

Writing a History of Work and Community in Wollongong, 1880–1940

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This paper forms part of the Introduction to Part One of a book dealing with the history of work and community in Wollongong, between 1880 and 2000. It will be written by seven people, including the authors of this paper, who will also be the book's editors. The writing of the book will be assisted by a grant to the editors from the National Council for the Centenary of Federation's History and Education Program, and with support from the University of Wollongong and the Council of the City of Wollongong. The book arises from research conducted by various scholars over many years on the history of the Wollongong district. This culminated in *A History of Wollongong*, a multi-authored book published in 1997, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the City's proclamation.¹

Being a general history, that book was subject to a variety of space constraints and, therefore, had to pass lightly over the themes of work and community. By the end, however, it was clear that, as the development of the district's natural resources linked it ever more firmly to both a national and international economy and polity, a process had been set in motion that shaped and then transformed the working and communal lives of its people. Consequently, as the authors attempted to explain this economic and social evolution, questions continually arose about the nature of work and community. These questions required and deserved a fuller treatment.

With some few honourable exceptions, the authors of Australian regional histories have not been concerned with the theory of community at any level. Through its account of work and community in Wollongong, this book will attempt to unravel the forces that make for the integration and disintegration of local societies, and besides stimulating popular historical interest, should provoke scholars to the closer investigation of social cause and effect. It will contribute to historiographical debate chiefly through its Introduction, which will link this work with theory and practice in its field.

Consequently, the book is not about the theory of community. It will be informed by an understanding of that theory, and its contribution to theory will lie in the account it gives of how a particular group of people, in a particular place and period, experienced and understood community. In short, its focus is on what happened and why it happened.

'Community' is a much abused word. Journalists use it in place of the more old-fashioned word 'public'. Politicians use it when they are not sure whom they are talking about or promising things to, or working up a rage on behalf of. Academics, admittedly mainly sociologists, use the term so variously that one of them has counted over 70 different definitions of it. The purpose of this paper is to outline our understanding of the term 'community', in a way that can be used to write a coherent and meaningful account of communal experience in Wollongong between 1880 and 2000.

We do not approach our task with the specific purpose of clarifying definitions, or testing the theories on which they depend. We are a group of historians who have written about 'community' in the Wollongong district. We are guilty of having used the term loosely, and the history we have written has drawn on theory eclectically. In other words, we have written our history against the background of theory that best seems to fit it. We have begun with as few assumptions as possible, and tested them for plausibility against the available evidence.

So, as a result of our previous writing, we have ourselves begun to evolve some theory of community as it applies to the process of historical change in the Wollongong district over the last century or so. It goes something like this.

It is fairly well accepted that geography does not of itself determine community, and that it is not even necessary to its formation. Thus it makes sense to talk about a community based on religion, or ethnicity. But in our writing about the particular period we have studied in the history of the Wollongong district, we have preferred to talk primarily about communities that have been geographically based.

We have done so because we have written mainly about the coal-mining communities of the north and central Wollongong district. Most of those communities had their origins in the 1880s, when investors in Australia and Britain decided that faster development of the Wollongong coalfield offered greater profit.² Until then the district's population of less than 8,000 was organised into a series of small farming settlements, serviced by a few villages and little townships. The handful of mines on the coalfield were small players, even in local terms; by the 1870s domestic servants still outnumbered coal miners. The situation was transformed in the 1880s by investment in coal. By the 1870s only about one in ten of the district's inhabitants lived in the coal mining centres located north of the seaport town of Wollongong. Within two decades more than four in ten did so, and the share rose steadily to stand at a peak of nearly seven in ten by the Great War. The population was redistributed again, particularly from the 1930s, by investment in metal manufacturing at Port Kembla, but by World War II almost half continued to live in the coal mining centres.³

At the time of their origin, the state of communication and transport ensured that these centres were relatively isolated from one another. But what determined their location was the reason for their existence: a practical entrance to a body of easily-worked coal.

These communities were, therefore, workforce communities. Coal was their life. It provided wages for the miners; the wages supported their wives and children, and provided income for the local tradesmen and shopkeepers. The community's prosperity, and its very existence, depended on the ability of the pit to get and sell coal.

In and around the pit, work was regulated by a comprehensive system of conventions and rules, some written and some not. The rules and conventions not only regulated the method of working. They regulated the allocation of work, the method of payment, and the determination of seniority. They were the foundation of status and prestige.

From the side of the men, the regulation of work was the function of the lodge, the miners' workplace organisation.⁴ The lodge often overlapped with the Lodge, a voluntary organisation based on religious affiliation and principle. The office-bearers of the two were often the same, and they carried the authority of workplace organisation into the community via a series of social functions: the provision of sickness and accident funds, funeral arrangements, and widows' benefit.

