



Albert Cook

Interview Transcript 1 November 2015

Oral History Project

Reliving the past: Stories from our communities

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Interviewee: Albert Cook
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Transcript: Sally Forsstrom



Albert Cook
The 1955 Flood

In this interview Albert Cook talks about his experiences of the 1955 flood. At the time of the flood he was a young man living at the family home located on the corner of Cobra and Macquarie Street and working as a motor mechanic at Budden Bros. Garage in Macquarie Street.

This recording, created on the 1st November, 2015 is part of Macquarie Regional Library's oral history project: 'Reliving the past: stories from our communities'. Each recording contributes to the developing story of life in the Dubbo area.

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Interviewer (I): Thanks for your time today Albert. For the benefit of our recording could you please state your full name and date of birth:

Subject (S): Albert John Cook, on the 30/04/1934.

[0:00:52] (I): So in 1955 how old were you?

(S): I was 20 years old.

[0:00:58] (I): Can you tell me a little bit about your early life in Dubbo?

(S): I was born and bred on a farm. My mother and father had a farm just out of Dubbo a bit past the airport, and I was there for 19 years until Dad got a heart condition and the doctor's advice was to sell the place. I came to town and got a job as an apprentice at Budden Brother's Garage.¹

[0:01:24] (I): So where were you living in 1955?

(S): Number 12 Cobra Street, which is virtually about where Raine and Horne are now.²

[0:01:34] (I): So some of the houses in those days were flat on the ground. Was yours flat on the ground or was it built up a bit?

(S): The house was about two foot off the ground which was a bit higher than some of the houses next door, they were only a foot, eighteen inches, but ours was two foot off the ground.

[0:01:52] (I): So you were actually living with your parents at that time?

(S): Yes.

¹ Budden Bros. Pty Ltd was located on Macquarie Street. (For Sale, *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*, 12 January 1954 p. 5, accessed 29-07-2018, at: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article132594154>)

² Located on the north east corner of Macquarie and Cobra Streets.

(I): And who else lived in the house?

(S): Only my parents.

[0:02:02] (I): Did you have any other relations living in Dubbo?

(S): Oh yes, yes, I had both my sisters living in Dubbo and they were married and lived out of the flood area.

[0:02:13] (I): What do you remember about the lead up to the flood?

(S): Two or three days beforehand up the Talbragar River there was about ten inches of rain, and the Macquarie was already in flood, and when that water came down, it blocked the Macquarie from flowing and made it back up.

[0:02:43] (I): Were people concerned about the river rising before the flood?

(S): Not unduly, not to the extent that it did. We've had big floods there back in 1950, we had a lot of floods, but nothing what was going to happen.

[0:03:00] (I): What precautions, if any, did you or your family take in case of the flood?

(S): None.

[0:03:08] (I): When were you first aware of a problem with the river?

(S): Well, about 5 o'clock in the morning, Mum woke me up and said, "Albert, the water's coming in Cobra Street." Now, I've never doubted my mother in my life, but I thought, well this was going to be the first time, so I had to get up and have a look and sure enough the water was coming up Cobra Street.

[0:03:35] (I): What happened then?

(S): Well, it kept rising, and friends of ours that lived in Macquarie Street, sort of around the corner, but the backyards backed on, their house was a bit lower. I and a chap that was going with the girl there, pulled up their carpet. Then it was still rising, and I estimate that it was rising about a foot an hour, the rate it was coming. So we went in and we pulled up the carpet in Mum and Dad's house.

[0:04:10] (I): Did you take any other precautions?

(S): We put the furniture on bricks. We thought, “*Well*, it’s not going to rise that high.” Bricks not that high, but that’s all we did. But the carpet we put up on top of the furniture.

[0:04:25] (I): How did you feel when you were rushing around doing this?

(S): How did I feel? Well, (sighs) I don’t know. I guess we just felt as though well, the water’s going to come in, we’ve got to save the furniture from getting ruined, and if we lift it up on bricks, that’s about six inches, that’d be plenty. But of course it wasn’t, it wasn’t enough.

[0:04:54] (I): So how high did the water come up?

(S): It came about two foot in our house, and as I said earlier, the house was about two foot off the ground therefore we had four foot of water in the house yard.

[0:05:07] (I): After you got water into the house, when did you decide to leave your house?

