Full transcript of an interview with

GEoffrey Watson

On 25 June 2008

by Sally Stephenson

for the

MEADOWS 150 ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Geoff, I’d just like to start with some brief biographical questions.

Yes.

Can you tell me your full name, please?

Geoffrey Watson.

Do you have a middle name?

No.

And where and when were you born?

I was born on the seventh of the eleventh ’27 at Clarendon.

What were your parents’ names?

George Henry Watson Junior and Annie Alicia Watson, née Griggs.

What work did your parents do?

My father was a labourer right up until ’39. My mother did house duties just for the husband.

Okay. I’d like to move on to the main questions now and start by asking you about your childhood. Where did you live when you were a child?

Right in Meadows, on the Kondoparinga Road. My father bought that acre of land in 1920 for fifty pounds, and today it would bring a hundred and seventy thousand dollars.
How long did you live there for?

I lived there for about twelve years.

And after that, where did you move?

I came down to the corner, the Fingerboard Corner, on Uncle George’s\(^1\) land, what my father took over, and we lived there for another ten years; and then I went out to Razorback Road.

What was the property on Fingerboard Corner? Was that a farming property?

That would have belonged to – that was a dairy of George Henry Watson’s Senior, and my father took over milking cows there.

I’d like to talk to you now about you schooling, and when you started school at Meadows Primary School I know that the poultry settlement was just established and so the school’s – – –.

Well, I was there before the poultry settlement a bit. When I went to school there were only two teachers, and then it went to three and then four teachers. This was brought about by the little schools of Paris Creek, Greenhills and one out at Jupiter Creek closing, and then eventually Prospect Hill closed, and all those children then went to Meadows, and then the poultry settlement come in. We always used to call them the ‘settlement children’. But they didn’t pay for their books at school.

How did they get – they still had the books?

Yes, but they didn’t have to pay them, they got free books.

And were they treated any differently?

No, they was children from the city when they come up to us, completely different to us – they seemed it, when we first – – –. But they all settled in, they were all settled in to the Meadows eventually.

In what ways did they seem different, initially?

Oh, I don’t know. They made Meadows grow a lot, they did.

Well, how did you feel about school, about going to school?

\(^1\) George Watson
I thought Meadows School was very good, overall. You know, I think everybody who was willing to learn got a good, basic schooling there. My son Kym and my daughter Jane both went there and they both did well later on at school.

**Did you enjoy it, though? Did you enjoy school?**

Oh, up to a point. Really, I wasn’t a scholar.

**What was the thing that you enjoyed most at school?**

Maths, I like arithmetic and things like that. And playing outside, of course.

**How did the headmaster use to treat the children?**

Oh, the headmaster was very good. One of his theories, though, was in those days in thirty years’ time we was going to run out of petroleum, and we still haven’t run out.

**And what if you did something wrong, what would he do?**

I don’t know, in them days, what it would have been. But, no, Meadows School I think was very good overall.

**Do you think people thought that schooling was important then? I’m just wondering how important schooling was seen.**

Oh, I don’t think – my parents never felt that school was important. I think that was my biggest thing. The school in them days wasn’t as important as what it was, say, ten or twenty years later.

**Now, when you were there there was an epidemic of polio, I think.**

Yes.

**What happened?**

The polio broke out around one Christmas, I reckon in the mid-’30s. I thought it was going to be good but then I got bored because it was about the end of March before we went back to school. That was a long time I was out of school.

**And your own schooling, actually, was interrupted by some travel.**

Oh, yes, yes. I went back to England with my mother once. She wanted to go back and see her brother and sister. But the first day I went to school there a boy called me an ‘Abo’ because I come from Australia, so I punched him one; and when I come
back home here one of my local friends called me a ‘Pom’ for my accent, so I thumped him one.

One of the things that you used to do at school, you mentioned to me, was to go on school picnics. Where did you use to go?

We used to go on one of Rogers’ cattle trucks, just with the sheep hurdles up on, and we’d go down to Seacliff. We always seemed to be cold down there, it did, when we went down there.

Do you remember what did you use to do down there?

Only go in the water. I can’t remember having any sport or anything, I just remember it was going in the water and getting cold because we weren’t used to it.

Now, I’d like to ask you a little bit about sport now in that I think you recall there were school sports days. What were they like?

