

JUDY JOHNSTON

O.F.C. AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

WEDNESDAY 7th September, 1988

ORAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT

ESSAY IN CONTEXT WITH INTERVIEW OF MRS. MAY MARCH

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Maitland and Newcastle from the days of settlement continued to grow and prosper however by the mid 1920s problems of unemployment were being experienced in the region, especially Newcastle, climaxing with the Great Depression. Approximately thirty percent of Australian workers became unemployed and large numbers of families were forced onto the dole. Many families suffered great hardships with many being evicted from their homes, with some moving into shanty towns. The Great Depression affected the whole of Australia and it was many years before the situation began to improve.

By the mid 1920s Newcastle was beginning to feel the effects of a decline in the coal industry and in some cases miners only worked 145 days a year.<sup>1</sup> This in turn affected the whole of Newcastle as coal was the port's largest export. At the same time, because of the publicity of the growth of the iron and steel industry, workers were attracted to Newcastle but being unable to find employment stayed, increasing the ranks of the unemployed. In February of 1929 because the miners would not accept a severe wage cut<sup>2</sup> most of the mines in the northern area were closed down by the mine owners in an attempt to lower the price of coal. The lockout was initially blamed for the unemployment in Newcastle when the real cause was the depression.

During this period many industries including B.H.P., Rylands and the State Dockyard dismissed hundreds of workers. This in turn affected many other industries one of which was the building industry.<sup>3</sup> This high unemployment placed a great burden on the local municipal councils as the State Government did not give assistance or take responsibility for this situation.

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1. Gray, S., Newcastle in the Depression, Broadmeadow, 198 , p.11  
2. Ward, R., A Nation for a Continent, Melbourne, 1977, p.167  
3. Gray, S., Newcastle in..... p.14

Elsewhere in Australia problems were being experienced. Some of the problems were caused by the tariffs on manufactured goods imposed by the Government to protect the over-production of sugar, fruit, butter and others, the high cost of shipping freights and high wages. Another cause was the high interest charges for overseas borrowings, all these became a burden on Australian enterprise and high unemployment resulted. In 1927 income from exports began to fall and this was the main reason for the depression in Australia, but this coupled with the drying up of overseas loan funds caused the depression to last longer in Australia. <sup>5</sup>

In 1930 one of the first signs of the large number of unemployed in Newcastle was the makeshift housing <sup>6</sup> which appeared on crown land, becoming known as shanty towns. The earliest of these was at Adamstown which was mainly used by itinerets searching for work. Many of the other municipalities had similiar camps, some being at Stockton, Carrington, Hollywood and Waratah. A camp was established by the State and Commonwealth Governments which was occupied mainly by men and this camp proved a thorn in the side of Newcastle until 1937. <sup>7</sup> Many of these camps were in existence until 1950.

Many families, unable to pay their rent or home loans, after being served with Notices to Quit were forcibly evicted from their homes. This was done by the owners while the police stood by and guarded them and although many evictions had taken place in Sydney, during 1931 the first of several evictions were carried out at Newcastle. These actions caused the formation of an Anti-Eviction Committee. One of the largest confrontations by the Anti-Eviction Committee with the police in Newcastle took place at Clara Street, Tighes Hill.

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4. Shaw A.G.L., The Economic Development of Australia, 6th ed., Melbourne, 1963 p.144

5. Ward, R., A Nation.....p.163

6. Gray, S., Newcastle in.....p.17

7. Ibid p.19

Life for many families forced to live on the dole was one long struggle of making ends meet. The dole was just enough to stave off malnutrition but many times people went hungry. In Newcastle because of men's anticipation of casual work, which was of a heavy nature, women and children ate less to keep their strength up.<sup>8</sup> Also because of under-nourishment and poor living conditions people were more susceptible to sickness and diseases.

