

<i>Month &amp; Year of Topic</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Written &amp; Spoken Presenters</i>
November 2003	<b>Oatley in the Depression Days</b>	Discussion Joyce Marks Ray Stevens Joy McMillan Jim Morris Alan Bennett Neville Gardner

**Copyright** Except where material is attributed to an earlier creator, you may copy, distribute, display, download and otherwise freely deal with this work for any purpose, provided that you attribute Oatley Heritage Group as the owner. However, you must obtain permission if you wish to (a) charge others for access to the work or (b) include the work in advertising or a product for sale, or (c) modify the work.

**Disclaimer:** Some material prepared by the Oatley Heritage Group is based on information provided by its members or others and is intended to be for general information purposes; as to its accuracy, therefore, no warranty is given or implied.

**OATLEY HERITAGE GROUP**

**MEETING DATE:** 27 Nov. 2003

**TOPIC:** Oatley in the  
Depression

---

**PAPERS BY:**

Joyce Marks (née Bray)

Ray Stevens

Joy Auld Mc. Millan

---

Comment: Glenn Stevens

MINUTES OF THE GENERAL MEETING OF THE OATLEY HERITAGE GROUP HELD IN THE OATLEY LIBRARY HALL, LETITIA ST., OATLEY ON 27TH NOVEMBER 2003.

- OPENING: The meeting was opened by the President, Alec Leach at 7.35pm.
- APOLOGIES: Margaret Forbes.
- NEW MEMBERS: The President welcomed Julie McKenzie and Steve Turner to the meeting.
- MINUTES: Minutes of the last meeting were read and received and adopted. No dissenters.
- BUSINESS ARISING: Alec noted that the Motorbikers, with whom Stephen Turner was associated for the Lions Festival, raised \$2,500 on rides etc. Thanks were offered for the chair and the display and stand. Alec also spoke about having given a talk about the original Clock Festival 20 years ago, which he gave at the Lions Festival in October, 2003. Alec thanked Rafe Kowron for his work in regards to the festival.
- CORRESPONDENCE: Kogarah Council sent leaflets and newsletters re their activities at the Library. Jim Morris sent stamps and a letter of resignation.
- TREASURER'S REPORT: As the secretary had the bank statement, the Treasurer deferred to Glenn for the Bank Balance which was \$1,407.53.
- GENERAL BUSINESS: Alec advised the meeting that next meeting's Topic would be "Personalities of Oatley Organisations" 26th Feb 2004 after the AGM and the Topic for May 2004 would be "Musicians of Oatley".
- TOPIC: Alec opened the discussion and handed the meeting to Joyce Marks who researched the subject with Alec and gave us an insight into the plight of families and conditions during those early days. Her papers are with our Archivist, Jan Crane. Joy(Auld) McMillan from Buderim Qld wrote about her recollections of her days during the depression and an anecdote about George Kendall (snr) and Her Father Sandy Auld. Ray Stevens gave his memories of depression days as did Jim Nicholson who claimed that rabbits were prevalent and blackberries were collected from Stanwell Park. Trains were packed during the season for pickers and their billies. Muriel Lind's father had men from all walks of life wanting to help build the Silvester's Castle. Her father was the builder. Bert Gibbons made radios. One man had a severe nose bleed during his working day, but would not stop work in case he lost his job. Norma Straney spoke about the brick kerbs, which the men on the dole laid as well as the guttering. Jack Marks spoke about the wattle and daub homes and the people who lived in caves. He pointed out that the fellow who lived in the park in Yarran Rd., had to live like that as his wife was put in a nursing home and the Government of the day took all possessions. He was left with very little. Alan Bennett told us how he was taken to Oatley and would shuck oysters for his father. Nev Gardner & Dorothy went round the foreshores in a boat with Alec looking at the home of Nev's grandfather in Algernon Street. The topic was a very popular one with the audience interjecting at various happenings. George Kendall brought along an album for viewing of some of the other days.
- CLOSING: Cliff Crane thanked all the participants for their input and the interrupters as well. There being no more business the meeting closed at 9.05pm.

