

NAME SHANE HARRIS

SUBJECT OPEN FOUNDATION AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

NEWCASTLE 1905 - 1928

TUTOR MARGARET HENRY

DAY THURSDAY A M

WORD COUNT APPROXIMATELY 1000

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Historically Newcastle has always been a city of both punishment and profit. The Aborigines were the victims of the British invaders who profitted, the convicts were the victims who made the settlement profit and the workers made the captains of industry successful.<sup>1</sup>

Newcastle has always been a wage earner's city with an unbroken tradition of earning its living by the sweat of its brow. So conscious were its inhabitants of these associations that, fifty years ago, when excavations near the steelworks uncovered ancient Aboriginal axes, choppers, and heaps of sea-shells, residents interpreted them to mean that Newcastle had been the site of small, primitive workshops even before the coming of the white man.<sup>2</sup>

In the early twentieth century, Newcastle was wholly dependent upon one main source of income for financial survival until the establishment of manufacturing industry, agriculture, the beef and wine industries and later tourism. Because of the large working class population, the Labor Party was loyally supported, unfortunately the safe seat "syndrome" meant that rewards for support were often forgotten.<sup>3</sup>

The coal industry which provided the main source of income also caused pollution and subsidence. As coal was the fuel used in factories and homes, locomotives and trams as well as cargo ships, Newcastle was "wreathed" in coal dust. The other source of pollution was the night soil which was buried in backyards before the implementation of a city sanitation service. Piped domestic water was only available in the inner city.<sup>4</sup>

As there was no street lighting beyond the inner city, suburbs such as Lambton, New Lambton and Merewether were hazardous to the night traveller. The roads were poorly made with few footpaths, street signs and house numbers. The public transport system consisted of horse drawn buses, steam trams and later electric trams and motor buses. Because of the limited transport system, workers tended to live close to their employment or near tram and rail stations.

Before 1930 few people owned motor vehicles thus the bicycle and horse were the working man's conveyances until the motor bike became popular.<sup>5</sup>

Electricity and piped water were available to inner city housing but the highest home ownership was in the mining towns which sprang up around the perimeter of Newcastle. Families moved as better houses with less rent became available near employment. The style of housing varied from brick terraces in the inner city, wooden cottages in the mining towns to shantys made from a variety of materials in the "camps" of the depressions.<sup>6</sup>

The social over-view of Newcastle in the depressions describes it as being a "dingy town, a town of bitter out-of-work men", and as "Lazarus without a Christ," depicts the hopelessness and despair of the unemployed "bread winners" who had lost employment in the mines, industry and on the railways.<sup>7</sup>

The wives and mothers who supported their men during these hard times were educated for domestic service, factory and retail work. A basic instruction in English and Mathematics with more emphasis on domestic education was usual before 1920, when schools such as Cook's Hill Intermediate High School began teaching girls French, Geometry and other subjects education became quite a problem for them as they had no "ground" knowledge of these subjects.<sup>8</sup>

The "heavy" industries of the 1900's were the largest employers of the available workforce, but this type of work was unsuitable for female workers. The factories and retail businesses accounted for almost all female employment in Newcastle. Arnott's biscuit factory, Kingsborough's, Scott's and Winn's employed three quarters of the females suitable for that type of work. The wage for shop assistants was one half of the male wage for the same work.<sup>9</sup>

The system of unpaid dressmaking apprenticeships was destroyed by the Minimum Wage Act of 1909, the weekly wage was set at forty shillings. These apprenticeships were really sweated labour as the dressmakers were poorly skilled

and could only offer instruction in basic sewing which would hardly be income producing for the qualified apprentice.<sup>10</sup>

As Mrs Gam recalls in her interview, her education began at a pre-school operated by untrained staff. The children were really in a day care situation as there was no formal instruction, they simply played in a supervised situation. The mention of broken Arnott's biscuits and watered-down milk suggests there was little interest shown by relevant authorities. She was a pupil at Cook's Hill School when subjects other than those previously taught were introduced into girl's education.

She was employed at fifteen by Way's Limited, her position appears to have been that of a clerk though she attended business college at night to learn "office" skills. Her story is typical of a working class girl in the 1920's.

As her family remained employed until the 1930's, she was not really affected by the depression. She was able to obtain better employment with Manufacturer's Mutual after the incorporation of an insurance company. This is quite interesting as Sheila Grey states that the Depression in Newcastle really lasted from 1920 until 1940.

Her mother was employed at Goldsmith's shoe store and her father was an engineer with Morison and Bearby at Carrington. He taught mechanical drawing in the evenings at home and at the Technical College, obviously he had received a good education.

Family life was important and the mention of excursions to the beach, the vaudeville shows and the "moving pictures" conjures up a picture of something wholesome which is missing in today's family life.

She mentions rents rather than mortgages and moving to be near transport and employment. The thought of no lawn adds to the dismal picture of Newcastle in the 1900's.

The practice of giving birth at home was obviously quite normal then and was not considered a "spectator Sport", as it surely is today. The close proximity with which families lived is not common in the 1980's.

The social life for young people appeared to be without the threat of drug and alcohol abuse, entertainment was simple and homely. It was quite safe to move around the city at night.

The Newcastle of today is still struggling for economic survival. Its proximity to Sydney and poor harbour facilities and difficulties in diversification " because of the economic and political hegemony of the capital cities" have created great obstacles for financial stability.<sup>11</sup>

The almost childlike trust in the Labor Party has greatly disadvantaged Newcastle because a safe seat attracts little from the party in government. Likewise, non Labor parties have shown little interest in what was regarded as an unwinnable seat.<sup>12</sup>

The turbulent history of Newcastle, from the British invaders dislocating the Aborigines, the penal settlement to the depressions and short term economic booms are well documented. Newcastle has largely remained dependent upon a single industry with profits being enjoyed away from the source because of the lack of local control.<sup>13</sup>

Before post war migration, Newcastle was a British industrial city transposed on Australian soil with all the same socio-economic problems, struggling for economic survival. Now the problems of retaining educationally qualified people should stimulate diversification from the coal industry.<sup>14</sup>

FOOTNOTES

1. J C Docherty, Newcastle, The Making of an Australian City,  
Sydney, 1983 p. 166
2. Ibid. p. 51
3. Ibid. p. 164
4. Ibid. p. 21
5. Ibid. p. 21, 24
6. Ibid. p. 20, 22, 24
7. Ibid. p. 62
8. Davies & Cannington Ltd., and Reg. C. Pogonoski Ltd.,  
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9. J C Docherty, Newcastle, The Making of an Australian City,  
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10. Ibid
11. Ibid. p. 164
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid. p. 162

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Summary for Local History Tape

Subject : Family Life in Newcastle 1905 - 1928

Interviewee : Mrs M Gam

Interviewer : Shane Harris C498975311

Open Foundation Course : Australian History 1988

Thursday pm





Mrs M Gam was born at Carrington in 1905. She lived there until her family moved to Cook's Hill in 1907.

Her recollections of Carrington are sketchy as she was so young, but she remembers the horse drawn bus and that her father, an engineer, worked for Marson and Beby. Transport difficulties made people live near their place of work.

The family home in Council Street, Cook's Hill is still standing today. It was a single standing terrace house with the usual "two up, two down", kitchen at the rear. There was an upstairs and downstairs balcony, the latter opened onto the street. The back yard was bricked, as was common in those days.

She remembers Halley's Comet in 1910, apparently she did not see the famous colours in the "tail".

People moved house quite often in those days. It was usual for friends to carry furniture if the next house was close. She feels that the reasons for moving often were proximity to work, better house for less rent or unemployment.

Her next home was in Bruce Street, Cook's Hill where she lived until her mother died. Her seven year old boyfriend moved the family pot plants in his billy-cart.

She attended a kindergarten in Darby Street, it was privately operated by two young girls. The children were given watered down milk and broken biscuits for morning tea. The cost per week was threepence.

She remembers Bar Beach as being a gravel hill, the family often swam at this beach.

She attended Cook's Hill School where she learnt domestic science subjects until the system was changed. When the new system was introduced she had no previous knowledge of Algebra, French or other subjects which were taught to the boys.

On Friday afternoons she and her friend often met their mothers for afternoon tea and the "moving pictures". That was also a time for dental visits.

She remembers her brother being born at home, this was the usual practice then. The midwife would keep a close check on the expectant mother and care for both she and the child after the birth. She feels that today home births have become "spectator sports".

After her mother's death, the family lived with grandparents in Dawson Street. She attended the Presbyterian Sunday School, Methodist Mission and Congregational Church on Sundays!

She left school at fifteen to work in the office of Ways Limited. This was a large catering and ice making firm with branch shops in Newcastle. They catered for all the large functions, weddings and receptions such as the one held for the Prince of Wales.

She attended business college at night to improve her "office" skills. She was to use these skills when she left Ways to work at Manufacturer's Mutual, which later incorporated an insurance company.

Friday and Saturday nights were hectic for young people, reserved seats at the pictures and dances. It was quite safe to move around the "town" of Newcastle at night.

Mrs Gam married in 1928 and moved to Main Creek where she ran a saw mill whilst her husband sought work during the Depression.

UNIVERSITY OF NEWCASTLE

OPEN FOUNDATION COURSE

1988

I, Marjorie Gam give my  
permission to Shane Harris

to use this interview, or part of this interview, for  
research, <sup>N/A</sup> publication and/or <sup>N/A</sup> broadcasting (delete one of  
these if required) and for copies to be lodged in  
the History Dept.

Newcastle University

for the use of other bona fide researchers.

Signed Marjorie Gam

Date 26/10/88

Interviewer Shane Harris

OPEN FOUNDATION AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

LOCAL HISTORY FAIR COPY OF TAPE

INTERVIEWEE MRS M GAM FAMILY LIFE 1905-1928 NEWCASTLE

SHANE HARRIS THURSDAY A.M.

We lived at Carrington because my father worked for Morison and Bearby, an engineering firm, Everybody lived near their work because of transport problems. The only thing I remember about Carrington is the little horse-drawn bus which went into town. The seats were all around the inside, the windows went up and down, I remember this because I caught my hand. We moved from Carrington to Cook's Hill.

We lived in Council Street, Cook's Hill. From a very early age I was taught my name and the number of our house in case I became lost, I was told to find a policeman.

It was a free standing terrace house, brick, with the usual "two up and two down". The kitchen was off the back and the staircase in the hall. It had both an upstairs and a downstairs balcony and opened onto the street.

My first friend lived next door, she is the same age and we have been firm friends since we were two. When they moved my grandparents took their house. There was a tiny lane between the houses. Today they have been beautifully restored.

When we lived in that house, I can remember my father waking me to see Halley's Comet, there weren't any colours in it.

In those days people shifted a lot, I think the main reasons were for better housing and cheaper rents. The rent for our next house was seventeen and six.

When I was about seven or eight we moved to a bigger house with a larger back yard which was also bricked. I used to long for a house with grass around it.

I can remember our friends helping us move around the corner, things would be put into conveyances and the men would carry wardrobes on their backs. My first "boyfriend" carried our pot plants in his billy-cart. We lived in this house until I was twelve.

The kindergarten I attended was privately run by two young girls, it was in Darby Street and cost three pence a week. At playtime, we were given watered-down milk and broken biscuits from Arnott's factory. Mum used to take me and my first school-mate to the tramline in Darby Street, we would walk from there. In the afternoon, the girls would put us over the tramline and we would walk the two blocks home from there.

After school, if it was hot, we would go to Bar Beach for a swim. Bar Beach was just a gravel hill then. On Friday afternoons, my mother and Mrs Fry would go to the "moving pictures" at the Lyceum. They would be brought a cup of tea and biscuits. We used to meet them there and go on to the dentist. In those days it would take ages to fill or "stuff" a tooth.

I was at Cook's Hill school for ten years.

Q What was it like, segregated?

A It was a domestic science school for the girls. The

boys were separate. In my last year it changed to a high school, the boys were brought over, and we had male teachers as well.

We were taught geometry, trigonometry, French and algebra, subjects we had never had before. Of course there were no more sewing and cooking lessons.

It had an asphalt playground which was terribly hot but there were weather sheds. Because I lived close, I went home for dinner.