Destitute single men were paid 'susso' which in 1931 was five shillings and sixpence, this was when the basic wage was £3,7.0.<sup>9</sup> For them to qualify in some states for relief, which was given in the form of food coupons, they had to leave their homes and roam the countryside searching for work. In some cases young women were also forced to do the same. Due to the large number of unemployed young men in Newcastle in 1931 some concerned citizens started a Young Citizens League to keep them occupied, teaching them the wireless, gardening and poultry.<sup>10</sup> However nothing was done by the Government until the late 1930s and then this problem of unemployment was solved the World War 11.

Unemployed women in Newcastle had a very difficult time during the depression. There was little or no employment for unskilled females and many were unwilling to enter domestic service. For a very small wage, or in some cases only board and lodging, in return for their services they were little better off than slaves. But when applying for food relief if they did not take the positions offered by the Department of Labour and Industry, relief was denied them.<sup>11</sup> Also for many families to survive and make life easier, girls were often encouraged by their families to enter domestic service. Because of this dilemma and accusations of immorality if they were destitute many

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8. Gray, S., Newcastle in.....p.27

9. Ward, R., A Nation.....p.188

10. Gray, S., Newcastle in.....p.29

11. Ibid p.32

women kept silent about their situation and the number of unemployed women did not appear to be great.

The birthrate during this period declined with Newcastle registering less births than the remainder of the State, in 1933 only reaching an average of 15.9% per thousand.<sup>12</sup> This was probably due to the poor health of the women.<sup>13</sup> The unemployed and poor could not afford contraceptions and abortions were widely practised while children who were born during this period were often small in size and suffered poor health.

Prior to the depression in the Newcastle region coalmining and the iron and steel industry were having difficulties and workers were dismissed in large numbers. Elsewhere in Australia the Great Depression was preceded by tarrifs, high wages, freight and interest charges which resulted in high unemployment. A large contribution to the depression in Australia was the loss of income the export of wheat and wool and during the depression approximately 30% of Australians were out of work. Families faced great hardships, the dole was insufficient for even the basic food and clothing and following evictions many people moved to shanty towns. Families were separated when young men and sometimes young women, had to leave home or enter domestic service to receive relief. Gradually conditions improved but full employment was only reached with the advent of World War 11.

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12. Gray, S., Newcastle in.....p.33

13. MacKinolty, J., The Wasted Years, North Sydney, 1981 p.109

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Signed ..... *A. M. March* .....

Date ..... 30th July, 1988 .....

Interviewer ..... JUDY JOHNSTON .....

JUDY JOHNSTON

O.F.C. AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

WEDNESDAY 7th SEPTEMBER, 1988

TRANSCRIPT

ORAL HISTORY ASSIGNMENT

|                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| Interviewer:                 | Judy Johnston                             |
| Interviewee:                 | Mrs. May March aged 82                    |
| Topic:                       | Mrs. March's memories of her early years. |
| Date and Place of Interview: | 30th July, 1988<br>Lorn Street, Lorn      |

### SUMMARY

My Aunt's earliest memories were of a little house in St. Andrew Street, Maitland. Apparently it was a very basic house and not very comfortable. The family's next move was to Bourke Street and this house was slightly more comfortable. It was a two storey house consisting of an attic where the two bedrooms were situated and the children slept upstairs. By this time the family had increased to ten children. Their last move was back to St. Andrews Street to, as she said, a lovely brick house. All these homes were rented.

My Aunt and her eldest sister went to school at the Monte Pio Orphanage at Campbells Hill. There were no buses to travel to school in, they had to walk to and from school. She only attended school until she was fourteen leaving school at the completion of sixth class. Aunty May has fond memories of the Nuns who taught her and the nice friends she made amongst the orphans.

On leaving school there were no jobs available and my Aunt had to go on the dole. In those days you had to work for the dole and she was asked what she could do. On advising the authorities that she could sew was sent to the Maitland Hospital with two other girls. Aunty May's task was to sew curtains and she remembers sitting in a great room with the sewing machine. Not an electric machine but the old fashioned type which you worked with your feet. The two girls who went to the hospital with her were given the chore of washing floors in the wards. What she stressed was the lunch she was given as part of the payment for the day's work. She was not paid in money but received a food voucher which could be used at the grocery store or the butcher shop. My mother and her younger sisters were employed as domestics as they were not trained for anything else.

Money, or the lack of it, played a large part in their everyday lives. There always seemed to be the problem of feeding the very large family. Aunty May said a large part of their diet was bread and porridge. In fact she said they were reared on bread and porridge. There were no fancy cuts of meat but chuck steak was used to make braises. The family consumed large quantities of soup or as Aunty May said "something that would go around." There were no luxuries such as butter and sugar, instead they had dripping on their bread, which as she said if you "put a bit of salt on it" it tasted quite nice. Through the lack of money most of their clothes were hand-me-downs or given to them by the St. Vincent de Paul Society.

Saturday night was bath night and in winter this took place in the kitchen in front of the fire. Their home contained only the very basics in furniture and there was only lino on the floor. The only form of cold storage was an ice chest.

Family life was very simple in those days. There was no wireless and there appeared to be few outings aside from the family attending Church on Sunday. As the children grew up they were allowed to attend the local pictures and later the church dances. It seemed that in order for each member of the family to make their contribution to the survival of the household they did not marry very young.

Upon her marriage and the birth of her sons, because of her memories of the depression with the resultant lack of employment, she wanted something better for her children. She went to work late in life in order to give them a good education, both obtaining degrees.

TRANSCRIPT

Question: Aunty May, whereabouts did you first live when you were born?

We lived in St. Andrews Street. A little weatherboard house just around the corner in St. Andrews Street, up the top end. Ah, it was a very old house and didn't have much in it, but it was comfortable you know, sort of thing. And then as we got more children, you know, and it got up to ten children, you know sort of thing, it was pretty hard. But then we went, then we went to Bourke Street.

Question: Was it a very big house in Bourke Street?

No, it was a, just an ordinary house and it had an attic on it and we used to sleep in the attic, upstairs. There were stairs on the side to go up to the attic. We used to sleep up there because the house only had two bedrooms. We were a little bit more comfortable there than we were in Bourke Street. And then we went back to St. Andrews Street to a lovely brick home. It was owned by Mr. Heads who had the cordial factory at the time. We were only renting it, you know sort of thing, but it was a lovely home. And, er, that was our last home, sort of thing.

Question: And how did you mother cope with all the sheets and...?

Well we went to school, we didn't finish Leaving Certificate or anything like that. We knocked off when you know, what do they call it now, sixth year or something. Well we knocked off then. Well we, all we knew was housework. See we weren't trained for anything. Oh the only thing is Gladys (my mother) went to do housework and the others did housework too. That was all done.....the only thing is in the dole in those days they didn't give you money they gave you a voucher and you could spend it at the grocers or the butcher.

Question: Did you father work all the time while you were.....?

No, when as I say when he came of age to retire he did gardening.

Question: But when you were young children he was working.....?

Oh yes, he was working full time out at the engineering, out at Neath.

Question: Oh yes, and the relationships with your family, you had a lot of boys and girls?

Ohhh...well we just had friends from school, you know. In those days you didn't have them like you have them like you've got to-day. You didn't go out with a girl friend or anything like that.

Question: There would have been a shortage of money, wouldn't there?

Yes, the money was the....the trouble with the clothing and food, you know sort of thing.

Question: And when you were children what were your activities, what did you do in your leasure time?

Ohh..what did we do. We just stopped home, I don't remember.... we used to go to the pictures. It used to cost us sixpence to go in those days....(laughter) and yes we used to go to the pictures, we were allowed to go to the pictures. But apart from that we just didn't, you know, have anything big or anything like that. As for birthdays, well we just had the family, you know sort of thing. In those days there wasn't much money about, you know. But when we went on the dole they asked us what we could do. Well I could sew a little bit and I went to the Maitland Hospital making curtains on a machine. That was my dole pay. And two girls went with me but they went in washing floors and that sort of thing, you know. I can remember that, sitting up in this great big room with the machine. It was those electric machines just the ones you use with your feet and er I think that was all we done. None of us had a trade or anything like that, you know. We weren't....in those days money was too scarce you know...

