

Talk given at the Oral History Australia Biennial Conference - *She Said He Said: Reading Writing and Recording History* - September 2013, Adelaide, South Australia

Wagga Wagga March 2012 Floods Oral History Project By Sally Hone, Curator of Oral History, State Library of NSW

This talk is about a project that the Library initiated last year — to document the March 2012 floods in Wagga Wagga. The Library undertook this project in partnership with the Wagga Wagga City Library.

I'll start with background about why we did this project, then give you some detail and examples from the recordings. I'll finish up with some concluding remarks about the value and significance of undertaking this project.

A current collecting priority for the Library is the environment - a subject that commands our attention more than ever, given scientific reports on climate change and the possible impact it is having on weather patterns. The goal now is to collect, for future researchers, original materials including oral histories, I mean by that - material that adds different perspectives from published sources.

A great variety of records have been kept over the last 200 years documenting the weather and climatic events – but while researchers – especially environmental historians – hunt through our collections for manuscripts and diaries, official records, photos and newspapers – there is little that can tell the story of human responses and interactions with the environment in the way oral histories can.

Imagine if we could hear survivors of the catastrophic 1852 flood in Gundagai tell the story as they experienced it.

By choosing to do an oral history project on the March 2012 Wagga Wagga floods the Library built on other significant environment-focussed collections. The stand out in the collection is the 1990 Nyngan Flood project, that had been commissioned by the Bogan Shire Council – but we have few other recordings covering natural disasters. I note, also, that oral history now has become a vital methodology for documenting and telling the stories of 'extreme' weather events – witness projects documenting the Queensland 2010/11 floods, the 2009 Victorian bush fires, and internationally events such as Cyclone Katrina in New Orleans

Why choose Wagga Wagga? it was largely a matter of good timing – the March 2012 floods had just happened when I was looking for a project. We had a connection with Manager of W W City Library, and she jumped at the chance to partner in this project, and swiftly produced an accomplished local historian to undertake the interviews.

[So what happened in March 2012 in Wagga Wagga?](#)

Wagga Wagga – population 60,000 – is located on the Murrumbidgee and the settlement spread over a flood plain, so it has a long history of flooding – in fact more than 70 floods since 1844. The March 2012 was one of its biggest floods in recent years. It came close on the heels of the 2010 scare, but it was not since 1974 that there had been a significant flood. In 2012 hundreds of homes were inundated, thousands of acres were flooded, 8,000 people were evacuated from the CBD and North Wagga Wagga. The damages bill for homes, infrastructure and businesses came to millions of dollars.

REF Powerpoint – pictures of the flood

We agreed that the interviews would be full life stories, with a focus on experiences of the flood. It was important that the questions would explore comparisons with past floods, local government planning and responses, the role of the SES, Army and fire brigade, methods of communication (including use of social media), loss, damage and other impacts of the floods, community responses, resilience and recovery.

Powerpoint – with scope of interviewees and themes covered

Oral Historian Sherry Morris started work in July 2012 - about 4 months after the event. Being well connected to the community, Sherry used her own networks and the Library helped arrange interview with the Council workers. A total of 24 people were interviewed.

The interviews are diverse, and rich with information. We gain a deeper understanding of floods and their impact through the many contrasting views recorded – between residents who have been through many floods and those who haven't, and most significantly, between emergency service workers and ordinary citizens – ie between the people carrying out the evacuation, rescue and recovery operations, and those at the receiving end of those services. We also gain insights into how both sides interact and work together.

The North Wagga Wagga citizens were the worst affected because that is where the levee broke. They displayed archetypal good citizenship – they are a close knit community and many have lived there for several generations, and once the waters subsided they rapidly got down to the business of cleaning up, pulling together to provide food and shelter and manpower to those in need. This is a community renowned for its slogan 'we shall not be moved', and the interviews are quite moving, as a portrait of a community so attached to its locality, that not even repeated flooding can convince people to relocate their homes.

Power point: here's North Wagga Wagga resident ALLAN WOOLSTENCRAFT relating his first hours of the flood.

All of the interviewees gave graphic descriptions of the intense, stressful and disturbing experience of a flood: the uncertainty, the rush to evacuate; the violent and destructive force of such a large mass of moving water: the swirling accumulation of cars, equipment, fences, poles, household goods, furniture, washing machines, and the sludge of mud mixed with paint and chemicals, that coated everything inside and out. Allan said it was like a wrecked Bunnings up along the oval fence.

There are 700 people of African origins in Wagga, recently settled under Australia's refugee program – and here is yet another contrasting view point – listen to Frank Jarfoi, formerly of Sierra Leone, talking about how his community was affected:

Powerpoint Frank Jarfoi

It is poignant to hear Frank relate how it re-ignited memories of the refugee experience, fleeing a civil war.

