bit more up top than pot hole intelligence.

INTERVIEWER: Q. What do you feel would have been Bob's major achievement, do you think there's one or many things during his time in Local Government?

MRS BROWN: A. There would be many things, I don't think if he was here today that he could single any one thing out but there were a lot of things.

INTERVIEWER: Q. I also recall him being fiercely proud of being a Cessnockian and very proud of the town?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And one thing I do recall is whatever he did he did for the town and not for glory for himself and it's something that always impressed me?

MRS BROWN: A. It was never, never for himself. He just always maintained that this was our town and both of us we just done whatever we could and wherever we could and if we made any contribution to Cessnock that was ^{what} we wanted to do without any glory attached to it.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And what about yourself, what do you feel that could have been either something that you've done or something that he's done, is there something that sticks in your mind that you've achieved that you've been more proud of than say some other job?

MRS BROWN: A. What as?

INTERVIEWER: Q. Being involved in Local Government?

MRS BROWN: A. In Local Government. Well of course my big day was being presented to the Queen, that was quite, I've been a royalist all my life. My father's people have been, they were among the very first people to come to Cessnock in business here, my grandfather was a baker, he came from Largs and had the first bakery business in Vincent Street and that must have been where I got my idea of business.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Of course Local Government when Bob was involved didn't have the availability of funds as to they do today?

MRS BROWN: A. No, no they didn't. There's much more Government funding today than there was then, they had to battle for everything they could get and so much had to be paid for the maintenance of the city from just ratepayers.

INTERVIEWER: Q. That was their only source of income was from the ratepayers funds?

MRS BROWN: A. Ratepayers yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Because Local Government was not really recognised by State or Federal?

MRS BROWN: A. No and Local Government plays a big part in your community and in your city or your town. Of course now we were only a township at one stage, we're the city of Greater Cessnock now and we do get Government funding now for different things but in the early days most of the work done in the city was from the ratepayers.

INTERVIEWER: Q. What changes, major changes have, your interpretation of the major changes that have gone on in Cessnock say from after World War II?

MRS BROWN: A. Well the changes have been, we have an awful lot of men in Cessnock that travel out of Cessnock by bus daily, there's hundreds of men travel to Newcastle that couldn't

get work here and but they continue to live here which was wonderful, this was their town too and but we do and we still do have hundreds and hundreds of men travel out of town to other mines and other work in the area and but lucky for us they continue to live here.

INTERVIEWER: Q. At the last Council elections we had our first Lady Mayor elected. I guess that augers well for women in Cessnock, do you think that Cessnock women are interested in their Local Government or do you feel that a lot of them just vote the way their husbands want them to vote, you know putting aside the fact that she does belong to the ALP?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes well I think in the years gone by the , I've been on election booths and you'd hear the women going in the gate asking their husbands how they would vote and their husbands would tell them how to vote but I don't see so much of that now because I think women are thinking for themselves.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Well we're the ones that have to pay the grocery bill each week don't we?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes it's a fact and I do think that women are taking more interest in Local Government which is a good thing.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes of course as a rule Local Government is the first tier of the political life that they enter?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes, yes we have the three tiers, the Local, Federal and State.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Of course it's much easier for them too to be involved in Local Government because it's close to home and they don't have to travel away and they're probably more aware of what's going on?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes, and of course there's a lot of men, Aldermen use Local Government as a stepping stone for State and Federal.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Of course in the Cessnock area our former Member R.J Brown he's now been elected to the Ministry: He has represented all three spheres of political life hasn't he?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Been Mayor of the town and the State Member for Cessnock and then the Member for Hunter?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And is now currently the Member for Charlton. We had a woman elected to Council in the late 50's, early 60's, Edna Hancock?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Would she have been the first woman that was elected to Cessnock Council or would there have been someone before her?

MRS BROWN: A. No Edna was the first and she really made a study of the Council and she done a really good job.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes I can't recall any other woman member being elected up until the 70's can you, it was all male dominated up until ---

MRS BROWN: A. The school teacher.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Alison Davey?

MRS BROWN: A. Alison Davey.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And then the next term of office was your eldest daughter Roberta?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes my daughter Roberta she followed on and she was an Alderman for four years.

INTERVIEWER: Q. It was something that she said to me she found Council life very frustrating. I know that it was her ambition, yours was going into business, but she always wanted to go onto Council but she said, I recall her the night of the last election twelve months ago she said "I don't know how my father and grandfather put up with it for so long". She said "I just find it so terribly frustrating". Did you ever recall Bob or John Brown say this?