Oh, yes, we used to have our little sports day, just in – not against other towns, though, not like they do now. We used to have all those sports once a year: pushing a tyre along, you know, jumping in a bag and jumping. They were very good, they were, those days.

Was that on the oval?

Yes.

The Meadows Oval?

Yes, yes.

And were there other regular, organised sports when you were at school?

No.

So what sport did you play later on, after you left school?

After I left school the only sport I played was cricket, and the first cricket match I can remember playing against another town was – Murray Hibbard organised a team to go down to Mylor. Meadows were all out for forty-one and Murray and I opened up the bowling; Murray got four wickets and I got six wickets and we got them out for forty, so it was a very close match.
So how long did you end up playing cricket for, how many years?

Well, I played cricket on and off for Meadows until I got married and then when I was on the dairy it was too much of a problem, but I did go back and play again later, when my son, when he went in and played at Colts and I came back to Meadows and played in C grade to make up the numbers.

Now, you mentioned to me that there were some reasons why you didn’t play football. What were they?

Well, I always thought running round in the wet and the cold, it just didn’t turn me on, playing football. I kicked a football around when I was at school but I never played football afterwards. It just seemed to be – and the oval was muddy in those days and it just didn’t turn me on.

I’d like to ask you a bit now about the Depression years.

Yes.

What do you remember about those years?

They were very hard. It was very hard for people to get work, and the little bit of money that you had had to go a long way. Food was no problem because we all had to grow vegetables in our back garden, we had fruit trees and there was plenty of rabbits around, so food was no problem. The biggest problem was getting work. That was a time when the local MP, Brookman, offered jobs to men to clear his land for four shillings a day when the going rate was five shillings a day, but four shillings a day in those days was better than nothing. But if you come in wet you had to decide whether you stood up for twenty minutes and then you either had to go back to work or knock off, and if you knocked off you got no pay for that day. Mawson was another one who employed men in those days at his mill at Knotts Hill on clearing land.

You mentioned to me in the preliminary interview about your family car during the Depression years. What happened to the car?

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2 Norman Brookman, father of Anthony and Nigel (see OH829/11)
3 At Burbrook, on what is now called Brookman Road [SAS]
4 Sir Douglas Mawson
To?

To your car, the family car. Did you use it during the Depression years?

Oh, yes. My father bought a brand new Overland Whippet car for two hundred pounds in 1927 and when it got hard going he couldn’t afford to keep it going so he jacked the wheels up and we had to go back to riding a bike and walking. Because we never went anywhere in those days. One time he got up, he wanted to go down to Encounter Bay, so we went down in the dark so the police wouldn’t see us and come home in the dark, but that was the only time I can remember going out. Otherwise we never went anywhere, not until say the mid–late ’30s after the Depression was over.

What sorts of things did you use to do in your spare time during the Depression years?

Well, there wasn’t a lot to do. You only just rode your bike around and things like that. Helped with certain chores around. But, yes, there was not a lot to do. There was no entertainment and things like that, there wasn’t. Well, there was later, you could go to pictures at the Meadows after they built the little piece on the front of the Hall so we could go to the pictures once a fortnight.

And you’d mentioned that you could get rabbits for food, so did you use to go rabbiting?

Oh, yes, yes, because there was a lot of rabbits around. That was actually when I got older and I could have a rifle that we went rabbiting. I don’t think they should have wiped them out; I think we should have left it like it was.

Where did you use to get the rabbits?

We never – it was the furs we was after, not the rabbit itself, the meat. We used to keep the rabbits for the dog, but otherwise it was just we used to go out and just go for the skins.

And was that in any particular part of Meadows?
Mostly around the back of what was called Rowley’s ⁵, up around the top of Bull’s Creek hills there. We used to always get most of them was out that way.

You mentioned to me in the preliminary interview that you used to go swimming in a waterhole on the Pitkins’ – – –.

Well, I didn’t actually go swimming in those holes; some of the other lads did, because there was a big waterhole in the Meadows Creek on a bend. But there was also old fencing wire thrown in it, and one lad got in there one day and he got tangled up in the wire and he drowned. I didn’t go in there. I might have went in in another little creek up a bit further where it only went up to my knees.

You also mentioned to me in the preliminary interview that you’d had a wireless at home. There was a wireless that you could listen to sometimes.