*The Depression years in Oatley.  
Thur. 27th Nov. 2003.*

- No Television
- No Refrigeration
- No taxis
- No telephones – and very few radios

Family came to Oatley at start of the Depression with the river to supply fish and oysters, large backyards to grow vegetables and fruit and chook yards for poultry and eggs.

All we had to find was 10/- for rent to keep a roof over our heads. There were no handouts with money, only dole coupons that were handed in for a few basic groceries or fresh meat.

To find the 10/- my Mother (Mrs Bray) had a boarder – a 12 year old son of a friend who paid her 2/- a week all-inclusive.

My Father (Walter Bray) opened oysters by hand in Wyong Street for 2/- a week. Starting at 8.00 a.m. in the morning and came home about 5.00 p.m. plus a jam jar of opened oysters which I had to walk over to Sandy Beach and these were sold to a lady for 2/-.

So there was 6/- which came in each week.

To find the short fall, Mum and I would walk miles to collect washing from people who were working, carry it home where it was washed and ironed and then carry it back for 2/6 a basket. I was five years of age while all this took place.

The rent was taken down to an Agent, a Mr Shuttleworth who lived near the Oatley Hotel. Oh yes, Oatley had a hotel even in those years and a very lovely school with huge seesaws and monkey bars facing Letitia Street.

The far ends of the grounds were hallowed areas. The boys cricket pitch, the girls vigaro pitch – very rough and rocky places.



## Page 2

90% of the families in Oatley were unemployed like my family, so this was the start of a very strong and caring place to live. We went to school barefoot, but had a pair of socks to put on when in the classroom. These had to be taken off at recess and lunchtime and to walk home. Mum had a friend who had two daughters and I wore their clothes for years. I was given a story book each Christmas and a lolly Easter egg each year.

To this day one of the girls is my dearest friend and we phone each week – she lives in the country.

The School of Arts where we are sitting now was the hub of the community. The unemployed did all sorts of things to raise money for the unemployed to keep a roof over their heads. Mum and Dad were in the forefront of this and worked tirelessly. If someone could play the piano, sing; give lantern slides, a penny was charged to enter. Dad would raffle a huge jewfish, carried on his shoulder on a sugar bag. It was so big and if no money was raised, he would cut it up in the hall and hand it to the people.

The big wide gardens which stand today in Woonoona Parade, were given over by the Council to grow vegetables. This was Dad's idea. He gathered a few friends together and they hand cut the stone and placed in around these huge garden beds to hold the soil together. The Louisa Street end still has that hand cut stone today. They grew potatoes, peas, beans, cabbages, and spinach – anything that was quick growing. You could come on a Saturday morning with a sugar bag and the men would hand out supplies. Nothing was ever stolen; everything was shared in those days.

My job was to look after the chooks. Feed them before school (hot pollen) and a small handful of wheat in the evening. Gather eggs and take some to people who had no chooks. To this day I have never tasted or eaten poultry. I would come home from school and find a "friend" hanging on the plum tree waiting to be plucked. Mum never made me eat it and to this day I am a pain the neck to my friends when invited out – "oh no, Joyce doesn't eat chicken"

### Page 3

All roads were dirt and very rough. Council had to do something – so the unemployed were given a week on the roads each 6 weeks. They were called “gangs” with a ganger in charge. Pick and shovels were provided and I think about eight men were in the gang. A whistle would blow and the men took up the tools. About 7.30 a.m. they started. At 9.00 a.m. a whistle would blow, the men downed tools and sat on the edge of the road. They either had a pannikin of tea boiled on a fire at the side of the road, or a smoke. Dad said only time for half a pannikin or half a cigarette – about 5 minutes.

Mum would have a huge boiler of soup made out of chicken bones or beef and ‘spec’ vegetables provided by Mrs Phillips in the fruit shop in Frederick Street. She would carry this out to the men at lunchtime with a thick slice of unbuttered bread. The enamel mugs would provide soup for the gang at lunchtime. They finished at 5.00 p.m. All they did was level the dirt. This made it easy for Mr Lawson the Postman, to gallop down the middle of it with his horse.

For some reason Ernie and Dad didn’t hit it off at all. Mainly because he did not put any letters in the letterboxes – but flicked them as he road past the house.

After several years, out of the blue an offer was made to Dad from Kogarah Council. If he could provide a draught horse and dray within a week, he could join the Council and be employed.

The cost of a horse and dray was £20. We didn’t have 20 pence. His wages would be £4 per week starting at 7.00 a.m. ‘till 5.00 p.m. – 10 hours each day.

Mum did washing for a family at Carlton (the 2 sisters whose clothes I wore for years). Dad had never met the family so Mum approached Mr McCotter who was a mechanic and built the huge brewery wagons in Redfern. Sight unseen, he put his hand in his pocket, pulled out £20 and gave it to Mum - with a written IOU from her to pay it back at £1 a week for 20 weeks.

**Page 4**

The two families became lifelong friends. Dad and Tom were like brothers. They remained so till the day they died. Mum and Dad will be remembered by many present at this meeting today. Dad never came home at night without a load of dirt deposited in the school grounds to level out the playing fields.

St Paul's had many a load of dirt deposited and levelled out before Dad came home.

The horse (Mick and Toby) would stop at the corner of Frederick and Letitia Streets and drink from the double drinking bay. A delight for us kids chucking the water over kids for pay back. What happened to it, I don't know. It would be a landmark today.

I could go on and on maybe another time about the bush, our black berrying days. Fish we had to catch swimming out to the sand bank in front of Norma and Russ's home, our playing days in the railway cutting behind the Scout Hall. Going over to Como via the Rail Bridge and hanging on for dear life as a train went by. Playing in Sylvester's Castle, but no, no - never in the dungeon. Cutting down huge gum trees for cracker night and sleeping in them in case the kids from Mortdale came over a put a match to our effort!!!

Why would anyone want to live anywhere else except Oatley?

*Joyce Marks  
(Bray.)*

Most of us here to-night were children of the Depression 1929-1932. Our parents and others struggled along with little money and few amenities or pleasures. Many men were out of work and there was the threat of losing homes. The councils, Hurstville for Oatley West and Kogarah for west ward (east Oatley) made provision for unemployment relief. Some men, known as "bob-a-weekers" were given picks and shovel work making roads and gutters as well as working in Oatley Park. When we observe the kerbs and gutters made with bricks around Oatley, it reminds us of those days of hard work.

We could say thank goodness for the depression as so much work was carried out for so many improvements in Oatley.

by Glenn Stevens

# Depression Years by Ray Stevens

It is universally agreed the Depression was from approx 1929 to 1939.

In fact a lot of the soldiers who went to the Middle East in 1939 had their first job for many years.

The unemployment in the 1930's was up to 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ % for men, so jobs were fairly scarce.

Personally you can only judge from your own experience during this period, & you rely on your memory & during the 1930's I was at school for half this period.

Oatley in those days was like a rural town with a much smaller population than today.

Blocks of land were like small farms 165 feet by 60 ft.

Most of the locals owned their own house or paying it off (that is if you had a job). A large number of your neighbours were ex-servicemen from the first war.

My father was lucky he was a carriage builder with the Railways & always seem to have a job.

He was a frustrated farmer & grew all types of vegetables, grafted fruit trees, grew his own tobacco, made his own home brew.

He was into breeding gold fish in a big way having 50 ponds.



a cold gold fish.

So from our aspect we always had plenty to eat.

We built all our furniture & our house.

At every opportunity we went fishing & there was plenty of fish on those days. Picking bulk berries in season resulted in plenty of preserved fruits.

Clothes were made where every possible & by my mother & shoes were not worn to school at Oatley, but going to Sutherland High School were compulsory.

Entertainment as known to-day did not exist early.

Oatley Hotel & Montdale picture show ~~was~~ <sup>was</sup> not built till the early 30's though a silent picture show operated in Montdale in Monts Rd. Dances were held fairly regularly at the School of Arts & the Masonic Hall.

Money was very scarce, our parents gave the kids one penny a fortnight but that did not seem to worry us.

The dole was very low & the scruffy men had to move from suburbs to pick it up.

Oatley Shopping was very small, I used to notice signs on them.

- which said "No TICK" or do not ask for credit as a refusable often affords"

Our main entertainment was the movies. IOT operated out of L.I.I. P.I.I.

Our first set was a Crystal set which was not a great success.

The only sporting clubs were Oatley Bay Swimming Club & Oatley Swimming Club at Oatley Park.

At Oatley Bay pleasure grounds there was a small Zoo & a wine saloon.

Swimming races were held on Sunday, when the wine saloon was illegally opened & resulted in a large membership. From memory this was closed down in the early 30s.

Most of the roads were dirt & the kids mostly played cricket on them only shifting the wicket when a odd car came along.

Every now & then a man would go into the bush & chop down trees & go around sell "Clothes Props".

Milk was delivered every couple of days, milk twice a day & post twice a day.

As far as I was concerned things were tough but we did not notice it due to our farming of vegetables & our holidays were spent in Oatley & there was always plenty to do.



14 Jakeman Dr.  
Buderim 4556

20.11.03.

To the Oatley Heritage Group.  
"Oatley in the Depression."

Joy Auld M'Millan

The depression affected our family badly. Dad was out of work for 7 yrs. after finishing work on the Sydney Harbour Bridge but had six weeks "cleaning up" before the bridge opened.

As kids we didn't understand how bad things were as there were so many in the "same boat" we didn't know any different.

Dad walked to Hurstville once a week & collected 5 loaves of bread potatoes & pumpkin. The butcher gave us bones for the dog but we had soup before the dog got the bones, we always had thick soup and at school we were given soup we used to take our enamel mugs & our names were written on the bottom with silverfrost.

There was a kind family who gave Dad some work around their home as well as fixing fences through them Dad acquired a horse & cart & he was able to do some carrying for them.

Mum made "tupper apples" & took them over to Stumbelton school in the horse & cart to sell to the children. The shopkeepers objected so that was short lived.

There was a farmer in Mortdale who used





set up his forge in our backyard. There was always a demand for horses manure.

With the river so handy we did a lot of fishing & always managed to get a feed.

Blackberries grew around the station. We wrapped our legs up in newspapers tied a billy to our waist & didn't go home till the billy was full. Ladies in the street would be pleased to have them to make jam so berry picking filled in most of our holidays & we had the bathes swimming was free & we all loved it. No need for a towel - low tide we had mud fights but we always did a few 50 yards. On the way home we would run from one tap to the next & squat down & press the "button" this was our shower. The sand was hot on our bare feet so we hopped from one shady spot to the next - keeping an eye open for bull ants.

There was a street light at the front of our place so summer evenings kids would gather & play cricket with a cut down fence paling & as the dividing fences were so low we were able to huddle all the way down to M'Intyre street.

People were kind & there was a lady (dressmaker) who would often give us clothes.

Things were tough but I loved growing up in Oatley.  
 Jay Child M'Intyre



OATLEY IN THE DEPRESSION

Nov. 2003

Jim Nicholson, who claimed that rabbits were prevalent and blackberries were collected from Stanwell Park. Trains were packed during the season for pickers and their billies.

Muriel Lind's father had men from all walks of life wanting to help build the Silvester's Castle. Her father was the builder. Bert Gibbons made radios.

One man had a severe nose bleed during his working day, but would not stop work in case he lost his job.

Norma Straney spoke about the brick kerbs, which the men on the dole laid as well as the guttering.

Jack Marks spoke about the wattle and daub homes and the people who lived in caves.

He pointed out that the fellow who lived in the park in Yarran Rd., had to live like that as his wife was put in a nursing home and the Government of the day took all possessions. He was left with very little.

Alan Bennett told us how he was taken to Oatley and would shuck oysters for his father.

Nev Gardner & Dorothy went round the foreshores in a boat with Alec looking at the home of Nev's grandfather in Algernon Street. The topic was a very popular one with the audience interjecting at various happenings.

George Kendall brought along an album for viewing of some of the other days.

CLOSING: Cliff Crane thanked all the participants for their input and the interrupters as well.

There being no more business the meeting closed at 9.05pm.

*(Extract from secretary's notes.)*