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Oral History –
An Interview with
Jim Brown



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Interviewee: Jim Brown

Interviewer: Ruth Jones.

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Q: How did you come to Ryde?

My dad was offered a job at Ryde at Primrose's Timber yard, in Victoria Road. He got me a job also there. Then the hard times came, a timber strike and one thing and another and we were laid off.

Q: What happened about the timber strike at the Primrose Mill?

Oh it carried on for about three or four years. It was when the Sawdust Hotel first had its bricks laid. We seen that laid and the Primrose's supplied the timber. It was there when I first had my first beer at the completion of it.

Q: The hotel was there?

At the completion of Sawdust Hotel. They put a free day on for the opening. Anyhow we were living at Morrison Road and my sister still worked at the Federal Match Company and she was the only breadwinner.

Q: Because both you and your father were put off from the Primrose Mill?

I eventually - Goodchild's had a dairy on the Morrison Road and Mr Goodchild gave me a job milking cows which I was reared - bought up mainly on a farm and I could milk cows. Cows and horses was my favourite and he gave me a job and I worked there until the time his son came of age to take over - I was on the delivery, delivering milk and milking and one thing and another and his son had to come and get a job so Mr Primrose had to put me off.

Q: Bit tough?

He took me up to Homebush sales yard and he put it over the mic., that I was a good milker, good delivery bloke, loved horses, good with horses, and a chap by the name of Hopping he had a dairy here in Ryde, practically on the Parramatta River. He was in a bigger way than Mr Goodchild.



Q: Did he have a bigger farm?

He had a bigger farm, he grew his own maize and he grew his own corn and he had a couple of horses. So I started on there milking cows and on the deliveries. We used to start milking at 11 o'clock at night, milking the cows and finished round about 1 o'clock and the carts would leave round about half past one for the deliveries in the morning.

Q: How many carts?

We had two I used to do the Gladesville, Drummoyne, Hunter's Hill run and another chap used to do the Top Ryde - Ryde run.

After that my dad decided - they moved back to Sydney and I still carried on with Mr Hopping.

Q: You mean your father moved away from Ryde?

Yes they moved back into Sydney. Because dad ended up getting a job in Sydney at Hammond's Saw Makers and my brothers got a job - my eldest brother next to me got a job and me sister was working there so they moved back to Sydney, and I stayed on with Mr Hopping. Eventually I got homesick (laughs) and I had to join them back in Sydney and it was a long way away.

Q: Where did you live while the family moved back to Sydney and you stayed here in Ryde?

At Mr Hopping's. We used to get paid so much I think when I worked at Goodchild's dairy I got fifteen dollars a week and me keep. [Interruption. Doctor's visit.]

Q: Jim you said that your father and you had a job in the Primrose Hill Mill. When you think back to that time can you see the mill and describe it in words?

Oh it was a big yard. Because it was all re-cut, it was all oregon.

Q: Where did the oregon come from do you know?

Oh America I suppose, but it was from other saw mills. Mills around the harbour had these floating logs and possibly they supplied Primrose with the planks you know, that could be re-sawn and re-cut, you know, into sizes. Yes, Primrose had sawyers, dad was a sawyer and I was on the forehead helping the tailer out - what the call the on the forehead of the machine.

Q: That's what you did?

Oh just tailing out and -



Q: - what does that mean, tailing out?

Oh when the main machine is putting it through the forehead machine I was on the other end putting it where the timber was supposed to go. It used go over the head and you used to have to put it out over the end.

Q: Stacking it up?

No just straddle it over the end and then sort it down underneath the ground - I can vaguely recall a yardman who used to put it in wax. Dressed timber. And then underneath where all the shavings went it was my job to go down and pull the shavings into chaff bags and that was all carted away to brick pit in Victoria Road. I understand the brick pit is still there. An unused brick pit. And that's where we used to tip the shavings from the saw mill.

Q: How did you find the work? Did you find it hard?

No I loved it. They harder the work was, when you come from the bush the harder it is the better you liked it. If you got a soft easy job it was monotonous. (Laughs)

Q: Was there lots of young men like you working at the mill?

