STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

J. D. SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORYs COLLECTION

OH 1168/5

Full transcript of an interview with

Beth Mary Robertson

on 9 and 16 December 2020

by Sally Stephenson

for the

Oral History Australia SA/NT Presidents' Project

Transcription by Kate Battersby

Recording available

Access for research: Unrestricted
Right to photocopy: Copies may be made for research and study
Right to quote or publish: Publication only with written permission from the State Library.

NOTES TO THE TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was created by the J. D. Somerville Oral History Collection of the State Library. It conforms to the Somerville Collection's policies for transcription which are explained below.

Readers of this oral history transcript should bear in mind that it is a record of the spoken word and reflects the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The State Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the interview, nor for the views expressed therein. As with any historical source, these are for the reader to judge.

It is the Somerville Collection's policy to produce a transcript that is, so far as possible, a verbatim transcript that preserves the interviewee's manner of speaking and the conversational style of the interview. Certain conventions of transcription have been applied (i.e. the omission of meaningless noises, false starts and a percentage of the interviewee's crutch words). Where the interviewee has had the opportunity to read the transcript, their suggested alterations have been incorporated in the text (see below). On the whole, the document can be regarded as a raw transcript.

Abbreviations: The interviewee's alterations may be identified by their initials in insertions in the transcript.

Punctuation: Square bracket [ ] indicate material in the transcript that does not occur on the original tape recording. This is usually words, phrases or sentences which the interviewee has inserted to clarify or correct meaning. These are not necessarily differentiated from insertions the interviewer or by Somerville Collection staff which are either minor (a linking word for clarification) or clearly editorial. Relatively insignificant word substitutions or additions by the interviewee as well as minor deletions of words or phrases are often not indicated in the interest of readability. Extensive additional material supplied by the interviewee is usually placed in footnotes at the bottom of the relevant page rather than in square brackets within the text.

A series of dots, **.... ....** indicates an untranscribable word or phrase.
Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, — — —.

Spelling: Wherever possible the spelling of proper names and unusual terms has been verified. A parenthesised question mark (?) indicates a word that it has not been possible to verify to date.

Typeface: The interviewer's questions are shown in **bold print**.

Timecode: Each paragraph of the interviewee's answers begins with the interview time in the following format [hours: minutes: seconds].

Discrepancies between transcript and tape: This proofread transcript represents the authoritative version of this oral history interview. Researchers using the original audio recording of this interview are cautioned to check this transcript for corrections, additions or deletions which have been made by the interviewer or the interviewee but which will not occur on the tape. (See the Punctuation section above.) Minor discrepancies of grammar and sentence structure made in the interest of readability can be ignored but significant changes such as deletion of information or correction of fact should be, respectively, duplicated or acknowledged when the audio version of this interview is used for broadcast or any other form of audio publication.

FILE 1 OF 3

I'm Sally Stephenson and today it's my pleasure to interview Beth Robertson. It's Wednesday, 9 December 2020 and we're at her home in Blackwood, South Australia. This interview is part of the Past Presidents of Oral History Australia SA/NT Oral History Project, and the interview is funded by a donation from the Marsden Szwarcbord Foundation.

So thank you, Beth, for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the project.

[00:00:33] Yes. It's been quite a journey, actually getting to the recorded interview this year.

Yes. We've made it and it's still 2020. But, just to begin with, can you tell me your full name, please?

[00:00:45] I'm Beth Mary Robertson and it's what we call a 'proper Beth', so it's not short for Elizabeth or any other name.

Were you named after anyone in your family?

[00:01:00] Yes, after my mother's younger sister.[1] She – her first name was Alison, but she was always known by her middle name, Beth – Ashby – and I think that my mother's mother would have been influenced by *Little women*.[2]

And when were you born – when and where?

[00:01:24] I was born on 8 October 1957 in the hospital in Canberra on Lake Burley Griffin, which they blew up a few years ago to make way for the National Museum of Australia.[3] And that's going to confuse the issue when, you know, national tours of places associated with Beth Robertson get under way because they won't be able to show the hospital I was born in!

So was your family living in Canberra at that stage?

[00:02:02] Yes. Yes. My father was working at the Australian National University. He had a three-year research scholarship in the Department of Experimental

[1] Alison Beth Chaplin, formerly Anderson, née Ashby (1933-2021). My aunt lived all her adult life in South Africa. She died of the COVID-19 coronavirus on 4 February 2021 prior to the distribution of vaccines.

[2] *Little women*, published in 1868-69, is first in a series of novels by Louisa May Alcott, featuring four sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy.

[3] Royal Canberra Hospital, demolished in 1997.

Pathology, and so my parents and my older sister and brother had moved over to Canberra. They were living in a house on Mount Stromlo, which was part of the observatory precinct that was made available to them in association with the university, and that's how I came to be born in Canberra, as well as my younger sister the following year.

Perhaps I can just ask you – step back a bit and ask you your father's name and your mother's full name.

[00:02:56] Yes. My father has a wonderful name: Thorburn Stirling Brailsford Robertson.[4] I had thought that he had been given all of those names at birth but, in fact, he and his older brother, and the oldest was his sister, all have as their middle name Stirling, so Judith Stirling,[5] David Stirling[6] and then my father, Thorburn Stirling, after his father. And my father, only months before my parents married, had Brailsford officially added to his name. And so those three names represent the previous three generations of the woman's maiden name marrying into the family, which is a Scottish tradition but he, in fact, had purposefully ensured that he had all three of those previous maiden names as his first names.

And what was your mother's full name?

[00:04:14] Enid Lucy Ashby.[7]

So what was their education like, your parents'?

[00:04:22] Well, both were university educated. My mother had her primary school years – early primary school years – here at Blackwood Primary School and it was traditional – the Ashby family are Quakers – and it was traditional for the children to spend some time at [The] Friends' School in Hobart. But, due to the stage of potential conflict associated with World War II, she was the only one who it was

[4] Thorburn Stirling Brailsford Robertson (1925-1966).

[5] Judith Stirling Woollard, née Robertson (1917-2012)

[6] David Stirling Robertson (1920-1999).

[7] Enid Lucy Robertson, née Ashby (1925-2016). See https://www.anbg.gov.au/biography/robertson-enid.html.

decided it wasn't safe to send over to Tasmania, so she did her high school years at Walford School down on the Plains.[8]

[00:05:23] My father had spent his very earliest years at Miss Evelyn De Mole's school at Mount Lofty[9] and then he became a weekly boarder at St Peter's College,[10] and they met on the Stirling train down to Adelaide when they were both in secondary school, and so they had known each other since they were very young.

So after they had finished school what did they each do?

[00:06:03] Well, my father finished – even though they're both born in 1925, with the nature of my father's education he began at Adelaide University in 1943 and started with the three-year Bachelor of Science degree with a focus on Organic Chemistry and Physiology, and then he went on to further degrees and studies, which we may speak about. My mother started university in 1944 at Adelaide doing the three-year Bachelor of Science, with her primary focus being Botany but also Human Physiology, so they both did have that interest in common. And so both scientific bent.

Yes. So she was really carrying on a bit of a family tradition there, wasn't she?

[00:07:06] Yes.

Can that be something you can talk a little bit more about – perhaps we'll talk about her parents.

[00:07:10] Yes. So her father was Arthur Keith Ashby,[11] and he was the son of Edwin Ashby,[12] who founded *Wittunga*, first as a farm but then as a native plant nursery and, later, garden. So Edwin Ashby, in coming to South Australia, had been involved in real estate and he continued that on coming up to Blackwood, but also established *Wittunga* farm as a mixed farm, but was a naturalist at heart as well as a collector of chitons and plants and butterflies and all sorts of natural history interests. They were followed on by his son, Arthur Keith Ashby, particularly in the interest in

---

[8] Walford Anglican School for Girls at Hyde Park, on the Adelaide Plains.

[9] Annie Evelyn De Mole (1875-1953) ran a school for young children in Orley Avenue, Stirling during the 1920s and 1930s.

[10] St Peter's Collegiate School, St Peters, Adelaide.

[11] Arthur Keith Ashby (1896-1971).

[12] Edwin Ashby (1861-1941). See https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/ashby-edwin-5066.

native plants and their propagation, and, later, South African plants. And so my mother was greatly influenced by her grandfather, Edwin Ashby. She knew him for some years in her early childhood and found his passion for natural history very inspiring.

So it's interesting that, without that family background, I imagine there weren't that many women, really, studying science at the time she did it.

[00:08:49] No, although by the 1940s you do have a couple of generations, not many, but some – a couple of generations of women who had studied science, including medicine. And she had some mentors in the field of botany. The one who particularly comes to mind is Constance Eardley – Con Eardley – who was a lifelong friend and mentor of my mother.[13]

So that's your mother's side of the family. I want to ask a bit about your father's parents, too.

[00:09:31] Yes. So my father was the son of the generally acclaimed as a brilliant scientist Thorburn Brailsford Robertson,[14] and of Jeannie Stirling,[15] who was a daughter of Edward Charles Stirling,[16] the scientist and surgeon and Director of the South Australian Museum, so again a very strong interest and background in science on both sides of that family.

So some of your grandparents were still alive when you were born, so I'm interested in what you can recall of them.

[00:10:18] Ah, yes. Yes. So, on my father's side, his mother was still alive, Granny Robertson, and she lived at *Maroonika*,[17] which was the old family home that she and Thorburn Robertson had established. And that was a wonderfully atmospheric home to go into, on Milan Terrace, Stirling, and it was always very quiet, a lot of heirlooms, old fabrics, a very old garden. She died only shortly before my father died, so I was still eight years old. But she has loomed quite largely in our lives

---

[13] Constance Margaret (Con) Eardley (1910-1978).

[14] Thorburn Brailsford Robertson (1884-1930). See http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/robertson-thorburn-brailsford-8239.

[15] Jane (Jeannie) Winifred Robertson née Stirling (1881-1966).

[16] Edward Charles Stirling (1848-1919). See https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stirling-sir-edward-charles-ted-939.

[17] *Maroonika* situated at 10 Milan Terrace, Stirling, South Australia.

because we do have some of the objects from the home and some of her drawings in this house.[18] My mother's father was still alive, Keith Ashby, and still living at *Wittunga* with his second wife, Bessie. She was Bessie Savage.[19] He remarried another Quaker after my mother's mother died, and she was a – my mother's mother was Edith Walker[20] from Victoria and she and Keith had met, as Quakers did, particularly in that era, at the annual Friends' Yearly Meeting, which would move around Australia, and that was a great place to – if you hadn't met someone at Friends' School then you had the opportunity to meet them at Yearly Meeting, and it was – because Quakers is a religion that is never more than, you know, several hundreds in Australia, right back from the colonial era, whenever a Quaker was travelling, you would meet up. You would meet up either to take part in a meeting for worship in the area that you were travelling in or to make contact with Quakers who lived in more remote and regional areas who didn't have that regular fellowship, and so you would make that effort. So just about every Quaker was known to everyone else in that era, and so there was this marriage between the Walkers and the Ashbys, which is how my mother and her siblings came into being. The Walkers were farming people.[21]

So yes, you've mentioned Jane. What do you remember of Arthur – sorry – Keith –

[00:13:56] Keith, yes.

– he was known as, wasn't he?

[00:13:57] He was a wonderful man, always sleeves rolled up, ready to get his hands dirty in *Wittunga* garden, which was, of course, very extensive by the time that he gave it to the state. He was a lovely, generous, jovial fellow, pretty dignified but, you know, with the call you would hear at the back door, 'Ooh-ooh!' That's the family call to say a family member has arrived at your house. So there'd be quite a

[18] The house is named *Allambee*.

[19] Hannah Elizabeth Ashby née Savage (1895-1986).

[20] Edith Mary Ashby née Walker (1896-1947).

[21] The Walker family still farms at *Riverdale*, Yinnar South. Victoria.

lot of that sort of thing. Yes. A lovely, lovely man, and unfortunately he died only five years after my father.

[00:14:58] One of the strong memories, though, of *Wittunga* is his slide nights, because by that time he was able to afford to travel with my step-grandmother, Bess Ashby, and they did quite a lot of trips overseas, including to South Africa, where my mother's younger sister had married and moved there. And so, of course, you had these *endless* slide nights, mostly of close-ups of botanical specimens, (laughs) and I remember many a night falling asleep under the table in the dining room at slide nights.

Well, I'll just ask you a bit now about your siblings before we talk about your growing up. So you've mentioned your two sisters and a brother. So the oldest is Helen.

[00:16:00] Yes, Helen Jane, and she added the name Thorburn to her middle names when she was an adult.[22] And she studied Medicine and has been a country GP [general practitioner] most of her career and she's been up at Laura in the Mid North [of South Australia] for many years now, and starting to look forward to retirement because being a country GP is a pretty onerous occupation.

So I think she's about three years older than you?

[00:16:38] Yes. Yes. We're all pretty close together. So Helen was born in May in 1954.

And then the next sibling - - -.

[00:16:50] Next is my brother, the only brother. He was born in January in 1956, David Edward Robertson.[23] And then comes me in October '57 and then my younger sister, Anne, who was given the middle name Stirling, Anne Stirling Robertson,[24] and she was born just a year and a week after me. So there's only a five-and-a-half-years' – barely five and a half years between the four of us.[25]

So what has David done?

---

[22] Helen Jane Thorburn Robertson (1954-).

[23] David Edward Robertson (1956-).

[24] Anne Stirling Robertson (1958-).

[25] Correction: four and a half years.

[00:17:25] David – he did start Engineering, having a great interest in that kind of field and being very practically skilled, as was his father. But he found he couldn't settle into first year Engineering and, actually, the following year, went into the foundation year of the Industrial Design course at Underdale College of Advanced Education, as it was then. So he became a first generation industrial designer and went on – after a few years working for others, he went on to establish his own business, Icarus Industrial Design. So he's been a small business owner and industrial and graphic designer as his career.

We may come to it later, but perhaps we should mention he does have a link, doesn't he, with oral history with the *Handbook*?[26]

[00:18:29] Oh, of course. Yes. So he's been a tremendous support to me over the years with various activities with the Oral History Association. When we come to my first activities in oral history he actually organised my recording equipment, being technically minded. But yes, when the *Oral history handbook* was going into its third edition as a major new work,[27] he and his company ever since then have done the design and managed the printing of the *Handbook* and some other publications.

And then, last but not least, there's Anne.

[00:19:21] Anne. Yes. So, unlike our siblings and forebears, we didn't go into science or technology-based interests. We both focused on Arts degrees and we both did Honours in History, and Anne took up – I think they would have been called a cadetship[28] – not sure – in the Commonwealth Public Service and moved to Canberra, and that's where she's had her life and career working in a number of roles, but always associated with history and heritage, so including the Australian Heritage Commission and National Archives, and then, after she took early retirement, she did some contract work at the National Library.

---

[26] *Oral history handbook* by Beth M Robertson. Published by Oral History Association of Australia (South Australian Branch) Inc. Currently in its fifth edition, second impression, 2006.

[27] The third edition was first published in 1994.

[28] It was the 'Administrative Research Officer Development Scheme' managed by the Commonwealth Government's Public Service Board. Anne moved to Canberra in 1982.

Well, I'd like to go back a bit now and talk about the different places where you've lived. So, well, you were born in Canberra, but how long was your family in Canberra before you moved back to Adelaide?

[00:20:43] Yes. Well, as I say, I would have spent my very early months in this house on Mount Stromlo, and my younger sister, being a Canberra person, she was looking into that recently and, apparently, it was a prefabricated Riley Newsum home in the Observatory Precinct, and we both thought that was – though we hadn't known this before – but our family has this connection with prefabricated buildings because the Quaker meeting house in North Adelaide was a Manning House brought out from England in the 1830s.[29]

[00:21:24] The family then moved into a rented house in Ainslie, or it may have been a house that belonged to the university, and that's where Anne was taken to as a little baby. But my father had a breakdown and we returned to South Australia in, I think, at the very end – yes, in December 1958, and they, my parents, started renting to buy a Housing Trust house in Seacombe Gardens.

So you were very young then. Do you remember any of the Seacombe Gardens home?

[00:22:19] No. My only memory is, really, when the family was packing up to move in 1962 to Grand Junction Road, and I think I remember maybe just me or maybe all four of us sitting on what's probably my father's carpentry workbench, which would have been moved as well, sitting up on that and watching as boxes and things moved. That's the only memory I have of Seacombe Gardens. But I have been back there in recent years and – no, that's not the one I went back to. I went back to the one [in Edwardstown] that my parents lived in before they went to Canberra and [I] met the people who were only the third owners.

I just want to follow up, actually, on your father's carpentry bench, though. What did he use to make?

[00:23:24] All sorts of things, including one of the bookshelves in this room. So, yes, very practical as well as intellectual capacities. Yes.

So when the family came back to Adelaide, what work was he doing at that point?

---

[29] The timber building was carried onboard the ship the *Rajasthan* which arrived in South Australia in February 1840. It was erected on land in Pennington Terrace, North Adelaide where it remains in use.

[00:23:46] Well, I guess we do need to speak at this point about his illness, because he wasn't able to work when the family came back. So, going back to his university days, as I say, he did his Bachelor of Science degree from '43 to '45, and then – and I followed a bit in his footsteps in this way – he then didn't leave university (laughs) for quite some time. But it did have an – it may have been one of the factors in the development of his illness. He had a year in 1946 when he was doing independent biochemistry research between the Biochemistry and Botany Departments at Adelaide University, and that was the year my mother was finishing up her degree, and I think it would be true to say that he was considering following in his father's footsteps and becoming a research scientist. In 1947 and for a couple of years he organised and supervised a new Histology practical class and then decided to do a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery, so that takes us right through to 1952. So he's been at university for 10 years at that stage.

[00:25:37] And we have papers here that show, at the beginning of that Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery era, he was reviewing his father's research into Tethelin, which was a particular protein that his father had identified associated with animal growth.[30] So you do get this idea he was thinking of becoming a medical researcher. And my parents married in 1948, so he was still at university at that stage, and after he graduated in 1953 he did become an assistant to a general practitioner, a Dr [JF] Frayne, and in 1954 he started his own private practice at South Road, Burbank.[31] But he had his first breakdown in the following year, 1955, and from - - -. My mother didn't speak about his illness and, you know, as the story unwinds, it was obviously a very traumatic series of developments in their lives. But my older sister was old enough to understand a little bit about what was going on, and she was certainly intellectually precocious and has the kind of memory that, when she hears something, she asks questions to understand and then she remembers for the rest of her life. It makes a good diagnostician in your local general practitioner.

---

[30] See TB Robertson, 'Tethelin: a growth-controlling substance obtainable from the anterior lobe of the pituitary body' in *The Biochemical journal*, Cambridge University Press, vol 17, no 1, 1923; doi:10.1042/bj0170077.

[31] Burbank is now known as Bedford Park.

[00:27:53] So my father became an alcoholic[32], and one would have to think that the culture of university probably had a role to play in that. He was an extremely gregarious and involved student and he was there a long time. He was involved in music, choir, science clubs, student representation and so on and did become involved in a drinking culture. But it could well have started earlier than that. Both my older sister and I remember our mother warning us against the thoughtless use of cough medicine. And in my father's era, of course, it was – without prescription, you could get codeine linctus, which was an opioid; and then using the kind of headache powders that have since been banned for free purchase over the counter, such as Bex, which was mostly aspirin and caffeine, so both addictive and damaging.[33] So my father became an alcoholic, in that he couldn't control his drinking, but also a drug addict, and of course he's in an occupation where he has access, and that era of general practitioners doing home visits, he would have those sorts of drugs in his bag. My older sister thinks there was – remembers hearing there was also the abuse of pethidine, the artificial opioid, in his addiction.[34]

[00:30:08] So he had had a breakdown before the family went to Canberra and had actually been admitted to Enfield Receiving House as a certified patient in 1956, and that was probably – well, it would have been for observation and probably a drying-out cure, but then no – it sounds as though he didn't think he needed any follow-up, and then the addiction reasserted itself in Canberra. So it's during this period where they're forming their family but he's, obviously, really struggling.

[00:31:02] I do have his thesis, which I don't think was ever presented. He had a couple of years where he was producing work for assessment at ANU, but I don't

---

[32] I do not mean to state that my father was an alcoholic at university; I do not know at what stage of his life prior to 1960 he found that he could not control his drinking in addition to not being able to control his drug addiction. My father may well have been 'a secondary alcoholic', a term he explained in a newspaper article ('We neglect alcoholics' by Dr. TSB Robertson, undated newspaper article in the Adelaide *News* or *Sunday mail*). Secondary alcoholics are those who 'appear to become alcoholics over a number of years, perhaps 10 or 15. A secondary alcoholic usually dates his alcoholism from a significant point in time. So, perhaps, one-third of his total drinking may seem uncontrolled.'

[33] As a doctor my older sister is familiar with the literature about drug addiction linked to drinking in the mid-twentieth century – a common scenario being the use of Bex to treat a hangover.

[34] June Foley (1927-) and her husband Lance Llewellyn Foley (1923-2000) were close friends of Enid and Stirling. June did not witness Stirling drinking but recalls Vance noticing that Stirling 'ate pills like lollies' when the men went fishing together in the early 1950s. Stirling's explanation was 'I need them'. Personal communication, 1 January 2021.

think the thesis was ever formally presented, and that was 'Aspects of the pharmacology of hypertensin[35] and the physiology of isolated intestine', so that's one of the outputs of his life but it's right at the end of this, I think, intention to follow in his father's footsteps, which he could not bring to fruition. And, you know, I'm sure there was depression involved in that. So when the family returned to South Australia he wasn't able to work and he continued to be in thrall to these addictions. And so, in 1959, it appears that things really came to a head in his uncontrolled addiction and, just recently, a friend of my mother's going through her husband's papers found a letter from Con Eardley that Con had sent to her – Judy and David Symon,[36] being others involved in the university fields – and Con was sad – this was a letter written in 1959, saying to Judy and David it's very sad how things are with Enid and Stirling at the moment and that she's [Enid] been advised to withdraw her support from him.

[00:33:26] And so that – and with the support of her father, Keith, that eventuated in a trip to South Africa with her four children under the age of about eight or nine at the time,[37] and she spent, I think, about three months with us in South Africa with her younger sister, who was, as I say, married and living there. My older sister can remember saying to my mother, 'But how will Daddy cope without us?' and my mother replying something along the lines of, 'Well, I've left a leg of cold lamb in the refrigerator for him, so he'll be all right.' So that was – I guess he did reach the depths in 1959.

[00:34:32] I don't have any memory – obviously, I was very, very young – I don't have any memory of his behaviours when he was an addict, but my older sister remembers him driving off one day and saying, as he was getting into the car – 'Oh, where are you going?' and him saying, 'Oh, I'm going to see a man about a dog,' and her knowing, in her precocious way, that he was going to a hotel. And I think it is probably correct that he would have done his drinking in hotels and in places other than home; my mother, of course, being from a teetotal tradition as a Quaker, and they were a very well – from what everyone says, they were a very, very well-suited

[35] The peptide hormone 'hypertensin' is now known as angiotensin II.

[36] Botanist David Eric Symon (1920-2011) and Judith (Judy) Symon, (1928-).

[37] Correction: Helen, the oldest, had her fifth birthday in South Africa.

couple. It wasn't a marriage of conflict. And so I think there was this both of them adapting to respect the other, but he couldn't stop the addictions continuing.

[00:36:03] So we came home from South Africa – I don't have any memories of South Africa – perhaps just one, of lying in a crib and looking through the slats, but that's my only memory. And so in 1960 he was, in January, admitted to Northfield Mental Hospital, which later became Hillcrest Hospital, as a certified patient for alcohol and drug addiction. And my mother, unable to work with us all so young – she had worked up until, I guess, around the time she was pregnant with me. She was working as a botanist at the Waite Institute and then also as – I don't know, I think that might come later. No, she was working as a senior research fellow on the revision of Black's *Flora* in the late – that was published in the second edition in about 1956, [38] I think. So she wasn't able to work with four very young children, and so, actually, she was eligible because he was a certified patient, to receive Social Services Widows Pension, which is horrible to think, and so that's – she would, of course, have had support from her father as well at this time.

[00:37:56] And so my father then came under the treatment, at Northfield Mental Hospital, of Dr William Salter,[39] who was about 13 years older than him. He was the medical superintendent at the hospital, and he was both a doctor – he had an MD – and had also then gone on to get a psychiatric degree. And he was clearly the one who showed my father – and my father was, obviously, now receptive to having treatment for his addictions, and they apparently hit it off tremendously. So Bill Salter had already been effecting changes at – I'll refer to it as 'Hillcrest', because that's what it became in this era – for instance, unlocking wards, encouraging the establishment of an Alcoholics Anonymous group at the hospital, and training – having trained psychiatric nurses – obviously, mostly male – and encouraging the training of recovered alcoholics as nurses. So he'd got to that stage in his thinking in the era that he then encountered my father, and my father's treatment was successful. My father embraced the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous and, in around June/July 1960, he began 11 weeks working without pay as a medical officer at the

[38] *Flora of South Australia, part IV Oleaceae – Compositae*, by John McConnell Black, revised by Enid L. Robertson, 1957.

[39] William Fulton Salter, Medical Superintendent (1912-2006).

hospital while Bill Salter convinced his superiors that an alcoholic doctor should be paid to come on the staff.[40] And Bill Salter has written that, you know, if we have proven the worth of recovered alcoholics as nurses, so how much better as a doctor?

[00:40:59] Apparently, it was quite a fraught time, waiting – so early in his recovery – my father waiting for this decision on which he was probably thinking his future hinged. But yes, it was authorised and so my father, who then, sadly, only lived for another five or six years, I think you can say he found what he was looking for in the work he was destined to do, and that was working with alcoholics at Hillcrest Hospital and at Yatala Prison.

So while he was working out there, is that the period when you were living out at Grand Junction Road?

[00:41:57] Yes. Yes, an amazing place. And I think, really, us children living at the Grand Junction Road house in this era where my father was recovered but his health was not sound – I think it was a tremendous distraction for us. His physical illnesses, which unfortunately continued to take their toll, having recovered from addiction, didn't loom largely in our childish lives because we were at - - -. It's now identified on maps as 761 Grand Junction Road, Northfield, but what it was was a house in the middle of paddocks east of Yatala Prison on the northern side of the road. Nothing else, either side of the road. And not very – you know, a short drive to Hillcrest Hospital. These days, when you go past it or look at it on maps, right on its eastern boundary of the block is the Women's Prison, but that wasn't there when we were living there in the early 1960s. That's where the police greys were agisted when they were in foal. And so (laughs) we would be feeding them carrots through the fence, them and their beautiful dark foals.

[00:43:48] The house had been built by RM Williams.[41] He had owned the land but it had been – and obviously he fought against the Playford Government's compulsory acquisition of this land. And the story goes that, during this battle, he

---

[40] Bill Salter's account of this time is recorded in an interview by William (Bill) Andrew Dibden in 1997, PRG 842/1/3, State Library of South Australia (SLSA) which is quoted in 'A biography of Psychiatry: the story of events and the people involved in the development of services for the psychiatrically ill in South Australia 1939-1989' by Dibden, 1989. See https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/15076/46/dibden_fin.pdf.

[41] Australian bushman and entrepreneur Reginald Murray Williams (1908 – 2003).

built the house, thinking it would help his case: you know, 'I'm living there. You can't compulsorily acquire it.' And, apparently, he had plans to – a bit on Quaker lines, actually – to develop this acreage he owned, of which the house would have only been a small part, into his factory and workers' accommodation. But the compulsory acquisition went ahead and then the Prisons Department had a house. They didn't have any use for it at the time so they offered it to Hillcrest Hospital, who said, 'Oh! Well, we've got a young doctor and his family who can use some accommodation,' and so that's how we came to be living there.

[00:45:11] And it was an amazing place to spend some of your youth, surrounded by paddocks. We'd walk through the paddocks down to the creek behind the house, you know, having been away from the house for hours exploring. But, because of the size of the property the house was on, my father was able to indulge in his interest in animals and pets and so on. So my parents had always had a cat or two, but now we had cats, a dog for a short time, geese, guinea pigs – and the guinea pigs were an Ashby family tradition; my mother and her siblings had grown up with guinea pigs – and emus, in the geese paddock. We had a couple of emus. Ran through three or four emus in the time we were there. One of them – every so often, one would jump the goose yard fence and create terror for us children, chasing us around the garden. But on one occasion one of them ran up the long driveway, up to Grand Junction Road, headed west, up to the Yatala Prison driveway, down Yatala Prison driveway to the gates of the prison, where it flopped down in a puddle of water. And we all, you know, ran after it and rescued it. Then at home – having tied a rope around its neck, it allowed us to lead it home, down the driveway – it jumped back into the goose yard fence – clearly the fence wasn't high enough – and died of a heart attack. And we were advised by, I'm not sure who, that in fact, you must never put anything around the neck of an emu. (laughs) It's not physiologically set up to cope with that.

[00:47:45] The surviving emus eventually went up to Cleland[42] to see out their lives. They had names like Applecore and Artichoke. Those are the two I remember. We had a kangaroo very, very briefly, but I think that ended in tears. And the guinea pigs – because we three girls became very enamoured of guinea pigs and had our

[42] Cleland Wildlife Park, Crafers, South Australia.

own colour and hair type preferences – and the cages were made up of various pieces of furniture from Hillcrest Hospital. Enormous wrought iron fireguards, which my father would cover with chicken wire and make beautiful guinea pig cages and lawn cages, as we called them, because they had the lid – the door, as part of the front of the cage, which would have been padlocked in the hospital situation so that patients couldn't put their hands into the fire. And some big double-decker bed arrangement that again got covered with chicken wire, and so we had the two-storey guinea pig cage.

[00:49:21] And another real feature of that era were some of the men my father was helping, and these were frequently men who cycled between Hillcrest – cycled, as in their life events – between Hillcrest and Adelaide [Gaol] or Yatala Gaol because of their alcoholism. And there were some great characters. In connection with the guinea pigs, the most memorable one is old Tom Waller,[43] who was from a very early Kangaroo Island family, even pre-colonial in terms of the sealing tradition from the earliest member of that family and Aboriginal intermarriage. And Tom Waller – my older sister says she thinks he was probably just at Hillcrest because he was peculiar. He didn't have addictions, but he couldn't fit in in ordinary society. And he would bring our guinea pigs leftover shepherd's pie, which they would proceed to, of course, trample into their sawdust because they didn't recognise mincemeat and mashed potato as food. But he would just say, unconsciously quoting a comic British book, *Pigs is pigs*.[44] (laughs) Yes.

[00:51:01] And another one who became quite a friend to our family was a man, Russ Thomson,[45] and I've got here one of his entries in the *Police gazette*,[46] which I came across when I was at the State Library – for a 10-year period I was rostered in the supervised reading room, and I was leafing through a *Police gazette* that a researcher had been using and, 'Oh! There's Russ Thomson.' I'd never seen a picture of him. I only had memories of him. And he was a chronic alcoholic and so the description of him, I think, typifies the men that my father was now working

[43] Thomas Henry Waller (1887-1983), son of Alfred James Waller and Mary Ann Waller, née Simpson.

[44] *Pigs is pigs* by Ellis Parker Butler, first published 1905. Correction: it is an American book.

[45] Russell James Thomson (1911-1973).

[46] *Photo supplement to the South Australian police gazette*, No. 10. October 1952.

with. So at this occasion, in 1951, he had broken into a liquor store and he had removed a crate of whisky and a crate of sherry from the premises and then went to nearby gardens and commenced to drink the contents. And that was what would happen. He would be released from Adelaide Gaol. He would walk to, you know, wherever he could get a drink and he would end up being arrested and back in gaol. And he was one who came under the influence of my father, who was known by these men at both the hospital and the prison as 'Doc Robbie', and he formed tremendously influential relationships with them and I think, you know, you can only wonder at what might have happened in this career if his body hadn't been ruined by his addictions.

Yes. So you mentioned the ongoing physical problems he had. What were the problems, if you - - -?

[00:53:19] Yes, so his kidneys had been very, very badly damaged. The medical records or the terminology my mother used – because she had to provide chronologies when applying, say, for the Social Services Widows Pension and on other occasions later – and so the terminology that was used in about 1961, a 'haemorrhaging duodenal ulcer' meant that he had to go into the Royal Adelaide Hospital. He had then two or three good years where his physical health – it was, apparently, improving. He didn't relapse in his addictions and we were through that time all starting or getting further into primary school and we were able to have family holidays, which were typically caravan holidays – caravan with an annexe, the red station wagon and a dinghy made by my father on the top. So Kangaroo Island, Port Hughes, Tumby Bay were destinations, some of them repeated, and so I do have early childhood memories of him appearing to be well and just ordinary family life.

[00:55:18] But in 1964 is the beginning of what is described in the records as 'renal colic' and so I understand this from my older sister, that this involves kidney stones and is a secondary problem associated with damaged kidneys and very, very painful. And in 1965 we were on holidays at Port Hughes and he had a collapse from this condition and was admitted to Wallaroo District Hospital. And Helen remembers going with our mother to pick him up from the hospital to return to Adelaide and he collapsed and had a fit in the car park. And this, she says, would be a uraemic fit, because the nature of this condition meant that the waste products that the kidney

should be filtering out are building up in the blood. And that went on through 1965 with this acute illness, Sickness Benefit claim, and then renal failure. So in November '65 he had emergency peritoneal dialysis and in that same year, in the February, the first successful living kidney transplant in the whole of Australia had been performed at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital,[47] and the recipient was surviving, so it was very, very early days in that.

[00:57:26] 1965 must have been a – you know, you look back and wonder how my mother managed with such a young family and my father so ill. My younger sister broke her leg when we were playing lions and zebras at Grand Junction Road.

Perhaps as an aside, can you tell me how do you play lions and zebras?

[00:57:54] You chase each other around a lot. And she was the lion, so the youngest was allowed to be the lion, occasionally.[48] And she fell over and broke her leg, and I remember us going – because we were closest to the front door of the house – and us, you know, 'Mummy. Mummy. Anne can't get up. She's really hurt.' And my mother, obviously thinking it's just another knock and bruise, and goodness knows what state my father was, resting inside, and it was, you know, one of the rules of the house is you don't go to the front door, you go to the back door. So there's my mother calling out, 'Go round to the back door. Your father's resting.' (laughs) And so poor Anne had her leg in a cast. And then in the midst of all of this was the ceremony to bequeath *Wittunga* to the state,[49] so it was actually an Ashby family reunion and all of my mother's siblings and their spouses descended on Adelaide,[50]

---

[47] The Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Woodville, South Australia.

[48] My brother David: 'My recollection of the lions and zebra incident is that it was before school one morning and that we were all in our school clothes waiting to be taken to school out the front of the house around the rose garden. Anne slipped sideways on the white aggregate gravel drive when she tried to turn sharply to catch one of us much larger zebras.'

[49] Keith Ashby signed the title deed gifting *Wittunga* to the state at a ceremony at *Wittunga* on 15 October 1965.

[50] Enid's older sister Hazel Gwenyth Woodruff, née Ashby (1923-2018) travelled from Edinburgh, Scotland with her husband surgeon and scientist Michael Francis Addison Woodruff (1911-2001). Michael Woodruff principally studied transplant rejection and immunosuppression and he had performed the first kidney transplant in the United Kingdom on 30 October 1960. Enid's younger sister Beth travelled from South Africa with her husband farmer George Anderson (1933-1986).

her brother,[51] of course, living down at Inman Valley on the *Mount Alma* farm, which their father had established earlier. You know, so it's a kind of bittersweet occasion in retrospect because they were all together and they were all able to see my father again, but of course no one knowing what the future might hold. And then, in the December, his mother had a stroke and died in January 1966. So in 1966 he became dependent on the kidney machine four or five days a week, and in June he was admitted to Queen Elizabeth Hospital and had a transplant in July.

[01:00:09] And the kidney was donated by an old family friend, a lovely woman called Myra Gluyas[52] – her maiden name was Scruby – and she was born and brought up in Port Lincoln. And I think my mother got to know her because she worked in administrative roles and I think she may have been – that's how my mother had come across her. But she became a very close friend of the family. She was one of our honorary aunts, because of course my mother's sisters were overseas and my father's sister was in Tasmania or perhaps overseas still at that time. So we had a little core of honorary aunts and Auntie Myra was one of them. And she was one of, apparently - I don't know the number, I think it is recorded somewhere – but, apparently, many, many people offered to be the kidney donor for my father in the wider family and their friends.[53] And he was – for all of his addiction, he was a really beloved figure in life, as was his father, so being notable for being sort of very generous as well as talented and capable.

[01:02:02] But, unfortunately, the transplant wasn't successful and he died on 29 August at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, and aged only 41. So, you know, following a very sad pattern which in some ways goes back to his grandfather. His father had died aged 46 – Thorburn Brailsford Robertson – you know, the effects of pneumonia and overworking, and Thorburn Brailsford's father,[54] he didn't *die* in his 40s but he

---

[51] Eric Ivan Ashby (1928-2004) attended with his wife Phyllis May Ashby, née Roads (1931-).

[52] Myra Olive Gluyas (1908-1995).

[53] 'The number of kidneys offered was perhaps the greatest tribute to peoples' regard for Stirling.' Letter from Bill Salter to Enid Robertson, 29 August 1966.

[54] Thorburn Robertson (1851-1932). It is an exaggeration to say that TB Robertson grew up without his father, although he was only 17 when his father left South Australia. Thorburn, his wife Sarah Ann Robertson, née Brailsford (1858-1940) and their only child Thorburn Brailsford Robertson emigrated to South Australia in 1892. In 1902 Thorburn senior and his wife returned to England, leaving Thorburn junior (known as Brailsford), aged 17, to begin studying at the University of Adelaide. In about 1904 Thorburn senior travelled to West Africa to work with a mining company. He contracted a

had gone to Africa in search of making his fortune, come down with some dread disease almost immediately and was repatriated to Britain rather than South Australia, leaving his son, my father's father, more or less without a father to grow up with. Yes. And so the cause of [my father's] death, in terms of how they list it on the death certificate – the immediate cause was septicaemia and the sort of mid-term was immunosuppressive therapy and renal haemorrhage, and then of course the chronic kidney damage over a space of 10 years recorded there.

So do you remember much about him as a father? You've mentioned how he was loved by others, but as a father?

[01:04:09] Well, in this room we're sitting in is, behind me, 'the big chair' that was his chair. I remember being cuddled and tickled in that chair. Clearly, in my living memory time with him, he was mostly not working and we – but he had maintained so many – had so many interests and capabilities. So, for instance, we each had a [wooden] hobbyhorse that he'd made and painted differently for each of us, so we'd ride around our hobbyhorses around Grand Junction Road.[55] He had established a beautiful aquarium of tropical fish. He obviously had to keep himself busy. And, I mean, we were very young when he died, but we benefited from his wide interests in various traditions that, obviously, my mother maintained.

[01:05:24] So, as I say, he was very musical and so we – my mother continued that, although it wasn't a great interest of hers, in that the earliest performances we saw were Gilbert and Sullivan and we saw them – we would go to Gilbert and Sullivan performances all throughout out childhood and early adult life. He had many records and we continued listening to them, in that tradition, so Flanders and Swann, Stan Freberg, Tom Lehrer, so that sort of reflecting his personality, the humorous and the satirical and so on. I've got a lot of his books, including authors like James Thurber. And he, like my mother, through their education, were very well-read. So yes, it's – and we were a family of quotations, as just normal parts of life. But some of them you just don't know where they came from. (laughs)

---

tropical disease and returned to England in 1905 seriously ill. He recovered to some extent, but his health and memory remained delicate. He died in Camberwell, London in 1832.

[55] My brother David: 'The hobby horses had, along with their custom paint jobs that we'd each individually specified, reins and harness made from vinyl strapping from furniture upholstery, and were attached by the sort of dome-head nails that you finish furniture upholstery with.'

Well, perhaps if we come back to where you were living, you're in Grand Junction Road.

[01:06:56] Yes.

And then I think you moved a bit later to Blair Athol?

[01:07:00] Yes. Well, during the year of his death, suddenly Grand Junction Road was required by government for government use, so Mum had to move the family. And so they bought a house in Kings Avenue, Blair Athol, so, you know, not knowing what the future would be. But it was – we were there through the period of that year, when he died, and for several years. So I had started at Northfield Primary School in 1963 and I moved to Enfield Primary School for starting in Grade 4. And I don't have – my main memory of Northfield Primary School is meeting my good friend, Ursula Jurczyk, on the very first day. And Enfield Primary School, I was there until the end of the first term in Grade 7, when we came up to Blackwood, and didn't have many memories because I was greatly upset by my father's death and became quite withdrawn. And so I mainly look at that period in my schooling life through that sort of filter, but last year was the fiftieth anniversary of the Grade 7 class at Enfield Primary School and they tracked me down. Well, it helps I haven't changed my surname. And I answered the phone call saying, 'But none of you remember me.' 'Ooh, yes, we do. You drew horses and you did this and that.' (laughs) 'And we were always the two girls in particular, we were always vying with you as to who would come top of the class.' And I went back and had a look at my school reports and I had indeed often been top of the class and had no memory of that as being part of my school experience. But a lot of memories did come back through that reunion, which was great fun, and so I'm now part of that Facebook group.

[01:09:57] And I was disappointed that my very memorable teacher from Grade 6 – apparently, he was overseas at the time of the reunion, and that was Maurie Francou.[56] And so he was a league footballer for the North Adelaide Football Club and a very charismatic character. He would have only been in his early twenties, but of course he seemed like such a grown-up person. He'd arrive at school and emerge

[56] Maurice Guy Francou (1944-). League footballer 1964-1971.

from his green MG sports car with one part of his body or another in bandages (laughs) on a Monday morning. And at the reunion my schoolmates were remembering him as a very physical teacher, and I hadn't seeded that away in my memory. Apparently, he would step up onto one of the school students' desks if he wanted to get quickly to someone misbehaving at the back of the room and stride across the wooden desks to get to them. But he was a very, very popular teacher and the primary school football team, of course, did very, very well under him at the time. And so that – even though I didn't start going to football games until high school, that following the North Adelaide Football Club through my teenage years and early twenties was all thanks to Maurie Francou.

So then you moved to Blackwood Primary School, you were saying, just for the end - - -.

[01:11:50] Yes, just – yes, for the end of Grade 7.

And do you remember any of that?

[01:11:56] No. No. I mean, I'm very familiar with Blackwood Primary School. It wasn't the same school my mother went to. It was a new one built up on Shepherds Hill Road at just the beginning of Eden Hills. I'm very familiar with it because I often walk my dogs through it, but I don't have any particular memories of Grade 7 there. And my mother had begun working while we were still at Blair Athol. She became research assistant to Professor HBSW – Womersley[57] – in the Botany Department at Adelaide University. It was something she did for 20 years, working with seagrasses, and she became very well-regarded in that field by (laughs) just about everyone *except* Professor HBS Womersley – that usual battle between the Herr God Professor, who wants their name and only their name on the research papers. But she did end up being published under her own name in marine [botany] works and did eventually win a case for higher pay as well.

[01:13:39] Of course, we were very, very fortunate as a family in that this house [*Allambee*], which I'm still in, which had been built by her father in the year he married, was available and when my father died, so the house – this house was renovated over a year or two and we moved up here in 1969, so a couple of years

[57] Hugh Bryan Spencer Womersley (1922-2011).

after his death. And that, of course, enabled my mother to have much less financial pressure. It was always tight, but she didn't have a mortgage hanging over her head and, yes, the house had been - - -. It wasn't derelict, but it had had a succession of renters living in it. My mother's family moved out – I'll just check on that – after my mother's grandmother had died,[58] and so the house had been – this house had just been used as a rental property and had become very, very rundown in the 1950s and 1960s.

[01:15:31] I think the first family that lived here had horses and they were agisted just around the house. It had an enormous cypress hedge that meant it was quite secluded from the street, [and] was still on septic tank, and so when it was renovated it was in just the right period for that to happen in terms of really good building materials, good workmanship, so it set it up for another 50 years. But some of the chickens are coming home to roost now. (laughs)

[01:16:20] And this house has – the one mystery associated with it is the writing in the cellar, which my grandfather dug himself. On the wooden shelves in the cellar in large red letters are painted, 'Don't, Mrs Townsend.' And we have no idea what that refers to. (laughs)

So I just want to ask you a bit more, briefly, about your mum's work. Did she start working with Professor Womersley – was that after your father died?

[01:17:04] Yes. Yes. In 1967, so pretty soon after his death. As I say, she had worked in their early married life. I haven't referred to the Waite Institute,[59] but the Waite Institute, and so working as a botanist, and then on the *Flora of South Australia*. And there was clearly – in the partnership between my parents, there was not the expectation that she wouldn't be using her brains and her qualifications, but the circumstances meant that she had to return to work, I think, sooner than she probably would have chosen. And coming up here to live, with my grandfather and her stepmother across the road in *Wittunga*, that was a very good solution. Unfortunately, my grandfather died in 1971 so we didn't benefit from his presence very long, but he died the way most people would want to do it: he just walked up to

[58] Esther Maria Ashby, née Coleman (1867-1943)

[59] Waite Research Institute (formerly Waite Agricultural Research Institute), University of Adelaide, Urrbrae, South Australia.

Blackwood to do a bit of business at lunch one day and dropped dead in the street. So he was, apparently, strong, still physically capable, and that was it. Yes.

Well, I'd like to ask you a bit now about your high school years – you said you went to Blackwood High School. Yes, what do you recall about high school and what - - -?

[01:19:11] Yes. So, you know, again that school always feels very close and familiar. I should actually say that the primary school was built on what had been part of *Wittunga* and the ovals at Blackwood High School had also been part of *Wittunga* farm. So, in my first year, there was – I did English, French, Latin, Social Studies, Maths, Science, Art and Home Science, and second year I kept that all up, although Social Science became known as Geography in that year. And my home class teacher was Mr Mollar, and that was a memorable year because, on 22 August, our whole classroom burnt down and I remember walking up, not knowing that that was happening but walking up through the *Wittunga* paddocks to see what's this fire, what's all of this noise, and it was my classroom. So we lost projects and things like that. And it itself was some kind of transportable and we were put in another transportable to finish the year.

[01:20:48] I was a very, very conscientious student. That's what my report cards say and that's what I remember. In third year, I was continuing with English and French, finally gave up Latin – the teacher, a man called John Stanley, my brother and younger sister and I suffered a bit in that Helen had gone before us and she was just *so* bright and, as I say, with a brain able to synthesise and remember what she learned. So Latin was one of the subjects in which I suffered by comparison with my older sister, and John Stanley was an old-school teacher who did a little bit of the casual corporal punishment. I detested him and was glad to, I suppose, at that age, be allowed to stop doing Latin. It might have even been withdrawn and I was very relieved, by the time I got to third year. So third year was the first year I did History, and that was with Mrs Griggs, a young woman – young married teacher – and I enjoyed that very much. Still doing Maths, Science I and II, more or less in the Biology side of things, and we were still doing Home Science. It was the same teacher every year, Mrs Weatherall, and she lived quite near here.

[01:22:53] And I had my core group of friends, Gillian, Jane and Gina and Beth. We were a real foursome. We certainly weren't the popular crowd but we were a

strong quartet and, yes, I can remember some of the Home Science disasters that we were involved in. (laughs)

What sorts of things did you do for Home Science?

[01:23:33] We certainly did cooking, and I remember Gillian completely unaware, because she was often in a bit of – you know, absentminded was Gillian – I can remember her using salt instead of sugar, with the inevitable results. But I also loved – with all of these subjects, I loved the projects and so I would use – and illustrating, doing illustrated projects, so I remember one associated with mothercraft, where I drew pictures, copied pictures of Sally [Brown] from the *Peanuts* [cartoon] to illustrate various points.

[01:24:26] And then in fourth year – we always applied for Commonwealth Senior Secondary Scholarships in our later years, and I think all of us were able to benefit from that. My English teacher in that year was probably my most influential teacher from my high school years, and that was John Griffin.[60] It was his last year at Blackwood High School. He went on to be a deputy head, I think, from there in furthering his career. I learned in later years that he was also a published poet, but his love of classic literature – Shakespeare and so on – was very, very formative for me and he said very nice things on essays and projects, even though in retrospect I can see I was pretty much just parroting him back again. But he was a big influence. I did Asian History, Maths III because I wasn't good at maths, Biology, Geography and Economics, and our home class teacher that year was John Williams, a Welshman, very memorable for being an enthusiast of orienteering and he always tried to encourage us to get involved in that, and with his Welsh accent he'd say, 'Otherwise known as "cunning running".' (laughs) But he obviously thought he needed to guide us in other ways, and being a modern young teacher in the mid-'70s he'd leave copies of *Forum* magazine (laughs) around the classroom, which was a bit of an eye-opener for a lot of us.

[01:26:32] And then, in 1974, it was my Matric year and I did English, Ancient History – and, well, I think I was a joint first in the whole year for the state in that – with Mrs Lang, Modern History, Maths 1S and Economics. And my home class

[60] John Griffin (1935-2012).

teacher was Mr Kenny and he also taught Maths. And I'd have running pretend arguments with him. He was a Sturt barracker, and me being a North Adelaide barracker – he'd even bet with me about it and I lost a twenty-cent bet with him on the outcome of a game, and so I got 20 one-cent pieces, pasted the North Adelaide white V on a red background onto every single one of them and did them up with sticky tape and gave them to him (laughs) to pay my debt. And he and I tried very hard with my maths that year, and I was pretty confident going into the exam, but even a boy, Andrew Roper, who was a future Rhodes Scholar, came out of the exam saying how hard it was and I only got a C, and I was very sad about that, although I did very well in all my other classes, all my other subjects.

[01:28:12] A figure associated with the high school years was the father of another friend of mine, Heather, and her father,[61] we learned, was a North Adelaide football fan and so that's how I actually started attending games, because he would drive a carload of kids down to wherever North was playing, so that was my Saturday afternoons in my later high school years and through university – certainly in high school with him driving us. He had been a prisoner-of-war in Changi, a chain-smoker, a lovely, lovely man but with an amazing knack of being able to get into arguments with people barracking for the same team! (laughs) Yes, so he was a nice influence in my teenage years.

So, during those teenage years, did you have any plans for what you might do as a career later on?

[01:29:31] No. No. There was always the expectation to go to university. My mother and her older sister were the first on that side of the family, but of course you had a university tradition going back four generations on my father's side. So there was the expectation that you'd go to university. We didn't consider Flinders [University of South Australia]. It was, I think, thought of as too much of an upstart, (laughs) just down the road, and perhaps a little unsettled with the sort of things that went on down there in its formative years. So yes, I think it was just expected that you would consolidate your general education by going on to university, and in the case of myself and my younger sister that meant a sort of rounded Arts degree.

---

[61] Rosslyn (Ross) George Warne (1918-1991). Correction: he was imprisoned in Java, Thailand and Japan.

So just before we move on to your university years, I just want to ask you a bit more about some of the overall influences on your childhood years. And you've mentioned that the Ashbys were Quakers. I wonder what influence did that have on your younger years?

[01:30:51] Yes. Well, my mother was always a regular attender at the North Adelaide Meeting House, and we certainly participated in that until our, I suppose, mid-teen years and then all four of us sort of asserted our independence. We've all remained in membership. We are sort of formally 'birthright' members because of our mother and as was she, and it goes back in the Ashby family to the 1600s and very soon after Charles Fox[62] formed the movement in the vicinity of North Hampshire, where the Ashby forebears came from. So there's this long tradition as birthright Quakers. And we have all – I think we all remain involved financially in terms of contributing for the upkeep of the meeting and we kind of – myself and the others, we kind of dip in and out. And so, many years ago, a Hills meeting was established once a month in people's homes so that people living in the [Adelaide] Hills didn't need to travel all the way down to the meeting house at North Adelaide, and my mother became part of that roster, as it were, and so, when she was unable to continue in her last years, that stopped. But then I was approached a year or two ago and asked whether I might like to be part of that again, and the house and I consulted each other and we decided that it was the right thing to do! Unfortunately, it was stopped short by the coronavirus after several occasions, but that'll happen again.

[01:33:16] In my teenage years, I was a regular at the Quaker opportunity shop on Kensington Road. I kept that up for many years.

Do you mean regular customer or did you help there?

[01:33:28] No. The Friday night sorters of everything coming in. But the Quaker tradition of silent meeting, tolerance, it's a huge impact, a huge formative impact. I had just been thinking, in preparation for this interview, I've just got here a representation of the Serenity Prayer used by AA,[63] and this is one that was made by one of my father's patients. So on the back it says, 'To Doc and Enid. May serenity, courage and wisdom be your constant companions. From Mac.' And I think he was

[62] Correction: George Fox (1624-1691).

[63] Alcoholics Anonymous.

one of the prisoners. And this became a byword for my father but it's very much in keeping with the Quaker tradition, and my mother then kept this in her bedroom for the rest of her life. And so this is – it goes:

> *God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.*

[01:34:59] And this would have spoken very much to my mother. I think she would have switched the two around, 'the courage to change the things I can' being how you approach any situation, and then 'the serenity to accept things I cannot change', and I do feel that that must have been something rather wonderful when my father came round to that understanding as part of his recovery. My mother was never someone who put her faith into words. It wasn't something that she would talk about or use and it's not really the Quaker way to use text, and there's no Quaker dogma, so it's not something that would be spoken of on a day-to-day basis. And indeed, before every meal, it would be silent Grace so you're not expressing rote words. But yes, this sort of tolerance and patience and doing unto others as you would have them do unto you is a very, very, very strong formative basis to my upbringing. And it does – can lead to a bit of trouble, because 'the courage to change the things I can' can often come out in rather anti-authoritarian (laughs) attitudes, and I can certainly see that in my mother's working life.

Is there an example you can tell me?

[01:36:52] Well, and certainly in mine. So one of the Quaker ways is to speak truth to power, and you feel it's an obligation. You see something's wrong or someone is hard done by – sometimes it's you, sometimes it's others – and so you feel you need to speak up, and that's certainly been something that I've felt I needed to apply during my working life, and certainly my mother did too, and it can be uncomfortable.

Some of the other things in your childhood – you had a number of hobbies. Now, you mentioned to me in the preliminary interview one of them was that you liked silence, actually, so that clearly relates –

[01:37:42] Yes. Yes.

– to being a Quaker. But reading and bird-watching were two other things.

[01:37:48] Yes. Yes. So both my parents read widely, my mother not in fiction, but then I had – although she had done a lot of reading during her years at Walford. But my father read both fiction and nonfiction and it's just a huge family tradition, as you can see: a house full of books. It's about 20 years ago when I decided that I couldn't keep adding bookcases to the house, so that was me controlling something I could control rather than become a hoarder. And so, ever since then, it's been as many books have to go out of the house as come into the house, and an awful lot still keep coming into the house! But I can hand on to a new life ones that I realise I will not refer to or reread.

[01:38:57] I do do a lot of rereading of favourites. And I do project reading. So, for example, on the bookcase behind me is a very handsomely-bound set of Charles Dickens and I'd accumulated – before I got that [set] from the Folio Society I'd accumulated just about every work but mostly in paperback, all mismatched. I'd read most of his works and some of them on more than one occasion, and really loved them. And then I saw that this Folio Society edition was coming out that looked very handsome and comfortable reading. You do need to put it down on a table, but very easy to read and nice to handle. And so I felt, well, I'm not just putting that on the shelves. I may have read most of them but I've invested in [this set of] them; I'm going to read them again. I'm going to read them in date order of publication. And I did that once a month through the entire set of his novels. And I thought, 'But I need to make this a project. So I'm going to keep notes on dogs in Dickens.' He was a great dog-lover and so am I. And so I kept notes. I wrote them up at the end, and I even had the opportunity to give a copy to Miriam Margoyles when I met her first at a book-signing[64] – or (pronounced differently) Miriam Margolyes, at a book-signing – and then again when we were both speakers at a big Solomon family reunion in Melbourne a couple of years ago.[65]

[01:41:10] So I like doing thoughtful reading, but I also love crime fiction and particularly Australians like Peter Temple. And nonfiction works of Helen Garner,

---

[64] *Dickens' women* by Miriam Margoyles and Sonia Fraser, 2011, which documents the one-woman show in which Margoyles plays 23 characters from Dickens' novels.

[65] Solomon and Associated Families Reunion, 11 March 2018. Miriam Margolyes opened the reunion. I presented 'An unintentional legacy: Emanuel Solomon and the State Library of South Australia's photographs of Old Colonists and Pastoral Pioneers'.

another one that I reread. And in recent years I've made a bit of a project with – I think in terms of, well, when I'm in the nursing home and I've only got one little bookcase, there are going to be books I want to take with me to my death, and so I keep an eye out for hardcover versions with their dust jackets. (laughs) And that's been something that I've been hunting down, of favourites like Anne Tyler, the American writer.

[01:42:06] And bird-watching comes from the family naturalist interest, but I did become quite a keen bird-watcher. My mother was a great friend of Joan Paton[66] through the university and we went on a bird-watching tour of New Zealand with Joan – myself, my younger sister and my mother – in 1975 and, yes, I became quite a keen bird-watcher, just locally, but when I go on holidays I'll keep a list. But having Belair National Park so close and training my dogs to drop and stay when I'm on the hunt. (laughs) And that's something that, once you've got the bird song and shapes and features in your head, you're a lifelong bird-watcher after that.

Well, one of your other interests was dogs, as you've mentioned, but I think – is that something that developed later in your life?

[01:43:24] We grew up – we had – very short time at Grand Junction Road we had a dog called Fred. My parents weren't really – hadn't been, traditionally, dog owners. They were cat owners. They got their first – there's an advertisement my father put in the paper when they were newly married saying that they needed a cat. They wanted a Persian. And in Canberra was the first and the original Pantueley, a hearing [short-haired] white cat got from a man named Foley on Pancake Tuesday, hence the name 'Pantueley'. And I still know June Foley of that couple of my mother's generation. And so they'd been cat owners. They did get a dog for us when we were at Grand Junction Road. He was called Fred, but unfortunately – and I'm sure he was provoked – he bit a visiting child and he had to go 'back to the farm'. I've no idea where that was.

[01:44:47] But when we were at Kings Avenue, Blair Athol, my parents got a yellow Labrador puppy and that was to be my older sister's dog and she named him Neon, being scientifically-minded. (laughs) And my mother took her and Neon along to the South Australian Dog Obedience Club in the South Parklands, where

[66] Ornithologist Joan Paton (1916-2000).

Helen would daydream and Neon would break to chase a possum or another dog and drag Helen along on her stomach. (laughs) So we grew up with Neon, who, obviously, came into a pretty tumultuous household with that period of my father's final illness, and so he wasn't a particularly well-trained dog and you wouldn't go into the backyard at Kings Avenue when he was eating a bone because he would charge at you to make sure you weren't challenging him. But we did all love Neon and, after he died, my younger sister and I got our first dogs in 1976. So that's the first year after my – I withdrew from my first year at university, but then that second year when I started properly was when I first got my first dog.

And that's been an enduring interest that we might come back to later, perhaps.

[01:46:23] Yes. Yes.[67]

I'd like to ask you a bit more about your university studies now, you've just mentioned. So you started – was that in 1975?

[01:46:34] Yes, that's right. So yes, I went straight from high school to university and started doing English History, which was History 1C, Psychology, Macroeconomics and Microeconomics, keeping in mind I'd been doing Economics at high school. But, in retrospect, I had a bit of a sort of mental health breakdown and I withdrew on 28 April. I think it was all pretty overwhelming. I was seeing the other day there were, in fact, 460 enrolments in History I the previous year, 1974, so you're kind of just in this *huge* crowd. You're anonymous in this huge crowd. And my friends from high school either hadn't gone on to university or were more in the sort of paramedical areas, so I hadn't moved through with friends who were doing Arts. And it was, you know, no doubt a good thing to have a break, anyway, because I had been a very conscientious student at high school, and so, as I say, I withdrew in the April. I cast around to find work to do. My only experience of work up until that time, which I continued doing on and off throughout university, was as, you know, a paid housecleaner through word of mouth and looking at advertisements [on the community noticeboard] in Woolworths and things like that.

---

[67] The subject was not pursued further in the interview. I have owned two Golden Retrievers, five Flat Coated Retrievers and a Curly Coated Retriever. I was an instructor at the Dover Gardens Kennel and Obedience Dog Club during the 1990s and wrote a short history of the club to mark its 30th anniversary in 1999, see http://www.sahistorians.org.au/175/documents/a-history-of-the-dover-gardens-kennel-obedience-cl-2.shtml.

[01:48:35] But I went around to various local and city businesses, seeing if they had any openings, and memorably went to David Jones. Yes, they had an opening in the fur department, and I came away thinking – because I was a precocious vegetarian from early in my high school years, when my older sister and I, our Uncle Eric from down Inman Valley had given us a horse to pasture in *Wittunga*. My older sister was horse-mad. And he also agisted steers destined for the abattoirs in the *Wittunga* paddocks, and so when the first lot went off to the abattoirs I said, 'I'm not eating meat until they've gone through the system,' and then I decided, well, I wouldn't, (laughs) after that. So having an opportunity to work in the fur department at David Jones wasn't going to happen. (laughs)

[01:49:47] So I looked more locally, and I think my mother suggested that I try Kalyra Nursing Home[68] up at Belair, and where the mother – no, it was Matron Watchman, who was a well-known [local] identity and known to my mother, and so I was taken on there as a nurse assistant and earned a bit of money – [and] had a very small but welcome inheritance from – my grandfather Keith Ashby's estate had wound its way through, and so I took myself off to England and Scotland and visited lots of rellies because there had been – on my mother's side there had always been the connections maintained with earlier generations, including with the Quaker tradition, keeping in touch. And my mother's older sister, Hazel, had been living in Edinburgh for many, many years, so I spent Christmas there. So I think that break did me good and I came home and started first year again in 1976. And I changed my choices a little bit, still doing English and History, but I picked up Classical Studies instead of Psychology and also continued with the Economics.

[01:51:48] And I do – I loved writing and I had – I've still kept a lot of the essays I did in high school and at university, and I had very much a love of English and History. I actually ended up doing more English and literature subjects through university than History but couldn't see a future application outside of academia. In my first year, two memorable lecturers were Barry Westburg and Michael Tolley. Michael is a member of the Society of Friends but he gave no quarter. But, for instance, I wrote an essay in my language assignment that year called 'Aussie Rools

[68] Known as Kalyra Hospital in that era, it comprised convalescent wards and the last vestiges of its former role as a tuberculosis sanatorium.

Footy as she is Wrote and Spoke', which I've still got today (laughs) and still reads quite well. I got a distinction for that from Michael Tolley, who was not someone you would associate with going to the football. And in History 1C the primary lecturer was Roger Hainsworth and Classics, John Trevaskis. I didn't keep that up, so second year I went English, American Literature, History – which was the War and Peace subject under Trevor Wilson, Professor Trevor Wilson – and did very well in that, and then in third year I refined further just to do English and History. I had been offered Honours in every single subject after first year, but I recognised at the time that that's just what they did if you got better than a pass and I ended up accepting or following through with Honours in History in 1979.

So when you came to do Honours History, how did you choose the topic and supervisor? How did that work?

[01:54:24] Yes. I think I was appointed a supervisor and it turned out to be, you know, an absolutely inspired choice for me, and that was Decie Denholm. She had been a long-long-term senior tutor in the History Department.[69] And, of course, your Honours thesis had to include original research, and I remember casting around in – interestingly, I hadn't done Australian History in my undergraduate years. Bill Gammage had joined the department in 1977 but I hadn't selected Australian History and I'd really – I mean, I'd done very well with Trevor Wilson in the War and Peace, Britain and Germany, 1870 to 1945 topic, and I did a lot of literature reading around that as well, such as *Testament of youth*[70] and then all of that author's works, because I always liked to contribute literary quotes to historical topics – contemporaneous literature.

[01:56:12] I hadn't done any Australian History, but I guess when you're doing Honours it kind of makes sense to look at something local because you're going to be able to find the primary sources. And I had been toying with the idea of doing a history of the environmental movement in South Australia, but found that someone was already working in that area. And so Decie Denholm said, 'Well, what about' – because she was a very good senior tutor who always had topics in her bottom drawer – 'What about looking into South Australian women during the First World

[69] Decie Denholm (1927 -2018), Senior Tutor in History, 1970-1989.

[70] *Testament of youth,* by Vera Brittain, first published 1933.

War?' she said. And I don't know whether it ran through my mind but I already knew quite a lot of women of older age groups and, as I say, I was very interested in the topic of war and peace, and I'd done undergraduate lectures on the conscientious objection movement, not just related to Quakerism, and so that appealed to me, that era.

[01:57:43] And then Decie said, 'And, you know, while you're at it, there are still women alive today who were adolescents or young women during the First World War.' And she said, 'I'm hearing about this research technique called "oral history". I think there's a meeting coming up at the university about that, so why don't you look into that and you might be able to apply that research technique?' And so it's thanks to Decie Denholm, who didn't have a personal interest in oral history and was just hearing about it on the grapevine, that I got involved. And so the first part of the year, of course, was involved in the – you'd also be doing your common course and a special topic, but I was also doing interviews and research, preparing to write the thesis later in the year.

[01:58:54] The common course was under the charge of Hugh Stretton and, I mean, I found all of these people terribly intimidating and they weren't people that I had casual conversations with, but I'm sure I benefitted from their tremendous intellects. And I don't know – you know, they wrote comments on the work that I did and I certainly took that to heart, more in, I guess, my writing style because I really didn't know where I wanted to go with research at that stage. And so one of the essays I did for Hugh I wrote it on Alex Haley and *Roots*,[71] and so again it was sort of combining different cultural studies or influences in the study of history, and I had taken up the recommendation from Hainsworth in my first year, where he'd commented on one of my essays which had been on slavery in the United States, and he'd said that, if I was interested in this topic, I should catch up with Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, roll*,[72] which had only recently been published. And indeed I bought that and read it and applied it to my writing on Alex Haley and *Roots*, so I was paying attention.

---

[71] *Roots: the saga of an American family,* by Alex Haley, novel first published in 1976, and television miniseries first aired 1977.

[72] *Roll, Jordan, roll: the world the slaves made,* by Eugene D Genovese, first published 1974.

[02:00:51] I did an essay on the 19th century American historian Frederick Jackson Turner and I was looking at that the other day, and I used quotes from F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner, both of whom were great favourites of mine, on the concept of frontier and the unknowable past and the nostalgia for an unknowable past and so on. And my special topic was Pacific History with John Young. He was a very impressive teacher. And in the exams we were advised by people like Hugh of the kinds of exam questions – or it might have been Decie who advised me – the kinds of questions that might come up in an exam. And one that I know I prepared for was I was told, well, it's very often there'll be a topic which asks you to discuss the various 'isms', like feminism, racism and so on. And me, having become a bit of an acolyte of Peter Singer,[73] I prepared my essay on speciesism and I think that's what might have tipped me over (laughs) into a first-class Honours, because I don't think I was an anticipated first-class Honours candidate.

[02:02:44] And, very memorably, when there was an event in one of the lecturers' homes – I think it was Wilf Prest's home – to celebrate those of us who'd got a first-class Honours when the results came out, he opened the door to me with a quizzical look on his face, 'And you are?' 'I'm Beth Robertson.' 'Oh, *you're* Beth Robertson,' and he took me into the room saying, '*This* is Beth Robertson,' because they must have all been standing around saying, 'I wonder which one *she* was.' (laughs) So I had remained a quietly conscientious student but I enjoyed and did well with the – particularly, I think, still at that stage with the writing side of things. I have a comment from Barry Westburg, I think it's when I was doing first year English – and I found him a very unsettling person. He was only just, I think, the second year over here from America and a bit of a tyro. And he wrote his comments on my essay, saying, 'This has all the benefits and faults of a "researched" essay.' And I think that – he didn't explain, and of course I didn't have the temerity to ask him what he meant by that – I think he wanted flights of fancy and personal interpretation and so on, which would have perhaps run the risk of being told, 'Why haven't you based this in sound research? Where are your sources?' But yes, I did become a bit of a master of the researched essay but enjoying adding the literary overlay to that. Yes.

---

[73] Peter Singer, Australian moral philosopher (1946-), author of *Animal liberation*, first published 1975.

[02:05:12] So I still have the schedule that I used from 17 September to 26 November in 1979 to write and have typed and have bound my thesis (laughs) on schedule.

So before you did that, though, you did a rather large number of interviews, so how did you –

[02:05:34] Yes.

– start and, you know, do them?

[02:05:37] Well, I had family connections and so – they're not well-prepared interviews, my first interviews. Some of them – I mean, as we know, as oral historians, in many cases you have great interviews in spite of you as an interviewer, and so I was blessed with some of them, such as Ellinor Walker,[74] who was involved in the Women's Non-Party Political Association and a wonderful speaker; and Kathleen Waterhouse,[75] who was a First World War army nurse, and she'd actually been engaged to my mother's uncle[76] who had died before my mother was born, and remained in contact with the family, and Kathleen had ended her career as Matron of the [Adelaide] Children's Hospital. So there were people like that as well as relatives. So I did interview Alison Ashby,[77] my mother's aunt, the wildflower painter, and that was lovely to have recorded her voice. Although I was a very inept interviewer, I did get some of her classic (laughs) ways of speaking on tape, and of course the wonderful story to have come from an elderly Quaker lady where she was collecting wildflowers in Cherry Gardens for her painting and she came across a gold sovereign. 'Evidently' – and that was one of her catch-phrases – evidently, an old German had been burying his hoard in the area and one had dropped out of his pocket. (laughs) So it was lovely to record some of those. My mother's aunt from *Cloverlea*, the dairy down at Mount Compass, Gladys Walker.[78]

---

[74] Ellinor Gertrude Walker (1893-1990). See https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/walker-ellinor-gertrude-15882.

[75] Kathleen Lucy Waterhouse (1891-1987).

[76] Ivan Edwin Ashby (1893-1920).

[77] Alison Marjorie Ashby (1901-1987). See http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/ashby-alison-marjorie-12151.

[78] Gladys Zellah Anderson, formerly Walker, née Sinigear (1901-1987).

[02:08:08] So yes. So first of all it was sort of done by extended family and connections, and then I had at least one, and it might have been more sessions, where I got permission to wander the halls of a nursing home, which was very unethical of me but I knew no better, and knock on people's doors – so talk about *me* being unprepared and *them* being unprepared – and ask were they in South Australia during World War I and would they mind talking to me about it. (laughs) And so those are particularly poorly-documented interviews, although some of them actually turned out to be quite valuable. They're short, but yes, there were some good results from that. But, obviously, it would have been much better to treat them as preliminary interviews and come back and do the real thing at a later date.

[02:09:16] Through Kathleen's connections, I interviewed several World War I army nurses and was very interested in that. And the thesis came together very well and is still very readable today and does still get used with a copy being at the State Library as well as at the university. So that was a worthwhile exercise and, of course, paved the way for the future because I hadn't landed on a topic where I might have been investigating another nuance of the outbreak of the First World War in Europe. So yes, that's thanks to Decie Denholm, and I have, on more than one occasion and in her presence, taken the opportunity to thank her for setting me on that path.

You mentioned that she'd said that there was going to be a meeting at the university about oral history, so did you go to that meeting?

[02:10:28] I don't think I went to the initial one, which was when Jean Teasdale[79] came over from Western Australia to actually establish the [South Australian] branch. I'd have to just double-check on that. But what I did go to was a seminar the same year, where a number of speakers, including I think Susan Marsden[80] as well as some of the more anthropologists at the Museum, so from a various number of fields, started talking about their research but now in terms of this concept of oral history.

---

[79] Jean Teasdale (1928-2002). Jean founded the Oral History Association of Australia in Western Australian in 1978.

[80] Susan became the inaugural President of the SA Branch. See OH 1168/1, SLSA.

[02:11:20] And Paul Thompson's book, *The voice of the past*,[81] was very new so I wasn't working – as I did, say, later, with the SA Speaks project[82] in the sesquicentenary – I didn't come to my oral history research for my Honours with any sense that there was a methodology in preparing for interviews and structuring interviews, or even documenting interviews. I was very much kind of making it up as I went along and just finding bits of information where I could.

[02:12:07] Fortunately, because, as we mentioned earlier, my brother was very technically-minded, I'd clearly said to him, you know, 'I'm going to be using a tape recorder,' which I did not have, 'for recording interviews.' And so he helped me source one – I can't remember whether he already had one or I bought one – but it was him who said, 'You'll need to plug in a microphone,' whereas most of those early interviews were just to have the tape recorder just sitting there using its crappy inbuilt microphone. And so he built the cable himself with the microphone so I did have a microphone pointing at the interviewee, so even though I'm an inept interviewer the sound is much better than it would otherwise have been, although I wasn't thinking about ambient sound and my method was to say – to put the interviewee at ease and to say, 'I'm using the tape recorder so that I don't have to take lots of notes and I can focus on you,' it wasn't 'so that this interview can become part of the historic record'. So I was very early in the practice.

[02:13:39] But my brother also – which I have spoken about before today – my brother also said, 'You're going to need a way of controlling the interview because people will get off track.' And so he rigged me up another – he built a lead that went into the auxiliary of the machine and he got a Kodak film canister and put a little switch in the top of the lid and I could hold that in my hand and surreptitiously turn the tape recorder on and off. And, of course, it didn't take me more than one or two interviews to realise what a bad idea this was and that I should learn how to become an active interviewer and to redirect the interviewee back onto the topic when needed, because if I turned it off as they strayed off-topic, odds-on I would then miss

---

[81] *The voice of the past: oral history*, by Paul Thompson, first published 1978.

[82] 'SA Speaks': an oral history of life in South Australia before 1930. Interviews with 45 men and women who were broadly representative of the population of South Australia as it was in the first three decades of the twentieth century. A Jubilee 150 project conducted by Beth M Robertson under the auspices of the History Trust of South Australia, 1984-1986.

the first half-sentence of when they themselves brought themselves back on-topic. And so I learned very early that I would just discard that innovation and become a better interviewer.

Well, that's probably a good spot – I'm just thinking – your voice is holding up very well, but we've actually been going two and a quarter hours without a break. So maybe we should stop at that point and then we can continue next time, I think, on just a little bit more about your thesis but then your later studies and work and the committee.

[02:15:34] Mm.

So thank you very much for today and I'm looking forward to continuing next week.

[02:15:40] Thank you.

END OF FILE 1: FILE 2

I'm Sally Stephenson and this is day two of the interview with Beth Robertson. Today is Wednesday, 16 December 2020 and we're at Beth's home in Blackwood, South Australia.

So thank you again, Beth, for your time today. We're going to start by going back over a few things that we discussed last time, and you wanted to tell me a little bit more about your mother.

[00:00:28] Yes. I thought I perhaps lost track of her, the chronology in regards to her as a young woman and those years. And I know I got into a bit of a muddle about when her parents and she and her siblings moved across the road to *Wittunga*, and that was in 1943, when my mother was doing Leaving Honours at Walford House. And that was after the death of her grandmother, Esther Ashby, and so the younger family moved across into *Wittunga* house, where Aunt Alison Ashby was otherwise living on her own.

[00:01:23] And I did want to mention also that, in her early 20s, my mother was diagnosed with spondylolisthesis, and this is a stress fracture of the vertebra, and it meant that she had to wear a stabilising Milwaukee brace for several years, which is a horrifying-looking contraption with a sort of head rest at the top and going right down with the contraption covering the hips to stabilise the vertebrae. It's [the condition] not something that's subject to operating. And then, after that, she wore a corset for decades, and yet she managed all of her physical activities as a botanist out

in the field and gardening and raising children and so on, with what to a lot of us would have seemed quite a defeating incapacity. So I thought I would mention that.

[00:02:39] And I'd also lost track of when she was working as a systematic botanist at the Waite Institute, and that was, in fact, her first main job and she was there from 1947 to 1953. And it was after that that she worked as a senior research fellow on Black's *Flora of South Australia*, second edition, or part 4, second edition.

[00:03:15] I'd also like to mention, in terms of her involvement in my father's recovery, that, while he became quite committed to the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous, she joined Al-Anon,[83] which is the self-support group associated with AA. And after my father's death she also went onto the board of the South Australian Foundation on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse that he had been working on, and Bill Salter as well, and she actually did that for 12 years after his death, until 1979 – so a real ongoing commitment with that – and formed again lifelong friendships through Al-Anon with other, in this case, women whose partners were alcoholics or recovered alcoholics.

[00:04:33] And, just finally, I mentioned that in 1967 she became a research assistant to Professor Womersley at the Botany Department at Adelaide University, and it was a relatively precarious employment because she was always on contract and dependent on him being successful in annual, two-year, three-year research grants. But, of course, those research grants were also tied to him having someone of her calibre so that the research and publication about seagrasses could continue.

And did she get superannuation as part of her contract?

[00:05:22] No. (laughs) And she did – I think I mentioned she did, very late in her career, engage in some industrial action in terms of questioning her rate of remuneration and was reclassified quite late in her career.

Well, I'd like to move now to ask you a bit more about your Honours. So we talked quite a lot about your Honours degree last time, but I was interested now in finding out from you how you felt personally about interviewing those 43 women for your thesis.

[00:06:05] Yes. Well, looking back, most of the interviews are in the State Library's collection. Not all of them were fit to go in because I mentioned haunting the halls

[83] Al-Anon members are relatives or friends of alcoholics.

of a nursing home, and in some cases I just didn't have enough information to feel that it was right to include those interviews. Some of the interviews were well prepared for – I mentioned people like Ellinor Walker in the first part of this interview, and I feel they do stand the test of time. I felt, I think, relatively confident. I think I became more nervous about interviewing as I went on in my career, when you know just how much you can prepare to improve the outcome of an interview. So I think back in my very early days I was quite blithe about it and, as I said last time, just assuring the interviewee I was using the tape recorder so that I didn't have to take notes rather than, as I would go on to say, so that we could get an excellent recording of their voice, which is an important component to this material being created for the historic record. So those first interviews I wasn't expecting that they would have a life after my thesis, but fortunately, of course, I didn't dispose of them. And nor in that era was my research subject to the consideration of an ethics committee, so I didn't actually give anything back to the interviewees, but those who I got through personal networks I think were very pleased with the outcome and knowing that the thesis had been finished and done well.

Did any of them ask to read the thesis?

[00:08:33] No, not that I recall. I think they were just humouring me and helping me.

You've written in one of the *Word of mouth* articles for the State Branch[84] that you were excited by the rich textures that words, phrases and stories quoted from the interviews added to writing, and it's interesting because I think we don't always talk about the literary merits of an oral history interview.

[00:08:56] Yes.

So I just wanted to hear you –

[00:08:58] Yes.

– talk a bit more about more about that side of it.

[00:09:00] And, look, and I still have words and phrases and stories that are evoked in my head when I recall particular interviews, and yes, I did make a great deal of use of quotations, probably more quoting interviews rather than analysis in my early

[84] 'Thanks for the memories' pp 9-11, *Word of mouth*, Christmas 2001, published by the Oral History Association of Australia (SA Branch).

days. And yes, I love to use people's manners of speaking, just as in my writing right back from university days I liked to use quotation from literature. And people in their personal idiosyncratic ways of speaking, of course, come out with marvellous turns of phrase as well.

Now, when you did your initial training, you've written that that was a workshop run by Ray Broomhill[85] and Susan Marsden. What was that workshop like?

[00:10:04] That was more – it wasn't how to do an interview. It was more along the lines of, 'Here is a range of people applying recorded interviews to their work.' So I don't believe that I was following any kind of methodology or preparation regime in my Honours year. And then my big influence from that year was then the work of Paul Thompson.

So, thinking back to those first interviews, what equipment did you use then?

[00:10:50] It was just a simple cassette tape recorder, and I think I described last time that I did apply an external microphone and that would have been, I think, at the suggestion of my brother, being a technically-minded person.

And so that was just a single microphone at that time.

[00:11:15] Yes. Yes. And a stand-held one, so it would have been the classic kind of pointing between us (laughs) rather than pointing at either of us. And very, very cheap, so I don't know whether my brother had any consideration of its pickup range or pattern. I certainly didn't.

We'll move on now to ask you about the work that you did immediately after your Honours, when you – so this is now 1980/81, and you started Library Studies, you told me. Why?

[00:11:55] Yes. Yes. I did. So the Graduate Diploma of Library Studies at what was then the South Australian Institute of Technology on the corner of North Terrace and Frome Road, the big old building there, it was – it's curious because, of course, I have ended up at the State Library for my career. I withdrew in the June of that year feeling, I think, that was probably a major episode in what many years later was diagnosed as depression, but it also felt like going back to school, the manner in

[85] Ray Broomhill had recorded interviews for his PhD thesis 'A social history of the unemployed in Adelaide during the great depression', awarded 1976.

which the course was taught. So I'd done very well in an Honours year and then find myself in a course where they're doing a roll call at the beginning of the class (laughs) and where the lecturer for the History of Libraries stood up in front of us and said, 'This is the textbook. I will be reading a chapter each time you see me.'

[00:13:21] It did feel like a step backwards, although I could see the great attraction. I enjoyed the cataloguing – a bit like learning shorthand, but I enjoyed that kind of detailed work following established rules. And I enjoyed – oh, we wrote book reviews, went to Writers' Week and wrote commentaries on what we'd heard and so on. But also, with a poor mental state, we were also supposed to learn a bit about computing, but it was still the programming through cards and my mind just went, 'I won't be able to cope.' And in the state I was in I didn't ask for help, and so I felt, 'No. No. I'll just back out of this.' And, in fact, I was straight As up until that point, but I did withdraw from it and I did go to talk to Decie Denholm and she was preparing the work *Behind the lines: one woman's war*,[86] which involved letters home from Berlin, where the woman was trapped, to friends and family in South Australia. And so I was involved as a research assistant to Decie Denholm in the later part of that year, so that was a nice, quiet occupation, proofreading the typescripts with her reading from the letters, and vice versa. Yes.

And so how long did you do that?

[00:15:43] That was just for the rest of 1980. Yes.

And then I think it was the following year you worked as a tutor in Australian History.

[00:15:54] Yes. So I'd retreated from Library Studies and thought, well, the best way forward will be to go back to the History Department and become a postgrad student. And in some ways that was never going to work, given my mental state, but in other ways, of course, it gave me the time – which I shouldn't have had; I should have been devoting it to my postgrad studies – but it gave me the time to do so much work for the South Australian Branch of the Oral History Association, which ended up with my later employment. So I enrolled in a Master's degree as a postgraduate

[86] *Behind the lines: one woman's war, the letters of Caroline Ethel Cooper,* edited by Decie Denholm, 1982. See https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/2583#idx18275.

research scholar and that was converted to a PhD after only one year, and I don't know what they were paying attention to to allow me to do that. (laughs) The original idea was that I was going to do a history of nursing, including oral history, and then that was refined to a history of the Royal District Nursing Society [RDNS] and the earlier district nursing movement in South Australia.

[00:17:17] I couldn't work with Decie Denholm because she was a mere senior tutor, so she wasn't available to supervise postgraduate work, and I was assigned a supervisor, and I won't name him because it was a very – it was an unhappy match in that he had just – or very soon after I began reporting to him he suffered a tragedy in his family, I was very depressed, and we spent the next two years avoiding each other. I don't think it was anybody's fault – perhaps the department for losing track of what on earth was going on – but yes, so that was an unhappy partnering there. It did give me the opportunity, as you say, to tutor in first year Australian History, which was really, apart from probably more fiction reading in that area, it was really the first Australian or South Australian History that I'd done, so I was preparing tutorials and learning as *I* went along as well. And one of my co-tutors, Bernie O'Neil, we'd both gone through Honours together and I think Rob Linn may have been tutoring as well – I don't have a clear memory of that – and they both went on to be professional historians[87] and, you know, I've remained in touch with them and others from that era since then.[88]

So, coming back to the PhD side of it, you did switch supervisor, I think, didn't you?

[00:19:21] That was when it was kind of, 'How can we extricate Beth from this mess?' And so that was in 1984 or perhaps late 1983, when I was switched to Susan Magarey,[89] and she was very, very kind and understanding, as so too was Lois Thompson, the Director of Nursing at the Royal District Nursing Society, and so I remember having quite a – from my point of view, I was very, very upset, needing to sit down and talk to Lois, but she was very, very understanding and kind. I'd done a

[87] Both also went on to use oral history as a primary research technique.

[88] I have been a member of the Association of Profession Historians (SA), later Professional Historians Association (SA) since 1990.

[89] Susan Magarey was Director of the Research Centre for Women's Studies at the University of Adelaide, 1983-2000.

lot of interviews and I was so thrilled when Rob Linn was commissioned to do a history of the RDNS for a book that was published in 1994,[90] and so I handed over all my material and, in particular, the oral histories he made a lot of use of in his book. So I sort of felt guilty right up until that time, (laughs) and then it was a weight lifted off my shoulders, that I felt that faith had been kept with the interviewees and that the material was used for the purpose for which it was recorded, and those interviews are also in the State Library's collection.

Now, I note you mentioned that, at the time you were supposed to be doing your PhD, you were doing a lot of work for the Oral History Association. So can you tell me a little bit about that involvement? I know you have written about it –

[00:21:22] Yes.

– in *Word of mouth*.[91]

[00:21:24] Yes. So I had joined in 1979 and I became a committee member in 1981, and then in 1982 became secretary while Kathleen Patitsas[92] was president, and then after the national conference and biennial general meeting that we convened in Adelaide at very short notice in 1983, I was elected president. I think Kathleen and Susan Marsden are very good at strong-arming people (laughs) into positions. So from 1983 and right through to 1997, I was president, editor – establishing *Word of mouth* – and we always called me 'acting secretary'; Joan Durdin[93] in particular was minutes secretary, so I did the sort of correspondence side of things as well – as well as being South Australian representative on the national committee. So that sort of intense involvement even predated working professionally as an oral historian or oral history officer at the State Library.

So when you were president for all that time did you have particular goals that you were trying to achieve?

---

[90] *Angels of mercy: district nursing in South Australia 1894-1994* by Rob Linn, 1993.

[91] 'Thanks for the memories' op cit.

[92] Kathleen was the second President of the SA Branch. See OH 1168/2, SLSA.

[93] Dorothy Joan Durdin (1922-) became the fourth President of the SA Branch. While still in good health in 2019 during the development of the Past Presidents of Oral History Australia SA/NT Oral History Project, Joan did not feel that her memory of her term was clear enough to support an interview. After retiring as a nurse educator in 1983 Joan attained Honours in History at the University of Adelaide and went on to record over 100 interviews and publish three books documenting South Australian nursing history.

[00:23:09] My goals, fitting with my personality type, was to get everything properly organised and on a businesslike basis. (laughs) So, in those early days, myself and Joan [Durdin] and Robin Radford as treasurer, our goals were to establish a suitable constitution, to incorporate the branch, establish *Word of mouth* as a regular newsletter, yes, and play our role supporting the national executive as well. So those were my sort of goals in the early years. And then, when it coincided with me first being an oral historian for the sesquicentenary project and then Oral History Officer at the State Library, of course, I'm spending all my days doing projects in oral history and assisting others to do them, and so I didn't also think how could we as an organisation do as, for instance, Susan Marsden had done and establish external to the Association, say, a large government-funded oral history project.

I'll come later to some of the other activities that you ran when you were in the Association, but what do you think were the main achievements and innovations, though, during that time apart from, you know, the constitution, the procedural side of things?

[00:25:13] Look, I don't – unless you've got some in mind, no. Nothing is outstanding to me. We were always very concerned to establish and maintain a sizeable membership and that is challenging in an area such as oral history, where most people move in and out of the practice and a much lesser proportion are involved long term. So you're always attempting to increase the membership, and so I know we started looking at ways where, of course, the – conducting workshops brings in the new members, then how to keep them. And so that's where we moved on to what we called skills seminars and mini-conferences and that sort of thing.

Well, I notice that, in 1990, for example, that you had more than 100 members, apparently, in the state branch, which is very impressive. I know at the moment we vary between 45 and 75. So how did you promote it? It was mainly through workshops then, are you saying?

[00:26:50] Yes. Yes, very much so. And always – as has been a feature, I think, through the life of the Association, not just here in South Australia but interstate as well – you have a wide range of people coming to the practice, and so there are a lot of community-based members' projects. And having that coinciding of the Oral History Officer, as I was then, at the State Library and presenting workshops, that could say, 'You don't just have my support in the work you're doing, but also this

voluntary organisation as well.' So I know that was definitely a symbiotic arrangement.

You referred a moment ago to the range of different backgrounds of people coming to the workshops and becoming members have been. Has that been consistent over the years, the types of backgrounds, or has it evolved?

[00:28:07] I don't think it has evolved. I think it has been consistent. I had a simple database of people and the organisations they were associated with or their status, say, as a student or lecturer. And from when I started at the State Library in 1987, running the workshops myself through the Library, and right up to 2000, and there are about 1000 names in that list, because I did about 50 one-day workshops during that period. And no, it's a pretty stable mix of, as I say, the community-based projects that can come from any quarter, students, teachers – perhaps they faded away over time; there was a period where the History Teachers' Association was very keen and would organise workshops in conjunction with the Library. They were always the hardest ones to hold and to maintain contact with, particularly because I would make it very clear to them from that era – there were over 1000 schools in South Australia, so I would say to the teachers, 'I'm here to teach you. You're here to teach the students,' whereas a lot of them seemed to like the model more of the, 'Can't you come into the classroom?' And if that had started there would have been no end to that.

[00:30:14] Looking over the list of all those attendees, you do notice that there's a very low representation of actual working historians in academia – a sprinkle, but I think South Australia in particular – it didn't have as many academics working in oral history, as opposed to professional historians, and also perhaps didn't hit an era when someone lecturing in History thought, 'Well, I'd better find out about what this technique is so that I know about it and can promote it as a research technique to my students.' So I think they are the main sort of gap that I would point to.

[00:31:12] But when I was (laughs) reviewing the list the other day, I was astounded to find that Leonard Cohen had attended, although he may have been distinguishing himself because he fitted in an initial there: 'Leonard J Cohen'. It might not have been the same person [as the Canadian singer-songwriter]. And also the *wonderful* English actress, Margaret Rutherford. Again, it might have been a different person because they were associated with the Campbelltown Local History

Group. But (laughs) those names hadn't stuck in my brain. But Stewart Cockburn,[94] the [veteran] journalist, he had attended a workshop. People from all over the place.

Well, perhaps it would be a good time to ask a bit more about the workshops that you ran. So you said you ran fifty – I think – one-day workshops. And so that was the introductory workshop, you - - -?

[00:32:09] Yes. Yes.

So how did that develop over time? So you talked about the one you went to, which wasn't really a hands-on workshop. How did the first workshops run?

[00:32:20] Yes. So before I went to the Library I started giving talks on behalf of the Oral History Association, just looking here at the chronology, and the first one branded as an 'oral history workshop' – and this was for the Association, so prior to me working at the Library – was in 1983. And by that time I'd had, I suppose, going on five years of practice and my own practice and reading and knowing – being associated a little with work done by Susan Marsden, Ray Broomhill and others. So it really just began in an organic fashion. I didn't have a template to follow, just, you know, how do you – probably, as with the early – the first two editions of the *Oral history handbook*, so very basic here's what oral history is; here's what you need to do it. Still at that early stage, much more the sociological methodology of 'You'll need to establish a questionnaire, a sort of one-size-fits-all for your project', which I moved away from later. And then, over the years, adding in a lot of excerpts so that people could actually hear oral history and what can go right and what can go wrong, as well as the wonderful voices involved. Becoming more technical, in terms of actually giving people hands-on opportunities with the recording equipment.

So what equipment was that that they were using in the early workshops?

[00:34:44] The Association – we bought a Marantz tape recorder, a generation before the one that was the mainstay in the analogue era at the State Library – that was the CP430. I can't remember whether it was the [CP]230 that we bought. You could attach two microphones but it wasn't stereo, and we certainly only had the one. And so that would more or less be show and tell in those very early years, but then, coming to the State Library and establishing a fleet of loan equipment kits, then I'd

[94] Stewart Cockburn (1921-2009).

lug two or three or four of them to each workshop so that groups of two or three or four people could each have a go with each one.

So in those early days, when the people went to the workshops and they could see that early Marantz recorder, what equipment were they able to use for their interviews?

[00:35:48] They would be using something bought from Dick Smith or Tandy. Yes, we weren't aiming very high at that stage, but certainly, fortunately, always promoting the use of a microphone that could plug in rather than using the internal microphone of the machine.

And so over the years, then, how did those workshops change?

[00:36:20] They changed – the needs – I've explained how they became perhaps more complex and the use of excerpts allowing people to understand how the formulation of questions can make or break an interview. But the way they changed was more to keep my level of interest, so I would be refreshing excerpts and something not necessarily from my own interviewing, which became less and less, but from all the works that I was supporting in community projects and academic projects and so on, hearing things. Also it was great that, after a few years at the State Library, I delved into a tape collection that dated back to the 1960s that was finally allowed to be converted into the Oral History Collection, and it was great to be able to find examples of what not to do with people who were no longer around to be offended by their recordings being made use of. (laughs)

I'm interested, too, how you actually played the excerpts in those days prior to PowerPoint and digital projectors.

[00:37:48] Yes. Yes. It was a real challenge. I know I started with a very cheap speaker – again, Dick Smith or Tandy or somewhere – and that was pretty tinny and, depending on your venue, you know, you'd say to people, 'Now, everyone be quiet and I think you'll be able to pick this up.' But then working with contract audio engineers at the State Library we settled on a – it was bigger than a breadbox – a quite massive, but – not massive, but sort of – what am I - - -?

That's about two feet, isn't it, I reckon?

[00:38:43] Yes. And a good 10 inches deep, but incredibly heavy, with good valves, so a twin speaker all in one moulding and, my word, that added to the weight of the

stuff that you lugged around, but it could fill a small hall with the sound. So that became part of my equipment for every workshop.

What were the excerpts on? What, were they on tapes?

[00:39:17] Cassette, yes. So the speaker plugged into one of the Marantz tape recorders for playback.

And how had you edited those to play?

[00:39:27] Yes. The audio – working with a contract audio engineer [at the State Library], part-time to start with, they were always a great help. When I established the analogue sound archiving equipment in 1987/88, having gone to the State Library position, I did learn how to use the open reel side of that as well. So, at a pinch, I could do quite nice editing, but it was for the most part working with the audio engineer to help create that or to – you know, we had the – an element of this, I think, still gets used – the 'Voices of the Somerville Collection' [compilation tape], and that kind of top-and-tailing excerpts, bringing them all together, that was the sort of thing the audio engineer did for me.

Now, you've mentioned that there were the skills seminars as well for those who'd already done the introductory one. How did you develop the topics that were offered?

[00:40:45] Oh, I think that was more just blue-sky thinking and discussion with the committee, or coming across someone in our own work that we thought would be [interesting]. I know in the early years the one that got the biggest attendance was when Rob Linn came and talked about how you can make money from being an oral historian, because he was an established professional historian then. We had some great support from people in the audio industry who would come and talk about how you can use recorded material, and also good support in the radio world – community radio world, particularly Radio Adelaide 5UV[95] coming along and talking about preparing recordings for broadcast and so on.

[95] Radio Adelaide (call sign 5UV) was established by the University of Adelaide in 1972. Rick Palmer, the original technician at 5UV, was a great source of technical advice in the development of the oral history collection at the State Library.

So are there any of the other topics that stick in your mind? I know that there were – I've written down from what you've written about reminiscence therapy, copyright, defamation and - - -.

[00:42:01] Mm, the legal one on copyright/defamation – that was great because working out an appropriate conditions of use agreement was what first got me interested in copyright. And defamation – of course, very interesting. It's not so much the interviewer who gets muddled about defamation. (laughs) I found it was often the interviewee – the interviewee who would say, 'I won't mention any names because, of course, I can't,' and they were talking about the most innocuous topic. But you mentioned reminiscence therapy, and I just loved getting involved in that. That was a whole new group of people. So that was – let's get the dates for this clear.

I've got 1989, 1990 and 1991.

[00:43:07] Yes. Now, the beginning of that was me having – because of the airline strike and being at that stage president of the national executive as well as the local branch, I was obliged to take a bus over to Perth to attend the conference that year and the UK academic, Joanna Bornat, was visiting. And we'd organised her to come back to South Australia to run a reminiscence seminar, so this is the idea of using reminiscence, as opposed to oral history, as therapy with the elderly and including with people in early stages of dementia. And I'd got to know some local health workers who were interested in this and I just loved being involved with that group of people, quite a disparate group of people, working in nursing homes and occupational therapy, nursing and the like. And the bus trip back with Joanna Bornat and talking to her – she is a historian and I particularly love the work she does reusing oral histories done by others,[96] which is a great interest of mine because too often researchers go out and do another lot of interviews. But, as time passes, that changes.

---

[96] See, for example, Joanna Bornat's articles 'A second take: revisiting interviews with a different purpose', *Oral history*, vol 31, no 1, 2003, pp 47-53; 'Revisiting the archives – opportunities and challenges: a case study from the history of geriatric medicine' with Parvati Raghuram and Leroi Henry, *Sociological research online*, vol 17, no 1, 2012, pp 1-38; 'Secondary analysis in reflection: some experiences of re-use from an oral history perspective', *Families, relationships and societies*, vol 2, no 2, 2013, pp 309-17.

[00:45:09] So Joanna came over. We had 80 people at the first seminar in 1989, and then we went on for another two years and the people I was working with were Coral Wheaton, Priscilla Binks, Janet Faber, Winsome Dunn and Sylvia Jobling. And yes, I found it really quite inspiring. It was in that era that one of them developed the reminiscence board game and actually created a prototype that did go into production,[97] so with a very large square dice that would then – you would roll and whichever colour came up you'd take a card out of the box and there'd be a question that might trigger some memory. But reminiscence is more than that; it's also using sensory stimulation, such as bringing along rosemary sprigs or lavender, all sorts of things to stimulate responses in memory. I really, really enjoyed that.

Now, we've touched on it a little but I'd like to ask you a bit more, actually, about the link between the state branch and the State Library, which was obviously because of your role, which we'll come to specifically a bit later. But you've mentioned the equipment loans, and I think South Australia is actually the only library – at the moment, anyway – offering oral historians the opportunity to borrow equipment, and I'm wondering how that scheme developed.

[00:47:16] I don't have a clear story to tell you around that. I know at the time the Battye Library[98] was providing loan equipment, so that may well have been part of it, because I certainly started my initial project budget – because I was originally a contract position – I did start immediately purchasing more units than I'd need to do oral history because it was always envisaged to be a collection that would be community-based in terms of its donations, 'vicarious collecting' rather than – which originally the Battye Library – it had been interviews done by staff members or commissioned interviews. I do remember that the – because the Battye Library was the first I was funded to visit – they were the longest-standing oral history program associated with a library in Australia – and I remember being a bit alarmed to see that there again one of the earlier generations of the Marantz tape recorder, Marantz CP430 tape recorder, and their oral history officers had gone to work with some masking tape and using white-out as pointers to indicate where the settings should be left. And I remember thinking, 'Ooh, I don't think that's the best way to get the best

[97] *Magic memories: a walk down memory game*, published by the Alzheimer's Association (SA), 1995. Nikki Dellavia who developed the prototype was a member of the Reminiscence Working Party described above.

[98] JS Battye Library of West Australian History, State Library of Western Australia.

sound levels and recording of an individual voice.' Yes. So I think it was a combination of the intention of the library to collect – to assist the community-based oral histories and that example from the Battye Library.

So now we're lucky to have Peter Kolomitsev and Andrea Hensing-Matto to manage that equipment and help people coming and borrowing it and so on. Who were the earlier people in those positions?

[00:49:45] Oh, gosh. Well, the first three or four contract audio engineers, I learned of them – they were each of them recommended to me by Al Sankauskas, who was the owner of Adelaide Tape Duplicators, which was one of the businesses that, you know, having me contact them about the development of the oral history collection and service at the State Library and also me seeking suppliers for equipment, they became very supportive. Al I think I'd gone to during the SA Speaks project for the copying of the master tapes after each interview was done. Yes. So he put me first onto – I can picture him and I cannot recall his name just at the moment[99] – our initial contract audio engineer, and of course this was only working one or two days a week, a couple more short-term ones and then Rob Pillar, who was a contract audio engineer with us for quite some years until around sort of 2003, and then Peter Kolomitsev since 2004 and then – that was through recruitment, and Silver Moon was the runner-up in that recruitment and so, when we had some contract funding, she came on board very quickly and was made permanent, and now Andrea Hensing-Matto – we're on the brink of making her permanent.

Well, we've sort of leapt forward a little bit and I'd like to come back now to ask you about the SA Speaks oral history project and how that project developed and how you came to be the interviewer in it.

[00:52:22] Yes. Well, we talk a lot about the development of that project in the interview I did with Susan Marsden,[100] because that was her inspiration. She originally envisaged it as interviewing centenarians, but it was amended in its scope, in its development before I came on board, to be an oral history of people who could talk about life in South Australia before 1930, so people who were young adults, if not a bit older, come 1930. And that was as one of the projects funded for the

[99] Phil Hibberd.

[100] OH 1168/1, SLSA.

Jubilee 150, the sesquicentenary [in 1986], through the History Committee, and I applied for the job. And I remember the supervisor was going to be John Tregenza,[101] who was the State Historian with the History Trust of South Australia, and I remember that, as part of my application, I was expected to send in an example of my interviewing. And that was the occasion when you realise, 'Ah! The element of the [interviewer] being silent is quite an important one.'

[00:54:05] It was the first time I'd had one of my interviews being scrutinised, as opposed to being something I'd done for research purposes, and I remember going through my recordings going, 'I'm not going to be able to find one which I'm not an audible nuisance in – during the duration of an interview.' But one of the district nursing ones I felt, no, that's got both good content, [and] I'm quite restrained with my 'yes', 'yes', 'ooh!', 'ah', and of course I put a covering note to it saying that the SA Speaks project – the interviews are intended for reuse and I would be putting a sock in it (laughs) from now on. Produced an interview log to go with it because the SA Speaks project, of course, was pre there being an oral history collection at the State Library. People such as Sue Marsden and Kathleen [Patitsas], as part of their lobbying for an oral history program at the State Library, had been donating recordings to kind of make the point, and SA Speaks was also supposed to be an exemplar of the practice of oral history methodology and material that would then be research-ready for a public collection. So I tried to reflect that in my supporting material for the application.

[00:55:57] Yes, and I did get the job. Susan Magarey was very supportive, I know. She was a referee and she certainly could speak to my oral history expertise. And then it would have been Susan Marsden as well, in terms of all my involvement with the Oral History Association because the SA Speaks Project Officer was also to be supporting community-based interviewing programs concurrent with the sesquicentenary celebrations. Yes. So I didn't get a PhD, but I got my first full-time job.

What was the scope of that project? How many interviews were you planning?

[101] John Tregenza (1931-1999).

[00:56:50] Originally, it was – on paper it was to be 100, and it ended up being 45. John Tregenza was supportive of it being more extensive interviews rather than more, shorter interviews and so the interviews averaged three hours in length. He'd done a very little bit of research-oriented interviewing so, you know, only a handful, but he was certainly a supporter of the technique.[102] He could see its potential. And he listened back to the early interviews. I've mentioned before me being very much influenced by Paul Thompson, the British oral history pioneer, who in turn had been very influenced by the practice of sociologists, where it's a consistent questionnaire that is applied to each interview so that you can get seriously compatible data points to compare. And that's certainly how I had first structured the interviews so that they would all deal with - - -. When I look at the early ones – they're all online and the transcripts are all online[103] – they move through in some detail, including, for instance, 'Describe that house you were growing up in and the rooms in relation to each other,' and so on.

[00:58:50] And the first – I don't want to malign them, but the first few interviewees, I think, were probably as nervous as I was and perhaps by coincidence not the best of raconteurs, and John's feedback was that he was – while he could see that one could compare the data between the interviews, he wasn't hearing any stories emerge or not a lot of stories emerge. And so I can see that the 'shape' of the interviews, what I call the shape of the interviews – I base it on the transcript, what the transcript looks like – changed fairly quickly so that those common questions took up less of the interview and then more of a focus on the individual's experience of, particularly, their working lives from their teens onwards.

So did you feel in the later interviews were you able to get more stories?

[01:00:09] Yes. Yes, and then that became a focus of my technique is how to change the way that I ask questions to elicit stories.

How did you change the technique?

---

[102] Eight interviews recorded by John Tregenza in the early 1970s are held at OH 30, OH 279 and in OH 730, SLSA. He made later use of the technique in 1990 researching the history of the Le Messurier family, OH 83, SLSA.

[103] State Library of South Australia Digital Collections: SA Speaks: An Oral History of Life in South Australia before 1930.

[01:00:24] Oh, the good old open questions and the shamefaced 'Tell me more', (laughs) and also the techniques of how to overcome the interviewee who says, 'But I told you about that when we first met in the preliminary interview.' And so the question would be 'You were telling me the other day about', and I'd have warned them I would be asking them to repeat: 'Can you tell that to me again?' So yes, starting to develop those interviewing techniques to elicit stories.

Now, apart from doing the interviews themselves, there were transcripts and summaries. Did you have to do those yourself or did someone - - -?

[01:01:14] Not the actual transcription, but yes, I did the summaries and even indexing for the first portion of interviews.

So was there a template that you worked from when you started those or was that something you also needed to develop?

[01:01:30] No. I think I needed to develop that as well. I was forging my way. (laughs)

Who did the transcripts?

[01:01:44] I think it was – even at the start then I think it was Chris Gradolf – Christine Gradolf. Yes. I can't remember – I mean, she advertised as Adelaide Transcription Bureau, of course more – very much – relying on business transcription.[104] And then she was very good at then learning the different techniques and ways of representing speech on paper. And so she remained as a contract transcriptionist when I went to the library as well and right through until about 2001 or so, I think. (telephone rings)

There's a phone ringing. I don't know whether you just want to pause to - - -.

[01:02:47] It will go away in a minute. It's got a very short time.

I'll just wait till they've finished leaving a message.

[01:03:13] Unusual these days to get a message. It's usually a hang-up. (pause)

Someone's leaving a *very* long message on your phone.

[01:03:49] I think it might be a Christmas message from a - - -.

[104] At that stage Chris Gradolf was using the original 8-inch floppy disks for word processing.

I think it might be an entire Christmas letter. (laughter, pause, beeps) Okay. So after that very long message on your phone we'll just continue. So we were talking about the transcripts and you mentioned that Christine Gradolf was doing them and the sort of formatting, and I'm interested – in the *Handbook* you set out or explain how to set out a transcript. Is that something that you'd done from the early days or had that changed with experience?

[01:04:38] I'm remembering that there was an early book. I'm just going to very carefully stand up and see if I can spot it on the shelf.

You've got a three-metre cable.

[01:04:54] Oh! Okay. (walks to bookcase) So here we go. (returns to seat)

So Beth has just got a book from her bookshelf. It's called *Oral history program manual* by William W Moss.[105]

[01:05:24] Yes. So this is a book that I bought myself, possibly recommended to me by my colleagues at the Battye Library, and so that was very much written from the point of view of managing an oral history collection. And, of course, I had the examples from the Battye Library as well. So those will have been a couple of sources of information for me. And in my first year – this [book] is actually 1974 – and in my first year, besides going to the Battye Library – this is my first year at the State Library [in 1987] – I was also able to go to the Canberra institutions, so seeing the examples particularly at the National Library's Oral History Program.

So, coming back to the SA Speaks Oral History Project, as well as doing the interviews and the transcripts, I know that there were some other things that you did. You told me in the preliminary interview that you went out and talked to groups and did – well, you made overtures to the ABC Radio History Unit, but can you tell me a bit more about those, please?

[01:06:51] Yes, yes. There was an idea that the SA Speaks project would lead to a book and perhaps be used by ABC radio for some broadcasting. That didn't eventuate but I know Peter Cahalan, who was the director of the History Trust, he and I met with Daniel Connell, who was a member of the ABC Social History Unit[106] – a unit that goes through many different name changes, but that was the most stable in that era. I got to know Bill Bunbury, who was the Western Australian

---

[105] *Oral history program manual* by William W Moss. Published by Praeger, JF Kennedy Library, New York, 1974.

[106] Social History Unit, Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

member of the unit, and he was just lovely and very, very supportive, and his oral history-based books, based on his broadcasting, are wonderful; and then, from the Eastern States, Tim Bowden. So all of them were very supportive, not just helping me but also of the Oral History Association nationally as well. And, in later years, Jenny Palmer as well, not to forget Ros Bowden. Both Tim and her were quite a partnership in that broadcasting area.

And, in terms of talking to groups, which groups did you address?

[01:08:32] It was really those who asked me, (laughs) because I did quite a lot of radio, both to elicit ideas for interviewees, recommendations for interviewees, because it was very much – as a government-funded sesquicentenary project, it was very much expected to be interaction with the public, and so I would get people ringing in to radio or following up with me afterwards about how their uncle or their great-aunt should be part of the program. And I diligently went to the 1911 census and worked out, in broad brushstrokes, the makeup of the South Australian population at the time so that I could interview very roughly, you know, a representative sample from regional, religion, occupation, cultural and so on.

And did you find – by the way that you did identify interviewees, were you able to fill all those different demographic groups?

[01:09:51] Broadly speaking, yes. There wasn't Aboriginal involvement. I can't remember the discussion around that, but there were, of course, other sesquicentenary projects in that area.[107] But otherwise, yes, got a nice big German descent representation, because that was about 10 per cent of the population at that stage, and about equal numbers men and women. And, of course, being a city state, you're also helped –with not having the opportunity for much in the way of travel and accommodation – you're also helped that most people retire to Adelaide, so I was able to get quite a good regional representation without the need to travel very much.

Okay. So after the SA Speaks oral history project, I think you've finally reached the point at which you were actually appointed to the State Library in 1987, so can you tell me a bit about that? It was a new position, I know.

---

[107] *Survival in our own land: "Aboriginal" experiences in "South Australia" since 1836* told by Nungas and others; edited and researched by Christobel Mattingley ; co-edited by Ken Hampton, 1988.

[01:11:05] Yes.

But how it came to be created.

[01:11:09] Again, that's the good work of Sue Marsden and then definitely Kathleen Patitsas, and lobbying, the Association, the branch lobbying. So of course, after the idea took seed with the Libraries Board, there was then quite some years of it coming to fruition, so it wasn't a case that I was actively lobbying for the job I eventually got. John Tregenza was certainly supportive. And so, once the Libraries Board decided that they would support this development, they put their own – no, it wasn't *their* funds that went towards it, but there'd been a bequest from Mabel Somerville[108] in the name of her father, James Dugald Somerville.[109] He'd been a very keen researcher of the exploration era and West Coast – Eyre Peninsula, West Coast history – in his spare time in retirement. And so she'd left a small – in the great scheme of things, a small bequest to the library to be used for historical purposes, and so the board decided to apply not the whole sum, because they did want to continue earning interest from it, but apply that to – I can't remember whether the commitment was one or two years. So I applied for the contract position and, of course, the SA Speaks project and my involvement with the Oral History Association put me in a very good position (laughs) to get the job, because in some ways I was already doing it.

So I think Margy Burn was your boss when you started. What was her attitude to oral history and developing a collection?

[01:13:37] Oh, she – yes, she was very supportive. I was very sorry she was there for such a short time. [110] And prior to that – oh, his name's just gone out of my mind who was the initial Mortlock Librarian,[111] more from a sort of administrative perspective – no, it won't come to me. But both of them were very supportive and Margy, who I'd known from the Barr Smith Library, she certainly made – was very

[108] Mabel Somerville (1897-1981).

[109] James Dugald Somerville (1868-1960).

[110] Margy left Adelaide to work at the State Library of New South Wales. Her career culminated at the National Library as Assistant Director-General.

[111] Ross Barrett, project manager during the establishment of the Mortlock Library of South Australiana.

supportive in enabling me to travel in that first year to visit examples of collections in progress, and yes, that was a very welcoming start to the library.

[01:14:35] Not quite the same from the archives people. That was prior to the archives being split – government and non-government being split for the fruition of the Mortlock Library and State Records, and I remember being shown around, taken downstairs to the South Australian Archives, where one of the archivists who was to give me the tour just sort of folded her arms and leaned back [against the door] and told me that JD Somerville would be spinning in his grave if he knew how the money was being spent. And I was (laughs) not forthright enough, even though it went through my mind at the time because I'd done a bit of research about him, to reply that, 'I'm sure that, if he could hear the voices of the explorers that he was so intrigued by, he might well have embraced the technology.' But you can imagine there was quite a bit of competition over available funding.

So I know when you first started – you've written about it in *Word of mouth* – but there's a rather lovely photo in one of the articles with you sitting at your – here we are.

[01:15:58] Oh, yes.

In the room.[112] This looks rather different to today –

[01:16:03] Yes.

– but when you were first sort of setting up the cataloguing.

[01:16:07] Yes. So I had the whole of the room at the southern end of the Mortlock Chamber, upstairs, where these days the Royal Geographic Society Library is headquartered – magnificent room to come in and work in. And so that picture shows me sitting in front of some display panels that were made up with a lovely young designer based on interviewing I'd done for the SA Speaks project to illustrate different aspects and reproduce stories. The room was big enough to have the workshops up there while I still had sole occupancy. We had the analogue audio preservation system in one of the corners and I'm sitting there listening to a tape or some tapes with one of the transcriber machines, which we used for playback rather than the Marantzes that were used for interviewing, and my folders, which contained

[112] Photograph of Beth Robertson in what was then known as the Somerville Room, B 50247, SLSA.

printouts from the Inmagic database that was the program that was initially used to describe the collection.

[01:17:42] And you might remember earlier me saying the alarm with which I met the idea of learning how to program computers. Well, I got to the State Library and I was told I was going to pioneer the use of databases in the Mortlock Library. But I was feeling that I was in a much more supported atmosphere, and I certainly had the enthusiasm now. I had a real goal; it wasn't theoretical. And Margy sent me off to do a TAFE[113] course for people who were afraid of computers, and that covered word processing, databases and spreadsheets. And, of course, by now it was the era of you didn't have to understand computer programming to use these packages. We still had the command line, so it was still relatively rudimentary as personal computers, but because I knew exactly the application I was making of this technology I actually thrived with it and haven't looked back from that.

[01:19:12] We were leading up to the formal opening of the collection by the board, and my first task in having set up this Inmagic database was to finish cataloguing the SA Speaks project, which I was very familiar with and had done summaries, index headings, as part of that project, so it was fitting them into this database system, and I would just sit there watching the continuous computer paper rolling out of all 'my' (whispers) subject headings and all the names. (normal voice resumes) I just thought it was wonderful – but very early days use of computers in the library and a young woman was sent up to me to show me how I could back up the computer and all my work, because that would be a useful thing to do. And she brought up with her some of these newfangled floppy disks and she said, 'Now, these have been – these may already have data on them, so first of all we need to just clean the data off them, and you can do that by using this command.' And as she's saying, 'Make sure you're not in the C: drive,' I'm looking at the screen and saying, 'It's prompt – is it the C: drive?' And she's going 'Delete', and so all my work (laughs) of the last few weeks was gone, because she hadn't wiped the floppy, she'd wiped the hard drive. And it was a little bit too early in either our knowledge or in reality to bring in a 'Dr Disk' to fix the situation, so I got hard at work and keyed it all in again.

[113] TAFE – Technical and Further Education, skills-based tertiary training.

Oh, dear! (laughter) Not an auspicious start. But was everything ready again for the launch?

[01:21:31] Yes, ready for the launch, yes.

What was the launch like?

[01:21:35] Ooh, I do have some images of it in my mind. Certainly, former Chief Justice, JJ Bray,[114] was not a supporter of oral history. He was very negative about the whole thing and I think probably one of the few of the [Libraries] Board who was not the slightest bit interested and didn't think that was the right way to spend the money. I knew him from – insofar as you could – from outside the library. I mentioned in the first interview that I did some house-cleaning jobs, and the longest-term one that went almost all my way through my association with the university, the one that I kept on, was with John Davey,[115] who was a lawyer of the generation of Justice Bray, and he had gone blind in his early 20s but, obviously, an amazing mind, and he would have clerks who would read things to him and he had a prodigious memory, and so he was able to continue working in sort of conveyancing and – what would you call the law associated with – licensing, yes, that area. And so I kept doing the weekly house-cleaning for his little unit on King William Road for years. And so you'd have people popping in, such as Justice Bray, who would hardly deign to look at me. I was beneath his contempt, really. (laughs) And you'd then see him at the library and he'd just completely ignore me. But so to our first woman Governor.

Roma Mitchell.[116]

[01:23:42] Roma Mitchell was a great friend of John Davey and I met her through him, and whenever she saw me in any setting – it might be at – you know, we'd both gone to the same thing at Festival Theatre or she was just walking down North Terrace, she'd know who I was, greet me by name – a kind and generous person. (laughs) So no, I don't have any particular memories of the launch except Justice Bray being very grumpy-looking in the corner.

---

[114] John Jefferson Bray (1912-1995).

[115] John Ryan Davey (1913-1992).

[116] Roma Mitchell (1913-2000).

So you had the role of Oral History Officer then – it was from 1987 to 1999. Did that position evolve over that time, or the scope of what you were required to do?

[01:24:44] Thanks to me, yes. I just took on more and more and more and more and, you know, initiated or got funding for projects and, as I say, delved into sound recordings in other parts of the library, got them under control. Because of the relationship with Radio 5UV – they were worried about their tape archive, which the university didn't have the facilities to look after, and so that was physically transferred to Mortlock so that I could go through it and extract from it the voice-based material that might be of research interest, and then the residue went back to the archives at the university. So, along with making sure that I documented and represented the collection at conferences, wrote about it, spoke about it, it turned into a very, very big job. But there was no sense – Margy was long gone – there didn't seem to be any possibility that it would ever be reclassified at a higher level, so I was contributing on a national level and still at the same substantive level in terms of my employment as when I started, so that did get me down and make me start looking at how I might improve that situation.

So if we move on to the next job that you did, so was that because of the inability to progress?

[01:26:53] Yes. Yes. And also I was very interested in audiovisual materials generally, not only oral history, and so the opportunity arose to apply for a job which was to manage at a level above the one that I was working on a newly-formed or a to-be-formed Audiovisual Project Team. So, you know, partly because of the work I was doing and a colleague in the published audio, in particular, area, in collecting-wise, there was the recognition that audiovisual material had never been – the way of managing it had never been mainstreamed in terms of cataloguing, in terms of preservation, in terms of public access. So that was really the start. The film and video collections in the archival area were just burgeoning and needed attention because they're very – like audio recordings – very fragile in terms of longevity. And so, yes, it took a bit of effort to - - -. Because on paper at the library I had no supervisory experience, but in fact I had contractors, I had volunteers, I commissioned professional historians, so I was working – I managed large projects with external bodies, and so that was something – I was very keen to get that message across, although it showed in no organisational chart. I'd keep saying to

them, 'Can you put a dotty line and a box to show all of these aspects of the work?' 'No. It's not a formal part of the structure.' But no, I did get across the line and did win that position.

So that was the Manager of the Audiovisual Project Team.

[01:29:15] Yes. I got involved then with film and video, had a really good team, and that took us through most of the building redevelopment era, so we were mostly based out at Netley,[117] establishing the same sort of level of facilities for film and video as I'd established for sound over the years. Yes.

So that job you had until 2002.

[01:29:51] Yes, and my substantive [position] was still the Oral History Officer. I needed to then – there was another big organisational restructure and I had to decide 'which way will I jump?', as it were. It was a functional restructure, so oral history was going to end up with Collection Development, but the audio archiving side was going to Preservation, whereas, of course, I'd done both, and so I made the right choice. I thought if I go back to my substantive position, which I did for a few months, as Oral History Officer, I'm still going to be equivalent to an entry-level professional officer forever – and it's quite true, the position is still at the same level, 20 years later – whereas, if I go into Preservation, where there was a coordinator, a new coordinator position at a higher level, one step [up] level, then I might have some career progression there. And so that's what I did and it worked out very well because I was only the coordinator to Heather Brown as the manager, oh, for really under three years and then Heather moved to ArtLab and I became Manager of Preservation in 2005.

I think that's your position.

[01:31:49] Current position, yes. Yes.

Now, you've mentioned about the collecting just a moment ago and I wanted to sort of follow up on that about the relationship with the State Library – the link between the State Library and community groups in collecting oral histories and how that compares with collecting all the other archival material. So I guess the community groups are actually producing that.

---

[117] The State Library leased office space at what is now known as Netley Commercial Park at the intersection of Marion and Richmond roads.

[01:32:15] Yes. No, oral history is different and the archivists lament the fact that they don't – they're not – haven't been sort of organised and/or resourced over the years to be proactive in their collecting, they just – they respond to overtures – whereas the Oral History Collection is very much out there encouraging, involved in the development. So no, it's a very, very different model and it does mean that oral history does tend to be seen still as something, even though it's back in the archival collections team, it still does tend to be looked on as 'the other'. And I've certainly promoted a different model and that's actually what I wrote about when I was asked to contribute a chapter to the *Oxford handbook of oral history* edited by Don Ritchie[118] – I think that's 2011, so well after my time as Oral History Officer – and proposing – it was about – I was asked to write on the 'archival imperative' in relation to oral history, so I chose to do it in terms of how can or – can oral history survive in an era of shrinking funding to archives and libraries, and just the never-ending do more with less.

[01:34:16] And so yes, it still hasn't really happened. Promoting this idea that the Oral History Officer and this vicarious collecting, being engaged in community, university and so forth oral history development – it's not necessary with today's technologies that they [the Oral History Officer] also have to be responsible for the description, the indexing and so on. That can be moved through a workflow where other people, expert particularly in indexing and so forth, can be value-adding to the process of managing that resource in the organisation. Things do, though, continue to remain pretty siloed.

Well, I'd like to move slightly now just to talk a bit about the outreach. This is more from the Association's perspective, I guess, rather than the State Library. You've mentioned to me in a preliminary interview about liaising with schools and that, at one stage, there'd been a Voices of the Past Oral History Award. How did that go?

[01:35:42] Yes. The first year was brilliant. We were able to attract a lot of people from outside the South Australian Branch to be judges and we had teachers such as Elvie Richardson on the committee with good connections. And we had a really

[118] 'The archival imperative: can oral history survive the funding crisis in archival institutions?' by Beth M Robertson in *Oxford handbook of oral history*, edited by Donald A Ritchie. Oxford University Press, 2010; revised paperback edition 2012.

good response from schools. I think I mentioned earlier there were over 1000 schools in South Australia. It was a – just have a look at my chronology here.

It was in 1988, I've written down.

[01:36:23] Okay. Yes. So 69 entries and 11 judges, and, you know, we were very excited about that. We had quite a lot of publicity around it and we forged on to a second year, and again – we had a few less entries. Again, we had sponsors; we had judges, mostly from off the committee. But then the following year only six schools, so the 35 entries we got in 1990 were only from six schools, so it had reduced itself to just this handful of very keen teachers and supportive schools, but it hadn't built momentum, it had fallen in momentum. And it certainly was very enjoyable to be part of. From my perspective as Oral History Officer, we did that terrible thing of 'pick the eyes out' of – (laughs) well, really, we took the winning entries into the collection as samples of oral histories done in schools, which I think is good to do every so often. They haven't got the same research value, but it's a valuable thing to do once in a while. But obviously it wasn't going to be sustainable, so - - -.

What did the students have to enter? Was it the audio or - - -?

[01:38:26] Yes. They had to enter the audio. That was the main requirement. But, of course, the younger students did some lovely, illustrated projects, little books and things like that, yes.

Now, another outreach activity that the branch did that you'd mentioned to me earlier was programs with unemployed youth. Can you tell me a bit about that, please?

[01:38:55] Yes. They [the programs] are not my favourite thing. I like willing students, (laughs) which is why I never became a schoolteacher. I like teaching adults who have made the choice to be there, so I always find it very difficult to – I'm not a natural-born teacher – to engage those who are there under duress. But I did a few of those, one down at Mount Gambier, which was actually really positive. Those country kids were much more open and receptive. I did it a couple of times with the program that I think Maggie Ragless,[119] the Local History Officer at

[119] Margaret E Ragless (1952-2012).

Mitcham, who I knew well – she had got involved with that and I was happy to support her, but I didn't think any of the parties really got that much out of it.

So with the Mount Gambier example, how did you – that connection, how was that made?

[01:40:03] No, I can't remember. But of course I did try to do one regional oral history workshop every year and so it was quite possibly word of mouth.

And those regional workshops, were they the Introduction to Oral [History workshops]?

[01:40:20] That's right, yes. And perhaps my favourite regional one was at Keith and working with Adair Dunsford and others. She was a journalist by training, but on a big property down there, and I did a two-part workshop with them. That was over, I think, a weekend and I'd previously done just a general introductory one. But they were very keen down there. And I think Conservation folk went down from the library as well, so it was not just oral history but also looking after local treasures. Yes, it was lovely working with Adair, and she was one of the people that then became one of the commissioned interviewers for projects such as the Honoured Women interviewing program[120] that was funded by the Arts Minister, Diana Laidlaw, of that era. And so that had me each year for several years poring over the Australia Day and Queen's Birthday honours lists and going, 'Ooh! There's an "honoured woman" who would be interesting to include.' So there's some really good interviews in that series and all done by matching a professional historian or a very adept interviewer, in Adair's case with a journalism background, to the interviewee. And there's some lovely topics. I won't remember offhand the woman's name, but she'd been recognised in relation to creating tactile books for blind children, and so we got an example of that into the collection as well, so a book about farm animals: we had the texture of the coat on each page.[121]

Okay. And another thing that I wanted to ask you about with the outreach was the link with the course that Adelaide University set up in 1996 on Applied History.

---

[120] The honoured women oral history project, 1998-199, OH 505, SLSA and The honoured women oral history project, part II, 2000-2001, OH 593, SLSA.

[121] OH 505/5, SLSA interview with Vida Maney by Adair Dunsford.

[01:42:59] Yes. Yes. I think Wilf Prest was the mover of that. And it wasn't long-lived, only a few years, and so these were students – you know, we had great hopes for that course, not just through the Oral History Association but also the Association of Professional Historians. But, unfortunately, it couldn't be maintained so these were students who were interested – well, they were doing an Applied History course and a logical outcome of that can be that one then becomes a professional historian in one form or another. So that was me both providing an overview of the basic skills in oral history but also how it can be applied by a professional historian.

So why was it that that course ended up ceasing?

[01:44:07] I don't have an insight into that but I was reading something the other day by Wilf in association with the history of the department, and it seemed to imply that there was a change in support by the higher-ups. But we never did in South Australia have a real focal point for the practice of oral history in academia, whereas I guess the epitome of the virtues of that is Janis Wilton at the University of New England, who's been such a support to the Oral History Association and, of course, formally trained so many students in the practice of oral history over the years.

I'd like to ask you now a bit about – I guess, going back to when you started working at the State Library and your early involvement with Oral History Australia. You've described in an article in *Word of mouth* in 2001 about the 'tidal wave of interest' in oral history at that time and I'd love to know what it was like for you being involved at that early stage – what it felt like.

[01:45:27] Busy. (laughs) Yes, you know, both the practice and the management of oral history is just keeping so many balls in the air (laughs) at the one time. And there are always so many loose ends. So it was an average of 300 hours of material coming into the library each year, and you couldn't keep up, although you always did your best to make sure that each could be processed, the conditions of use agreements and the donor agreements all signed off, the preservation work as well. Yes. Very, very busy. So many very interesting projects. So always very fulfilling but sort of relentless. And then I'd set myself absurd goals of doing a paper for every – you know, a conference every year, not just the Oral History Association but the Australasian Sound Recordings Association, which would always be on the Eastern States, because I did like to document the development of the collection or aspects of it as I went along.

So you were also, really, one of the pioneering curators of oral history in Australia and from some of your articles I know that you've become good friends with the others in the other states. But can you tell me a little bit more about how you worked together with those?

[01:47:24] Yes. Yes. So we were – I was not the first, by any manner of means, because the State Library of South Australia's collection isn't the oldest, but I certainly could be seen as one of the pioneering generation of oral history curators and all of us were involved in the Association, so it wasn't just making the connection because we were colleagues in libraries but also because we were, all of us at one time or another, the mainstay of the voluntary association in our states as well. So Ronda Jamieson was my counterpart at the Battye Library and had been for many years before I came on the scene, and the status of oral history at the Battye Library in that era was very high and it had been managed in such a way – and I couldn't really explain why this came about, but it was managed in such a way, for instance, that the agreement between each interviewee and the library would go to the board meetings and so the board would apply their seal to that agreement. And I just think that was brilliant in terms of keeping the profile of the collection so high. I can't tell you whether the same was done with agreements for archival collections coming in, but certainly the [oral history] collection in that era had very high standing, and it had been started because a senior librarian had gone across to America in the very early times of the idea of oral history being established in the '60s, and had brought the idea back to the Battye Library.

[01:49:46] So Ronda was a prolific interviewer but also collection manager. She wasn't as interested in the technical side of things as I was, so for that side I would go to my colleagues in the national institutions, and particularly Kevin Bradley and Shelley Grant at the National Library of Australia[122] were very supportive as well as sound engineers and curators at the National Film and Sound Archive. Another very close colleague was Francis Good at the Northern Territory Archive Service [in Darwin], and we got on very, very well, so much so that we were able to convene the 1997 national conference in Alice Springs just by telephone (laughs) for two years,

[122] Kevin and Shelley were in the sound preservation unit associated with the National Library's oral history collection at the stage I am recalling. Kevin has since succeeded Margy Burn as Assistant Director General: Australian Collections and Reader Services at the National Library.

getting that organised. That was a great experience and just pre-email. Email was just coming in in 1997 and I remember having access to it in the last months leading up to the conference, but of course not everyone did, and thinking – I had no idea how it would develop, but thinking, 'I'd just better press on the way I've been going just to finalise this,' so much more reliant on telephone as well as 'snail mail'.

[01:51:34] In State Library of Queensland it was Niles Elvery, I think with a librarianship background. Rosie Block at the State Library of New South Wales, and we became and still are very firm friends. She came over here when she was first appointed. She's the best part of a generation older than me. She came to 'learn at my feet'. She's got the most wonderful turn of phrase with her South African upbringing, and I do like being called 'Dear Heart', so Rosie was wonderful, you know. We were thinking what was she going to bring to the practice of oral history because she hadn't, evidently, had anything to do with history in her background. But she was just absolutely the right personality and intellectual curiosity and so on, and just became a mainstay of the association as well. And then there was Jill Cassidy. The State Library of Tasmania didn't take an interest but Jill was a historian at the Queen Victoria Museum up in Launceston, and she's been a great colleague and mainstay as well. And I mentioned, really, to crown off the group, is Janis Wilton at the University of New England in Armidale. So always great to catch up when I was very much involved in both the association and collection curation. I'd go to just about every conference and catch up with them all, and always there on the other end of the phone to help each other out, get new ideas.

So you've mentioned in particular the Alice Springs conference. Can you tell me a little bit more about that – any memories that are particularly strong?

[01:53:49] I mean, I think both Francis and I were very, very proud of that conference. I think it was the biggest ever at that stage, over 250 registrations, a *large* cohort of Aboriginal people from across the Top End as well as other localities, a Māori contingent from academia and community groups in New Zealand – you know, it really was two years of hard work to put the program together – and Francis, of course, had some personal connections in Alice Springs – because we were preparing to host a conference in a place that neither of us were in. But I very much remember packing my bags as we were getting the news of Princess Diana's death, packing my bags thinking, 'But I don't want to go. I'm over this conference. It's as if [during]

those two years I've [already] done it. What am I going to learn? I don't really want to go.' And I was lugging up *Handbooks* and journals and all sorts of things. But I'd never been to Central Australia before and, of course, that was glorious. We had a brilliant attendance, lots of concurrent sessions and lots of additional sessions in evenings and so on.

[01:55:53] Sally Morgan was on our program, the author, and she certainly threw a spanner in the works in the first day or two of the conference because she was going to be doing an evening presentation at another venue and she'd gone – I think it was the first day, first full day of the conference – and she'd gone to have a look at the venue early, earlier in the day, and she came back to Francis and said, 'I'm not going to present there. You're putting me in a bar,' and like me she had a family experience of alcoholism and she said, 'I'm not going to do it. Just looks like a bar, smells like a bar, not going to do it.' And I remember Francis coming over to me where I'm busy doing something or another in the foyer of our big conference venue, and saying, 'Beth, I'm going to say something that I'll regret if I go on talking to Sally. You'll have to deal with it.' (laughs)

[01:57:10] And so I went out to the venue with Francis's local support scout who'd helped set these places up and she said, 'It's not going to look anything like this tonight. This, this, that and the other's going to happen.' I still didn't know – and, of course, there was a lot of interest in Sally as author of *My place*[123] that hadn't been in print for very long, and we had many, many people booked for that evening – [but] I missed the bus to the venue. (laughs) [I] still didn't know whether she was going to turn up. Got there and the venue was empty, but it was alongside a cultural art gallery and I'd forgotten that a tour of that gallery was what was going to happen (laughs) before the night's event. And then suddenly Sally and all of them come flooding in, standing room only, she gives a great talk and I go up all concerned afterwards sort of saying, 'Thank you very much,' and she sort of had the look on her face as to – 'Of course. Of course. It was all all right.' She said to me, 'Oh, Beth. I just like a bit of drama.' (laughs)

[01:58:42] So yes, it was a very, very good conference, and our conference dinner under the stars at the Old Telegraph Station with the Māori contingent singing, and

[123] *My place* by Sally Morgan, 1987.

they did a farewell at the conference venue as well – it was a great conference. And I even turned my mind to thinking, 'Ooh, perhaps I should go into conference organising'! (laughs) I'm glad I didn't. But it did feel like a bit of a triumph and also – because I was, you know, already, as I'd said earlier, in this mind of, 'I can't keep doing this work at this pay forever' – it did seem like a fitting climax to then start looking elsewhere to where I could go in my career.

So of the other conferences that you've been to in other years from Adelaide, Sydney and Perth – well, everywhere, really – are there particular memories or things that stand out from any of those conferences?

[02:00:03] Oh. (pauses) No. Always something to learn. New people associated with oral history to meet. Now I'm going to say something very silly now. The conference in Brisbane[124] was in – I can't remember which university, but a big sort of octagonal chapel-y type building as one of the venues, and the university's curly-coated retriever. It was a very large black dog and he would lie in one of the doorways during the whole session, and I thought, 'My word, a Curly-Coated Retriever is a handsome dog. I'll have to have one of them one day.' And I did. (laughs)

[02:00:56] No, the most memorable one was having to get all the way to Perth during the pilots' strike because I do not sleep in cars, trains, planes or anything, and so to be awake with twitchy legs for 36 hours was just torture.

You've mentioned to me in the preliminary interview that you've always used audio in your presentations at conferences. So how did you manage that? Because you describe the rather large breadbox-sized device –

[02:01:33] Yes.

– you used at local workshops. Did you take that - - -?

[02:01:35] Yes. I took that along, because it was only the radio broadcasters in the early days who would use audio excerpts and they had access to equipment. But no, I would always fly the flag and, through great effort, bring along the technology to be able to use it. I remember I was giving a – it wasn't a workshop, it was a session at a

[124] The 1991 Oral History Association of Australia was held at the St Lucia campus of the University of Queensland in the Chapel of St John the Evangelist at St John's College.

teachers' conference or something about using oral history audio on the Web,[125] and the venue – we were assured that I would be able to play back audio from websites that we were connecting to. No, the firewall didn't allow that. And so Rob Pillar – okay I went back to the State Library and said to Rob, 'We've got to get the audio off those websites onto cassette so that I can play them through the speaker in synchronisation with what they're viewing on the website.' And he said, 'Yeah, we can do that.' So we did that. That evening – I only found it out because I always do go to a venue ahead of time if I can – only found it out the afternoon before the presentation – made it all work.

Now, I'd like to ask you a bit more about publications but I might just pause for a little break. That will also mean the file size won't get enormous. So we'll just stop for a moment. Thank you.

[02:03:25] Okay.

END OF FILE 2: FILE 3

I'm Sally Stephenson. We're continuing the interview with Beth Robertson. This is now file number 3 and it's still 16 December 2020.

So, Beth, I would like to ask you now about some of the publications that you've been involved in, and obviously the best-known of those is the *Oral history handbook*. And you have written in detail about that in issue 50 of *Word of mouth* back in Autumn 2006, but I'd like to just hear from your perspective what it was like preparing that very first *Handbook* and why there was the need for it.

[00:00:33] Yes. It was still very early days with oral history. There hadn't been much published and there was certainly no handbook available to guide researchers wanting to embark on oral history. And so, yes, I think very good idea by the committee to take on the idea of an oral history handbook. I do recall that the genesis of the *Handbook* was a set of seminar notes by Ingrid Srubjan and she made her notes available to the South Australian Branch and then the committee took over. I remember meetings at Kathleen Patitsas's house in the city. And yes, it was a real committee effort to put that together and we got it printed at Wattle Park Teachers' Centre. But such was the technology at the time – and I think I still have them somewhere or, no, they would be part of the record in at the State Library, perhaps –

[125] 'Oral history - sound, image and text on-line', State History Conference, Adelaide, 2000.

is that the text was typed. It was then pasted onto boards for the printer to print from. And John Gasper, an architect, was on the committee at the time. He'd got involved in oral history doing a project about South Australian architects.[126] He didn't ever go on with oral history but he and I have kept in touch over the years and he was a talented cartoonist. I had only just met him. And so his cartoons graced the very first *Handbook* and he very kindly, when I was working on the much larger third edition, he happily produced more cartoons. And I was just speaking to him the other day and he said, 'Just let me know if you'd like me to do some more.' So that's been very generous of him over the years.

[00:03:25] But yes. So this little half-A4 orange-covered publication was priced just at one dollar, to start off with, and it just sold like hot cakes, 1000 copies in the first year and a half.

Did you sell that within South Australia or nationally?

[00:03:50] Yes. Both. There was a funny little situation which Susan Marsden and I talk about in her interview, where one or two of the interstate branches got their noses out of joint a bit: 'What's South Australia thinking that it could be the one who creates an Australian handbook for oral history? There are probably going to be superior publications coming out of other branches.' And at one stage we needed to submit our handbook to be measured against another one that was in preparation, but that one never came to fruition. So ours existed, no other did, and eventually the national committee, certainly by the third edition, which was the one that I expanded both in size and in content, the national committee were right onside and helping pay for the initial printing costs and very happy for it to be promoted throughout Australia.

I think that's an interesting point, that South Australia did produce the first handbook. Why do you think that was?

[00:05:31] It's interesting, isn't it? We're just an organised bunch, aren't we! We want people to do it right. (laughs)

---

[126] 'Architecture and building heritage in South Australia oral history project', 1980. The transcripts are held at OH 765, SLSA. In recent years John Gasper has also used oral history in family history research.

So you referred – over the years – we're now up to the fifth edition at the moment, but yes, the third edition I know was a particularly big change and you've written about that one of the major gaps you wanted to tackle was about how to structure an interview and also about what brands and models of equipment to buy. So it's interesting – before that, in the earlier editions, what interview structure, if any, were people using?

[00:06:14] No, it really was just organise your interview in the manner in which – will suit the topic, or referring to the sociological – sociology methodology. And the equipment was always 'Your tape recorder and microphone will need the following features', which just irritated me because it's like the very few times in my life I've bought a car. I have no interest in cars and I want a recommendation of one in my price range that does what I need it to do. And I would always say to Kevin Bradley at the National Library, 'Give me brands. Give me names. That's what people want.' There's very few – there certainly have been and are some who are very technologically oriented, but most want a really good recommendation that they can afford, so that's always been the way I've approached it.

So I know there's a rather interesting story about the launch of that third edition, if you can tell us what happened with that.

[00:07:46] Well, I think you're referring to the copy of the book actually not turning up. (laughs) But it did, at the eleventh hour. But I was really delighted that Tim Bowden accepted the invitation to come and launch the book, so that created a bit of interest. It wasn't a huge crowd by any manner of means, but there were lots and lots of people there who'd been so helpful along the way. Looking back at the photographs from that occasion is very pleasing. I know Susan Marsden was there and family members – my brother, who we mentioned last time and who has been so helpful in the design and sort of marshalling the printing in more recent years of the *Handbook*. And his son, Tavis, was just a babe in arms at the time, so he got to be involved in that as well.

So I think you said after that you were not going to have a public launch of any subsequent editions.

[00:09:05] No. No.

So some of the main changes, then, looking at it, the fourth edition had to cover the increasing use of digital technology, so how did you go about researching that?

[00:09:21] Yes. Well, the fourth edition – so which year was that?

2000.

[00:09:27] 2000, so that was just the end of my – I was still supervising the Oral History Officer – that was Trish Walker – while I was the manager of the Audiovisual Project Team, so I was still supervising the Oral History Officer and, of course, very much involved in the technology side with the Audiovisual Project Team. So that was still a very live interest with me, and again talking to local audio engineers, interstate colleagues at the national institutions, and wanting at that stage to identify – because the technology was changing so quickly – identify some freely-available online resources that people could then be directed to within the pages of the *Handbook* to see has something further, because, of course, our audience isn't just South Australia, who can say to the State Library, 'Is there some other equipment I should be looking at?' but interstate and some overseas customers as well. So there's been one or two – two sites that have been very stable that I've been able to point to throughout the fourth and fifth edition of the *Handbook* that are still providing very sound advice on the technology as it changes.

Now, sometime after 2000 – I'm not sure of the exact year – but the *Handbook* went international.

[00:11:25] Yes. Yes. That was very strange. Now, I think the overture – I think came through Rosie Block – pretty sure about that – and it was a publisher in Taiwan wanting to translate the book into Chinese for that market. And I really still don't know how that went. I mean, I have copies (laughs) of the book.[127] I can't read it. I have a Chinese – or Taiwanese – staff member on my team, but he, of course, is so polite he wouldn't tell me if he didn't understand what on earth the end translation had become. And I've really rather shied away from taking it further than that because I'm hoping (laughs) it's okay.

[00:12:33] It never turned into a second print run, so far as I'm aware, and it's a very – from my Australian perspective, a very twee-looking production with rather childish colourful figures on the cover and it's clearly been broken up – the text been broken up in a lot of different ways. Yes, it was an unusual experience. I don't think it's the same handbook.

[127] Five Senses Arts Management Inc. Held at SLSA as *Oral history handbook* [Chinese edition], 2004.

Well, it still has an international reach, but we now get orders, say, from South Korea but they buy the English-language version.

[00:13:18] Excellent.

So you had written that you thought the fourth edition would be your last. Well, what happened?

[00:13:28] (laughter) Yes. I suppose I really wanted to show that the bridge from analogue to digital had been crossed. No more analogue recordings, please. And I guess that reflects my interest in audiovisual preservation, because each new analogue recording that was being produced was becoming a burden on the facilities and workflows that we were establishing at the State Library. So much so that, when we decommissioned our Marantz tape recorders, of course we were getting overtures from people: 'Ooh, can I have that if you're not using it anymore?' And we did not give a single one away except some overtures, I think, from perhaps Papua New Guinea and maybe East Timor, where it was a case of no other technology available. But no, it did seem very important to stem the tide of analogue recordings being created and, you know, the wisdom of that is that we've now got the 2025 deadline looming for magnetic media, both audio and video, with the media breaking down and the playback equipment not being repairable and no parts. So yes, that was a conscious decision.

[00:15:21] The handbook structure still works very, very well. I didn't feel that I needed to update – only, really, cosmetically – most of the rest of the book, but the equipment chapter needed to move us properly into the digital era. And, of course, now I'm toying with the idea is there a sixth edition, because the technology chapter, which was huge in the fifth edition, can be shrunk right down because we're here. It's the digital era. I don't know.

[00:16:00] The last print run of the fifth edition is almost sold out but it took five or six years to get there, so the market is still there but it's much, much smaller because of all the online resources that are available. So that's on the cards for next year but a bit more thinking and discussion about whether we actually get there.

Well, you've sold, I know, more than 16,000 copies.

[00:16:40] It's 19,000.

Nineteen, is it?

[00:16:42] Yes. But, you see, that's really one of my prompts to get to the sixth edition, whether I could get to 20,000. (laughs)

And because many of those books are in libraries they would have been used by many, many more than 19,000 people, so that's really quite an astonishing impact that you've had. How do you feel about that?

[00:17:04] Yes, yes. I'm very proud of the *Handbook*, and it's one of those nice legacies of one's lifetime. I think I've done good with the *Handbook*.

Yes. Well, we certainly promote is as the bible of oral history in all of the workshops. Well, you haven't been content with just the *Handbook* because you've mentioned that you've edited *Word of mouth*, the state publication, from 1983 to 1999.

[00:17:36] Yes. Oh, look, I come from a family of documenters. My younger sister does the same with the ACT dog obedience club.[128] You know, the newsletter documents the history (laughs) of the organisation. And yes, there's lots of - - -. And then it has gone on. I think we're probably the branch with the longest continuous substantial newsletter, so I think it's done a very good job of documenting oral history in South Australia over many decades, so a very, very good record. There was a silly stage there where I was doing *Word of mouth*, the Professional Historians Association [newsletter] and the local Neighbourhood Watch newsletter, and it was still in the analogue era, and I gave a workshop at a history conference,[129] *How to produce newsletters painlessly*. (laughs) There isn't really a way!

Get someone else to do it.

[00:19:00] (laughter) Yes, that's right. And I remember one of my examples, me taking the higher moral ground here, my dislike of the blank page or pages in the newsletter with the little note saying, 'Your comments welcome. Waiting for your contribution.' I said, 'No. It's the newsletter editor's job to go out and fill that space!'

So how did you go and get content?

---

[128] ACT Companion Dog Club.

[129] State History Conference, Adelaide, 1994.

[00:19:31] Well, again it was this – really, I guess, the interconnection of my work with the branch and my work at the State Library. So I would be seeking small articles from people doing projects, some judicious reprinting, and then, of course, reports from various people, including always Francis Good from the Northern Territory.

So when you first started *Word of mouth*, which was in 1983, so I think you were the inaugural editor then –

[00:20:18] Yes.

– what were the aims?

[00:20:22] Again, to keep in touch with membership and as a – the journal, the national journal, was, of course, only once a year, so this is an opportunity to publish reports and then, later, short articles outside of the main publication available. And keeping in mind that our membership has always been such a mixed one, the newsletter is an unintimidating publication space.

And how was it put together in those early days?

[00:21:01] The very first one – no, the first few ones – a university friend of mine, Roseanne Scarsella, did the typing for me. I've always been – I am a touch-typist but not a brilliantly accurate one. So I learned touch-typing. I went to Muirden's Secretarial School – I was allowed to pay just to sit in on lessons – I think that was at the beginning of my Honours year because I thought that would be a useful skill, and it certainly has been. But Roseanne had done it to a degree where she was a much more competent touch-typist, and so just the same as I didn't type up my own Honours thesis because that would have been a much longer process as I made mistakes – had to start afresh (laughs) – Roseanne was kind enough to do that typing to start with, and then it became a more automated process after that.

So does that mean, then, that the authors would send you something written out in longhand?

[00:22:23] Yes. Yes. Or typed and we'd retype.

And how were images, if they were, put into the - - -?

[00:22:33] The images were confined to the cover and my dear brother David actually drew a work of a young school student interviewing an old man on the cover of the

very first one, and then the printer – we would provide a photograph to fit into the design of the front cover, done by my brother, and yes, so for quite some years we didn't include photographs inside until the technology caught up with that.

So at what point – I mean, were people starting, presumably, to email you articles sometime –

[00:23:16] Yes.

– before 1999?

[00:23:19] Yes.

Now, you've also been involved with the national journal.

[00:23:27] Yes, actually up until only last year, where a change in approach by the new editors – so I remained on the editorial committee of the journal up until then. Janis Wilton was on it for many years as well and I found myself in the invidious position of being the last old-timer. So, 'Can you please stay for continuity?' And then, as I say, there's been a change in approach, which is fine. So for the last probably eight or even ten years the role was as the preliminary stage of peer review. So this editorial group would receive articles that had been sent in by writers who wished to be considered for peer review, and so our role was to read them. They were anonymised. We would read them and report back independently as to whether we believed they were suitable to go for peer review, whether they would be if a bit more work was done, or whether they should be asked to – or whether they would be advised that the editor will deal with them as a non-peer-review contribution. So that was very, very interesting and was one of the ways that I kept up with my reading in oral history as well as the State Library still subscribes to the British and the US associations' journals, which I'm still on the distribution list for them at the library. So I did keep up a level of reading in that.

[00:25:52] And then the other part of the editorial committee members was to suggest peer reviewers, and I sometimes felt at a bit of a loss for that because I'm not much connected with academia, but I still found that, through my reading and networks, that I could make a contribution to that.

From 1986 to 88 you were the reports section editor. What did that require you to do?

[00:26:26] So yes, that was – there would be a call for papers each year, which would advise people of the different sections of the journal. And so I would – if I didn't get enough flowing in through that call for papers for the journal as a whole, I'd be using my interstate connections and local connections, always looking at the interstate newsletters and asking or making contact with people to see if they could add a project report to that section.

And much later, 1997 and 98, you'd written that South Australia was responsible for those particular editions of the journal, so how does - - -?

[00:27:17] Yes.

Why was that the case?

[00:27:19] They tended to follow the conference and so Peter and June Donovan were the editors that year, June on the committee I think also for a while, and so there were two editions that came out of the Crossing Borders Conference at Alice Springs. And I think they might have continued on a little bit longer than that as well, both being extremely competent professional historians and writers and having published a lot. Yes, so the journal and responsibility for it moved in step with responsibility for the conference.

Well, the next thing I'd like to ask you about are the ethical guidelines that the Association established firstly in 1993. Can you tell me a bit about how that came about?

[00:28:31] Yes. I know there was a lot of discussion and debate around the contents of the guidelines[130] as they made their way through, I think, more than one, perhaps two biennial general meetings, but certainly a very worthwhile development that I believe was following such developments in, perhaps, America in particular. And you also had the influence of Association of Professional Historians and their

[130]On reviewing the transcript, I remembered that SA Branch committee member Anne Geddes, then tutor in the Classics Department at the University of Adelaide, initiated the development of ethical guidelines in 1985, intended as a partner publication to the *Oral history handbook*. Anne was using oral history as part of a Jubilee 150 project on South Australian pioneer women (PRG 727, SLSA), unrelated to her work as a tutor. She proposed a stimulating question-and-discursive-answer format of guidelines. Her draft was circulated to all registrants of the biennial national conference in Melbourne in 1985 at which Anne led a discussion on the subject. The National Committee took carriage of their further development, culminating in the more conventionally framed 1993 *Guidelines of ethical practice.* See 'Ethics: oral history guidelines' by Anne Geddes in *Word of mouth*, no 8, June 1985, pp. 6-8.

leadership in ethical guidelines as well. And I don't know whether they've had much review over the years, but they seem to hold us all in good stead.

Now I'd like to move on and talk a bit about copyright, because that's something that you've devoted considerable thought to. I'd just like to start by asking you, actually, about those interviews back in your Honours thesis and how you handled those. You mentioned there weren't any – you didn't have to worry about ethics or there were no conditions of use forms then. So how did you manage [those]?

[00:29:57] Okay. It's very interesting and sort of a very contemporary topic to consider. So I had no sense that I needed to get anything in writing or, indeed, verbal. So back in the very early days when I guess we thoughtlessly borrowed the idea from broadcast journalists, or indeed newsprint, doing recordings as part of their information gathering. And it was even put into words by some people, and certainly in the broadcast arena: 'If someone sees a microphone pointed at their face and responds to a question, they've agreed to that being used in any way that you might see fit'. So that was when I was starting and I just proceeded on that basis, I would say completely thoughtlessly, whether I even formed that idea. But when I started looking into it that was certainly the rationale that was quite live at the time.

[00:31:17] And so I did my Honours thesis interviews, as I say, using a more sociology model, so much so that in my thesis the interviewees aren't identified by name; they're identified by initials, which was really quite ludicrous in retrospect because it's them as individuals and the context of their lives that makes the information so compelling. So then I move on to learn more about oral history, so certainly when I was interviewing Royal District Nursing Society nurses and community branch people and so on I did apply conditions of use agreements from that time onwards.

[00:32:17] So what to do about my Honours thesis interviews? I think it would be very unethical just to discard them because I hadn't known what I was doing at the time, and so I decided to – when I started at the Library in 1987, I decided – or I suppose a year or two afterwards – they've got quite an early number in the collection – that yes, they should become part of the collection and be de-anonymised. I didn't discuss that and I certainly didn't think I should now go back to those who are still living and gain an agreement with them, and I can't remember my thinking around this. Certainly the material I inherited at the library had virtually no conditions of use agreements and so there was a period of time in which I didn't

think about it too closely, what to do about these inherited works from this earlier period of time.

[00:33:38] So I did, of course, establish conditions of use agreements, both ones where the interviewee opts to retain copyright and one where they assign copyright to the collecting [institution] or maybe to the interviewer but then to the collecting institution. So that was my first real thinking about copyright and delving into it, and I found that quite an absorbing process, and that's been applied over the years.

[00:34:13] So now we come to an era where we want to make more use of this material and to let other people make more use of this material, so again it comes back to those old interviews with no agreements. Do we simply apply the letter of the law that says the interviewee and the interviewer have copyright in this work and under the Copyright Act up until 1 January 2019 these unrecorded works are in copyright in perpetuity unless you can get the agreement of the copyright owner or their descendant? But from 1 January 2019 unpublished works have the same copyright terms as published works, so it's the year of death of the copyright owner plus 70 years. Again, what do you do with this legacy material?

[00:35:29] So even before the change in the Copyright Act I'd become part of National and State Libraries Australasia Copyright Committee. I sort of inherited the role when I was Acting Associate Director for a short period of time, and then I really embraced it because I found it so fascinating. And it was the era where we're starting to consider this concept of 'orphan works', so the copyright owner may be able to be identified but cannot be contacted, either because there is no – if it's likely they were alive, there's not enough information to actually locate them, or they've died. And if the copyright wasn't deliberately assigned by them in their will, then it starts to follow many different trails with their descendants or beneficiaries of their will and, indeed, can just go into limbo under some circumstances. So there's this ethical conundrum. They [the interviewee] willingly participated in the interview on the basis that they're helping your research effort, in many cases on the basis knowing that it's going into a public library collection for the benefit of other researchers, but you don't have the piece of paper that says that.

[00:37:21] And so, yes, our position at the library and in other national and state libraries in Australia is that, so long as the material is not sensitive, then the work can be considered an orphan work, and be made available for research or study, so can be

made available online with it being identified as an orphan work to the public so they can then make their own risk decision as to whether they'll make further use of it, and we [the State Library] would, too, if we're putting excerpts or whatever into a publication.

[00:38:15] And the feedback that we get, both with oral history and with archival material, is that descendants, let alone other researchers, are just absolutely thrilled that it's been retained, it's been described, it's been made available. So we still, obviously, need to be careful in terms of sensitive information, and both – perhaps a nugget of sensitive information within a much more innocuous interview, that's really the trap. If it's an interview on a sensitive topic, then you know what you're dealing with. The difficulty with a large collection is being aware of that sensitive little time bomb. And the response of some curators is, 'I don't have time to listen to or, if there's a transcript, read everything before I put it online,' and the answer really is, 'Well, perhaps you're not doing your job properly,' and especially where a transcript is available and you can just scan through it. And the transcript, of course, is the one that's going to be caught by the web crawler and bring up a result, and we have had an example of that where someone complained of defaming words which had just popped up in a Google search about the third party. And so then you employ the takedown policy provisions. So very fascinating.

So how did that whole situation play out, then, that particular example? You took down the transcript, but was there any further action that needed to be - - -?

[00:38:15] No. No. And probably – I don't remember – I expect the excerpt was then removed. It will remain in the – you can't defame a dead person, so after a period of time that can be put back into the whole of the transcript that's made available. So one of the things I worked on over a few years in recent years is a copyright determination and risk management framework[131] that I, obviously, think is brilliant and it is used by the library so that individual staff members can work through it, such – you know, I want to put online with something the library is doing, this poster

[131] The framework, which remains an in-house copyright tool at SLSA at the time of this interview, is outlined in *Dealing with copyright long after it has exhausted you… Proposing a copyright risk management framework for Australian libraries* by Beth M Robertson, Jessica Coates and Janice van de Velde, Australian Library and Information Association National Conference, August 2016, see https://www.nsla.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nsla.copyright-risk-mgt-framework_alia16-paper.pdf

or this archival item, or indeed this interview, and you work through the steps. Is it subject to copyright? Is it in copyright? Has the copyright been transferred? Was it transferred to the [Libraries] Board? And so on and so forth. And then you move out of the copyright law into the risk management realm with things such as orphan works, and does my organisation have the appetite for this low level of risk? Yes! Right. Let's do what we wanted to do with it. And that includes, in the library sense, making it available online so researchers, advised that it's an orphan work that we're putting online for research or study under the provision of the Act and that you as a re-user are responsible for any risk of using it other than for that purpose.

Well, I'd like to change the topic completely for a moment now and talk about the link between the South Australian Association and the Northern Territory, because now the branch actually has 'SA/NT' in its name –

[00:42:56] Yes.

– but before the fairly recent change in the constitution that wasn't the case. So how did you work with the Northern Territory when you were President?

[00:43:09] Yes. Well, it was mainly through Francis because, officially, members who resided in the Northern Territory became members of the South Australian Branch. There had been an attempt to start a branch in the early years of the Association in the Northern Territory, but of course that was very difficult to maintain with the distance between Alice Springs and Darwin, and the number of highly transient members of the population there. So it made sense and it has made sense ever since. Of course, if they could get the numbers they'd be, I'm sure, more than welcome to develop further, but no, it worked really well because Francis was a very assiduous both representative – but it's only in more recent years, after my time, that you would have – because you do have Northern Territory members on the committee?

We do now have one.

[00:44:34] Yes. Yes. So that certainly was never a step that we went through in my time. But Francis was always our correspondent and he came to Adelaide every so often as well. And then, you know, it was a brilliant idea – certainly not mine – to convene the conference in Alice Springs and I think it was also the first time it had been convened anywhere other than a state capital.

And were Northern Territory members involved in many workshops and other things that - - -?

[00:45:24] No, not unless they travelled to do so. So it really was – I suppose you were a member and you benefitted from publications, and Francis kept in close contact so that he could feed through additional information, but no. And Francis, of course, was doing workshops himself through the Northern Territory Archive Service, so playing that role in the Territory and moving, you know, covering vast distances as well.

Well, we mentioned earlier about you were amongst the pioneering generation of curators, so you've got a wonderful perspective on oral history from its fairly early days in Australia to the present. So I'm interested in your views on how, if at all, oral history has changed in that time. I mean, I guess possibly the most obvious way might be, actually, how we record it. But I guess, when I ask you about the changes in oral history since you started, what's the first thing that you think of about the changes?

[00:46:47] I think it's more in the analysis and the way in which oral histories are interpreted and written about. The investigations and literature around memory and the influence of – oh, you know, Alistair Thomson's work with the Anzacs being a case in point – how does an individual's memory of the experience of being a First World War soldier get influenced by society's changing attitudes to war and a common memory that develops about an event which an individual actually lived through and experienced in a very individual way. I was influenced very early on with some writing around oral history and folklore and I remember writing a piece called 'Don't take no offence by it' – the benefit of asking people to talk about other people.[132] And I remember Louise Douglas from the New South Wales branch and she became a museum curator and manager, and she congratulated me on my analysis of oral history, which I didn't really understand I was doing at the time, and that was from the perspective of – I like this idea that there are varieties of truth rather than unquestionable facts and the folkloric idea that a story may not be – may have changed over time, and for a story to survive it has to get retold even if it's by the one performer – but, although it may be exaggerated or embellished, there is

[132] 'Don't take no offence by it!: the value of asking interviewees to tell tales about other people', in *The Australasian sound archive*, No. 9, December 1989.

likely to be a kernel of truth, and the interest in – I certainly have always been interested in allowing for this in interpreting oral history interviews.

[00:49:52] And, obviously, there's been huge movements in quite a number of important directions in regard to the analysis of oral history and the function of memory. And I guess that's one of the challenges for me if I did go onto a sixth edition of the *Handbook* is just indicating that with a number of key references. But I think still retaining the idea of the *Handbook* – well, that's [the historiography of oral history] really only the first few pages – it's about how to *do* oral history. But I feel I would need to rewrite the opening pages to address, without egging it too much, acknowledge the sophistication of *analysis* that's involved in oral history these days.

Over the years, how has, do you think, oral history been perceived by other people in academia but also in public institutions and in the general population?

[00:51:16] Yes, I think there's a great deal more receptivity to it. There's much less just this throwaway that oral history can't be trusted and that oral history isn't objective, as if any written resource, including Hansard, didn't have subjectivity or rules of omission (laughs) that are applied to it. I think there is a much wider acceptance in academia and in publishing and the like that there is – that it is a source amongst other sources that is valuable and should be used, and certainly, I think, still without putting a name to it [i.e. the name 'oral history'], a great deal of public recognition of the value of it through the way in which journalism has changed, both print and broadcast and radio. You have generations of interviewers who interview a lot more like oral historians now rather than feeling – I'm thinking of radio here – rather than feeling they have to jump in and make sure there's not a moment's silence to let the poor interviewee gather their thoughts. Yes, I think there's a much broader acceptance of it.

And I'm also interested in whether the ways in which oral history is used – whether that has changed at all since you started.

[00:53:26] It's certainly used in so many more different mediums. And, as I was mentioning before, I'd just get thrilled whenever I see oral histories from public collections being reused by people who have had no part in the creation of those oral histories. I always find that very exciting and, of course, that comes down to good

curation of the collection so that people can get a window in to the fact that there might be worthwhile material there to be used, but it also comes down to the diligent researcher who's willing to – having thought, 'Oh! There might be material in the State Library's collection. I'll now go in and listen and/or read to find those nuggets.' And I still subscribe to the academic journal *Australian historical studies* and, you know, every so often I'll just be reading away on one topic or another and suddenly I'll find an excerpt from an interview from the State Library's collection or more than one and it'll be used in a way that I couldn't have imagined that it would be brought to bear on such a disparate topic. But there it is. So I do keep track of articles. I was mentioning before Joanna Bornat's been a big promoter of this. I do keep track of articles that promote the idea of reusing material.

[00:55:25] And it becomes inevitable. For a while there I was a little bit worried that oral history would always move forward in time – you know, 'We won't research the First World War anymore and use oral history materials because they're all dead. We'll move on to the Depression. Hmm, they're gone. We'll move on to the [Second] World War.' But, of course, then you have things like the Centenary of the First World War and the oral history material rises again. The people are long gone but the sources that were created through those interviews are being reused, which is very heartening.

So does the State Library also have a way of monitoring how interviews are used in ways other than publication, when people request permission to use - - -?

[00:56:27] Only in the broadest terms. My team is responsible for monitoring collection use and you'd be aware that the Oral History Collection – I'm just thinking why is this still so – that the Oral History Collection is still used through – requested through a manual slip rather than an electronic retrieval, and I am just thinking this doesn't need to be the case. But my team, as well as analysing the electronic requests every month, we go through all of the manual slips of material going into the reading room and oral history – I'm not the one doing the counting – it's always remarked upon that it's a relatively high use that continues with that material, which is very good.

I was just recalling a few years back when we had a request that went to June Edwards, who was at that stage at the State Library, I think. It was someone, a voice coach, wanting a Ngarrindjeri accent to be able to train an actor in London.

[00:57:50] Yes. No, you often don't know how it's going to be used and, at the other end of the scale, we get a lot of requests at the time that interviewee has died and the family wanting to play excerpts at the funeral. That started right back when I was – early days as Oral History Officer.

Do you think has the definition or the concept of oral history – has that changed or remained static, do you feel?

[00:58:32] It has changed but it does then tend to be given other names. I'm thinking here – so, in some ways, no, it hasn't changed. I'm thinking here the State Library of Queensland are very keen on what they call 'digital storytelling', and so they're very consciously not saying this is oral history, as in a well-prepared interview for reuse as research purposes and other things. They're saying let's incorporate interviewing into a short, sharp, shiny [presentation], and often including video technology as well. But I was rather pleased that they refer to it as 'digital storytelling' rather than 'oral history' because I guess, from my didactic point of view, it would just be another barrier to people understanding that oral history done well is time-consuming and does require preparation and thought by both parties.

[00:59:51] So no, I think at its heart oral history remains the same. Of course, there is a lot more oral history that is much more contemporaneous to the events that are being talked about, and fortunately there's a tremendous amount of literature developed around that because, of course, it is problematic to think that oral historians should move into communities during or after crises and see that as a necessary part in the experience [of] or recovery from disaster. I was reading the other day the comment that this is usually done from the point of the oral historian wanting to help, not for any exploitative reasons, but of course it's a highly sensitive area to work in. But, on the other hand, some communities actually ask for that involvement. But there is – has been a terrific literature developed over the last 20 years about that practice, so there is a lot of thoughtful guidance out there. But the idea of using oral history in that way, even in terms of a company like Holden is closing – 'we'd better send in the oral historians' – that wasn't a concept when I was starting out in that first generation or so of oral history. It was more that an industry closed down in this community 30 years ago; let's go out and find people who can talk about that time. So yes, it does get into pretty tricky areas these days and so long as that's what the individuals on the other side of the microphone want, it can

certainly produce some very dramatic material, but I myself do personally think that is straying it more into journalism and that we've got some very good journalists in Australia who can both record but then interpret and present in sensitive ways.

Well, I'd just like to touch now on – we've sort of mentioned some of the awards that you've got, and the main one being that you were made a Life Member of the – as it was then – OHAA[133] in 2001, and then being inaugural winner of the Hazel de Berg Award for Excellence in Oral History in 2006.

[01:03:24] That was a surprise. There was a conference I wasn't going to go to and Rosie said, 'But you must.' (laughs) And I think she might have had some influence in that, but that was wonderful and I was very, very pleased to be honoured with that. I, of course, was very familiar with Hazel de Berg's[134] work in an unusual way, in that one of the interviews I did when I was Oral History Officer – and I didn't do many, but I did try to keep my hand in every year or so and do a substantial interview – and I guess one of the ones I'm proudest of is the interview I did with Hedley Brideson,[135] who was the – he started as a young man, I think, in the 1940s and then he became State Librarian and left under a cloud in 1970. And I heard – started hearing about him when I started at the library and I was researching the use of the room that I was given as Oral History Officer and found that, during World War II, it had been a very go-ahead area for collecting and disseminating information for war industries and using newfangled technology like microfilm and the like, under Hedley Brideson in charge of that service.

[01:05:18] And I looked more into him and started asking some of the older staff members, 'Is he still alive?' 'No. No. He's dead,' said one. And another one said, 'Yes, but he's gone mad. He's barmy.' And I was intrigued by this and I heard more about him leaving under a cloud, but I also learned more about the extraordinary work he did, and this is where Hazel de Berg comes in, in that, as State Librarian for about 15 years, up until his resignation, he had really envisaged the State Library developing along the lines of the State Libraries of Victoria and New South Wales, so a much wider collecting vision, much wider events and activities. And one of the

[133] Oral History Association of Australia.

[134] Hazel Estelle de Berg née Holland (1913-1984).

[135] Hedley Brideson (1910-2003).

things he did in an era, of course, where one would have to travel to see collections, he obtained copies of material held in other places, he established a loan system with open-reel tape recorders for folklorists and ethnographers, he was on the Adelaide Rotary Club with Don Bradman, which is how the library got [Bradman's] collection, and so on and so forth. And I did eventually find out he was neither mad nor dead, and I did a two-part interview with him,[136] and he actually attended a few events at the library before his death.

[01:07:14] The leaving under the cloud was that he was – he virtually lived at the library. He gave talks in the evenings, did teaching, helped organise the first Writers' Week and subsequent ones, and he was the one who started the facsimiles publications that the Friends of the State Library continue – they were done under the Libraries Board, originally – of early Australian works, particularly of exploration. And, of course, in that era, the State Library had an enormous bindery that bound books in library binding as they came in – you'd take off the original cover, bind them into library bindings – scores of bookbinders and a [bindery] foreman who was running his own business on the side using government resources. And this was found on Hedley's watch and he had a breakdown as a result.

[01:08:38] And one of the things that he'd got from the National Library was a very large proportion of Hazel de Berg's recordings with artists, architects, writers, all sorts of people. So we had all of these seven-inch reels, I think, of Hazel de Berg's collection, and this was part of the early recordings that I took into the Oral History Collection to assess. And by that time the National Library regarded Hazel de Berg's collection as a jewel in their crown, as so they should, as a pioneer oral historian, although she always edited out her questions. So I wrote over to the National Library formally, saying, 'We hold all of these' – I listed them. I said, 'Clearly, we shouldn't hold them and we don't have the resources to make them available here and that would be stepping on your toes, anyway. We don't have the rights to make them available. What would you like us to do? We're happy to send them over to you.' And the National Library replied, 'No, you can discard them.' And that original letter – and I hadn't sent a list or, if I had, it went through the stage where I went back to them and I said, 'I wanted to make it clear we can dispose of them? You are

[136]OH 478, SLSA.

sure you have all of these recordings?' And it was only at the second stage that they got back to me and said, 'Ooh. We've found six or seven amongst yours that have been missing from our collection for decades. Could you send them back?' So that little quality assurance insistence on my part meant that the Hazel de Berg Collection at the National Library is more complete than it may have been. And, of course, it was her daughter, Diana Rich, who established the award in her mother's name, so I was very well aware of the significance of this award and, yes, very, very chuffed to receive it. And all of my – just about all of my contemporaries that we've talked about have subsequently received the award.

Well, we're coming towards the end of the interview now, so I'd just like to finish by asking you some sort of overall questions about your reflections on the – well, actually, your goals and hopes for oral history in the future, where you'd like to see it go.

[01:11:50] I guess I think of it in terms of the State Library. I'd love to see us get back to being able to have a full-time Oral History Officer again. It's been part-time for many years now. There's really good new management of the Archival Collections team at the library and it's great that Enid Woodley has been able to continue – not yet permanent, I don't believe – coming back to the role this year after some earlier contract work. There's a real sense that now is the time to sort out a lot of legacy issues. Being a part-time role for so long there are big gaps in adequate processing. And also we are very conscious – and Peter Kolomitsev has really championed this as well – that we have no simple means of making the audio of the oral history collection available online.

[01:13:22] We've used the Digital Collections website to deliver particular parts online, including the whole of the SA Speaks interviewing program, but there isn't – that's a curated program system for delivery. We haven't got any way where a member of the public can find an interview in the catalogue and, rights allowing, 'click here' and listen to it and see the transcript as they're [listening] – not necessarily beautifully joined up, as they are in the National Library's system, which we have looked at, whether that could be broadened for national use but that's not feasible at the moment. So we decided to – as an organisation, to identify the oral history collection as the first one that would go into our digital preservation system that we're implementing at the moment, so all of the born-digital and digitised

analogue recordings, all these digital files, are being prepared for ingest into Preservica, the digital preservation system, so that those files can be managed over generations to remain available. And so it's got to a really heartening stage where the - - -.

[01:15:09] First of all, one of the reasons we chose Preservica is that it has its own universal access portal that can provide access to audio and motion picture, which we also needed. The determination has been made that that access portal doesn't meet our needs, so our wonderful collection viewer that's already attached to the catalogue where you can do such good research into photographs is going to be adapted so that it can be used as a player for oral history and other audiovisual material. So that's a really long-held dream [of mine]. And then any interview catalogue record with the rights management metadata associated with it that says there are no restrictions on this kind of use, well, then it will just be a case of 'click here to listen' and it will be accessible.

[01:16:31] Similarly, if there are restrictions that won't allow global use, then the system picks up that metadata and says it can only be played in-house. So it's the same with photographs that are in copyright: if you're using the collections viewer offsite and you click on the thumbnail of an in-copyright photograph, you just get a message saying you'll have to come into the library. So it will work the same for oral history. So that's really going to be a dream come true and certainly one of the things that will be very exciting to see, the delivery of oral history as research material. That's a long-wished-for development.

Well, I think we've really covered so much in the interview, and you've talked about changing approaches to oral history and how it's viewed nationally. So I guess I'd just like to ask is there anything else that you were wanting to mention that we haven't already covered?

[01:17:42] I think we've done really, really well. I've made a few little notes but I think we have covered them. I guess (laughs) one of the things I can mention is my obsession with obituaries. Now, not the death notices in the newspaper because they don't have enough contextual information, but such as the Saturday *Advertiser* with the 'Tributes' page, and when I see a tribute to someone in South Australia in another publication or online, because that all-important closing of the life dates of oral history interviews is what I've always been obsessed with. I hate to say it, but I

used to refer to it as 'killing them off' in the oral history database. That's not very nice, is it? But it's obviously – the only way you can manage the rights associated with an oral history interview is to know if the person has died or not, and many of the earlier restrictions were worded as, 'These restrictions will be in place until I die,' rather than, 'These restrictions will be in place until 2020,' which – you know when 2020 has arrived but you don't know when someone has died. So that's actually remained one of my obsessions, which I just can't seem to get colleagues that much interested in, because it applies to all the archival material as well, which have donor agreements and the like.

[01:19:46] So perhaps that's a fitting final comment in this interview is, if we look at the life cycle of an interview and the associated interviewee, knowing when that person has died is a very important way of closing the loop.

Well, it just remains for me, then, to thank you for the huge amount of preparation that you've put into the interview. But it's been a pleasure and a privilege to interview you, and just because you've had such a huge influence on oral history in South Australia and nationally. And I probably wouldn't be sitting here doing this interview if it weren't for you writing the book and running those early workshops. So thank you so much for everything that you've contributed to oral history.

[01:20:38] And thank you very much for being such a well-prepared interviewer, which equally is an important part of the equation.

Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW