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OH 870/9

Full transcript

of an interview with

ENID LUCY ROBERTSON

11 November 2008

by

Susan Mann, assisted by Meg Butler

for

**FRIENDS OF THE BOTANIC GARDENS OF
ADELAIDE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

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ENID LUCY ROBERTSON

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ENID LUCY ROBERTSON

SUMMARY OF ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW SOHC/OH870/9

Enid Robertson was interviewed by Susan Mann on 11th November 2008 at Enid's home *Allambee* in Blackwood, opposite the Wittunga Botanic Garden.

Enid is a member of the Ashby family who lived at Wittunga from 1902 and donated the site to the SA Government in 1965. It was opened to the public as a Botanic Garden ten years later.

Enid describes the very productive farming and gardening activities of several generations, through a vivid description of the property as she remembers it during her childhood. The uses of various areas and specific trees and plants are recalled along with the disappointment of seeing some aspects removed or changed after Wittunga came under the management of the Adelaide Botanic Gardens.

Edwin Ashby's broad interests as a naturalist are described. Keith Ashby further developed an experimental approach to growing Australian plants including "*the Ashby method*" of watering, which Enid describes. She comments on the influence of her "*road less travelled*" as a Quaker.

Enid tells of the various positions that she held as a systematic botanist and her recollections of visiting John McConnell Black, author of *The Flora of South Australia*, for help to identify plants.

Alison Ashby, Enid's aunt and well known botanical artist, had owned part of the Wittunga farm and she donated her section, Watiparinga, to the National Trust of SA. Enid's Management Plan for the property won a Heritage Award in 1986. She describes the revegetation and conservation work that she has undertaken at Watiparinga – with help from family and friends - and points out the issues that have arisen as the horticulture of indigenous plants becomes better understood.

The second disk contains Enid's experiences as a member of the Board of the Adelaide Botanic Gardens, at that time only the second woman to have occupied this role. She joined the Board in 1974 and recalls initial discussions regarding the establishment of the Friends of the Botanic Gardens.

Listeners are referred to other recordings in the State Library's J D Somerville Oral History Collection made by Enid in the past, regarding the devastating fire of 1935 that swept through the Wittunga property.

This interview concludes with Enid's endorsement of the Friends of the Botanic Gardens and her views about the Tropical Conservatory in the Adelaide Garden and the Arid Zone Botanic Garden (at Pt Augusta).

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Interview with Enid Robertson conducted by Susan Mann and assisted by Meg Butler at Enid's home in Blackwood opposite the Wittunga Botanic Garden, Blackwood, South Australia, on 11th November 2008 for The Friends of the Botanic Gardens Oral History Project of the State Library of South Australia.

DISK 1 OF 2

This is an interview with Enid Robertson of Wittunga Garden knowledge and the interview is taking place at Enid's home in Blackwood opposite the Wittunga Garden on the 11th November 2008 and the interviewer is Susan Mann.

Thank you Enid very much for your time. If I could just ask you a couple of demographic questions, so first of all can you just give me your full name?

My name is Enid Lucy Robertson.

And when were you born Enid?

A very long time ago on the 20th November 1925.

And whereabouts were you born?

I was born in a hospital in Unley but I grew up in the house we are now in Allambee, Sherbourne Road, Blackwood.

And what was your father's name?

My father's name was Arthur Keith Ashby always known as Keith.

And when was he born?

He was born in October in 1896.

And what did he do?

He was first of all an orchardist, he did his apprenticeship in Tasmania with relatives. All the Ashby's were, and most of us still are, Quakers, belonging to the Religious Society of Friends, and he was apprenticed to a family of Friends in Tasmania. He learnt all about how to look after an orchard and what to do. When he came back to South Australia that is what he started doing, planting an orchard in part of Wittunga land. Some of Wittunga land was cleared when it was bought by my Grandfather Edwin Ashby, some of it was still fully clothed in natural vegetation.

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And what about your mother, what was her name?

Edith Mary Walker before she was married and she came from Gippsland in Victoria.

And you lived here all of your life you said, all of your growing up life?

I lived here all of my growing up life in Allambee until both grandparents had died then as a family my father and my mother and us four children moved across to Wittunga house. Very sadly my mother died within a very short time of that which left my father totally devastated so that this house, he could hardly bear to come over here at all and it fell into great disrepair. When my husband died, when we were both forty in 1966, my father gave me the chance to come back and live in this house. I looked at it, the children looked at it and I said to my father, *"I couldn't afford to do it up"* and he said, *"Didn't I say I would do it up for you"* (laughter), which he did, which was absolutely wonderful. He did the house up and then I moved back here with the children and I have been here ever since so I have been here a long time.

Obviously, from all of my reading in preparation for this interview you were a very close family or family was very important as a value?

I think so yes. When I was growing up I thought I was very, very lucky to have grandparents and an aunt living just across the road. I made up my mind to learn one new thing [every week] from my grandfather but unfortunately I didn't make that decision until I was in my early teens [I should have made that decision many years earlier]. A naturalist and an enthusiast and the enthusiasm is what stood out to me, you can see it in his eyes always.

So your grandfather was Edwin Ashby?

Yes Edwin Ashby.

And he had come from England?

Yes.

And Esther was your grandmother, Esther was his wife?

Yes correct.

And is it correct that she was also a great organiser, she came from a farming family?

Yes, yes she was a great organiser and she actually, in a lot of ways, ran the farm. She was bedridden for many, many years and she actually ran the farm, did all the books from her bed (laugh) quite amazing. In those days if you had a heart attack and you had to rest in bed, frequently you didn't get out of bed again. She was still in bed when the house was burnt down in 1934 and that was an exciting time.

Yes I would like to come back to the fire but perhaps if we could just move on and I will definitely come back to that. Edwin and Esther were the people that really started the Wittunga Garden weren't they? I mean he was the enthusiast and the collector but it was Esther who was the manager? Would that be how you would describe it?

When they built the house and moved up to Blackwood in 1902 they had three children and so Esther was busy looking after the children, the fourth child had died before they left North Adelaide where they had lived previously. It was Edwin who started the garden and he started what was an English Gentleman's garden really.

Well I guess that was what was known at the time do you think?

Yes.

But he quickly gained a great interest in native plants, is that correct?

Yes he was a naturalist it wasn't only plants he was interested in, he was interested in birds, vitally interested in birds, vitally interested in insects, particularly butterflies, and he had collections of bird skins, collections of butterflies some of which I have still got myself now. But plants, yes, wherever he went he collected plants and brought them home again.

Obviously he passed this on to particularly his son, your father and to Alison?

And to Aunty Alison, yes, both of them. The elder of the two boys Ivan who unfortunately was born a diabetic, he did medicine at the university and died as a brilliant medico. He died in his early twenties and some of the things in the garden are related to his illness and part of the way the house is, is related to Ivan's illness too.

So Keith and Alison they were the ones that actually carried on the legacy at Wittunga?

Yes I would think you would say that Keith principally because once Alison was free, no longer had to look after her bedridden mother it is quite amazing how she blossomed forth. She had always been painting flowers since she was a teenager but she then got her own motorcar and she motored to Western Australia and to Mount Kosciusko every year collecting wild flowers and painting them and had specific places where she sat with the light exactly right for her, painting her flowers. She also collected some plants too.

When we spoke with you last you were very kind in sharing with Meg and I a visualised walk through Wittunga and I am wondering whether or not you could share some of that for the benefit of the tape?

As I walk from my home, which is Allambee I walk across Sherbourne Road through what we always called the Little Gate. The Little Gate has a different sound now but for many years it had the same creaky noise as I remembered from my childhood. I walk across into Wittunga Garden, immediately I can see the Pecan Nut tree, a very, very tall tree it is on my left hand side as I walk down a path. That was a very important tree, somewhere, which I can't find at the moment, I have got the receipt for that tree or the account for the tree stamped with a receipt. It was bought from another Quaker family from the Robson's from Hectorville who sold nut and fruit trees and the Pecan Nut tree is still there and I consider it a very, very important historic tree.

As I walk down the pathway, which is next to the first Maluka Bed, maluka means the boss, I have got on my right hand side an Irish Strawberry tree. Why is that important to me? That's very important, *Arbutus unedo*, because that was a tree that grew from seed that my grandfather Edwin Ashby collected when he was in America. When he went trying to find some solution to help his elder son Ivan with his diabetes. Insulin wasn't available in Australia and Edwin went to America hoping that he could get something which would cure Ivan, unfortunately he wasn't successful but he brought back the seed for this Irish Strawberry tree so that is an historical planting.

A little bit further down, again on the right hand side of that same little pathway, there is a stump, now a stump may not seem very important but it is the stump of a huge *Prunus pisardi* tree and why was that important? Every year the women in my family used to have a party there, I couldn't understand why they had a party. They belonged to an organization called the Women's Non Party yet every year they had a party under this particular tree (laugh). The Women's Non Party had many names over the years but

they had to have a party every year.

Immediately after I get off that little pathway, on my left, I feel very sad, that's where the Vine Trellis used to be, with approaching thirty kinds of named table grapes. The Vine Trellis is no more – what happened to the Vine Trellis? The Vine Trellis was bulldozed down. *"It can't have been my fault"*, said Noel Lothian who was the Director at the time, *"I was overseas when that happened"*. None the less the poor gardeners who had to do it were heartbroken, they thought it was a very important part of the garden (pause) that's gone.

Just immediately to the west of where the Vine Trellis was, was what we called the Home Orchard when I was growing up and it had lots of different fruit trees, many, many different fruit trees, beautiful fruit trees. What remains of that now - just immediately as we arrive here, there is an old Persimmon tree, one of two Persimmon trees which were in that orchard and next to it what we called a Cherry Plum. The Cherry Plum always ripened just at Christmas time so that mother had to make cherry plum jam at Christmas time (laugh).

But up on the right hand side one can see Wittunga house, which isn't as I remember it in my childhood, but things change. There is still one huge old cypress tree and I remember the time when my father came home one evening, and said, *"Gorillas have made a nest in the Pine tree"*, and we children said *"What"*? But it wasn't the gorillas it was us children, we had made a tree house up in the, it wasn't a Pine tree, it was an old cypress tree (laughter). As I go through Wittunga all these marvellous things come back. I can see gazania borders, why are there gazania borders? Now that happened much, much more recently. It happened that at one stage of my life I was living in a Housing Trust place and I had gazania plants everywhere and I said to my father *"Would you like some of them"*? With gazanias you can roll them up like a carpet, so I rolled up a whole lot of gazania plants and gave them to my father. He said *"They make wonderful borders to the garden"* so he unrolled them and they made borders.

Below this part of the garden down towards what is now called the 'Lake', what we always called the dam, there were terraced gardens and they used to have alternately, there would be Australian plants in one, South African plants in another alternately down there. Things have changed a lot and sadly the reason they have changed is because a horrible fungus, root-rot fungus *Phytophthora cinnamomi* often called just PC is unfortunately in part of Wittunga Garden and it kills lots of plants. It's very sad and I suspect it is still there because instead of there being the sort of plants that should be there, those plants have been replaced by plants which are not affected by that fungus.

As we get further down I can see up on my right hand side, I can see the Apple Store. Why do they have to call it a barn, we never called it a barn, we called it the Apple Store, it's where you stored the apples, why does it have to change its name to a barn? We packed the fruit there, we all helped, we all packed the fruit which was sent overseas, exported. When you look at the lake, people say what a beautiful lake. I look at the lake and I remember that when it was a dam it didn't have an island, it was a peninsula joined to that, now it's an island in the middle of the lake. I am wondering will that island ever fall over (laugh) in the high wind because all sorts of things have grown up on that island. It just used to have pampas grass on the end of the peninsula now there are large ash trees, other trees and the island is getting eroded away more and more and more with the waves from the water in high winds. I suspect one of these days that island will collapse.

When we were at this stage I am remembering this used to be the Pear Orchard here, this used to be the Pound Paddock where any sheep, cattle, horses, strayed animals used to be put in there. That's where the toilets are now in the Botanic Gardens.

As we move around, yes, there is a car park that used to be the Bull Paddock. The Bull Paddock has gone, of course, long ago. It was the building of the toilets and the making of the car park which held up the opening of the Botanic Gardens, I found that quite fascinating.

So we go beyond the Bull Paddock and we get into what we called the Hill Paddocks, the Hill Paddocks were where the sheep grazed. There had been some fruit trees there early on but those trees didn't survive well, but there was always this row of fig trees a Smyrna fig, an unusual fig. Figs have male and female trees and they have to be pollinated. The female flower has to be pollinated by pollen from the male flower. We had none of the male trees at Wittunga, we had to go to the Government Experimental Orchard, which is now called the Blackwood Forest, for some strange reason. We had to go the Government Experimental Orchard to get figs off their Smyrna trees which were male and carry these figs home and put them in little wire netting baskets on our fig trees, so that the little wasps came out taking the pollen and pollinated the figs. We had these most delicious Smyrna figs to eat.

As we go round I can see the railway line which used to go through the middle of the Wittunga property. I can see the Cow Paddock, that is where we are now in the Cow Paddock and it was when my father got to that stage of planting plants in the Cow Paddock that Noel Lothian said "*Keith you have gone far enough, no more, the rest of*

the plantings are going to be mine" (laughter). So Keith had to stop at that stage and as it turned out it wasn't a very long time before my father died that that was said.

As we come a little bit further we would get to the Wild Part, (pause) with great sadness there is no Wild Part, the Wild Part was a wild garden. We could find orchids there, we could find sundews, we could find all the marvellous little understorey plants that one should have, however a very strange change has happened just now 2007 – 2008. In Wittunga house the Urban Forest Biodiversity Group now use Wittunga house as their offices and do you know what they are doing? The boss, who is Ross Oke, said to me the other day *"Do you know they really should have locally indigenous native plants in Wittunga Garden and we are starting to plant them back with the help of Blackwood Primary school children"*, and I said *"Good on you Ross"* (laughter).

That's a lovely story so that must give you great satisfaction to see that happening then?

Yes and I didn't mention all of the trees which I think are historic trees in the garden but there are many which I think are important

You were telling me last time about the old Persimmon tree?

Yes the big old Persimmon tree, which is in the Home Orchard and it's a different sort of Persimmon from the Persimmon tree, which is up at the top end, a much smaller tree the one at the top. Yes, we used to swing on the branches of the Persimmon tree and it was very interesting. The Persimmon's fruit used to disappear from the top of the tree first in the olden days because the birds used to eat them but since it's been the Botanic Gardens they disappear from the bottom because people pick them. However they only have to try and eat them and they are very disappointed because you should wait until they are totally ripe. They are not the sort of Persimmons that you can eat when they are not properly squashy.

So it was 1965 when the family handed the garden over to the Government wasn't it?

Yes.

But it was another ten years before the garden actually opened?

Yes it was ten years. Yes 1965 and it was a family decision, we knew that none of us could afford to look after the garden. My father was being billed at building block rates

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for that part, and you just couldn't afford to do that, so we thought it would be far better to give it to the State. Sir John Cleland he was one that very much encouraged my father to do that - J B Cleland was a marvellous man.

So while you have had some disappointments in seeing some of the plantings and the structures removed are you as a family still happy with that decision?

Oh very definitely, very definitely yes, yes.

That's good. Thank you Enid. What I would like to do now is just move a little bit to you, focus a little bit more on you and if it is ok I would like to talk about your role as a Systematic Botanist because I have found that to be extremely interesting discussion?