(S): Well, once it was coming in, we knew that we couldn’t stop there, obviously, so we took the cars - possibly taken them out a bit before that - and then Dad drove up to one of my sisters that lived in Darling Street, out of flood area. Well, then when the water was getting up higher, my mother which was only five foot tall - my brother-in-law, Kevin, was there, he was six foot and a bit - so he piggy-backed Mum over the gutter and out and up to dry land.

[0:05:56] (I): Goodness it must have been a bit of a trial for your mother. Was she nervous, upset?

(S): I don’t know, I don’t think she was nervous. I always wished I’d had a camera at the time, but she wasn’t going to re-enact it (laughs).

[0:06:15] (I): What kind of communication systems were in place in 1955 to warn you and your neighbours about things like this?

(S): Nothing that I know of, it was just what we found out. Back in those days there wasn’t anything like SES [State Emergency Service], or any warning systems like that.

[0:06:38] (I): There was no warning systems. So how did other people manage? What was the rescue system in place?

(S): There wasn't any proper rescue. I did hear of some people, heard the commotion going on, and put their feet out of the bed and they put it in six foot of water, and that was the first they knew of it. But after we got out and the Council had turned the power off, anywhere where there was flood, for safety reasons of course, Kevin and I went over to North Dubbo 'cause we had - heard that it was in a bad way. We met up with a couple of young fellows over there with a row boat, and we went with them and got several people out of the houses, particularly in Macleay Street - it was flowing like a river - and took them up to dry ground.

[0:07:38] (I): How did these people feel that you were rescuing them? Were they frightened, or thinking it was it a bit of a lark?

(S): (Laughs) I don't know, they weren't frightened. Back in those days, was the good old days if I dare say it, and they knew we were going to rescue them, and that was all they were concerned about.

[0:08:00] (I): Was there any noise? Was the river noisy or - silent?

(S): No sirens or anything. I mean, people just used their own instinct that there was a big flood, get out while you can.

[0:08:19] (I): Where did you sleep after you had to evacuate your home?

(S): We went to Darling Street, to one of my sisters, and we stopped there for a few days.

[0:08:33] (I): So actually, the flood didn't cover the whole of Dubbo, there was only particular parts. Do you remember the parts?

(S): Well, Macquarie Street, of course, it had about six foot of water in it. I never went down to Macquarie Street, while the flood was on. The water in Talbragar Street reached right up to the Garden Hotel, which is on the corner of Talbragar and Gipps Street, and it just reached up to there. There's a mark in Talbragar Street on Shakespeare's Funeral Parlours, which is up about six feet, to say where

the floods came to. It certainly came into Brisbane Street, Brisbane Street is a fraction lower than Macquarie Street because the ground next to a river is usually a little bit higher than a couple of hundred yards away from the bank.

[0:09:34] (I): Tell me about the next day, the day after you went to your sisters.

(S): The next day, well, I'd gone back the day of the flood a couple of times to look in the house. That wasn't a joyful situation, I can assure you. But the next day, I went down and at eight o'clock in the morning, the water was just going out of the house. The water in the council pipes was still working so I got the lino and threw that out onto the lawn. And I got the hose and went around all the floors with the hose and washed all the mud out while it was lovely and soft, and that got rid of the mud.

Well, then eventually the water went out of the house yard and Mum and Dad come back down. And Mum had a great, green finger, thumb and she had a beautiful garden, so we got the hoses and washed the mud off all the shrubs, the plants, and everything. And I don't think Mum lost a plant, or anything, she might've lost a couple of little annuals, but she didn't lose any main plants, and that was marvellous really.

[0:10:54] (I): I just find that pretty amazing, and I also find it fantastic that you actually, in chatting to me before, you actually told me because you hosed out your house it was better, if you could just explain a bit more about that – than people who left theirs and went much later?

(S): Well, back a few years ago, when Nyngan had their floods, and they were evacuated out, and they weren't allowed back to their houses for, I don't know, a week or two,³ and it would've been a terrific mess to clean up that dry mud once it set. And if they'd let a few people back to wash the mud out of the houses, as the water was going out, it's only silt and it's gone. But, I can assure you that

³ The Nyngan Floods occurred in April 1990 when the Bogan River burst its banks and flooded the township. (*We didn't stand a chance- the Nyngan Flood years on*, Daily Liberal, 3 January 2010 accessed 23-0302-18 at <http://www.dailyliberal.com.au/story/853721/we-didnt-stand-a-chance-the-nyngan-floods-20-years-on>)

we found mud in various cracks, and one thing or another, several years afterwards, that just didn't get washed out.