These functions found wider commercial and political expression in the Co-operative, and the trade union. The Co-

op's function was to keep down the price of food, clothing and domestic goods for its members. It too had its rules, and so did the union that figured strongly in its government.

Union and Co-op were also providers of recreation. They organised picnic days, sporting events, and teams.⁵ Men who worked together played together, and sometimes prayed together—especially in times of disaster, when every member of the community knew the brothers who were the victims.

These relationships commanded conformity and obedience. All miners belonged to the lodge and, through it, the union. In times of strike action, local tradesmen and shopkeepers gave credit, or suffered the consequences. Waverers had their roofs 'tin-kettled'.⁶ For over 95 per cent of women in the coal communities, almost the only outlet for their abilities was unpaid domestic duties. It was the role of a woman to serve her man, in good times and bad: to provide hot meals, scrub his back in the bath, and serve on the ladies' auxiliary as required.⁷

The purpose of the rules and conventions, and the insistence on conformity with them, was to provide security within the community, and to defend it against attack from the outside world. The two were mutually dependent, and their relationship was objectified in the attitude of the lodge and its members to the mine manager. He was, in one of his roles, an agent of the owners in the outside world, and therefore if needs be an oppressor and exploiter. But on his ability to sell coal profitably the future of the pit depended. The attitude of lodges to 'fair' managers, even in times of dispute, was ambiguous.⁸ Community needs tempered class politics.

But despite the strength of rule and convention, meant to preserve community, the forces acting on it and within it changed. The outside world impinged, even through the institutions meant to preserve continuity. A union which wished to act on the principle that 'an injury to one was an injury to all' had to convince lodge members that the business of other communities, no matter how disruptive, was their business too. The district union's affiliation to a State or national union and to a political party invited attention to national and even international affairs. Demands and pressures for unity with coal miners in places beyond Wollongong, even beyond Australia according to the ideology of the Communist Party or the Industrial Workers' of the World, could be disruptive to people whose only knowledge of the world had been gained in their pit and its surroundings. The same applied to the Labor Party, where the need to operate on Parliaments and Conferences in Macquarie Street, Melbourne and Canberra imported the concerns and problems of a bigger world.⁹

Physical conditions also changed. Transport by rail and by road, by train and by bus, became more efficient and cheaper. Wireless and then television powerfully brought new and unsettling opinions into the household, and created new wants and ambitions. The shape of the economy changed, and so did the techniques of cutting coal.¹⁰ New hands without the old memories and deference to the community's conventions found jobs in the pit, and there were new opportunities for employment for the sons and daughters of the old hands.

At the same time communication also increased in scope and began to erode the cultural institutions and practices of particular town and village communities. Improved transport services made possible district bands and choirs, and they gradually superseded their local versions. Better transport also encouraged the extension of educational institutions and services, such as libraries and newspapers, which introduced ideas and issues from the wider world. The movies and the radio, which established a near perpetual presence of the outside world in the home itself, not only added to the sources of new ideas and issues. They increasingly

satisfied people's entertainment needs and became forces for the disintegration of local institutions like bands and choirs.

Diversification of the district economy, especially as metal manufacturing began to challenge coal from the 1920s, produced a variety of effects on the coal communities. The steelworks and ancillary industries at Port Kembla offered a greater variety of jobs, which involved daily travel away from home and the pit town.¹¹ The development of a service economy in the decades after World War II accelerated these changes, by requiring more formal education for workers and by providing a greater number and variety of jobs for women.¹² The era of relative domestic certainty was fragmenting.

As the breaking in of the wider world upon the district changed and expanded the wants and the expectations of its inhabitants, conditions of economic boom after the War coupled these to 30 years of full employment and greater family disposable income. Rising demand for the variety of consumer goods and services available in the wider world meant death for the Co-operative stores.¹³ In the same period the professionalisation of sport diminished the importance of or even destroyed the local community team.

Before they began to break up the coal mining communities provided a kind of security that can be best illustrated by the life expectations of an 'ideal type' young male. When he began his working life as a wheeler¹⁴ in any of the Wollongong mines in, say, 1910, had a certainty and, therefore, a security built into both his present life and his future. At work he was part of a hierarchy which regulated his respect and his deference to certain of his fellow workers. That hierarchy also regulated his attitude toward his employers and their agents. The hierarchy of respect carried over into the wheeler's society outside the pit. There was continued deference to the 'big hewer', who could walk out from the pit when he had completed his darg,¹⁵ and that respect might well have been reinforced in the town's band or choir, or in its churches.

The wheeler had an expectation that, in time, he would go on to the coal, and would enjoy the respect and the greater financial rewards that were the due of the miner. As a miner his union would enforce rules and principles, such as the cavil¹⁶ and the darg, to protect his earning capacity and his health. In times of adversity the loyalty of his workmates would support him and his family. His wife would support him domestically. The union would protect him against scabs and the management.

