



## SHOALHAVEN LIBRARIES IMPROVE LOCAL CONNECTION WITH THE PAST

In 2003 Shoalhaven Libraries received a grant from the State Library of NSW supporting a project to index the South Coast Register newspaper from 1926 to 2002, with the Shoalhaven City Council to continue funding the indexing from 2002. The Register is unique as a record of the daily life of the Shoalhaven district highlighting the rise of the modern town of Nowra and the rivalry with the historic town of Berry.

The period indexed is one of drastic social and cultural change, economic depression, world war and the mechanisation of rural life. Some of the attitudes reflected in the early 20th century newspaper articles would today amaze and sometimes shock. Married women were reported only by their husband's name so searching for Mary Smith after she had married John Brown would be difficult as she would only be written up as Mrs. John Brown. Paternalism and condescension towards aboriginals was considered the norm. Court fines were imposed for "crimes" such as carrying firearms on a Sunday or smoking cigarettes in a public hall.

The local newspaper was where residents found out what was happening in the Shoalhaven Shire, who was having visitors or who was going away on holiday (a burglar's dream today). Engagements, marriages and deaths were frequently reported but, interestingly, births were rarely reported in this period. Most issues of the *Register* carried memorial notices, often with poetry written by a family member graphically illustrating the grief felt even decades after the death. Named citizens had details of their medical conditions published -so much for medical privacy. Appendicitis was big in the 20s to 40s. People shared their elation at success and sorrow or grief through the local newspaper.

Possibly the heaviest users of the historical index are the local history/ family history researchers. Newspaper articles give details of life, fleshing out the bare facts of births, deaths and marriages.

Although the default search field is named 'subject-keyword', the indexing is by subject with each relevant article read in full, thus broadening the retrieval. With keyword indexing, only the words used in the article are searchable, which has obvious limitations. An old saying was often used in the 20s and 30s articles to indicate that a young man was getting married. He was said to be "joining the ranks of the benedicts" but the words marriage or engagement would not be used. With keyword indexing it would not be clear just what was going to happen to that young man.

In the future it is hoped that a Boolean searching facility may be added to the index so that subject terms may be combined or retrieval refined by excluding terms. The ultimate dream would be for the microfilm from which indexing is currently produced to be replaced by connection to an online full text file so that the article as it was published would be only a click away. Please pay our past a visit. The index is located on the left side bar of the Shoalhaven Libraries' online catalogue page or at [www3.shoalhaven.nsw.gov.au/applications/newspaperindex/](http://www3.shoalhaven.nsw.gov.au/applications/newspaperindex/) Happy historic hunting.

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