[0:11:59] (I): Was there any sort of bad odour after the water went away?

(S): I don't recall, but then my smelling powers are not real good, as far as that goes. The furniture was - well, one of the worst things that we lost, which was a terrible shame, Mum and Dad had a Pianola. And I don't know, we may have lifted it up on the bricks but with two foot of water, it just absolutely ruined the bottom of the Pianola, to the extent that it wasn't repairable. And that was a terrible shame. I could play it (laughs).

[0:12:36] (I): Yes, yes, it is always sad when you lose something that you value. I'd like to focus back to other people in Dubbo, if you remember. How did other people find out about the rescue efforts and the emergency arrangements? You've already said that there was no formalised SES.

(S): Well I don't know, I guess just by the fact that people said, "Hey there's a flood on," and "Move out." There was a couple of light-hearted things about it, I mean, it's no use taking these things too seriously, really. The people next door had a row boat tied up to them. And the children across the yard, across the street, were swimming up Cobra Street. Now, that's not the common thing that you see, and there was a few amusing things like that. I guess the most amusing thing was Mum getting piggy-backed out, but anyhow (laughs). But as far as warning, no there wasn't, I don't recall any warning, it was just what you found out. And people, no doubt, were going door to door knocking (knocking) on their neighbours saying, "Hey look out there's water coming up."

[0:13:54] (I): Yes that's true in 1955, we did care for our neighbours more than we do now.

(S): That's right.

[0:13:59] (I): When did you become aware that the flood wasn't just in Dubbo but it was over a lot of the other areas of the state?

(S): I couldn't tell you exactly when, we probably heard it on the radio. Naturally, back then, there was no television. We probably heard it on the radio because

2DU kept on the air, they got the ground part of their studio under water, but where the studio was - it was up a flight [of stairs]. And they kept on the air, I don't mean 24 hours a day, but they were relaying messages to people, friends and relations that were away, to let them know that people were okay. And to my knowledge there was no loss of life during the floods.⁴

[0:14:56] (I): What do you remember about the town clean-up?

(S): Not a great lot about the town itself clean-up. A couple of days later, as I said, I was a motor mechanic, or apprentice at Budden Brother's Garage, which is opposite near enough to the old Post Office. Of course, they got, I don't know, four, five foot of water through their garage. Well I went down, and washed all my tools out and cleaned them up, and helped clean the place up a bit, like, for them, and then we eventually went back to work.



Flooded cars in Macquarie Street, during the 1955 flood.⁵

[0:15:35] (I): When we were chatting, you told me that the cars [in] those days you were able to get them going again?

(S): Yes, if a car goes through water, as long as you don't start it afterwards, it won't hurt it. But, you've got to drain the oils out, we had to take the pistons out, clean them up, get the mud out of the cylinders and do all that. I think there was

⁴ While no one in Dubbo was killed Dubbo during the 1955 Flood, across NSW 25 people lost their lives in the February floods. (Hunter Valley Weather, Hunter Floods of 1955, 50 year commemoration, accessed 19-02-2018 at: <http://www.hunterweather.com/events.php?id=41>

⁵ Image courtesy of Macquarie Regional Library Pictures Collection, Digital Image No. D000596.

quite a few of the cars were insured apparently against flood. Because, we were working our forty hours a week in the five days, and then we were coming back at night for about three hours for, I don't know, [about] three weeks, to try to get these insurance jobs out. Because on top of that the boss still had his normal customers coming in wanting repairs. So we were very busy.

[0:16:34] (I): Did I ask you were the Budden's was, the building was?

(S): About opposite the Post Office, the old Post Office.

(I): So it definitely got flooded through too?

(S): Oh yes, yes.

[0:16:50] (I): How long did it take you, or your family, to get over the flood?

(S): Good question. I don't know. Well, we went back into the house once it had dried out, it took a few days to really dry out. Then we went back there and, well I guess we sort of got rid of a little bit of furniture, like the Pianola, that wasn't any good. Eventually somebody's truck, or something, carted the rubbish away. And I couldn't tell you exactly how long it was before we moved in, but it wasn't a great length of time. You sort of take these things in your stride, and grin and bear it and, live for another day.