Oh, yes, in those days that’s the only thing – – –. We didn’t have electricity and the wireless had to be by battery, but if the battery was getting down, well, you’d have to save it. It wasn’t good days, they weren’t, we never had no electricity or running water or anything like that.

Where did you use to get your water from?

We used to have to go outside to the tank and get it. Was just a natural thing to do in those days.

I think occasionally a circus used to visit Meadows: do you remember going to see the circus performance?

Yes, yes. It was about threepence or sixpence to go in, it was, and they used to have it between the school and the Hall. It was only a little circus. But I suppose once every several years it used to come there. Another thing that used to come there were the blind, they used to put a good concert [on]. Harold – can’t think of his other name now⁶ – he used to come there and put on a good show occasionally. But otherwise we never went out of town.

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⁵ Mr Arnold Rowley’s property was to the south of what is now called Rowley Road [SAS].
⁶ Harold Raymond
I know you were in the Juvenile Lodge for the Oddfellows, they had a hall in Meadows. Can you tell me the story about the official function that was being held there?

Oh, the Oddfellows?

Yes.

Yes, we used to go to Lodge, the children did, and on this particular night the officials were coming up from Adelaide and they asked us all to take along a supper. But when suppertime come around we children were all shown the door and we didn’t appreciate that, and some of the lads got the idea of putting a bag over the chimney, because they had a fire going in the fireplace, so we got a long ladder, went up and put this bag over it and then we all disappeared. Unfortunately for Maurice Ellis, he happened to be walking down the street past the hall and they caught him and they blamed him for it.

It was like another night, New Year’s Night, three lads decided to go down to a dear old lady and take her gates off. Unfortunately, they didn’t know she was keeping an eye on her gates, and one of the lads after they took it off said, ‘I’d love to see her face in the morning’. And this voice come out of the hedgerow, ‘You don’t have to wait until the morning, you can see it now, and you can put the gates back on, please’.

I know during the Depression years your father did some other jobs that you’d mentioned to me, and one of those was wattle-barking. Can you explain to me –– ––?

My father did a lot of jobs. At one stage he drove a team of horses, eight horses, over on Cowell on the West Coast. And him and his brother used to dig wells, one Saturday afternoon they lined a well with two thousand bricks. He used to go out wattle-barking, yes. In them days, wages were four-and-sixpence a day and he was making seven shillings a day. At the end of each day, he tied his bundles up in neat heaps and put them in a big bundle, cover them over with the tops of the tree so they’d dry out slow and get more weight, and when the bark got to the mill the men knew his bark and they’d feed it into the crusher just a little bit faster so it would stall the motor and they could have a rest.
Where did he use to do the – which land did he clear for the wattle-barking?

He used to always look for the wattle bark where it was growing – there’s thin wattle bark and there’s thick wattle bark. And he’d always have to pay the landowner so much for rights to go onto his property and get the wattle bark.

Do you remember which properties he went to?

No, I don’t, really. I was too young in them days. He could have done it even before I was born.

Your father also did some work for the Council, crushing stones.

Well, it wasn’t actually for the Council; it was cracking stones on the side of the road. People with horse and dray would take the stone from the quarry and put it on the side of the road, and then men would be given a job of using a napping hammer – a napping hammer is a small-headed hammer, rounded on both ends, and they used the wood out of a willow tree for the handle because of its flexibility. It hits a rock and springs away, where a normal hammer handle will jar. And when they finished cracking it down to the required size, they’ve got to shove it into a neat heap measuring three yards by two yards, coming to a ridge at the top, so that it could be measured; and then the Council would pay them what they’d cracked.

What were the stones used for, what did they used the crushed stone for?

The metal was put on the roads. The metal was always cracked down and put on the roads.

And those, the large stones, where had they come from in the first place?

That quarry, as you come down to Meadows going towards Macclesfield. There were other quarries, but some of them were harder than others.

I know you sometimes used to play in the quarry, too.

Oh, yes. We used to go up – it’s the only thing we could do. You just had to amuse yourself in those days. There were no computers, remember, and no organised sport for young children.

What games did you play in the quarry?
Oh, we only had marbles and cards and things like that to play with. You made up your own games.

I’d like to ask you a little bit now about the war years. What effect did the [Second World] War have on the town, do you think?

