

Blue Lake: Finding Dudley Flats Transcript

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

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BLUE LAKE TRANSCRIPT

Setting: Dudley flats, West Melbourne, Australia, 10 November 1942, [Sunset.]

Elsie: [*through weakest sobbing & keening*] My h— ... My h— Your honour—

Host: The wastelands of our largest cities are often secrets hidden in plain sight. Where life can be left to rot like yesterday's trash.

Jack: [*shouting, now much closer to the keening*] Someone call the coppers! Someone! Elsie's in a bad way.

Host: They are no-go zones, fenced-off areas that we've despoiled and turned our backs on.

Setting: West Melbourne, present day

David: ...and there's an article in the Herald in 1953 describing...yep [John approaching]

John: You're supposed to have track awareness. It's a private site.

David: Oh, sorry.

John: No worries. It's Vic Track. Government.

Host: I'm Rebecca Huntley and Welcome to the History Listen.

John: Government. Yeah. You have to have track awareness. You have to be wearing vests and stuff.

David: Ok, yeah. Fine.

Host: Today we're heading to a site on the western edge of Melbourne's CBD - riddled with ports, roads, railways, rivers and other murky waterways. It's a 4-kilometre-wide wedge between the city and the inner western suburbs.

John: Underneath here, whenever they do anything, they hit water straight away. So it's continually sinking.

Host: At the time of European settlement, it was a lush wetland, dominated by a stunning blue saltwater lake, later known as Batman's or the West Melbourne Swamp.

John: It was supposed to have been fantastic. Like paradise.

David: Don't know about paradise.

[Song: Blue Lake]

Host: But by the mid-20th century the swamp had been reclaimed and its waters drained. It became notorious for its stinking rubbish tips and the shanty town called Dudley Flats that took root in them.

Writer David Sornig has been walking the area looking for forgotten remnants of the shanty town, re-imagining its residents and the wetland's lost Blue Lake. Let's fall in step with him...

David: If you're from Melbourne's west you'll know the strange blind spot that runs from the Maribyrnong River to Docklands. I have really clear memories of passing through it on a train as a child, feeling just how disconnected and confusing it was. But I never knew why.

It was only a few years ago that I heard of the Dudley Flats shanty town and the lost wetland. When I spoke to people about them, barely any of them had heard of these places. No one could find them on a map. If they have any reality left today, it's in fragments. And recovering that reality needs something more than just picking up what's on the surface.

Phyllis: And it was beautiful, really lovely. It was all sandy and blue.

David: Phyllis McIlvenie lived across the road from the tips in the 1930s and 40s.

Phyllis: The big boats used to come in. It was the docks.

David: There were no fences then?

Phyllis: No fences. There were no fences.

David: The path she's remembering once passed through the tips toward an unlikely beach.

Phyllis: This is where, the times you passed, you could see where some of the people were living.

David: And you could see some of the shanties.

Phyllis: That's right.

The Dudley Flats shanty town appeared around the tips after the economic shock of the great depression. Its first residents were people who had been shaken out of their jobs and homes. Without rent to pay they made ends meet by fossicking through the rubbish.

Phyllis: I only remember that mum said I was never ever to go there. Never to go anywhere near there, near the tip. But I never seen a shanty town, but I'd heard so much of it. It was a derelict place where all the no gooders lived.

Setting: Boat landing, Maribyrnong River, present day Melbourne

Peter: Better sit down there out of the way, otherwise you'll get run over with the crowd.

David: Gday Peter, I'm David.

Peter: David, how are you...

David: So this is the Blackbird?

Peter: This is the Blackbird.

David: I've walked overland, looking for another view of the Dudley Flats site, many times, but I've never come by boat.

Peter: The one expression I can remember - 'You don't go down to Dudley Flats because you're likely to be kidnapped. A family will pinch you.'

Now, it's Peter Sommerville, OAM, KSJ, citizen of the year for 2010... Ready to go down?

David: It's the long way there. Along the Maribyrnong River and around the container port.