MRS BROWN: A. No they didn't become frustrated because if things didn't go right they always sort of talked about it and tried to work it out and get to the bottom of the thing and straighten it out but they didn't let it get them down.

INTERVIEWER: Q. In the early days too you didn't have the party politicking going on in Council the way it is these days would it have been?

MRS BROWN: A. Well yes in a way.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Oh there was some?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. In the 30's and 40's we had a lot of Communist representatives of, Communist Party people in the area did they take much of an active role?

MRS BROWN: A. Well they tried to.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Just looking at the True Believers which has just finished on the ABC you know the Communist Party is not as prominent today as it was then?

MRS BROWN: A. No. We did have Communists here.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And how were they received by the people of Cessnock?

MRS BROWN: A. Not so well.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes in a Labour town?

MRS BROWN: A. Not so well no.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And did they try to become elected to Council?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes but they didn't get there, they didn't get there because it was one thing, although there was a lot of strong Labour diehards here they still didn't want communism.

INTERVIEWER: Q. If there was a little bit of politicking going on it would have been an orchestrated ALP faction, who were the other people, were they Independents because when I became first aware of Local Government in Cessnock it was the ALP or the Independents and I remember the first time I had to vote it was dominated by an Independent Council?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes well that didn't happen very often of course but if you wasn't a strong Labour man you'd be an Independent or Independent Labour.

INTERVIEWER: Q. That's right your husband stood for State and Federal Parliament on a couple of occasions, when was the first time?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh that was when Mr Neilly was in.

INTERVIEWER: Q. That was State Government, that was George Neilly?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. I think I can remember the year, it was in 1965 or '66?

MRS BROWN: A. And then he stood against Bert James in the Federal.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And how did he go against George Neilly?

MRS BROWN: A. Well he went very well but just not good enough.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Not good enough, but it was very, very close?

MRS BROWN: A. But you see in those days we were very, very Labour dominated.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes we're looking at twenty two years ago. And in the Federal Seat was it as close or?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes he done very well in the Federal against Bert James, but then again it just wasn't enough.

INTERVIEWER: Q. So he must have really been well and truly liked and respected by even Labour party people because with an area of something like eighty per cent votes being returned ALP he must have done extremely well?

MRS BROWN: A. Well he did, he did but that wasn't because of any party politics that was just because of him, of himself.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes well that's certainly something to be proud of?

MRS BROWN: A. Well yes it was.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Even though he didn't quite get there.

MRS BROWN: A. No, no but it was a really good effort.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And you've seen Cessnock change over the years with the wine industry becoming more well known and the amount of tourists, the number of tourists that have been coming into the area?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes that's played a big part in our area and the standard of living is very high in Cessnock now to what it was years ago. See you drive around we have beautiful homes here, as nice as you'd see anywhere.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes we do. And the thing that I've noticed too over the years are the number of older homes that are being restored?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And being renovated, I find that amazing and of course there's very little land within the city area itself for sale?

MRS BROWN: A. No there's not much land close to the town, you have to go out a bit now, out Nulkaba way and further afield.

INTERVIEWER: Q. To travel to Newcastle or Maitland or Sydney how would you have gone?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh it was a day, a whole day trip.

INTERVIEWER: Q. You had to change at Maitland Railway Station didn't we, did we change at Maitland to go into Newcastle?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes you had to change at Maitland and then get out at Newcastle Station and but of course Cessnock from Maitland out was a private line, it wasn't a Government railway.

INTERVIEWER: That's right, South Maitland Railways, they were my initials before I was married, S.M.R.

MRS BROWN: A. It was not a Government, from Maitland out it was owned by the collieries for the coal trucks and it was also used as a passenger train.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Of course the Brown name is very famous around the coal area isn't it with Baron John Brown. Yes we're often asked whether we have any affiliation with the family but unfortunately we have to say no. Well the area that I live in, Bolwarra, was actually a parcel of land granted to a John Brown as well and we think that it is the Baron Brown so he must have owned vast amounts of land?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes in the early days they did have big grants, they were granted this land.

INTERVIEWER: Q. The book that I've been doing a bit of research looking through has been of course a book called Mines, Wines and People. And it's very interesting too on some of the old, I thought I knew Cessnock very well until I read that, the three contributors to the book. Now who actually commissioned that, do you remember, the book?

MRS BROWN: A. To write it?