I don’t think it had a lot. I feel that Meadows livened up when the War came around because we had a lot more dances on. Troops were coming home – at one stage we had a lot of troops who’d come home from the War were billeted round Meadows; if you had a spare bed you offered it to a soldier, and they were there for, I don’t know, up to two months – but it made a lot of difference to Meadows. The rationing didn’t have much effect, I don’t think, because we grew our own vegetables and things like that. The only thing I can remember a shortage of was axe-handles, we couldn’t get good hickory axe-handles. To me, the shortages were after the War, when we had – that affected us more than anything.

What were those shortages?

When you wanted to build something. You couldn’t get bricks, you couldn’t get cement, you couldn’t get iron for a long time after the War. I think that affected – well, affected me personally more than through the war years.

I know that during the War there were also some Italian prisoners of war in Meadows.

Yes, there was a lot of Italians around; but I didn’t like the way they walked on a Sunday free round the streets. They walked everywhere free on a Sunday and I often thought of our own prisoners of war in camps and that annoyed me, it did.

I’d like to ask you about a few just incidents that happened in Meadows when you’ve been living here, and one was that you mentioned to me that there was an accident at the school corner that you saw: what was that?

I beg yours?

There was an accident –

Oh, yes.

– at the corner by the school.
A boy – I would say it was seventy-two years ago – this driver of this 1925-model car used to come up the street, pull into Kondoparinga Road and park his car, go into Smith’s shop and get what he wanted, come out and back out across what is now Mawson [Road] and go off back down. On this particular day, we four boys were walking across the road and we waited, then one boy went across, this other boy that was killed thought about it then he went to go and he stumbled and fell right behind the car, and he ended up underneath the car when the car stopped. And I’ve asked a lot of people since, and no-one can even remember that accident, and unfortunately I’ve forgotten the boy’s name. But how it happened is still vivid in my mind. It must have affected me, I think.

When you were – I think it was in the 1950s that there was some flooding of the Meadows Creek. What was that like? In the 1950s I think, you told me the Meadows Creek flooded?

I reckon the last time Meadows Creek flooded was 1960. It did flood before then quite often, but the last time I saw the Meadows Creek – that’s between Echunga and Meadows there, what is Battunga Road now – the water used to come right out to the road, and the last time I saw that I reckon was 1960. I haven’t seen it since that. And down here towards the cemetery, the water there, on that land there, was right out across the paddocks; and we haven’t had years like that, I don’t think, since.

Now, there was another story that I’d like you to tell me again, please, was the one about Jesus’s cat in the churchyard.

About?

In St George’s Churchyard.

Oh, yes. The minister’s son. He went down there one day and he saw on a headstone, ‘Jesse Catt’, so he went home and told his father that Jesus had a cat. He misinterpreted it.

And the other story that you had told me was about the damage to your uncle’s house in the storms.8

7 Meadows Public Cemetery
8 Courier 25 September, 1941; page 2, column d.
Yes, we had a severe storm – very windy weather, it was. When my uncle had the house built, he put latticework in both eaves so the hot air could get out and the breezes could get in. But on this particular day the wind went in one side and it couldn’t get out the other side quick enough, and he was inside, he heard all this noise and he went outside just in time to see the roof go over the top of his head. Very rough weather, it was.

Now, I’d like to ask you a little bit now about your family history, because the Watson family’s been in Meadows for five generations.

1855. Michael Watson left Ireland with his wife, Elizabeth Craig, and son, William, on a ship, the *Agincourt*, and came out here in 1855, took up land at Meadows, built a wattle-and-daub house, had another eight children. He was a hard man, though, he was like a lot of Watsons. When he wanted his plough repaired he got his two sons to carry it over to Macclesfield, repair it and bring it back home again. On another occasion he got William to bring a bag of wheat up from Bull’s Creek on his shoulders. William eventually had a row with his father and left home, and we never heard anything more of him. Before going away, he turned on [his father’s whisky still and drained it] – it’s shocking to think that a Watson had a still.

After that, it was a few years after that, James Watson, his second son, my grandfather, got killed when a log rolled over and a limb on it pinned him down by the head and killed him, and that’s when Michael turned his back on his daughter-in-law and his seven grandchildren and they had to look after themselves. Old Michael died in 1913.

