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OH 692/157

Full transcript of an interview with

DAVID TOLLEY

on 14 November 2001

by Rob Linn

Recording available on CD

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OH 692/157 TAPE 1 - SIDE A

NATIONAL WINE CENTRE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT.

Interview with David Tolley on 14th November, 2001, in Adelaide.

Interviewer: Rob Linn.

David, to begin from the beginning, tell me a little about yourself. Where and when were you born.

DT: Well, I was born in Adelaide on 21st July, 1923. I spent most of my school days at St Peter's College in Adelaide. Prior to that I was at the Hope Valley school—public school. I was there for a couple of years before coming down to Saints. I used to get on a tram at Paradise, near Hope Valley, and get off at school. Then in 1934 my parents went overseas so I became a boarder at Saints.

Who were your parents, David?

DT: Len Tolley and Ann Tolley.

And tell me a little bit about your father and mother, and also about your siblings.

DT: My father was a winemaker and a chairman of Tolley, Scott & Tolley, which was a distillery making brandy. He and his brother, Tim, and a Mr Scott, who came out from England as a partner with them, bought the Phoenix distillery in Nelson Street, St Peters, and they then carried on as distillers.

They, as well, moved to the Barossa and had a distillery in the Barossa producing mainly brandy. In latter years they did start making wine, and they called that wine Tollana wines.

What else did you want to know?

A little bit about the rest of your family.

DT: My own family?

Yes. Your brothers.

DT: I've got two brothers. Peter, my elder brother, and Reg. Peter, David and Reg. Now that name has been used in the wine industry for a number of years, calling the wine *Pedare* Wines. How that eventuated was that my parents went overseas, mainly my father on business, promoting TST brandy. Left us in Adelaide in the care of our uncle and aunt, Fred and Blanche McMillan, to look after us. And on their way over by ship they stopped in Fremantle and my uncle—Uncle Fred McMillan—sent a telegram saying that the boys, Peter, David and Reg, which they said in short 'Pedare', are all well. And that's how the Pedare first started. PE for Peter, DA for David and RE for Reg.

So there's a story there.

DT: There is.

What would your earliest memories of your family's involvement with the wine industry be, David? Your very early memories.

DT: My very early memories!

RT: My father on the motorbike. I can remember my father going around the vineyards at Hope Valley on his motor bike with a dog sitting on the handlebars.

So the Hope Valley vineyard had been established for some years by the time you were born?

DT: That's right, yes.

Well, during the War—I left school when I was eighteen and joined the Navy. In 1945, in April, I got married, while still in the Services. And then I went away again to sea on the *Quiberon* destroyer. There was the *Quick Match* [another boat] and the *Quiberon* that were Q-class destroyers. The Q-class destroyers that were loaned to the Australian Navy by the British.

So you went away on the destroyer?

DT: Yes.

Then you returned from the War?

DT: And then the end of 1945 most servicemen who were married were discharged. So I was discharged in December of '45. And my father said to me, 'David, we want you in the vineyard'. And I thought to myself, 'Well, I really should be going to Roseworthy to do the viticulture course'. But he said, 'No, I want you in the vineyards. We're short of helpers'. So that's virtually where I first started doing my viticulture course. And we had vineyards at Modbury, Tea Tree Gully and around the winery at Hope Valley.

So David, your family owned vineyards right across the board. You were saying that they were at Hope Valley, Tea Tree Gully, and where else?

DT: Modbury.

Now, you said you came in as a viticulturist. Tell me a little about what your job was at the time and the people that you worked with.

DT: This is after the War, you mean?

Yes.

DT: After I was discharged from the Navy, I moved to Hope Valley looking after these vineyards. As well as that we had a small property in the Barossa called Medlands. There was a small winery there, where we processed the fruit grown on that place, plus the fruit from growers from whom we used to purchase grapes in that area. For a number of years this little winery was run by myself and the foreman, Sid Turnbull.

What was your task in the vineyards?

DT: Really making sure the vineyard was ploughed and finished off, and pruned. All the jobs there.

Were you doing that yourself, or were you overseeing?

DT: No, I was not actually doing any manual work. Mainly supervising.

Was the labour mainly local people up around the area?

DT: Yes. All local people. And during vintage, well, we were able to get the locals and their wives to come and help us pick the grapes, until eventually we then were able to start picking them with a harvester. And by that time we had to move out of those areas and look for other areas for vineyards.

What we did was to buy land in the Barossa near the Medlands vineyard. We then had quite a large holding in the Barossa, about 250 acres, mainly premium wines. And those grapes were mechanically pruned, and eventually mechanically picked and harvested, and brought down in the cool of the evening to Hope Valley and processed at the Hope Valley winery.

This would be the 1970's, would it, by this time?

DT: That'd be correct, yes.

David, I believe that in the 1950's—early 1950's—you also made another movement beyond that outer metropolitan area up to the River Murray.

DT: That was one of our most important moves. In those days bulk wine was very much sought after, and we felt that producing two and a half to three and a half tons in the Barossa Valley and turning that into bulk wine was not profitable. I suggested, and my brothers suggested, to our father that we should look to the Riverland. He said, 'Well, I'm not in favour but go ahead'.

Anyhow we did. We moved to the Riverland to an area called Qualco and purchased 100 acres of virgin land and planted varieties that the Bank said that we must plant. Those varieties mainly were Gordos and Sultanas. And once we'd planted the proportions they (the Bank) wanted us to plant

then we could plant the balance into varieties like Grenache and Shiraz and things like that.

After we were able to pay the Bank off we then did a replanting programme and planted premium varieties. Most of the varieties were grafted onto rootstock, mainly Ramsay, and that was a very good move. As well as increasing the quality, the yield was much improved and much sought after. All that fruit was mechanically pruned and mechanically picked.

That was right from the beginning, was it?

DT: When we did the replanting. After the replanting, when the Bank said go ahead. Then we decided to pull out the Gordos and the Sultanas and plant Shiraz and varieties like that.

David, up until this time, what were the products coming out of the grapes you were growing at the different vineyards? Was it mainly fortified?

DT: Well, it was in the early stages, but we did have a demand for NE 27, which was a strength of wine that was accepted in the UK. That was for bulk wine. And what they did with that particular product, when it got into Europe or into the UK, I don't know. But I think they purchased spirit and fortified it up to the strength that they wanted.

Or they blended it in some way.

DT: I think they blended it with—I was told that they bought a lot of fruit from Cyprus. Would that be right?

Could be, yes.

Were Tolleys making any table wine in the 40's and 50's?

DT: Yes. Yes, they were. We had a very good demand for our red wine in decanters. What was it? 2.25 litre.

The barrel flagons?

DT: Little flagons. Very popular. That, and dry red and dry white. In those days, dry white could be whatever the winemaker decided that it would be. And eventually we started to bring out better quality flagons and bottles because people demanded them. So we brought out Rhine Riesling, Chardonnay, Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon. As well as that we then got into doing the bottling, and then promoting our product in Australia.

In the 50's, say, David, who was the winemaker with Tolleys at that time?

DT: In the 50's it would've been my brother, Reg Tolley. Mainly him.

So it was truly a family enterprise?

DT: Yes, it was.

Did you enjoy that outside work with the viticulture?

DT: Oh, yes, I thoroughly enjoyed it. I miss it now. I certainly miss my visits. Every week I had a programme of visiting the Barossa vineyards one day and then maybe I'd make an early start and go right through to the Riverland to see our man up there and discuss various things with him. And discuss projects and what have you. Then maybe the next time I'd have a trip down to the south east to our vineyards at Padthaway.

We'll come to them in a little while because I want to talk to you about that.

But with the Barossa and the Riverland vineyards, did you use irrigation on them right from the beginning?

DT: Well, the vineyards in the Riverland were all under overhead sprinklers. We had a water licence to do the whole block. So we were very fortunate in having that.

In the Barossa, 90% of the vineyard was all under drip. Not that we ever had to use the drip every year. It was a safety guard. And if we had a bad run where we had a drought for a month or two, we were able to supplement the vines with water, which was great.

So did each of the vineyards have a manager on them?

DT: Yes, they did.

And their task was to oversee the basic operations?

DT: Yes, under my instructions. There was a foreman/manager in the Barossa and a foreman/manager in the Riverland.

So they were the two main areas.

DT: Two main areas.

This is after the outer Adelaide ones had been closed?

DT: Yes.

Just reverting to those outer Adelaide vineyards. As you alluded to earlier, David, Wynn had a number, Angoves had some at Tea Tree Gully -

DT: Penfolds.

Penfolds had them. And there were smaller holders, too. Small land owners I think had very small acreage.

DT: Yes. Though not very many. There would've only been two or three small holders of vineyards.

Tell me a bit more about how the vineyards were lost, because it's going to be interesting in the future to hear that story again. What actually happened? You said that the government intervened for housing land.

DT: The government compulsorily acquired our land, and it was a number of years before they developed it. In the meantime, some of those properties were leased out by the government to different people, and they ran the vineyard and sold the grapes. Some to us and some to the other companies. But our particular vineyards were taken over immediately. We didn't lease them back at all.

And then we proceeded to develop our new vineyards in the Barossa.

There would've been a loss though of an enormous amount of input to those vineyards over the years -

DT: Yes.

- and careful planning, I would've thought.

DT: Well, to make up for the loss of that fruit that we were able to buy fruit from the Riverland, and from growers in the Barossa, to keep us going until our vineyards came into production.

And David, is this the early 1970's we're talking about? Or late 1960's?

DT: I'd say it'd be late 1960's.

Seems sad, in hindsight, that that whole green belt had to go.

DT: It is. It would've been nice to still have that green belt.

Was it a prime grape growing area?

DT: I would say that it was a very good area. Maybe not as good as the Barossa. Some of the land didn't have the necessary rainfall either. But in those early days there was no underground water to put them onto drip.

When you purchased Medlands in the Barossa, what grapes did you plant there? You've told us what you put in in the Riverland. What about the Barossa?

DT: Mainly Shiraz, Cabernet Sauvignon, Rhine Riesling, Sauvignon Blanc. Mainly those varieties.

So Medlands is in between Tanunda and Nuriootpa. Is that right?

DT: That's right. It's on the Seppeltsfield Road.

So today you're talking super premium land, I guess.

DT: That's right, yes.

We were lucky, too, that the Para River was our boundary. We were able to draw water from the river during the winter. We were great ones. We were able to pump as we had an irrigation system. We used to pump water from the river up to the vineyard and flood it, when it was available,

and we thought that boosting up the subsoil moisture during those winter months would be a good thing, which it was.

So you actually used flood irrigation at the off-time rather than the normal time?

DT: Yes.

I've just remembered. I forgot to mention that when we moved up to the Barossa, on one of my number of trips overseas, our company suggested that when I was away I should visit a number of areas in France, and we did. Elizabeth, my wife, and myself, we had a very interesting trip, and while we were in France in one area Elizabeth said, 'There's a little area there. It's a barrel. Let's go over and see what it's all about'.

Anyhow, when we got to this little barrel, it was a tasting area, and they had some Gewürztraminer. And another variety called Sylvaner. So we said, 'Oh, we'd like to try that'.

We tried it and we thought that was marvellous. So on my return to Adelaide I said to my brothers, 'We tried this very nice wine, Gewürztraminer, and Sylvaner'. 'Oh', they said, 'we're not that interested really but give it a go'.

So luckily, about this time, they were just releasing new varieties in South Australia, because prior to that they were not releasing any new varieties because of phylloxera.

What dates are we talking, approximately?

DT: 1971.

Anyhow, they released this variety in Adelaide and I was able to procure three cuttings of this Gewürztraminer.

Three cuttings?

RT: Three cuttings.

They weren't that lavish!

DT: And three cuttings of Sylvaner, and three cuttings of Pinot Noir—the varieties that we didn't have in the Barossa in those days. And while I was at Hope Valley I'd said to my brothers that we needed a little glass house for propagating these cuttings.

Anyhow, I cut these sticks that I got from the department into one bud cuttings and potted them off and got them growing. And then the following year I think I had about thirty cuttings, and I planted those in the Barossa. And that was the beginning of our Gewürztraminer. And we did very well with that variety in Australia. It's not a big seller but I still think it's a different type of wine.

What style of wine was it that you tried in France and that you brought back?

DT: Very similar.

Very similar?

DT: Mm.

Just describe it to me, David.

DT: Well, it's very fruity, and very pronounced flavour. Gewürz means spicy, of course. So that's spicy traminer.

And then there was another variety, Sylvaner. That was a popular one—Gewürztraminer Sylvaner. That was a blend.

So was that blended, was it?

DT: Well, it could be, and that's what we were going to do, but we eventually just used 100% Gewürztraminer.

And how did the Pinot fare over here?

DT: Well, we did quite well with it. We won a number of prizes with it. We put it into a little bottle like the (*couldn't decipher word*) liqueur bottle. And we sold quite a bit of that.

Was it an acquired taste, do you think, for Australia?

DT: I'm a little bit disappointed in Pinot, although I've heard that there is maybe a new way of growing this particular grape, and winemakers' new techniques for handling it. I hear that the variety has been much sought after.

But obviously your Barossa vineyard was a great success, from what you're saying.

DT: Yes.

And the Riverland as well was successful?

DT: Very successful. Especially when we were able to replant with different rootstock, and graft onto the rootstock.

Why did you choose that certain type of rootstock? I think you said that it was Ramsay.

DT: Yes.

Why would you choose that?

DT: Because it was recommended to us. There was another one, which I can't think of at the moment. There were two. And we used to propagate our own up there in the Riverland.

So that would've been part of your viticultural oversight, David.

DT: Yes. That was my job, to undertake to do all that.

Now getting on in time, I suppose the tastes of the Australian public are changing and your winery would be moving more into the table wine production?

DT: Certainly was, yes. Yes, we were into table wines, whites and reds. Mainly the 750 ml, not the half bottle. And, of course, in the decanter were the premium ones. There was a big demand in that type of material for clubs such as golf clubs. And now that the company's owned by Foster's Brewery a lot of my friends say to me, 'When are they going to bring back

that nice flagon Shiraz you had, and the nice flagon Rhine Riesling you had?' I say, 'You'd better ask them'.

The answer is probably 'never'. (Laughter)

DT: No, they can put it into bottles and do better.

David, the brand was Tolleys Pedare. Is that correct?

DT: Well, no. It wasn't actually—no it was Tolleys wines and Tolleys Pedare. They weren't all Tolleys Pedare.

I can recall as a young man selling wine during holidays that the Pedare Riesling was very well known indeed.

DT: Yes.

And would've been seen amongst the top few, I would think. Would that be correct?

DT: It would be, yes.

TAPE 1 - SIDE B

David, we were just talking about Coonawarra and your family's contacts with that, and you said that your grandfather who would've been ...

DT: Douglas Tolley, yes.

And Tolleys purchased bulk wine from there in the 1920's.

DT: Yes.

From Redmans probably.

DT: Probably. I'm not certain about that but I think it's right. And it was brought up in casks to Hope Valley, and then my grandfather had it bottled

and he sold it to the UK, mainly, with a label that we have still got, which we used for our centenary label when the firm was 100 years old in 1992.

So that's quite a bit of tradition there, David.

DT: Yes.

What about the story of your father, whose name was -

DT: Len.

Len. He knew Tony Nelson at Woodley Wines.

DT: That's correct. And Tony and my father were friends. And Tony said, 'I'm considering maybe buying Wynn's vineyard, or winery, at Coonawarra—Penola.

It wouldn't have been Wynns there. It was the old Riddoch winery.

DT: Riddoch. My father said, 'Well, I think it's a good idea'. Nelson said, 'Well, what about all these grapes that I'll maybe have to process?' And my father said, 'Well, I can do with some of that wine'.

So he would've used it for distillation?

DT: That would be right, yes.

And my memory is that Nelson did buy it and called it Chateau Comaum, and did very well out of it, and then sold it to Wynns I think after that.

DT: Yes.

In your personal story though, David, we've come up to the point of when you had left the metropolitan area and had gone to Barossa and the Riverland, but you had also established some other vineyards in the south east of South Australia.

DT: Yes. We purchased just over 100 acres of land at Padthaway in 1989. This land, previous to us buying it, was used for market gardening. Vegetables mainly. And this particular block was all laser levelled and flood irrigated. We realised that when we bought it that we'd have a water

licence suitable for drip irrigating the whole property. So then we started to develop it with premium varieties, and nearly completed it all—and there was only a small section left, which was planted just prior to the company being sold.

What varieties would you have chosen for there?

DT: Mainly Cabernet Sauvignon, Shiraz, Merlot, a little Cabernet Franc, Chardonnay and Rhine Riesling. People said, 'Oh, Rhine Riesling! You'd be better to plant Shiraz'. We said, 'Well, we want some good premium Rhine Riesling', and we were very, very pleased with the quality of the end result.

Did you actually have any vintages off the property before the company was sold?

DT: Oh, yes. Many, yes. Well, 1989. So we would've had—oh, the first picking would've been, you know, three years from that in 1992. So we would've had at least three pickings.

David, the taste of the Australian public, as we were talking about earlier, was changing very rapidly. Now, you had been doing some distillation, had you? Or was it TST more that was doing this?

DT: Well, no. Most of our distillation was from varieties that came from the river. Some Doradillos. We needed spirit to fortify our demand for ports and sweet sherries, which we still sold.

What else was I going to lead up to?

This was about the changing tastes of Australia, and I'd asked you the question about distillation. So you were still doing some distillation?

DT: Yes. The distillation was sent in bulk—in bulk tankers— to Tarac, manufacturers in the Barossa. And then there was the marc(?). That's the end product—pips and skins. That was also collected in bulk and taken to Tarac in the Barossa and processed for us. And then the resultant spirit was brought back to the winery and used to do our fortification.

Was it becoming increasingly difficult to keep the winery going at Hope Valley at that time as housing was built around it?

DT: Yes, but with the modern transport—modern trucks—we were able to pick grapes in the Barossa in the evening and have them delivered in the early part of the morning to Hope Valley winery. Same with the Riverland as well. And even Padthaway later.

So within eight hours you had the grapes?

DT: Yes. Picked and brought down ready to crush.

Were there problems with the housing being so close to the winery at that point?

DT: No. No. We were there before the houses were there.

I know what you're saying. I just thought there might've been some issues.

DT: Oh, there were people complaining about the effluent. But eventually that was solved.

So those issues evolved and were solved?

DT: That's right.

What's the largest change you saw in the industry in your lifetime, do you think, David? The biggest change of all.

DT: The biggest change? That's a difficult question. (*Laughs*)

Lady's voice in background: Refrigeration.

DT: Yes, I think that maybe the new techniques used by the winemakers—refrigeration, controlled fermentation. I think that was the big turnaround. The winemakers didn't expect to have any failures. And we find now that wines that were produced a number of years ago—maybe premium wines like Cabernet Sauvignon—you wouldn't have dreamt of putting them on the market until they were at least three years old. Today, with the modern

techniques—refrigeration—you're able to produce a product to put on the market in two years and it's most acceptable.

Looking back to the mid 80's, David, before you developed Padthaway, did the vine-pull scheme affect your company?

DT: Not really, no. We were able to still carry on like we were with our people that bought bulk wine from us. We did sell quite a lot of bulk wine. By that time the Riverland had come into production and we were able to cope. And then with the vine-pull, well, we just pulled out varieties like Grenache and planted Chardonnay, which was a new variety, which was starting to gain favour. But luckily, the varieties that we didn't pull out were [important to us] when the red wine came back into favour again and we were still able to carry on with that good quality material.

Was there any knowledge as to why red wine went out of favour for that short time?

DT: That was the histamine problem. Wasn't there a bit of a scare about that? [Some thought] that the histamines were causing a problem, which was a lot of rubbish. Now the medical profession are recommending that a glass or two a day will do you the world of good. I agree with them.

(Laughter)

So we now have an excuse.

DT: That's right.

David, tell me about the final years of Tolleys before Mildara Blass took it over. You were saying that there would have been five generations of Tolleys by this time?

DT: Well, really four. Four, yes.

So the ownership becomes spread thinly. Is that correct?

DT: That's correct, yes.

And how many of the Tolleys were actually left hands-on, if you like, with the company?

DT: Well, there would've been, in our company just prior to Mildara Blass taking over, Reg Tolley. He was the Chairman. There would've been myself. I was a Director. There was Jonathon Tolley. And Christopher Tolley. They were Directors.

Prior to that when my brother, Peter, was alive, we were three joint managing directors. Then when Peter died Reg took over as Chairman. Well, that's really what's happened.

Without going into it too deeply, David, how many shareholders would there have been amongst family? Quite a number by the sound.

DT: *(Laughs)* Quite a lot, yes.

And is that the core of the problem for you as an enterprise, as happened with Yalumba and with Johnstons at Pirramimma, that there was a need to actually either buy out each other, or whatever, or move on?

DT: That's correct. If some member of the family maybe was able to raise the finances and purchase all the shares, I think that the company would still be going.

Tolleys were still quite successful?

DT: I'm certain it was, yes.

So how did the Mildara Blass/Foster's approach come about?

DT: Oh, I think they just approached our Board, and the Board had to tell the shareholders. The shareholders all agreed to sell.

At the time Mildara were after brands, weren't they, I think? Very much so.

DT: Were they?

Premium.

So would that've been Ray King at the time?

DT: Yes, that's right. Ray King.

What years are we talking now, David? The mid 90's?

DT: Well, it was taken over in 1995, wasn't it?

Yes.

DT: No, they weren't looking at us much before '95.

So in hindsight are you sad that it had to happen that way?

DT: Yes, I am really. I miss my general run to the Riverland and the Barossa and Padthaway, but I suppose now that I've reached the age I'm at that maybe I would've had to retire anyhow.

Thank you very much David for your many insights.