INTERVIEWER: Q. Yes. Was it commissioned by the Council or, because I recall that just after the book was published that Bob was no longer Mayor at the time?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes well it was commissioned by the Council but of course there were three men that done the Mines, Wines and People.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Do you recall whose idea it was to write the book? In this copy of Mines, Wines and People that you have here the three authors, Mr Parkes, Jim Comerford and Max Lake have signed the book, would you like to read what Max Lake's written, it's written to Bob and he says, can you read it?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes "To one of the great men of the area".

INTERVIEWER: Q. And then from Jim Comerford?

MRS BROWN: A. From Jim Comerford he wrote the mining section "To my old mate Bob" from Jim Comerford. And from Stan Parkes he said to Bob Thanking him for everything. Yes he gave a lot of information and the book was signed by three.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Well our copy that we have at home I would like before one of them retires or goes I'd like to get them to sign it because fortunately the three authors they're alive and it's a wonderful book on the area. As you said Cessnock has changed a great deal, what sorts of things would you like to see, we're fairly well serviced when you think about it in lots of ways, apart from transport, we don't have any Government transport which is something that is very unfortunate, at least the city of Maitland does have a railway line going through, but as far as services go,

the hospital, I mean the hospital has been a community hospital hasn't it?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And we have the retirement village. As a person looking back over your years what do you think could be done by the civic leaders to improve Cessnock.

MRS BROWN: A. Well as far as people go we still need, the aged people we need more accommodation for the aged here. We only have one retirement village and the Cessnock House for the elderly ladies and at Abernethy of course we have what we call the Old Mens Home. But the aged people are not so well catered for here.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Well what about for the younger people?

MRS BROWN: A. We need a lot more supervision and entertainment for the young people, there's not a great lot here for the younger people.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Of course there's been many avenues of entertainment sought over the years hasn't there?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. People have tried to get things off the ground for them but you know it's----

MRS BROWN: A. It's very hard to organise young people, they don't want to be organised they want to do their own thing and it is hard to find how to entertain them and what to do for them.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And for young families that are just starting out, young married couples what do you think their needs are?

MRS BROWN: A. Well from what I can see we have a lot of new young married school teachers being transferred here and they sort of get together and have their own amusement in their own homes. There's a lot of that going on here.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Of course there's no picture theatres here anymore?

MRS BROWN: A. No. We used to have about seven. Seven theatres here at one stage and but there's no theatre here now. Whether it would be patronised or not I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Of course there's a drive in just on the other side of Kurri and even it's declined over the years hasn't it?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes it has and another thing a lot of people if they're going out to the movies they just like to go out for an evening out, they'll go out for dinner and then on to a movie.

INTERVIEWER: Q. The attitudes of the mine workers say back thirty years ago to what they are now do you think they've changed at all or have they remained the same?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh I think a lot of miners have come along a long way in their thinking.

INTERVIEWER: Q. In what regard?

MRS BROWN: A. Well in what's going on around about them. They don't just go to work and come home and have tea and go to bed anymore, they, they're interested in what's going on and they like a bit of entertainment and they like mixing with other people.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Because it's an industry that is now in another stage of decline so it's going to be very interesting to see what happens to Cessnock because of course if the industry declines any further Cessnock could really be struggling for a while?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes and we don't want to be a ghost town.

INTERVIEWER: Q. No, the ghost town image is something that we can, the other industry that I recall coming to town was a gasworks?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes but of course that's gone now.

INTERVIEWER: Q. That's gone now, yes that was with the natural gas coming through that was closed down, that was the reason for that. So we probably need to attract a lot more industry?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes we do need industries and of course tourism has become a big thing. We do need to encourage the tourist trade.

INTERVIEWER: Q. Of course there's such a great number of people that can be working in the tourist industry but they have to be trained as well?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER: Q. It's not just something you go in without training because you're looking at international tourists?

MRS BROWN: A. Yes and you have to be able to keep up with them.

INTERVIEWER: Q. And of course one of the great cries about Cessnock is the roads?

MRS BROWN: A. Oh yes. Of course the roads were never built here for the traffic that we're getting through here, that's the big thing and that concrete road down through Neath down there, my late father-in-law had that concrete road put down in Depression days, was put down on what they call a RED scheme, that was an unemployment grant and he was called

all sorts of things for putting down a concrete road but it's still there.

INTERVIEWER: Q. That's right, and they are now starting to put down concrete roads.

MRS BROWN: A. I think they thought he was crazy putting down a concrete road.

INTERVIEWER: Well just to finish up with I think probably I'd like to make a comment why I wanted to do this interview, to put your thoughts through but also too I think that something that you and Bob gained over the years was respect from the people of Cessnock and I think that should be recognised.