This configuration of relationships and expectations that prevailed in the mining villages between 1880 and 1940 was repeated in a dozen or so small settlements centred on pits from Helensburgh in the north to Wongawilli in the south. It was reinforced by the lack of alternative occupations in what were largely single-purpose economies, separated by distance and isolation, themselves functions of the existing technology of travel and of communication.

South of the town of Wollongong there existed community of another kind. The country here was a widening plain, which extended about 12 miles inland from the coastal village of Shellharbour to the steep foothills of the Illawarra Range. It was well-watered, easily cleared, and fertile. It became the site of a vigorous dairy industry.

The population here was not grouped into a number of closely-settled areas as was that in the mining townships that clung to the escarpment north of Wollongong. At the Great War and up until World War II the size of the farms south of Wollongong averaged 150–200 acres¹⁷, and the farmhouses were scattered accordingly. There were only a handful of settlements of any size, at Albion Park, Dapto, Shellharbour and Unanderra, where the farmers and their families delivered their produce, bought their supplies, and sometimes met socially. There was nothing like the intensity of contact which characterised the mining villages of the northern part of the Wollongong district, but nevertheless common experience

developed a strong sense of community among the dairy farmers and their families.

As in the mining villages of the north, all did the same kind of work. The sense of shared work experience was even stronger, however, because all members of the family—men, women and children—had to work at a range of jobs that took up all daylight hours and, in winter, some hours of darkness as well. This was so because the cost of hiring labour at union or award rates, as in the mining workplaces, would have exceeded significantly the returns from dairying.¹⁸ There was a well-understood apportionment and gradation of tasks: children to help with the milking before and after school, wives to do the same and keep house, adult males to do the heavier work and earn extra money from jobs off the farm in the slack season, old people to look after the vegetable garden and the poultry.¹⁹

For males in their prime, the work they did was not only arduous, but occasionally dangerous. Accidents with animals, implements and firearms were frequent and disabling. Beyond these personal risks were the risks of the farming enterprise itself. There could be too much as well as too little rain; weeds and insects could infest pastures and crops; disease could strike the herd. The risks run were hardly compensated for by the income earned. Although the farms exploited the labour of all members of the family over hours way beyond those allowed by industrial awards, they returned an income well below that earned by a Sydney tradesman in regular employment.²⁰ Saving was not easy, and the farming families lived with financial insecurity. No matter how farm income varied, the farmer had to repay the loans he had taken to buy stock, fodder and equipment.

To these people the Co-operative Movement was a godsend, and some of them preached Co-operation with religious fervour. It offered them some control over the marketing of their produce, and with that a regular and secure income, if they could agree on the best way to buy the equipment to process and market their milk, cream, butter and cheese. That required the formation of a Society, the subscription of capital, the election of a governing body, and the supervision of management. It meant the joining together of the farmers of the district in a common enterprise on whose success their livelihood depended.²¹

The Co-operatives had their enemies, and the farmers well understood who they were. They were their adversaries of old: the city 'middlemen' and the banks, false friends of the country people they professed to serve. They represented money power, and to the extent that they opposed the interests of any single Co-operative, so they damaged the interests of each of its members.²²

Why not unite then in a single movement to oppose them? It was not so simple. Each Co-operative was competing against the others for market share, which encouraged a concentration on the interests of each particular district or region, rather than on the interests of the dairying industry as a whole. Each community was concerned with its own fortune, before those of others in the industry.

This fundamental concern with the economic well-being of the community and the hostility to the city helped reinforce resistance to change. Together with its quest for economic security, the dairying community preserved its prejudices and pattern of social life. But it was not autonomous, and over time it could not successfully resist influences from the wider world. Laws took the community's children off the farm to attend school regularly,²³ and for increasing periods; wars took away its young men, and those that came back were changed; regulations required new methods in the production and marketing of milk; Wollongong's economy began to offer new opportunities in employment to surplus sons, and even to women; and, as the town of Wollongong expanded into suburbs, so some farmers found the sale of their pasture land

for real estate more profitable than the production of milk.

There were important differences between the two kinds of community that affected the relations between the members of each of them, and the attitude of individual members toward the community as a whole. Geographical concentration meant that the members of the northern mining communities interacted with one another more frequently than the farmers and their families in the south, with consequent reinforcement and stronger pressures to conformity. Attitudes to work, and to property, differed between the two. Most farmers were either small proprietors, or quasi-proprietors who hoped to become so, and conscious of the difference in self-esteem that ownership made. They had the prospect of becoming at least asset-rich in their lifetime, and they believed that they could achieve prosperity and independence through hard work. They were their own employers, and exploitation of their labour-power was for their own benefit, not for the enrichment of an absentee coal-owner. They believed in individual solutions to problems, at least as strongly as in collective action.