[0:17:45] (I): Yes, I think we did in those days. How do you think the flood affected Dubbo and the region around it?

(S): In what way?

(I): Do you think that people might have looked on Dubbo as a centre to set up some rescue, or, do you think that everyone still wanted to be in their little silos?

(S): I understand the rescue, I don't know whether it was called the SES at that point, was set up not long after the flood, and there was more things in place, because the powers-that-be knew that such a flood could happen.⁶ And I think there was possibly more information given out about a flood, if it happened again.

⁶ The State Emergency Service was established in the aftermath of the 1955 floods, to assist with communities dealing with natural disasters.

[0:18:45] (I): Did Dubbo get any help from outside of Dubbo, like Sydney? Or did people send you food parcels?

(S): They were taking up collections in Sydney. I'm told that if you went to the movie theatres - there was quite a lot of them back in those days - there was places where people could donate money to be channelled back to people who [had a] loss. And I've got no idea how much money was collected, but people were very generous down in the city, and those kind of places.

[0:19:25] (I): And you weren't exactly involved in the airport and planes landing, but have you got any recollection of planes dropping food outside of Dubbo?

(S): No, I can't say I have. I couldn't. I don't know.

[0:19:46] (I): Can you think of any other things that happened, that we haven't touched on?

(S): Not off hand. I suppose there are other things. Some of them might be more minor, and that. I know one thing that, somewhere in Macquarie Street, I think on the corner of Macquarie and Church Street, the ground collapsed - possibly a water main or something, and there was a hole there of, they tell me, about four, five feet deep, in it. But you couldn't see it when the water was over everywhere. And of course around at the Police Station, it was an older Police Station than [what is] there now, and any prisoners, and that, they had to evacuate them out. I don't know what they did with them, but anyhow they evacuated them out.

[0:20:37] (I): Did the Government take any action about trying to prevent the floods that you agree, or disagree with?

(S): Well, there's always the talk, "Oh we're right now we've got Burrendong Dam." Now, I don't agree with that, and I'll probably get queried that that's not right. But this flood come from the Talbragar. It was the big rain up the Talbragar that caused it. Now, Burrendong Dam certainly can catch a lot of water, but like, a little river and several other big creeks, flow into the Macquarie this side of the catchment of Burrendong Dam. Now if you get a lot of rain up the Macquarie you can still get that flood, just the same. If the Dam happens to be full when you

get a lot of rain, you still could get the flood. I've mentioned that to a few people and some agree and some think, "Oh you're barmy."

[0:21:35] (I): So you told me that you were working long hours, do you just want to talk a little bit more about that?

(S): Well, we had to get the insurance jobs done and naturally the boss, Budden's, had their customers that wanted mechanical repairs done on their vehicles no matter what, so we had to sort of work hard. And I remember at the particular time, there was one chap - and he used to come in once or twice a day to see how his car was going - he didn't bully us or push us or anything. But we used to be amused, but we'd say, "Oh there comes" - I can't even think of his name - "there comes so and so," and he'd come in, "Oh what are you doing now? Where are you up to?" We'd tell him, he was happy (laughs).

[0:22:27] (I): So you said you were working long hours, what type of lighting did they have in 1955?

(S): Well, we had lead lights, in other words probably about a 60 watt light bulb on the end of an electrical cord, and you'd be poking that around and, even in the day time you're working a bit by lights, but of course at night you're working by lights. Looking underneath cars, in cars and so forth. And your eyes get a bit tired after a while. So we cut it back, we were doing about four days - nights a week and we cut it back to three, two and then we said, "nuh, no more." But we had a lot of cars worked on by then. We were working flat out.

[0:23:11] (I): That's great. On a personal level, did you have any special friends that were concerned about you?

(S): Well my - I think she was my fiancée at the time, I'm pretty sure we were engaged then, if not shortly afterwards (coughs). Her and her family had gone to Sydney to see the cricket and they heard about the flood of course, and I remember, Edna, my fiancée saying that they heard that the Dubbo Police Station was evacuated and they knew, well, it must've been pretty bad. Well, they couldn't ring us because the phone was out of course, and they got in touch with 2DU, as other people did, and 2DU put a message over, and somebody

heard it, as far as I was concerned about Edna getting in touch with me, so I went somewhere and rang her up. I knew what her phone number was in Sydney, and rang her up and said, "Well yep, we're okay." But 2DU were marvellous, absolutely marvellous. They were, I think - I'll stand corrected - I think they were down towards the end of Macquarie Street, towards Talbragar Street, in a two storey building, and I understand that the staff there were walking through water up to their chests to get to work. But, they were very devoted.⁷

[0:24:48] (I): Do you remember when the first newspapers were able to be published?

