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OH 589/4

Full transcript of an interview with

REX STUART

on 24 January 2001

By Jude Elton

Recording available on CD

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AUSTRALIAN WORKERS' UNION RELATIONS
WITH ABORIGINAL WORKERS TO 1975:
J.D. SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, MORTLOCK
LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIANA: INTERVIEW NO. OH 589/4

Jude Elton interviewing Rex Stuart on 24th January 2001.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

**Interview with Rex Stuart of the Arabana Community at Port Augusta on 24th January, the year 2001, conducted by Jude Elton.
Rex, could you tell me where you were born?**

I was born in Finnis Springs, under a gum tree.

Was it on a station at that time?

It was on a mission station.

And did you grow up there?

I grew up there, I had to go to school there until the age of fourteen.

And would you have liked to have access to any further schooling, and did you get access to any at the mission?

No, because the type of schooling that we had, I was in a hurry to get out of it.

It wasn't appropriate as far as you were concerned.

We had to go to school, and if we didn't go to school there was always the fear with our parents and with the missionaries and with the bloke who owned the stations that there was – they called him the Aboriginal Protector. If we didn't go to school we had the fear of [being] taken down to Colebrook Home where the rest of the half-caste people went.

And how old were you when you started work?

Fourteen. I had to get work at the age of fourteen or come back to school again for another year, that's what I heard, but I was afraid of that.

What was your first job?

My first job was working at Macumba Station on the beef cattle station.

And what sort of work was it?

It was – at the age of fourteen I knew how to ride horses at the time, because at Finniss Springs there were only horses and buggies and that, and we learned to ride horses bareback and anything you like, we had to muster horses, get them in, for the day to cart water and all these sorts of things. So by the time I left school I was well experienced in the horses.

How did you get that job at the –

Macumba Station.

– Macumba Station?

Yes. I went up there because my uncle and my relatives worked up there, and they worked for a bloke by the name of Ernie Kemp at that time, and I just said, ‘Uncle, could you get me a job? I don’t want to go back to school.’

Did you receive any further training at the station?

Yes. I received training. As soon as I got there I knew how to muster – well, not altogether that well, but further training was how to muster brumbies, how to muster cattle, what to do, how to approach when you do go mustering, and how to make hobbles and how to put turk seed on hobbles and which way to – when it’s a rainy day there’s a certain way you’ve got to put a hobble on a horse – how to break in horses, and how to go mustering, how you’ve got to not talk and just keep quiet. And night watch, with cattle that you must deal with that were really wild.

And was Macumba Station just a cattle station?

It was just the cattle station. It bred horses and cattle.

And did you work at Macumba – ooh, for how long did you work there?

Well, three years straight since I left school. I didn’t want any holidays because it was holiday to me just to be away from school.

And did you go to other stations after that?

Yes. I came back, and because I was so long away from my mum and dad without any holidays for three years I didn’t want to depart from my mother, because my dad always went shearing and done other station jobs and all

that and I thought that being the second-oldest son I'd give her a hand with wood carting on bung carts, buggies, water carting – because we had to cart our water and all that. So I felt sorry for her, and she didn't want me to go away either, so I got a job there at Finnis Springs Station.

And did you stay there for a while?

Yes, I stayed there for a while. Then at a slack time the missionary didn't like me being around there because of reasons that I know of, so he asked me to get away from there.

How did you feel about that?

Well, I didn't want to go really because it sort of separated me from looking after my mother. But I had to go because I still had the fear – because that's why I went away from when I feared the Aboriginal Protector – I still had that fear that they might come and say something or do something, or – – –. I didn't know the connections they had, but I just agreed and went to Witchelina Station.

So then did you work at that station for a number of years?

Yes, I worked in Witchelina Station for – oh, I don't know how many years, but what happened was that they changed managers and the other manager, I got to like him well, and he didn't like us to resign, but when he left I left too.

And was that another cattle station?

It was a cattle and a sheep station.

So did you ever learn the sheep side of the industry?

Yes, we had to control dingoes coming in. I was a boundary rider then – you've got to be isolated on your own and you had to kill the dingoes that came and killed the sheep, and if you couldn't see them you had to track them down and you had to shoot them like – well, you had to chase them, regardless of whether your horse fell or not while you're on your own – that's you. And I had lots of falls with the horses that fell on top of me, hurt my shoulders and had to walk back, and dogs went. Mainly rabbit holes

that stopped me from getting the dog, but after that I'd go back to the place where the dogs would come in and water, then I'd follow them again. You had to track them down before you find them.

It sounds like dangerous work. Did they come and check to see how you were going?

No. (laughs) If you died you could be found a week later, maybe two weeks. There's no 'phone connections, not like nowadays. They just come and checked up on you and if they don't see any fresh tracks something's wrong.

And so how often would you get to go back to the homestead or see the other workers?

I never went back to the homestead. I went back to the boundary rider's hut. And the manager came out once a fortnight to deliver some groceries, which was butter and tinned meat and stuff – no milk, no sugar – oh, sugar and tea, yes. That was the main thing – onions, potato.

Any other fruit or vegetables?

No. Nothing.

And did you ever get any holidays? When did you get to go back to the station?

Well, at Macumba I received no holidays for three years, like I said. That was a holiday for me just to be away from school, and the fear of the Aboriginal Protector – was Mr Penhall – he might come and take me. I didn't want to go back again.

And the other stations later on, when you were doing the boundary rider work, did you get a break from that at all?

No, not unless I asked for it. But the other station at Macumba Station, it wasn't a boundary rider's job, it was a track rider's job, where there is no fences. And I was out with a friend of mine about a hundred miles from the nearest place, Whitworth[?] Station, and this was among bull camels, snakes, wild dingoes and everything, and we had to go into the station every three months to get flour, tea and sugar.

But apart from that you just had to exist, survive on your own.

Yes. At the age of fourteen.

**It's a lot to ask of young people, isn't it, yes. And did the ---.
(sound of vehicle passing, break in recording) How did you feel
about the working conditions back then?**

I never knew much about the working conditions because the day I left my place where I grew up, where I was born and went to school, I thought everything was the same. Nobody checked on you, you had to survive one way or the other. And I lived on salt meat and damper plus the occasional bullock that we killed when we were out droving for three years – salt meat, damper and raw onion. When we came back to the station the white people used to go back and have their showers, shave, shampoo or whatever, have their ice-creams and things – we still lived on salt meat and damper, cooked in – (pause) what they – the copper that they put clothes in, and that was green. And when you got that it had maggots on it. We were fed in the wood heap, slept still in our swags, no washing machine, no nothing – just live like the Abo.

And were there white workers at that station as well?

What?

White workers at that station?

Oh yes, white ringers.

And what were their conditions like?

Their conditions were they came back, they had their showers, they ate their meals in the main kitchen up at the station, and black fellas weren't allowed to change their diet. We still lived on salt meat – well, salt meat green and maggoty – and onion, and damper.

And the accommodation that you had, how did the Aboriginal workers' accommodation compare with the white workers' accommodation?

Still that same swag we went droving with.

And what was the white workers' accommodation like?

They had their little compartments, they had their shower facilities, they had their beds and everything made. They went to eat at the dining room, at the kitchen.

How did your wages compare?

Well, every time – every five or six months we went in droving – from droving to cattling, we had to ask our boss, ‘Can we have 20 dollars?’ Then we got that.

So you got no regular wage.

No regular wage.

And you weren’t getting the same wage as what the white workers were getting?

I still don’t know. I don’t think so. Because we only got paid 20 dollars when we go in and truck cattle after about three or four months of mustering cattle, droving cattle, cutting out cattle and driving them in through all this dust, through days and night watch. Night watch! And I should tell you that our clock was the daylight star. There was no end to that because when you muster fresh cattle you don’t sleep at night, you had to take it in turns in watching cattle, these wild cattle. All night you go around and around, and to keep awake you had to just keep singing or anything.

Did the white workers share that night work with you?

Yes, they shared the night work with us.

And did you share the other jobs, or were the Aboriginal workers restricted to some jobs rather than other jobs?

The Aboriginal workers were in a way restricted because you had to be under some white – like what we called them then weren’t overseers but head stockmen – what they tell you to do or what they told you what horse to ride, regardless of your abilities or anything, you got to learn one way or the other. If you fell off you get told off or you get a thrashing with a bridle or a hobbler cane.

And who did that?

The boss, the head stockman.

If you'd objected to that treatment, what could you have done? I mean, what would have happened to you?

Well, regardless if you're a hundred miles out or somewhere, you've got to walk from there with your swag, regardless of whether you get home or not.

They would have sacked you.

They sacked you and said, 'On your way.'

And if you'd complained to, say, the mission station or the police, would they have done anything?

There was no police around, there was no mission station around. I'm talking about two or three hundred miles away, out, in the desert where no-one else is. Who can you complain to?

Back with the conditions at Macumba Station, did those conditions continue on as you went through your working life?

Beg your pardon, say that again?

As you got older and you worked at other stations, did the sort of conditions that you've just described – were they still like that?

No. The next station that I came back – like the Witchelina Station – they had something like a union thing you had to go in and I didn't know anything about the union then. That's when the union came in. I had no understanding of the union. All you had to do was join it, then I first got the understanding of tax – I didn't know what that meant – and so my tax got to come out. And that's where I was first introduced, and I was seventeen at the time, when I came back to Witchelina Station.

And was that a cattle station?

It was a cattle station where they bred cattle, sheep and Arab-bred horses. And those Arab-bred horses were meant to be tough, rugged and you could chase dingoes as well as muster sheep and the rest of it.

And you said the union was there, was the union covering all – – –. (break in recording) At this later station, did the union cover all of the sorts of jobs at that station, or just those related to the sheep and shearing?

Mainly the shearers, that's where I heard of the union. I didn't know what it meant. Who were they? We never ever contacted them, but you had to be there. But at a certain age like the age of seventeen then, as well as the age of fourteen, I didn't know anything about unions or what you should do, what they should allow you to do, what limit they should push you to, I didn't know. I just thought, 'You're there, Rex, you got your job. If you leave that job – – –.' The Welfare always played upon my mind.

So how did you find out eventually about the union?

Well, it was many years after when I came down to get a job on the railways. I had to put my age up to get a job on the railways because it was much more comfortable, you had your breakfast, you had your lunch, you had your bed, you had your shower. So most of my mates all went to the railways.

And so in the pastoral industry you really didn't get to find out about

–

No.

– what the union was about?

No, no. All you had to do is just sign up.

How were you told that you had to sign up? Who told you that?

Well, if you don't you get the sack, that's what I heard down here in Port Augusta: you've got to be in it because the rest of the union members would kick up a stink about it.

And did that mean that when you joined that you got better wages?

I hope to believe that, but I think so. They said, 'You've got rights, you can kick up about that.' Being coming from the station where there was no union, I didn't know what to kick up about because I thought it was much more comfortable than where I came from.

And did the working conditions improve at all? Were they more equitable between the Aboriginal workers and the white workers?

Oh yes, yes. It was sort of equal then. Because some of the people that I got work on the railways with, they were much older than me and they were

much longer than me, and they told me what my rights were and all this. I didn't – it took me a time to – a bit of a time to get to grips with that too.

So that was in the railways, but not on the station.

Not on the station.

Yes, so in any stations that you were at, were the working conditions ever comparable between Aboriginal workers and white workers?

What's that?

Were they ever the same between white workers and Aboriginal?

No way. No way. Aboriginal people were expert in the stock work. We were trained to ride bullocks while we were on the station regardless of compensation – there's no word that's compensation. If there were we didn't even know what that meant anyway. If you got hurt you went back to the station, you lay down for a while, then you yearned to get back with the mob again. And any dangerous horse you'd jump on – if you get killed, you get killed. We weren't registered. They bury you where you died. The black fellas will, anyway.

Did the union at the station you went to where you felt you had to join up, did they ever hold a shed meeting of all the workers?

They may have, but I knew nothing of it.

So you were a member but you didn't ever get to go to a shed meeting?

No. Most probably if I did I wouldn't know what they're talking about.

Was language a barrier?

Language is always a barrier, because when I went to school they had teachers come from Sydney and Melbourne and all this and that and we had to get away from this Creole language, and we didn't understand big words. We were just starting. But if we didn't understand them we had to do words like 'imposition' a hundred times – 'I should know how to understand this word' and all this. This was after school. But the teachers that came on this mission station, okay, it was all right for them, for us to understand them,

but we couldn't explain because our Creole or broken-down English, we had to get out of that and we had to forget about our own language and none of this 'Yababadoo' round the school; we'd learn English.

Did you ever come across, say, a union rep on the job who was an Aboriginal person who perhaps could speak language?

Never.

Did you see the union organiser at all?

I saw the union organiser, but being an Aboriginal person you stay in the background and let your white mates – hopefully they'll speak for you too, you see, because it was something like a family. We didn't – *I* didn't understand all of what they meant, any rate. But I just went along with it.

So did the union ever feel like family to you?

I don't know. As long as you paid your fees and that's all, then you don't see them no more.

Did you ever come across a union organiser who made a particular effort to talk to Aboriginal workers?

No, they always spoke to a group. At that time I don't think any Aboriginal person had the guts to say what they thought because they felt, you know, let the white people talk. They understand that language. Any big words we were really scared of – and still am.

But such good things to say. (laughter) Were you ever a shed rep yourself? Did you ever become a union delegate?

No.

Not even on the railways?

Not even on the railways.

About how old were you when you started on the railways, that you left the pastoral industry?

I was seventeen, but to get the job on the railways, because it was cash paid every fortnight and you had a commonwealth store down in Port Augusta, you could bank your money in there and I didn't even understand that. I

thought when you bank your money on the train that was left there until you get old and you can't work no more. So when I banked my money I had lots of money in the bank but I thought if you had to go and ask for it people might think that I'm robbing the bank or something, so we just worked. We had our food, we had our commonwealth store and we had our bed and breakfast, tea, and we had our shower and that and paid fortnightly. And it was much different from droving.

It sounds very different. Did you ever come across or hear of the experiences of the Aboriginal women on the stations? Were they also working on the stations that you were at?

Aboriginal women were on the station where I was at – that was at Macumba. They did the washing for the station mob. They did the cow milking, they did the cow mustering, they did the cow and calf separating. And we had to do our own washing wherever on water holes and that, but when we came back to the station and we changed our clothes, it was every time, when you took your trousers off that you brought in would almost stand up in that sweat after six months of droving. And it wore out on you. To replace it you bought new ones, save washing, because you had no soap, nothing. Unless you went for a swim in your clothes, that might loosen it up a bit.

Were you aware – would you have heard at all if the Aboriginal women who were working on the stations, in the homesteads, whether they got paid at the stations that you were at?

Well, I don't know much about the woman part, but I know that they washed clothes and they cooked our meals when we came into the station in coppers – copper, what you washed clothes with, that same copper boiled our salt meat and we got potatoes in it, cooked potato, and raw onion. That's all we got.

And was there a different cook for the white workers?

Yes.

Was there different food for the white workers?

Yes. I'm sure they didn't eat the maggots that I found in my food.

As an Arabana man working on the stations and having worked around this area since, what are your views about union priorities?

I think differently now, because things are much more different from what is back there. Before when I went on stations I just thought that's the way it is, rough life, rain, hail or sunshine you're out there with the cattle, that's your job, you're stuck to it, regardless of whether hot or cold, whatever the weather, it didn't mean anything to us. All night job, that was your job. We didn't get paid for this all night – it wasn't hourly-paid like eight hours a day now, it was from the rising of that daylight star to no end. You had to do the night watch after. You'd hurry up and have your tea, you're coming on watch at two hours of watch. That's how it was.

So do you think that union priorities in relation to Aboriginal workers could be different?

Well, nowadays they reckon it is, and there's every possibility. But back there, before I came onto the railways, there was no union – I didn't even get taxed. We weren't registered. If you died, you died, they buried you where you died. No recording of you or where you came from. No police – you know how the inspectors come round? They just dig a hole and bury you where you die.

And as an Aboriginal person, again, what do you think about the way unions work, about union structures?

I got no idea. No idea. I just carried on being in the union. The last lot of jobs that I had just be in it, you got to be in it, and that's all to it.

Has anyone ever explained how unions work?

No, not with me.

And you've been in places, obviously, where there's been union delegates as well as union organisers. Have they ever told you about union training, union education?

No, but there have been people, like you go back to where I came from, Grade 7, and Aboriginal people, when there's big words in anything you say, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah,' to everything although you don't understand it, because that – I'm talking about myself now – because in school you had to say, 'Yeah, yeah,

yeah, yeah,' otherwise if you didn't understand the teacher that came from Sydney or Melbourne or anything you get the cane for not understanding her. And they said, 'Use your brains,' and we had Aboriginal brains, you know. We're trying to get off our language and we're trying to get into this – well, English speaking, but when they got long words and all this and that you had to understand that too. There was nobody to explain that either.

Do you think it would be good if there were Aboriginal union delegates and Aboriginal organisers in unions?

Nowadays, yes, I reckon there would be. But I'm talking as a retired person now, you know, but I reckon it will be much more better. And yes, because the Aboriginal approach to an Aboriginal person is much different to a white person who'll come along there for about ten minutes or something and rattle off these big words, so we'd say, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah,' (loud creaking sound) and that's that. He's gone, no difference.

So they would talk differently and relate differently, do you think?

I reckon they would talk differently and relate differently, but nowadays there are Aboriginal people getting more education than what I used to get, you know, and most probably they would understand what was being spoken of and they'd retaliate and ask these sort of questions. But I'm just going back on my time, when nobody was talking.

Given that amongst all workers there are – – –. (break in recording)

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A: TAPE 1 SIDE B

Given that there are people in unions who come from very different backgrounds, do you think it is perhaps the responsibility of unions to make sure that everybody understands, no matter what their background is?

Yes, I do, because I do interpreting in court and that, and I have meetings with judges from different places and they come and had meetings with us and they explain what's the problem. They gave me the opportunity to talk and I explain my difficulties in the courthouses and the court jargon what they use, and where there's no interpretation for the big words that they use in court and what I should interpret. Yes, I agree with that.

So would that be a good thing for unions to do?

Yes.

Did you ever take any industrial action when you were on a pastoral station, or hear of any?

No. I didn't want to get into that. I was just a nervous little Aborigine.

Did you ever hear that the unions were taking a case in the 1960s to try and get equal pay and working conditions for Aboriginal workers?

No.

So you didn't ever come across a union person who was consulting with you –

No.

– about that?

No.

The Industrial Commission made a decision that Aboriginal workers in the pastoral industry should *all* get equal wages and working conditions from the end of 1968. Were you ever informed of that?

I was only aware of that when I came to Witchelina Station, but you had to be over the age of seventeen to get 20 pounds a week. And that's the same thing that happened to me up there when I was droving. I was doing a man's work, I was taking everybody else's risk like they take, and if you had to say you're under seventeen you get less wages, yet you had to put up with the dangers of night watch, night rush and all this with cattle, brumbies and anything like that. You had to put up with all that. So a bloke like me had to just let these little whiskers grow and say that he's over 21.

Were you actually on a station when the decisions were implemented from 1969 onwards?

If I was on a station at that time – I *would* have been on a station at the time – I would not have known about it.

So you didn't see any evidence of the decision being implemented?

No evidence, we just worked along.

So none of the other workers got increases in pay?

No, we had no increases in pay. I don't know anything of it. All I knew was if you're over the age of 21 you got over 20 pounds a week.

Did you hear that the Aboriginal workers on some of the stations in the Northern Territory walked off the job because they didn't get equal pay? Did you hear about that?

There were lots of Aborigines that I heard about. Even my father had to walk off because he went up on a droving trip, he got sick, he had a 'flu, he had scabies and he had to carry his swag to the nearest station. And they had to treat him on the nearest station and he had to just be left halfway mark, because he couldn't ride a horse because he had that many sores on him.

And might that have been through malnutrition, just not having enough proper food?

I don't know, but the end result was that they didn't care if he died or got back to Marree which was about more than a hundred miles away.

In 1966 the Gurindji walked off the Vestey stations in the Northern Territory. They weren't happy with the delay in equal pay. And they said that they would strike until they got better wages and conditions. Did other communities ever hear about that?

They heard about it, but some communities were much less experienced in speaking up for themselves than others, so a lot of the other communities relied on what might happen.

Did people want to take action here?

They wanted to but they didn't know how to come about it or who to approach.

So they didn't know where there might be support.

They don't know, and a lot of them today still don't know where there might be support, apart from the Division of State Aboriginal Affairs where they could ring up now and do things, and the unions and that – it's much different now from what it was back then.

Do you think people see unions any differently now?

Well, that question honestly should be up to the younger generation, because I didn't see any back then, I saw nothing. As long as you had to be in it to be with the mob, be with the group.

Thank you very much, Rex, for those comments. They're really very helpful and they really describe station life for you as a young worker very well indeed. Is there anything that you'd just like to add?

Well, I'd just like to – well, I was talking to a friend of mine who was a drover too at that same time – there's not many of us left now, okay? Real dinky-di drovers. They call them commercial road drivers and Rundle Mall drovers and all this now, but they talk about horses and that, but it's all motorbikes and things and there's hardly any of us left now. And it should be recorded so that people can document and keep a record of what life used to be, because it's not a simple life. If you had to be droving, if you had two canteens you had to weigh them both, and if the cook understood you he'd take a billy can of water out of this one, tomorrow morning for breakfast he'll take the billy can of water out of the other so that they'll balance, otherwise you've got to tip some in the other. And the meat packs had to be weighed and the swag had to be equal and all those sort of nitty gritty little things, otherwise the pack horses, the swags and that will slip, the pack bags will slip and all this sort of thing.

So there was a lot of detailed knowledge that you had to acquire.

A lot of detailed knowledge, a lot of detailed knowledge. Because when you're travelling along you found out that – a lot of the station workers had mules and that, but when it rained, when you get in swampy country, we found out that the mules, because of their smaller feet, they'd sink in to their belly with the pack that is on, and we found out that bigger horses with flat-footed – they went through better than the mules did, yes.

Anything else that you think – that would be important to have recorded about that life?

Well, there are endless things that I could say, but it would take hours, you know. But it's quite – looking back in life now it was quite enjoyable. There was no rush, you had to do your job, nobody – you were out there, you had plenty of time to think, during lunch break you had to watch the cattle, after lunch break you drove them off, and the younger people used to be sent out to watch cattle through dinner hour so the head stockmen and the older people could have their little rest.

Did you get a rest?

We sneaked some sleep while we watched cattle, all right, (laughs) but we'd get told off if the cattle wandered away while we were asleep. But we'd gallop around them and we'd blame one another, you know. That sort of stuff.

Well, look, thank you very much again, Rex. That's very helpful indeed. Thanks for your time.

Yes. And that's experienced knowledge what I've just told you.

It certainly sounds like it, and very skilled knowledge to me!

Yes, it is! (laughs)

Ah, hang on! (sound of vehicle engine) It wiped it, so we'll ---. (break in recording)

If an Aboriginal person had to disagree with the white head stockman and there were arguments, ended the sack, he'd be told to roll his swag, get home the best way he can. Now, there'll be some relatives in that stock camp which would be really hurt by that, because they can't go and concentrate on cattle thinking that their relative is going to perish. And they know, like the back of their hand, the distance they've got to walk, so some of them would walk off the job with them. And this happened to an uncle of mine. He walked from Roxby. The same thing happened. He was told to walk, and a friend of his said, 'Well, if he's going to walk I'll walk too.' They had to walk about 150 miles straight across to the place where I was born. He never ever got there. There weren't no telephones around in those days. Letter you might get once a week, but the letter they got at Finniss Springs where I was, 'Oh, So-and-so and So-and-so walked.' And it was a stinking hot day, those days were

summer months, so my grandfather had to put on a horse, shovel, water bag – water bag was hope that they were still alive, shovel was didn't think they would be still alive. He went away for about a week and a half, he found them dead. He rode back to the station where he was and told my grandmother, 'Your son's finished. I buried him where they are, in a shallow grave.' Right up until this day I don't know where that is. And those sort of things did happen.

END OF TAPE