Despite these differences, both the coal-mining and the dairying settlements formed communities in the sense we have used the term in the book. In both, individuals did the same or similar work; they shared common hazards, and goals and objectives; they developed conventions that regulated their working lives and their social roles; they had clearly identified enemies, and they banded together in their quest for greater security. But despite the controls they evolved, the communities could not prevent change in their relations with the wider world, and consequently within themselves. By the 1950s they had been severely weakened; by the 1960s they had become vestigial.

Within these two communities there were other groupings of the kind that historians and sociologists have sometimes also recognised as communities. The most prominent of these were the congregations grouped around the various churches in the district.

The churches catered for a population in which Protestants formed the great majority. In 1921 only about 25 per cent of the residents of the southern local government areas were Roman Catholic; at the northern extreme, the proportion was about 15 percent.²⁴ Many of the dairy farmers in the south were of Northern Irish or Scottish descent; the religions of the coal miners in the north reflected their Welsh, Scottish and northern English origins.

By 1921 some 75 churches served a population of some 34,000.²⁵ This large number had causes other than the religious enthusiasm of their congregations and the variety of sects. In the dairying country, serious worshippers needed a church within practical horse-powered travel from the farm gate. In the north, workforce communal loyalties demanded that there be a separate church for each mining village centred on each pit.²⁶

Church services, and church governance, were shared by laity and professional clergy. In the Methodist and Primitive Methodist congregations, the tradition of lay preaching was strong, and laymen also occasionally preached from Presbyterian pulpits. In the governing bodies of the Protestant churches, full-time clergy presided as of right over councils of the laity. In mining areas, these often included prominent lodge and union officials.²⁷

Their presence had a tempering effect upon the professional clergy and the sermons they preached. Generally, the churches were an influence for moderation and harmony in industrial relations, and as such were good for business.²⁸ One coal owner noted record production in the week after the Great Revival Crusade of 1901-02 ended,²⁹ and several coal owners and managers were prominent churchmen and significant benefactors.³⁰ Despite this, clergy did not always hasten to advise their coal mining congregations to abjure strikes, and some actually supported miners on strike against the coal owners. During the 1917 General Strike a

local clergyman at Helensburgh made his trips on horse, "rather than ride on a scab train".³¹ Clergymen appointed to Wollongong district parishes often found it advisable to modify their opinion on the relationship between God, man, and magistrate in view of the industrial opinions of their congregations.

These could apply even to matters beyond the grave. Nine of the miners killed in the 1887 Bulli disaster were Roman Catholics. The mourners withheld the coffin of one of them—a known scab—from burial in consecrated ground, and released it only after the officiating priest appealed to them from the graveside.³² The teachings of the Church were welcome only so far as they did not contravene the rules and mores of the workforce community, and threaten its security.

The Protestant churches had strong connections with the Loyal Orange and Masonic orders. Lodges came early to the Illawarra. The first Orange lodge established in Australia outside of Sydney town was founded in 1846 at Kiama, just to the south of the present boundaries of the City of Wollongong.³³ The members were Northern Ireland Protestants who had cleared the brush for dairying. They kept alive the memory of the Battle of the Boyne, and pledged themselves to keep the rich and golden lands of Australia free of the curse of Catholic domination. Their lodge's motto was 'No Surrender'.

The Freemasons established their first lodge in the district at Dapto in 1845 and, like the Orangemen, continued to establish new lodges until the time of the Second World War. Both organisations also found strong support in the mining townships in the northern part of the district. By 1900 Orangemen had formed 15 lodges in the district, and there was a larger number of Masonic Lodges.³⁴ Sectarianism raised its head in a variety of ways. For instance, the one-horse coach, operated by a dairy farmer, which took children from the farms at Yellow Rock to school in Albion Park in the 1900s, stopped only at the public school; it would not take children to the nearby Catholic convent school run by the Sisters of St Joseph.³⁵

Masonry was then a secret order, with its own ceremonies, rituals, and offices. It was non-sectarian in the sense that it required of its members only a belief in a Supreme Being, but its membership was overwhelmingly Protestant. Masonic rules enjoined the Brotherhood to do good works. They visited the sick, comforted the widows, befriended the orphans, and cared for the aged. In a time when social services were primitive, they provided a shield against misfortune for their members. In the north these activities merged with those of the union lodges in the mining communities. Sometimes, perhaps often, the office-bearers of the two lodges were largely interchangeable. In the south, Masonic lodge members were prominent in the dairy co-operatives, and dominated agricultural societies. Domination was not difficult. The census of 1921 identified Jamberoo as the most Protestant local government area, with a Roman Catholic population of about 10 per cent.

Domination of voluntary organisations and brethren in positions of influence led to unofficial preference for Masons in appointments and promotions. This was especially so when jobs were hard to get, and promotions few. In the Great Depression of the thirties there were many with no particular interest in a Supreme Being who believed that membership of a Masonic lodge would only do them good. It could help miners who met their mine manager and his deputies on common ground at the Masonic lodge. The same occasions blunted social divisions, so that considerations of community could override those of class.