When I went to the University I did a very broad range of subjects because I believe you should do things that you are interested in, not do things because you think you will get a job when you are finished. It was a very broad range of subjects and systematic botany was one of my great interests. I know a lot has changed since I graduated at the end of 1946 because I was offered two half-time jobs when I graduated. One was lecturing in the medical school in microscopic anatomy, human histology, and the other was working as a systematic botanist, keeper of the arboretum, and weeds adviser to the Minister of Agriculture at the Waite Institute, when there was nobody else who managed or taught people how to manage weeds. So I took two half-time jobs in two different places and I don't recommend that to anybody. The job at the Waite Institute was available because Con Eardley who had been a lecturer of mine, she had gone overseas on [sabbatical] leave and so her job at the Waite needed to have somebody else do it. The job at the Waite turned into a full time job, which was great and so I worked there from the beginning of 1947 to 1953. I got married very soon after I had started that job. My husband, who had done a science degree, he did his medical degree while I was supporting him (laugh) working at the Waite Institute. That was great fun (laughter). One of the things about a Systematic Botanist is they demand accuracy, which is one of the reasons why I always pick up when people will insist on saying Wittunga started in 1901, it did not, it started in 1902. Aunt Alison Ashby was born at North Adelaide in February 1901 and moved to Wittunga with the family in 1902 (laugh).

So that is a good marker?

And there will be many, many brochures for the Botanic Gardens, which have the date wrong, the date was even wrong on the plaque unveiled at the opening by Sir Mark Oliphant (laughter). I told them on the same day that the date was wrong and it took ten years before that date was corrected and they made a new plaque, of course, and put it in a different place just to satisfy a Systematic Botanist I suppose. (laughter)

So what about me and Systematic Botany?

The way I understand it from our last discussion was that a Systematic Botanist means the identifying and naming of plants, have I got that correct?

Identifying plants, yes, that is right.

So what did your role involve, paint me a picture?

At the Waite Institute anybody who had any plant that they didn't know what it was expected me to know what it was. At that time there was a Herbarium at the Waite Institute but there was no State Herbarium, so there was no Herbarium at the Botanic Gardens in Adelaide that I could go to, and no botanists there that I could go to. However there was the marvellous man J M Black, John McConnell Black who had written 'The Flora of South Australia' and he was at that time, when I was working at the Waite, he was revising it and working on the third part of the revision. The Flora was in four parts and he was working on the third part. So if I didn't know what a plant was and I couldn't work it out my only recourse was to ring up J M Black who was over ninety but a marvellous old man. I used to ring him up and say, "*Please sir can I come and bring you a plant and you could perhaps help me identify it*"? So I would go to his home at Brougham Place, North Adelaide and this dear gentleman, a real gentleman, would look at the plant that I had brought him and say, "*Hmm, I think it might be, but just a minute, I will get a specimen down and see*", and always he had to climb up a little ladder to get the box down from the top of his collection of boxes. I would say "*Please Sir can I get it for you*"? He would say "*No, no, no, no*", he would bring it down and he would open up the box and take out the herbarium sheets at the right place and say "*Yes, just as I thought*" he always said (laughter). I would thank him and go away again and I did that many times and that was an amazing experience.

At the Waite as the Systematic Botanist I was also in charge of the Arboretum, which is a huge collection of trees from all around the world, which have been kept and recorded their stages of growth and everything, and a lot of them are still going. I was also

Weeds Adviser to the Minister of Agriculture, so if anybody wanted any advice as to how to get rid of a weed I should know how to do it. This was before the days of many of the chemicals which are used now, actually they used to use layers of salt to kill a lot of the weeds which one would never do now, altering the salinity of the soil, none the less that is what I had to do.

Now as a Systematic Botanist I continue to identify plants, I continue to collect plants. I collect a lot of plants, I collect them from all over the place and these days you have to have a permit to collect plants in many places so I have to renew my permit every year. Many of the plants that I collect, these days are from Watiparinga, and Watiparinga is another part of what was Wittunga farm when I was growing up. As was the case with many farms in families they weren't all owned just by one person and my Aunt Alison Ashby, the botanical artist, she owned a portion of Wittunga Farm. Eventually she decided to give this portion to the National Trust of South Australia. In giving it she said she hoped it would be "*reclothed in Australian trees and shrubs for the enjoyment of the public*". Now Watiparinga when she gave it, was all totally cleared grassland. Why had it been cleared? Because it had Grey Box – *Eucalyptus microcarpa* on it which was easy to clear.

The history of Watiparinga is well known because two railway lines have passed, and one still passes, underneath it. The original single track railway line went through that land and the old viaducts were there and it's because of that, that we have got photos of the early days, and so we have got these as reference points now. We can see how much tree cover there was and so on. Everybody had to take photos of trains, didn't they? It was very important to take photos of trains coming out of tunnels so we have got those as benchmarks and train people love taking these photos and they keep them. We now use them as photo points to see how things are developing.

So she, [Alison Ashby], gave this land, which had been cleared, farmed, grazed, super phosphate spread on it, it had actually been cleared for well nigh one hundred years and she wanted it reclothed in Australian trees and shrubs, and she was the first one to start planting things there. People love planting, don't they, it's gorgeous planting things? She would raise seedlings and she would plant them and many people helped her and that's how things grew up on Watiparinga. I have this interesting situation where, when I was growing up, what is now Watiparinga was part of the farm land where we had cattle and I used to go and help my father grub out native plants so that there would be more grass for the stock to eat. Now I feel horrified about it because I am helping to restore that grassy woodland.

In 1986, no 1984, I wrote the first Management Plan for the Watiparinga Reserve and it just was a Management Plan for how to manage a Reserve in 1984. But to my amazement because there were no other Management Plans for little Reserves, in 1986 I was given this marvellous Heritage Award for writing that book – The Watiparinga Management Plan. I was flown to Sydney to receive it from the Governor General, all expenses paid, and I could take anybody I liked from anywhere in Australia to go with me. I took my daughter who lives in Canberra and I hadn't seen for some while, so the two of us went to Sydney for a lovely weekend. I have been working on restoring Watiparinga ever since and that is a long story. I am now currently working on the third edition of 'The Restoration of Grassy Woodland on Watiparinga'. The second edition came out in 1999 and this will be the third edition, which unfortunately won't come out quite in 2008 but it certainly will in 2009.

The changes that I have seen there are marvellous and as a Systematic Botanist of course, I love finding new plants and do I find new plants? I certainly do, there are still new species of plants arriving that haven't been seen in that vicinity for just so long. I believe that once the situation is right, the ground is right, all those nasty things that when you were farming were put into the soil, have been leached out, then if the right seed blows in it takes root. The number of plants of conservation significance that are growing there is fantastic and now Grey Box – *Eucalyptus microcarpa* grassy woodland, just that eco system, is a very, very important eco system. *Eucalyptus microcarpa* which was known under a different name for a long time, they weren't as difficult to cut down as huge River Red Gums and some of the other gum trees, so that they were cleared early on.

So Enid, if I could just interrupt you there. So Alison when she gave this to the National Trust she replanted with the help of friends and colleagues, I presume and so what you are saying as a result of that it started to regenerate itself naturally, is that what you are saying?

It did. Unfortunately the thinking at that time was different to what it is now. The thinking then was that any Australian plant would do, so with her already great knowledge of Australian plants she planted plant species from all different parts of Australia that she believed would be suitable for that area. Yes, many of them were, many of them have now become environmental weeds and we now are finding that these plants have to be got rid of. An example of this would be the *Acacia iteaphylla* - Flinders Ranges Wattle, which is now endangered in the Flinders Ranges, is an

environmental weed in the Southern Lofty's and every single plant of that that comes up on Watiparinga we have to get rid of now. There are approaching thirty of the Australian plants that Alison Ashby started with, or that the Society for Growing Australian Plants, now The Australian Plant Society SA, they also did this. They planted a lot of what I say are the wrong plants and many of those have also become environmental weeds so they are being removed.

One of the things was, and this started right at the time with Alison Ashby's plantings, once she no longer had the stock in there eating the grass, it grows up and the weedy grasses, like wild oats, grow up to two metres high and they become a fire hazard. Then the whole neighbourhood cries out, "*you have to do something about it*", and that has been a real problem. One of the first things that was done for that fire hazard was to spray soil sterilant and that then kills everything and starts erosion. It is quite fascinating how one solution leads to another problem and this tends to go on and on. I am sure somebody will say later on Enid Robertson did this, that or the other, and now we believe it's the wrong thing (laughter).

This particular year 2008 we have had an unusual season and what's happening over at Watiparinga? The wild oats are more than two metres high again principally where people start walking. Dogs are allowed in Watiparinga, they walk their dogs, what does a dog do as soon as it gets out of the car? It goes and does a poo doesn't it or it makes a piddle, one or the other or both. This alters the phosphate and nitrogen content of the soil, what grows best? Not Australian native plants, not Australian native grasses but those introduced wild oats and the other things and it has just been so obvious this year, very, very interesting indeed. The chap who is actually trying to get rid of all those wild oats this year he is finding that the wild oats are so tall that the mower that he has hired pushes them over but doesn't properly cut them, he has to go over it two or three times to get rid of all the oats. This of course costs more money and have we got money to pay for that sort of thing? No.

And I understand also that this plan became a blue print for other Reserves, is that correct?

Yes, well it was very interesting because when I first got involved with Watiparinga it was in 1973 when a Management Committee was formed and I was working at the Adelaide University. My eldest daughter Helen was a medical student so I started off with Helen helping me getting rid of weeds. There were many, many weeds there and what we did was, Helen and I experimented the way to do things and pulling them up

seemed the most efficient way. Some of them we had to grub out, some of them we had to spray some poison on them, poison was the last resort. What we found we were doing was we were working from the best areas and gradually making the good better as we went and we found that we were developing the same principals as what was called the Bradley Method in the eastern states which I didn't know anything about at that time. The Bradley Method never used any poison at all, we did but minimally.

We employed more and more university students, and the way we chose our students was that they were friends of Helen's and being a very gregarious girl she had lots of friends. They weren't necessarily science students, they were medical students, they were science students, they were art students, they were musicians and I do remember one boy saying *"I can't do this work any longer my hands are getting sore and I can't play the piano"* (laughter). However we paid the students at the same rate as if they were working in Woolworths, Foodlands or something, re-shelving. They thought it was marvellous to work outside in the fresh air with their friends doing something that they thought was really worthwhile. The University students that had the most time were always the brightest students because they were best organised. They would come up with new ideas. The best way of doing things will be this, and whatever they came up with, we tried, if it worked we incorporated it and if it didn't we dropped it and so on. We did have to mow a lot of grass in those days, what did we find? We found that there were stones all over the place and they would break the blades of the mowers so we had to pick up the stones. The students had all sorts of bright ideas how to pick up the stones but the best way was the Chinese way – you pick up one stone and you carry it (laughter). They used to sing as they carried the stones and made these big piles of stones and rocks so that they could mow the grass. We have had some marvellous people working there, Rhodes Scholars and everything else. One of them who had a tenured position at Cambridge, when he came back, very recently, only a few years ago to do a job on Waite Campus. He had been invited to come back for a few years. He gave me a big bear hug when he saw me at his first lecture here and he said *"The best thing I ever did in my under graduate days was to work on Watiparinga and put theory into practice"*.

That is wonderful.

Yes, and another one who became a Rhodes Scholar that a lot of people know in Australia now, is Hugh Possingham who just was an enthusiast and enthusiasm is desperately important in doing things and Hugh was always an enthusiast. When he

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started at the University he knew exactly what he was going to do at the University, but after the first week, the chief lecturer in the subject that he was going to major in was so boring. He was doing applied mathematics as a fill in subject and the lecturer in applied mathematics was Ren Potts who was an enthusiast so what did Hugh do, he changed and of course, like his mentor, Ren Potts, he became a Rhodes Scholar too, didn't he.

What do I have said to me these days? *"I don't suppose you know Hugh Possingham, he is so wonderful, he is so enthusiastic"* (laughter). So enthusiasm goes a long way.

I must have jumped from whatever subject we were talking about (laughter).

No that is wonderful Enid. What we might do is finish this tape and change the tape and move onto the next one is that ok?

Yes

END OF DISK 1: DISK 2

This is tape 2 of the interview with Enid Robertson on the 11th November 2008 and the interviewer is Susan Mann. Thank you Enid. So we finished up with all of your experience about Watiparinga, so what I would like to do now if it is okay with you is to move to your experience as a Board member on the Botanic Gardens of Adelaide, because I understand that you were only the second female Board member, is that correct?

Yes that is correct.

So can you paint me a picture of what was involved in being on the Board?

Can I just first tell you that the first female on the Botanic Gardens Board was Edith May Osborn known as May and she was only aged 29 and the photographs of May aged 29 sitting amongst all these plump, bearded, huge moustached gentlemen is quite gorgeous. She was a professional botanist and she thought that she was going to be dealing with that and she was very, very disappointed that she had to deal with things which were nothing to do with botany whatsoever.

When I became the second female on the Board I was a little bit older, I don't think I was probably as wise as she was but I was 49 years old. I strongly suspect it was because my family had given Wittunga to the Gardens although the Wittunga Garden wasn't open; I joined the board in 1974. Noel Lothian was the Director and he had been the Director for a long while, since 1948, so yes Noel was Director for a very long time. There were always two members of Parliament on the Board which I found a bit strange, and one of them, perhaps fortunately I can't remember his name now, but he could never remember the names of people and he would always give me a dig in the

ribs and say "*Who's that person*" (laughter) fortunately I usually knew them. The Chairman of the Board was very, very efficient, the Secretary who took all the notes was very, very efficient. Our meetings always started in the morning and then we had lunch and then we went on after lunch. Now one of the things that I remember very, very distinctly was that the only thing that we had to drink was wine at lunchtime and never having been a drinker I asked if I could have something other than wine. They gave me fizzy lemonade, which I thought was not really very nice. I asked for some nice fruit juices, apple juice, orange juice, pineapple juice, and it was very interesting, once the juices were there a lot of the men decided that they would have juice also, perhaps so that their thinking would remain clear for the rest of the afternoon (laughter). There is one of the things I remember very, very distinctly. I remember when The Friends of Botanic Gardens was first suggested while I was on the Board.

Is that right?

Noel Lothian was horrified, fancy having a Friends group, they would interfere with what he was doing. It's fascinating that he become Patron I think, didn't he, of The Friends Group? (laughter)

Yes, the President. (laughter)

But no he was not in favour of it at all.

So how did the Board pass it then, how did they finally win his favour?

I don't know because The Friends started in 1977, was I still on the Board in those days?

Yes, you were on the Board from 1974 to 1980 weren't you?

Yes, well I don't remember that. I know that I got very, very cross with all sorts of things because after my father had died all different ideas were suggested to what should be done with Wittunga and now in my passageway [in my home], I have got the plan that was suggested. The whole of the Garden was going to be turned inside out and upside down and nothing, nothing would remain of the original structure of the Garden (pause), no historic garden *at all*, nothing remained. I have got notes that I made at that time that I was so very, very cross about it, whether I said all those things which are in my notes I am not sure but I wrote them down.

They certainly didn't ask any member of the Ashby family whether they would like the Garden changed that way. I am not aware that any members of the Board queried it, that it shouldn't go that way. It was just as if it was a bare piece of ground and they landscaped it the way a landscape gardener would have it. I wrote down "*Why imprint the stamp of the 1970's on the whole garden? Is that better than the concept of the Ashby family from 1902 to 1965?*"

That's a very good question.

(laughter) "*Are you aware that any of them [the historic garden features] have any significance, because as Edwin Ashby was developing the garden he developed different methods of cultivating different plants?*"

The Maluka Beds, and 'Maluka' was the name of the boss in *We of The Never Never*, which is how it came to have that name. The Maluka Beds were raised beds as in areas in Western Australia where there was very good drainage. The soil at Wittunga wasn't soil with such good drainage so he raised the Maluka Beds. He put overhead sprinklers that was his idea at one stage, all these overhead sprinklers which you could turn this way or that way, and we have got all those photographs showing those.