Afterwards, people returned to find houses flooded to the roofline, contents swept away, the loss of precious belongings – photo albums, heirlooms. People like Virginia Anderson were hit very hard – not having experienced floods before. She, and others, contrast with those who had been through it several times. It is slightly bewildering to hear the 'old hands' relate their experiences with such pragmatism, realism and humour even. Nevertheless, many long term North Wagga residents were caught out, and quite shaken by the event, believing the waters wouldn't rise as high as they did, since 2010 had been a false alarm.

Powerpoint : Listen to Virginia Anderson talking about coming home once the water had receded

As I mentioned, the interviews with, Council engineers and other workers, the regional head of the SES, the former Council chief engineer and other volunteers, give us rich information from the other side of the fence

They are informative on so many levels –

- They give us context, history and wisdom from past floods; and technical explanations of the 2012 flood
- We learn about flood prevention and preparation – the management of the levees and other infrastructure;
- They highlight the impact of environmental change – from farming and other development – and how that affects the course of each flood.
- The history of the SES – how mostly it is staffed volunteers, and surprisingly it was as late as the 1970s that the SES hired paid professionals.
- We learn about Council's efforts to prepare and educate people for floods, to consult with the community as it revises and improves its flood operation manual – their bible for floods.

Before you start thinking this is a PR job for the Wagga Wagga city council – I would say that some of these workers talk with surprising honesty.

They were critical of the media – particularly for its misinformation on the height of the levy, which confused people. They were critical of the politicians – who flew in, posed for the media, and left – and made no promises about funding for much needed levee reconstruction. Most interesting was James McTavish on the role of the SES, and the tensions between him and the Sydney headquarters. For the Council engineers and McTavish, making the right call on whether the levee would hold, and whether people needed to evacuate the CBD, was difficult, and not helped by what they saw as interference from 'out of town'. They believe the call was the right one, with hindsight – but there is interesting discussion about whether in fact they needed to evacuate the CBD. I was fascinated to learn from McTavish that he strongly questioned the judgement of the Sydney based directors of emergency services. For the first time ever, they called a State of Emergency at the time of the evacuation, leaving McTavish wondering who was in command - he said - I quote – **“if you look back with 2020 vision you'd say that of any time during the operation, that was the most risky time as nobody knew who was in charge.”**

I'll play a short extract from McTavish talking about the evacuation, and the hard reality of living on a flood plain

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TO CONCLUDE

To conclude – I believe this project provides extremely important and interesting information and perspectives about people living with floods – both generally, and in particular.

In her recent book 'Flood Country' on the Murray Darling Basin - Emily O'Gorman, an environmental historian, investigates the historical relationships between people and their environment through the lens of floods. She shows that – I quote - the 'idea of natural disasters is also clearly deeply cultural' – floods and droughts have had a profound effect on the local as well as the Australian psyche. Her book explores 'the different ways in which floods have been managed and understood and some of the long-term consequences for people, rivers and ecologies'

This project, while of relatively modest scope, I have no doubt contributes to that discussion and will be of great value and interest to future historians and other researchers.

It provides insights into a local ecology, disaster prevention and management. And it is rich social history - local characters, telling their story, revealing their identity, that particular community's perception of itself. The themes may be familiar and common to many other parts of regional Australia – but it is Wagga Wagga's story - It highlights the local - Hampden Avenue and Mary Street in North Wagga, The Palm and Pawn hotel, The Black Swan Hotel, the North Wagga Residents Association, the pony club, and Wollundry Lagoon.

It reveals the personalities – citizens and officials - the relationships between them, their experience and memory of past floods. I must mention here, that there was a local hero too - t shirts and bumper stickers appeared soon after the flood, declaring WE  JAMES McTAVISH.

Now, probably the greatest value of this project is that it is already being used as resource for the community – it is in the WW library and streamed online,

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as a powerful educational resource – especially for newcomers, but anyone involved in floods, in Wagga, and elsewhere. I learnt from it, was moved and inspired sitting at my desk in Sydney as these stories came to me. I realised that all I knew about floods I had seen on the television or read in the paper – but there is nothing like hearing it from the people who experienced it first hand – and not just once, they had been through this ordeal many times.

And another major point - the community was highly appreciative to have the chance to tell its story – and have it preserved for posterity. I went to Wagga Wagga for the launch, (incidentally, when organising that launch, the interviewees made it clear that they did not want politicians there, it was about them and their story) and I learnt first- hand from the participants and other locals how important it was to them – to have told their stories and to know that the stories will always be there to be listened to.