

# ‘The Store’ Oral History Project

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*Ann coordinates the GLAM<sup>x</sup> Living Histories Digitisation Lab at Special Collections, University of Newcastle and brings her strong collaborative and advocacy skills to the team. Ann was born in Newcastle (NSW) and has a strong commitment to preserving cultural heritage of Newcastle and the surrounding areas. In her role, Ann supervises Career-Ready (WIL) students and volunteers where they can gain GLAM sector skills across conservation, archival science, librarianship, digitisation, metadata, curatorial, and digital heritage skills.*

‘The Store’ Oral History Project is a collection of 20 oral histories created in 2019 and publicly available on the University of Newcastle Library’s Living Histories digital repository.<sup>1</sup> Interviewees shared memories of the Newcastle and Suburban Co-operative Society Ltd, known locally as ‘The Store’, which was the biggest and most successful co-operative society in Australia. In 2019 the former Hunter Street site was earmarked for demolition. This meant that the building would no longer stand as a reminder of its retail and social past, or physical evidence of the cooperative movement that many people continued to remember fondly.

The project was a collaboration between the University of Newcastle Library, Doma Group and Artefact Heritage Services and the wider community. The project team worked out of the GLAM<sup>x</sup> Living Histories Digitisation Lab (Auchmuty Library) where work integrated learning (WIL) placements are hosted.<sup>2</sup> Users of the Lab gain GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums) sector skills across conservation, archival science, librarianship, digitisation, metadata and data management, curatorial, and digital heritage sectors. This project celebrated The Store’s legacy and enhanced the University’s archival holdings of this Newcastle icon.

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1 ‘The Store Oral History Project’, *Living Histories: University of Newcastle*. Available at <https://livinghistories.newcastle.edu.au/nodes/view/89913>. Accessed 1 April 2024.

2 Gianni Di Gravio and Ann Hardy, ‘GLAM<sup>x</sup> Lab Living Histories Digitisation Lab – engaging tertiary students with university archival collections’, *Archives and Manuscripts* 46, no. 2 (2018): 214–221.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The history of the greater co-operative movement came from Britain and the Rochdale pioneers established a society in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Community dividend scheme, commonly known as the ‘divvy’ was a notable feature of the movement and payments to members.<sup>4</sup> Cooperative society membership entitled members to dividends at the end of every quarter or half yearly. The Newcastle and Suburban Co-operative Society established in 1898 had strong roots in the Hunter Region, and the Newcastle West building in Hunter Street had been its flagship retail outlet since 1906. At its peak in 1974 it operated 15 branches and had 98,000 members and 1,450 workers. It provided groceries, retail goods, health and funeral funds, a travel agency, and many other services, before eventually closing in 1981.

## COLLABORATIVE MODEL

The proposed demolition of the former Store building prompted this oral history project. Part of the condition of consent for the development application for the Newcastle West building required the applicant to undertake an oral history project for heritage interpretation of the site. Heritage consultants approached the university library to collaborate, with the prospect of involving students in the work.

Professional heritage specialists from Artefact Heritage Services helped the library and developer Doma Group. Doma Group donated to the Vera Deacon Regional History Fund (VDRHF) to implement the brief and did not work directly with university staff. This fund was established in 2008 in honour of the generosity of Mrs Vera Deacon and provides paid employment to University of Newcastle students and volunteers to research and share knowledge about the history of the Hunter Region with the wider global community.<sup>5</sup>

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- 3 George Jacob Holyoake, *The History of the Rochdale Pioneers* (UK: Routledge ebook, 2016 [first edition 1893]).
  - 4 G. J. Lewis, *A Middle Way. Rochdale Co-operation in New South Wales 1859–1886* (Sydney: Australian Association of Co-operatives Ltd., 1992), xv–xvii.
  - 5 Ann Hardy, Gaute Rasmussen and Gionni Di Gravio, ‘Visualising Deep Time History in Context Using Accessible and Emergent Technologies: The GLAM Sector Experience’, in Eugene Ch’ng, Henry Chapman, Vincent Gaffney and Andrew Wilson (eds), *Visual Heritage: Digital Approaches in Heritage Science* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2022), 69–91.

## PLANNING

Discussions were held on how the interviews would be conducted and recorded, costs, staffing, insurances, and liability for employees, as well as how WIL students' opportunities could be incorporated to gain experience. Ethical considerations were also discussed alongside the required permissions and approvals.

An objective of the project was to make the created digital assets publicly available, and therefore discussions about where the digital assets would be stored and hosted took place at an early stage. Extensive work needed to be completed to digitally curate and host oral histories on the Living Histories digital repository supported by the library.