[Boat starting up, CB radio]

But even from the water it's hard to see exactly how the past maps onto the present. Docks have been carved out of the land. The Yarra River has been rerouted. The creek has silted up and shapeshifted.

Peter: So you would have no doubt part of Dudley Flats on both side of the creek. So a bit of it would be down here, where...

David: What's left of the people who lived here really only floats in on in a few memories, some second-hand stories and a mess of documents. These people become vivid to us when we listen to the few words they left behind.

David: So this old schooner called the John Hunt was stranded over there...

Peter: Yeah, because that was a big mud flat. And they used to bring vessels up and break them up there.

David: And he was told to tie his ship there, after the first world, he was German and he was interned and then he went back to it and he stayed there. They said move on and he said I'm not moving on. He was going to put a mining claim in. He stayed there, they filled up the old Yarra and he was stuck.

Lauder: I was stuck.

Phyllis: I had heard of this German man, but I'd never seen him. We called him German George.

David: German George. At other times he was called Bob the German.

Phyllis: Bob the German.

David: 'German George' was Lauder Rogge, a hermit who lived on the hulk of his ship, the John Hunt. The former blackbirding schooner was stranded in the mud between Coode Island and Dudley Flats. Phyllis remembers him from the late 1930s when he'd already been living there for more than twenty years.

Peter: Well, I'll have to unhook and do some work...

David: Lauder arrived in Australia in 1900. In the years up to the First World War he lived and worked on the waterways of Melbourne's ports.

[SFX of engine cutting]

(Reading) 6th June 1918. The minister has approved of the above named being interned at the Commonwealth of Australia concentration camp, Liverpool.

David: Even though he'd become a naturalised Australian, Lauder found himself coming under suspicion from military intelligence. They called him 'a marvellous man in handling craft.' And thought him 'capable of being dangerous.'

Lauder: 'Capable of being dangerous.'

Setting: Coode Island, Maribyrnong River, Melbourne, 1936

When I came back to the John Hunt after the war, I sailed her down and tied her up where the harbour trust told me, opposite Coode island. But she spat all the oakum from her seams, and when they filled in the channel around the island, so that the river ran only on the other side... I had to leave her there.

Phyllis: He had a lot of dogs and we had to be very careful. You know I had a dog Tony. Everytime I went over to the tip Tony came over with me. Had to be careful in case Tony got caught up with dogs. They were very savage. Very savage dogs.

David: Lauder kept at least sixty dogs in his Coode island compound. Many of them were starving.

Lauder: I sailed all over the world when I was young. I am no good to go to sea again.

David: The Victorian Society for the Protection of Animals intervened in 1936.

Lauder: They lay baits and poison my dogs. They tell me 'you have too many dogs. You should get rid of them.' How can I? They are like my children.

David: Lauder was allowed to keep one as his companion. The rest...

Lauder: ...were destroyed.

David: In 1938 he was threatened by arsonists and set a fire break around the ship. But in the hot wind the fire took hold of the hulk.

[sfx: ship goes up in flames]

Lauder: Now I have no clothes except these I'm wearing, and I must sleep in the tin shed I used for the dogs. There is not enough kindness in people. I am a man without a country. Ich bin ein Mann ohne Heimat.

Setting: Former site of Dudley Flats, present day Melbourne

Gary: I'm Gary Vines, I'm an archaeologist and historian. So as an archaeologist I try and imagine the stratigraphy below us and the layers of fill and excavation and disturbance that's gone on.

David: Gary's walking with me around the back of the Docklands entertainment district, the most recent reinvention of this part of Melbourne.

Gary: So we're just about on the southern edge of Batman's Swamp.

David: Early Melbourne's sewage drained directly into the swamp.

Gary: It only took ten years to turn the blue lake into a foetid swamp. And that layer preserved. I think I'm the only person to have seen Batman's swamp. That layer of black gooey stuff that's underneath us everywhere.

David: Gary's archaeological work during the construction of the Citylink freeway in 1999 took him deep under today's surface of landfill and swamp reclamation.

Gary: I look out for things that are out of place. It's sort of one of the physical signs of human activity. When you see something that doesn't belong there. As you move west across the swamp you go from glass and ceramics from the mid-19th century and organic remains and get into some of the more toxic stuff from the desiccators and incinerators and the chemical and industrial waste that was being dumped in and into the first of the plastics.

David: We've come more or less to the rear of the docklands studios and we are looking for something that might resemble the site of Dudley Flats. Gary?

Gary: Well, I think we're about there. I reckon this is about the point which is the edge of the landfill from about the 1910s to the 1930s. And then in the Depression the rubbish tips became the livelihood of a group of people who were scavenging off the tip.

What I was hoping for was to find evidence of that, evidence of the humpies that were built out of rubbish from the tip. When they were pulled down and mostly they were demolished on purpose by one or other government department, they were just flattened, went back into the same pile of rubbish they were built on and then more rubbish came in and piled up on top of them. So what we're looking for is this layer of slightly different deposit of rubbish between two other layers.

(Death notices) 8th April 1915. Peacock., Lillian Rosalind. The loved wife of Jack Peacock. Fond mother of Doris and Jackey. Aged 25.

Lindsay: My feeling is that he was a victim of circumstance with the loss of his, with the death of his wife at a reasonably young age and she was very young also.

I'm Lindsay Peacock and I'm the grandson of the King of Dudley Flats.

David: After his wife Lillie's death, Jack Peacock scavenged the tips and taught horse riding from his rough shacks in and around Dudley Flats for almost 30 years. He persisted even when others had moved on or died.

(Classified ads)

Apply to Jack Peacock. Rear, city council store yard, tip, Dynon road, West Melbourne.
400 feet of wire cable rope.
Straw and manure for sale...

Lindsay: One of the stories my father told me was that he always carried a bank book wherever he went that had at least a minimum of 10 pounds in it so as the police couldn't lock him up for vagrancy.

(Classified ad)

...Girls, don't be a bride, be a buck jump circus rider.
Lessons given in rough, flat steeplechase riding.
Hall of fame riding school.

David: You'd never met him, had you?

Lindsay: No, I hadn't. I suspect quite strongly that my father was shielding me from any contact with Jack senior because of his lifestyle of which he was quite ashamed. Given the time, even though he's a wharfie I'd describe us as comfortable middle middle class, he still had those hang-ups about his father living on the tip and being virtually a manure carter and a lowly member of the lowest strata of society.

(Classified ad)

Wagon, pony, harness - 9 pound the lot.

Lindsay: 'This life suits me, and it is only the mental weaklings who desire to remove me. Men of education would allow me to remain.'

David: These are Jack Peacock's words, addressed to a Lands Department inspector. The department tried and failed to move him out of Dudley Flats in the mid-1940s.

Lindsay: 'I remain yours, Jack Peacock.' Respectfully yours perhaps could have been... *(laughs)*

Lindsay: The other thing was the watch, the fob watch...

David: The watch was the last item listed in the inventory of Jack's possessions.

Lindsay: ...which was a very non-descript fob watch, which my father took to a jeweller and had full restored and gave to me.

David: It was valued at 2 shillings.

[Song: The Dud King of old Dudley Flats]

Lindsay: Obviously to a lot of people he would be a deadbeat and a neer-do-well, but I see him in heroic proportion. I think the Australian ethos always accepts people who act outside of the norm in a positive way. And I see him as succeeding at a time when a lot more people who were a lot more comfortable and a lot smarter went under and went by the by, jumped out of windows. He carved a little niche for himself, that kept him going for two decades on what was a rubbish tip, Dudley Flats.

David: The authorities moved in to knock down the last of the permanent shanties in the early 1940s. The remains of the shacks were burned or buried in the tip.

[Song: The Dud King of old Dudley Flats]

Phyllis: The lady next door Mrs Baker. She lived in number 2 Lloyd St.

David: Lloyd St in South Kensington practically neighboured the tip and Dudley Flats.

Phyllis: Mrs Baker knew Black Elsie very well. She said she was a lovely woman, well educated, clever, and a beautiful voice. She had nothing but praise for her.

David: Elsie Williams lived a precarious and volatile life in the shacks of Dudley Flats through the 1930s and early 1940s.

Setting: Melbourne's Fitzroy court, July 1935, a weekday morning.

Male court clerk: You are charged with having used indecent language in the watchhouse in the hearing of persons passing by. Elsie Williams, have you anything to say?

David: Elsie was born in the Central Victorian town of Bendigo in 1901 to Afro-Caribbean parents.

Elsie: *[after a sigh, Elsie walks away from the court, singing quietly, sweetly]*

He leads Black Elsie

He leads my mother

He leads Black Elsie

All—

[speaking loudly, forthrightly, as though back in court:] Nothing will break my spirit.

David: It was the same year that the new nation barred anyone of her colour from immigrating.

Elsie: *[in much fuller voice, proudly:]*

All the way

From Earth to heaven

Let Jesus lead me, all the way...

David: Elsie's childhood was blighted by the early death of her mother, and by the loss of the family home to a fire. But Elsie was ambitious. She became a forthright and determined young woman. And her singing voice was striking.

Setting: Dudley flats, West Melbourne, 10 November 1942.

Phyllis: It was Sunday morning when we went down to the tip. We met up with the girls and decided to go down the tip. Mum was busy she didn't know where we were. There was only 4 us.

David: The tip was a nuisance. It smelled, it was rat-infested and smoke from the always burning tip-faces drifted across the surrounding neighbourhoods. But to the local children it was a playground. Full of treasures.

Phyllis: And round about here was this woman. She was on a vegetable patch. She was right in the middle of it, lying on there. She was crying and she looked very tiny. Very tiny. She was in a terrible mess. And it was realised it was Black Elsie.

But I was still scared of her because she had a razor. Not a razor blade, a razor in her stocking she carried, and she'd slash your face to ribbons. Mum said she'd done it to a tram conductor because he dare ask her for her fare. So she slashed his neck and face and his ear. Mum said, you ever go see that woman, you just run. Just run. Because she's a wicked, wicked woman.

Setting: Interior of a Melbourne tram (route number 57), late December 1941, evening.

Elsie: *[singing playfully]*

Life upon the wicked stage
Ain't ever what a girl su-ppo-ses;
Stage door johnnies aren't raging
Over you with gems and roses.
I know i can d-o bet-ter
Even tho' i ne-ver had

[spoken:]

A chance—

[singing again:]

I know i can d-o bet-ter
Why can't you remember

[spoken, self-mocking:]

Is it customary for you to lose your memory every time you have a few drinks?

David: Through the 1920s Elsie took her talent across the country performing popular African American slave spirituals with the Fisk Jubilee Singers. By the end of the decade, she was on the Melbourne stage in *Show Boat*.

[singing again:]

Life upon the wicked stage
Ain't ever what a girl su-ppo-ses;

[fadeout:]

Stage door johnnies aren't raging
Over you with gems and roses ...

David: But by then she was already drinking heavily and was in trouble with the law. She was becoming unmoored.

Elsie: *[giggles before exclaiming:]* snowflake was just the opposite of my colour!

David: Like any person, Elsie was a cauldron of feeling and experience. She didn't fit into any neat compartment.

Elsie: *[strangely bright singing, to the tune of the hymn 'Jesus leads me all the way':]*

I am Elsie
Elsie Williams
Josie snowflake, lovely sight.
I appear
To be a vagrant—
I will appeal, all the way.

David: But her violent boilovers were often attributed to race.

Elsie: *[speaking, with eyes narrowed:]*

If i had a razor i would cut you pieces.

David: At her final trial in 1939 Judge Richardson wondered if she was Aboriginal. He thought she was 'subject to temptations and passions rather different from those ordinarily affecting white people.'

Elsie: *[singing:]* i had a razor - yes

[speaking, accusatory:] oh, you liar!

[singing again, briefly strong:]

I had a razor
All the way.

[singing. weaker, becoming softer, though maintaining dignity:]

I would ask you,
Please be lenient,
Be as lenient, as you can.

David: In the first half of the 20th century, Melbourne could only contain Elsie in prison. Or abandon her to the unruly territory of Dudley Flats.

Setting: Dudley flats, West Melbourne, 10 November 1942.

Phyllis: She said she was starving, she hadn't eaten anything, she wanted something to drink. Could they help her. She was crying softly, she was very softly spoken. And she said my man punched me, punched me into the fire. And the girls were saying what can they do to help. She said the rats came and bitten her. Her skin looked grey. Not black, grey. Because of the dust from the fire. She was very badly burnt. Very badly burnt.

David: So she must have been there for quite some time already?

Phyllis: Looks as if she'd rolled in it. He'd knocked her at the top of the hill and she'd rolled in it. Because the further you got down, the worse was the fire.

Elsie: My man he punched me
[speaking, shocked:] —punched me into the fire.

Jack Peacock: *[shouting:]*
Someone call the coppers! Someone! Elsie's in a bad way.

Elsie: *[singing again, faltering now:]*

I'm so hungry

All the way.

All the way

Phyllis: And she said, can you help me girls? Can you get me some help?

Elsie: From earth to heaven
Let Jesus lead me, all the way.

All the way
From earth to heaven
Let Jesus lead me ...

Phyllis: And... But I took off.

David: But you did go back later?

Phyllis: I did, yes...I went out to the girls' place and they were back and they said, no they couldn't find her.

Elsie: Let Jesus lead me...

Phyllis: This blue lake, as you call it, it was black.

Elsie: The blue lake was black.

Phyllis: Everything had rotten away because the fire kept burning on the tip. And the ground used to be a hard crust. And yet if you stood on it, you'd sink into coals, red hot coals.

Elsie: Red, hot coals.

[Song: Blue Lake]

Gary: Well, I'll have to use my imagination. Archaeologists are not supposed to. They're supposed to deal with the evidence and the facts but in a way, we can't really make sense of those in a way that other people can understand unless we put this imaginative story around it.

David: Whatever remains of this place - the idyllic and the ugly, the swamp and the shanty town, the shame and the survival - is in pieces. It's buried in the ground, in archives and in memories.

Gary: But from where we are just on the edge of the swamp, we would have been able to look across here and have this huge, big expanse of water, probably shimmering in the sunlight on a day like this. Covered in birds. We know that wherever there was water it was always absolutely packed with wildlife. So, the views would have been incredible from early Melbourne.

David: You can assemble the fragments, but you still need to imagine them into being.

Gary: So the bits I've picked up and some probably 1920s, 30s, bit of a sort of art deco pattern.

David: Imagination is a fragile, and imprecise tool. The reality it makes only lasts as long as the attention you devote to it.

Gary: And the glass could be anything from like 1910 to even 1970s, you know it took them a while to come up with chemistry to produce decent clear glass. The darker the glass is the older it tends to be. It's just a sign of not being able to get the impurities out of it most of the time.

David: And you can never really be sure of the clarity of your gaze.

[Song: Blue Lake]

Host: The Blue Lake was written and produced by David Sornig, Cynthia Troup and Miyuki Jokiranta. The sound engineer was Tim Symonds. This program was an adaptation of David's book, *Blue Lake: Finding Dudley Flats and the West Melbourne Swamp*. Elsie was played by Zahra Newman, Lauder was played by Adrian Plitzco and score by The Orbweavers, Marita Dyson and Stuart Flanagan.

Head to our website for more details of the book, photos of Dudley Flats and its inhabitants and to find out why the blue lake was blue.

I'm Rebecca Huntley and thanks for your company on The History Listen.