

**STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA**  
**J. D. SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORY**  
**COLLECTION**

**OH 692/134**

Full transcript of an interview with

**LEN POTTS**

on 23 July 2002

by Rob Linn

Recording available on CD

Access for research: Unrestricted

Right to photocopy: Copies may be made for research and study

Right to quote or publish: Publication only with written permission from the  
State Library

**NOTES TO THE TRANSCRIPT**

This transcript was donated to the State Library. It was not created by the J.D. Somerville Oral History Collection and does not necessarily conform to the Somerville Collection's policies for transcription.

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

This transcript had not been proofread prior to donation to the State Library and has not yet been proofread since. Researchers are cautioned not to accept the spelling of proper names and unusual words and can expect to find typographical errors as well.

**OH 692/134 TAPE 1 - SIDE A**

**NATIONAL WINE CENTRE, WOLF BLASS FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT.**

**Interview with Len Potts on 23rd July, 2002, at Langhorne Creek, South Australia.**

**Interviewer: Rob Linn.**

**Well, Len, just to begin with, where and when were you born?**

**LP:** I was born in Broken Hill on November 22nd, 1927. I suppose I was there about a fortnight or so with my mother, of course, and then I came back to Langhorne Creek, and I've lived in Langhorne Creek for the rest of my life, for the last seventy-four and a half years.

**Len, who were your parents?**

**LP:** My father was known as Fiddle Potts. His name was Henry Leonard. *(Laughter)* The Potts' have got a lot of nicknames, so my Dad's name was Fiddle, and there's an interesting story about that but I might tell you later. He was a member of the Potts family who founded Bleasdale. His grandfather was Frank the first, who came out from Portsmouth in 1836 with the *Buffalo*. I think he was about the seventh in the Potts family. I think there was eleven in the family altogether, and he was born in 1899. He was one of the younger ones in the family.

**This is your father?**

**LP:** Yes, that's right.

**So he was born in 1899.**

**LP:** 1899. My mother was of Scottish descent, I suppose you could say. Her father was a Scotsman who came from the Isle of Skye. He was a farmer through and through. He didn't grow grapes. I don't remember much about him because I was only five when he died. I don't remember

much about my grandparents on the other side because they all died when I was young.

**What was your mother's family name, Len?**

**LP:** She was a Craig.

**So were they local people here as well?**

**LP:** No, they came from Mount Barker. Her grandmother was a Cleggett. The Cleggetts have been in the area ever since its been settled. So we've got Cleggetts and Powells—that was another very common name in the district. And so it goes on. My Dad lived here at Bleasdale and he only had to go up the road towards Langhorne Creek a couple of hundred metres/three hundred metres to meet my mother. Nobody moved much in those days, Rob, I don't think. *(Laughs)*

**No, I don't think so, Len.**

**So Len, you grew up in Langhorne Creek?**

**LP:** Yes, I've lived here all my life.

**Were you educated here?**

**LP:** I was educated at the primary school and then I went to Strathalbyn to do my secondary schooling, which was only for two years. In those days schooling wasn't recognised as very important, I don't think. Not for a lot of people. My Dad had a vineyard by that time and so I went and worked in the vineyard. And so I spent my life there virtually. I worked here at Bleasdale for probably the first three years of my life after leaving school, from fourteen to when I was about seventeen. So that's why I'm here today probably because I can tell you a few things that went on in Bleasdale that are probably interesting. I think they are.

**I'd love to hear a bit about them, Len.**

**LP:** OK. *(Laughs)* Where do we start?

**Tell me about your earliest memories of the place, and the people.**

**LP:** Well, perhaps I can start off by saying that when I came here to work, when I was fourteen years of age in 1941, Arty (he was the oldest boy in the family, the oldest surviving boy) was managing Bleasdale because at that stage my grandmother, Alice Potts, had died. She died in 1935. She held the estate of Bleasdale in trust and so she was managing it, and then when she died in 1935 Arthur took over (or Arty, that's probably how the others have called him). He was about six years older than my Dad. Well, he managed the winery and my Dad used to work mainly in the vineyard when he was here, and when my grandmother died he was left a part of Bleasdale. He had a legacy of forty-five acres almost in the middle of Langhorne Creek, so he went up there. He didn't want me in the vineyard for a while. He thought that it would be better if I went to Bleasdale and worked under a boss. So I came down here, and my boss here at Bleasdale was Diddy(?) Potts. *(Laughs)* And Fiddle and Diddy are two brothers who are next to each other in the family line. And so I came down here and I worked for Uncle Diddy. And most of my life in Bleasdale consisted of washing out vats, filling barrels, serving wine at the wine sales. That's about all I suppose. It was circulated around that. Did a bit of vineyard work at times. I suppose I did some work. I used to have a lot of fun.

**Tell me about some of the fun, Len. I'd like to hear about some of the stories.**

**LP:** Well, one thing I was thinking about this morning was about wine sales. Back in those days there were no bottles. You couldn't come in and buy a case of wine because there wasn't any. You came in with a sugar bag, or most people did. Mainly the old German settlers from up along the Bremer Valley, between Hartley and Callington.

**Oh, the Jaenschs(?)?**

**LP:** Yes, the Jaenschs. That's right. And *(sounds like, Soo-vards)*. And Samuels. There were quite a few of them. There was a lot of them. And

they all used to come and get their wine at Bleasdale. And there was no table wine as such. There was a couple of puncheons of Burgundy down the cellar and a few barrels of Hock, as it was called, which is dry white wine. But everybody drank sherry or Port. And so they'd come down here, and most of the Germans up there drank sherry. And they'd come down and they'd all have sugar bags, and in each sugar bag they'd have a stone jar. Some were gallon jars, some were two gallon jars. And in each bag there was also a bottle, and that was regarded as discount. *(Laughs)* So they'd come down here and I'd have to get a hose from off a rack—a rubber hose probably about six feet in length, about quarter inch in diameter—and I'd put the hose in the barrel and then I'd suck it with my mouth. Very unhygienic but it worked. And then it would start to siphon, and siphon into the jars. They'd look at them to make sure that they were full. And of course while they were getting their jars full they'd have a glass, and they'd toss down as many sherries as they could possibly drink. *(Laughs)* And then they'd pay—I think sherry was nine and six a gallon. About one and six a bottle. That's right, one and six a bottle.

**Roughly what years would this be, Len?**

**LP:** 1941/42. During the war. A lot of people locally used to buy their wine. And most of the wine that went out of Bleasdale went out in fives—five gallon barrels. Sometimes ten. There were hundreds and hundreds of them. We used to put a label on them. I can remember putting labels on them with a couple of blue tacks, and tack them on the head of the barrel. They all had to be painted every now and again of course, and stencilled with a number, so that they were identifiable. That was one of those things that was routine. Every Monday morning you'd have to start filling wine barrels—mostly sherry. Sometimes Port but invariably sherry.

**So Len, would it then be loaded on a cart and taken to Strathalbyn station?**

**LP:** At that stage it would have been on one of the early trucks. It was an old Ford T I think from memory. That's about the earliest I can remember.

I know they had a Ford T here, yes, before the war—before 1939—and I think it was the same one. Just after that they got a Bedford truck and she was very fashionable. Then they'd take a load of wine up to the railway station at Strathalbyn. Most of it was taken to Strathalbyn and sent out from there. Later years, probably 1945/6, they started to deliver in Adelaide. They delivered a lot of wine by truck then.

**I know my wife's family used to talk about sending a keg down—five gallon—from Mount Lofty to Strath.**

**LP:** That would be right.

**And they did it for, evidently, about eighty or ninety years.**

**LP:** As long as that? *(Laughs)*

**Oh, yes.**

**LP:** Well, there you are. But table wines were unknown.

**Did you drink wine in your own home at all?**

**LP:** No. I used to drink wine down at the lake or down the Coorong. When I'd go down with my Dad I'd have a mouthful or two of sherry or Port because I was cold probably. I always used to drink wine but nobody ever stopped me. Nobody ever encouraged me or nobody ever stopped me, and when my Dad had a drink, I would. My Dad never drank table wine, and he lived until 1970, but he always drank sherry or Port. That's what everybody did in those days. Some of the old people who are still living, they don't drink table wine even now. I can quote quite a few who are still living, or only just, and they're still drinking sweet fortified wines.

**So Len, would beer have been the major drink at the time?**

**LP:** I suppose it was. Yes, I suppose it was, Rob. I'm not sure because I've never drank beer in my life. *(Laughs)*

**Very sensible, Len.**

**LP:** Yes, I think so, too. I agree with that. *(Laughter)* Two things that I've never done—smoked and drank beer.

**So Len, that was one side of your life here. Tell me a bit about the family members who were working here. You mentioned Uncle Diddy.**

**LP:** Yes, Uncle Diddy, he was the winemaker. Well, I suppose you'd call it winemaker. He fortified the wines, and I helped him. There was a still house down here. You know that, do you?

**Yes, I do.**

**LP:** Actually my Dad was one of the distillers, he and a brother-in-law. And they used to make fortified—well, put the distillation juice through the still and get the spirit out of it. And there was a little still house over there towards the other side of the winery. It wasn't all put into fortification of wine, some of it was sent away. I remember Hardys used to buy wine spirit. I don't know who else did but there was a number I think that used to take spirit from here. That was one thing that kept us fairly busy—fortifying wine in the appropriate time.

We also used to make concentrated must. Do you know that one?

**No.**

**LP:** Well, that's grape juice, using a higher baume. Grapes picked—usually Shiraz—about sixteen or seventeen baume. And then it was boiled down to about 30% of its original volume. So in other words, two-thirds of it evaporated. It was extremely sweet, and it was used for sweetening wines. It was legal. You could put sweet wine into others to add the—and then of course they'd fortify it and they'd be allowed to put more spirit in it then. So there was a lot of that done for a long time. Called concentrated must, or my uncle called it cherapago. I think that's the way it was spelt. I don't know a thing about it, where it originated from. It might have been Portuguese or Spanish—something like that. But that was common. There were two big coppers—do you remember that Ken? The big copper tanks

they used to boil the grape juice in? They were about that big. Yes, about that deep, that's right.

*(Couldn't decipher comment in background).*

They were obsolete by then I guess. So that's what they used. So a lot of juice went into that—into concentrated must.

Going back to the people who worked here, well, Diddy was the chief winemaker. He also had another man that used to work with him called Oscar Wenzel. My great grandfather, Frank Potts, he married a Wenzel. The Wenzels came from the Harz mountains in Germany. They came out about 1846, or thereabouts. And they were in the copper mines up at Burra. And Frank apparently paid a visit up there with his brother-in-law, who was Henry Ayers. Frank apparently met, and eventually married, Augusta Wenzel and then they came out here to Langhorne Creek. So that's how it all started.

Oscar Wenzel, or as he was known here, Toot. *(Laughs)* He used to be a winemaker as well, or he used to help in the winemaking. I can remember him looking at wines and assessing them for their value.

### **Were they fairly big blokes, Len? Tall chaps, were they?**

**LP:** No. Diddy was only a little short chap. Quite short. He was only about five foot four. He wasn't very big at all. And fairly rotund. Whereas Arty, his elder brother, he was probably six foot two or three, and he was slim like Mike. He was very tall. Quite diverse the two branches of the family. And my Dad was fairly short, and dumpy like Diddy. Another one was very slim, one of the younger ones. Another one was in the middle. Interesting, two different genes in the family. Quite incredible.

Yes, there was only Arty and Diddy and Fiddle that took an active part in the winery. There were two other brothers but they didn't. One was a motor bike crank and he actually went to Adelaide and worked for George Boltens in the show he had down there. Another one was a radio operator and he lost his life in the Second War when he was only about thirty-four or five. That's the main ones that I can remember.

There was another one called Fred Potts, who was a cousin to my Dad, Diddy and Arty. Fred worked here all his life, I think. Worked here for as long as I can remember. And he used to do various things. He worked outdoor in the vineyards at times, and he was the chief operator of an old Blackstone oil engine.

**Oh, beautiful things!**

**LP:** Oh, super-duper. (*Laughs*) That used to operate a grape crusher—a Whitehill grape crusher. And also a must pump, which used to pump the must up into the red gum press. You've seen that?

**Yes.**

**LP:** And I've also been associated with the old red gum press, of course. That's one of my more unpleasant memories because it was so damn tedious and so much work involved in it. It was a great thing. I'm not knocking it.

**Tell us about the tedium, please, Len.**

**LP:** Oh, this is a little bit later on when I was working with my Dad in the vineyard and we used to bring grapes in. We grew a grape called Verdelho, and the Verdelho was noted for being an excellent Port variety. In other words, be left until there was about sixteen or seventeen baume, and then it would be picked and brought down here to Bleasdale. And of course it had to have special treatment so it was put into the press. The idea of the press was that you'd fill the cage up and then you had to let it drain for a while, then you'd put some more in. All the time we were standing there waiting for it to drop down a bit. And Fred would say, 'Put another half a dozen forkfuls in', so another half a dozen forkfuls of grapes would go into the crusher and up into the cage. So after about three hours you'd have your trailer, or wagon or whatever it was that we used at that stage, empty. So it was a real time waster. It was very obsolete.

*(Laughs)* So when they eventually abandoned it we were very pleased. It's a wonderful machine, no doubt about it. Priceless.

**And physically the winery was—what?—centered around the press itself?**

**LP:** Yes, that's right. Yes, the winery's shifted centres a bit. It's moved down this way. As you know, all the rest of it's obsolete—the stills and the boiler room and all that. But it was very active in those days.

**So the boiler room ran what equipment in the winery?**

**LP:** No, it was right up the end. Do you know the chimney outside by the road?

**Yes, I do.**

**LP:** Well, that's where the boiler is. That's the chimney from the boiler.

**What equipment did that run, Len?**

**LP:** It ran about four steam engines. Had a thing called a donkey engine. It was about ten feet high. You know the donkey engine?

**Yes, I do.**

**LP:** Well, it ran one of those. This is the tragedy of it all, these things have all been broken up. They shouldn't have been. They should have been be kept. They were priceless. Nobody realised that. And it operated three steam engines—four steam engines perhaps. Principally, it provided heat for the two stills. There was a direct feed still where the steam went in through a steam pipe into the distillation wine and brought it to boiling point, to where the alcohol evaporated off it. The other one was a coil. It had a coil in the bottom and the steam went through the coil and condensed water went out into the drain. Yes, that's the principle. One was direct injection, the other one was a coil.

**You'd need a fair bit of wood to power the main boiler though.**

**LP:** They cut a lot of wood.

**Was it stacked as cords?**

**LP:** Yes. Well, it was all cut by the people on Bleasdale. They used to spend a period every year out gathering wood from different parts. There was always somewhere where you could get some wood. Wood was easily obtainable in those days. Not so today, but it was then. There were heaps and heaps of wood out in the yard.

**So what would the routine have been at vintage in those first years you worked here, Len?**

**LP:** I suppose Fred was the key man—Fred Potts—on the old Blackstone boil engine because he operated that, which operated the crusher. There was only one grape crusher when I first came here. There were two later on, and they were both Whitehills, too. And they used to crush grapes. By the way, the twin red gum press, almost without exception only pressed white grapes because the red grapes you wanted to keep the juice on the skins to get the colour out of them. So that was usually pumped with the use of the pump into concrete tanks, which were paraffined. And that's still done today pretty well. It hasn't changed much at all. Then they do a free run off it.

**So the growers lining up along the road here?**

**LP:** Yes. I can remember back in 1942, my Uncle Arty said, 'Come out and have a look at all the grapes you've got to put through'. It was Thursday evening, and next day was Good Friday. And it was a bad year and everybody was trying to get their grapes off. And we looked down the (*sounds like, Backwaters Lane*), and they went right back to where my mother used to live, which is about half a kilometre away—about 400 metres. There were horse and carts and all sorts of things, all lined up. Wagons and trucks and utes, and they all had grapes in them, and they all had to come through Bleasdale before we knocked off. I think we finished up about midnight that night. (*Laughs*) So before Good Friday. But that's how they all came in, in very small lots mainly. Probably some were

as small as a couple of hundredweight up to probably a couple of ton. That's how they brought all their grapes in. They were picked in the vineyard and then brought straight in.

**And did you work in the vineyards here as well, Len?**

**LP:** Bleasdale, I don't think I did. I might have worked down there occasionally if Uncle Diddy couldn't find me any work to do.

**It's mainly in the winery?**

**LP:** That's right. Yes, I worked in the winery mainly. I used to get in the vats. I was the vat cleaner because, you mightn't believe it, I was only a little bloke in those days. We had 300 gallon ovals—they were oval vats—with a manhole at the bottom. Used to unscrew a bolt and there was a cross-arm across it that pulled the lid into the head of the vat, and we used to knock those out, and then I'd have to get in. It was about that high and about—you know what they are, don't you, Ken? The old 300 gallon ovals. They're still there, aren't they?

And we used to get in there with a little broom with a handle on it about that long. And I'd get in there and he'd pour some water in for me and I'd swish the water around and clean. Then I'd have to push it out into a tub. Then he'd throw me some more water in, and then water with some germicide in it to finish up. And so it went on. That's how we used to clean our vats. And then they were ready to close the lid up, put some wax on it, and then fill it up with wine.

**Incredible.**

**LP:** Sure was. And the big vats. All the vats with the manhole on the top. We had to get in those, probably with a rope ladder if they were too deep, and clean them out. Probably chip some of that tartaric acid off them that had accumulated over the years. So clean them up ready for the next year. Everything had to be prepared. Most of the Port and the sherry was put up in the roof(?) in small wood to mature it. That involved a lot of

work because the barrels had to be lifted up and put in position and chopped(?) up. Then we'd get a long hose, about an inch hose I think it was, or inch and a half, and we'd have a little petrol motor pump going down below and you'd pump the wine up into them. You'd have to be up there to close them off when they were full. Give you a shower of wine sometimes if I was thinking about the Coorong or something, or a girl, or whatever it was. *(Laughs)* I used to get into trouble.

**You'd become pretty keen on the Coorong by this time, had you?**

**LP:** *(Laughs)* There were all sorts of things I thought about. Cricket, and all sorts of things I used to think about. Even work I guess.

**How did you discover the Coorong, Len?**

**LP:** How did I?

**Yes.**

**LP:** My Dad used to go there before me and I started going there when I was ten years old, and sixty-five years later I'm still going there, more keen than ever. Yes, I love the Coorong, Rob.

**It's an amazing place.**

**LP:** It sure is.

**So coming back to the winery, how many people would have been working here at that time, Len?**

**LP:** In 1942?

**Yes.**

**LP:** During the war. Labour was fairly scarce, as you can well imagine. And I can think of about six ladies who were working there. Four of them were in the land army—Women's Land Army—and a couple of others that lived in the town. Fred Potts' wife was one. Prior to that, I think it was just about all men. Well, it must have been. That's getting back a bit. I can recall certain ones. I think I could mention ten or a dozen that were

there working fairly permanently, or were permanent. There would be about a dozen I think, Rob. That's counting the vineyard workers as well.

**Of course.**

**LP:** Yes, they would have looked after the whole lot.

**So Arty lived in the house?**

**LP:** He lived in the house. That's correct.

**And he was sort of the public face I suppose, was he?**

**LP:** Yes, he was. He was the manager, and he made all the decisions about what should have been done, where the wine went and what happened. He also did a bit of selling. He used to go to Adelaide and around the hotels. He wasn't a good—none of the Potts were good at selling things. We're hopeless. *(Laughter)* Still are. No, we're not made for that. We're made to have fun I think.

**There's been a history of the Potts' doing lots of interesting things.**

**LP:** Oh, yes, they love doing interesting things but not selling wine. That's too mundane. *(Laughs)*

## **TAPE 1 - SIDE B**

**Len, we've talked a fair bit about working at the winery here. What about in your own vineyard? You lasted two years here and then you went back home, didn't you?**

**LP:** Yes.

**What was the vineyard like, Len?**

**LP:** Well, at that stage it was part of Bleasdale, up till 1935, so it was fairly run down. Hadn't been worked very well. So I went in there with my

Dad in 1933(?), and we worked together and we got things a little bit better. And then my brother—I've got a younger brother two years younger than me.

**What's his name?**

**LP:** Kevin. And we joined forces, and the three of us worked on the vineyard. We worked about forty-five acres initially, and then we bought another ten acres down the river about another three or four kilometres, and then another little bit we purchased upstream, and so we finished up with about ninety acres. And we stayed there until 1970, until my Dad died. And by that time my son was seventeen years of age and he'd been to Roseworthy, and he'd left, and he came home to work with us. At that stage my brother decided that it would be better if we split up, so we split our partnership. So I went with my son, Bill, and Kevin went with his two sons, and so we broke away. And now my son, Bill, has a son twenty-five years of age. So the next generation's coming on. My grandson, Ben, he's very interested in winemaking and he's heading in that direction. He's doing a winemaking course. He's also interested in the vineyard. So it will be rather interesting to see which way he goes, but I think eventually he'll make his own wine. He's making it now. That's what he wants to do.

**Len, when you came back to work with your father, what grape varieties would you have had in that vineyard?**

**LP:** Oh, that's easy. Verdelhos. Acres and acres of the damn things. And Shiraz. And Grenache. That's the only three varieties of any note. And then we bought another vineyard and we planted that with Palomino because that was all the rage at that stage. It made good sherry, and that's about all, but it made good sherry. That was an old currant vineyard and we grubbed the currants out and we planted Palomino. And then in 1970—are you interested?

**Yes, please.**

**LP:** 1970, Cabernet was all the rage. Nobody could grow it because nobody could get it to crop. That's why it wouldn't crop because there were no clones. If you wanted some Cabernet vines you went over the fence and went down to McLaren Vale, or wherever, and got some sticks, brought them home and rooted them and planted a vineyard. Half of them didn't crop because the clone wasn't good enough. And so a cousin of mine, who is Diddy's son, David, who has now passed away, he and I went down to Waite Research and we got some wood from a chap by the name of Wally Boehm.

**Oh, Wally Boehm!**

**LP:** You know of Wally Boehm?

**I know of Wally.**

**LP:** Wally was very good to us. He gave us some clonal wood, actually one called SA 159. That was in 1970. And we planted that and we started growing Cabernet and getting five or six tons to the acre, which was very good in those days (1970). Oh, prior to that we had some rubbish here, and stuff that was mixed up, and Wolf found that and came out and picked the eyes out of that. That's another story of Wolf. Any rate, we started growing Cabernet and we finished up that we had probably more Cabernet than anybody in Langhorne Creek, which is nothing these days but it was a lot of grapes in those days. We had probably thirty acres of them. That's how we progressed. Pulled out all our Grenache and all our Palomino. Anything that was inferior or made bulk wines, we disregarded it—pulled it out. We could see that the writing was on the wall. We had to grow good grapes or get out of it, so that's what we did.

**You could see that table wines were going to become the way?**

**LP:** Before then. By 1960 there was a little bit of Malbec being bottled here, and it was very good wine. It was put in a bottle, and that was the way to go. It was pretty obvious in those days that—yes, 1961, maybe,

was the first one. I couldn't tell you for sure but I think it's 1961. Wolfy would have probably told you 1960 something, but thereabouts any rate.

### **What was the story with Wolf coming down?**

**LP:** Well, Wolf came out from Germany in 1960—I think it was 1960—to Kaiser Stuhl because that's what he was brought out for—to make sparkling wines. And he had a bit of an eye for red wines all the time. He started doing a bit of consulting around the place, Norman's down at Underdale and Bleasdale here at Langhorne Creek. And another one or two. I'm not sure where they were but I think there was about four wineries. He used to buzz around in a little brown beetle—little brown Volkys. He came to Langhorne Creek and he had a look at the wines, and he was rather impressed with them apparently.

My Dad at that stage was fairly casual down here. I wasn't here at all but my Dad was here, and he said one day to my Dad, 'What about giving me some Cabernet, Fiddle?' And Fiddle said, 'Oh, haven't got any, Wolf. Haven't got enough. We want all we've got'. 'Oh, won't you let us have any?' 'No, can't sell you any'. So he went to Bleasdale and one of Arty's sons-in-law, Geoff Scutchings, was here and he talked Geoff into letting him have some Shiraz. I think they were inferior Shiraz, the vines were only about two years old and the berries were big, and they looked awful. Anyway, Wolf got them, and he got a bit of something from western Victoria, and he put them together and he made a wine that was very good. It got a medal any rate, down at the Adelaide Wine Show. So the next year he came back—we had a bit more Cabernet by then because we were starting to grow a bit more every year—and he said, 'How about some Cabernet this year, Fiddle?' 'Oh, yes, I'll give you five ton, Wolf'. 'Oh, make it ten ton'. 'No, no. Five ton. Go to buggery. I'm not going to sell you any more than that'. So any rate he took the five ton I think it was, and he took five ton of Shiraz, which were good grapes too. So he got a gold medal that year in Adelaide, and away he went. Wolf's not going to hear this, is he? *(Laughs)*

**Probably not.**

**LP:** Because he said to my Dad, 'I can't pay you for the grapes because I haven't got enough money. Can you take it out in shares?' Fiddle said, 'No, you pay me when you're ready, Wolf. Don't worry about it'. Because my Dad was pretty easy going. So any rate, a year later Wolf paid him, and away he went. Started getting grapes from Langhorne Creek and—oh, incredible. He really made Langhorne Creek.

**He did, didn't he?**

**LP:** Oh, absolutely. If it hadn't have been for Wolf we would have still been paddling along I think.

**He wasn't afraid to put the name on the label.**

**LP:** He was not. No, he wasn't backward in coming forward. (*Laughs*) In all respects.

**Did you get to know him pretty well, Len?**

**LP:** Yes, in a way. Wine-wise we did. Not otherwise. No, he didn't go to the Coorong or anything like that. No, he wasn't interested in that. He liked the big flash boat and wanted to go out and sit there and have a glass of wine and catch a couple of whiting on a line, and that was about it.

**So Len, we're talking about Wolf Blass and his impact on the area. Were there other people, too, who paid a big part in promoting Langhorne Creek in those days?**

**LP:** Yes. Stonyfell would have been the main ones, through Metala. Arthur Formby, or it was actually Arthur Formby's father, first came here in about 1860 and he bought 3,000 acres of land down where Metala is, and he was growing grapes down there. And his daughter married Ronald Martin, who was the owner of Stonyfell. And so there was an amalgamation between the two. I remember Ron Martin frequently coming out and coming here to Bleasdale to look at wines, because Metala only

made wine for one year down there I think. Chap by the name of Paul Freimal(?) made wine down there. It's a German name. He jumped ship. If I can find the name and how to spell it, I'll tell you.

**This is early on, you mean?**

**LP:** He was still alive in 1939 and '40. He was there then. I think he might have still been making a bit of wine down there but I'm just not sure now. They were sending their grapes here to be crushed, and they were also buying spirit from here. There was a bit of a liaison between Hardy and Ronald Martin. Yes, I'm not too sure now, but Paul was here. I can remember Paul very well.

**So Metala kept going for a long time then in effect, didn't it?**

**LP:** It did. It's still going. The label is.

**Dolan took it -**

**LP:** Bryan Dolan, he got the recognition for Metala wines. No doubt about that. Yes, that's quite right. Bryan did a lot of work on Stonyfell wines. He made some beautiful wines, too.

I don't know if you're interested in other wineries in the district, but there was one other one, that was a chap by the name of Edward Hector. He had a vineyard and a wine cellar down the Milang Road about a kilometre. I don't think he lasted very long. He was fairly well to do apparently. He used to travel all over the world and he didn't do much work on his vineyard and it was left to other people to look after and I think they made a bit of a mess of it. He made some wine there but he didn't last very long. Probably only five or ten years and he was gone.

**Did you find it difficult, Len, to keep up with the viticultural changes through your working life?**

**LP:** In the vineyard?

**Yes.**

**LP:** Not really. No, I think we kept abreast of them. We changed our tactics at different times. Yes, viticultural practices are always changing. They still are. Always will be I guess. There's a lot of things to be done yet. But, yes, we used to put on an application of sulphur in the spring time, and probably after that we didn't do anything. But nowadays you're spraying continuously. There's no end to it. Whether the grapes are any better—they're not some years. We used to get good dry years and dry growing season. So it was pretty easy to grow grapes. And we used to irrigate out of the river in the winter time. That's fairly unique to Langhorne Creek of course, but we irrigated and we didn't have to water through the summer. We'd get through the summer growing season comfortably, and we'd pick our grapes in the autumn, and then prune them, and the cycle would commence again. So it was a fairly simple life. Plenty of time to go to the Coorong, I know that. *(Laughs)*

**What about the trellising side? Did you have to work much on that?**

**LP:** No, we only used a very simple trellis. It was only a single cordon. Trellis about two feet six in height, single wire cordon. We didn't have any VSPs and Scott Henry trellis and all those things that they use nowadays. People are still using them, Rob. Still plenty of single cordon vineyard around the area. Any amount of it. And they're still trellising that way. They all seem to be getting good quality fruit. So that's a debatable question.

**So you didn't ever have any problems with yields as such?**

**LP:** Yields were a little bit on the heavy side at times of a very wet year. I suppose the thing that would have cropped the heaviest would have been the Palomino, and that might go ten or twelve ton to the acre, which was pretty heavy, but most times we could get it right. Get it up to probably thirteen baume, and that's all they seem to need. No, we never had much trouble getting grapes ripe.

**And did the floods affect you badly at times?**

**LP:** No, the floods were a blessing. They were the things we wanted. We still do. We still look for floods. Floods are only an embarrassment in the summer time when they come through the vineyards when the vines are growing. Then they can cause a problem, which one did in 1992. It came through the district and inundated the vineyards. 1941 was another year. 1946. Yes, just occasionally you get a bad year when everything goes under water. Or if it doesn't go under water, the vines get so much water they don't finish off properly. They finish off watery and insipid because they've got too much water. No, most times we have no—naturally if we get a flood in the winter time it's fairly well dried out by spring and the vines have got an ample amount of moisture to carry them through. They've got good subsoil and a supply of water so, no, that's no problem. In fact we look for it.

**The area doesn't get affected by drought I guess?**

**LP:** Yes. We get years when we don't get any run-offs through the river.

**Do you?**

**LP:** Yes. That's made us evolve into a system where most of us have got good ground water, so we sink a bore and put a pump on it and we can flood irrigate. We used to flood irrigate, now we're watering through drippers. And we've also all got—everybody's got—water from the Lake Alexandrina. Everybody in the district. The whole 15,000 acres—I'm not quite sure now—but it's all irrigated from drippers from the Lake Alexandrina. So we've got ample water. It's just a matter of using it wisely.

**Exactly.**

**LP:** And that's the problem, trying to educate people as to what to do,. They don't understand. (*Laughs*) They put too much water on most of them, over-water and produce too many grapes. And also flooding the

subsoil. The aquifers are getting too much water, creating a problem. We're going to have a salt problem one day if people don't stop watering like they are.

**Yes, I was just going to say that the salinity becomes a real problem.**

**LP:** That's exactly right.

**Now did you have any effects from the vine-pull scheme here in the mid 80's at all?**

**LP:** There was not one vine pulled out in the vine-pull scheme in Langhorne Creek. Not one. Nobody had any trouble. We never had a surplus. I think from memory we may have had some Palomino that we couldn't sell but eventually we got rid of it for grape spirit. That's all. That's the only thing that I can remember.

**And Len, what would be the most significant changes you've seen in the industry over your years?**

**LP:** Oh, without any doubt, the introduction of water from Lake Alexandrina, which set the place alight. In 1989 there was I think about 1,000 acres of vines in Langhorne Creek, and now thirteen years later we've got about fourteen or fifteen thousand acres, and still growing. It's all been water from the Lake. Definitely that's the biggest thing that's ever happened, without any doubt.

**And you found that to be very positive?**

**LP:** Yes. I'm pleased to see it happen because I think we were not big enough to be recognised. We still don't get a lot of recognition in comparison with McLaren Vale and South East and limestone coast. We're bigger than Clare. We're bigger than the Coonawarra. We've got a big acreage of vines but we're finding it hard to get recognition.

I was going to add to that. I was going to say that people don't talk about Langhorne Creek on the radio, for instance. They always mention McLaren

Vale or Coonawarra. It's a fact, you've never heard anybody mention Langhorne Creek. We're going to get busy on it. *(Laughs)*

**What a good idea.**

**LP:** About time somebody knew about us. *(Laughs)*

**What a good idea. Well, plenty of people drink it.**

**LP:** I know they do. *(Laughs)* A lot of it's being exported, of course. Orlando's exporting—all theirs is Jacobs Creek I should say, or the majority of it. That's the biggest vineyard.

**Export would be another big change, wouldn't it?**

**LP:** Yes, of course. That's right. Well, that goes hand in hand with the increase in tonnages I guess. We never had anything to export once upon a time, but now there's thousands of surplus.

**Has there been a change to the area in that it's not just the one family with all the various -**

**LP:** Yes, that's so. There's lots of things that's happened. There's the big proprietary wineries such as Orlando, Hardys, Mildara (or Berringer Blass). Who's the other one? Yes, there's that group. And then there's another group of areas that are being grown by syndicates you might say—by pharmaceutical company. That's Kooringa(?), down by the Lake. And there's another one up here called Kirribilli(?). And there's CMV(?). There's a few like that that are getting into the thousands of acres. And then there's a lot of—it's not a very nice term but I'd call them opportunists—farmers in the area that have found it very difficult to make a living in the last thirty or forty years. And sheep have been poor. And grain. Very low income situations. And they're planting vines to get a decent income, which they are. There's a lot of those. Numerous people are doing that.

And there's the old originals who were here probably fifty or a hundred years ago, and they were also expanding. Then there's another—I don't

know what's going to happen but we've got a New Zealander in the area that's growing red grapes here and white Sauvignon Blanc in New Zealand and white grapes here. And he's interested in expanding. He's a friend of Bill's actually. So there's all sorts of things happening, Rob, with expansion in lots of areas. But the proprietary wineries, they've made the difference. They're producing huge quantities of grapes now.

**And are they involved in getting recognition for the area as well?**

**LP:** I hope so. *(Laughs)* I'd like to think so. Jacobs Creek wouldn't have Langhorne Creek on it for a start. It's just Jacobs Creek.

**Where do you see it going, do you think, Len? In the future, for this area.**

**LP:** The future of the industry in Langhorne Creek?

**Yes.**

**LP:** Oh, there's still room for more expansion yet. Yes, there's plenty of land left to plant vines on. They're going nearly up to Strathalbyn now. There doesn't seem to be any limit. Well, there is, there's a boundary—Langhorne Creek boundary. They can't plant outside of that and get recognised as a Langhorne Creek wine.

Oh, the other one I'm thinking of is the people who just amalgamated with Penfolds.

**Rosemount.**

**LP:** Yes, that's right. They've got a big area over on the western side of the district. And they're in Langhorne Creek. Only just, but they're there. So they call themselves Langhorne Creek although they're living kilometres away. But that's alright. I don't mind. I think it's all good. It's one of those things that I think it's the only way you can go. There's no point in being little and nobody knows you. You've got to get out in the world these days and get on the global market and do things.

**Len, do you think your father and his generation would be surprised by all this?**

**LP:** (*Laughs*) I think they would. Absolutely sure of that, Rob. Yes, I think they'd just about—well, they'd turn over in their graves, I'm sure of that, if they knew what was going on. Absolutely no doubt about it. And I think old Frank, if he'd come back, he'd rub his eyes in disbelief. He just wouldn't believe it. No, they had no idea what was going to happen. Nor did we for that matter. We didn't think that things would ever go like this, but there it is, they have.

**Yes, I am interested in that, Len. So the early days.**

**LP:** Well, I'll do my best. You know the history of course of Frank, do you? Somebody's told you that?

**He came on the *Buffalo*.**

**LP:** Came out on the *Buffalo* from Portsmouth harbour in 1836. For a start he was a carpenter. He learned carpentry on the warship called—forgotten now. I might think of it directly. He came out to Western Australia and he sailed around the world a couple of times—this is in his teens—and he went back to England and he became a tallow-chandler at Portsmouth. And when he was twenty-one he decided to come out—he saw an advert for the *Buffalo* going to South Australia, which was going to be colonised, so he bought his passage for £10, I believe it was. So he came out to South Australia and he got settled at Port Adelaide. And he built houses because he had a set of carpenters tools. He lived there for a year or so.

And then he decided to build a boat, which he called *The Petrel*, which was about twenty-eight feet long, and was capable of carrying about twelve ton of merchandise. So he set sail for Kangaroo Island because Kangaroo Island was settled way before 1836. Went back to about 1802 I think, from memory. So he went to Kangaroo Island and settled on American River, and he scraped salt. He used to bring salt over to the mainland—

over to Port Adelaide. I don't know what they did with it all but they certainly used it. And he used to bring seal skins and a bit of produce—onions and various things—over for settlers. He did that for a year or two and then he decided to sell *The Petrel*, which he did, and it went on the Port Lincoln run. And Frank—what did he do? He went back building houses again. That's right.

His sister came out, who was (*couldn't decipher name*) Ayers. Frank's brother-in-law, in other words Henry Ayers, was first Premier of South Australia. So they came out, and Henry Ayers came out because he was a financier. He came out to get the South Australian company on its feet because it was just about broke at that stage. South Australia didn't have any money and so he encouraged the copper mines up at Burra. Frank went up there with him once or twice. Apparently they had a shortage of candles, and Frank was a candlemaker, so he—this is how the story how it goes. Frank knew all about candles so he got candles up to the Burra mines, and he went up there and he met up with Augusta Wenzel, as I mentioned to you before. So eventually they got married, came back to Adelaide and lived there for a year or so. Then he decided that he'd have to get some land.

He heard of the Wellington ferry crossing being open and he thought he'd go and have a look at that, so he came out here. We're not quite sure how he got here but there's a story that he went off to Morgan and walked down the river, which is about 300-odd miles. There's a bit of truth in that we think. We're not quite sure yet. But any rate, he went to Wellington and then he walked along the lake until he came to the River Bremer, and he walked up the Bremer and he got to Langhorne Creek, which is—what?—seven or eight kilometres inland, and liked the look of the land. It was being surveyed so he went to Adelaide and bought the block of Bleasdale, and had another couple of hundred acres somewhere else. And so he decided to settle here, and he came out from Adelaide. He left his wife in Adelaide, came out here and built a hut where the house is now—the main house is—and he grew a few crops of wheat.

He used Aborigines to labour for him, and the reputation that he had was excellent. He was held in high esteem by the Aborigines. They thought that he was wonderful, and he was very kind to them. So he started off. He had a good start.

So in 1865, or thereabouts, he must have, in his journeys down to Adelaide, met up with Thomas Hardy. So Tom, you can imagine saying, 'Oh, why don't you try growing some grapes out there, Frank?' And Frank saying, 'What am I going to do with the damn things? Who's going to eat them?' He said, 'I'll buy the wine from you. I'm short of wine. I can't get enough'. You know, this is the way that I'm sure it went. In fact, Tom Hardy used to come out here to Langhorne Creek and stay out here. And I'm sure there was a very close liaison between the two of them.

And so in 1865 Frank planted some vines. Maybe a little bit earlier than that. But any rate he started making wine. *(Laughs)* As to wine quality, I've got no idea, but he used to get it down to Adelaide or get it down to McLaren Vale. We're not sure, but it did go down there by rail eventually. We know that. There was no railway line until 1873 I think in Strathalbyn, so that would have ruled it out for a year or two.

## **OH 692/134 TAPE 2 - SIDE A**

**NATIONAL WINE CENTRE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT.  
Interview with Len Potts on 23rd July, 2002.  
Interviewer: Rob Linn.**

**So Len, Thomas Hardy comes into the picture again.**

**LP:** Yes. He was buying wine from Bleasdale back in those early days. We haven't got any proof, maybe Hardys have. We've never seen it but we know that he was coming out here. He didn't come here to look at the country, he came out here to buy wine. That's one thing for sure. In fact, they were making quite a considerable amount of wine. I can get figures

on that but I haven't got them in my head, but they were making quite a few thousand gallons of wine every year.

So in 1865, Frank would have been fifty years of age, and he went on making wine, and having children, and by the time he was sixty he had five able-bodied sons who could work for him. I think they took the winery over—they took the business over—and Frank went back to making ships. He made paddle-steamers down at Milang. He made four paddle-steamers down there. The story goes that he used to walk down to Milang, and he made a piano, and he used to play the piano as he went along, and sang songs to himself. But I don't think that was exactly how it happened. But any rate, he made four paddle-steamers.

But in the meantime the business progressed. Two of Frank's sons planted vineyards of their own, which is in close proximity to this, and so everything was going pretty well. Then old Frank died in 1890 when he was seventy-five years of age. Oh, prior to that he built a red gum press, which isn't the one that's there now. That was built in 1892. So this was built after he died, but it was a replica of it, only the one that Frank built was a single cage press, whereas this is a twin cage press. That's the only difference. It was only a few metres from—three or four metres—from the one that's there now. And so they had a press.

And I read a letter where Frank wrote to one of his sons and suggested that they seriously think about a still house so that they could make their own spirit. And how they got spirit before then, I don't know. I'm not really sure. Unless Hardys brought it over and they fortified the wine and took it back. That's one of those things that we'll never know because there's no records of it. But any rate, he continued selling grapes there—well, they continued selling wine to Hardys up until about 1895 or 6, and I'm not sure what happened after that. There's no records that I can find. And so my grandfather, Frank Potts, he wasn't the oldest one in the family but he was left the winery. And the other boys were left parcels of land, and parcels of money. He did very well. He was a very wealthy man when he died, so it seems. I've read the Will and he had a lot of money for those

days. And so my grandfather took over the winery and the vineyards around it, and he ran it until he died in 1917 from cancer—he was only about fifty-five years old when he died—and my grandmother held it in trust. 1917, Harvey would have been twenty-four years of age, so he probably was old enough to have a say in how things ran. So he took it, and my Dad and Diddy—the three brothers—they sort of ran it between them.

They developed wine sales in different areas. All these little five gallon barrels went out everywhere. *(Laughs)* So it sailed along and it went very well. It was progressing extremely well at that stage. They had a good wine market and they were doing very well.

And then my grandmother died and then the estate was broken up. My uncle took the winery, my Dad took forty or fifty acres up by the town, and a house, and my other uncle took a vineyard down the road about a mile—couple of kilometres. And so that was the end of the winery—Bleasdale as it was. And so Arty took over and he ran it with the help of my Dad and Diddy. They still stayed here. And so it went on like that up until the 1940's/1950's. Yes, all through there. It went alright. And then Arty died in 1962, and so Arty's son, John, took over, who wasn't particularly interested in winemaking. He was more interested in playing golf and cricket. *(Laughs)*

### **A different style of life.**

**LP:** That's right. *(Laughs)* Yes, he liked having a good time, and he didn't try very hard. It went but it wasn't pushed. It just struggled along. Somebody said one day, 'How to succeed without trying', because Bleasdale was still successful but nobody tried very hard. It was one of those things that just went on. Yes, it's been going like that. John died in 1987, and from thereon it had a couple of managers. Do you know David -

### **Owen?**

**LP:** Owen, yes.

**I was told about him today.**

**LP:** He was a good man. He stirred things up and got things going.

**Yes, Michael said that.**

**LP:** Yes, wonderful. He did a lot of good for Bleasdale. Power of good. And now they've got a board of management, and I've got a son on that. He hasn't got anything to do with me. Only got a few shares in it, that's about all. Michael's not on it, of course. That's right. A couple of the Clifford girls—well, Micky's daughters, they've got some. That's right. And Bill Scutchings, another one. That's June's son. And so it's going on alright. They're spending a lot of money, and I think they're making some money, too. Got a good market overseas. Yes, it's still a family company, and that's something, isn't it, these days?

**It certainly is, Len.**

**LP:** There's not very many companies that can say they've been in the same family for four or five generations. That's getting a long way away, isn't it?

**Yes.**

**Len, I just wanted to say how much I've appreciated you talking with me today.**

**LP:** Oh, that's a pleasure, Rob.

**It's been wonderful.**

**LP:** I'd love to talk to you some more. I really enjoyed it because I love talking about the olden days.

**And all these stories, Len, they came down through your family, did they?**

**LP:** Oh, yes. Arty told me most things. I've got lots of stories I suppose if I start to think about it. Got a lot of stories about old Frank and how he used to live and what he used to do. Yes, it's extremely interesting, isn't it?

**It is. Well, thank you very much, Len.**

**LP:** It's a pleasure, Rob.