

NSW DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING

'Millers Point Oral History Project'

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE: **Dr Michael Armstrong**
TAPE NUMBERS: MP-SM13
INTERVIEWER: Siobhán McHUGH
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00:01 START OF TAPE MP-SM13, SIDE A

00:02 Tape identification

Michael, could you tell me a bit about your family background, how they came to be involved with the Palisade Hotel?

00:34 My family had a long association with the Palisade Hotel, over fifty years, from 1923 to 1973. The licence of the hotel was originally taken on by my grandfather - his name was

Cornelius Armstrong. He migrated to Australia after the First World War, largely as a result of the uprisings in Ireland at the time and the subsequent difficulties with the Black and Tan suppression of some of the Republican sentiments at the time. His eldest brother had previously emigrated to Australia, well prior to the First World War and his family, his brother's family, had become well-settled here and had done very well. Interestingly one of his eldest brother's sons, John, ultimately became Lord Mayor of Sydney in the 1960s. So it was no surprise when my grandfather, who was the youngest brother in that family, emigrated to Australia. He took over the licence of the Palisade Hotel in 1923 and was licensee there from 1923 until 1946, I think it was when he died and his widow then took over the licence from 1946 until 1948 when she died.

02:02 At which stage my father, who was the middle of three brothers, took over the licence. Both my father's brothers were doing dentistry at the university at the time and it was deemed that my father take over the licence, even though he was only twenty-one years of age at the time and bearing in mind that the youngest age that a person could actually enter a hotel in those years was twenty-one - that made him easily the youngest hotel licensee in New South Wales.

Just tell me why do you think did Cornelius actually head for Millers Point and the Palisade when he got here?

02:42 I suspect that part of Sydney had a long tradition of accepting Irish migrants. Additionally some of his relations from his brother's family had hotels in the Pyrmont area and had settled round there and round Glebe and that was the reason, I think, why he settled in the inner-city. It was also obviously at the time a period of time when the waterfront was very active, very busy, so it naturally seemed a good place to have a business.

Well if he took over in 1923 shortly after that the Depression would have hit, a very hard time for the community around Millers Point, and the stories we have heard from other people say that your grandfather and the Palisade Hotel was particularly charitable about helping out the community, what do you know about that?

03:46 That is very true. My understanding of that is that both my grandparents..... they were fairly comfortable because they had a good business and they had a good income because a lot of their income came from seamen on boats and whatever, so they were reasonably well-to-do. They nevertheless had a great social conscience and made sure that a lot of their fellow citizens who were doing it pretty tough in those times with little to eat and no income, that they were fed and clothed and looked after as best as they could. I

look back on that time with some pride because I know my grandmother in particular looked after many, many people who lived in Millers Point who had nothing to eat.

It is obviously something that the community has remembered because it has been spoken about. Moving on then to your father's time, already before we even get to the hotel it is interesting that Cornelius has come out as a migrant and two sons doing dentistry, that is quite a step up, isn't it?

04:59 It is. There has been a long history in my family of members of the family doing professions. I mentioned my grandfather's brother's son who was Lord Mayor, two of his other sons became doctors, one became a psychiatrist, one became a Macquarie Street eye specialist. One or two others became lawyers and two became publicans. So it was no surprise, I guess that both of my father's brothers did dentistry. One having completed dentistry then moved back to London and practised dentistry from the early 1950s until he died in the middle 1970s. My father's youngest brother, who is also dead, was an interesting fellow, he barely passed the Leaving Certificate but in dentistry found a real niche. He went to England twice, he got a double doctorate in dentistry, which is pretty rare, became one of the first practising orthodontists in Australia at the time when he came back. Also, which is also very rare for an orthodontist, he believed that orthodontists were vastly overpaid, refused to accept any private money at all and worked his entire life in the public dental system in Melbourne, so I guess my uncle Neil was a true socialist in that sense. As I say he was intellectually and academically a very high achiever so it was no surprise that the two of my uncles did do dentistry.

Well your father taking over a pub in Millers Point at the tender age of twenty-one, the area had a reputation for being quite tough, it must have been difficult for him.

06:52 I think it was but I also think too that there was a great sense of community in those times and frankly there still is but not as much as was the case then. A lot of people lived there, they looked after each other, they saw each other through difficulties and I think there was a sense that because the Armstrongs had such a long history in the area that they were a family that was highly-regarded and was respected. People made sure that if there were tough times there little of them extended to my father or his family but certainly I heard many stories.

Well moving on to when you were born then Michael, what was your date of birth?

I was born 16 February 1951.

Just tell me a little bit about your early childhood memories and your family life.

