

ACT Gold Awards Oral History Project

Thea De Salis: background, attachments and references, timed summary

Interviewer: Mary Hutchison

Background

Thea De Salis is the daughter of Harry Mouat who came to Canberra in 1913 to survey the ACT border. He surveyed the western side of the Cotter catchment and when that was completed, the Cotter River. He then continued as a surveyor for the city of Canberra. Harry married Iris Winchester in 1912. After his appointment to Canberra, Queanbeyan and survey camps were their residential base until they moved to a house in Acton a few months after Thea was born in 1917.

At the time of interview Thea was 93 years old. Apart from time in Melbourne and other Australian locations during the Second World War and several years in America (1947-1951), she has always lived in Canberra. She attended Telopea Park School and was amongst the first students at St Gabriel's, later Canberra Girls Grammar. After leaving school she worked for the Public Service in Treasury as a shorthand typist. When she married in 1941 she had to resign from this job but wartime employment measures enabled her to work for the Department of Defence in Melbourne when her husband was posted there for Airforce training.

Thea's husband Bill (William Alfred Fane) De Salis was a descendant of the De Salis family of Cuppacumbalong and a foundation pupil at Canberra Boys Grammar School. His father had properties in the Cooma district and in 1937 moved to 'Weston' in the ACT. Weston played a significant part in the lives of Thea and Bill and their children until it was resumed in 1969. Their children are Adrienne, Peter and Philippa.

Interviews with Thea were conducted on three separate occasions. The first two provide the most substantial information with the third used as an opportunity to clarify and add to material collected in the first two. It is noted that the best summary of clarifications and corrections is the email from Adrienne Bradley to Mary Hutchison.

Attachments and references

Background to the interview, including a summary of key family activities and dates provided by Thea's daughter, Adrienne Bradley, is attached. Other attachments also support and clarify the interview.

Attachments

- Adrienne Bradley, 'Althea Florence De Salis' – unpublished family history notes
- Adrienne Bradley, 'Harry Playfair Mouat 1880-1952' – unpublished family background and survey work, includes reproductions of family photos showing survey camps
- Adrienne Bradley email to Mary Hutchison 9 May 2010 in response to interviews on 4 and 6 May 2010 – clarifications and corrections
- Thea De Salis, 'Acton Peninsula' – unpublished memories written during 1990s

- B/W printouts of family photos – several of these discussed during the interview
- A 'mud map' of Thea's memory of Acton Peninsula

References

- Adrienne Bradley, 'Leopold Fane De Salis (1816-1898): The private man and public figure', *Canberra Historical Journal*, New Series No. 44, September 1999, pp. 25-33.
- W.A.F De Salis, 'Some Family History, An address delivered to the Canberra and District Historical Society 30 November, 1960' (available at the National Trust, ACT)
- ACT Heritage Council, Entry to the ACT Heritage Register, 10005, Field Books, Survey of the ACT
- Matthew Higgins, *Rugged Beyond Imagination: Stories from an Australian mountain region*, National Museum of Australia, 2009

Timed summary

Interview one: 4 May 2010

Length: 0:49:43

- 00:03 Recording ID. Family background: parents' arrival in Canberra; survey work and living arrangements.
- 05:10 Move from Capital Hill surveyors' camp to Acton 1917. House and neighbours in Liversidge Street.
- 10:13 Children of neighbouring families: playing in local environment; Canberra House; friendships. School: early days of St Gabriels (Canberra Girls Grammar) at Glebe House. De Salis family connection with Reverend Galliard Smith (lived at Glebe House while Rector at St John's)
- 15:13 Schooling at Telopea Park and St Gabriel's. Acton environment. Shopping in Queanbeyan. Father's brief transfer to Brisbane. Difficulty of transferring to Sydney, desire to do this and eventual move there.
- 20:04 Changes in Canberra during 1920s: Parliament House; library in basement of; photo of Adele Mildenhall and Thea at PH by WJ Mildenhall. Horses at Acton. Restrictions on girlhood activities. Later social life. Transport issues. Construction of Civic. Domestic work at Acton and employment of Martha as domestic help.
- 25:09 Building near Acton Offices used as School. Regular trips to Sydney with mother. Activities and relatives in Sydney. Father's family background. Aspects of domestic life in Canberra.
- 29:54 Social life at Acton: relationships with neighbours; original homes of local residents; new residents as more public servants arrived late 1920s. Mother's feelings about Canberra. Social strata amongst Acton residents. Bridges across Molonglo River.

35:32 Molonglo River as play location. Entertainment as grew older: outings; Albert Hall dances and fetes. St John's Church. The Causeway. Move of Acton families to Forrest and Red Hill. Kingston and Manuka Shops. Impact of Great Depression on family life and Thea's educational and work opportunities.

40:13 Move to Forrest early 1930s. Work as shorthand typist in Treasury. Interest in law.

PAUSE

42:14 Work in Treasury. Social activities as young woman. First meeting with husband. Grammar School girls and boys.

PAUSE

45:17 Memories of parents. Father's nickname 'Happy Harry'. Mother's feelings about Canberra life during early survey work. Own feelings about moving to Forrest and childhood.

49:43 END

Interview two: 6 May 2010

Track one

Length: 22: 42

[for clarification of time periods on this track see Adrienne's email notes]

00:08 Recording ID. Identification of the Lake as a major development in Canberra. De Salis family connections with St John's Church and Canberra. Resumption of De Salis property. Bill's return to work after the War. Move from Red Hill to 'Weston' [1957].

05:16 Life and farming activities at 'Weston'. Resumption of property and making a living after this. De Salis family and properties including Cuppacumbalong. Snow families and Canberra history.

10:18 Lack of interaction with local rural families pre and post-marriage. Bill's work and life before the War. [note: reference to Mr Daley – it was the Daley's house at Jervis Bay where Bill and Thea met – see interview 1] Bill's War service and Thea's travels with him to Airforce training locations. Period in Melbourne and accommodation there.

15:20 Work for the Defence Department in Melbourne during the War. Work before the War in Treasury. Work routines as shorthand typist. Dislike of this work and how came to do it. Preference to become a lawyer. Social life after marriage. Development of Canberra suburbs pre-War.

22:42 END

Track two

Length: 32:23

- 00:08 Parents' move from Canberra to Sydney [1944]. Living in Forrest with parents while Bill serving in New Guinea. Details about house in Forrest – built by Oakleigh and Parkes. Bill's return from war service. New job in immigration and family's move to New York [1947-1951]. Return to Canberra.
- 05:00 Changes in Canberra on return from America. Experience while Bill was away on war service. Addresses and moves after Bill's return. Snow family. Social life in Canberra during 1920s, especially impact of arrival of public servants in 1926-27. Father's Canberra-based survey work.
- 10:17 Memories of ceremony for the opening of Parliament. Laying of Foundation stone for Girls Grammar School. Memories of Canberra during 1920s building period. View from Acton. Albert Hall and Hotel Canberra.
- 15:10 Impact of Depression- public service salary cuts and sackings. Business initiatives by ex public servants. Next Canberra development by Menzies. Social life and children in post-war period. Life at 'Weston'. Mother's return to Canberra after father's death [1952]. Olympic Games in Melbourne 1956.
- 21:15 Parents' life in Sydney after 1944. Move from 'Weston' to Pearce. Enjoyment of life in Pearce. Recent growth of Canberra.
- 26:21 Current social life. Voluntary work while children at school. Memory of opera performance at Causeway Hall. Feelings about living in Canberra in comparison to Sydney and Melbourne. Reflection on mother's ease with Canberra in later life.
- 30:23 END

Track three**Length: 16:40**

- 00:03 Memories in response to photographs: father's early surveying days; Queanbeyan connections; parents' flat in Potts Point, Sydney.
- 05:11 Memories in response to photographs: mother's family; social and working life 1930s; De Salis family; Acton neighbourhood and childhood friends.
- 11:22 Memories in response to photographs: Bill De Salis military service; 'Weston' and other De Salis properties; Sheehan Street, Pearce.

Interview three: 20 May 2010**Track one****Length: 20:06**

- 00:02 Recording ID. Pronunciation of De Salis. Discussion of Acton photographs – location and identity of children. Houses/buildings used as hospitals in early

Canberra. Layout of Mouat's house at Acton and possibility that it was used as a hospital.

04:11 Memories in response to photographs: kewpie dolls, Telopea Park School, house at Dominion Cct Forrest, Bill and Thea.

08:57 First public library at Parliament House. Acton neighbours.

15:49 Beginnings of Boys Grammar School and role of Bill De Salis in this. Girls Grammar School.

20:06 END

Track two

Length: 1:03

00:02 The Sheaffe family and others