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Open Foundation
Australian History
Thursday 10am - 12noon.

Research Topic: Life in the Great
Depression

~~My~~ Margaret,

Sorry I couldn't come today to hand this
to you. The kids have been sick with
cold and now I am full up with cold.
Karen.

Newcastle in the Great Depression, witnessed great unemployment, poverty and hardship. As the reduced coal prices affected the whole community and unemployment was widespread, Newcastle witnessed its community shattered and beginning to fall apart. People relied on the dole, lived in camps set up in council parks and beaches and pulled together as a whole to survive. One survivor, May of Lambton, remembers mostly the great community spirit of friendship and caring for one another. Though she struggled in a new marriage with young children she managed to live a life that was full and rewarding. The plight of the unemployed saw them pull together in the form of the Unemployed Workers Movement which organised protests in the form of pickets and demonstrations.

Newcastle entered the 1930's depression with a serious unemployment problem due mainly to the falling demand for coal. Newcastle was closely linked to the coal industry and when the demand for coal fell it affected Newcastle as a whole. The intermittency of employment affected the community, reduction of coal shipments affected the port and the lowering of the price of coal resulted in a clash with the miners federation and the mine owners, which saw the closure of many collieries. Unemployment was worsened in Newcastle by the flow of unskilled workers attracted to Newcastle by the steel and heavy industries.

Newcastle could not absorb these people into other avenues of work and this resulted in large scale unemployment.

Relief for the unemployed was offered in the late 1920's and onwards but was not strong enough to deal with long term unemployment. Lodges and friendly societies, unions, churches and the Salvation Army were traditionally strong in their handouts of food and clothing, but could not deal successfully with the depression of the 1930's.

Municipal councils began to provide relief work for the unemployed but most councils could not afford to continue with relief work and pay for the demands of their ratepayers also.

Food relief became the main concern for the unemployed. The inadequacy of the dole and the casual food handouts were not enough. The people of Newcastle supplemented their diet with home grown vegetables and fish caught in the Hunter River and Lake Macquarie.

Shelter was also a problem for the unemployed. Makeshift dwellings were erected by the councils. There were camps at Carrington called Texas, at Waratah called Hollywood and one at Nobby's Beach. The dwellings were made of canvas, corn bags, old timber and were flimsy and draughty. Ratepayers complained these camps were an eyesore, and a nuisance to the community but many of the camps remained in Newcastle until the late 1930's.

May, of Lambton, married in 1930

to an apprentice moulder working at B.H.P. May and her husband lived with her husband's parents from 1930-1932. Mays' husband was laid off early in 1931 but was lucky enough to be re-employed in 1932. May and her husband supported themselves while living in the three bedroom weather-board and iron home of Mays' parents-in-law. They had no money and relied on dole tickets for their food. Their food was supplemented by home grown vegetables, fruit, and fish caught at Lake Macquarie. They did all they could to sustain themselves and had developed a bartering system with neighbours in the community. If May had too much of one thing, tomatoes for instance, she could give them to a neighbour in return for eggs or fruit. Mays' husband would collect coal, fallen from coal trains, and wood from the bush for their fuel stove because they had no money for gas for their gas stove.

After Mays' husband's re-employment in 1932, May and her husband bought their home, a two bedroom weatherboard and iron house, at \$5 deposit with \$2000 owing. They paid this off 12 and six a week, about \$1.25 at 2½% interest.

With the birth of her first child, May remembers cutting up her wedding dress for baby clothes. Something today that is so treasured was so easily put to another purpose in the depression. May taught herself to sew and with

material handouts made all her families' clothing.

May remembers the great community spirit that gave and took equally from one another. Gifts were made for Christmas for neighbours, family and friends, and on birthdays, fresh flowers were picked and given to neighbours. For entertainment May and her family and friends would have card games at each others house and she remembers that supper was also served. They would go on picnics to Newcastle Beach, walk in the bush and pack sandwiches for lunch. May remembers the lovely creeks and wildflowers that were at what is now Waratah West. ✓

Though May thought of herself as an old married mother at the age of twenty-one, and struggled to keep her family going she never thought of her life as monotonous.

To help confront and in some ways control the depression the unemployed workers movement in Newcastle offered an organised effort for the unemployed to protest their predicament. By March 1931, there were sixteen branches established roughly corresponding to municipalities.

The unemployed workers movement offered physical welfare in the form of boot-mending, and food and clothing distribution. It also encouraged members to deal with their feelings of guilt about their plight, and offered social activities to release

the pressure of boredom. This gave the unemployed some control over the employment situation by helping the unemployed pull together in the face of a collective crisis. ✓

The unemployed workers movement organized protests in the form of demonstrations about the lack of shelter, the dole and the inadequacy of food. They organized meetings, marches and pickets.

Probably the most successful protest was the Tighes Hill Eviction which presented evictions as part of the class struggle. On 14th June, 1932 police served an eviction order at 30 Clara Street, Tighes Hill. There was a fight where civilians and police were injured. Thirty men were charged with assaulting police and rioting, and though the case went to trial the Attorney General directed no further proceedings after the jury could not decide. ✓

This protest was successful in publicising evictions and in most cases people could stay as tenants, if they looked after the house by painting or looking after the yard, even if they couldn't pay rent. ✓

The Depression in Newcastle was one of hardships for its community. Unemployment was widespread which saw many people having to live in camps built of iron, wood and canvas. Food and clothing were given out in dole tickets but this was not enough and it meant that people also relied on fish and on home grown vegetables and fruit,

to supplement their diet. Though times were hard there was a great community spirit which saw many people pull together and help each other!



Bibliography.

Cray, Sheila. Newcastle in the Great Depression.
Newcastle, 1984.

Macknothy, Judy. The Wasted Years.
Sydney, 1981.

Interview with Max Hay?