Oh there was a couple of us - another chap, as I recall helping on the other machines. It's hard to go back that far now.

Q: What sort of hours would you work?

Oh about eight hours I think. But you had no morning tea, all you had was lunch, a half hour for lunch.

Q: What did you do for lunch?

You took your own lunch and I used to boil - I had to go down and boil the copper.

Q: For Tea?

That was part of my duties. Go down and boil the copper up and fill their billies up for their lunch and take it back up to the mill.

Q: What would you do after work?

Oh just the things that blokes used to do. Come home and have a shower or have a bath. You had your duties to do at home sort of thing.

Q: What kind of duties did you have to do at home?

Oh very little, just like odd things.



Q: Where was the house? You say it was in Morrison Avenue but was it closer to the Church Street end or down towards Putney?

It was down towards Putney actually. You know Tennyson Road?

Q: Yes.

Tennyson Road - well it was down towards Putney from there. There used to be a barber shop right opposite us. Hinders (?) was his name and it's still there the shop I believe.

Q: What did Morrison Road look like at that time?

Well if you saw a motor car run up and down twice a day you'd call it a lot of traffic.

Q: Was it a dirt road or sealed?

I just can't recall now. No it was a sealed road, tar-sealed, yes it was. When my dad got out of work at Primrose's dad had a tennis-court on Morrison Road directly opposite practically where we lived.

Q: Did he own it? Or rent it?

No it was disused and he got it going again, he worked hard on it and got it going. It was right on the creek side that used to run down through the bottom of Morrison Road. He had a club going there. I think it used to cost two bob a week.

Q: Was it a grass court or a hard court?

No a hard court. We used to play tennis and had to go down and mark the court and all this sort of thing. And then on Sundays - well we had girl friend's of course - same as all young blokes. Once or month or so he'd organise a picnic and he'd hire a truck from Devonshire's who had a fruit shop on Victoria Road. He had this truck and dad used to haul that out and he'd charge and everybody would take a hand - and he would charge for the hire of the truck two shillings. We used to have a good time.

Q: How many of you would go?

Oh depending on who wanted to go, sometimes eight or ten.

Q: Where would you go?

Oh sometimes we'd go to Lane Cove and you know - a little way was a long way in those days, those trucks. Oh to Mosman and all that sort of thing, hard to recall now. There was a swimming baths in Putney Park, just a cement one.



Q: A harbour pool?

Yes and the only time it used to fill up was at high tide and you couldn't swim when it was low tide because there was no water in it. And then they had a big recreation hall in Putney Park. They used to hold turn-outs there.

Q: What does a turn-out mean?

Oh sing-songs and dances - you know.

Q: I am interested in where you would meet these girls that every young man had?

Oh well I had - my girl's name was Mary Adams. The brother's girlfriend was one of her sisters. And . . . girlfriend was a sister also - the three sisters.

Q: Three brothers and three sisters?

Yes.

Q: Where did you meet the Adams girl?

Right opposite St Mary's church on Victoria Road. Right opposite there's a shop. I don't know whether it's called Field of Mars Road now or what it used to be called. But we all used to meet there, especially of a Saturday night or Friday night and we'd all walk up to Ryde, go to the pictures.

Q: What was the name of the picture show?

Oh I forget now love.

Q: Was it the Rialto?

I couldn't recall that. Directly opposite the picture show there was a hall where they used to have boxing and amateur bouts and sing-songs of a Saturday afternoon - Saturday night, Friday night. That's where I used to do a bit of boxing.

Q: How did they recruit you into that?

Oh we just along. They would charge a small fee and then they'd ask somebody if they wanted to have a box and of course I was always interested in boxing, I loved it. I used to get up - you'd get nothing for it, unless somebody liked to throw a few coins into the ring (laughs)

Q: In appreciation of the show you put on? (Laughs)

Yes (laughs). Sometimes get two or three bob each out of it. Apart from that - no we had a good time in Ryde.



Q: With the boxing, how serious was it?

Well it got serious when I went back to live at home. The depression was really on, you know. Dad wasn't working.

Q: Was this when you went back to Sydney?

Dad wasn't working and things were very very hard. As I say I was a bit mad on boxing and I rigged myself up a punching bag in the backyard and I used to train myself. Thinking I was a real time boxer. (Laughs) A chap seen me one day and he was a trainer - an ex-trainer, he lived next door and he took me over and another chap he took him over also and he trained us up a bit and then I went to Ern McQuillan's. A well known boxing trainer.

Q: Where did he hang out?

In Newtown - oh he had a big place, he trained all the big top rankers here later on. I had a few fights - six rounds until one day I got a hell of a hiding, one night it was at North Sydney stadium. I fought a chap with the name of Wally Shuttleworth. I shouldn't have fought him but I filled in for somebody else. I filled in for this chap, he was crook or something and my trainer Ernie McQuillan he told me, 'Please yourself' he said, 'I think you can beat him'. But I couldn't beat him, he gave me one hell of a hiding, and I went home, I was bruised, black, couldn't see out of me eyes, both blacked up. And me mother said, 'That's the end son', she said, 'No more boxing for you. Just for self defence but no more boxing for you', she said 'If you consider doing any more boxing you're out'.

Q: How did you feel when she said that?

Oh I didn't like it at all. And then we used to go down -

Q: - did you try and argue with her?

No - nobody argued with my mother because she was that lovable she could always get round you. I took her advice and other people told me it was good advice, you know - for what you got out of it, they pointed out two or three punch drunk fighters, and 'That's what you'll end up like'. But I still had an interest in it. I used to go down on Sunday night - Darlinghurst, Marie Winton's.

Q: Was that another gym?

No it wasn't a gym it was more or less a sort of a club. They had dancing and they had a boxing ring and all that, but it was only just amateur boxing you know. If they see anybody getting hurt they'd stop it you know? You only got a few shillings for it.



Q: You said some very nice things about your mother. How do you think did she cope with your father losing his job at the mill?

Well my mother was very very strong headed. She's very strong and she just took it in her stride. Yes. Plenty people could come to our place for Christmas dinner and mum would never bat an eye, she's sit 25 or 30 people down for Christmas dinner or whatever you like.

Q: Did she work at all? Apart from in the house of course?

Yes she did in the war effort, she worked at some place for the army you know like packing something for the army.

Q: I meant actually in the depression years.

Oh no there was no work at all, nobody worked, very few people worked.

Q: And the tennis court and the lorry for the picnics and so on that just helped bring a bit of money in?

Yes, yes.

Q: Why do you think your father moved back into town if he had that small income?

Oh well he got this job in town see? My sister was working in Sydney and to cut cost for them, my brother John, he got a job in Sydney and to cut costs that's why they moved back, they moved back to Sydney.

Q: And they left you working in the dairy.

Yes - well I didn't mind that because I used to live at Hopping's. As I said you used to get so much a week and your keep.

Q: While you were at Goodchild's your family was still living up here in Morrison Road. But then when you went to Hopping's you lived at Hopping's.

Yes I lived at Goodchild's too and my family lived at Morrison Road.

Q: What kind of accommodation did you have there?

Oh good accommodation. The driver and myself had a room to ourselves. Single beds. You'd have to be very careful - I used to have to get up - I was milking the cows, I'd have to be up round about half past ten or eleven o'clock and you'd have to be careful you didn't disturb him because he was the bloke that had to be up at 1 o'clock to go on the run you know? Oh no, you got your three meals a day.



Q: Who cooked those, who provided them?

Mrs Hopping and her daughter. The wife and the daughter.

Q: How many men would they cook for?

Oh well there was only the two - the two workers and Mr Hopping and Mrs Hopping and the daughter, that's all.

Q: And you were beginning to say that you got fifteen shillings a week.

Fifteen shillings a week and your keep.

Q: Do you think that was generous pay?

Well for those times (laughs) you took what you could get sort of thing. Well yes I used to make do on it. I clothed myself well and that sort of thing.

Q: What happened to the job at Hopping's?

Well I got homesick - well not actually homesick, I thought I'd go back home and that was it. Just as well because Mr Hopping [inaudible words] it was the height of the depression, because nobody had no money, nobody. I went back to Sydney.

Q: Was there any way that milk was distributed to people out of work?

No not to my knowledge but when I was on the run I used to be big hearted and two or three I used to give extra milk to. But apart from that it was never distributed - not to my knowledge anyhow.

Q: There was no government scheme officially to distribute milk?

Oh no, no, no. As far as the government was concerned I think we had more strict hygiene then what they've got today.

Q: Tell me about that.

You'd never know - it could one or two o'clock in the morning you might be out on the run and an inspector would pull you up and examine your measures, examine the cart, examine every part - the cleanliness and sometimes they'd try and trap you they'd pull you up, you might be caught smoking on the cart you to - oh - did you ever, they really reprimanded you. We used to have stopping places.

Q: What, for a bit of a smoko?

We'd stop and give the horses a breather and have a smoke ourself. Many a time they'd pull up in cars and they'd say, 'Can I buy a pint of milk off you?'



'Oh yes. Have you got something to put it in?' 'Oh no we want to drink it here we'll drink it out of the container', all this sort of thing, out of your measures you see?

Q: And what did you do?

Oh well we'd say, 'You go to hell mate, nobody drinks out of those, if you've got a container we'll sell you a pint of milk.' And then they'd come to the dairy, examine the bails, examine the cow bails. The dairy had to be spotless. They'd go through everything. Everything was all stainless steel benches. The floor had to be scrubbed.

Q: Whose job was that?

That was whoever was milking. When I had to milk that was my job. Oh they were strict.

Q: How did you keep the milk cool, particularly in summer?

Well that was in the laps of the god. We would be carrying about 20 or 30 gallons of milk in the cart, we had two of them. They were all under cover. They were concealed inside the cart. When you finished you washed them out and scoured them out, they could slip out, you could pull them out.

Q: Did you carry ice or anything like that?

No, no no. No way.

Q: So the stainless steel containers kept the milk.

Yes well it would be fresh milk and in the early mornings - well it would be one o'clock when we'd leave the yard and by the time you were off the road it would be seven o'clock in the morning. By the time you got round the milk would be still fresh. It would be still like it came out of the cow sort of thing. And the people those days, they had their refrigerators.

Q: And they'd take them in and look after it themselves?

Yes they had their jugs and billies out. To one particular place I had to go into the kitchen and the jug would be on the table, pour out the pint or whatever and put it in the frig.

Q: That was service.

Yes well that was part of it but in return there'd be a plate of cookies for me. (Laughs)

Q: Would people pay you by the day?

No, no - some would. But mostly it was a weekly bill.



Q: And were you in charge of billing as well as delivering?

You'd come home in the afternoon - or morning, go into the office and you'd state what each customer took for the day.

Q: To whom would you tell that?

To the boss and he'd put it in the book. Monday was bill day. He delivered the bills [tape break]

Q: Jim you were just saying that every Monday was bill day, can you tell me a bit more about that?

Yes we used to deliver the bills on the first delivery on Monday morning and then we would collect on the Monday afternoon run. Sometimes you wouldn't always catch them but nine times out of ten it would be left in their billy on the Tuesday morning or the next day. We had very, very, very few bad payers. Some of them paid cash or some of them left their money in their billy can or jugs or whatever.

Q: Did you deliver anything apart from milk?

Cream - we had our cream day also. Mainly the Sunday was cream day. A lot of them would take half a pint of cream. You'd separate the milk at the dairy and it was fresh cream straight. You wouldn't have that big a cream run. Quite a few took cream.

Q: Anything else apart from milk and cream?

No, no, no. That was all.

Q: When generally did you get back from the run? What time did you get back?

Well you had to be back off the road by seven.

Q: Who told you, you had to be off the road?

That was the law.

Q: Because it was on a delivery cart or because of the horses?

No it was the delivery cart, I don't know the reason, I just can't recall the reason. But I'm pretty certain there was that set time, you had to be off the road by seven or seven thirty.



Q: So then you'd come back and tell the boss who had taken how much milk, was that only once a week?

Oh no that was everyday. The duties were when you got back you had to unharness your horse, wash out your milk measures, your milk tanks, brush down the horse, look after your horse first and see that he was fed and washed your cart down inside where the milk containers went and where the measures went and all that sort of thing - and then you'd go and have your breakfast.

Q: I imagine you could be quite hungry by that time?

(Laughs) I'd say so. Yes, you'd do a lot of walking and a lot of running.

Q: And after breakfast?

Bed time.

Q: So how long would you sleep.

Oh an hour or half an hour before - depending on whether Mr Hopping would want me to go on milking or helping milk the cows or just to be going straight on the run. If you were going straight on the run you'd get up about half past eleven.

Q: At night?

Yes - or in the daytime if you were on the afternoon run.

Q: There was a second run of milk deliveries in the afternoon?

Oh yes you did one in the morning and one in the afternoon.

Q: So you had a bit of a sleep in between the two runs?

Oh yes, sure, god yes, you'd have to.

Q: And when did the afternoon run end?

Round about five o'clock.

Q: And then you'd have to clean everything again?

Yes come back, clean, do your horse, clean your cart, containers, start all over again.



Q: Did they give you a meal (laughs) in between some times?

Oh no - sometimes you'd get a cup of tea or a biscuit. Oh they looked after you, you were well fed, never went hungry.

Q: But in fact from what you say you got two short lots of sleep, not say one stretch of 8 hours.

Mmm, yes - oh you got used to it. For the night run you'd have to be up at eleven o'clock and go and milk and that finishes round about say half past twelve. Get your milk ready for your run and then do a run, it used to take it out of you a bit.

Q: Sounds like a long day to me.

It would be a long day but that didn't happen every day. He was a good boss.

Q: Mr Hopping's was good, what about Mr Goodchild?

He was a good boss too, but Mr Hopping's was better. He was more considerate you know.

Q: How many days a week would you do that?

I had one day a week off.

Q: And does that mean that on that day there was no delivery or somebody else -

- oh somebody else would hop in and do the delivery.

Q: He'd cover for you.

Yes he'd cover for me. Somebody else would do it.

Q: At Hopping's and at Goodchild's did each firm and each delivery person have a set area of deliveries or did you try and poach customers from each other?

Oh we had our own customers. But then again if you came out and pulled me up for a pint of milk I'd serve you and I'd try and get you. I'd say, 'Have you got a milkman?' 'Oh yes but he's not very satisfactory', 'Well all right, what about trying us? We'll see you get the service'. And if you won that customer over you got the first bill. Mr hopping would give me whatever it was say ten shillings, you got it, that was your commission for getting a new customer.

Q: That was a good idea.

Yes that's what I say, he was a very very good man.



Q: Did the delivery guys ever sort of come to blows about anything?

No, no, we were all good mates. There was Paul's big dairy just off Morrison Road, there was Goodchild's, there was Hopping's, there was dairy farmers - no we was all good mates.

Q: Did you ever have a dairy man's picnic or a sports day?

No. They used to have a show and that was my pride I had the horse and had the cart that he used to put into the show.

Q: The Ryde show? Where was that held?

I don't remember now love, somewhere in Ryde park. I never got the opportunity to ride he done that himself. (Laughs)

Q: Did you paint the cart up?

No it was already painted, just had to keep it clean. The show horse - he was beautiful. A high stepper and I was a proud boy when I took him for a run of an afternoon. All the other drivers used to say 'You're bloody lucky to have a horse like that'. But the old horse - I really loved him. He knew the run better than me. The morning run I could let him go and use the bottle can and go serve the customers, he'd wander down he knew where every customer was, he knew where every stop was. God he was a lovely old horse. Mr Hopping used to say, 'You've got that horse spoilt'. I used to give him pieces of sugar. Sugarloaves. I used to keep a handle of sugar in my pocket and he used to come up nudging me for his sugar.

Q: He knew where the sweets were. Now what time did you have for the boxing? How did you fit the boxing into all this busy life?

Well when I went to boxing I was out of work, dad was out of work, nobody working, that was in the height of the depression.

Q: So that was after working in the dairy.

Oh yes when I was doing boxing at Ryde it was only amateur stuff.

Q: Did the girls come too?

Oh yes, oh lord yes, we never went anywhere without our girls.

END OF INTERVIEW