Then he had another idea, and that was what we then called The Never Never and this was because my grandmother said, "*That he was never, never going to stop building more garden*" but a quite, quite different idea. That was, that you made a saucer, a hole, a large saucer perhaps a little less than a metre across, or thereabouts, you filled it up with water and you let it gradually soak in to the plant that was planted there. So it was more like natural rainfall giving it a good water every so often and that was called the Ashby Method. For a long time that was a very important thing, I think, to have retained in the garden, to show this change of the thinking of how to grow Australian plants.

Beyond The Never Never was the Wild Part, and, what was the Wild Part? It was wild garden, it was perfectly natural vegetation with the Grey Box trees, *Eucalyptus microcarpa*, the South Australian Blue Gums, *Eucalyptus leucoxylon* still growing there naturally. The Native Cherry, which is a semi-parasitic *Exocarpus* still growing there. All the understorey plants, native lilies popping up everywhere and flowering in the Spring. Many different kinds of native orchids still flowering there, all the native grasses which are so vitally important as the food plants for certain insects, and so on. There is just this web of life, the whole chain, what did the Botanic Gardens do with the Wild Part? Just got rid of it, why would you want it, why *would* you want it? So yes

Enid was very critical about that, so what else did I do when I was on the Board of the Botanic Gardens?

So Enid, just before you move on from that particular example, how did you change the Board's mind so you were very critical but you must have been successful in changing the Board's mind in certain areas?

I can't specifically remember changing the Board's mind, so I am not going to dwell on that, perhaps I did have some influence on some of them.

I can remember some peculiar things, perhaps I mustn't mention....no, he must be dead by now, but Dean Berry was a member of the Board and a very well known man in the Anglican Church apart from other things. There was an Elvis Presley memorial in the Botanic Gardens and the Board was asked to allocate some money to have various things done. I remember Dean saying, "*Elvis Presley, I have never heard of him, Elvis Presley, no, I don't know who he is, we won't allocate any money to that at all*" (pause). Yes I used to think some members of the Board were a bit funny (laugh).

One sad thing that happened was when Wittunga was handed over, we were sitting on the front veranda, if that is the right word, of Wittunga house, the tape recorders were running. You can see them in all the photographs and my father is speaking and you can see Noel Lothian standing above him as much as to say, "*Keith you have got to say the right things*" as everything was being recorded. All my family, and actually it was the only time and the last time ever – 1965 – that all of our family with our spouses were together, because my husband died very soon after that. There is all of us there and the tapes are recording everything that is being said. Those tapes got lost, what on earth happened to them? They have never, ever been found. The last time, and it is a very long time ago now, that I asked Noel what happened to them, he said, "*Well I suppose I just made notes from them and gave my report to the Board and then discarded them*". We are still wondering if they might turn up. Ed McAlister is going through the remains of Noel Lothian's possessions and still has a lot more boxes to go through, but whether they will ever surface, we don't know.

Oh I hope they do, that is a great loss.

Yes, that was a great pity. So I think you need to ask me questions about the Board rather than me trying to remember things about it.

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Sure. So your role was simply as a Board Member?

Yes, a Board Member.

And as a Board Member how did you see your responsibility to the Botanic Gardens, across per se so not just Wittunga but Mount Lofty and the Adelaide Garden, how did you see your responsibility as a Board Member?

I think always, I would always speak what I believed was the truth – always. There is a saying which I think perhaps is the way I feel about a lot of things ‘two roads diverged in a wood and I took the one less travelled by and that has made all the difference’! So that regardless of what other people think, I’m likely to have an outspoken view on something which is different, and I have been notorious for that on all sorts of Boards and Statutory Bodies, and so on, that I have been on.

I have been on so many fascinating things and I know up in the National Parks, one of the Head Rangers, used to say that Enid Robertson was the only one who always sent in a written reply when we were asked to write a report on something or other. He said, “*I may not like what she says but she always has got an opinion*” (laugh) and he always used to say, “*And she never swears but the way she says ‘stupid’ she might as well be swearing*”.

I like that (laugh). Enid, I guess the other thing too that would give you a lot of confidence to be able to speak your mind is your scientific background, because you are coming from factual knowledge about certain issues as well?

Yes, but it is also the Quaker background because men and women are all equal in The Religious Society of Friends or Quakers, there is never any difference. I think that has made a huge difference and I have found, like I said, I wanted something pleasant to drink, like fruit juice, I found that all sorts of things, because I speak what I believe to be the truth and I stick by it all sorts of younger people with less confidence have said, “*Can I stand near you because I don’t want to do that either*”?

I work with lots and lots of different Friends of Parks groups and Friends of Reserves and so on and a way to get people to do things that they perhaps wouldn’t want to do is to suggest. I know there is a rare plant growing over there, it has a gorgeous smell, I know and I have smelt it so I know it is there, and I suggest to somebody who might be getting bored with just pulling up bone seed or young olives. I say, “*I think it would be a good idea if you work over there*” and they find this rare plant and they say, “*Enid, look what I found, what’s this, isn’t it gorgeous*” and I will say, “*Yes that is a Dianella,*

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that's that very rare one, isn't it gorgeous". Then they are ready to go on and do more and more work. I have been doing this for years and getting away with it (laugh).

It sounds wonderful to me. So you then, because of that very strong background and obvious confidence in your self, you weren't particularly challenged by anything on the Board?

I certainly can be challenged, I certainly can be challenged and it can take a lot of self-control...

To maintain that calm exterior?

Yes, not only on Botanic Gardens Board but I can remember some other occasions and other places where it is required.

