

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

OH 721/3

Full transcript of an interview with

BILL LASLETT

on 27 January 2005

By Robert Thompson

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 created by the J. D. Somerville Oral History Collection of the State Library. It conforms to the Somerville Collection's policies for transcription which are explained below.

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.

It is the Somerville Collection's policy to produce a transcript that is, so far as possible, a verbatim transcript that preserves the interviewee's manner of speaking and the conversational style of the interview. Certain conventions of transcription have been applied (ie. the omission of meaningless noises, false starts and a percentage of the interviewee's crutch words). Where the interviewee has had the opportunity to read the transcript, their suggested alterations have been incorporated in the text (see below). On the whole, the document can be regarded as a raw transcript.

Abbreviations: The interviewee's alterations may be identified by their initials in insertions in the transcript.

Punctuation: Square bracket [] indicate material in the transcript that does not occur on the original tape recording. This is usually words, phrases or sentences which the interviewee has inserted to clarify or correct meaning. These are not necessarily differentiated from insertions the interviewer or by Somerville Collection staff which are either minor (a linking word for clarification) or clearly editorial. Relatively insignificant word substitutions or additions by the interviewee as well as minor deletions of words or phrases are often not indicated in the interest of readability. Extensive additional material supplied by the interviewee is usually placed in footnotes at the bottom of the relevant page rather than in square brackets within the text.

A series of dots, indicates an untranscribable word or phrase.

Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, - - -.

Spelling: Wherever possible the spelling of proper names and unusual terms has been verified. A parenthesised question mark (?) indicates a word that it has not been possible to verify to date.

Typeface: The interviewer's questions are shown in **bold print**.

Discrepancies between transcript and tape: This proofread transcript represents the authoritative version of this oral history interview. Researchers using the original tape recording of this interview are cautioned to check this transcript for corrections, additions or deletions which have been made by the interviewer or the interviewee but which will not occur on the tape. See the Punctuation section above.) Minor discrepancies of grammar and sentence structure made in the interest of readability can be ignored but significant changes such as deletion of information or correction of fact should be, respectively, duplicated or acknowledged when the tape recorded version of this interview is used for broadcast or any other form of audio publication.

Interview with Mr Bill Laslett recorded by Robert Thompson at Port MacDonnell, South Australia, on 27th January 2005 for the The State Library of South Australia's Mount Gambier Region Oral History Project. Also present is Bev Perryman.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

This is an interview with Bill Laslett on the 27th January 2005. Also present are Bev Perryman and Robert Thompson. Bill Laslett was born on the 9th November 1918, he was the fourth child of William Manger Laslett and Lillian Rose Laslett. Bill is my mum's brother, and this year is the 150th anniversary of the original George Laslett arriving in Australia on the *Fulwood*. Do you know anything about that side of the history, Uncle Bill?

LS: (sound of garbage truck) Of the history of George?

The original George coming out to Australia?

LS: (laughs, referring to vehicle) They don't take long. Well, no, I don't know that I know a great deal, Robert, with the exception that Grandfather Laslett came over to – was in Adelaide. He worked as a guard at the Yatala Prison Farm before coming to the South-East. I understand that they came by bullock dray from Adelaide to Mount Gambier, then they put in a bit of time out at Wye and then moved into Allendale. And I remember Grandfather; I don't remember Granny, not at all, because I don't know just when she died – – –.

Yes, 1917, so it would have been a year before you were born.

LS: Before, yes. Well, as I say, I've got no idea. I think that Jack and Reg, they remember Granny. But then old Grandfather, I remember him very, very well in that he was a – well, not a tall man, but a squatty man. He had an illness, supposed to be a heart attack. Well, of course a heart attack those times was something pretty serious and he took to the chair. And the old cane chair was in the house at home for as long as I can ever remember. But he used to walk around with two sticks, identical sticks, one on each side, and he never did a day's work, I don't think, from that time that he had his heart attack he mustn't work, you see, so – – –.

He'd have a thirty years' spell!

LS: Yes. Well, he sat down in the chair for thirty-odd years. And as far as Granny was concerned, well, I don't know anything like of the Langford family but I guess that a lot of that has already been tabulated as far as the history of the family is concerned. And, as you said there, they had seven or eight children.

Yes, eight.

LS: Eight. And my ---.

Well, nine actually – the first one died.

LS: First one died. Yes. There was Auntie Lottie, Auntie Lil, Auntie Em, Uncle George and Uncle Dick, Uncle Alf, Auntie Fanny and Dad. That right?

Yes, that's right.

LS: Dad was the youngest of the family. And Auntie Lottie was the eldest of the family, and Lil Kerr was her daughter that married Alec Kerr, and so when Dad was born he was already an uncle. Yes, he was already an uncle because Auntie Lottie had had her first daughter before Dad was born, because their family must have been spread out over a fair period.

BP: Twenty-two years.

Yes. It says in Rosalie's book that she's just put out that they were at Caroline, which is Wye, is it?

LS: INTERVIEWEE: Yes, Wye, yes.

– in 1866, and then there was a letter written from Allendale on the 19th June 1867, so we assume he's in Allendale by 1867 and some of those children, Em and George, were born *at* Allendale, but Dick was born at Caroline. So they must have still – Dick was born *after* those two, because he was born 1872, so they must have still had that ---.

LS: Yes, because he would have been younger. Dick was younger than Emily and George.

And George, yes. So they still must have retained that Caroline country for a little while, anyway.

LS: Yes. I don't know just exactly where it was, but I always understood that it was there somewhere in the Hunt's area, it'd be round where the – Donovan's Dairy's

just taken over a bit of that country now. There was a cemetery supposedly there, too, in there.

Oh, right?

LS: BP: That's on Hunt's property.

INTERVIEWEE: That's on Hunt's property, yes.

In that tape that Collie Bone – that you've got, Bev – he talks about Old Man Laslett being down next to his – I don't know whether it was his grandparents, I suppose – at Wye.

LS: Oh yes, yes, it'd be his grandparents, yes.

Yes. He said it was half a mile or so south of Tony Hunt's house, so would that be about – – –?

LS: South of Tony Hunt's?

BP: No, wouldn't be Tony; Jim's.

Would it be?

LS: BP: Yes, Jim's.

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, it'd be Jim Hunt's.

Oh, right.

LS: Yes. I would say it would be Jim, because if you go –

BP: South of Tony's you'd be in the sea.

INTERVIEWEE: – south of Tony you're getting almost down to the sea.

Are you?

LS: Yes. No, I always understood that the cemetery and that out there was somewhere in the vicinity of what they called the Stony Flat, in that flat bit of ground there, and which would have been south of Jim Hunt's.

Oh, right. So they must have only been there for a year or so or something like that, and then moved into Allendale itself and –

LS: But they still retained – – –.

– retained that land at Caroline for a while, anyway.

LS: Well, it looks like it according to that, doesn't it.

Yes. Because Dick was born there. Or maybe he was just registered there.

LS: Oh no, they possibly did, they possibly retained that But then they moved into Allendale.

They didn't live in what we know as the Laslett home, they didn't live there originally, they lived on Bay Road near the Hall –

LS: Oh yes, yes.

– for a few years, we don't know exactly when they moved into what we know as the Laslett home.

LS: No, I don't think they originally came to the old Laslett home, I don't think they originally came to there. I don't think so, I don't know.

Well, that's what the old Council records say, that they were on part of Section 391, which is just near the Hall there.

LS: Oh, yes!

And then was it Section 382 where the old Laslett home is – – –?

LS: Three eighty-two or three eighty-three, I'm not –

I don't know, I'm not too sure.

LS: – I'm not too sure, either.

Well, either way.

LS: It was seven acres a block.

So originally that old fellow, he only had that seven acres, and he had to go out and get work, like I think he did a lot of roadwork, didn't he?

LS: Roadworks, yes. As far as I can understand, Robert, that was the case, that he – well, it was one of the things that was – employment wasn't that easy to get, those times, and most of the employment you could get would have been manual labour. No, I understand he worked on the roads, constructing roads, and of course constructing roads those times was a different thing from what it is today in that it was all manual, break the stone and everything like that.

So you'd only just remember him because he died 1926, so you've got a *reasonable* recollection of him, I suppose.

LS: Oh yes, yes. I've got good recollection of the old chap himself. But my main remembrance is of him struggling to his feet, getting his two sticks, out of the big, old, cane chair. Those times there was no inside toilets, the toilets were out the back, and he'd go wandering off down to the toilet with his two sticks, and I can *still* see him doing that. And yes – well, you see, I would have been seven or eight years old then, when he died. But the Holland connection and then later, of course, the Earl connections, all came into being – anyhow, I won't jump ahead of you.

No, no, that's all right.

LS: The Hollands were a big family and, as I say, Auntie Lottie had Lil before Dad was born; they went on and had quite a number of children and Uncle Will Holland, that married Auntie Lottie, was the first horse-drawn funeral that I remember. And I can remember standing in the backyard at home, where Grandpa used to be, and looking out across the paddock and the hearse was trotting past old Lou Kekewick's – there was McCaskill's then there was old Lou Kekewick's, where Burford now lives, on that side of the road – and I can see the hearse going down the road, the two horses in the hearse and then the gigs and buggies all trotting along behind. And that was the first real funeral that I ever remember was Uncle Will Holland's.

About what year would that be? Is this before your grandfather died, or – – –?

LS: No, it would be later than that, Robert. It would be later, I wouldn't know

You don't remember your grandfather's funeral?

LS: No, I don't. No, which I should, I should have been able to recall that but I don't. No, you see – well, I would have been eight years old.

Yes. You might have been parked off somewhere else, maybe.

LS: Well, I think that that was the normal thing, was that the children were taken away. And that's why I would have been at Grandpa's when old Will Holland died. Will Holland, of course, was the father of many of the Hollands that are still around the area today. And then of course the Earl family came into it with the marriage of several Lasletts into the one family – – –.

Yes, it was three Earls and three Lasletts, wasn't it?

LS: That's right, yes. Two brothers and their uncle. (laughter)

Yes, that's right. Well, what about your mum and dad? Your dad was William Laslett, and he married Lillian Rose Earl – one of the three Earl–Laslett marriages: can you tell us a little bit about them?

LS: Well, Dad's second name was, he was William Manger Laslett, and there was some connections to the Mangers and that and the old Langford family, and Dad of course died at a very early age: he died in 1938, I think it was – is that right? – 1938, and after quite a long time of sickness; and they think that – those times, of course, they didn't have facilities to treat asthma, for instance, and that sort of thing that they've got today, there was no such thing as these puffers and that, and he died, as I say, at the early age of fifty-three.

And he had tuberculosis, was it?

LS: Well, it was a type of that sort of thing. But, you see, he always camped on the front veranda so he had plenty of air, he always used a spittoon sort of business, you know, a mug with a lid of it, so that if he wanted to spit it all went into that bottle. And no, he became very – – –.

Because he was worried about spreading the disease to the rest of you, or – – –?

LS: Oh, well, I don't know that there was a danger of anything like that, but that was what he did. It gave him the opportunity, with his bed out on the front veranda, to have the benefit of the fresh air all the time. And I would say that it was mainly – well, what we would term today more or less a thing that Ventolin and all these things would have been prescribed by a doctor for. But no, he married Lillian Rose Earl, and of course she was one of the daughters of Thomas Earl and Rose, and they had quite a big family. But Mum's mother died when they were only a very, very young family – I think she died at about forty-something.

Yes, forty-two, I think.

LS: Forty-two, was it?

And had ten children.

LS: Yes. Ten children?

I think it was ten.

LS: Yes, that sounds about right. And of course these are the sort of things that happened in those days. Well, diphtheria, whooping cough and all the things that you have needles for today, they had nothing like that. In fact, one of the Wallace families was almost wiped out with diphtheria and things – that was the Robert Wallaces, not any connection with the ones that are here now. Well, they were relatives, but not close relatives. And a lot of people died and they really didn't know what was the cause of it all.

BP: What was your father's occupation?

INTERVIEWEE: My father's? He worked in the Telegraph Department for a time. Uncle Alf Laslett – that's Dad's second-elder brother – he was with the Telegraph Department and Dad worked with them for a time; but mostly he was around on the farm at Allendale and then, when the Bert Wallaces moved from Allendale, they went to Geelong – that was Auntie Fanny and Uncle Bert – they had six daughters and there was the woollen mills were opening up in Geelong and they moved over to Belmont, and it was then that Dad had the opportunity of buying the extra land across the road. And on that block of ground Dad had the distinction, perhaps, of growing the first subterranean clover in the district, and he planted nine acres of rape and it didn't come up, and anyhow, when it did come up it was subterranean clover. (laughs) And that was how subterranean clover really started in the Allendale area.

BP: Through a mistake.

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, yes. It was a good mistake that they made.

So your dad had the seven acres and across the road where Bill lives now?

LS: Yes, where Bill is now, yes.

And what was there, about thirty acres in that?

LS: There was thirty-six acres there, I think it was. There was four nine-acre paddocks. Then later we bought what was Charlie Earl's, but that wasn't in Dad's time, that was later. And then we bought old Mick Pudney's, that Vance Kemp's got now, we had that for a time: there was thirty acres there. Then he bought, in Dad's time, he bought what was known as 'Pudney's', that Bill's got now, to that eighty acres down there, and then bought the part of Griffin's at a later time to that again.

And chopped and changed around with our little bits of land here, there and everywhere, and then had a block at Garden Flat that used to belong to Mr Stan Butler. After World War I, Mount Schank Station gave to each of the soldiers who returned, from the Mount Schank area, they gave them a block of land known as 'Garden Flat'. And I was talking yesterday to Henry Kerr about it, and he said, 'I don't know anything about that, but I sort of remember the names and that,' because we were talking about the Memorial Park, in that Mount Schank Station gave that ground to the Allendale district and it's always been run by a committee. A lot say, 'It's the Council that owned it,' and that sort of thing, but the Council have *never* owned it; it's always been run by our committee. But there was two Domans, Bill and Charlie Doman; there was Perce and Stan Butler; there was old Jimmy Mahoney; there was Bert Hennessy and Stan Uphill: all from Mount Schank area that returned from World War I, and Mount Schank Station gave them a block of ground.

How many acres? Or did it vary?

LS: Well, it was a varying acreage in accordance with the type of ground that it was on. Stan Butler had the biggest block and that was about a hundred and fifty-odd acres. We later owned that, we bought that later on, and we had that until 1970. But it was a good gesture on the Mount Schank Station because, you see, somebody said, 'Oh, what about like Pairen and all that?' Well, Pairen of course was the next war, it was World War II when Pairen was cut up and a lot of Mount Schank was cut up then to make blocks for the Soldier Settlers. But this was in First World War that they gave these seven blocks of land, and it was a wonderful gesture from them.

Phyliss Smith said the other day about her father, he got land out at Kongorong in the First World War, and that was part of the Schank Station.

LS: Who was that, Robert?

Phyliss Smith.

LS: BP: Daymans.

The Daymans.

LS: Oh, Daymans – oh yes, yes, yes, that would be right. Yes, they were – – –. They lived where Kentgrove is now, but they were right over on this side: go up the

Oil Wells Road and just in from there was AS Dayman, Arthur Storer Dayman. They later moved into Allendale.

BP: Where was old Tom Carrison's house in Allendale, because she said that they used to live in there. Now, where was that?

INTERVIEWEE: Tom Carrison's?

BP: Old Tom, yes. Did they have a ---? She said it was off the Bay Road.

INTERVIEWEE: Daymans? Daymans used to live in Charlie Winterfield's ---.

BP: No. Phyliss and Lou Smith ---.

INTERVIEWEE: Oh, Phyliss, yes. Phyliss and --

Wally.

LS: -- Wally.

BP: Wally. Wally. Wrong one. Wrong one.

INTERVIEWEE: Phyliss and Wally.

BP: Yes.

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, well, that was old Charlie Winterfield's place. There was Mick Pudney's then there was Winterfield's, the blokes who'd got all the horses and that -- not all the horses, but the draught horses. That's where they used to live. And that's where Arthur Dayman and Fred moved in there. Well, then Wally and Phyliss moved into there.

BP: Later. But this must have been in their first -- when they were first married, and they -- well, not first married. But she said they lived in -- it belonged to Tom Carrison, and it's not the one on the Bay Road because they didn't live there, and she can't quite remember where it was. But anyway, that's beside the point. (laughter) We'll get on with the Lasletts.

So your dad had not a lot of acres, then. He would have been in a similar position to *his* father, so he would have needed to do other work off the farm.

LS: Oh yes, yes. They did a lot of roadwork and that sort of thing. Well, then he got involved in fence contracting, you see, that we carried on for years, and that's afterwards, and he erected many, many miles of fencing. Well, I recall that they

called tenders for the fencing of the stock route through the Mount Schank Station, and it went through past Guyers Hill, up through the Stone Hut, the Near Stone Hut, the Far Stone Hut and the Clover Paddock.

These were all names of the Schank Station paddocks?

LS: The paddocks, yes. The Clover Paddock was the one that was come out at the school at the Schank, where the meatworks had got their across the road holding paddocks, and the next mile was the Near Stone Hut, and then there was the Far Stone Hut, which was at Guyers Hill. We put in a tender, or Dad did, put in a tender to do the fencing. And we put in for seven shillings a chain to do it. Laurie Hood and Slim Pearson got the tender to do the Clover Paddock at six shillings a chain, Ollie Schubert and Alec Laube done the Near Stone Hut for four shillings a chain. They gave us the Guyers Hill one because they thought that was going to be the hardest one, but it was the best one because there wasn't a lot of the flint stones that there was in the Near Stone Hut, and Dad was very thrilled when we got that job. It was like a mile each side of the road. And it was, it was a good job to do because a little bit of sandstone but then you went into the crumbly limestone up on the hill and it was a – we got a good price at seven shillings a chain. Well, Dad did a lot of contract fencing: worked for the likes of Oliver Bodey, for instance, who was a well-known pastoralist in the district. And he said to Dad, 'I want you to do the job, but,' he said, 'you're too dear.' And Dad said, 'Well, you take it or leave it.' 'No,' he said, 'it's more than I really can afford, but I can't afford not to have you!'

And one job I remember was fencing around what Spuddy Feast's got there now, across the road from Lowlands, around that. And the bloke came out with a load of netting, one bloke stood on the back of the truck and just as it come up about a hundred yards he pelted the netting out, didn't care how it landed, and Dad refused to put it up. He said, 'I would not put that up,' because he couldn't straighten it out, it was all dented and that sort of thing. Well, Oliver Bodey had to get some more netting and that hurt. (laughter)

No, but he done a lot of fencing, Robert, in his time. And, well, there was always a bit of stonebreaking and that sort of thing to be done. And those times you quarried the stone out in the paddock, carted it and it was dumped in alongside the

road where it had to go, or close to it, and then you'd break it up into the small pieces like that.

This'd be done with horse and dray originally, wouldn't it.

LS: Horse and dray, yes. And then it got to the stage when it was they'd bring out the wagonloads, and that was hard work because, you see, a dray was lower to the ground and you could tip it up and tip it off, but a wagon you had to *throw* it all off. But then, of course, when it was broken, the overseer would come round and he had a ring – something smaller than that –

BP: Which is about four inches?

INTERVIEWEE: – yes, three inches or something like that – and he would put it over the stones and make sure that there wasn't too many big ones in amongst it and that you didn't break them too small, otherwise you had too much powder. Well, then it all had to be heaped up and done with a template so it could be measured as to how many yards there were – this would be square yards or cubic yards. And then eventually along would come the horse teams with the scarifier, the one that's down here in Volunteer Park – Don Kerr, mostly, with about six horses in the scarifier – he'd rip the road up and then they'd call tenders for someone to come and spread the metal. Dudley Feast did a lot of that, a lot of spreading the metal, he and old Ben Cox. And Dudley's mother was a Cox – is that right? Yes. (break in recording)

The jobs that your dad used to do, apart from roadwork and the fencing that he did, and his farm work, any other jobs that he used to do? Or I suppose he's pretty busy with that.

LS: Well, they always had a few cows, of course, they had the few cows, and a few cows those times, ten or twenty cows, was a reasonable amount. And not like it is today, is that they used the old four-gallon buckets – kerosene tins that the petrol used to come in: petrol those times used to always come in a wooden crate with two tins in a crate that you buy your petrol in, then it made an excellent bucket to cart the milk out to the stage. You'd sit down and milk the cows and cart the milk out to the stage and tip it in the can, and then somebody would come along and pick it up and take it to the Mount Schank factory.

You'd have been milking by hand at this stage?

LS: Oh, yes. Yes, all by hand those days, yes.

BP: Did your mother used to milk as well?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh, yes. Yes, Mum was a really good milker – *really* good milker.

So it was a family concern to get the cows milked in the morning and at night?

LS: Oh yes, yes.

Everybody had to lend a hand.

LS: Well, yes, Robert. I remember milking the cows when I started school, getting up and helping to milk –

When you *started* school?

LS: – before I went to school, yes. At six years old. Now, I never started school until after I was six – my birthday was in November and I didn't start until the January of the next year, so I was over six; but I remember milking cows before then, before going to school. Still milking the brutes. (laughter)

You must like it! What about your dad's brothers: did they stay in this area or did they move away? Or the rest of the family?

LS: Well, Auntie Lottie of course remained at Allendale, the Holland family; Auntie Lil married old Paddy Glynn, and they finished up living up on Benara Road but they put in a lot of their time down at Lake Bonney, that's where one of the family was drowned, at Lake Bonney – he and his sister were out in the boat and they got capsized, and she tried to save him but she was unable to do so. They lived up in Benara Road for quite some time.

Uncle George Laslett – that's George and Len Laslett's father, who married two of the Earl sisters again – they eventually went to, they were at Glencoe and he worked at the factory at Glencoe and eventually got a thirty-acre block at Moorak, that's in Yells Road – yes, Yells Road, in Moorak – and he grew potatoes and things like that. And he was a very dapper little gentleman and always used to wear the watchband, one in each pocket – – –.

Uncle Dick, he finished up at Mount Schank, he had a block there which now belongs to Mount Schank Station: that's on what they call 'Laslett Road', just more

or less opposite the main entrance into Mount Schank Station. Used to grow a lot of variegated thistles. (laughter) He was a great man, Uncle Dick was, with his horses. He'd get up at three o'clock in the morning and feed the horses, then go back to bed for a little bit, and then, as soon as it started to come daylight, they'd feed them again, they'd have another feed before they'd go to work. And they all had to be groomed and scraped down and that sort of thing.

What was the idea of getting up at three o'clock in the morning and giving them a feed?

LS: Oh, make sure that his horses were looked after. And he had a son named Bert, his younger son was Bert, and it didn't suit Bert, this getting up of a morning.

I don't blame him!

LS: I didn't blame him, either! He didn't like the idea at all. And he used to camp down at the old hut at Pudney's there and do a bit of work, ploughing and that. He was a perfectionist, Uncle Dick, as far as his ploughing was concerned: everything had to be dead straight, it couldn't be out – to plough and that he'd peg out the line like a fence line to strike out for his head lands and everything was real perfectionist. Well, then he took over the quarry, the quarrying the sawn stone for builders, the big quarry in Pareaen, where Brenton Jaensch is. And he had a tripod and they'd get it there, and they'd wind them up, the big blocks, and drive the wagon in underneath and load three blocks of this stuff onto the wagon. Well, then it had to be got off when you got to the house site wherever it was. But he done a lot of work there in Pareaen on that. But then – – –.

So he owned that land?

LS: No, he didn't own it. No, no, that belonged to Pareaen, that would be the Lange family.

And Uncle Alf, well, Uncle Alf was in the Telegraph Department. I don't know that he ever knew anything else bar the – and he worked all over the place, a good bit of it in the North, some in Melbourne. Dad was in the Telegraph Department when they were in Melbourne.

Do you know how long your dad was in the Telegraph Department?

LS: I don't know for sure, but I would say it was about four years, something like that, Robert – I don't know for sure, no, I'm not certain of that. Well, then Auntie Em, of course, was a spinster, she lived at Allendale and looked after her father for a long time, and then she finished up over with Reg and Margaret, they built her a little flat place over at their place and she lived over there with them for a number of years.

Where was that, Uncle?

LS: That's where Brian and Shirley Butler were, and they got burnt out in the 1959 fire, the house was burnt down, gutted, in the 1959 fire. That's where Reg and Margaret used to live until about 1952, then Brian and Shirley took over there and that all got burnt out in 1959.

And you said that Auntie Fanny and – was he Bert?

LS: Uncle Bert, yes.

Yes, they went to Geelong?

LS: Yes, Abraham Barrier, Abraham Barrier Wallace but they called him 'Bert'.

Yes. He was born up near Broken Hill, wasn't he?

LS: Yes, I think that's where the Barrier –

In the Barrier Ranges?

LS: – came in, somewhere like that, yes. Yes. He was a gentleman, a real gentleman. And they had these six little girls. They said there was never, ever, little boys' trousers on the line, (laughter) it was always girls. And there are six in the family of them and they all moved over there, and they all worked, as far as I know, at the woollen mills at Geelong. They had land out at Belmont and Uncle Bert used to run chooks as well as work on a farm out a little bit further. I remember going over there just as a kid, went over with Auntie Em, Auntie Rosa and I, and I went out with Uncle Bert to get a load of wood and we were loading up the wood and I see him drop this bundle of wood and looked around and he'd gathered up a snake! (laughter)

You *would* drop it in a hurry, wouldn't you?

LS: Yes.

So your dad's family was a fairly large family, and the Earls were too –

LS: Oh, yes.

– so did you have big family get-togethers, say for Christmas and things like that?

LS: Oh, well, not so much – – – Well, Uncle Dick, for instance – put it this way – used to come down to church every Sunday, and he'd drive down from the Schank, come to our place and have dinner of course there, but church was at eleven o'clock or at three o'clock. And the first thing he done when he'd get there would be to take old Marie out on the jinker or the buggy, give her a good wash down, nosebag of chaff, and they'd be there for the day and then go home after church. As far as get-togethers were concerned, I think that the biggest get-togethers that any of us remember would be in your time, when we all used to congregate at Mum's on Christmas Day and this sort of thing for the Christmas festivities.

Best day of the year!

LS: Well, the cricket match was on. Eat the Christmas puddings. And Mum used to always make the Christmas puddings, Bev, and used to hang them up along the back veranda: the Christmas pudding, the Boxing Day pudding, and 'We'd better have one for New Year's Day,' and then, 'I don't think they're too good, I'd better make another one,' and they were hanging all up along the – you'd hit your head on them walking underneath. They were, they were good days, weren't they.

Yes, it was a terrific day. Looked forward to it from when one finished to the next one.

LS: Yes.

What about your schooldays? We haven't sort of talked much about your early childhood. You said that you had to milk cows before you even started school.

LS: Oh yes, well, that was the normal thing to do, but then it didn't seem to be – it wasn't a real burden or anything like that those times. But they were the things that you had to do. No, well, I started school and it'd be in 1924, I think it was, over at Kingsley: Mr Harold Jones was our teacher, he taught Jack, he taught right down to Una, the whole – seven of us in the family and he taught the lot of us. So most of us had our seven years of schooling, it was at the Kingsley School under the one

teacher. And in those days he had the whole lot of the school on his own until such time as Lenny Winterfield, another well-known identity in the district, he took on the junior teacher's job, the monitor, and that relieved things quite a bit. But there was up to sixty children going there. And every morning, of course, in those times, was you were lined up, you were inspected to see if your boots were clean, you saluted the flag and give the – what was it? – the honour roll, repeated the honour roll. You can't remember that, now, can you?

BP: Yes, I can.

INTERVIEWEE: You can! Can you remember doing that?

BP: Yes. I remember one piece in it: 'I promise cheerfully to obey her laws' –

INTERVIEWEE: That's right.

BP: – and I always thought it was 'Chifley' because he was Prime Minister at the time! (laughter) And I promised 'Chifley' to ---.

INTERVIEWEE: Oh, goodness me!

Not 'cheerfully' at all!

LS: BP: No, 'Chifley'.

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. Well, there you are! Yes, that was the normal thing was everybody – and they'd walk around behind you and that sort of thing, up and down the lines, to see that your boots were clean and everything like that.

So you'd have to give the boots a bit of a wipe after you left the dairy.

LS: Oh yes, well, that had to be done. Then you'd hold your hands out to see if your hands were clean.

What happened if they weren't?

LS: (demonstrates a slap) Sent to the shelter shed. But no, he was there for many, many, many years. But eventually I think the betting on the horses got the better of him and he'd duck out of school, you'd wonder where he was gone, he'd gone up when the races were running, you see, when the wireless come in, he'd go and hear the races. But I don't know whether any of them of that family are living: you see, they had Ray ---. Ray Jones was about not very long ago, that's the second son.

Melvie, who was just a wee bit older than I am, he finished up as a school teacher, finished up doing himself in, I believe. Then there was Ray and then there was the other, Laurie, he was a little bit simple. But they were good days, the old school days, there's no doubt about that. I often look back on them. But I was always glad when it was finished. I left school four days after I was thirteen, we got our Qualifying Certificates, came in the mail on the morning of the 13th – old Mrs Yateman used to go over in the dogcart from out the back road and she'd always bring the school mail – the results came, we were told we could go home. I went home, got my bark stripping iron and went down to Burns's, down at old Albert Kieselbach's, and stripped bark for the rest of the day after that was done. That was my first job that I did.

Who for?

LS: Albert Kieselbach.

Oh, yes, working for him. Oh, right.

LS: Yes, stripping bark for him.

You said you weren't all that pleased about going to school – did you play games at school? Marbles or anything like that?

LS: Oh, yes, yes. Although in the time that I was there, Robert, we had the big interest of taking over the block alongside of the school, which belonged to the Methodist Church. And that was always then the garden. And every year we used to be very proud to win the school exhibits at the Mount Gambier Show with our garden produce. Mr ES Alcock was the man responsible for the agriculture in the area, and he used to come down and address us about how to do this and that, and we all had our separate plots – or perhaps two or three of you would have a plot – and that was one of the main interests I think that we had at school was our garden interest and the growing vegetables.

Was this just the boys or were the girls involved as well? Or did the girls do sewing?

LS: No, the boys were mainly the ones that were involved in that. The girls, I wouldn't know what they got up to.

Did they do sewing?

LS: Could have done, yes, yes. They had Ev Holland, Thelma Holland's mother was the sewing teacher there for a long, long time.

BP: Elv Tibbles said that.

Yes, that's right.

LS: INTERVIEWEE: Is that right?

Yes.

LS: You tell me if I'm wrong.

BP: No, no, I remember that. You played cricket?

INTERVIEWEE: I played cricket, yes. Yes, I played cricket. We played cricket at school, we had cricket matches and football the same as they do now. I played with Allendale until – I played my last match when I was just on fifty, when I played my last game of cricket. (laughter)

Some of us are *over* fifty and still going.

LS: I made a hundred once at Kongorong, I made ninety-nine and ninety-eight, and I only ever remember making one duck¹ in my cricket career.

That's pretty good.

LS: Oh, I keep telling Simon that but he takes no notice, still makes them. No, I thought I might have had a game yesterday, Australia Day, they might have had an 'old-timers' game or something, I might have got a job.

Did they have a game yesterday?

LS: Under-twelves.

Oh, right.

LS: Under-twelves played all day.

Oh, did they!

LS: Yes – or most of the day, yes.

BP: What about shopping, where did you shop, get your supplies?

INTERVIEWEE: At the shop, at the Co-op Store at Allendale. Mr JBC Tibbles, Bert Tibbles, 'Shirty' – they ran the shop, he and the family. And for as long as I can remember they had the shop, from my early days until it was closed down. He was sort of an agent for the Co-op Store in Mount Gambier. Dad was a member of the Co-op in Mount Gambier and I remember he and Mr Griffin, and they took me for some reason to the Co-op meeting in Mount Gambier, and the Co-op was where Josephine's is now, that was the – had the big, old staircase and that and they'd go upstairs to the meeting house. J McBean Cameron was the Manager of the Co-op in the Mount, and Mr Tibbles was an offshoot more or less of them, and then they delivered all around the area in the van. Done Port MacDonnell as well as Allendale. Then Horrie used to take – (telephone rings, break in recording) – deliver the goods all round the district and when old Bert used to the delivery around the Bay he used to get it done as quickly as he could, he'd have an ale or two at the Victoria, and many a time the horse brought the van home of its own and he was asleep in the thing. One occasion it came to the Chimney Corner there and the horse took the corner a bit short and tipped the van over and that was that.

What's the Chimney Corner?

LS: The Chimney Corner? That's the corner right at the old shop, William and Mortimer Street corner there.

Why is it the 'Chimney Corner'?

LS: Well, there used to be an old chimney there. Yes, there used to be an old chimney there, on William Street. I don't know who lived there or anything else, but there's a shed or something there now. But whose was the chimney, I don't know.

BP: What about health, if you were sick or – did you have to seek, did your parents seek medical assistance?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, yes, of course they did. And those times there was – well, Dr King and Dr Lorimer were our doctors and they were some of the first people that had motor cars, and they used to come to Allendale, if there were people in need they would come to Allendale. And I remember the morning that Dad died Dr King

¹ A batting innings in which no runs are scored.

had come down that morning, we called the doctor and he came down that morning. And he was there when Dad passed away, the doctor was. No, I think their service was possibly better than what it is today, as far as getting you to a doctor ---. Go to a doctor today, you've got to wait for a fortnight to get in or something like that. But they did do what they could, there's no doubt about that.

BP: And did your mother have any remedies that she used to use for just the common colds or cuts or bruises or earaches or ---?

INTERVIEWEE: Not unusual, I don't think so. I mentioned old Mrs Yateman here a while ago, and Mrs Yateman used to always prescribe kerosene - didn't matter what it was: a few drops of kerosene and a bit of sugar and that sort of thing. That was typical medicine.

BP: What was that for, a cold?

INTERVIEWEE: Fixed anything. (laughter)

BP: If it didn't kill you!

That's right.

LS: INTERVIEWEE: You didn't die, you didn't have a bottleful!

BP: Oh, dear!

And Elvie's grandma, she was the village midwife, wasn't she, Granny Lithgow?

LS: INTERVIEWEE: Yes, that's right, yes. I was born in Allendale itself. Some of the family were born in Mount Gambier, at Baringa or St Neots or something, but I was born in Allendale I understand and Mrs Lithgow was present when I was born, as far as I know. She did a lot of deliveries in her time, yes.

You said when you left school you went bark stripping. What other jobs did you do?

LS: I would say that my first jobs would have been mainly out on the fencing lines and that sort of thing. Because we had quite a bit of clients that we could work for and with, and I think that that's one of the main things that I've ever done in my life was fencing. I did work it out one time on a bit of a basis that - and this is going back ten or twelve years ago - that I'd fenced from here to Murray Bridge and back again, like in a straight line sort of business, if it was all put together. And I can still

go around a lot of fences in the district and say, 'Well, I put that one up.' But some of them are a bit like me now: they're getting worse for wear.

They'd be pretty old, some of them – some would be fifty years old, maybe?

LS: Oh, easy, yes. Some of them are. Yes. Some people said, 'Oh, you can't use stringybark' – you couldn't use stringybark because everything was to be pine and that sort of thing, but we put up stringybark posts after the 1959 fire and some of those fences are still going, too. So that was a bit of a fallacy.

And you'd have used the old number eight wire too, wouldn't you?

LS: All number eight wire those times, yes. Number eight wire and heavy barb, there was no such thing as tensile wire or tensile barb or anything like that. The only light wire that we would have used would have been number ten for tying on.

And nowadays people put posts a long way apart, even up to a chain or so.

LS: Yes.

But when you were fencing in your young days they'd have been – what? – six or seven metres apart, or – – –?

LS: Well, we used to do – mainly it was three posts to the chain [22 yards]. And we used to have a piece of timber, a piece of light timber, measured off, that you put in that post, and then you measured and made a mark, that was your first dropper; then put it to the next one and that was your second dropper; and the next one was your post. You see, there was no such thing as just haphazard ideas like we've got today –

Yes, just step her off!

LS: – stepping them out and that sort of thing, that came in later. But you put in three posts to the chain with two droppers in between. Different altogether fencing, with electric fences and that today and everything else.

Some of the digging you would have had to contend with would have been pretty terrible.

LS: Yes, yes. I suppose that some of the worst – I think the worst day I ever put in was David Carlin and I, and we dug eleven post holes for the day, and that was out in the block of Henry Kerrs, out at Aldridge's, that was Henry Kerr's. White metal,

and you couldn't find a hole, you couldn't do anything, you couldn't move. And we put down eleven holes for the two of us for the day. And that would be some of the slowest I've ever ---. Now, of course, you'd get a diamond drill or something or other like that and punch a hole through, nothing.

And you didn't used to use gelignite?

LS: Those times, no. No, no. No, we never used gelignite those times.

It's wonderful stuff!

LS: Good stuff, yes.

So it would have been really hard work, fencing, in those days.

LS: Oh yes, well, it was. Yes, it *was* hard work. Well, then when of course the fire came through, that created a lot of - lots of fence ---. I think that that year David and Max [Feast] and I, we did twenty-four miles in that following year: pulling down the old, burnt ones and rolling up the wire and then doing that. I enjoyed the fencing.

BP: Who would have - would that have come under insurance, Mr Laslett, or do you think the farmers would have had to have paid for it themselves, for that fencing?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, some were insured and some were not. Our fencing was *not* insured. We'd insured for years and years and years and years, and that particular year it wasn't done, our fencing wasn't done. We'd left the fencing because we thought, 'Oh well, we can put it up ourselves.' But, generally speaking ---.

END OF DISK 1: DISK 2

We were talking about the fencing, Uncle, and you were talking about the '59 fire, how you'd put up twenty-four miles of fencing that year. What were your recollections of the '59 fire? It was a huge fire that started down Kongorong way and it didn't stop till it hit the Glenelg River, did it?

LS: No, it didn't. It didn't really stop it, the Glenelg River, either, Robert. It jumped across the river to the other side, then the wind changed and took it towards the north, on the other side of the river, and it was there that it was really stopped. But not in that day; it was still burning fiercely. No, it was a horrific day. My first recollections of being close to it was when Charlie Wallace and I headed off in the

old Vauxhall ute that he had and we got to the Kongorong Corner on the Mount Salt Road and a bloke came along and he said, 'I wouldn't go any further, if I were you,' he said, 'it's coming across the paddock.' It was coming across like through where Shepherds and that are now, coming straight through there at that stage. It started quite early in the morning down on the Carpenter's Rocks Road and it didn't take long when it came out into the open country to get there. We were very nearly caught, in that we were just there at the corner and another bloke came along and he threw the car doors open, just opened the car doors, and Charlie and I hopped in and they said, 'You were very nearly going to get caught.' And I said, 'Well, I wasn't going to get caught.' They said, 'How were *you* going to get out of it?' And I said, 'Well, I had a box of matches in my pocket and I was going to light a fire and follow it along.' You light it ahead of the fire itself and you light it and you follow along on burnt ground, and burnt ground don't get burnt twice. *Now*, they tell me if you was to do that today it's a criminal offence.

BP: Because I remember Dad was saying that somebody wanted to burn at Pareen, backburn, and the police wouldn't let them. That was on the Bay Road. He said if they'd let them – the farmers wanted to burn it so it'd burn back, and he said they weren't allowed to do it. And he said, 'It wouldn't have crossed that road.'

Yes, and done all that damage.

LS: BP: Yes. But anyway, go on.

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, well, we burnt on the Settler's Road, alongside of lucerne, and it came through the lucerne paddock as though it wasn't even there. And then, as far as burning the Bay Road was concerned, I think it was jumping overhead so much – – –. I was on Young's Road, just up from where we live now, when it came through there and there was no fire on the ground but there were great balls of fire –

BP: In the air.

INTERVIEWEE: – sixty, seventy feet in the air, well above us. The atmosphere was all sort of burning and the fire was jumping.

It was a terrible day, wasn't it? It was really hot and really strong wind.

LS: Bad day, it was. Yes. Yes, it was a really bad day. And I think we were very, very fortunate there was only the one life that was lost, and that was poor old John Smith and he came out of his own home to come and help somebody down the road and he got caught there at the corner on the rise there. But apart from that, there was a lot of houses burnt, there was a lot of stock burnt and this, but fortunately only the one life. Ash Wednesday lost a number of people, the Eyre Peninsula fire the other day a lot of people, and I think that this would have been on perhaps a greater scale because it was burning in open country, and with the pines – well, no good stopping in the middle of the pines to try and stop it, you could do nothing there. But this was jumping so far ahead all the time. But I think that much more of the country would have been burnt, even the next day, and Charlie and I said, ‘Well, we’ll go out and see what happened to the old ute.’ And we went out and we could see smoke rising out in your block. You know where the hut used to be?

Earl’s hut?

LS: Earl’s hut?

Yes.

LS: And smoke was just starting to pipe up from there. And there was pine trees just up from the hut, towards the west, and it was just coming out of the old, burnt roots on the trees and the grass was just starting to burn again. So that would have let a whole lot of the south, south of the fire, to get going again.

Because I don’t think – like Earl’s side of Kongorong, that burnt, but I don’t know that our side did, did it?

LS: It *would* have been, it would have been the next day. Only we got it out. We went out early the next morning. And the funny part about it all afterwards was when we got to the old Vauxhall she’s sitting there on the side of the road with the tyres burnt off it and the wireless still playing away as good as gold. (laughter) Mick Glynn came along and he’d seen that we had cans of water in the ute and he’d seen the fire going to take the ute, and he hopped off his horse and he threw the water all over the ute – it still burnt the tyres but the whole ute was still, the wireless was still going. No, it was – – –. Everything happened so quickly.

Well, you said you and Charlie were there on Mount Salt Road, was it?

LS: Yes.

What did you do after that?

LS: Well, we came back and came down Young's Road – that's our road – and poor old Bill Saunders, who just lived up the track, he was walking round in the paddock. I thought, 'You're a silly old man, you're going to get burnt,' and with that the fire just went clean over the top of us! Never even recognised we were there. We were right in the track of it but it went clean over the top of us. Well, then I was interspersed all day round about the place, got back to the main road after being everywhere else and Jean had been to the Bay, Jean came to the Bay because Peter had the corgi dog, he had it, and the pony. Graham Hutchesson came along and he grabbed the pony and he said, 'I'll take the pony, I'll go and shift the cows,' he said, 'I'll take them down to the beach,' and he took a mob of cows out of their place on Dot, the pony, and (laughs) laughed about it afterwards, you know. Graham had the big hat on, he had the Army coat – it was as hot as hell and he was wrapped up like this: Dad had told him to put on some clothing to keep the fire out. And he said to Jean, 'I'll save the pony,' he said, 'I've got to save myself. I'll ride her in the sea.' Anyhow, he brought the cattle all down and put them in the Bay Reserve and he saved the pony. Peter's down there, 'What am I going to do?' He had his toolbox that he got for Christmas and the corgi dog, and they headed off to the Bay anyhow, down here.

They got back to Wallace's corner at Don Kerr's, right where Graham Hutchesson lives, and there was a hold-up there on the road and Major Williams, Roy Williams, said, 'How did you get on? How's your house?' And said, 'I don't know for sure.' And Jean said, 'Well, I'm going through to go have a look.' He said, 'No, you're not, Jean. No, you're not.' He said, 'You stop here, I'm going.' He hopped in the bus and away he went, and he came racing back, he said, 'Your house is all right. Everything's burnt all round it, the sheds are burnt, the hay shed's burnt.' He said, 'Everything's burnt round the house, the paling fence and everything, but your house is still OK.' So that was the first acknowledgement that we had that we had a home. Others not far away, of course, were burnt down. But there was – what? – forty-odd houses or something, wasn't there, burnt altogether in that fire? But fortunately, as I said before, only the one life was lost. Sorry, Bert.

No, you're right.

LS: BP: We haven't spoken about your war service.

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I started my war service with the 3rd Light Horse in Mount Gambier, when that was going. We were camped up here at the racecourse at the Mount, was there for a few months and then the 3rd Light Horse was abandoned, we became the 9th Motor Regiment. Went to Adelaide, dug trenches all over Adelaide, all down through – when I was down at Flinders the other day I said, 'I recognise some of this country: we dug foxholes all through here.'

What was the digging like?

LS: Oh, not too bad. It was better when we got to the beach. But anyhow, had a few months in there, then we loaded all the trucks and everything onto the train and sat up on the open deck train with your trucks and everything sitting up on top and you were sitting up there all the way to Mount Martha in your truck, (laughs) on the back of the train. And we had a bit of time at Mount Martha. Then we were eventually disbanded and I just joined the AIF then and I was posted to the 2nd/27th Infantry Battalion.

There was quite a few local people in that battalion.

LS: There was quite a lot of locals in the – this was a big stronghold, as far as the 27th Battalion was concerned, because the 2nd/27th was a South Australian battalion founded at Woodside and there was quite a number of people that had enlisted from here with the 2nd/27th. And the first man I met at the 2nd/27th Battalion was Jack Burnett. And our battalion was out at Mount Garnet on a bivouac and Jack was left in charge of the few that were left at the camp, so he was the first man I met when I joined the 2nd/27th Battalion.

He was known as 'the Major', but – – –.

LS: Oh yes, Major Burnett.

He was Major Burnett, right.

LS: Yes, yes, he was Major Burnett. And he was a Military Medal man, wasn't he, Jack? From there we were posted into Queensland, it was at Queensland then, we

were at Queensland. Then they went to New Guinea, to the Ramu and Markham Valley campaigns. Pretty hard going. But it was quite an experience.

I've just read a book about that campaign in New Guinea, and the author wasn't all that rapt in the way MacArthur – he was back in Australia, and he was giving order to the generals over there in – – –.

LS: Oh, yes. MacArthur was not a very popular man with our troops at that time, I tell you.

A lot of Australian troops were sacrificed by these tactics he had to push forward at all costs, apparently.

LS: Oh, yes, yes – and he was safe in his little compound.

Yes, and didn't realise the conditions the soldiers were fighting under.

LS: He had no idea; in fact, I don't think anybody did.

Could you describe those conditions for us?

LS: Well, some of those conditions, Robert, I never saw some of the worst. You take the Gona-Buna campaigns, the Kokoda Trail and that, I was never in. I was in the Ramu Valley and the Markham Valley campaigns, and I suppose my first initiation of fighting was in – anyhow, it was one place the commandoes had hit the Japs the night before and we followed through.

Nadzab, was it?

LS: Nadzab. And they'd left a hundred and sixty-odd Japanese dead in this little village that they were taken by surprise, and the commandoes – an old chap that used to come down to the Schank from Bundaberg, used to come down and put in a fair bit of time up with Gladys Laslett, he was in that group; and Ron Rogers, I believe, was also in that same commando group. And Ron, of course, to all intents and purposes, should not be here, should not have been here, in that somebody said they were carrying him out and they thought he was dead. And a bloke was walking past and he said, 'God!' he said, 'It's *you*, Rogers!' And his eye flickered. They thought he was dead. And he said, 'He's not dead.' And he finished up with a plate in the side of his head, finished up down here at Peggy Walters' and then for many, many years after that. But that was one of – my first initiation of what war was all about, loss of life and things like that. Of course, the commandoes, they never lost a person

because they just took them all by surprise: they just went straight through them and they were gone.

BP: So was it your job to – what happened with the bodies of the Japanese?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, we were supposed to clean them up. But I think that that was left more or less to the what they called the ‘Pioneers’, and we moved on, too. And I finished up I was on the – you might have heard of Shaggy Ridge, and that was where a lot of lives were lost, on Shaggy Ridge. I lost two very good mates there: one of them was a chap from Bordertown, and I’ll never forget the story that he told me beforehand. He hadn’t long been married – and he was a corporal – he hadn’t long been married and he said, ‘You know,’ he said, ‘my wife has never gone to sleep of a night except laying on my arm,’ and he was telling me this just between ourselves, sort of business. And he and Bill Scanlon from Millicent and another little fellow from up the North Coast, a bloke by the name of Smith, and they wanted volunteers: he says, ‘I’m going.’ They said, ‘Why do *you* want to go?’ He said, ‘I’ve had my brother was killed at Lae,’ he said, ‘I’ve had a brother killed at Finschhafen,’ he said, ‘I’m going up to get *my* share.’ Bill Scanlon got back, from Millicent. The three of them went up there. Tom Exhill from Bordertown, his body was recovered a few days afterwards, and little Billy Smith, his body was recovered also. But Scanlon from Millicent, he got back. But [that] left our section, I think there was four of us at that stage still only left, and we were right on the edge of Shaggy Ridge. But anyhow, you don’t want to hear about that and things like that. But then we came home. And, finished up, the next time we went to Morotai – I had the two trips to New Guinea – went to Morotai – – –.

Could you describe what the conditions were like? Like it’s rainforest, torrential rain?

LS: Oh yes, we had kunai grass as high as this house, and you were trying to force through that. And there were no tracks, you see, there was only the ‘boongs’² and that that were living there beforehand, and you were trying to get through all of this and you didn’t know who was looking at you, sitting up a tree in the next place. And I had another very good friend, his name was Trevor Martin, he was connected to the

John Martin's store, he was our lieutenant. And he said, 'Get them to dig in here, just here.' And we were digging these foxholes. He said, 'I'm going up to see Bob Johns.' Well, Bob Johns was a son of the Commissioner of Police in South Australia and he was in charge of another section. Poor old Trevor hadn't gone I don't think twenty yards from where we were and there was a sniper up in a tree and shot him. And we laid there all that next night before we could get out to get to his body, yet the Japs came in and got theirs almost under our noses and we didn't even know they'd taken the bodies. And so the terrain and that, Robert, was heavy, thick, mountainous, mud – you couldn't say, 'Well, I'll go from here to there,' and know you were going to get there because to get there you'd have to perhaps do a route march all round the place to get there.

Anyhow, we went to Morotai, we did a bit of a bivouac there and stayed there for a couple of nights, and by then I was with the Tank Attack Company of the 2nd/27th – that was the two-pounders, what they called the 'two-pounders' – and we were the spearhead, our battalion was the spearhead, on the landing at Balikpapan. I got left behind with another chap with the guns when they went in because they didn't want to take the two-pounders in – well, they were floating everything in by hopping off boats and walking in – and I got left behind which I think was more dangerous there, with the coconuts falling out of the trees, (laughter) which was quite a dangerous thing.

Yes, it would be.

LS: You know, you're camped under the coconuts, you have to be (laughs) hopeful that one's not going to fall on top of your head! But anyhow, we got into Balikpapan and the Air Force and that had wrecked the place. Of course, that was a great oil place, there was oil wells everywhere, great containers and that, and they'd blown the place to pieces pretty well. And that was quite a holiday. My discharge came through. Our battalion was to go down to Macassar, to take the surrender from the Japanese in Macassar, our gear and everything was loaded on the boats to go and my discharge came through, and they said, 'Well, you can stop here, but you'll have to wait until your gear comes back from Macassar, and then you'll be going home.'

² Natives.

I said, 'Well, this is all right.' I sat there on the edge of the Markham River for nearly six weeks before they got my gear back!

Eventually we flew out in an old Mitchell bomber, and of course the thing had been completely gutted – there was no seats, no nothing; she was just the barrel of the plane. And we were sitting there in the hull of this thing, quite a heap of us, and the pilot gave a little bit of an address before we went and he said, 'Now, she's not too good, she's not too good,' he said, 'I can guarantee you that.' He said, 'We might have to put down,' he said, 'and we're flying over the sea all the way.' Why he told us I don't know. And then he turned to me and he said, 'See that axe up there?' And I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'If I give you the word that we're going down,' he said, 'you get that axe and bash out every window that you can so that everybody can bail out through the windows.' 'Right.' Anyhow, we flew round to Morotai and they said, 'You'll fly to Morotai, you'll get off that plane, you'll get on a plane and you should be in your own capital city tomorrow at least.' Got down to Morotai and they said, 'Where's our plane?' 'Plane?' they said, 'What's that?' They said, 'You might get a Liberty ship in about three weeks.' Anyhow, we got one in ten days. Anyhow, ours was the best one, and one of them wasn't too good so we had to remain in the convoy to bring the stricken one home, back to Brisbane. Got back to Brisbane and was discharged from Brisbane in November of 1945. So that was my Army career.

At one stage you were posted 'missing': could you tell us that story?

LS: Well, yes. That was up in the Markham Valley in the Ramu Valley campaign. My mate – and he *was* a good mate. By trade he was a watchmaker, a jeweller, he had a jeweller's shop in Drummoyne in Sydney and at that stage he'd sold the largest diamond ever sold in Sydney, and he was younger than me a good deal but he had his own shop. And we became very firm friends. But he couldn't swim a stroke. (laughs) And I'll never forget this as long as I live: we were doing training in Queensland out from Caloundra and went out on these barges, you see, and they bring you in so far and they say, 'Now, *in* you go!' Toss you off. All your gear. He said, 'I'm not going in there,' he said, 'I'll drown,' he said, 'and I might as well drown there,' he said, 'as straight in the boat.' He said, 'I'm not going in.' 'Oh,' they said, 'yes, you are. You've got to go in.' Anyhow, he said, 'Are *you* going?' I

said, 'Of *course* I'm going.' And I said, 'In you go!' And he dropped in and before I could get over the edge he's out of the water again. 'Come on!' (laughs) Anyhow, we got in. And paddled in alongside of him, we got in there.

But anyhow, we were out on bivouac and he and I were left as the rearguard, that if we struck any trouble we covered while the others went and then *we* went. Anyhow, a mob of Japs came strolling down the track as casual as could be and a great heap of them, and we could see it was no good doing anything, and they bailed out. They started firing and, anyhow, it was Wally and I, we had to get out.

What was his other name, Uncle?

LS: Wally French. And anyhow we sort of covered the others a little bit and then we went off, and these Japs, they still come running down the track. And they were great big fellows: most of the Japanese were little fellows, but these were marines. Anyhow, we took to the mulga and he said, 'We've got to go this way.' I said, 'No, we've got to go that way.' And so we had a bit of a difference of opinion and I thought, 'Well, I'm a bit of a bushie, I know something.' Anyhow, I had a magazine, what they called the *Salt Magazine*, and I threw it on the ground or I dropped it, anyhow, and after we'd gone a certain amount of time I said, 'This is not right, Wally, we've got to go the other way.' 'Well,' he said, 'how are we going to get back there?' Anyhow, we traced our steps back until I found this bally *Salt Magazine*.

So you knew you were heading the right direction then.

LS: We headed then in the right direction. And I said, 'We've got to go over here, the river's over here. We've got to go there and then we've got to follow the river down and go back to camp.' 'No,' he said, 'you're going the wrong way.' I said, 'Look, Wally,' I said, 'I don't know, but I'm sure we've got to go this way.' Anyhow, 'All right, have it your way,' he said, 'have it your way.' Anyhow, we got to the river and the darned river's flowing the wrong way. He said, 'Told you. Told you.' Anyhow, I said, 'There's something wrong, Wally, something wrong,' I said. 'This is not right.' Anyhow, we came back to the river and I said, 'We've got to cross this stream,' and I said, 'There's something not right here.' 'Well,' he said, 'you go,' he said, 'I'm stopping here.' I said, 'No, you're not.' 'Yeah,' he said, 'I might as well be shot by the Japs,' he said, 'as drown.' He said, 'I'd sooner be shot

by them than drown.’ I said, ‘You’re not going to drown, you cranky bagger.’ I said, ‘Now, come *on!*.’ ‘Nah.’ Shoot hands and he said, ‘It’s been nice knowing you, Bill.’ I said, ‘Well, that’s not good enough for me,’ and I said, ‘*I’m going.*’ (break in recording) And there’s these great, big bamboos growing and I grabbed one of them them and I tossed it as far as I could out into the stream. It was still growing, and I threw it out and I said, ‘Now, *come on!*’ With one plunge he jumped in and he didn’t need the bamboo – he nearly jumped to the other side of the river! (laughs) And we got over and anyhow I said, ‘There’s something wrong but we’ve still got to go. That river’s going the wrong way.’ ‘All right.’ Anyhow, we followed the river down and we came to the main river itself, and where we’d struck it was a tributary. The river had gone up and around like that, and curled back and gone back into the river and we’d struck it there. Anyhow, we got back. We got back to the camp and they said, ‘You’ve been posted “missing”.’ But before the message got home to either family – he was a married man at that stage – before any news came that we were missing we reported back in. And he said, ‘You know,’ he said, ‘I’ve never prayed in me life,’ he said, ‘hardly before.’ He said, ‘The nearest I’ve been to the church, I run the chocolate wheel at the Castle Hill Club,’ he said, (laughs) ‘for the Church of England.’ He said, ‘That’s as close as I’ve ever been to church. But,’ he said, ‘I prayed last night.’ And anyhow we got back, and we remained firm friends until he died some years later.

He built a new home – he lived out at Kellyville in Sydney – he built a new home, holiday place, up at Lake Macquarie, a beautiful area. Not Port Macquarie but Lake Macquarie, and it was a beautiful area. He built a new house and he and his wife, Dot, went up to cut the lawns and that. But you could sit up on this blooming hill in this house and you’d look out on the lake and you’d see the fish jumping. And he cut the lawns and went inside and he collapsed and he died there and then, he never lived in the house at all. We went back there and took Dot up to the house several years later, Jean and I did, we went up there and took Dot, and it was the first time that she’d stayed in the house up there. We haven’t heard a thing from them for five or six, six or seven years, we don’t really know what happens. We’ve tried to connect by phone, I can’t find anything that will give me a leader at all. And none of his other mates in Adelaide and that, they’ve often asked if we heard from Wally: haven’t heard, haven’t heard a word.

It must have – your war experiences must have forged really strong bonds with those people that you went through those experiences with.

LS: Oh, sure, Robert. Well, for instance, the day before Christmas Day the phone went and I answered the phone and I didn't know who it was: he said, 'G'day, mate.' I said, 'Bert Searle from South-West Rocks.' He said, 'You're right! You're right!' And he's two or three weeks older than what I am, we've remained firm friends ever since. Haven't seen much of them, they've been out here once. His son is involved with Kimberley-Clark and he brought his father and mother, they met him in Sydney, they took two days to come from Sydney to Adelaide, stayed in Adelaide one night, came down here and stayed with us for two nights and then had to be back in Sydney in about two days' time. And they want to come back again and I said, 'Well, you know where you've got to come.' But no, no, there was, there was a bond.

I think I might be somewhat critical sometimes, Robert, when I think of – well, say, for instance, the RSL³ in Mount Gambier with somewhere round about three and a half thousand members and that sort of thing and they might have about three hundred returned servicemen, and a lot of them are there just for the social activities. I'm not against that at all, but you get in there sometimes and those people won the War: yes, see, that's what annoys me a little bit. Well, down here at Port MacDonnell, we've got sixty-odd members and you've got a job to get four or five of us to have an annual meeting – like, that were really involved. And that's not good. Donald Gordon, who was a very staunch RSL member, said, 'We will rue the day,' he said, 'when we disregard what we're supposed to do at our meetings,' and that has happened. It's sort of turned into a social club, more or less, but what else can you do? If you want to keep the thing going you've got to have somebody to do it. And that's good in some respects.

BP: What about – we'll get off the War –

Right. (laughter) 'Don't mention the War', Beverley!

LS: BP: – 'Don't talk about the War!' – how did you meet your wife?

³ RSL – Returned and Services League.

INTERVIEWEE: Well, I suppose I'd known the family for a long, long time. We'd done a lot of fencing for Jean's father and that sort of thing at different times. And I suppose that we became more involved when I was milk carting. You see, I did about three years with Harry Holland carting milk, and Jean used to have her few cows, used to, as you well know, used to put them up here in the paddock and I used to pick up the bit of milk and I suppose see her now and again, and I guess that went on from there.

Who was her father?

LS: George Feast. You know, Malcolm's Ken?

Yes.

LS: Ken and Jean are brother and sister and Malcolm was Ken's son.

BP: And were you married before you went to the War or afterwards?

INTERVIEWEE: No, no, no, I had no attachments at all at that stage. No, had no – weren't even – well, we weren't married until 1948, I think it was, yes, '48. March of 1948 I think it was.

BP: So you were – what? – in your thirties, or how old were you when you were married?

Yes, would have been thirty.

LS: BP: Thirty.

If you were married in '48.

LS: INTERVIEWEE: Yes, '48. Yes, I would have been thirty. Jean would have been twenty-six, something like that.

And the Laslett family were traditionally a really strong Methodist –

LS: That's right, yes.

– family in Allendale: could you describe a bit – – –. You mentioned there earlier about church was at eleven or three o'clock –

LS: Yes.

– so could you describe a typical Sunday for us?

LS: Well, in those days, the church, as far as we were concerned, was one of those things that was – well, we *did*. We went to church at mostly it was three o'clock. I suppose we'd find it a bit inconvenient now if we were doing it now, three o'clock, but it was the done thing, that we went to church.

And did you have Sunday School before that?

LS: Sunday School, yes. And Mr Isaac Wallace was the Superintendent of the Sunday School. No, no, the church, as far as we were concerned, was what was done on Sunday.

Nothing else was done, was it?

LS: Very, very little. Very, very little. I was thinking the other day, Robert, at the Australia Day, how over at the [Allendale Soldiers' Memorial] Park and that Dad was on the committee of the Memorial Park for a long, long time and there was a great controversy about playing any Sunday sport, on the Memorial Park of a Sunday. It just wasn't done.

Times have changed a bit.

LS: Changed a bit. And that, of course, I think can be overdone too, we can forget that it is the Lord's day, can't we? We can easily forget that.

And the PFA played a big part in the young people's lives in Allendale in the 1930s, didn't it?

LS: It did, yes, yes. Well, the PFA had somewhere round about sixty members at Allendale at one stage, but that included O.B. Flat – like George Laslett's bus used to come down every night there was a meeting, bring the Talbot family and this one and that one, and there were sixty-odd people who were in the PFA at those times. And they were great days.

BP: What sort of things did you do? Just had a meeting, or did you have entertainment or dances or – – –?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, you more or less made your own entertainment and things like that. Then every year there'd be a concert, you'd put on a concert. Well, then there was the preparation for all that sort of thing went on. No, they were good days

and I often look back on those times and realise that there's not a lot of that old brigade that are still left in the district.

BP: What about the Ag[ricultural] Bureau? Were you a member of that?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I was a member of the Agricultural Bureau at Allendale. I went to the Agricultural Conference in Adelaide twice as a delegate. They used to have delegates go from the Bureau, two from each branch: I went over twice. And that was good.

BP: And weren't you also a board member of the Dairy Co-op?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. I became a director of the Yahl Co-operative, firstly. David [Carlin] and I were fencing down at Amos Jones', down at Cape Douglas, and these two jokers came wandering through the bush: it was Les Patzel and Lloyd Ashby. They came down to see if I'd nominate as a director, which I agreed to do. Yahl Co-operative became part of Mount Gambier Co-op, which was Yahl, Glencoe and Gambier West all combined, so I was a board member of that. I was Deputy Chairman of Mount Gambier Co-op for a good many years. I finished up, I think I had about twenty-one years as a board member of the Co-operative. I was never opposed as a director, and on my first appointment I received every vote: there was three candidates and I received one vote from everyone that voted on that day, so I had an overwhelming victory, and I never had to sit for a – after that I was never opposed until I resigned, and the Zaadstra photo – picture down there, the print – was presented to me when I finished up with the Co-op, and I enjoyed every minute of that with the exception of the late nights. And in the early days, of course, when Yahl was – Mount Schank became part of Yahl, the board and the workers from the Yahl factory used to go down to the block down the Casterton Road that they bought – they bought it for the wood, to cut the wood to fuel the boilers – they used to go down there and cut it into four-foot lengths to fuel the boilers, and that was the jobs when the milk was pretty light-on. The employees didn't have time off; they were sent down with an axe in their hand to cut wood.

Oh, right?

LS: I don't know how we'd get on doing it today!

BP: Demarcation. You mentioned that you sent *your* milk to Mount Schank –

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

BP: – can you recall the Allendale – – –?

INTERVIEWEE: Never in operation.

BP: Never.

INTERVIEWEE: I never remember it being in operation. The old boiler, of course, was still there and I don't know whether it's still there now, is it? I don't think it is. But no, Gordon Lees, of course, were wrapped up in that – there was Old Gordon, then there was Young Gordon and then there was Basil, you see: well, Basil worked at the Schank, and Gordon; but then there was Old Man Lee, he was the cheesemaker at Allendale.

Was this around 1900? Or before 1900?

LS: Oh, it could have been before, Robert, yes. They're at where Judy Kain used to live. There was twenty-six cheese and butter factories in the South-East at that one stage, everybody had a factory. Because there was no transport and things like that you all took it by horse and cart. There was Kongorong, there was Mount Schank, there was Gambier West, Yahl –

BP: Millel, was that another one?

INTERVIEWEE: – Millel, yes, Millel, Sutton Town, and wherever there was a village there was a cheese factory. Now there's not a manufacturing factory in the district.

BP: Rather sad, isn't it.

INTERVIEWEE: But I suppose the biggest highlight, as far as my career with the factory was concerned, was I was invited to represent the cheese industry on the South Australian Trade Mission to the Middle East, and that was an experience – one that I wouldn't want to do today.

No!

LS: You know, I was looking at the television the other night, the crowd that was going to Mecca: well, we were at a hotel just out of the village from Mecca, and there was this big staging camp for the people to go to Mecca that held three million

people! You fancy! Three million people on their trek to Mecca. We had a chap that was with us, he came from Oman, and we got talking one day and he said, 'I've got to go to Mecca this year, I've got to go to Mecca.' I said, 'Why is it so important that you go to Mecca?' 'Well,' he said, 'there are certain things I'm not real proud of in my life.' He said, 'I go to Mecca, I get it wiped off.' So he said he had to go to Mecca. It was a real frenzy. But places like Rihad and that, that you read about today, and where they have all this trouble and there's this fighting and carrying on and things. And we went to Singapore, then to Bahrain, and then across Saudi, through Rihad, down to – doesn't matter. I dipped my hand in the Red Sea, just to say I'd put my hand in the Red Sea. And now Dubai is one of the thriving cities of the world – they tell me there's a seven-lane of traffic into and out of Dubai – and it was just more or less trade by boat and that when we were there in Singapore. And quite an experience that was. We couldn't sell much cheese because we didn't have it, and Kraft cheese was well involved in all those areas at this time, and they were very interested more in Kraft cheese, they would have been, than in anything else. And we could have sold heaps of cheese if we'd had the article available. But the chief complaint from the Arabs was, 'Can you guarantee it will come off the wharf at Melbourne?' See, that was their biggest trouble. That was back in 1978, and I think that a lot of that has been corrected over the years, in later years – well, we hope it has. But they said – well, I took cheeses that were sent with us, and we got cheeses that were supposed to have been with us in Singapore when we got to Rihad and things like that. Well, you see, they could have been anything. Some of them we ate ourselves rather than that. But that was a real experience. We had people from the water resources, we had bakers, Gibb's pies, Hal Bannister who represented the potato industry, and things like that. And there was eleven of us went on the trip. But not now, not now.

No! Some of the other jobs that you would have done over the years: you've mentioned milk carting, bark stripping – you and Reg used to press wool, too, at one stage, didn't you? Or was it just you that was the wool presser?

LS: No, no, I would say that the wool pressing would have been done mainly by, that I would have known about, Robert, would have been Uncle Dick and Dad.

Oh, right! I thought *you* was the wool presser.

LS: They used to do the wool pressing at the Coolah Station.

Oh, that's probably the story that I -- --.

LS: Yes, I think that would be the one. Because they used to sort of contract to do the wool pressing at Coolah. Well, Coolah, of course, in those days, was a big shearing shed. And those times, of course, it was no bale hooks, they all had to be stitched. And I think they held the record for many, many years, and it was all hand-pressing, and they pressed fifty-six bales of wool in one days. Because the shearers and that used to have a run before breakfast and then break for breakfast and then into it again. But they used to have to go back of a night-time, but they – I believe – pressed fifty-six bales of wool.

Just the two of them?

LS: The two of them in the day.

With one of those man-killing presses?

LS: Yes, hand presses. And then they had to sew the bales.

That would have been time-consuming as well.

LS: Oh yes, yes, very much so. Yes.

Did they travel round to any other sheds, or was it just Coolah?

LS: No, no, they just did Coolah, as far as I know.

And you carted pebbles at one stage?

LS: Yes, I carted pebbles with Harry Holland. Bruce Holland was saying about the pebble carting yesterday, and I said, 'Well, I can go back a good bit further than you can,' in that we used to go down to Blackfellas Caves. And of course you couldn't get through there with a truck in those times and I used to take the trailer, old four-wheeled trailer, with two horses in it and we'd go down to Cape Douglas and cart the pebbles back to Passy's Corner and then Harry would load them onto the truck and that sort of thing. But I was looking the other day, when I was down at Carpenters Rocks, that we used to cut through – no roads, there was only a track – and we used to cut down, go down over the river in what was called Neil Houston's – and the old building, I think, is still there, the old Houstons' house, and Ungers have got it all

now – and we used to go through that gate and then go wander across the paddock and come out at the Jackways’ and cart the pebbles. A swine of a job, too, I tell you.

They’d have been heavy, wouldn’t they?

LS: Oh, heavy. Yes, we used to have to drag the bags of pebbles up the cliff and then load them on and then bring them back, and they’d be well over a hundredweight and that sort of thing, and trying to drag them up the sandhills – – –. It was all right if they’d had it already done, but they didn’t always have it done and I didn’t blame them!

BP: Wasn’t there a crane or a wooden apparatus there on the cliff, to pull or wind them up?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, afterwards there was, yes. Yes, definitely, that’s right, Bev. Yes, there was. That made things easier altogether. But that was in later times.

BP: What years would you have done the carting?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, that would have been straight after the War. See, I went milk carting with Harry soon after I got home, and then I worked on the Council for eighteen months.

What did you do there, just general work?

LS: Truck driving.

Truck driving, oh, right.

LS: Yes. In your father’s time. They bought a new truck, Dora Taylor was driving one and they bought a new one and I had the job of driving the new Ford truck. And I was on that for about eighteen months. Fred Elliott –

BP: Was overseer.

INTERVIEWEE: – he was overseer. Jack Taylor-Dora used to say, ‘You want to watch him,’ he said, because old Fred had a –

BP: Glass eye.

INTERVIEWEE: – glass eye. He said, ‘If he’s got his glassie looking at you the wrong way,’ he said, ‘look out,’ he said, ‘he’s in a bad mood.’ (laughter) I was on the Council for quite some time – the opportunity came up and I was invited to put

my name down to take on the foreman's job, the overseer's job. Alan Milstead said, 'I'll give you all the assistance I can,' and it was as good as cut-and-dried, but I thought, 'No, I'll go milking the cows.' So I went milking the cows, like a silly mug. But no, it was quite an experience some of those things, you know, the different ones you worked with and some that you could rely on, some you didn't care whether they worked or didn't. I was talking to one of the Lattin relations the other day and was saying about Old Nick, because Old Nick, he wouldn't work an Iron Lung unless you made him! (laughter) Anyhow, we got too far ahead with the carting and we all had to go out on the road, but they wanted one left in the quarry. Nick said, 'I'll stay. I'll stop quarrying.' Came in at night and I said, 'By hang, Nick, you didn't do much today!' 'No,' he said, 'but I'll get just as much pay as you will.' (laughter) He was a wake-up.

About when did you build your house in Allendale?

LS: Ninteteen fifty-eight, Robert, 1958. Built it. Wally Smith delivered the stone, I cut a lot of it up into slabs, then Bert Kuhl came down and brought his machine down and we chopped it up into ashlar with him on the sawbench. I was working on the Council then and I used to slab the stone of a night-time with a torch, torch sitting up and follow the line down, after I'd come home from there.

With a hand-saw?

LS: With a hand-saw, oh, yes. With a stone saw you cut it off. And Wally Smith delivered the stone there, and it was a real renovation when Bert arrived with the stone-saw with a bench, and you put the slabs on and cut them into ashlar.

Would have been easier.

LS: Oh! Much. Much. Yes. Built the house at Allendale and was horrified – we got everything finished up and no carpets, no floor coverings, no nothing, and Jean said, 'We want to pay for the place before we have anything like that.' And we had an overdraft at the bank, anyhow, of twelve hundred pounds. And I thought, 'We'll *never* pay for it, we'll never be able to pay for it.' And there it was.

And was Keith [Laslett] involved in the building of your house?

LS: Keith was just starting with Kuhls at that stage, yes.

Right. So he did an apprenticeship with Kuhls, did he?

LS: Yes, he did his apprenticeship with Kuhls, yes. He was with Bert Kuhl, he started with Bert Kuhl.

We haven't mentioned about cars. Because you would have been born before the car period –

LS: Yes.

– so when did Lasletts get their first car?

LS: What year I wouldn't know, Robert, because it was a Model T Ford. It was one that didn't have headlights, of course, as headlights – – –.

END OF RECORDING.