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Full transcript of an interview with

ROGER BLAKE

on 11 April 2003

by Rob Linn

Recording available on CD

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OH 692/10 TAPE 1 - SIDE A

AUSTRALIAN WINE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT.

Interview with Roger Blake at Yenda on 11th April, 2003.

Interviewer: Rob Linn.

Now Roger, where and when were you born?

RB: I was born in Waikerie. You know where Waikerie is? Up in the river in South Australia.

Yes, you're a river rat. *(Laughs)*

RB: Yes. I was born in 1927. My father was a First World War soldier. He was actually a builder and he went up to Waikerie. He had a little five acre farm. When I say it was a block, that's what they called it then. It had about an acre of apricots and some nectarines and some peaches. And a few oranges and a few sultanas and a few Gordos and a few currants.

Also the Waikerie Co-op was mainly a distillery at that stage. There weren't that many that had shares in the Co-op at the time, but my father was one of them. He used to dry his currants and his sultanas, but the Gordos they used to send down to the Co-op for sweet wine. Then later on, they also took the currants and the

sultanas and the whole lot down. Actually his best friend was John Darling who was the secretary, so pretty involved.

The winery used to be right down near the river. As kids we used to go down and swim, and we'd walk over and have a look and see the crushing going during vintage while we were there.

Did you?

RB: Yes. The boiler was all wood fired in those days, so you could go and have a yarn with the boiler bloke, and go and have a look at the distillery. It was pretty open. So, you know, that was really my introduction to the industry.

Roger, before you go on, what were your father's and mother's Christian names? I should've asked you.

RB: My father's name was William Harvey, and my mother was Marion Beatrice.

And you were just about to say how you went into the industry.

RB: My elder brother joined up and went to the war, and he said that when he came back he was going to be a winemaker. Well, he didn't come back. He joined the commandos and he was killed in 1942 up in New Guinea. So I said that I'd go into the wine industry. I didn't really know much about it, other than what I'd seen. As far as the technical part of it was concerned, there wasn't that much involved. Mainly in those days it was nearly all sweet wine, so about all you did was (*sounds like, an alcohol*), and that was about it.

When you say sweet, you mean fortifieds?

RB: Fortified wines. Nearly all fortified wines up the river.

So then I went to Roseworthy. Course, I was really keen on setting up vineyards at home and all this sort of stuff. My father said, 'No, I don't think you'd better do that. I think you'd better make sure that you get into the industry properly'.

Talk about Roseworthy for me, Roger, before you go on.

RB: Roseworthy?

Yes.

RB: In what respect?

What was it like, and who were you with.

RB: Actually it was quite interesting. In those days, other than the co-ops, all the industry was owned by private people. The main ones were Seppelts, Hardys, Leo Burings, Orlando, Hill Smiths (which is Yalumba). And also Emu Wine Company in the south. They were the main ones. There were a couple of smaller ones.

Anyway, when I was there, there was Dave Hardy from Hardys, Dick Buller from Bullers at Rutherglen, and Jim Barry and myself, who were two that were outsiders. There was also a young lad from New Zealand when I was there.

One of the Corbans?

RB: Corban. He was another one that was there when I was there.

And when our blokes came back there were people like Johnnie Stanford, Phil Tummel, Brian Barry (Jim's brother). Ray Kidd was there. Who else?

So were you there in Hick's time, Roger?

RB: No, he was a long time after me.

Hick, the senior. Was he teaching?

RB: He was teaching, yes. We actually were the last ones that he taught at Roseworthy. He went from there down to a place just opposite the library where they did -

Chemical analysis.

RB: Chemical analysis. He was in an investigation of some description.

We were very lucky. We had 'Hicky' for science, Jock Williams for viticulture, and Rex Kuchel was our micro fellow. So we had some pretty decent—very forward thinking people at the time.

Well, Jock Williams went on with Wynns, didn't he?

RB: Yes. Jock left for Wynns. Rex Kuchel left and went down to the library or -

Botanic Gardens.

RB: - Botanic Gardens, or somewhere, too. They all left. But they were all very keen.

The biggest problem with the industry at that particular stage was that they wouldn't tell you anything. Very secretive. *(Laughs)* In fact, later on, Bryce Rankine made himself very unpopular because he went and asked the wineries if they would tell him where they were going wrong, and they wouldn't. 'We don't have any crook wines'. He knew bloody well that they did. And of course, because he asked them these questions, they didn't like it. This sort of made progress in lots of ways very slow. Well, even when I was up in the Barossa, the various wine people weren't supposed to say anything about what their company did, or anything like that. Very, very secretive.

So Roger, you would've had to do two years of agriculture first?

RB: No. Oh, the other one that was with us was Bob Knappstein. That was the Knappsteins from Clare.

Originally the idea was that you were supposed to do three years ag. You did an ag diploma first and then you did your wine course afterwards. Well, Bob and Dick Buller had done their three years, or they would've completed their three years, and at that particular stage they only put six through at a time. So the ones that wanted to do it at that particular stage were Jim Barry, myself and David Hardy. And there was another lad, *(couldn't decipher name)* from Sydney, but he dropped out. Then there was another lad—Butterworth—but he dropped out also. So it only left five of us then. The three of us—David Hardy, Jim Barry,

myself—we had to get to two years, and then Bob and Dick came in with us. Theoretically we should really have done three. They said that they might as well just let these—I don't think we did that much more than anybody else, only the two years.

And Roger, did you do vintages with wineries at the time?

