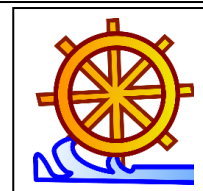


# HELM



## Heritage of East Lake Macquarie

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### HOLIDAYS AND TOUGH DAYS

In the earlier part of the last century as unions negotiated improved conditions for workers and coal miners with better pay, shorter hours, longer annual breaks and free weekends, many would visit the shores of Lake Macquarie for holidays, weekends and picnics. The Swansea to Belmont area was always very popular, especially with the miners from West Wallsend, Maitland, Singleton and the surrounding areas. At first these recreational times were spent in tents – relaxing, fishing, swimming. As time went by a number of families graduated to little weekenders and boatsheds on the lake foreshore.

Beginning in 1924 there was a downturn in production on the Newcastle and Maitland Northern Coal Fields for some four years. Some mines were idle; some worked intermittently. This created a downward spiralling cycle of less wages, less trade. These conditions worsened significantly when the Great Depression hit in October 1929, after the crash of Wall Street; which wiped \$26 billion from the stock market. Income from exports fell, many local industries came to a standstill. On average, unemployed workers reached 1 in 3 by 1933. The situation was compounded by Governments cutting expenditure, wages and pensions; whilst increasing taxes; as they struggled to repay overseas loans. Banks, trade, and many industries and investments collapsed. Men desperately searched for a day's work in the cities. At all costs, families tried to avoid being evicted from their homes and having all their possessions put out on the footpath; some disappearing in the middle of the night. Dole recipients could be given work such as building roads, digging ditches, council maintenance. Some were despatched to country areas and had to live in camps away from their families. For some there was no alternative other than to pack a swag (also known as a "matilda") and search in the country for work. Swagmen could receive food ration coupons at regional police stations if they could show they had travelled 80 kms a week looking for work. Over time some travelled as many as 8000 kms; often hitching a ride, and jumping from train to train, to evade paying fares. They were accompanied by the "bagman's bible" – a pocket sized train timetable. The swaggie was said to be "on the Wallaby" (following an unmarked outback track) and "humping the drum/bluey" (rolled blanket over his shoulder). A good way to carry a heavy load was to have 2/3 - the blanket roll, clothes and other things not needed during the day strapped on the back; 1/3 in a sugar or flour sack with food and cooking items in the front for easy access in the "dilly bag"

Source:

State Lib of NSW



- Great Depression 1
- The Susso 2
- Coon Island 3
- Little Pelican 4



first national REAL ESTATE | Andrew McGrath

**4972 1066 - NOW AT SWANSEA!**  
**SWANSEA PLAZA ARCADE**  
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**Kindly supporting the community – including Caves Beach Surf Life Saving Club; this edition of HELM newsletter.**

## “THE SUSSO” AND “THE DOLE”

Many children began to chant this song:

“We’re on the susso now; We can’t afford a cow; We live in a tent; We pay no rent; We’re on the susso now.”



Some local shopkeepers extended credit for long-term customers. But by 1932, over 60,000 people were on Govt. sustenance payments – food ration vouchers. Change for the Govt. relief cheques was given by stores in the form of money tokens embossed with their name; and could only be spent there (such as these ones from West Wallsend Co-op, 1930-1933).

Welfare payments for those in dire straits were in the form of rations of solid food such as bread and potatoes. Qualifying requirements were tough. All people in the family had to be unemployed; questionnaires were probing. The only other alternative offered was the dole – working for Government infrastructure jobs - low pay; could be sent anywhere; housing in country areas was often in tents; refusal meant cancellation.

People had to be prudent, resourceful and resilient. The staple diet was bread and dripping; bread with milk and sugar; bread and golden syrup (“cocky’s joy”). Babies were given diluted condensed milk; toddlers ate arrowroot biscuits. Budgets were stretched by getting stale bread, cheap cuts of meat, bruised fruit and veg, broken biscuits. Poor nutrition often led to poor health with bronchitis, whooping cough, gastro and rickets being common; high sugar levels meant tooth decay for many. Recipes for creative cheap meals that made food go a long way were shared; leftovers were never thrown out, often recycled into stews and casseroles. Toast, potatoes and flour were inexpensive and popular; meat was very limited. All of the animal was used, including tongues, liver, shin, shank, brains, cheeks, tails. Chicken feet could add taste to broth; bacon rinds or ends would add flavour; as did lard or bacon fat. Free ingredients were even better – such as dandelions, after soaking and washing the leaves thoroughly. Many took advantage of the rabbit plague, becoming known as “underground mutton”. (But years later many shunned rabbit meat as it reminded them of the hard times.) Schools often became centres of help, providing soup kitchens, distributing clothing. Everything was scraped and squeezed to use every last drop – sauce bottles, toothpaste; and using just enough soap for hygiene.

### MAKING DO

Scarcity created innovations, and various handy hints were shared. Instead of wearing stockings, legs could be dyed with tea. Shoes could be mended with cardboard, scraps of leather from belts; or re-soled with tyre rubber. Shoes were exceedingly important as much walking needed to be done to look for work or receive the susso. Men sleeping in camps or by the roadside would tie their shoes around their necks to avoid them being stolen. People learned to make their own clothes (including using sack and flour bags); repair what they could, hand me downs when outgrown. What could not be fixed was used as rags for cleaning after salvaging buttons and anything else that could be recycled. Bartering items and labour was common. Driftwood could be collected from the beach, and used or sold; likewise metal; and bits of coal from around the mines and railway lines. It was important to try to remain as positive as you could. Free entertainment, such as games and sing-alongs helped to forget your troubles for a while. Focusing on sporting successes lifted spirits - Don Bradman’s record 452 not out in 1930, and Phar Lap’s successes; as did the completion of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932.



## SETTLEMENTS

As many families had no income and could not pay their rent or repay loans, settlements sprang up in various locations around the state. People often arrived with what they could carry. They put up tents and built huts with whatever materials they could scrounge – typically corrugated iron roofs, white washed hessian walls and earthen floors. Life was hard, but in other ways it was happy and carefree.

## EAST LAKE MACQUARIE COMMUNITIES

In the early 1900's many looked to the eastern side of the lake as a destination for leisure and recreation, enjoying picnics on the banks, holidays, fishing and boating. Development was slowed by poor road conditions and a lack of transport. Water transport - ferries and launches were the main means of arrival until better roads; and rail and tram links were built. A few of the wealthy families from Newcastle and Sydney holidayed in guest houses and hotels. Most were local coal miners and their families from West Wallsend, Wallsend, Cessnock and Kurri who camped in tents. It became their destination for annual holidays, down times during strikes, and retirement. Common practice was to informally occupy Crown Land on the lake foreshores. Increasingly boatsheds were erected from 1910, then gradually weekenders from 1920 as transport improved and better working conditions had been gained by the unions, giving weekends off and longer holidays. To better manage tenure on Crown Land, permissive occupancies/conditional leases were granted from 1915 onwards, for a nominal yearly rent of 2 pounds, and maintenance of the foreshore.

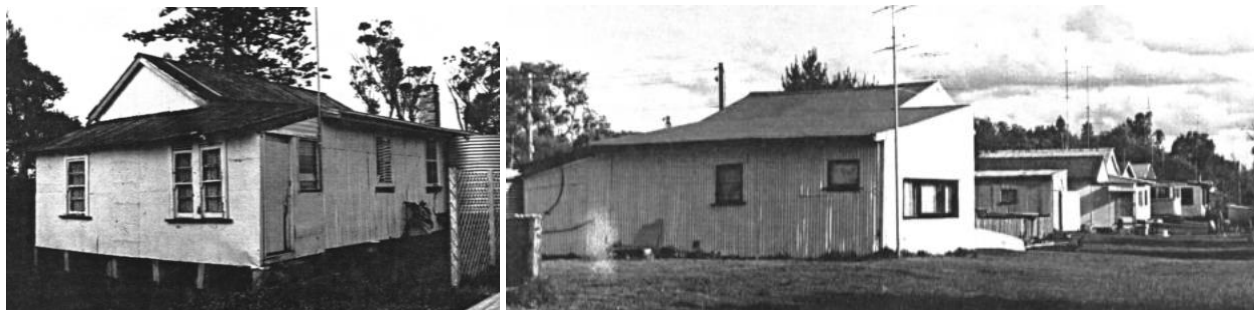
In the 1920's industrial troubles in the mines developed with many strikes and lockouts in the Hunter. They were compounded by the Great Depression in the 1930's. Boatsheds and weekenders became the basis for a new life around the lake, particularly at Coon Island, Little Coonie, and Little Pelican. As holders of permissive occupancies lost their jobs they moved in and adapted their boatsheds and weekenders. As families grew they added to and improved their accommodation. They used cheap materials and whatever was at hand mainly fibro, timber and corrugated iron. Neighbours helped each other to build; and maintain the foreshore. Seafood was in abundance and became a staple in their diet, along with the vegetables they grew. Bartering was a way of life – trading food, goods or skills like sewing, gardening, building. With no services like town water, sewerage or electricity at the time; rainwater tanks, fuel stoves, ice chests, hurricane lamps and candles were used.

**COON ISLAND AND LITTLE COONIE** were named after the first permanent resident, Herbert Greta Heaney. He came from Greta near Cessnock (hence his middle name). "Coon" was his nickname. It was said that it came about either because he returned from the mines with a coal dust blackened face; or he became very suntanned from a lot of fishing. The early houses were made from timber cut from the Parbury estate with white washed hessian walls. Many had dirt floors. Over 70 sites, measuring 10m x 20m were able to be built on. The rest of the sandy soil area had drainage problems and was under water at high tide. The original residents were miners, WWI veterans and a few European refugees. At first there was no bridge. Access was by boat; or on foot at low tide, carrying all their supplies. Gradually, the residents built a narrow footbridge, later made into a single lane road bridge; and a gravel road led to the houses. Their frugal lifestyle continued beyond times of necessity, repairing and recycling and reusing what they could. Many of the families were related by blood or by marriage, because they didn't move far, and socialised together. Gradually more stringent restrictions were imposed by Lands Dept. – leases could only pass to spouses; when they moved or died the lease would end and the property had to be removed or demolished. Despite letters of protest, media publicity and going to Parliament, pressure mounted in the 60s and 70s to remove residents at a time when heritage wasn't highly valued. As leases expired and residents left, houses were removed. In 1994 it became a reserve when the last resident left; to be replaced by cycleways, paths, picnic areas, BBQs, wetlands, maintained by LMCC and Landcare. *Source: Val Hall; LMCC.*



## LITTLE PELICAN – A GLIMPSE AT A SMALL UNIQUE REMNANT OF A BYGONE ERA.

This community developed in the same way. Occupation pre WWI was recreational; followed by permissive occupancies (POs) in the 1920's on blocks sized 40' by 40'. The earliest official record found was in 1927 to Joseph Wolfe, a miner, from Pelaw Main (near Kurri Kurri), leased at a yearly rent of 2 pounds.- conditions imposed were: no subletting, no transfer without permission, materials to be removed on termination. A declining demand for coal in the 20's affected miners and linked industries, such as BHP steelworks. With intermittent employment and long term unemployment in the 30's people had to reassess their priorities and options for food, clothing and housing. Makeshift shacks on Crown Land sprang up in various locations – "Coral Trees" at Stockton; "Nobby's Camp" on Newcastle Harbour foreshore; Wangi, Cackle Creek, Ladysmith. Likewise, weekenders at Little Pelican were adapted for necessity. It was a simple lifestyle, living off the land by growing and catching food; and bartering. As families grew, so did their houses and the community bonding. A typical shack was a weatherboard construction with iron roof; 26' by 26' containing 4 bedrooms with a verandah. They faced west to the Channel; with water tanks, vegie patches, dunnies and garages to the track. Some were so skint they had to ask for time extensions to pay their nominal rents. The only access road was through swampland, which became impassable when it rained. By 1931, there were 20 sites; 1940's - 25 occupancies. By the end of WWII no more POs were granted, but some were transferred, often to family. In 1956 a drainage easement was proposed which would cut off Little Pelican from Big Pelican; to accommodate Sunstrip Caravan Park. 1962 saw a policy implemented which aimed to clear all structures and develop the site as a public recreation area in response to increasing pressure by evolving conservation and environmental groups. Attempts to buy the land were blocked in 1972; 15 of the 25 cottages remained in mid-70s. A review in 1982 found that they were basic constructions and materials, some better cared for than others; the reserve was being maintained; power was connected, and sanitary and garbage services provided by LMCC. Rent was increased to \$480 pa. 1992 saw 4 pensioners granted permanent residency and a 80% rebate on the new rental of \$1500pa. As people moved on, more leases were terminated. (1998 – 11 remained; 2007 – 8). Rent = \$7,400. 2007 was a turning point. 2 DAs were submitted to LMCC for demolition, but were identified as potential heritage items, the decision deferred; and the Little Pelican Progress Association was formed to get an interim conservation order. Sadly one burnt down in 2008; another was vacated and therefore terminated; that left 6. Significance assessments have recognised the historic link - that these vernacular buildings with their mixture of colours and materials which were salvaged or cheaply sourced, represented the adaptations and extensions from weekenders to permanent residences by necessity, to deal with unemployment during the Depression. RATING: state significance-moderate; local-very high; becoming increasingly rare—the only known ones on Lake Mac. Dual application was made to Lands for secure tenure for Little Pelican Row and Dark Corner, Patonga, so that people would have security and be willing to invest money to re-wire, conserve and maintain their cottages. Patonga was granted in 2013, but inexplicably not Little Pelican, which continues the fight for their heritage.



Source:  
Little  
Pelican  
Progress  
Assoc.;  
LMCC

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WE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR MORE OF YOUR HERITAGE STORIES!!!