07:46 Well I lived from 1951 until 1957 at Millers Point, so I spent my childhood there and I recall many, many aspects of it quite well. I used to often sort of walk around the docks

and the wharves and see the ships. We used to go to Observatory Hill Park a lot of the time. I went to school at St Brigid's Infants School at Kent Street. We often used to go to the Botanical Gardens in Sydney, which was essentially in a way my back yard, and feed the ducks and wander around the beautiful parks and gardens in that part of the city. So I had a wonderful childhood in that time and because I was the oldest of a number of brothers and sisters many of the local people would take me out and about when mum was obviously pretty busy with my siblings. Again, it gets back to the sense of community where these people were trusted and respected and my parents knew they would look after me.

Some people have talked about playing around the Bridge pylons and Flagstaff Hill - did you do that?

I did. I can't recall too many of the specific details but certainly I did, yes.

When you were about six your family moved out to Collaroy, why was that?

09:16 Well there were several reasons for that. I think my family had always had a house at Collaroy, which at the time was really just a beachside resort-type suburb on the Northern Beaches of Sydney. We had always had the house there and my parents saw it as being perhaps a better location for a young family to grow and develop and have access to better recreational facilities, it was a lifestyle issue, essentially.

How many children were in your family?

Six.

So you moved up here but your father kept on the pub, did he?

10:00 He did. He kept the pub going as a business and it was a good business, so he used to commute from Collaroy to Sydney. That involved long hours, a lot of driving and I think some hardship on his behalf but he did it because he thought it was better for the family.

So you leave school at eighteen and decide to go and study medicine and the pub comes back into your life.

10:30 That's right. Well I used to often go and visit the pub when I was a boy at school, dad would have the habit of taking some time off on Wednesdays so myself and my younger brother Neil - Neil is a name that is common in our family - would often go in school holidays up with dad on a Wednesday, go in early with him and see the beer be brought in, in kegs, and bottle deliveries done. See the hotel open up and then wander upstairs until dad decided it was time for all of us to go back home to Collaroy. Yes, the pub did come back into my life because when I did medicine I knew I had to get some income and dad at that stage needed to have some reliable staff and I guess I filled the bill from his point of

view in that regard so I then went back to work as a barman and cellarman. I worked my way through medical school for many years until the middle of 1973, working for dad and managing the hotel some of the time, working as a cellarman, working as a barman and helping out around the place. To the extent where my father became quite dependent on both myself and my brother, who also did some work there, and I think to some extent that brought about his decision to sell the hotel in the early 1970s when he could see the time was coming when I couldn't actually help him any more.

What was the clientele like in those years, 1969 to 1973?

12:03 Mainly waterfront workers and local residents and some people who would come and visit and just have a look around the place. It was mainly local people, mainly waterfront workers and also workers in the big Dalgety Wool Store, which was just around the corner at the time.

We have heard stories of the pub being a very important centre for the community, what sort of role, apart from the obvious thing of providing beer and presumably meals, what sort of things happened in the pub? Were there fights? I believe there was a golf club as well organised from there.

12:46 That is very true. I hardly ever saw a fight. Many people would come there and use it as their community meeting place, they'd meet their friends there. One or two used to run their business from there, they would have their special place in the bar. One chap in particular used to operate the waterfront gear store from the bar of the hotel, he had the phone near him and he ran it very efficiently and never actually left the bar, probably from dawn to dusk.

Waterfront gear - what was that?

13:24 Organising where various cranes were going to go and where hooks and grappling stuff were. If anything got broken he'd have to arrange for it to be fixed and get a replacement for it. He operated all this quite efficiently from the bar of the hotel. So it was a meeting place for many people and it fulfilled a very good role in that regard. There were no poker machines, of course, in hotels in those days and that was a really good thing, the hotel being a meeting place and being almost like a social gathering point. It did have a golf club - in fact I used to play in it, and we used to play various courses all over Sydney from Kogarah to Fox Hills to East Hills to Bayview, to Mona Vale, Northbridge, we played at many golf courses all over Sydney. It was a very good social situation and it was very enjoyable.

How did the golf club work because golfing you think of as a more middle-class thing, how did people afford the clubs?

14:38 Well, they managed to organise themselves so that they had them. There were a number of keen golfers who were there and they had had their own clubs for years. Some of the members of the social golf club were members of other clubs as well, so there were some very good golfers in the club, a number of single figure players, so that wasn't really an issue. Also in the early 1970s in particular it was getting to the stage where waterfront workers were actually getting paid much better, so it wasn't a difficulty for them.

Were there ever turf wars or things between the people who drank at the Palisade and other pubs?

15:20 No, not in my experience. That may have been the case in the 1940s and 1950s but I can't honestly say I was aware of that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, so there wasn't hostility between people who went from one hotel to another. Certainly a lot of people had their favourites and they would go to one pub and not to another but for reasons that always escaped me and frankly still escape me. There was no open hostility between the clientele from what I could observe, but of course I was probably a naive twenty year old at the time so maybe I didn't know.