## PRODUCTION

To begin with, the project needed to locate people willing to share their stories. The project was promoted via Special Collections social media and Hunter Living Histories website, on radio and in local newspapers. Many people who contacted us were enthusiastic to share their personal connections to 'The Store' and the team devised interview questions and other correspondence to go out to interviewees.

Interviewees were contacted for a preinterview, and this was done over the phone. The interviewees were informed about the library's collaboration with stakeholders (Artefact Heritage Services and Doma Group) and how interviews would be used. This gave interviewees the opportunity to ask further questions. The project team was mindful of having a diversity of participants and a range of perspectives about 'The Store'. The final group of 20 participants varied in their perspective and uniqueness and interviewees were mostly aged in their sixties and seventies, the eldest aged 102. There was one Aboriginal interviewee in the project, however they withdrew towards the end of the project.

When organising interviews, a letter of confirmation, a questionnaire or 'Interviewee Information Sheet' and an outline of the questions were sent to interviewees, along with the option to be interviewed at home or at the Auchmuty Library. There were two project staff in attendance at each interview. One person conducted the interview,

whilst the other ensured the video camera and equipment were working. Interviews were videoed using a Canon HD Camcorder and each interview was approximately 50 to 60 minutes in length. The post-interview phase included editing the audio-visual digital files, packaging up recordings for review by the consultant, and identifying and transcribing key excerpts that could be used to promote the project. There were also administrative tasks, and the time-intensive task of digitising the interviewees own personal collection items that complemented the oral histories. This was not initially factored in, but the team soon realised that each interviewee had their own collection of physical memories in the form of photos and memorabilia that required digitising and became an important part of the project. The team decided to opt for video interviews rather than audio capture only, with Special Collections preferring video. If the interviewee felt comfortable with being videoed, then this was the optimal recording format as it captured a person's mannerisms, environment and general physical appearance. An advantage of videoing interviewees meant that items from their personal collections could be added to the final interview, this enriched the process for both the interviewing team and interviewees.

The edited MP4 files were uploaded to the library's YouTube channel and embedded in the Living Histories digital repository. A 'collection' page was also created on the digital repository where the interviewees personal memorabilia such as photos were digitised and included online with the oral histories.

#### **UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

The team in special collections provided invaluable technical expertise, guidance and support to the project team in curating the online collection. Furthermore, the opportunity for students to work with industry professionals was invaluable, as it gave the students professional work experience. The team worked collaboratively and openly with all stakeholders throughout the project, and students anecdotally gave feedback on how much they personally and professionally felt they received from working on this project and engaging directly with interviewees.

‘The Store’ Oral History Project was the perfect project for the GLAM<sup>x</sup> Lab space. The model has similar principles to other GLAM Labs.<sup>6</sup> In 2019, the GLAM<sup>x</sup> Lab was a sector leader with only two other universities in Australia having similar university spaces: Deakin University and the University of Melbourne.<sup>7</sup> The oral history project was a good fit at the GLAM<sup>x</sup> Lab because it introduced broader GLAM sector skills at the university library and is a space that helps students gain skills and experiences to enhance employability and resilience. Opportunities for WIL students continue in 2024. I would certainly recommend university academic and professional GLAM staff work with students and external industry professionals on community-focused projects.

## CONCLUSION

Although Special Collections at the University of Newcastle library had been collecting oral histories since the 1980s, this project reinforced the value of having an oral history program. The project provided an opportunity to streamline the existing oral history program and resources used by the community and academic researchers interested in oral history practice.

This oral history collection associated with the co-operative movement aligned with the research interests of academics and complemented well the existing *The Newcastle & Suburban Co-operative Society Ltd and cooperative movements* archive held at the library. Oral histories can contribute and enrich existing archives held by institutions and can provide further knowledge and context to better understand a particular archive.

The project team learnt not to underestimate the scale of community interest in a particular history. This was the case with ‘The Store’, an organisation still in living memory of people in the community and fondly remembered. I would encourage other tertiary institutions to consider similar projects, especially where they hold archives and collections relating to the wider community and stories that are still in living memory.

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6 G. Papaioannou, ‘Foreword: GLAMS and Labs’, in Mahendra Meney et al. (eds), *Open a GLAM Lab* (Book Sprint, Doha, Qatar, 23–27 September 2019), 8–11.

7 Gravio and Hardy, ‘GLAM<sup>x</sup> Lab Living Histories Digitisation Lab’.