Question: Also in those early days we might ask a bit about the locality. Were many roads formed or many houses around where you lived?

Oh there were always houses, yes, Oh yes, we weren't isolated. There were always houses alongside of us and that sort of thing. I know when we were in St. Andrews Street there was a lady there by the name of Mrs. Kidd, she lived next door to us. No there were always houses where we went, we weren't isolated, you know...

Question: Was there much of a shopping centre in those days. Were there industries and blacksmiths and I suppose there were lots of hotels and that around?

Yes, there wasn't the shopping like there is to-day.....there was just the ordinary shops for clothing and getting your groceries and that sort of thing you know. Just ordinary small shops. They weren't like big ones like they are to-day, you know sort of thing. But apart from that the living, we got enough to eat. I think we were... bread and porridge. I think we were reared on it really...

Question: And what did you have for tea at night? What was your dinner at night?

We had mostly...we didn't go in for rump steak as the saying goes, but we did have a lot of chuck steak. Mum used to make a lot of braises and soup, we had a lot of soup, you know sort of thing. Something that would go around, you know sort of thing. But a few times we didn't even have butter or sugar or anything like that, but we had dripping and on bread it was quite nice if you put a bit of salt in it...(laughter). But we did that, that is right we did... but it didn't hurt us. The way we grew up it didn't hurt us one bit because that was the times. It wouldn't do for people to live/<sup>like</sup>it to-day.

Question: And what sort of transport would have been around in those days?

Oh walk (laughter).

Question: Would you remember the Maitland trams?

The tram went through High Street, yes, yes I remember the tram that went right through High Street, yes. Umm, well cars were out and all that sort of thing. There wasn't cars like there is to-day.

If we saw a car it was something new, you know sort of thing. Oh they've changed a lot to-day.

Question: And were there many larrikins in those days, like there are to-day?

No (laughter) not like they are to-day (laughter). They're dreadful to-day, really dreadful.

Question: And did you all go to Church in those days, was that a...?

Yes, we had to go to Church every Sunday and we used to have, we didn't have refrigerators and things like that. Every Saturday night was our bath night and we had a big tub and just bathed in front of the fire in the winter time, in the kitchen and with the ice-chest the ice-man used to go around in those days and you'd have the food in the bottom and your ice in the top and you had to watch your water tray because it went down into your food. But we never knew what refrigerators were in those days.

Question: And how old were you when you went out for your first job?

Oh gee I think I would be around about fourteen, I'd say.....

Question: And where did you go for your first position?

Where did I go?

Question: Yes, what did you do?

Oh that's when I went on the dole.

Question: On the dole to the hospital.

Mmmm..

Oh, I see.

See you had to be a certain age when you knocked off school to get the dole and that's what it was. Just a voucher, no money, just a voucher but to the value of that voucher, but you don't get it like you get it to-day. You could either take it to the butchers or to the grocers and bought your food that way. But, er, then they expected you to work for it in those days. That's why I had to go to the hospital. I didn't have to go but they asked what I could do see and I said, Oh well I can sew a bit (laughter) and that's why I went. It was lovely. We, er, we only worked one day a week and then they gave us a meal in the hospital like when we finished, mid-day, and that sort of thing you know. But I made those big curtains, just hemmed them and then when we were finished the next time we ...went up we were doing the bandages, you know for, they used to have the bandages in those days. We were doing those. But there were one or two girls with me, there were three of us sort of thing at a time that went to the hospital. But, er, we didn't notice it, we just sort of ....you know, that was our way of living in that time, you know sort of thing.

Question: You went up to sixth class at school. What was your schooling like?