The community of Masons in some ways therefore reinforced the workforce community, but in others was sometimes antagonistic to it as a kind of selective sub-community. In times of industrial crisis in the coal industry, the differences tended to disappear. In the emergency, both communities merged as one, when

the consensus for survival of the workforce community established precedence in the face of the common enemy.

Family and kinship relations supported the communal groupings. The NSW family in 1901 averaged 3.8 siblings; by 1933, it averaged only 2.2. In the dairying areas of the Wollongong district, the average remained far closer to the 1901 figure.³⁶

The family was more important in supporting community among the dairy farmers south of the town because it was a working unit. Almost no one was too old or too young to do some work on a dairy farm, and often three generations worked on the same property. The master of work was the father, who directed the labour of his wife, his parents, daughters and sons. He was responsible for all important managerial decisions, and his responsibility endowed him with strong authority.

But he did not monopolise it. Custom required that the old people be treated with proper respect. In the house, it was the wife who made the decisions. There was little room for disagreement, misbehaviour, malingering, or perhaps even initiative and innovation. Physical punishment, or the threat of it, usually was sufficient to ensure that children conformed to parents' wishes.

The senior members of the family not only taught the young ones the work skills they needed. Informally, and very powerfully, they taught the values of the community: while they worked, at the dinner table, when visitors came and the children listened while the adults talked.

There was a lot for them to learn. They learnt that other children led lives like theirs, and that once the farm was established, their parents had done so too. They learnt what they might hope for and what they could expect as they grew up. They discovered who a family's friends were, and who were its enemies. They gathered who it was that they might marry.

Marriage was important. Judicious choice of partner reinforced the values of both families. It could help consolidate properties, pay off loans, and reduce mortgages. Perhaps even more importantly, it guaranteed a source of additional labour or help. It established networks of reciprocal obligation within the community, and their interlacing bound the group more tightly together.

On the dairy farms, the strength of the family as a force which bound its members more closely into their community lessened only a little before 1940. The pressures which were to weaken it—falling birth rate, technological change, population movement, mass media and vocational choice—were much stronger in the postwar period than they were in thirties and before. Some of the changes were more significant in the northern mining communities than they were in the south. But even there, communities remained strongly bonded until the Second World War began, and for some time after.

The Great Depression of the early thirties was largely responsible for this. Between 1929 and 1933, some pits did not work from one year's end to the other,³⁷ and young single men went on the tramp to meet the demands of a dole system which required them to 'keep moving'. But their absence did not seriously weaken the community. They returned as the pit began to work again, and as they did, they reinforced the lessons which the Depression had seemed to teach the coalmining communities. The enemy had revealed himself as the willing agent of a heartless system which dismissed its workers without concern for even their survival. The only defence of the miners was to bind themselves as tightly as they could into a community which could offer them some security, because nothing else would.

Although the coal mining and dairying workforce communities dominated in their respective regions, there were smaller workforce communities that operated within their respective geographic areas. These smaller workforce communities had

many of the characteristics of the larger, and related to their supporting structures of church, family and social groups in much the same way. Three of these smaller communities were the railway community at Thirroul, the quarrying communities at Dunmore and Shellharbour, and the community that was based originally on the smelting works at Dapto.

Thirroul began its railway life as Robbinsville in 1887, when it served as a depot for the navvies building the Illawarra railway. In 1915, with the duplication of the line, Thirroul acquired extended marshalling yards, coal staites and a roundhouse which stabled the goods and passenger locomotives used on the Illawarra run.³⁸ At its peak, the roundhouse, yards and staites employed about 450 men, about the same as the two coal mines at Thirroul.³⁹

As in the mines, there was a clear line of progression. Boys began as engine cleaners, raking out ashes from the locomotives' fireboxes. After they served their time, and passed the necessary exams, they became firemen; after some years, and more examinations, they would become locomotive drivers. There was a parallel progression for platform staff, from junior porter to station master, each stage marked by the passing of exams.

Progression often meant transfer in the railway service, but many elected to stay, rather than seek promotion.⁴⁰ Besides the core of long-serving employees there were other sources of stability. The Railway Institute, which arranged classes and examinations for running and platform staff, built a hall which served not only as a classroom, but as a social centre for the railway employees and their families, nearly all of whom lived within walking distance.⁴¹ It served both social and political purposes. The railwaymen's unions met in the Railway Institute hall, and so did the Thirroul branch of the Australian Labor Party.

As with the mines, it was the unions that were the principal guarantors of certainty. They policed the relevant awards, and enforced their own house rules. All employees belonged, and the pressures to conform to industrial policy once the unions had decided were very strong. As with the coal unions, those who disagreed were required to accept majority decisions, or suffer ostracism or worse.⁴² After its defeat in the 1917 Strike the Australian Railways' Union struck a 'Lilywhite' medal for those who had been on the right side, and train crews who had wore it on their watch-chains in defiance of official orders.⁴³ At the side of the up-line, someone carved the lily into the rockface, so that all could see it and remember.⁴⁴

Union membership and membership of the Thirroul branch of the Labor Party overlapped. Members paid their dues and signed the Pledge Book at the pay office. Bill Woodward, a guard based at the Thirroul depot, was for many years a Vice President of the Australian Railways' Union, and almost continuously the holder of a senior office in the Thirroul branch of the Labor Party. During the period of Jack Lang's ascendancy in NSW Labor politics, the Branch numbered its membership in the hundreds.

In the southern part of the district the pattern of farming communities was disturbed a little in some localities by the presence of workforce communities more akin to those of the northern mining villages. At Dunmore and nearby Shellharbour, blue metal quarrying for road works began in 1880. The workforce at each quarry numbered at least 40, and many of the men and their families lived in company built villages.⁴⁵ These brought a paid workforce, trade unionism and, sporadically, Labor Party branches, into areas otherwise free of such ideas and organisations.⁴⁶

A more forceful intrusion occurred in 1898 when a smelting works began operations near Dapto. Its workforce of some 500 men operated under its own award of the NSW Arbitration Court, and supported its own union (the Central Illawarra Smelters' Union), Labor Party branch and workmen's institute, and a

variety of other, social, organisations. This strong little community was dispersed from 1905, however, when the smelting company collapsed. It was a sharp reminder to workers and their families, as well as to bankrupted local business people,⁴⁷ of the brutal suddenness with which forces beyond the community's reach could assail it, even shut it down.

Other individuals who were outside the community, and endowed with the power to make such decisions determined that a new smelter be opened at Port Kembla, a few miles south of Wollongong, in 1907. The NSW government had earmarked the area for industrial development, which spelled a rapid end for the dairy farms which occupied it. Some plant from the former Dapto works, as well as former smelting workers, their families and their houses were relocated to Port Kembla. Within 15 years Port Kembla was a major industrial centre, with the Electrolytic Refining & Smelting (ERS) Company's works providing the copper bars and ingots that, from 1918, Metal Manufactures turned into wire, cable, sheets, tubing and alloys; Australian Fertilisers Limited was established in 1920 to make sulphuric acid for ERS and superphosphate for Australian farmers.⁴⁸

These companies were linked by production processes and interlocking ownership, and they took a particular interest in the sense of community formed by employees and their families. This was not unlike the activities of some mine managers in some of the colliery villages, but at Port Kembla company officials went to remarkable lengths to shape the ideas and institutions of community. Throughout the period, they were adept, especially the officials of the ERS Company, at founding and being appointed to the executives of virtually every social, welfare, sporting, religious, educational and other community organisation in the town. Apart from the trade unions and the Labor Party branch, they were omnipresent. They even had a presence on the board of the workers' co-operative store.⁴⁹

In 1929 Australian Iron & Steel Limited commenced the production of iron and steel at Port Kembla. It too joined the corporate effort to weld a sense of community that would buttress gratitude and loyalty to the employer, and it worked. Unions, industrial action and political radicalism remained muted at Port Kembla until the later 1930s.⁵⁰ Like the mines and their villages, however, the factories and the institutions of community at Port Kembla were savaged by the Great Depression. Many families lived in tents and other makeshift accommodation, and the men were reduced to begging daily for the little work that was available. In the 1930s, including after 1935 when it was acquired by the Broken Hill Proprietary (BHP), the Port Kembla steelworks' injury and fatality record meant that it was better known locally as 'The Bloodhouse'—labour was plentiful, cheap and expendable, and the unions were weak. What the companies at the Port had invested previously in binding a community together was no longer relevant.

As Port Kembla's factories recovered slowly from the Depression in the late 1930s, the pattern of community there was disturbed. Industrial expansion began to attract job-hungry men from all over NSW, and from the pit villages to Wollongong's north. The latter had its own unsettling effect on the workforce communities that had clustered around the pits for some two generations, as an increasing number of workers' trains delivered men daily to the industrial complex at Port Kembla and brought them back again at night. By 1936, with 5000 workers, BHP was the biggest employer in the district: 3700 at its Port Kembla steelworks and another 1300 at its two coal mines, at Wongawilli and Bulli. This represented over 10 per cent of the district's total population, and imbued BHP with a corporate power and influence unequalled by any previous company investing in Wollongong.⁵¹

Like the mining and the other industrial companies that

had provided the base for Wollongong's workforce communities in the period, BHP was owned by distant people who made distant decisions that determined much about the fate of its workers, their dependents and their communities. From the late 1930s, and particularly in the decades after the Second World War, BHP, however, expanded its ownership and dominance of the district's mining and manufacturing industry. It did so to such an extent that it became a major factor in diminishing the isolation and eroding the distinctiveness of the workforce communities that had aggregated around the pits. The farming communities were also compelled to accommodate the needs of a single corporation. New industrial workers had to be housed, which led to the creation of new suburbs in the southern localities, disturbing once again settled patterns of farming community that had existed there, in some cases, for more than a century. Separate mining company pit villages and dairying centres were being welded into a single company town.

Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw about community, so far as the idea of it applies to Wollongong between 1880 and 1940? We can conclude something about its essential qualities, and the use of the word itself. 'Community' has its fullest sense when it refers to a group of people whose lives are partially shaped by the work that they do, and who themselves consciously shape their lives to preserve their work. The two processes result in a set of mores or conventions, some of which may be written down to regulate work practices; but besides those written down, there are a number of unwritten laws which regulate not only industrial behaviour but also behaviour beyond the workplace, whether it employs large numbers or small, concentrates in one place or spreads over a wider area. The community enforces conformity by applying social sanctions, sometimes physically harmful, against those in breach of its more important conventions. Conformity brings the rewards of support and assistance at critical times, and pleasant sociability at others.

Subtending social institutions like churches and family generally support communal conventions. The community can tolerate minor conflict between its rules and the behaviour of groups within it, but when the two came into serious contradiction, it was the former that had to prevail. This is because the overriding purpose of the rules of the community is to promote security for its members. Thus, those rules operate in their strictest form when the community senses its existence is under threat, as when an identified enemy from the external world appeared, personified or not. But the community cannot always identify its enemies, and there are some so subtle that it cannot devise rules that would contain them successfully. Other enemies are so large and strong that they are simply beyond the community's powers to contain. The intrusion of the larger concerns of the unions, or the Labor Party, or the changes in ambition induced by radio, or the increased opportunities offered by better transport and changes to the surrounding economy all threaten community values and practices. Even more destructive, and perhaps finally lethal, are changes in the technology of production and the marketing of product.

These are conclusions we have drawn from evidence raised to the level of theory. We would not really claim that status for it, because theory should be capable of explaining universally, and we claim only that the argument we have just set out in abstraction is good only for a specific period in a specific place. We hope it may apply to enough other places for it to be able to make some useful introduction to a general theory of community. We claim that so far as it applies to Wollongong over about 60 years before 1940, it has, with minimum assumptions, enough power to explain

not only the appearance of distinct communities and their social disciplines, but also the passing of both.

Endnotes

- 1 J. Hagan and A. Wells (eds), *A History of Wollongong*, University of Wollongong Press, Wollongong 1997.
- 2 H Lee, 'Rocked in the cradle': the economy, 1828-1907', in Hagan and Wells, *A History of Wollongong*, p. 45
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 42, and H. Lee, 'A corporate presence': the economy, 1908-1945', in Hagan and Wells, *A History of Wollongong*, p. 70.
- 4 For a discussion of the activities of the miners' lodge in New South Wales, see J Hagan and C Fisher, 'Piece work and some of its consequences in the printing and coal mining industries in Australia, 1850-1930', *Labour History*, 25, November 1973; R Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales: A History of the Union, 1860-1960*, Melbourne University Press 1963.
- 5 Photograph Collection, Local Studies Section, Wollongong City Library, and R Markey and A Wells, 'The labour movement in Wollongong', in Hagan and Wells, *A History of Wollongong*, p. 93.
- 6 The banging of pots and pans or pieces of iron, or the throwing of stones on to iron roofs.
- 7 Lee, 'Rocked in the cradle': the economy, 1828-1907', p. 51, and W Mitchell, in E Windschuttle (ed.), *Women, Class and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia 1788-1978*, Fontana/Collins, Melbourne 1980
- 8 For example, miners made a presentation to J S Kirton, manager of the Excelsior mine at Thirroul during the 1890 strike.
- 9 For the role of trade unions in the formation of the Labor Party, and its subsequent development in Wollongong, see J Hagan and K Turner, *A History of the Labor Party in New South Wales*, Longmans, Melbourne 1991, *passim*.
- 10 See D P. Dingsdag, *The Restructuring of the N.S.W. Coalmining Industry, 1903-1982*, PhD Thesis, University of Wollongong, 1988.
- 11 Lee, 'A corporate presence': the economy, 1908-1945', pp. 65-6.
- 12 R. Castle, 'Steel city: the economy, 1945-1995', in Hagan and Wells, *A History of Wollongong*, p. 71.
- 13 Markey and Wells, 'The labour movement in Wollongong', pp. 93-4.
- 14 A wheeler was a junior who either pulled skips of coal, or led pit ponies which did.
- 15 The darg was the miner's individual production quota, set by the miners' lodge according to conditions at workplaces in the pit.
- 16 The cavel referred to the distribution of mining places in the pit allocated so that all members of the lodge would have their fair share of 'easy' and 'difficult' working.
- 17 Calculated from figures in *New South Wales Statistical Register*, 1915-16 (Police Patrol Districts of Albion Park, Dapto, Figtree, and Shellharbour) and 1938-39 (Police Patrol District of Albion Park).
- 18 Lee, 'A corporate presence': the economy, 1908-1945', p. 54.
- 19 B Weston, *Albion Park Saga*, Tongarra Heritage Society, p. 1.
- 20 Lee, 'A corporate presence': the economy, 1908-1945', p. 54. See also Weston, *Albion Park Saga*, pp. 1-2.
- 21 W A Bayley, *Illawarra Pastures: Celebrating the Diamond Jubilee of the Illawarra Co-operative Central Dairy Society Limited 1899-1959*, Illawarra Central Dairy Society Limited 1959, pp. 7-10.
- 22 Lee, 'Rocked in the cradle': the economy, 1828-1907', p. 41.
- 23 See R Castle and J Hagan, 'Share farming, tenancy and the development of the dairy industry in New South Wales, 1890-1940', *Journal of Australian Studies*, March 1999. The Public Instruction Act of 1880 provided for the compulsory schooling of children between the ages of six and 14. These provisions were made more effective by the regulations of 1916.

