



**NUMURKAH DURING THE
1934s DEPRESSION**

**VENEZUELA DURING THE
2019 ELECTRICAL FAILURE**

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Hypothesis: *The 1930s Depression had a beneficial effect on rural communities by bringing people together and fostering a strong community spirit through a reliance on each other to survive in difficult times.*

The Victorian rural township of Numurkah provides a suitable case-study for the purpose of testing my hypothesis. In doing so I will concentrate on changes in business practices in response to the Depression, the treatment of the unemployed; and social activities and organisations in Numurkah during the Depression.

Evidence has been drawn from Numurkah Shire Council minutes, directors' minutes of a local company, a published local history, the local newspaper and oral accounts given by four people who lived in the Numurkah district during the Depression.

The traditional view of rural people's and communities' experiences during the Depression is that they were hit particularly hard.

Spencely states, "Poverty was endemic in the bush, despite the repeated subsidies of various kinds. Worst hit of all were small farmers on the wheat land¹.

Lowenstein also implies that rural communities suffered more than their fair share of the Depression burden². Recently, other historians have challenged this view of the Depression in rural areas. David Potts suggests that the Depression actually brought about better times for many by bringing families and communities together.³ This study, using a localised example, aims to put forward a view of experiences of rural communities during the Depression.

Numurkah is situated in the plains of the Goulburn Valley approximately 250 kilometers north of Melbourne. During the 1930s, Numurkah was linked to Melbourne by the Goulburn Valley rail line, and was an important trading centre for the surrounding wheat growing district. Stock agents were the main businesses with several general stores, the Numurkah Hotel, and other businesses operating in the township of around 1000 people.

Brown, Corke and Co was a local chain of general stores centering on Numurkah, and selling a broad range of items including: men's and ladies clothing, footwear, ironmongery, groceries, drapes and fabrics. It also ran several truck services which sold goods to farmers on their farms.⁴

During the Depression, Brown, Corke and Co was an example of how businesses changed their practices in order to help the community⁵. One change was the rationing of work to reduce expenses rather than sacking staff. Rationed staff members were given one week off work without pay every month.⁶ Managers also shared the burden of reduced sales, with the manager at the Wunghnu depot having to pay rent of 10/- per week on his house from 2nd December 1930, whereas previously he had lived in the company owned house, rent free.⁷

Debt carrying rather than debt collection was another change by Brown, Corke & Co. According to Mrs. McKeown, whose father and then her husband owned Brown, Corke and Co, "It was far better to carry a debtor through to better times and get what you were owed, rather than to force people to pay up, put them through extra hardship and possibly still not recovering the debt."⁸

Further evidence of this attitude can be seen in the directors' minutes on 27th October 1931 and 14th September 1932, "It is urged that every effort be made to reduce book debts as much as possible out of the forthcoming harvest."⁹ This statement shows that Brown, Corke & Co were very aware of their financial position, particularly in relation to debts. However, it also shows that Brown, Corke and Co were aware of the financial circumstances of their farming clientele in only trying to recover debts when farmers got paid at harvest.¹⁰

On 21st October 1930, Brown, Corke & Co moved to operate in a conservative manner by reducing credit sales and concentrating on cash business. However, credit sales only dropped from 58% in April 1931,¹¹ to 52% of sales in September 1931,¹² whilst total sales remained steady at around £1800 per month.¹³ Such a small drop suggests that many of Brown, Corke and Co's customers relied on credit, and that Brown, Corke & Co did not leave them floundering in the middle of the Depression by cutting credit sales.

Farmers did rely on credit sales and debt carrying. One farmer drove into Numurkah in 1946, to repay debts from the Depression, fourteen years earlier.¹⁴ The taking of promissory notes by Brown, Corke & Co, dating no later than 4th July 1933,¹⁵ provides further evidence of Brown, Corke & Co's willingness to help those in financial difficulties survive the Depression.

The actions of Brown, Corke and Co during the Depression, in under-employing rather than sacking staff; spreading the burden amongst all staff, including managers; carrying debtors; and continuing credit sales suggests that at least some of Numurkah's businesses changed standard business practices during the Depression. These actions would have helped keep the community together as it demonstrates a firm's loyalty to its customers and to the community.

As well as having to deal with local unemployment, Numurkah also had to deal with the hundreds of unemployed who came up from the city by "jumping the rattler."¹⁶ Of the unemployed who came to Numurkah, most were single men. However, some families arrived with all their possessions on one cart,¹⁷ as witnessed by Mrs. McKeown: "Being right on the corner (of the Goulburn Valley Highway), I saw people just stream past seeking work."¹⁸

With very few jobs available, it would be hardly surprising to find community resentment to outsiders competing against locals for jobs. However, the reaction of people in Numurkah was vastly different: "When the unemployed knocked on your door begging for food you gave whatever you could. In return, they chopped wood or did any work they possibly could. If the food they received was good, then O.K. would be inscribed on the gate post. If the food was poor then W/O (wash-out) would be inscribed."¹⁹

This inscription let others on the track know where they could get a decent meal and put pressure on those who had showed a lack of compassion.²⁰ Food left over from social gatherings was given to the unemployed²¹ and the local branch of the Red Cross gave Christmas Treats to the Poor.²² In response to growing unemployment, the Shire Council set up a register of the unemployed,²³ and placed them with anyone willing to employ

them. The Council set aside over £1200 from August 1930 to July 1931 for unemployment relief work schemes.²⁴ The Shire Council was active in relieving local ratepayers in financial difficulties by “leaving the arrears of rates in the hands of the Secretary to collect in the usual way with no drastic action to be taken”²⁵.

The Council relieved ratepayers by getting rate defaulters to work for the council and pay off the outstanding rates.²⁶

These actions demonstrate the awareness of the Council of the difficulties facing its ratepayers and the Council’s willingness to assist ratepayers in financial difficulties. Acting in this manner, the Council provided an example to the rest of the community and would have contributed to improved community spirit in Numurkah.

There was never a shortage of social activity in Numurkah during the Depression.²⁷ Cricket, tennis, Aussie Rules Football, bowls, and golf were sports played regularly each season. Sport also provided cheap entertainment for spectators.²⁸ Other entertainment included: the annual Numurkah Agricultural Show held in October,²⁹ concerts, school fairs, flower shows, church balls, and music competitions.³⁰ Private entertainment such as combined dance and card parties³¹ mixed with the public entertainment previously mentioned, provided many opportunities for local people to gather together, have a good time, and lighten the burden of tough times, thus possibly fostering a stronger community spirit.

Numurkah had a number of social organisations during the Depression. Cricket, football, golf, bowls and swimming clubs catered for the sporting-minded. The Town Band, Choral Society and Orchestra gave those with musical talent an opportunity to demonstrate publicly their talent.³² Charity and Community organisations were also present in Numurkah. The Progress Association was particularly active declaring in November 1930, “Our objective is to make Numurkah a better place to live for everyone.”³³ At the same meeting, the Progress Association launched a successful campaign to save the town-band which was threatened with dispersion in November 1930³⁴, because it was unable to pay an outstanding debt of approximately £60.³⁵

The Association played a key role in setting up spectacular lighting displays and celebrations in the main street of Numurkah on Christmas and New Year's Eves at the end of 1931.³⁶ Younger people were also catered for in Numurkah with the first scout troop being set up in 1930³⁷ and the Guides and Brownies in 1933.³⁸

A number of social and community organisations in Numurkah provided the people with many opportunities to gather together, to enjoy themselves or to work as one to improve life for themselves and others, perhaps contributing to the building of community spirit.

Potts³⁹ and Lowenstein⁴⁰ have relied almost entirely on oral evidence to support their arguments. The problem arises in that the oral evidence collected supports two contradictory arguments, which raises questions about their methodology. Were their samples biased or selective? Did their questions lead interviewees into certain types of responses? Was all evidence gleaned used? Oral evidence, like any other sort of evidence, such as newspaper articles or editorials, diaries, official and private letters, cartoons and songs and to a lesser extent statistics, needs to be critically analysed.

The oral evidence of Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Patrick, and Mr. & Mrs. McKeown raises some interesting questions. Mrs. Brown's recollections of the unemployed in Numurkah were that "they seemed to melt away. I didn't really notice them." This would suggest that she lived a sheltered life in the township, as Mrs. McKeown, who lived on the corner of the Goulburn Valley Highway, noticed the unemployed streaming by seeking work.

Possibly the most important factor in the evidence of the four interviewees is that they were all children or teenagers during the Depression. Hence, their memories would tend to be less perceptive of poverty, as children were spared a great deal of the depression burden by their parents. Mrs. Brown's recollection of social events, however, is consistent with a local history of Numurkah and the local paper.

The problem with representing the Depression today is that society has changed so much, making it very hard to put oneself in the shoes of those who lived during the Depression.

Many statistical, particularly financial records will probably have been destroyed. Personal letters, diaries or memoirs tend to decay or get lost. Oral history tends to also be coloured by time, as political and ‘one class’ views portray⁴¹ particular experiences and this bombardment over many years tends to intrude into people’s memories and their accounts change, either slightly or quite drastically.

Hence, conflicts between representations can occur.

As historians, we must decide on the reliability of these representations and then draw conclusions based on our assessment of their reliability. Headlines in the Numurkah Leader such as “Selfish Citizens”⁴² and “Town Band - Regrettable Lack of Public Interest”⁴³ tend to suggest that community spirit in Numurkah was weak and that people were more concerned with their own welfare. This seems to be confirmed by the Progress Association’s statement, “there were many people talking depression who had not yet felt its effects. Instead of decrying their town, these people should be helping it along.”⁴⁴ This conflicts with the oral evidence given independently by Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Patrick, Mr. & Mrs. McKeown, the actions of Brown, Corke and Co, and the treatment of the unemployed.

The customer and community-oriented actions of Brown, Corke and Co, and the Numurkah Shire Council tend to suggest that community spirit was strengthened during the Depression. A wide range of social activities, and a number of community organisations may have also helped strengthen community spirit by bringing local people together to share experiences, enjoy themselves and work together to improve life for themselves and others. Although the Depression brought severe economic hardship to rural communities, it also helped strengthen community spirit as people relied on each other to survive.

1 G. Spencely, *The Depression Decade. Commentary and Documents*, Topics in Australian History Series, Nelson, Melbourne, 1981, pp51-52

2 W. Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour. An oral record of the 1930’s Depression in Australia*, Melbourne, 1978, p.10.

3 D. Potts, ‘A Positive Culture of Poverty Represented in Memories of the 1930’s Depression’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, No 26, May 1990, p.10

- 4 Interview with Mr. K. McKeown, former director of Brown, Corke & Co, on 17th July 1993.
- 5 Director's minutes, Brown, Corke & Co Pty Ltd. 1881-1981, in possession of Mr. Keith McKeown, former Director of Brown, Corke and Co, Numurkah, 17th September 1930.
- 6 Interview with Mr. K. McKeown, 17th July 1993.
- 7 Director's minutes, B.C & Co, 2nd December 1930.
- 8 Interview with Mrs. B. McKeown, 17th July 1993.
- 9 Director's minutes, B.C. & Co, 27th October 1931 & 14th September 1932.
- 10 Interview with Mrs. K. Brown, 17th July 1993.
- 11 Director's minutes, B.C. & Co, 20th May 1931.
- 12 *ibid*, 27th October 1931.
- 13 *ibid*, 20th May 1931 & 27th October 1931.
- 14 Interview with Mrs. B. McKeown on 17th July 1993.
- 15 Director's minutes, B.C. & Co, 19th May 1932.
- 16 Interview with Mrs. K. Brown, on 17th July 1993.
- 17 Interview with Mrs. B. McKeown, on 17th July 1993.
- 18 *ibid*.
- 19 Interview with Mrs. Patrick, on 17th July 1993.
- 20 *ibid*.
- 21 Interview with Mrs. K. Brown, on 17th July 1993.
- 22 The Numurkah Leader 2nd December 1930, p.2
- 23 Shire Council Minutes, Numurkah Shire Council, 6th May 1929.
- 24 *ibid*, 11th August 1930 & 13th July 1931
- 25 *Aid*, 2nd October 1930.
- 26 *ibid*, 2nd October 1930
- 27 Interview with Mrs. K. Brown, on 17th July 1993
- 28 *ibid*
- 29 The Numurkah Leader, 2nd October 1929, p.4
- 30 Interviews with Mrs. K. Brown & Mrs. Patrick, on 17th July 1993
- 31 H. McQueen, *Social Sketches of Australia*, Melbourne, First ed. 1975, 2nd ed. 1991, p.139
- 32 Interview with Mrs. K. Brown, on 17th July 1993
- 33 The Numurkah Leader. 25th November 1930, .2
- 34 *ibid*, 4th November 1930, p.3
- 35 *ibid*, 4th November 1930, p.3
- 36 *ibid*, 5th January 1932, p.2
- 37 W.H. Bossence, *Numurkah*, Melbourne, 1979, pp251-252.
- 38 *ibid*, p.253
- 39 1). Potts, *loc.cit.*, p.3.
- 40 W. Lowenstein, *op.cit.* p.xiii
- 41 See P. Spearritt, 'Mythology of the Depression' in J. MacKinolty

(ed.), *The Wasted Years? Australia's Great Depression*, Sydney, 1981, pp. 4-9.

