

James Watkinson

David J Lee

James Watkinson, also known as Jim, or Woko, was my grandfather. He was born in 1888 and lived his early years in Mill Street and Pymont Street before his marriage. He moved to 122 Bowman Street on his marriage in 1912: that is where I lived with him and my grandmother until he died in 1954 when I was 6. I moved to Concord West with my family, but spent many weekends and holidays with my grandmother, so that is where I remember him and heard so much about him. When those houses were pulled down, my grandmother came to live with us until she died in 1970.

My grandfather worked as a stoker at the Pymont Powerhouse and as a stevedore on the docks. I clearly remember the shiny baling hook that hung in the laundry alongside his big leather work belt and razor strop. So he achieved his great feats as an amateur in his own time. He was a great swimmer, water polo player, and amateur boxer. His Marriage Certificate lists his occupation as a Master Mariner so he was a man of many talents.

He would take his grandchildren to wharf 13 to watch passenger ships come and go and collect the streamers left behind. He also took me to the Domain baths to learn to swim.

He married Alice Christina Olsen (the daughter of a Norwegian Master Mariner who jumped ship to stay in Australia and became an Australian Citizen on the 7th August 1904 in Melbourne).

My grandfather was a pillar of the Pymont community, and the driving force behind water polo and swimming in NSW. He was part of the water polo premiership team from 1925 to 1931. He was also a tireless volunteer, heavily involved in establishing the North Narrabeen Surf Life Saving Club.

In 1929 he led the campaign to save the Pymont Baths from CSR's plans to demolish them, rallying the community and the swimmers. Over several months they gathered each night to rebuild what had been taken down during that day! Eventually the demolishers gave up and the baths survived until 1946.

He taught hundreds of children (including Boy Charlton) to swim and play water polo: many became state champions, including his daughter - my mother was a schoolgirl champion. Much later he swam against Charlton, who was 17 years younger. He also swam against Duke Kahanamoku during one of the Hawai'ian's famous visits to Sydney.

He won an RSPCA award for bravery in rescuing a baker and his horse, when the baker's cart fell into the harbour. The Domain baths might have been named for him before that honour went to Charlton.

He is commemorated by a plaque in the James Watkinson Reserve in Pymont. A plaque like the one at the Reserve was also installed at the Boy Charlton Baths but has since disappeared.