You had also mentioned to me about the church that your family used to go to. Which church was that?
Church that Michael went to was the Primitive Methodist Church, which I didn’t know, I think it was gone before I was born. I can never remember seeing that church up on that hill.

**What stories had you heard about that church?**

I don’t know what happened to it or anything about that church, really, myself – until I saw you showed me the photo of it.

**But you mentioned to me something about those church records.**

Yes. There was a disease around at one time and I think they burnt all the records to try and kill all diseases that they had at the church.

**I just wanted to ask you a little bit about some famous residents in Meadows. You’ve already mentioned Mawson and the Brookman family, they’re probably the best-known of Meadows families. How do you feel about Mawson’s achievements?**

(laughs) Now, that’s a technical one, that is. Well, I felt Mawson’s expedition down to the South Pole, he lost two men, but what really did he achieve by it? You know, he came back a hero, but he killed two men in doing it. But, really, he didn’t get to the South Pole; what did he achieve by it? That’s how I felt, you know. I might be hard-hearted, I think we’ve all got our own views, and to me he got more recognition than I feel he deserved.

**When you were a child growing up, were you aware of what he had done, then?**

I beg yours?

**When you were a child, did you know much about Mawson then?**

No, I didn’t. My uncle Fred [Watson] ended up working for him at his sawmill at St Peters. He used to go back and forwards, and he worked for him for a long time in his late life. But personally, I didn’t know him. I knew Brookman but not Mawson.

**And what do you remember about the Brookman family?**

The Brookman family, I feel – member of parliament\(^9\) did a lot of good round Meadows, they did. He was a very good member of parliament. Their house\(^10\) got

\(^9\) Mr Norman Brookman MLC

\(^10\)
burnt down once because they had charcoal in the roof and when it got alight they couldn’t put it out. But Brookmans I thought did a lot for the district.

**Well, I’d like to finish now with just some general questions about Meadows. What, from your perspective, have been the biggest changes in Meadows over the years?**

I feel the expansion of houses has grown quite a lot over the hills. I think the only thing that’s holding us back is mains water, because it takes special people to live off of tank water. The sporting facilities have improved a lot, the school I still feel’s very good – it gives a good, basic training. My son Kym and daughter Jane both went there and they both did well, like a lot of other children.

**Do you think their experience growing up in Meadows was different at all from yours? Was Kym and Jane’s experience growing up in Meadows, was that different from your own childhood in Meadows?**

Oh, yes, a little bit; not a lot, but a little, because they didn’t live in Meadows, they lived six miles out of Meadows. But they always went back to Meadows.

**That was on Razorback Road. Was that a dairy farming property?**

No. We went out there – when I was going to get married we bought a hundred acres and built a house on it and a dairy. Then we bought another hundred and seven acres and then another hundred acres, we ended up with three hundred and fifteen acres out there. But the son didn’t want to go onto it and the daughter didn’t, so we ended up selling it.

**So have either of your children stayed in the area?**

Have either my – – –?

**Children stayed in the Meadows area?**

No. No. No, once the daughter went to school she [trained as a teacher], and the son after he finished university he went to Canberra for – what was that project? – went over there and then he was offered a job over there, and after that the German one who marked his [PhD] thesis for him offered him a job in Germany at Hagen University.

10 Burbrook, on Brookman Road
And so I think – has he been in Germany ever since?

Mm. He never learnt – he had to learn German, though, and he had six months to learn it. But it was very hard for him when he went there for a start because he had to translate everything back to English when they spoke to him. But now he’s been there longer than he has here.

Well, what do you think is important about living in a small town like Meadows?

Well, I think small towns are good because everybody helps everybody else. At the present moment, no; one time we knew everybody who lived in Meadows; you don’t now. I think small towns are very good, like Prospect Hill here. You don’t know anyone in a city, you don’t know who lives up the road six houses up. But in the country you do.

Well, before we finish the interview, were there any other particular stories or incidents that you wanted to mention?

Not as I can think of, offhand. I don’t think there’d be any – – –. There may be, maybe not, but no, I don’t think there’d be anything else I wish to say.

Well, if not, then, I’d like to thank you very much for agreeing to participate in the project and for telling us all these wonderful stories about you and your family’s involvement in Meadows over a very long period of time. Thank you.

Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW