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Full transcript of an interview with

CARL LOELIGER

on 26 August 1997

by Rob Linn

Recording available on CD

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TAPE 1 - SIDE A

AUSTRALIAN RURAL HISTORY PROJECT.

Interview with Carl Loeliger at Lubeck in the Wimmera on 26th August, 1997.

Interviewer: Rob Linn.

Carl, to begin with, something reasonably mundane, where and when were you born?

CL: I was born in Murtoa on 21st April, 1935.

And who were your parents?

CL: My parents were Charles and Anna Loeliger nee Puls. My Father was a migrant from Switzerland. He came to Australia in 1926.

What brought him here? Do you know, Carl?

CL: Well, Switzerland used to not only export watches but regularly export people, and Dad was part of a wave of Swiss migrants to Australia, and New Zealand, and Canada, in the 1920's.

Is that right?

CL: Mm.

So how did he end up in this area around Lubeck?

CL: He first went to Camperdown in the western district and was there for about 18 months, and decided he would move on. So he came up the main line - main railway line - from Melbourne, got off the station at Murtoa, and only told us in later years that when he got off at the station he thought he would stay a fortnight and then consider leaving Australia and going to Canada. But any rate he stayed in Murtoa and he's buried in the Murtoa cemetery.

What did he find at Murtoa that kept him here?

CL: He was always interested in farming and he was not at Murtoa very long before he got employment with a well known Murtoa family by the name of Delahunty. Good Irish people.

And okay, so he worked then as what? An agricultural labourer?

CL: Yes. As a farm labourer for a number of years, and then eventually he share farmed with one of the Delahunty brothers for about two years before he and Mum bought this farm where we are now.

That seems amazing to me. That a Swiss agricultural labourer would buy in this district. That that time was a pretty difficult time for many people.

CL: It was difficult for my parents also. They came onto a farm that the two previous owners of this farm had gone broke and the general prediction in Murtoa was that they would be the third owners to go broke. (*Laughter in voice*) But I expect what finally saved them was the boom that took place after the end of the Second World War. They had the happy coincidence of reasonable years and rising prices.

Perhaps fortunate on one level but perhaps their land management skills were quite a bit better than the others.

CL: Well, yes, and just a general management skills. I mean, they weren't frightened of hard work. They both were - they were used to living frugally but well. Yes, they were difficult years but they finally got there.

What would your earliest memories be of this area, Carl?

CL: Of this area?

Well, Murtoa.

CL: Oh, Murtoa area. I still have memories of where we lived at Murtoa. My parents built a new house on land owned by the Delahunty's, and I still have some memories of that place. Some of the Delahunty children used to come over and play with a very long rope that Dad had bought. They used it as a skipping rope. You know, I don't know how many of them were in this - be a large group of people in this skipping rope.

I have memories of the horses there. I remember particularly one horse who leaned over the fence and got hold of the cap that I was wearing. *(Laughter in voice)* Yes, things like that. Otherwise I don't remember just too much of Murtoa area. Mind you, I was all of two when we left there.

**Yes, that's not bad going, Carl.
So you had other siblings in your family?**

CL: Yes. I'm the eldest of four. Two boys, two girls.

And your brother, Les, still farms this property?

CL: Yes. In fact, it's because he's here that I'm here. After I left UP & G at the end of '84, well, I came back here. I did own some land, and own a little bit more now, but I would not have been able to get going on my own. But because of the family connections here I could actually resume farming.

So, Carl, do you remember the year that your parents actually came to this property?

CL: I don't really have any really clear memories of that, although I do remember some of the things that happened around the house here. Well, not this house, the old house.

Well, tell me about them.

CL: For instance, there were pepper trees very close to the house. Right around the house. I remember Dad grubbing those - taking them out - because gardening was very important, particularly for my Mother, and anyone who's tried to have a garden near pepper trees will know the two don't mix. Also just very close to the house there were the remains of a burnt out shearing shed, which Dad also cleared away. I do remember those kinds of things.

So what did the property consist of in those times?

CL: Consisted of - in terms of acres, it was 1256 acres I think to be precise. Most of which had been cleared, although my Mother tells me that some of the country still had very light scrub on it. Otherwise, with the exception of about 50 or 60 acres, it had all been cleared.

Was this country well watered, Carl?

CL: Yes, it was well watered. (*Laughter in voice*) In fact, it was known to be - in wet years - rather too wet. Lubeck country has had a reputation for being rather wet, although that now with changes in the farming methods that's not a problem. Wet years are no longer a problem for us. Dry ones are.

Do you just want to expand on that?

CL: The reason for that is that the country now takes water much better than it used to, and that's been brought about by a number of things. This country is what's called popularly crab holey country. That's very uneven country, which means that when it did run water, you had water collecting in holes. So crops were always patchy. Pasture tended to be patchy also. So, oh, Dad started that in the later 1930's already - levelling - and didn't have very sophisticated machinery but that began to make quite a difference.

Then getting, yes, better topsoil, the use of subterranean clover, and then in the 1960's the use of gypsum, which changes the chemical composition of the soil and makes it much more friable. These have had dramatic impacts on the capability of the land.

Well, going away from that sort of overview of the land and back to the earlier times, Carl. Did you do your schooling in this area?

CL: Yes. I went to the - at least primary schooling. I went to the Lubeck State School and I actually went from Grades 1 to 7 at Lubeck Primary School - or Lubeck State School. That, of course, is now closed. That closed in 1983. Then I did just one year at Stawell Technical School. And at that time Dad was not at all well (he was on his own, working on his own) and he managed to take that harvest off, but just. So I actually came home on the farm before I was 14.

Did that seem like a pretty hard thing to you at the time?

CL: Not really. I have to admit that I wasn't particularly fond of school, although I had no difficulties with school work. Was not particularly fond of it. And my first reaction when I got home, that I learnt more in the first months that I was home than I'd learnt in a long time at school.

In what sense was that?

CL: I suppose a whole range of practical things rather than just theoretical things.

Did you feel an affinity with the soil?

CL: Yes. That's something I always have and I don't quite know why that is but I think it's partly due to the fact that I've felt that I've always battled, if you like, with my parents, to make something of this particular patch of dirt.

They must've shared something of that themselves.

CL: Yes. Yes. Both of them. And perhaps Mum in particular. She taught us an appreciation for animals and plants and - well, the flora and fauna if you like, which I think a lot of people miss out on. As children we all had our own patch of garden in which we grew a variety of things. Sometimes successfully, sometimes not so. *(Laughter in voice)*

So you came to have more of an understanding through your Mother particularly of what made things tick I guess.

CL: Yes. But then on the other side also, the farm side of things as well. And we always had farm animals as well as crops.

Now, you went to school in Lubeck. What did Lubeck consist of in those school days?

CL: Well, in those days Lubeck had a total population of probably about 70 people. And at different times that population would expand. For instance, when as happened in the early 1950's - sorry. It also happened in the 1940's, and 50's. Any major work done on the railway line meant that there'd be railway gangs living for sometime in Lubeck. And of course, they'd just about double the population.

So there was a general store here?

CL: General store, Post Office, greengrocer. There was no bank agency that was open every day, apart from the one at the Post Office, but the Commercial Bank and one of the others (I'm not sure which other) they had a sort of part time agency. Someone would come across from Rupanyup half a day a week, or one day a week.

Was there a strong sense of community around this Lubeck area?

CL: Yes. There always has been, and there still is, although of course the community is very much diminished.

How did that evidence itself, Carl? Was it their sport? Were there sporting clubs?

CL: Yes, sporting clubs, churches, other organisations, and Lubeck had a Progress Association, which is quite remarkable for a place of its size. But you had the full range of organisations. The Country Women's Association, the Red Cross.

During the War, for instance, the Comforts Association. This was an organisation that women formed basically to try and make life a little more comfortable for soldiers that were serving overseas, and then to help rehabilitate them after the War.

So the Fighting Forces Comfort Fund?

CL: Yes.

I'm with you, yes.

I mean, you would remember I would think the town quite clearly during the War years. Was that a time when people were drawn together in a sense?

CL: I think so. Certainly the War had very much an impact, and because there were men from Lubeck, for instance, Japanese prisoners of war on the Burma railway, everyone was very much aware, you know, that families didn't know where these men were. I think that helped to bring people together. The War was certainly very much on everyone's mind. I remember at school, you just could not forget about it. It was always there. I expect going to school you're

not always so aware of what brings people together and keeps people together.

In hindsight, do you think perhaps the War was a watershed for the local community?

CL: I don't know whether it was a watershed. Obviously the First World War already had an impact on Lubeck because the cricket ground was named in 1919 the Memorial Reserve. And a piece of granite was stood up with, you know, the names of the people who'd served and who'd been killed. Memorial gates were built. So obviously that already had quite some impact.

The Second World War, of course, also had that sort of impact. The local hall is called the Lubeck Memorial Hall. It was built in the 1950's.

I don't know in what sense it could be described as a watershed. I mean, it was certainly significant.

Well, I was thinking perhaps of the human side of it. I mean, perhaps you would've been too young to recognise that, but did some of these people come back with very changed lives and changed minds about how things would work, or could work? Perhaps you just didn't meet with them.

CL: I knew those people at the time but really didn't get to know them then. I've only got to know one or two of them in more recent times. And certainly the War did alter them very much. Not - or in a negative sort of way, although the negative things are there. Also in positive ways. Yes, I really haven't thought too much about that so I find that pretty difficult to answer just quickly.

Well, coming back on to the farm, Carl, you really - when you came back - would've been caught up in that boom, wouldn't you, of the early 50's to a large degree?

CL: Yes. Yes. Well, everything was much more optimistic than it is now, for example. Yes, in that sense of course the War did have an impact because during the War - well, people did what they could but everything was scarce. It was just taken for granted this is a time of just hanging in there. You're not going anywhere. Whereas in the 1950's you did. You had the energy and enthusiasm of people coming back from Service. But also other people, too, had - yes, I think new found energy and purpose. This was a time for

reconstruction and making things good again. And also, of course, the prices for rural products were higher than people had ever known them. Particularly wool. Those sorts of prices have never ever been obtained since.

Did you have many sheep on the place there?

CL: There's always been sheep on the place here but in those days we didn't have many at all. Would have been less than 1,000 sheep.

So your parents did well out of the rising grain prices at the same time?

CL: Rising grain prices and rising wool prices, yes.

Did you notice major changes on the property during those years?

CL: In the 1950's? I expect I didn't notice them so much because I was there and in part of them rather than being, you know, somewhat removed and being able to identify them. I think there were greater changes in the 1960's, and since.

Do you want to start telling me about them?

CL: Well, I'd like to think my Father was always reasonably progressive, although he was in some ways a conservative man but he was always willing to try something new. And some of the things we tried in a small way in the 1950's were tried in much larger ways in the 1960's. I mentioned to you before about, well, work on the land. I mean, in the 1960's, although again I'd - see, 1959 I left the farm again and went away. And really didn't come back on a full time basis until 1985.

After a good deal of study.

CL: That's right. *(Laughter)*

The levelling I was telling you of before, almost planing of the whole property, the sowing of much improved pastures, beginning the use of gypsum - yes, dramatically changed things, and yields for grain crops, for example, improved dramatically then in the 1960's. Prior to the 1960's we'd never ever dreamt of having 20 bags to the acre crops, but they became reasonably common from the 1960's onwards.

Is that common for the neighbourhood at the time?

CL: It certainly wasn't in the 1950's and early 1960's. Our property here was regarded as fairly marginal sort of country for cropping. Well, that's changed. I mean, now, it still has to be treated carefully but it's shown that it's quite good cropping country.

So at the time that you went away in '59, had the little town of Lubeck become littler?

CL: It certainly had, although not nearly to the extent that it's become littler from, say, the late 70's onwards.

So when you returned in the early 80's, there must have been quite vast changes from 1960.

CL: Oh, yes. If you're talking about the township of Lubeck, huge changes. Well, as I mentioned before, the school closed - sorry. The school closed in 1989 but at the time of the School Centenary in 1983 it was already obvious that the school's time was limited.

1989 the Post Office closed. I think the store closed in the early 80's. Also in - oh, that was the mid 90's, the Uniting Church closed. And in the early 1990's, the Anglican Church closed its doors. The railway station ceased operations in 1984 and was knocked down by a bulldozer in 1985.

The one reason why Lubeck was a prominent place earlier on was because it was the - that's where the branch line to Rupanyup eventually going out to Boolangum took off from. Boolangum, that was the end of this branch line, and now that closed also in the early 1980's.

These are basically grain feeder lines, were they?

CL: Grain feeder lines. Also wool, of course. And then it took things like fertilizer and lots of heavy material out.

So they weren't passenger lines in particular?

CL: It was a passenger line, too. I can actually remember passenger trains going out on that line but that would be the 1950's - 40's and 50's - but not since.

See, in this part of the world, prior to 1960, and prior to the greater prevalence of motor cars, people used the trains. From Horsham to Murtoa, or from Horsham to Stawell. Football matches and things like that. How would people get there? There'd be a special train. So, you know, passenger rail was just used very much.

Well, that makes sense.

CL: And even people from Lubeck went to a secondary school in Stawell by train. Every day. Down in the morning and back at night.

But by the early 80's this had all disappeared.

CL: Well, the passenger rail services would've started to shrink already in the 60's.

So were there other changes you noticed in the community apart from the diminution of the town itself?

CL: Yes, and again it's related to that. The farms becoming more mechanised, and larger. Fewer labourers and fewer casual labourers. Once upon a time you had quite a number of people around who would move from farm to farm getting work. Well, their number was decreasing. Some were still used, say, at busy times like harvest and shearing but generally speaking there was a decline in the number of those sort of people being employed.

TAPE 1 - SIDE B

We were talking about the changes and the fact that you'd been away for 20 years and things were looking a bit different, and they collared you for a job, which was writing the school history.

CL: Yes, that was 1983. I was away again in 1984.

You returned back here full time, more or less '85, was that right?

CL: Yes.

And to come back on the farm after that time was that really interesting experience?

CL: Interesting, yes. But not difficult. And I would explain that by saying that I've always had a gut feeling about farming. That was always my - I'd have to say - my first love as far as occupation was concerned.

All those years away in urban areas and overseas made you feel that somehow rural communities were different from urban communities?

CL: I think so. Well, I suppose I'd always felt that way and always a little suspicious of generalisations because find instances where they're quite wrong. Think it's still largely true that rural communities are different. I'm reminded of something that Geoffrey Lawrence wrote in his book on the rural crisis in Australia, just published mid 80's, that urban Australia has never really understood the fabric of rural society. And I think that comment also is reasonably accurate. And so it is different. I think the one thing where it's different, and it stands out in a number of instances, and it's also indicated by the problems that some governments have in understanding rural Australia. For example, they really do not appreciate how much volunteer effort goes into making rural Australia tick. They've no appreciation - well, no appreciation is perhaps going too far. They have little appreciation of how that works.

Perhaps they choose not to appreciate it.

CL: Except now, of course, when the money's short. Now there's calls everywhere for community committees to run things that once State and Federal governments did. And of course, as you know, the rural communities are thin on the ground. So much so that most of us feel under enormous pressure.

Because you're having to perform on a multitude of different bodies?

CL: Yes. Yes.

The next question I was going to ask you was 'do you think politicians have understanding of rural communities' but I think you've answered that one pretty well thanks, Carl.

I know when we were talking before the meal that you made it quite plain that in fact on nearly every aspect of the dealings you've got to deal with locally, politicians appear to have very little understanding of what makes communities tick out this far.

CL: I think so. I mean, we'd have to give credit to some of our rural politicians. I think they certainly understand. But the other thing that's happened, of course, in Australian politics, that one vote/one value has created a lot of difficulties for rural Australia. Enormous difficulties I think because whilst there's - I mean, the one vote/one value is a praiseworthy thing. It is difficult for rural Australia where the need for services is quite different from that in the city.

If you were able to theorise about the future, Carl, would you feel positive about rural communities in this area?

CL: Yes. I would feel positive but I would also say that I have considerable misgivings. And they are due to a couple of things. One would be this lack of understanding of rural Australia by urban Australia. The other would be the lack of appreciation of our environmental problems by both rural and urban Australians. And the other thing is this almost obsession of people with the idea that bigger is better and biggest is best.

In many places in rural Australia we don't need less people, we need more people. It's different from some parts of the world where the human pressure on small areas of land is terribly, terribly great. We almost have the opposite. We need more people to properly care for the land.

But who pays for it, I wonder?

CL: Well, finally, urban people will have to learn that we all have to pay. Because in the worst case scenario, people won't be able to live in the cities if the rural areas are in fact blowing away.

It's interesting that you should say that, Carl, because you're the second or third person in the recent past that's actually said the same thing. That I've been really encouraged to hear rural people say that they can see that unless all Australians put in - and Bill Gammage was the other

person who said it to me most recently - there won't be a land for them to have produce from.

CL: Well, I mentioned sort of the dry season. But even the water problem, you see. There's a lot of talk about water quality. But water quality is more than putting in a multimillion dollar filtration plant somewhere. I mean, water quality is about the quality of the whole catchment.

Mm. Exactly.

CL: And there's very little appreciation for that. And of course, the other thing is that - well, you take Melbourne for example. To satisfy the water requirements for a city like Melbourne, an enormous area of rural Victoria has to be drained. And whilst the actual catchments are in pretty good nick, the areas downstream from where Melbourne's water is taken, are not in good nick. They are all degraded.

So you can see in the future that there's a need for urban people to actually have greater appreciation of a rural environment, not just the people or the land but the whole environment?

CL: Yes. And that's the - look, it's wonderful that there's a growing awareness, and you can actually see that. There is a growing awareness. But there's a very long way to go. There's a huge leap between awareness and action on a grand scale. And people - you've heard people say that this is urgent. Very few people have got the notion that it's urgent. 'It's taken 200 years to develop the problem, we've got 200 years to fix it'. Well, I mean, that would seem to be a nicely balanced equation, but we don't have the 200 years. People are talking ten, twenty or thirty years.

So you see the future of perhaps this part of rural Australia as having a need for urgency, do you, Carl?

CL: Yes. Although we are fortunate here. I mean, we are by no means in the sort of - we don't have the worst case scenario for Australia but we've got quite significant problems. And problems which need to be addressed urgently. You see, in this part of the world there are not many areas where production is down considerably, except in parts of the upper catchment in the Wimmera River, where there's some quite ugly scenarios. But even there, I mean,

people are talking about expanding the wine industry and so forth, and this can be done if it is done carefully. They'll have to be very careful - done very carefully, or it will only increase the problems that are already there.

Carl, just to sort of tie things up here - I'm getting tied up now. We've just been talking about the way in which Australians need to appreciate the land which they live in, and rural Australians perhaps need to appreciate it, too, and understand that they've missed something.

CL: And I would think that is coming to appreciate this land, this soil, this flora, this fauna, for what it is. And although it may seem very different from things European, it is just as valuable. It is just as beautiful. And in some cases it might even be more beautiful. And from a purely practical point of view, of course, it thrives here. Whereas a lot of our imported species simply find it very difficult going.

We are still learning how to live in this place. How to act towards it. How to belong to it. We're still learning how to appreciate the trees and plants and animals and birds that are here. This is an incredibly slow process. We are still in some sense alien to this place. That's where we have very much to learn from our Aboriginal brothers and sisters, of course, because they over a long period of time did learn how to live in this place, and how to live here without damaging it as we've done.

Well, thanks very much for talking to me, Carl.

CL: You're very welcome.