

On the Record and Off the Record: The case of the runaway ferries*

** The written account of this event, **When the Ferries Got Away**, is available from this website ([link](#))*

I want to talk to you today about writing the history of an event. We tend to write histories of people and places, but not so often the history of events. This event took place 20 years ago - long enough back to be interesting history, but recent enough for me to still be able to talk to a lot of the people who were involved in it.

This event happened the week before Easter in 1978, when there were terrific floods all along the coast of NSW. The floodwaters rose so quickly in the Hawkesbury River that at Wisemans Ferry council workers couldn't get the vehicular ferries there off their cables - which is the usual procedure during floods because otherwise the cables can get torn out by a build-up against them of debris coming down the river. After a series of freak mishaps four ferries, lashed together, were swept downriver with three men on board. One of the ferries soon sank, (not the one with the men on it), another broke free and was eventually secured a few Ks downriver, while the remaining two careered on down the river, locked together and at the mercy of the floodwaters.

The runaway ferries proved to be virtually unstoppable. Packed around with flood debris and unable to be separated, with a combined weight of several hundred tonnes, they had become, in effect, a floating artificial island which had tremendous kinetic energy and all attempts to secure it to the bank were unsuccessful. The drama reached its climax when the juggernaut was about to ram into the road bridges at Brooklyn, which is some 50 Ks downriver from where they first broke away at Wisemans. Ramming the bridges would have caused a huge amount of damage, or could even have destroyed them completely. Police cars were standing by ready to stop the traffic. As things turned out, disaster was averted, but only at the very last minute - like, 50 metres from the main expressway bridge.

Twenty years after this event, browsing through the archives of the local historical society, I came across a tape-recording of a talk given by one of the council workers - the foreman, actually - who had been in charge on board the ferries when they took their wild ride on the floodwaters. It was a dramatic story, a real cliffhanger,

and I decided to “write it up” when I found that for various reasons it had not been widely reported at the time. To this end I began chasing up what had been documented about the incident, and tracking down as many of the participants as I could to tape their memories of it.

Over the years, the event had achieved the status of local folklore. When people spoke of it they often referred to it as a “drama”, and that was how I chose to tell the story - as a drama. I organised the chapters into Acts and Scenes, and tried to weave together the oral accounts I taped (the “off the record material”) with what I could find that had been written or documented about it (the “on the record” material”). It was an attempt to piece together what really happened by portraying it from the perspectives of the various participants, but also taking the written record into account.

It is the strengths and weaknesses of these two major historical sources - what survives in written form on the one hand, and the stories that people tell you about it on the other - that I want to talk about today.

If you were to go solely on what survives in the written media about when the ferries got away, you wouldn’t think it was much of a big deal. This what the papers had to say:

SMH Tuesday March 21 *Three Hawkesbury River vehicular ferries broke loose from their moorings about 3pm and drifted downstream. Police and local fishermen who gave chase managed to rope them together and secured them to a bank.*

On the same day, the **Daily Telegraph** said: *Three big car ferries were swept down the Hawkesbury River from Wisemans Ferry 15km to Laughtondale where two were secured by water police and the other went aground. Three workers aboard the ferries were uninjured.*

The **Hawkesbury/Richmond Gazette** the next day carried this report: *The ferries from Wisemans which drifted away from their moorings downstream on Monday towards Spencer have now been recovered and moored at Spencer.*

OK. So we all know that you don’t believe everything you read in the newspapers, but not only are these reports woefully inadequate - they are almost entirely inaccurate to boot. There was actually very much more to the event than anyone would suspect from reading them. (The main reason the coverage was so cursory is that there were many “human interest” stories about the ‘78 floods, all up and down the coast - and they couldn’t *all* get a guernsey in the press.)

Accounts of the runaway ferries saga also survive in the written record: The foreman council worker who was aboard had to write a formal report afterwards, and I was able to access this on the Council's files; the Hornsby Bush Fire Brigade was involved, and they made their Radio Log available; some months afterwards a longish account was published in the RTA magazine *Main Roads*, and an article also appeared in the *Hawkesbury/Richmond Gazette* about the same time, but the really interesting details of what happened were restricted mainly to the people who had been directly involved.

The thing that struck me most about the written material was how terse most of it was - how lacking in human detail. No-one could begin to imagine what it must have been like for the three men on the ferries if they didn't know, for instance, that the debris that banked up around the ferries was also occupied by snakes, spiders and other nasties that were refugees from the flood. To spend a night on board, as they had to, knowing that these critters were around would be unlikely to give you a good night's sleep. And then there were the mosquitoes! As one worker said: "*I think we lost about a pint of blood each that night, down in the mangroves. We were sitting there with the windows and doors shut, smoking like mad to keep them out of the cabin.*"

If I hadn't been able to mine the memories of those still living who had participated in the drama, if the story of the runaway ferries had been left to be written up after they were all dead, the account would have been a pretty tame affair indeed. There would be little that might convey the extent of the drama, the excitement, the danger, the risks - all the things that make it such a good story. Posterity gets the sanitised written record which is a bureaucratically-acceptable version of reality, one that suits the people who run the show. But it rarely gets anything which describes what things were like from the workers' point of view, even if, as in the case of the runaway ferries, the workers were the main protagonists.

But, as Alan Bond would doubtless attest, memory is notoriously unreliable. Although the story I was able to write was more humanly colourful because I was able to include the recollections of the participants in it, we still have to acknowledge the difficulties that oral testimony brings with it. The written record may be inadequate in some ways, but so too is what people tell you. I'll give you a couple of examples:

I was able to trace most of the people who had played a role in the drama - about a dozen major players in all, ranging from tug skippers and deckhands, the Water Police, an RTA observer from a helicopter, and the council administrative official who was responsible for the ferries at the time. But two of the three men who had stayed on board the ferries to try to stop them had already taken The Big Ferry Ride in the sky. This gave a pretty open slather to the one surviving ferry worker -

who was very much the junior - and you can't help suspecting that his account was embellished in various ways here and there, with nobody else left now who'd been on the ferries to say otherwise. For example, he told me of an incident where one of the assisting tug boats was holed just above the waterline at one stage, and how he helped with running repairs to keep it seaworthy. When I asked the tug's skipper about his recollections of this he couldn't remember anything like that happening. And after all, it was *his* tug, and he'd had to get other damage repaired when it was all over, and you'd think he'd remember something as important as that.

The stories told by interviewees contradicted each other at times. One of the more memorable incidents concerns the actions of the Water Police who were in attendance. What had started off as four ferries breaking away from Wisemans had, by the time the flotilla was approaching Berowra Creek the next day, been reduced to two ferries embedded in a mass of debris. Let me read you a couple of accounts of what happened when it was decided to try to tow the ferries across the main run of the flood and into the calmer waters of Berowra Creek:

First, we have what was on the tape made by the (now deceased) council foreman who was boss on the ferries:

“As we were entering the area known as the Tideline at the entrance to Berowra Creek, one of the tugs fouled its propellor with the huge amount of debris that was there, (and) about five minutes was lost before the boats were under way again. The police launch had returned and offered assistance, but in doing so they fouled the line to the lead workboat, and to free it the line had to be severed.”

Next we have the story as the skipper of one of the tugs remembers it:

“We decided to try to steer them into Berowra Creek, and there was a small boat out in front with a fairly long towing line... As we were approaching the entrance to the creek the Police launch came by and got tangled up with the towline somehow. I can't remember exactly what happened, but there was a bit of a kerfuffle that meant there was a delay before I could pick up the towline again and start pulling. That was a hiccup at a crucial point, and by the time I did have the line in place we were past the mouth of Berowra Creek.”

Then there was what the junior council worker remembered:

“They put two toelines onto us, hoping that they could swing up into Berowra Creek... We're about to try this when up come the Boys in Blue again, sirens and all - straight across the toelines! Cut 'em both right through! Then the fun really started.”

Ok. So there are minor inconsistencies here - like, was it one towline or two that got cut. But oddly, or perhaps not so oddly, the story from the Police was *quite* different. I mentioned the incident to one of the cops who had been on the Water Police launch, but he had no recollection of it at all. In his (very firm) words: “*Oh, no. We didn't cut any ropes. I can tell you that right now.*” And after that he refused to make any further comment. What would *you* say really happened? What I find significant here is that nothing at all about this incident appears anywhere in the written records that I was able to chase up, yet it appears that the incident was an important one, and the main reason that the flotilla didn't make it into Berowra Creek and safety.

Here's another contradiction. The ferry flotilla had been stopped just before night-fall (temporarily, it turned out) and tied up a bit upriver from the little village of Spencer. They thought they'd captured them at last, and settled down to spend the night there. The council foreman remembers this:

“I had a few dollars in my pocket so I went in the Hornsby fireboat to Spencer and bought three meat pies, three cans of Coke, a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches. By the time I returned the pies were cold, but we were grateful to have something to eat and drink. Drifting is thirsty work.”

But his mate remembers it this way: “*Russ went round to the shop at Spencer in the fireboat. All he had in his pocket was enough money for some Mars bars and a packet of cigarettes, so we all sits up to a big feast - of a Mars bar and a cigarette each!*”

It doesn't really matter in the big picture *what* he bought, of course. Memories of the details of an event that happened twenty years ago are obviously going to be blurred somewhat. But - and this is the bugaboo of all oral accounts - if they make mistakes about the little things, how can we be sure that they don't make mistakes about more important matters?

Well, often the contradictions in accounts are obviously trivial and don't matter. The only decision you have to make is which one to put in or whether to leave them both out if they're unimportant. I chose to put them both in and let the reader decide. In fact, I decided to include most of the contradictions because we all know that memories are malleable, and I can see little point in trying to pretend otherwise.

Often accounts differ as to time. You know the sort of thing: “It was a Wednesday, in the morning... or was it the Thursday? No it was definitely the Wednesday... or was it in the afternoon?”. This is where written records can be helpful, as they tend to be more reliable about dates and times and things like that than peoples' memo-

ries are. In the case of the runaway ferries, accounts differed as to the time that the third ferry was finally captured and tied up to some mangroves. One account said this happened in the middle of the night, another said it happened just before dawn. By checking the transcript of the Radio Log from Hornsby Bushfire Brigade it was a simple matter to see who had remembered correctly.

Now although written reports can come in very handy, to my mind their biggest problem is that they tend to leave out anything that could be embarrassing. I mentioned earlier that the foreman was called upon to provide a written report to council after it was all over. Significantly, the following incident was *not* included in it:

“We decided we’d drop the anchor over. We had to drag it the length of the ferry and drop it over off the flap. It was so bloody heavy ...we had to inch it along the deck with a crowbar. We finally got it to the edge and heaved it over. It just flopped onto the compacted debris and sat there! So then we had to get the axes and chainsaws and crowbars and cut a hole in the rubbish so the anchor would go through. It took us about an hour and a half to get the hole through, when suddenly the anchor just went - swoosh! - down the hole! We jumped back up on the flap and let her go, and all the chain’s running out, and running out, and we’re thinking “Beauty!”. Next thing we know the bloody winch the anchor was attached to comes thundering straight down the deck and over the edge, and follows the anchor and chain straight down the hole! The winch was only held down by two bolts and a whole heap of paint that had been applied over the years! And nobody knew!”

In effect, the anchor wasn’t tied on to the ferry, and would have been no good even if used in less exceptional circumstances! Obviously this wasn’t included in the written report because the blokes involved were responsible for the maintenance of the ferries, and they wouldn’t want their bosses to know about it. But it was the sort of thing that made a good story in the pub.

And so the things that give oral accounts their colour, that put human flesh on the bare bones of formal records, are the very things that the formal records rarely, perhaps never, contain. For example, it’s mentioned in the formal records that the council foreman was injured at one stage, when he had jumped off the ferries with a rope to try to secure them to a tree. They don’t mention that once he got the rope tied around the tree he watched its diameter shrink from 2” to less than 1” as it took the weight of the ferries, and then snap, flying back and knocking him out of the tree so that he rolled across an oyster-covered rock, had to be taken by small boat to be treated by an ambulance which was nearby, returned covered from head to foot in mercurochrome to the amusement of his mates, then went back to the ferries and made several more attempts to stop them.

The written record also doesn’t mention that when it was all over, the council that

employed the men never even formally thanked them. Nor does it record that the Council's generosity and gratitude to the injured man who had risked his life to save them millions of dollars extended only to paying him an extra four hours a day overtime, and for the few days he spent recuperating afterwards. Well, the written record wouldn't mention that, would it?

As we've seen, it's the off-the-record stuff that provides most of the colour, detail, and human interest. You can often get people to talk about their feelings and describe the atmosphere at the time - to put some human flesh on the bare bones of the written record, if you like. And what's more, oral accounts are often the only way that ordinary people get to have a voice at all.

On-the-record stuff is, of course invaluable - often it's all we've got to work with. Things like the Bushfire Brigade Radio Log are highly reliable, since they formally document what is happening literally as it happens. But most written material isn't always as reliable as this, because it is almost always written so as to protect the interests of the socially powerful and any accountable institutions that might be involved. And in the case of newspaper reports, their veracity is compromised by lack of time and inadequate research caused by having to meet deadlines, and a tendency to sensationalise.

We have to remember that written and oral sources both have their advantages and their disadvantages, but for my money, it's hard to write a truly comprehensive account of anything without, if you possibly can, using both.