42 *The Numurkah Leader*, 16th December 1930, p.2

43 *ibid.*, 18th November 1930, p.4

44 *ibid.* 25th November 1930, p.4

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VENEZUELA RETURNS TO 'MIDDLE AGES' DURING POWER OUTAGES
[AFP] aria Lorente March 29, 2019

1 / 6 A man carries drums with water he collected from a stream at the Wuaraira Repano mountain, also called El Avila, in Caracas on March 13, 2019

2 / 6 A man carries water cans in a wheelbarrow in Caracas

3 / 6 Many Venezuelans have been forced to walk very long distances during the power outage -- or face seemingly endless queues

4/6 Pedestrians walk by a graffiti reading "Is There Light?" (AFP Photo/Federico PARRA)

5/6 With minimal public transportation, people have flocked to the streets of Caracas (AFP Photo/YURI CORTEZ)

6 / 6 The power outages have had a life and death impact on some patients in need of critical medical care, such as kidney dialysis

Caracas (AFP) - Walking for hours, making oil lamps, bearing water. For Venezuelans today, suffering under a new nationwide blackout that has lasted days, it's like being thrown back to life centuries ago.

El Avila, a mountain that towers over Caracas, has become a place where families gather with buckets and jugs to fill up with water, wash dishes and scrub clothes. The taps in their homes are dry from lack of electricity to the city's water pumps.

"We're forced to get water from sources that obviously aren't completely hygienic. But it's enough for washing or doing the dishes," said one resident, Manuel Almeida.

Because of the long lines of people, the activity can take hours of waiting.

Elsewhere, locals make use of cracked water pipes. But they still need to boil the water, or otherwise purify it.

"We're going to bed without washing ourselves," said one man, Pedro Jose, a 30-year-old living in a poorer neighborhood in the west of the capital.

Some shops seeing an opportunity have hiked the prices of bottles of water and bags of ice to between \$3 and \$5 -- a fortune in a country where the monthly minimum salary is the equivalent of \$5.50.

Better-off Venezuelans, those with access to US dollars, have rushed to fill hotels that have giant generators and working restaurants.

For others, preserving fresh food is a challenge. Finding it is even more difficult. The blackout has forced most shops to close.

“We share food” among family members and friends, explained Coral Munoz, 61, who counts herself lucky to have dollars.

“You have to keep a level head to put up with all this, and try to have people around because being alone make it even harder.”

- Scouring trash -

For Kelvin Donaire, who lives in the poor Petare district, survival is complicated.

He walks for more than an hour to the bakery where he works in the upmarket Los Palos Grandes area. “At least I’m able to take a loaf back home,” Donaire said.

Many inhabitants have taken to salting meat to preserve it without working refrigerators.

Others, more desperate, scour trash cans for food scraps. They are hurt most by having to live in a country where basic food and medicine has become scarce and out of reach because of rocketing hyperinflation.

The latest blackout this week also knocked out communications.

According to NetBlocks, an organization monitoring telecoms networks, 85 percent of Venezuela has lost connection.

- ‘People need to eat’ -

In stores, cash registers no longer work and electronic payment terminals are blanked out. That’s serious in Venezuela, where even bread is bought by card because of lack of cash.

Some clients, trusted ones, are able to leave written IOUs.

“People need to eat. We let them take food and they will pay us when bank transfers come back,” explained shop owner Carlos Folache.

Underneath an office block of Digitel, one of the main cellphone companies, dozens of people stand around trying to get a signal.

“I’m trying to get connected to get news... on this chaotic episode we’re going through,” said one man, Douglas Perez.

With Caracas’s subway shut down, getting around the city is a trail, with choices between walking for kilometers (miles), lining up in the outsized hope of getting on one of the rare and badly overcrowded and dilapidated buses or managing to get fuel for a vehicle.

Pedro Jose said bus tickets have nearly doubled in price. “A ticket used to cost 100 bolivares (three US cents) and now it’s 1,500 (45 cents),” he raged.

As night casts Caracas into darkness, families light their homes as best they can.

“We make lamps that burn gasoline, or oil, or kerosene -- any type of fuel,” explained Lizbeth Morin, 30.

“We’ve returned to the Middle Ages.”