(S): No, I'm afraid I wouldn't know. Those offices would've went under. When I say under they would've had – well, the Daily Liberal was in Church Street, and the Dubbo Dispatch was somewhere around there too, and they would've got three, four, five foot of water in there. So they would've been a while before they started publishing again, and I wouldn't know just how long.

[0:25:23] (I): So the days before our instant news and television coverage, you had a more informal method of communication...

(S): An informal...?

(I): Informal - so how did you find about things happening if it wasn't through 2DU?

(S): Oh, just word of mouth, the old bush telegraph is pretty good in those days. I mean we didn't have mobile phones, naturally of course, or any of that kind of communication. But, the bush telegraph – people got to know – and, take in consideration that back in 1955 the town wasn't anything near the size it is today, and everybody knew everybody - more or less.

[0:26:14] (I): How long was it before your fiancée could get back to Dubbo?

(S): Ah, (laughs) - to be quite honest, I think once she found that I was all right they stopped down for the test match (laughs). She was an English barracker, it was England playing Australia, she was an English barracker. And, I think they

⁷ Albert's engagement to his fiancée Edna Joan Campion was announced in November 1954, Engagements, *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*, 30 November 1954, p. 4, accessed 29-07-2018, at: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article132582107>

stopped down, because what was the point in coming back? But one amusing thing was, she rang me the day before the flood, I think, and she said, "Oh could you go out and get my raincoat" - or umbrella, one or the other – "and post them down, because we think it's going to rain." Well of course the next day the floods were up and there was no chance, so that didn't eventuate. She understood (laughs).

[0:27:05] (I): The grocery stores would have all been flooded. So how did you get your food, your supplies?

(S): Well, I don't remember going hungry. No, well, the main store at that time was the Western Stores, of course. There was the little corner shops on every corner, well, no doubt, they would have had a certain amount of stock, but that would've got - literally eaten up. The wholesalers in Dubbo at the time – it would've been lucky if they weren't flooded. Wright Heaton's was one of them and they were in the lower part of Talbragar Street. PDS was in Brisbane Street, I think, they would've been flooded. But, I dare say they would have got the supplies in from Sydney - extra truckloads of food. And just when the Western Stores really opened up again I couldn't honestly tell you.

[0:28:14] (I): Albert, you mentioned that you lived out on a farm, were there any sort of minor floods whilst you were out there?

(S): Well, yes, the river used to come up periodically, and then in 1950 it come up, and the L.H. Ford Bridge wasn't there then, the old White Bridge was. The White Bridge didn't get covered with water, but the approach on Dubbo side of it did, of about, oh I don't know, eight, ten foot of water (coughs), which cut the town off. So the only way you could get to town was to walk the railway line. And, I don't know whether you've ever walked it but, the planks are too close to take a step on each one, and too far for every second one, and then you always had the risk of the train coming along. But, they knew people were walking on the bridge, so they went slow, and if they went slow enough you jumped on the train.

Well Dad used to say, “Oh, it’d be interesting to see a flood come up from the other side,” – [the] Dubbo side. So when he had to sell out because of his heart condition and he bought the house there at 12 Cobra Street, well, we sure saw a flood didn’t we, it come up (laughs) – and four foot of water in the yard. But, anyhow, Dad wanted to see one on this side of the river, so he did (laughs).

[0:29:39] (I): He sure got his wish.

(S): (Laughs). We reminded him a few times too. But, yeah - it was quite interesting.

[0:29:49] (I): Sorry one further question, do you remember the flood of 1956? How would you compare that to 1955?

(S): I've had that in the back of my mind - a little over two feet less, because, when it come to our house, we thought it was going to come in so up come the carpet again. Well you know on the verandah of a lot of houses they’re about six inches lower than the house. Well, it come over the verandah but not into the house. Therefore it was a little over two foot less than the ‘55 flood. And I should have mentioned that, thank you.

(I): Thank you for your time. Your story will form part of the Macquarie Regional Library’s Oral History Project. This interview was conducted by Barbara O'Brien and Simone Taylor.