Oh well I went to the orphanage school and the Nuns oh were lovely. Yes we went to the Nuns up at the orphanage and....they were lovely. Of course in those days there was orphans there too. They had the orphans there and we had some nice friends amongst the orphans. It was really nice there. I enjoyed that school. I think your mother and the others, there was only Molly and I went up there I think. The others went to, down to the other school.

**Question:** St. Johns. Why would that have been?

Down there, to the Nuns down there. I think your mother went down there I don't think she went to the orphanage. I remember Molly and I going up there. We used to have to walk from St. Andrews Street right up to the orphanage school and back home again. There were no buses in those days.

**Question:** Did you ever get a job or you just always on the dole?

No, no I never...just, we just did the housework and that sort of thing. We weren't trained to do anything sort of thing, you know. But of course as long as we were on the dole we had something coming in to help with the house, with the food, that was all there was to it. The furniture was just ordinary, we had nothing special. Beds and table and that sort of thing.

**Question:** Did you have wireless in those days?

No, and we had no carpet on the floor either in those days. It was all lino right through the house (laughter). I remember that because we used to help with the housework, you know sort of thing, at home. But when you look back now it wasn't hard, you know what I mean. It.. because I think the children to-day got it made, but we didn't notice it. We were just growing up, you know we were happy in our family.

**Question:** What age did you start courting?

Oh boy. You mean what age were we let out to go to a dance? (laughter) Oh, I'd say well in the twenties (laughter). Oh no. Mum and dad weren't strict but they..we were family you know what I mean. Just... of course we all had our rows and you know, upset and sort of thing, just family, you know sort of thing. We didn't notice it. We didn't think it was hard at the time, you know sort of thing. We used to have hand-down clothes, as you grew out of them, it will fit you and that sort of thing. Especially with the boys. The boys were...

had to have hand-down clothes and that sort of thing. I think Mum used to buy some from the St. Vincent de Paul were in those days too. And I think we got clothes from there. They didn't sell them there, they gave them to you, you know. They sell them now.

Question: Where did you go to for the dances? Where were the dances?

The dances were mostly at the Catholic, I think it was the Catholic Hall. No there wasn't a hall there was there....but it was something to do with the schools I know. I just can't think where they had the dances then...

Question: Is that where you met Uncle Claud?

Oh, where did I meet Claude? Yes at a dance. Yes, that's right at a dance, that's how we met there. And, er, I don't think your Mum did. I don't know where she met your father, I just forget, to tell the truth. But, er, know those things they just all fall into place, don't they. You know what's that like sort of thing. But I<sup>met him</sup>/at some dance because I know we used to go to a few dances you know, sort of thing. Dances and picture shows, that was it.

Question: And you courted for quite a few years before you got married?

Oh yes, oh yes. We weren't allowed to get married on the spur of the moment. They wouldn't have it (laughter). Oh yes, yes. None of us married early. But still and all I suppose we lived, that's the main thing.

Question: And where did you have your wedding breakfast when you got married?

All at home. There wasn't halls, we couldn't afford a hall in those days, you know sort of thing. One of us got married and I can't think who it was. I was trying to think the other day. It was in Bourke Street...in St. Andrews Street in this big home that we were

in and we put the food on ourselves but we had to have cordials and things for drinking and of course beer and that weren't mentioned, you know, in those times. Mum had ordered the cordials from the factory, you know they bring it in the cases in those days, the bottles. And when the wedding was over, and the breakfast started the cordials didn't arrive (laughter) and we had nothing but a cup of tea. Look I can't think whose wedding that was, I know it wasn't mine, but I can't think. But that was right. We had no cordials, no drink (laughter)

Question: You would have been married during the depression, or you would have gone through the depression.

Oh well see Claude was working. He was a painter see. He worked at Hexham butter factory and er, yes it would have been in the depression. We went through the depression. Oh, I think everybody in those days did, you know sort of thing. But, I can't think of one time that Claude wasn't out of work. But...only when he got sick then he couldn't work, you know sort of thing. But to-day with... we were more worried about the boys you know, getting them settled up sort to thing. That's why I went to work (laughter).

Thank you very much for this interview.