- 24 *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 1921.
- 25 Number of churches from chronologies in S Piggin, *Faith of Steel: A History of the Christian Churches in the Illawarra*, University of Wollongong, Wollongong 1984. Population: Wollongong's five local government areas; see *Statistical Register of New South Wales*, 1921.
- 26 Piggin, *Faith of Steel*, p. 82.
- 27 For example, Fred Kirkwood, miners' lodge secretary at Mount Kembla. See *ibid.*, p.166.
- 28 *ibid.*, p. 98.
- 29 Rev D O'Donnell, quoted by *ibid.*, p. 139.
- 30 For example, William Somerville, manager Bulli mine; William Robson, manager Mount Keira mine, and Ebenezer Vickery, proprietor Mount Kembla mine. See *ibid.*, pp. 84, 88 and 131.
- 31 Quoted in *South Coast Times*, 24 August 1917.
- 32 *ibid.*, p. 116.
- 33 J Hagan, 'Politics in the Illawarra', in Hagan and Wells, *A History of Wollongong*, p. 165; C Stocker, *Early History of the Loyal Orange Institution, N.S.W.*, Sydney 1926.
- 34 *ibid.*, and F C Farrell, *The Square and Compass South of Sydney*, Wollongong 1987.
- 35 See Weston, *Albion Park Saga*, p. 26, and a 1904 photograph in the possession of the Tongarra Bicentennial Museum, with notation.
- 36 T A Coghlan, *The Wealth and Progress of New South Wales 1901-02*, Government Printer, Sydney 1902, p. 968, and the *Census of the Commonwealth of Australia Commonwealth 30th June, 1933*.
- 37 *Annual Reports of the Department of Mines, New South Wales, 1930-1935*.
- 38 C C Singleton, *Railway History in the Illawarra*, Illawarra Historical Society, Wollongong 1969, p. 41.
- 39 Mr Reg Tuckerman, locomotive driver, interview Thirroul, June 1985.
- 40 Mr Tuckerman came to Thirroul in 1928. He stayed until his retirement 40 years later.
- 41 Stuart Sharp (Heritage Officer, State Rail Authority), 'Angels in the Railway Service', paper read to the Thirroul Railway Institute Preservation Society, 9 December 1995.
- 42 Bill Woodward (guard), interview, Thirroul, June 1980.
- 43 *ibid.*
- 44 It remained until the 1970s.
- 45 See W A Bayley, *Green Meadows: Centenary History of Shellharbour Municipality New South Wales*, Shellharbour Municipal Council, Albion Park 1959, pp. 65-6 and 112-3; also *Gazetteer of Historical Industrial Sites: Wollongong/Shellharbour/Kiama Districts*, Illawarra Industrial Archaeology Society 1979 (quarries and villages shown in locality map in text).
- 46 From references in *Illawarra Mercury* and *South Coast Times*, *passim*.
- 47 W G McDonald, *Nineteenth Century Dapto: Notes on the History of Dapto and its Neighbourhood*, Illawarra Historical Society, Wollongong 1976, pp. 70 and 72; Lee, 'Rocked in the cradle': the economy, 1828-1907', pp. 49-50, and references in *Illawarra Mercury* and *South Coast Times*.
- 48 See Lee, 'A corporate presence: the economy, 1908-1945', pp. 58-9.
- 49 G Mitchell, Company, Community and Governmental Attitudes, and Their Consequences, to Pollution at Port Kembla, with Special Reference to the Electrolytic Refining and Smelting Company, 1900-1970, PhD Thesis, University of Wollongong 1981, Chapter 6.
- 50 *ibid.*
- 51 Lee, 'A corporate presence', p. 62.