This transition into a high school meant that if I wanted to be a teacher or a nurse, I had to stay another year. Before going to teacher training college, you went to Hereford House.

When we were living in Bruce Street, my brother was born at home, this was quite usual then. The midwife would keep a check on the prospective mother and attend the birth. I was nine when my brother was born.

My mother died when I was twelve. We then moved to Dawson Street with my grandparents. They lived between the Baptist Tabernacle and the Presbyterian Church. I was sent to the nearest Sunday School, Presbyterian, although I was Congregational. I went to the Methodist Mission with them and the Congregational in the afternoon.

Although I would have liked to teach or nurse, I went to work at Way's when I was fifteen. They were a large catering firm, like Sargents, with branch shops.

I was the youngest of four girls in the office. We worked from nine until six, Monday to Thursday, nine until nine on Fridays, and nine until one on Saturdays as well as all public holidays with a fortnights annual holiday. I was paid fifteen shillings a week with mid-day dinner provided. We could have anything on the menu but the specials. Afternoon tea was brought into the office, which was very handy when I went to business college at night. I got a raise of half a crown, two and six, every six months.

Two nights a week I learnt shorthand and typing at Stott and Hoares in Thorn Street, I would have something to eat at the YWCA opposite and then go and practise typing before the lesson. The fares were six pence each way and three and six in fees.

After a few months, I had to go around the shops and read and turn off the cash registers. I left home early, Hamilton South, to start my job. The first shop was in Beaumont Street, the second near Hamilton Station, the third at the Bank Corner, one in Union Street, one next to David Jones', and the "top" shop was opposite Steffer's, now Fletcher Jones. I had an hour to get there. I was given two shillings for the

The pies were three pence retail, cakes were one penny and three pennies each, special French bread rolls were three pence. I did the ordering for the shops. I had to add all the little itemised tickets.

The "top" shop had a basement tea-room and a first class dining room upstairs. The meal was two shillings and three pence with soup and sweets three pence extra. Any left over chicken was curried.

Way's did the catering for the Show, races, sometimes I had to go and work on the cash register, there was no extra pay for this.

We also catered for the dockyard, the meals were sent out on a little ferry in time for the evening meal for the "bosses" on late shif.

The shop served breakfast a seven, the kitchen was in the basement. They did all the big balls, banquets and weddings. They catered for the Prince of Wales' reception. I do not know what happened to them.

I worked there for three years and then I went to the Chamber of Manufacturers for thirty shillings a week. It was the first office in Newcastle. I left after eighteen months to work at the Chamber of Manufacture and Manufacturer's Mutual Insurance.

On Friday nights you met your friends in town and on Saturday nights you went to balls, the pictures, and parties. The social life was good for young people. The School of Arts in Watt Street was a good place to meet.

My father taught mechanical drawing at home and he was one of the first teachers at the Technical Colleges night classes. It was in Hunter Street, near Union Street. He attempted to build a car but this was not successful, though he made pedal tricycles for my brother and me.

On Sunday afternoons, families would walk to the beach and visit their friends for tea.

Most children were involved in something like dancing, choir or elocution. Mrs Hannell lived where the Cultural Centre is now, organised productions for children, unfortunately I was frightened by the "bad" boys who used to chase us.

As a family we enjoyed the vaudeville; Dix and Baker operated from the Victoria Theatre. We also visited my grand father at Toronto; we caught the train from Honeysuckle Station. Toronto was only settled between Fig Tree and Carey Bay.



I can remember the steam trams and the electric trams which went up Scott Street and down Hunter Street. There were no traffic lights but on the corner of Perkins and Hunter stood Mr Creamer in his pith helmet, directing the traffic.

It was usual for men, my father included, to go to work on a push-bike. Later he had a motor bike and joined a club so that he could "hill climb", etc. There were no taxis and very few motor cars.

On Friday nights, Dad would be paid and give us a treat. A "Woman'Weekly" type magazine for Mum, comics or fairy tales for us.

I can remember the two Chinamen who brought their wares in baskets suspended from poles over their shoulders. One sold soft-goods and the other vegetables.

My paternal grandfather was a floor-walker at Winn's and then Scott's. I think he was their oldest employee when he retired.