Was that the days when there was still six o'clock closing?

No, six o'clock closing finished in the middle 1950s, I have no experience of that.

What about women did they go into the pub much?

16:10 Yes, they did. There were two facilities for women, there was what they called the Ladies' Parlour, it wasn't terribly salubrious, in the back of the hotel. But because there was no designated ladies' area women could drink at the public bar.

There wasn't a stigma attached to that?

No and plenty did.

What about SP bookmaking - did that go on?

16:39 Oh it certainly did. There was an SP bookie who would allegedly operate from outside the hotel and inside the hotel on Saturday afternoons. There also used to be an SP bookie in a shop just across the road too. Certainly, there was SP bookmaking, yes.

Did the police ever raid it for that reason?

17:07 I think occasionally the police would come round on a Saturday afternoon just to check it out but the SP bookie usually would be made well aware by his Cockatoo that there was trouble afoot and he was usually nowhere to be found when things happened.

What about food, did you have counter meals?

No, we didn't.

Accommodation?

Yes, we had accommodation, yes we did. Had a few rooms upstairs, maybe half a dozen.

What kind of people would board, mainly seamen?

17:45 They were really more permanent boarders that would stay there. Not all the rooms were taken but we had a couple of permanent boarders who lived there for years and we employed a housekeeper to look after them. We had accommodation upstairs.

That was around the time that the Green Bans were starting and gaining momentum, do you remember those at all?

18:10 Yes I do, I remember the Green Bans and Jack Munday. That was true and that was a very controversial period in Sydney's history. My only comment is thank goodness that Jack Munday was around because I think he and his group saved a lot of the character and architecture of that part of Sydney.

Just moving on then to when the pub licence was sold - what happened then? Who got it, do you know?

18:47 Yes, dad sold the licence, I think he thought after he'd been there for so long that he needed a change, so he sold the licence. Then he sold the hotel to a fellow named Morrison and he was the publican there for some years. I think he became sick and I'm not sure what happened after that in terms of the licensees. There have been a few licensees since then and I must say I don't know them personally.

Do you ever call back in for a drink?

19:20 I occasionally do. The first floor, which is now restaurant, was where our old residence was and I've had lunch there on a number of occasions. I occasionally call in there, yes.

Just from a point of view of heritage interest what sort of physical changes have happened now compared to what it was like in your time?

19:41 Hardly any. The downstairs bar has been altered. The exterior of the hotel has barely altered at all. The downstairs bar has changed quite a bit, it used to be a U-shaped bar and now it is a rectangular-type bar over in one corner, downstairs. There has been little change structurally to the building in all my time of knowing it.

What about the little wood stove that is in the downstairs bar was that there in your day?

20:14 I don't think so, no. I'd have to think about that one but I don't think it was.

Was it a very different world for you moving between university and medicine and this very

working-class and waterside-orientated world of Millers Point?

20:39 Not particularly. I think it certainly helped ground me and mature me in terms of my response to other humans. I certainly think my hotel experience benefited me enormously in terms of communication skills in Medicine. I think there is a mistaken concept out there in society that everybody who goes to medical school comes from the Ivy League sort of background and that certainly wasn't the case when I was at university, maybe it is a bit different now. We had people come from all over the State and from schools everywhere and some came from rich backgrounds, some came from poor backgrounds, the bottom line was what people were interested in was what sort of a person you were like and what sort of a doctor you made and how competent you were. No, we had a wide variety of people in the medical school.

Were you ever called on to use your medical skills in the pub?

21:46 Just occasionally, but bear in mind I was only a student then, so the skills were a bit thin on the ground. Just occasionally I'd have to give an opinion here and there.

You didn't have anybody suddenly giving birth or anything like that?

22:00 No, nothing as exciting as that. There were a few accidents and a few incidents and a few people would lesion or two, if they wanted an opinion on it. No one died, no one collapsed, there were no major head injuries, no births, deaths or marriages that I can recall.

Just in terms of Millers Point now - do you still know some of the locals around there, do you go back much?

22:31 I have got to say it is over thirty years since I've had any connection with the hotel, I go back there occasionally. I must say many of the locals wouldn't recognise me or know me at this stage. A lot of dad's old customers would have died, a lot have moved to other parts of the city or have moved away from Sydney, so in a residential sense the area has changed a lot. A lot of that has been because a lot of the houses have been knocked down with the wharf redevelopment so there is nowhere near the number of people who actually live in the suburb. There is nowhere near the number of wharfies who work the wharves now because of containerisation. So the local environment has changed enormously in the last forty or fifty years.

It is going to change again, you probably know that the lease for Patrick's expires next year and half of it is going to be kept as open space and half of it redeveloped into office buildings - how would you like to see the future of Millers Point go yourself?

23:37 Well it is hard to say. I wouldn't like to see much high-rise. I'd like to see a real

emphasis on the maritime aspects of the suburb, I think that needs to be maintained, whether it is with open park land or whether it is with wharf redevelopments, or whatever. I don't know, I'm not an architect so I don't know but I think it is important it doesn't become high-rise, it doesn't become all office space. I think it is important that people are still given the opportunity to actually live in this suburb. It has always been a residential area, as well as being a commercial area with wharves and whatever it has always been a residential area, and I think it is really important that that aspect of the suburb is continued.

24:33 I think it is also important that it doesn't become too gentrified, that it doesn't become so fashionable that the actual nature, or the real reason for the suburb's existence and the history of the suburb is actually cast aside so that the type of people who have always lived there can no longer afford to do so. A lot of the people who have lived there over the years, of course lived there in houses that were rented from the Maritime Services Board, they never owned the property there but the leases were passed down from generation to generation. I think it is important that an attempt is made to preserve Millers Point as being a part of Sydney that is suitable for people who have an historical connection with the suburb to be able to stay there.

Just when you were there, when you working in the pub, did you come across many tourists?

25:29 Some, certainly nowhere near as many as now, but some. I think in those days tourism wasn't the industry that it is now. Also tourists would probably tend to gravitate more to that part of The Rocks which is east of the Harbour Bridge, rather than west of the Harbour Bridge. Millers Point was almost a backwater compared with the hustle and bustle east of the Argyle Cut so tourists didn't form a major part of Millers Point in those days.

Just on another interesting point because the way we found out about you was through Frank Hyde's wife - was there some Millers Point connection that made you be her doctor?

26:16 Funnily enough, no. I have looked after Frank and Gaby Hyde now for nine years and what happened was Frank Hyde's previous GP retired. His previous GP, who had been long-established in the area had a problem as to who was going to look after his patients so he liked our practice, he liked our style of medicine, he liked the way we looked after people, so he asked if we would look after his patients. As a consequence Frank and Gaby came to our practice by sheer fluke and I think it was to their delight that they found out my connection with their history.

Well just finally, just for the record, could you clarify for me..... you said that most of the other properties were leased from the MSB what was the situation with the Palisade?

27:19 Yes, the Palisade was also a leasehold hotel and it was leased from the Maritime Services Board and every three or five years the lease was up for renewal. Yes, it was a leasehold hotel, it wasn't a freehold, unfortunately.

Do you ever take your own children back to see the area?

27:38 Yes I do. We have got three boys and they are still at school, the youngest in fact is only eight, but we go back to Millers Point and have a little wander around there occasionally and point out where dad grew up and where dad went to school, where dad played. It is important, especially when you live on a peninsula, that you don't think the city sort of begins and ends at the Spit Bridge, it is important for them to know a little about their history and their heritage and I do take them back, yes.

It sounds as if you are quite attached to the area still and quite proud of it.

28:16 Well I am. I think it is something you should be proud of because it is an important part of my life and my heritage. If I am a boy from Millers Point who has achieved something in life, well I am proud of it and I am proud of the fact that I came from that part of the city and that my formative years were spent there.

Is there anything else you would like to add, Michael?

28:52 Not really, except to say that I just think it is really important, to allude to what we what talked about a few minutes ago, that the heritage of the area is preserved. I think people such as Jack Munday have helped keep Millers Point the suburb it is, or the area that it is rather than a suburb. It is really important that the natural quaintness and beauty of the place, Argyle Street, the Argyle Cut, Observatory Hill, Observatory Park, the old hotels, the old houses, it is really important that they are preserved as best as possible so that future generations can appreciate a bit about this part of Sydney. I always think one of the tragedies of Millers Point was that St Brigid's Infants School was closed down by the Catholic Church, I think every effort should have been made to keep that school going. It was established in 1835 and when it was closed it may have been in fact the oldest continuously operating educational institution in the country and I think it was a shame the Church saw fit to close it. I realise the reasons why it was done but perhaps more effort could have been made.

Just on that point of maintaining the heritage, the built heritage may well be maintained but it seems what is happening is that a lot of the younger generation are actually moving out, so do you think the place can retain its character if in fact there is just the building but the community has altered drastically and doesn't have the generational attachment?

30:38 That will be difficult but I think it is possible. I think the main thing is if the suburb is

maintained as a residential suburb, rather than become a commercial district full of offices, if the district is a residential suburb, I think I would be optimistic.

31:07 END OF INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL ARMSTRONG AND END OF TAPE MP-SM13
SIDE A.