If you would like to know one of them, because I lived for some years, when my children were very small, in Yatala Labour Prison farmland. I spent a lot of time visiting inside Yatala and my husband worked with alcoholics and drug addicts. I was in Yatala one time and the alcoholic group (AA Group) in Yatala were called the Leopards. They said, "*We can change our spots*". They chose a particular chap, called Yatala Bob, I never knew him by any other name, and his mood could change so rapidly that no one warder would stay close to him without somebody else being present. The Leopard group decided to give me a present and who was to hand it to me? Yatala Bob, of course, and what was the present? Two earrings and a necklace and Bob put his arms around my neck to do up the necklace and I have never had to have so much self-control in my life as on that occasion. I survived (laugh).

Very pleased to hear it. So what then do you think would be your greatest advantage of being on the Board, what do you think you have achieved by being on the Board of the Botanic Gardens?

Probably just by putting an alternate point of view on different occasions but a specific incident I just can't name one.

OK, just to sort of wind up that sort of experience with the Gardens, per se. So the Friends were formed while you were on the Board; did you ever become a Friend, did you become a Friend of the Botanic Gardens?

Oh yes.

At its inception did you?

Just exactly when I don't know and apparently they have lost the

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The original list, yes it's a real pity.

I wonder what happened to that? I wonder if it is in the same place as the tape? (laugh).

It would be wonderful to think it was.

But I certainly did join early on because I believed in all the things that they were doing and Collin Robjohns, (pause) yes.

You remember him?

I remember him and his sister was Ann Deland whom I knew very, very, very well. I have never taken the active part in the Friends of the Botanic Gardens that I have in all these different Friends of different Parks that I belong to, dozens and dozens of them almost, because with all the different Friends of Parks I was going to about ten different working bees every month, yes lots of them.

Correct me if I haven't got this right. I understood that you actually worked as a volunteer in the State Herbarium for a while, is that correct once it moved to the Botanic Gardens?

Well yes, yes but not called a volunteer because I am a Systematic Botanist. I can go into the Herbarium and go into the vaults to check things out, whereas most people are not allowed to do that. I collect specimens, I have actually got a pile of them now and as soon as I am able to, I will be going in there and a lot of the specimens, I think, I have identified them correctly, and they are ready to be incorporated into the Herbarium immediately. Those that I am totally sure about I will just hand over with their list and their numbers. There is a special book you put all this in, so they'll get handed over. Of the remainder, some of them I know who is the specialist in that field and I will say, *"I have identified this as, so and so, can you please confirm it"* and usually they will confirm it and so, that just goes in. Then there will be some that I am quite lost about. Oh yes, I can get it to the family, I can get it to the genus but getting it to the species is something I can't do, and those I will leave with the relevant specialist to work out. So I can do a lot of those sorts of things and that is what I go in to do.

They give me a corner that I can work in and I just systematically go through all the things I have got to do and then if there are any species that I haven't been able to deal with and I can't leave with the right person I may take them home again and do some more work before I can get in [to the Herbarium] again. So I am not one of the general volunteers in the Herbarium, they do quite different things. They are told to sort out things, stick labels on here, do all sorts of things, quite, quite different.

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I see thank you. I think we might wind the tapes up but the one thing we didn't talk a lot about was the fire in 1935?

1934, March 9th 1934, a day I shall never forget.

Yes, yes it must have been a shocking thing for your family but indeed the whole Blackwood community; it was a terrible, terrible day. Because you have spoken about that very clearly in the other oral history that you have done that is located in the Library¹, if you are okay with that I would be quite happy to leave.

Right.

Because what I would like finish up with is to just talk a little bit about You joined the Friends of the Botanic Gardens; do you consider that now in 2008 that it is still a worthwhile institution for a Botanic Gardens to have?

Oh very, very, very definitely. I think the Friends have done a vast amount of work, vast amount of work.

So if you were sort of setting up or talking to a younger person such as myself (laugh) in this instance, what do you think is the most important role of Friends Groups for Botanic Gardens?

Well, they certainly raise a lot of money and that has enabled the Gardens to get a lot of things they might have otherwise not have got. I think leading guided walks is very important and as you know I sneak in onto some of those walks on some occasions and enjoy them very much too, yes I think that is very important.

Thank you. So what do you then think are the role of Botanic Gardens in cities and countries?

I think they have an educational role in educating people about plants from other countries. I like to think that they also educate people about plants in their own country, though unfortunately that hasn't so much been done. One of the things that I was outspoken about when I was on the Board was having a Tropical Conservatory, which I thought was ridiculous. We will allocate \$1000 to the Arid Zone Botanic Gardens and we will spend millions on plants which don't belong in this part of the world and will have to continue to spend millions on it. So yes, I was very, very outspoken about that. I think the Botanic Gardens should look after what is in their own country. That is vitally important.

¹ Further oral histories of Enid Robertson are located in the JD Somerville Oral History Collection, State Library of South Australia

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That is really absolutely fascinating to me, Enid. I am really very appreciative of your time this morning. Is there anything else that you would like to finish up with?

I can't immediately think of anything at the moment.

Well I am extremely appreciative of what you have given to Meg and I this morning; it has been wonderful. I haven't dwelled on some aspects because as I said it is very well documented in other oral histories that you have given but I feel that we have captured some aspects that I haven't read before so I am extremely pleased about that and I do thank you so much for your generosity.

Thank you very much indeed.

END OF INTERVIEW