

Open Foundation Course.

Oral History.
The Depression

Ernie and Ellen Fenly
interviewed by
Ann Cummings.

Outline of Oral History.

by Ann Cummings

I am interviewing Ernie + Ellen Fenly of Farnsworth St, Thornton. They are both aged in their late sixties. The subject I have chosen is the "Depression".

Ernie + Ellen (husband + wife) explain the differences between life today and life in the depression and the community spirit of the people in which the church played a major part. The 'dole' is discussed as well as the attitude of the unemployed and how they coped. The type of home commonly built is another point of interest as well as the food they could afford to eat. In spite of the depression, entertainment still played a part in their lives and Ellen + Ernie explain its form. Speaking from a workers point of view, they had many informative experiences to share.

The Depression

Life in the Depression was very different to ^{from} the way it is today. With minimal work and scant employment benefits, life became a battle for survival. Simple essentials such as housing and food were threatened by impending poverty. A community spirit developed as people banded together to help each other. While some people were able to build 'makeshift' houses or bush humpys, others found themselves evicted from their homes because they could no longer pay the rent. Pride in a man's ability to provide for his family often had to be abandoned as he lined up in a cue to take advantage of food and clothing handouts.

Ernie Fenly's first memory of the Depression was of people walking the parks with nothing to do. These people were unemployed. Their "dole" system consisted of the issuing of coupons which supplied you butter, sugar, milk and tea. Twice a year you were issued with clothing, Ernie was given a pair of boots and Ellen was given bloomers, shoes and a dress. Before you received your coupons, you were thoroughly investigated. One of the questions you were asked was why your parents could not support you.

Later, a scheme was introduced so that you worked for your unemployment benefit.

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Instead of coupons, you were now given money. How much work you were given was dependent on how many children you had. If you had one child you were given one day of work. If you had two or three children, you could expect to receive several days of work in a fortnight. If you did not take the job that was assigned to you, you would be refused your unemployment benefit. Ernie was given the job of napping stones for the roadwork. Another job he was given was clearing mud from the creek. This was not a popular job because as Ernie explains, "the poor bugger would be up to his waist in mud". Owning a horse was an advantage ~~for~~ because the horse would pull out the scoop of mud and you would earn more money as well as stay drier.

Ernie believed there was no stigma attached to being unemployed. He explains there was "none of that dole bludger business" and the unemployed were seen as "one unfortunate family". Ernie knew of no one who refused the dole because of stubborn pride. A caring community spirit prevailed in his township of Thornton. If someone needed help, a charity day or dance would be held to raise money for them. These dances were popular. A mother and daughter or a whole family would arrive in a horse and sulky.

The women would bring the refreshments and the men would boil water in a kerosene tin for tea. A piano and a violin supplied the necessary music for their square dance. Religion played a strong part in their lives for different religions would unite and patronize each others charity functions. This ensured that every function was a success.

Newcastle was dotted with small coal mines during the Depression. Anyone could dig for coal because coal mining was not regulated like it is today.

This coal was usually of poor quality and it was sold to the power station. The mine workers would cut their own timber props to hold up the roof and take them down in skips. When they arrived home, blackened by their days work, water would be boiled in kerosene tins to make their bath.

After the Depression, a coal board was formed and coal mine owners had to comply with new regulations, including the supply of toilet and shower facilities. The small coal miners who could not afford these amenities, had to close down. Most mining operations were made up from members of the same family and there were minimal accidents.

Housing could be a major problem to the unemployed. If you were working you could afford to rent a nice home but if you were unemployed,

you could not be fussy about where you lived or what type of house you lived in. To buy a house was considered unusual at that time. In the area where Ernie lived, he cannot remember anyone being evicted from their homes because they could not afford the rent. Land was very cheap and most houses were built roughly. One method of building a house was to buy used potato bags, soak them in a weak solution of cement and hang them up to dry. They would set so as "stiff as boards", Ernie said. These bags would be used for the side of your house. "Those houses stood for years" Ernie proudly told me.

Another type of house, built more commonly in the bush than the city, was a humpy. Ernie built his bush humpy so Ellen, his pregnant wife, could be closer to him. He was cutting railway sleepers for the Government at the time, and it was difficult for him to come home because he had no transport. Ernie started to save the bark from the trees. He would lay it on the ground and pile branches on it. These were used as weights. After several months of doing this, he started to build his house on the weekends. He used no nails in his humpy because you could not buy nails long enough to go through his bark. His gable roof was held on with wires and weights and the floor was left as dirt. Each day, Ellen would sprinkle the dirt floor with water

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till it was hard as concrete. Potato bags were used as mats and a side house was built with a stove. A mattress was made from kapok which was thoroughly teased and inserted in a cover.

The Depression was a time when women were scarce in the workforce. This was due to the belief that men should have first priority on any work that became available. Women's wages were dramatically lower than a man's wage. Ellen worked before she was married and although she would have preferred a higher wage, she was grateful for what little work or wage she could find. When she married, she stayed at home and looked after her family. (He) Ellen had all her babies at home and after the birth, she would stay in bed for a fortnight while her mother tended her. She sewed their clothes, knitted, crocheted, cooked and cleaned without any modern appliances. "That was our pleasure those days, to stop home with the children and look after them," Ellen explained.

Owning a car was considered a luxury in the Depression. If you did own a car and you were unemployed, Ernie explained that your car would probably be an "old bomb". No one had a licence because it was not considered necessary.

The tyres would be showing canvas or have a hole in them, but no one including the police, would be perturbed by this. It was also rare for a woman to drive.

Camping was considered to be the most popular form of holiday. There were no site fees, tables and chairs were built roughly from wood and you would live simply. It was a cheap holiday that was enjoyed by all.

Budgeting was a must in the Depression. Ernie was fortunate in that he could pick up vegetables cheaply from the farms. Rabbit was a popular food and you could often cook a stew from sixpence worth of meat. There was no refrigeration and the butcher would arrive in a horse and cart. Often his meat would be flyblown. Doctors and dentists would have to wait for payment and the local store would allow you to "tick up" until you could pay. Credit was unheard of for such things as furniture for you had no collateral. Wages were low, there was no sick pay or holiday pay and when you did lose a days pay, life became an even greater struggle. The Depression is not a time ^{that} Ernie would like to relive, but I feel his resilient nature helped him cope a little better than ^{many} others.

Bibliography.

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