RB: Yes. The first vintage I spent with Evan Savage at McLaren Vale, and the second vintage I spent with Wally John at Nuri. He was in—what did they used to call themselves? I think in those days they called themselves the South Australian Grapegrowers. And then they went to Nuri, and later on they went to Kaiser Stuhl.

When I graduated I went to Emu Wine Company. That was at Morphett Vale with Ben Chaffey.

I've spoken to Ben.

RB: Is he still alive?

Yes.

RB: He must be getting up a bit now.

Yes, he is. *(Laughs)* He sure is.

RB: And then they said that they didn't have a continuing job.

There was an ad in the paper for an assistant to Harry Manuel, who was the viticulturist in New South Wales, so I applied and I got that job. I was under the impression when I took it on that I'd take over from him, because he was getting pretty close to retirement. So I came over here.

This is to Yenda, Griffith?

RB: To Griffith, yes. And I worked out at the research station.

Now, the trouble with it was—typical Government organisation—that they made the appointment but they didn't have any money to have any equipment to go with the job.

Now why is that so unusual, Roger? *(Laughter)*

RB: I got into a lot of trouble, too. *(Laughs)*

The CSIRO was just across the corner, so I said, 'I'll go over there'. So I went over there and made myself known and said, 'Can I use some of your equipment?' *(Laughs)* Well, when they found out about that—'NO, you're not allowed to go there'. So I said, 'Well, as it's irrigation, what about I do some irrigation trials in relation to yield and all this sort of stuff. 'No, you can't do that'. So any rate, I did bugger all. I ran around and saw the wineries and one thing and another. This was all in six months.

What year was this, Roger?

RB: '48.

Then they had a meeting and they brought all these blokes up from Sydney and they said, 'From now onwards, jobs like Harry Manuel's, if you haven't got a degree you don't get it'. So I thought, 'I'm off'.

But you had a diploma in oenology.

RB: That's alright, but they wanted a degree bloke. It didn't matter whether he had—whatever—they wanted a degree. And the person that followed me after was Potter, and he had a degree. So he could've gone forward if he'd wanted to, but he didn't want to. So I think the next appointment they made sure that it would be a degree person. I don't know. I left.

At the same time there was a job going—or I thought—at Corowa with Lindemans. I went down there and I interviewed the bloke. And I spoke to the winemaker there, and he said, 'Can't see much future here'.

Was that Ron Prince? Was he there then?

RB: No. It's a bit crazy because the bloke that was there—I've forgotten his name now—left Lindemans shortly afterwards and he went over to London for the Wine Board. I can't think of his name now. That would've been 1948. And of course had I gone there well, I would've bloody (*sounds like, sat there*) and taken his job. But anyway, he said that he couldn't see much future here. Anyway, they wrote and said no.

But while I was down there I called in and spoke to Mr Buller, and he said, 'There's a job going at Tahbilk with Purbricks. Why don't you go and see him'.

So this was Dick Buller's father, was it?

RB: Yes.

So when I left here I went down to Tahbilk. Did one vintage and stopped there for about eighteen months. From there I then came back here to Griffith and I worked with Bet's father. He started a little winery—Crusader Wines.

So did you actually get the job at Tahbilk?

RB: Yes. I stayed at Tahbilk for eighteen months.

Eighteen months?

RB: Yes, and did one vintage.

Was that an interesting experience?

RB: Yes. Had a lot of fun. With the red wine that we made that year we got a Highly Commended. They didn't have any first prizes or second prizes, but they gave a Highly Commended. We got that in Melbourne, and also in Adelaide.

At that particular stage I was engaged to a sheila in Adelaide, and she dropped me, so I thought, 'Bugger her, I'll stop here'. *(Laughter)* So I tossed the job in. What I did was that I asked the boss for more money. He wasn't interested in giving me more money. *(Laughs)*

This is Purbrick?

RB: **Yes.**

He was a gentleman, wasn't he?

RB: **Oh, yes. He was a very, very nice bloke. I mean, he was very, very good to me. He sort of looked upon me as similar to the lads that go out as—stock and station agents. What are they called?**

Jackaroos?

RB: **Jackaroos. Same type of thing. He'd invite you in for a sherry every night, and then after work we'd have a sherry. A couple of times he invited me to his place for dinner. Sort of treated a little bit like a son rather than an employee. He was very good to me in lots of ways. I was a bit stupid. I should've stopped there I suppose. *(Laughs)* But anyway, I came home here.**

At the same time that I'd applied for this job there was also a job at Berri. This was the one that eventually Brian Barry got. I went and saw them, and when I went there—it was rather strange because I said, 'Are you interested in making table wines?' 'No way', the bloke said, 'we'll never make table wines here'. Because it was all sweet wine in those days.

Was Doug Collett there then?

RB: **No, Collett wasn't there. He hadn't even graduated in those days.**

Oh, they've got a winery by the same name. They've got a winery in the Barossa. He was one of the early graduates from Roseworthy. Can't think of his name now.

Yes, I can. It was Wilsfords, was it? The guy there. Burge? Noel Burge?

RB: Noel Burge, yes. He would've graduated about the same time as Hackett.

That's correct. He was in that year. I've spoken to Noel, too.

RB: Is he still alive?

Yes. Just.

RB: He'd be getting up a bit, too.

He's not as old as Ben Chaffey but he's very elderly. About eighty-eight or eighty-nine I think he is now, Roger.

RB: He was a very, very, very nice bloke.

Still is.

RB: Any rate, I went for this interview but they didn't let me know anything for a while, so in the end I came over here. Later, of course, I met Bet.

So that was that. *(Laughs)*

RB: Well, actually I'd written home and told them that I'd met this lass and how marvellous she was, and all this. They received this letter from Berri and opened it, but didn't tell me. If they'd offered me a job I would've gone there in a bloody flash. Anyway, it was just one of those things. So I came up here and I worked with Bet's father for quite a few years.

He had land here, did he?

RB: He originally was a case maker, and he decided to set up this winery in a little vineyard. It was about a sixty acre place at Bilbul, just opposite the Bilbul store. Actually Evan Savage came over and did, I think, one vintage with him, and then they started up their own little winery in town. And so I was there for quite some time.

In those days you could, and I think you still can, set up a \$2 company, and what happened was that the people that he was selling his wine to in Sydney had a \$2 company, and they took all his wine and sold it and never paid him. *(Laughs)* So he finished up then that he had to sell—he had a lot of land and stuff around here—nearly all his assets, other than the winery. He went to Canberra and set up a wine business in Canberra.

So what was his name, Roger?

RB: Cooper. Wally Cooper. He started out at Queanbeyan. Had a grocery store and wine business type of thing, and then he finished up going into *(sounds like, Civic)* and had a place in there. In the end he gave that away because his son really was more interested in going in the commerce side of business in Canberra.

So he sold his business and then he went up to Coober Pedy—the opals—and the poor bugger died up there. Just had a heart attack. He was only sixty-five, I think, when he died.

So when that happened I then got a job with McWilliams in Yenda. They'd transferred their champagne system from Sydney back up to here. Tony Herbert at that particular time was in *(couldn't decipher word)* and he told me about this, so I applied and I got the job. I was there for a couple of years. My main job, as far as the champagne part of it was concerned, was doing all the yeast cultures and things like that. Making up the blend and then putting them in the bottles. They actually hadn't started putting it on the racks when—I was only there for a couple of years. Usually they left it on the *(couldn't decipher word)* a couple of years before they actually put it on the racks. They'd set all the racks up and they were just about to start, and old Dougie showed me how to do all this stuff.

All the twiddling?

RB: Yes.

And then I got a letter from Ben Chaffey offering me a job with him -

Oh, Seaview.

RB: - at Seaview. I'd always wanted to go back to South Australia so I said to Bet, 'Let's go back to Seaview'. 'Yes, that's alright'. *(Laughs)* So went down to Seaview for a couple of years.

And the same type of thing happened there. Ben had some really good wine and he had some bloke in Sydney that was supposed to sell a bottle of this and twenty dozen of something else, and all he did was throw in the good stuff. *(Laughs)* So

Ben said, ‘Things just haven’t worked out the way that I wanted them to. I’m not telling you to go, but if anyone offers you a job, take it’, which was very decent of him.

So if one comes up, don't hesitate to get going.

RB: That's right. (*Laughs*)

I’m not firing you, but there's the door. (*Laughs*)

He's a nice bloke—Ben.

RB: And they'd spent a lot of money because they'd built us a new house and everything down there. And he was really going in leaps and bounds. I mean, he had this good stuff that he was selling. This bloke just ripped—well, same life story in Sydney I think.

So then I applied for this job at Nuri. Again they didn't tell me much about it—what was involved—until I got there. Very secretive, you know. I sort of talked my way into getting a job there. I don't think anyone else applied for it, truthfully.

So who was this with, Roger?

RB: Hickey was there at that time.

Oh, Kaiser Stuhl.

RB: That was at the time when Hickey was doing all this Kaiser Stuhl set-up. He was a smart bloke. He had lots of good ideas but not the personality to go with it, and that was where his downfall was. And of course, because of that he wanted to take all the credit for everything, which he did.

Anyway, when I got there, he said, 'We've got this contract with Leo Burings to make this pearl wine'.

Sparkling Rhinegold.

RB: Yes. 'And this is the bottle'. He showed me this bloody bottle. *(Laughs)* It had all the deposit and *(couldn't decipher word)* on it. I said, 'How in the hell did you ever sell this idea to them?' But he had. So that's how enterprising he was.

So when I got there, they didn't have anything at all at the time. When Springfield brewery in Adelaide—you an Adelaide boy?

Yes. I know Springfield brewery.

RB: When Springfield brewery decided to close down -

Where the Strath factory ended up.

RB: - they bought a couple of the containers—two or three of them. And they were for fairly low pressure. So we had to get the people from the *(couldn't decipher word)*—whatever it was—and I remember that we had to fill these things up with water. You got a little pump and they'd get the pressures. I did all this. Check the pressure with them and make sure we could get this thing up. I think

we probably had to take it up to 120 psi, and make sure that it didn't blow, you know, because we only wanted it at 40. They usually start to creak a bit. *(Couldn't decipher word)* said, 'Oh, you'll get away with it'. So anyway, we put these things in.

Everything was done on the cheap in those days. We didn't have polyurethane. We had some ordinary doors that they'd put a bit of stuff in the middle of, and we made this shed to go around these tanks. *(Laughs)* But he, as I say, was pretty enterprising. In the old days when little backyard blokes made aerated waters they had a little six inch filler(?).

Yes, I know them. I've used them.

RB: He bought one of those. And that's the centrifuge he bought. I think that was from one of the breweries. But what it amounts to is that you run the thing, and then afterwards you pull it all to bits and wash all the plates. And you've seen a bloody separator.

Yes.

RB: Well, you can image how long it used to take to clean this bloody thing up.

Anyway, so he bought that. And he bought this thing here.

Roger's just pointing to a pad filter.

RB: The system was that we'd ferment this stuff in these containers, bring it up to 40 psi, and then we chilled it. Virtually what happened was this: to get it up to 40

psi we fermented half a gram per litre. When I was working with Max we used to work out how many grams per litre you put in to get your 100 psi (*couldn't decipher word*). So we worked backwards. So say it was half a gram—I've just forgotten what the figure was now.

TAPE 1 - SIDE B

RB: So say we wanted thirty grams at the finish, we'd finish up putting thirty and a half in. When it got up to 40 psi we'd circulate it and stop it there because that would stop the yeast.

And then we picked it up, we ran it through the centrifuge, and we hooked our centrifuge on this little filter. I don't know whether you understand, but when you're on a centrifuge there's a hell of a lot of pressure caused with it spinning and so on, and so you have a valve on the other side to regulate it. And then you keep on winding this thing until—so then we could unwind a little bit to get a bit of pressure across here.

Well, the first time we did it we didn't quite understand how much pressure was on this thing. (*Laughs*) So we blew the end of this out.

You blew the end of the pad filter out?

RB: The end of the pad filter.

In those days Johnnie Minks used to be in Adelaide, and he was agent for all this type of stuff. He was a very good friend of Ben Chaffey's.

But anyway, I rang him up and, 'Yes, we've got (*couldn't decipher word*) shop down there'. It was this end here that I think we blew out. So he gave us the piece. I went down in the ute and picked up and away we went next day. Everything was trial and error in those days.

Yes.

RB: Because this was a germ proof filter we assumed that we'd got all (*couldn't decipher word/s*) out. We looked into a microscope and there was (*couldn't decipher word/s*) on the plate when we had a look, and we thought, oh, well, she'll be right.

When I was in Adelaide—before I left—(*sounds like, Ben said I want you*) to do a management course, and to do a management course you had to do a couple years of supervision. So I did one year, and when I was up at Nuri they had a course where they were only in the second year, and quite a few of the wine blokes were involved in it. The blokes from Gramps sort of whispered on the side, 'You're going to have trouble with that stuff of yours because you've got yeast still left in it'. Well, within about three weeks time, for sure, in the bottle deposit there was a yeast deposit. The yeast had multiplied. So here we were. Had this bloody great contract with all this stuff. So we said that the only thing we can do now is to blend the stuff we've got. Fortunately for us the Co-op cannery at Nuri had gone broke—all their refrigeration. So all the stuff we'd bottled, we put in cold storage there to hold it until we worked out what in the hell we could do.

Anyway he had read somewhere where they'd pasteurised champagne, so he said that maybe this was what we've got to do. So I turned around, in my spare time, and went down to the breweries to find out how they pasteurised their beer. They were very cooperative. Told us what they did, how long it took and what was involved.

This is down at West End, was it?

RB: Yes, West End Brewery. Had a good yarn to them. Showed me and told me all about it. So then we came back and, as I said, we did everything on the cheap.

In the old days they had copper filters that they used to use with filter (*sounds like, pulp*). When I was at McWilliams they had one set up as a steriliser for sterilising stuff, and they'd just put a little element in the bottom. We had one of those here, too, so I got the boys in the workshop to pull out (*couldn't decipher word/s*) so that I could put some back pressure on this thing. Hooked up the air compressor so that he could get some back pressure, otherwise the bottles all blow to pieces. When we did this, some of them were still blowing. We were a pretty big production at that particular time.

Yes.

RB: We had a crowd from Adelaide that were putting in another automatic machine. It might've been 12 or 24 head, or something. It was an ex one from a soft drink place. And while the bloke was there I was talking to him a bit, and I said, 'I can't work it out'. And he said, 'When we're doing cordials we have to make sure we've got enough head space. If we don't, and it gets hot, the bottles blow'. Ah! So then I sort of experimented with various head spaces. Some of the bottles wouldn't blow, and I couldn't work out why some did and some didn't.

Anyway, we worked out what the head space was. We did all this in this little container, and then we sent some stuff down to Adelaide to get a little bit (*could only decipher the following words: sterile.....champagne it was*).

So you'd pasteurised it all ready?

RB: We'd pasteurised in this little container we had at 140 for forty minutes with a back pressure and all that. All we'd done is gone down where we had the stuff in the container and taken it out and mucked around with it.

And also at the same time, because it was cold, we could get the right level with one of those vacuum filters that Wally Wire at Magill used to make years ago. Just put the thing under it. Wally used to make all bits and pieces. He made little vacuum filter thing that everyone was using, because it was mainly sweet wine. (*Couldn't decipher sentence*). Anyway, we sent this stuff away.

The next thing was that we then set up this vacuum filler(?), and took the tops off and set it all up. At the cannery, they had all their (*couldn't decipher word*) that they used for their thing, so we filled up one of these. Because it was a distillery also, we had one of the blokes come and fire it up. We had containers that we could run some water and we put a back pressure valve on it so we could have some back pressure against the stuff, and away we went.

And it worked.

RB: And it worked. So then they shifted this stuff across to the winery. And really as far as it's concerned, if we hadn't have done that they would've gone broke because there's no way in the world they had enough money to do what

Gramps were doing. Sterile filters and sterile room cost a small bloody fortune in those days.

Yes.

RB: And then as they said, this was the thing that got them where they were.

It did, too.

RB: And then of course they spent all that money on the bloody face and everything and went broke. Bloody stupid. (*Laughs*)

So having done all that, Hickey then said, 'Oh, we want to make this Pineapple Pearl'. The Pineapple Pearl and the red stuff.

Cherry Pearl.

RB: Well, I don't know.

Lady's voice in background: **It was Cherry Pearl.**

RB: Cherry Pearl didn't work. When we sterilised the red, it had a kerosene taste about it. Wouldn't work. The Pineapple Pearl did.

He said, 'If you can get these things to work, I'll give you £100 bonus, and I'll put your wages up to(?) £100'. 'That's alright'. So did this. And when it came he(?) never said a word. Anyway, it came Christmas time and he gave me the £100 and

said, 'They're not going to put your wages up to 100'. *(Laughs)* 'That's a bit rough'.

The 100 part we didn't worry about, but the point of it was that where we were renting, the bloke wanted us to get out. He didn't say tomorrow but he wanted his mother living there, or was going to shift in. And so I said to the directors, 'Can you give us a hand to finance a house?' And they said, 'On condition that if you ever leave we'll value the house'. No way!

There was a job advertised for Wynns over here. So I said, 'That's where I'll go'. So that's when I came over here.

This is about '61, would that be?

Lady's voice in background: **We arrived in October 1961.**

RB: **So that's when I came over with Wynns.**

So you've got a lot to answer for, Roger, because your leaving there then caused Wolf to come to Australia. *(Laughs)*

RB: **No. Wolf was sent(?) before I left.**

Was he? That's good then. You're not to blame. *(Laughs)*

RB: **Actually I went and picked up Wolf in Sydney. It's a funny story when you talk about Wolf-y Blass.**

Lady's voice in background: *(Couldn't decipher words)*.

RB: Yes, we had a long time together.

Oh, that explains it. *(Laughs)*

RB: The point that sort of annoyed me was that they got Wolf-y Blass over there at the time when they were doing all this bloody Kaiser Stuhl stuff. Ray wanted a German winemaker to go in conjunction—was all his idea I think—with Kaiser Stuhl, the German heritage, and all this sort of stuff. And of course that gave Wolf a bloody good PR thing, you know, because when he went to Sydney they feted him and did everything in the world.

In those days you didn't have an unlimited expense account, but if you went away they gave you £7 a day or something like that and you were supposed to manage on it. Might have been £7 a week, I don't know. But when I went there they put me in the bloody most expensive hotel in Sydney with the result that the £7 went on accommodation. *(Laughs)* So when it came just to go up to the lounge and have a beer, because we didn't tip the buggers they wouldn't serve us. *(Laughs)* We did our *(couldn't decipher word/s)* and came home. Yes, I was the first bloke that met Wolf.

Lady's voice in background: **Tell him about when you drove from Adelaide to Nuri.**

RB: When I drove from Adelaide to Nuri, you wouldn't credit it but Wolf-y said to us that he was a bit nervous about meeting Hickey. So he came in and had a cup of tea with Bet. Now you wouldn't think that of Wolf-y Blass, would you? *(Laughs)*

No.

Lady's voice in background: **He(?) stayed overnight with Judy and Hickey in their own home. Hickey was the boss, and Wolf really was nervous. I think only for about five minutes. (Laughter)**

RB: **Oh, yes, I knew Wolf-y very well.**

With the two of you together, that would've been a pretty dangerous combination I think. *(Laughs)*

RB: **Yes, I know Wolf very well.**

Lady's voice in background: **You've always said that Wolf Blass has the best palate.**

RB: **He has a very, very good palate. A very, very good palate.**

Lady's voice in background: **And when our daughter went away to uni—and she didn't drink. She and her friends would go out to dinner and they'd say, 'Your father's a winemaker, Sue, you can choose the wine'. And she told her father that she always chose a Wolf Blass, because Roger had said that you'd never get a bad wine if you chose Wolf Blass.**

RB: **I used to call him Perc the Punter.**

Perc the Punter?

RB: Yes. In those particular days there was a horse thing and they had this punter bloke on one of the programmes(?). They called him Perc the Punter. When Wolf came out here he had two ambitions. One was to own a red car, which he got, and the second was to be a good punter. He used to go down to the races nearly every weekend, so we used to call him Perc the Punter.

He's always been keen on that.

RB: Always been keen on horses.

Anyway, I was only being facetious earlier. I think a lot of him. He's been very good to me.

RB: He was a very smart cookie. When he did his run, on every line, he sent a carton to all the bloody politicians and the various wine writers and all this stuff. No other bugger ever thought about doing that. They're so bloody mean that they wouldn't give you a thing. (Laughs)

He's very much like that, isn't he? That's quite right.

RB: He's a smart cookie. And every politician knew him.

Yes.

RB: And really praised him up, too. (*Laughs*)

Well, it was like when he planted the vineyard first out at Bilyara there—the chook shed. He got all his friends in the wine trade to come up and help him do all the planting. And they used to have barbecues up there at the weekend, and these people thought it was a terrific idea.

RB: Yes.

They never got paid, of course. They got good wine and good food and they got on with it.

RB: It's a bit like when you go over to France and work in the vineyards

Yes.

So, Roger, you leave Kaiser Stuhl and you come over to Griffith again. Coming home for you, Bet? Yes.

What did you come into over here? That was with Wynns, was it?

RB: Yes. What happened was that Caldwell set up this winery in Yenda. Johnnie Stanford worked there.

Caldwells were a bit liquor retailer too, weren't they?

RB: Yes. They used to have all the wine shops in Sydney. And they had their place in Corowa, and they set up here just after the war. They had a French bloke who was the original winemaker, and then when he left Johnnie Stanford

came. Johnnie Stanford was here at the same time that I was working for Bet's father. He and another bloke used to challenge one another as to who could drive the fastest from here up to Yoogali. *(Laughs)* They smashed up a couple of cars between the two of them. *(Laughs)* He was a real trick.

I knew what the winery was like. It had been very poorly designed in the first place. When they put their fermenters in, instead of having a fermenter side by side, they had three across, one in the middle. So the middle one, you had to throw - *(Laughs)*

When I was at Kaiser Stuhl they had a similar problem there. They had to throw the stuff over the top of the tanks. They used to throw it into what they called a banana carton, and you push it up the press. Pretty bloody primitive, you know. And Hickey decided that he'd try and pump the stuff, so he had a mono pump and a jet and we did all this stuff up there. I knew when I came here that I could do the same thing with these tanks. It was only sweet wine, so it was pretty simple and straightforward. Ken Ward used to look after it.

I know Ken.

RB: Actually he was my boss when I was here. He was in Melbourne.

The first year when he was here they'd taken 2200 ton, and the first year I got 3300 ton, and the rest we got up to 20,000. Well, to start off with it was mainly bulk wine, but our big change came when Tooheys bought Wynns. What happened is that Tooheys bought into the wine industry and, first of all, I think they bought the one at -

Horndale?

RB: No, they bought Glenloth to start with.

Yes, sorry. Glenloth, not Horndale.

RB: They bought Glenloth, and they found out that they didn't have a good winemaker or a good sales part. They knew Ben Chaffey was a bloody good winemaker, so then they bought Ben Chaffey's place. This was conditional on Ben stopping there for a couple of years after they'd bought it. Well, after Ben's couple of years were up, they then had no sales section, so then they bought Wynns who were good sales people. Wynns then had Glenloth and Seaview as part of the Tooheys organisation. And later on when Tooheys sold to Adelaide Steam, that's when we became involved with Penfolds.

Yes, that's right. After Tooheys bought Glenloth, I think Morgan Yeatman went there.

RB: Yes, Morgan Yeatman was at Glenloth.

That's right. And then I think Pam Dunsford came in there, too. And Brian Walsh was there.

RB: And Robin Moody was there.

Lady's voice: **Robin Moody was after.**

Yes, that's right. Pretty good group at that stage.

RB: Yes, that was a very good team. Wynns had Bob Williams and -

Ken was working around all of them, wasn't he?

RB: Yes. Well, Ken virtually was in charge of all of the set up. Ken eventually finished up at Coonawarra.

Yes, I was talking to Lorna not that long ago. He's not too good.

Lady's voice: **Isn't he?**

No, he's not too good. She's terrific. No, he's crook.

(Tape restarted)

We just had a diversion for a minute. This is talking about Tony Herbert, the winemaker at McWilliams at Hanwood, who began to really get the Coonawarra wines up to scratch. And you were talking about the volatility, Roger.

RB: Apparently David Wynn had decided that a little bit of volatility didn't go astray, because it was mainly French stuff, you know. And so they didn't used to top up their containers. When Tony took over, all this volatile stuff was down there, and he really got Coonawarra up to where it should've been. And then when Tooheys took over, all the best wine—this is the wine at Coonawarra—had to be under Seaview label. So all the good Coonawarra stuff went up to Seaview and was bottled as Seaview wine. Tony really was the one that set them up. Don't get me wrong. Ken was a bloody good winemaker too, but it was Tony who really was the one that -

That digression happened through talking about Ken Ward.

But you were saying that he was your boss here at Griffith, Roger. So what was the path of Wynns here at Griffith? You said you got up to doing 20,000 a year at one stage.

RB: When I first came over it was nearly all sweet wine. I was talking to them one day and I said, 'Look, we'll make this bit of sweet wine'—because we were only in a pretty small way at that particular stage—'why don't we buy a vineyard so I can get some of the men in the off time. I could keep them on and we could go out and work in the vineyard'. They said, 'That's not a bad idea'. So David Wynn said, 'Right-o, we'll buy a vineyard'. So we bought one vineyard.

That was the time, roughly, when dry red sales started to go through the roof. Let me go back one.

We used to make sweet white, sweet red and dry white. We didn't make much in the way of dry red at all. I used to make about 3,000 gallons a year just to try it out. We mainly all made sweet wine.

Then all of a sudden the dry red sales started to go through the roof. We asked our growers to put in red grapes. They said, 'No. They're too hard to pick, they're too hard to prune. We'd sooner put white grapes in, like Semillon, because they're easy to prune and they're easy to pick'. And it was all hand picking at that stage.

So the directors decided that the only way they were going to get these red grapes was to plant them themselves, so all the directors bought a vineyard. So we finished up with about five or six, and I was then in charge of the vineyards.

About 300 acres, Roger? Roughly.

RB: Roundabout that. As well as the winery.

We didn't go for high yields, it was only low yield stuff, and that stuff went to Coonawarra and was blended in with their non irrigated Coonawarra stuff. Morgan Yeatman made the statement, 'notwithstanding the Yenda component, it's very, very good wine'. This is all part of Tony Herbert's system with blending the Coonawarra *-(Laughs)* You can imagine Morgan saying that, can't you? *(Laughter)*

Then later on when Tooheys took over, they said, 'No way. We're not interested in our manager looking after the vineyard, you'll have to get your own manager'. So I went for a seventeen week trip overseas as a send off. Part of that trip was looking at mechanical harvesters in California, and at that particular stage Wally Pilisio was getting a harvester from New York State that year. When I was over there he asked me to check it out and find out which was the best harvester. The one he bought was considered the best.

At the same time that I was over there some other people from other parts of the world were also looking at the harvesters there, and also the upright harvester, or equivalent to the one that was in California. So we had a good look at California and a good look at New York State.

Is that about when Bob Hollick was over there?

RB: Roundabout that time. Everyone was going backwards and forwards in those days.

The first harvest he did was on Yenda Estate Services. It was some *(couldn't decipher word)* that was ripe towards the end of the year, and then he went from there down to Coonawarra and did Coonawarra. So for years he did Griffith and then he went down and did Coonawarra.

So that's the start of the mechanical harvester.

RB: They had demonstrations of mechanical harvesters in South Australia -

And Mildura.

RB: - and all those places. He was really one of the first commercial blokes that went into it here.

Then when we took over with Tooheys, things really went in leaps and bounds. That was the time when we decided that we'd put up a new winery section. I was talking to Ron Potter one day and I said, 'Instead of using the tanks, why don't we use a tank like a Potter fermenter?'

Actually how it came about, when I was at McWilliams, to drain their whites they had a slatted cage in their tank. Everyone had the same thing. You just pumped the wine in and then the juice ran through and then you threw the stuff in the next tank for distillation or whatever. I worked out the distance that this stuff was, you know, from the rungs, and so we made a tank with a cylindrical section. So we had this draining section across here.

So the cylindrical section -

RB: In the centre.

Yes.

RB: It was the same, so it would drain.

We worked out what we'd do. We had a yarn with David Wynn and said, 'What about we try one of these out'. Ron said, 'Well, if it doesn't work, I'll give it to you at the same price as a storage vessel'. In other words, it was pretty cheap as far as they were concerned. You could use it as a storage vessel. So that's what we did. We set up a (*couldn't decipher word*) tank and put this thing on it with a bloody crane on the top to lift the screen, and muck around, and that's how the tank started. Then we put in one lot of tanks with these stainless steel tanks.

OH 692/10 TAPE 2 - SIDE A

AUSTRALIAN WINE ORAL HISTORY.

Interview with Roger Blake at Yenda on 11th April, 2003.

Interviewer: Rob Linn.

So Roger, you were just saying that you'd been building this thing up and David Wynn had given the go ahead.

RB: Yes. So we tried it out and we were quite happy. I gave a paper in Mildura about it. Actually we weren't really the first ones to go ahead with it. I did all these photos and stuff and took it over to this conference in Mildura. The blokes that put the first ones up commercially would've been Browns at Milawa.

Oh, really?

RB: Yes. They really were the first ones that actually did it in a commercial way. Shortly after that Wynns went ahead and did ours. You'll have to check with Ron but I'm pretty sure Milawa did it before us.

The original ones were virtually sitting at ground level with a screw feed(?) underneath. It was only mainly for white wines at that stage. We didn't make much red. De Bortoli's were the next ones that went into it in a big way. They put theirs above and had a great big cement thing underneath. We had a bin underneath ours. Anyway, when Tooheys came they decided that they'd spend some money on an elevator, and put a bin underneath.

Then the next stage as far as the winery was concerned was that Wynns started off with this wine cask, and of course those sales sky rocketed.

Yes, they did.

RB: And then it was decided that they didn't have enough room. They used to do all their blending and stuff in Melbourne. Then they decided they'd do all their blending at Yenda, so they put a decent laboratory up here, and we made all the bulk wine for the wine casks here.

That would've been pretty huge for them. I mean, they were the successful people, weren't they?

RB: Yes.

No, actually Angoves were pretty high too I think, but Wynns were the big people in the casks, weren't they?

RB: What happened was that there was some bloke in Melbourne that had worked out the original tap thing they had in it, and they sold that to Wynns, conditional on the fact that it wouldn't be used by anybody else for ex number of years. So really they had the wine cask trade to themselves until later on. The one that they use now apparently was used in America for acid for batteries—battery acids.

Yes, I've heard that.

RB: Then the whole thing changed. It was all manually done before that. But Wynns did very well out of it.

So the winery here just went from strength to strength.

RB: Yes. We were getting stuff from Mildura and, as I say, 20,000 ton. We had lots of storage.

The next thing was that Tooheys sold out to Adelaide Steam. The reason they sold out was because at that particular stage Fosters had bought Toths and they were bringing a lot of beer in, and Toths owned all the pubs. Apparently the deal was that they'd let Tooheys sell their beer in Toths pubs if—because that was a separate division to the brewery that Fosters had bought. And so that's when they sold the winery to Adelaide Steam.

Then the next thing that Adelaide Steam did was that they bought Lindemans. They ran out of money then. That's when they put them through the hoop. And

that's when the South Australian Brewery bought them. And when the South Australian Brewery bought them they decided that because Lindemans were— well, not only did Adelaide Steam buy Lindemans, they also owned Loxton Co-op.

Yes.

RB: Well, Penfolds had owned Murray(?) Co-op before. When they bought Loxton Co-op they had contracts with all their growers.

They had Kaiser Stuhl as well by then, didn't they?

RB: Penfolds had Kaiser Stuhl prior to that, yes.

That's right.

RB: But that was Penfolds -

Yes.

RB: - as part of original Adelaide Steam. This is towards the latter end when they came in on our side(?).

First of all, the big mistake they made when Adelaide Steam bought Lindemans was that they sacked all the bloody Lindeman sales staff, and of course Lindemans sales went like that. Then afterwards when they sold the bloody stuff, they had all these contracts with these grape growers. (Laughs) The South Australian Brewery mob were actually owned by Seppelts. The only winery they had was

Seppelts, so the Seppelts people took over the management. They then, because we didn't have any contracts here, cut all our growers out to satisfy these contracts they had in Loxton. Then they sold the Loxton plant and decided they'd close the Yenda plant down and shift all the stuff from here to Mildura.

At the same time as they were doing this they still had a contract with Yenda Estate Services, which they couldn't get out of, so they had to take these grapes.

You were part of that at this stage, were you, Roger?

RB: This was right towards the end. I was just about to retire at this stage.

Yes, but you had a vineyard as well?

RB: I had a vineyard as part of it, yes.

So what they decided to do was that they'd get the de Bortoli's to run it. We still had a few staff left. So they decided that they'd then make a bit here. They were going to send some trucks to Lindemans, they were going to get some with de Bortoli's and they were going to make some here. And check the three. Well, the stuff that we made just left all the rest for dead. As far as de Bortoli's were concerned they weren't going to keep Yenda Estate Services separate. We obviously must've just got the run of the mill stuff that they had. Variety-wise *(couldn't decipher word/s)* unnecessarily.

So they decided then that they would still run a bit more, so they sent a crew over here. In the meantime, they'd shifted—I've forgotten now. They sent a crew over here for one year, which was a bloody calamity. After that they shifted—after they pinched the refrigeration—all that up to Mildura. Then for some reason or other they decided to come back again. *(Laughs)*

So there was a bit of to-ing and fro-ing, Roger?

RB: Yes. They put a new bloke in and drew up new contracts. This was five years ago that they did this. It's expired now. They spent millions of dollars. It looked as though things would go really well. Then when Rosemount took over, the Rosemount bloke said that as soon as the contracts were over they were going to shut down. So nobody knows what they're going to do here at the moment.

Pretty good story, isn't it? *(Laughs)*

RB: So I sort of went from here to there, to there. *(Laughs)*

It sounds to me like you came over here to meet your wife. You met your wife and you ended up back here. *(Sounds like, Things still going the same.)*

RB: Well, they say that once you've tasted the local water, you've got to come back.

And you had the disadvantage of being born at Waikerie.

RB: Yes. *(Laughter)*

Downstream.

RB: Yes.

I've had a fairly interesting life. The only part that I was a bit cranky on was that I thought that when I retired I'd go out and have a big growers' party and they'd all wish me all the best. Well, instead of that, I was their bloody worst enemy because I told them I didn't want their grapes.

That would've been pretty hard.

RB: Yes. The worst part of the whole system was to say to these blokes that I was sorry but we weren't taking any of their grapes. Fortunately de Bortoli's were going ahead in leaps and bounds, and also Riverina were starting up, so the growers didn't have any trouble.

That was fortunate.

RB: The other part about it is, as far as the Penfolds set up is concerned—I mean, Penfolds had been here for years and years and years. It was really only Penfolds and McWilliams, and then all of sudden they shut down, so they just told the guys to skip off. And then they did it a second time. And it looks as though they might be going to do it a third time. *(Laughs)*

Yes, I've heard that, too.

Well, thank you so much for talking to me, Roger, about your life. It's very interesting.

RB: It's been a very interesting era really.

Yes.

RB: In your notes here somewhere you're suggesting in relation to the development in the industry—to me, the person who should get more credit than anybody else for the industry going ahead is Colin Gramp. And Guenter Prass. When they put out their sparkling wine, this was the time—I mean, they'd tried before. They'd had various things. They'd tried to get the wine industry making low alcohol stuff, but when they started with their pearl, the young kids started to drink. From there they went to drinking table wines, and from there onward. And that really was the big change.

For sure, wine casks had a big influence too, simply because you could go to the pub, you could have a counter meal, the bloke would give you a glass of wine because he wasn't going to waste anything. But to start off with, I feel it was the sparkling wine. When I was at Nuri—I was in Junior Chamber of Commerce—and we went up to a conference at Berri, all they would serve after hours was sparkling wine. This was all to the young blokes. Obviously charged a bloody arm and a leg for it too, but this was the type of attitude that was relative to the drink that the young kids had. And I feel that this was one of the big shifts. And with Nuri, as I said, it was the sparkling wine that really gave them the turnover to get going.

Exactly.

Well, thanks, Roger, for saying that. I don't think you're alone in thinking that either.

RB: There are a lot of people, you know, who say Wolf Blass this and—Guenter Prass should get a bloody OBE, and also Colin Gramp for the same reason. I mean, Wolf did a lot for himself. Don't get me wrong. *(Laughs)* And the wine industry I suppose has benefited as a result of it.

They have, yes.

RB: But Guenter Prass and Gramps I feel really—because when you think that Colin brought this bloke out here and decided to set this up, it must've cost them a bloody small fortune. You know, they wouldn't let you in. It was all behind locked doors and everything.