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Oral History –
An Interview with
Owen Bennett



An Interview with Owen Bennett

Interviewee: Owen Bennett

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TAPE 1 SIDE A

Q: Mr Bennett, your parents Wilfred and Margaret Bennett moved to Ryde as a young married couple did they?

No they were married after they came to Ryde. Mum lived in Melville Street and dad lived over in Belmore Street for quite number of years and they married and they built their place in Adelaide Street.

Q: So they were courting ---

--- I should imagine, I wasn't here (laughs). In fact my grandmother lived on the corner of Dale and Adelaide Street in an old fibro home there.

Q: What kind of a house did they have in Adelaide Street?

A weatherboard place, 3 bedrooms, kitchen dining room with a huge old fuel stove, a big walk-in pantry. I remember the old bath with legs and dad got a chip heater and we had that for years and we had the old ice blocks. The ice man used to come round every day with ice and then we got the old Holstrum Kerosene 'frig which went for years and years.

Q: Was it considered a comfortable house for the time?

Oh yes, yes. Actually it was built all hardwood but inside was lined with all baltic lining boards and varnished.

Q: Who was the builder?

Oh I'd have to get dad's book, which I promised to get for you.

Q: Did he have it built?

Oh yes he had it built.



Q: He had it built, so before they were married they were having this house built?

Oh I should imagine, yeah.

Q: That suggests a reasonable comfortable level of finance then.

Well dad worked for the city council then as a ganger, but it was a house with 11 foot ceilings and the ceilings all had lining boards too, there was no plaster or anything like that, just lining boards, and - yes it was a comfortable home, yeah, my word.

Q: He had no trouble paying for it then?

That I wouldn't know, I think he might have struggled a bit in those days.

Q: He wasn't put off during the [mic. drop out] it was - how did he manage to pay for it? It wasn't any trouble in the depression?

I forget what the loan was I think it was fifteen hundred pound or something to build a big home. I suppose he struggled, I was pretty young in those days. We always had food, perhaps I went to school a bit without any shoes. But we made our own fun didn't have many toys, but no, we always had food.

Q: He wasn't put off during the depression?

No, no, got a reduction in salary though during the depression. After I don't know how long, or when he stopped that, he went in as a cleaning custodian at the city council and he was there till he retired. When he was 65. Before he went into the ganger as a young fella he was out in the scrub as a rouseabout on the stations and that for quite a number of years. His father actually had a shoe store in Ultimo, in Harris Street Ultimo. That's when they first kicked off. Then they moved out to Ryde. I can remember this place as just all paddocks, there were only a few houses around here, you walked through paddocks to get to school. But I don't know, it's something that you grow up with you don't realise the change in things really. I mean if you go away for a number of years and come back you find there's a big difference you know? But as you grow with it you don't notice it so much.

Q: Well let's look at that house and its garden. Your father obviously grew vegetables?

Yeah we had chooks and that was usual and liquid manure, manure from the chooks. We had a fair big patch of garden, vegetables, you name it pumpkins everything what happened, I used to - this billycart he made I used to go up to school every morning before school and pick up all the food scraps in the billy cart and that was buried in the garden. He used to bury a trench and fill that over and bury a trench, well that'd last, and he had another garden over here,



well that was done before and all that rotted into the garden so there was never any fertiliser needed to be used.

Q: How did you feel about that job?

Oh well in those days you did what you were told. (Laughs) Not like nowadays. Oh know that was - and my sister had jobs and my brother had jobs and my job was to pick up these food scraps - you know all the skins and that from the school and mow the lawns with a hand mower. For that I used to get threepence a week. Which wasn't bad going in those days.

On Saturdays I got threepence a week and then on Saturdays I was given sixpence and that was to go to the Royal Theatre at West Ryde which is now the hotel on the corner of Anthony Road and West Road and we'd get in for threepence and buy a cream caramel toffee for threepence, and that was Saturday afternoon's sport like, you know.

Q: What was your favourite movie down there?

Oh boy, that's going back. Speed Gordon was one, and that was a serial I used to go for the serials (laughs) and gee that's a thought, that's going back a long way. Laurel and Hardy I think Laurel and Hardy was one of the best ones everyone would go and see, I know everyone would cram to get into one of those. Buster Keaton - I remember Buster Keaton, and oh, who was the cowboy in those days?

Q: Hopalong Cassidy?

No I think it was before that? It wasn't Gene Autrey, I can't think of his name.

Q: Were the kids well behaved?

Oh no, no, we used to get lollies and marbles and everything and roll them down the aisle and they'd have a chap come in and try and catch em you know, there'd be jaffas everywhere flying round the place. (Laughs) Oh no they never behaved themselves. A lot of the kids were put out for playing up, if you got caught. Oh no - in those days I think - well we had more fun in those days I think.

Q: There were a lot of kids round there by the sounds of it.

Oh yes we had our little gangs.

Q: What did your gang get up to then?

Pinchin' fruit (laughs)



Q: Whose fruit?

Oh old Pop Rollo had an orchard, mandarins and oranges and peaches in Grand Avenue just off Constitution Road and we used to - we'd never break any trees or anything, and we wouldn't pinch large amounts of fruit, just pinch enough you know to have a good feed. We used to have our bike bag and we'd fill the fruit up in the bike bag and I'd be gone by the time they'd half finished, I was a good picker. And then we used to go out to ---

Q: --- what did they do about it?

They used to try and catch us (laughs). Oh no - I'm trying to think, who was it? Not Sergeant Dobbie, Clay - 'Sunny' Clay - I'll get the other sergeant's name - we were caught now and then and brought home and you'd get a good kick in the backside.

Q: The policeman would bring you home?

Oh yeah, knock on the door and say, 'Bill', that was dad's name, 'Bill, here he is, he's been pinching fruit', so not only did you get a good kick in the backside you also got a pretty good hiding from your father too.

Q: Why didn't that deter you?

Well I think that pinched fruit tastes much better than when you buy it (laughs). We used to go to North Ryde out to - I can't think of their names now - out in Culloden Road and we used to pinch peaches. Go out on the pushbike (laughs) and the father and son used to watch us. They knew dad - I forget their names - and yeah, they knew dad and we used to go in, and unbeknownst to us they were watching us and we'd take the peaches, we didn't break any trees or anything, come home - your bag would be all sopping wet with peach stains because they were all ripe peaches. But the 40 thousand thieves used to go out and break the trees and pinch everything you know.

Q: That was vandalism though wasn't it?

Oh no they just pinched anything, you know. And Sam that's the son I met him again out in Arcadia he had a big peach orchard out there - Vella, Sam Vella, and he said ---

Q: --- Billa?

Vella, V E L L A. And he (laughs) no not Sam it was Jack. At any rate we happened to be out, Dorothy and me, we were out driving - after the war, not so long after about twenty years ago. We saw this peach orchard, and we thought, 'oh we'll go and get some peaches' and we were talking away and Jack said, 'Do you live in Adelaide Street, somewhere there?' I said, 'Yeah' and he said, 'My father knew your father', I said, 'Where do you live?' he said



near the peach orchard in Culloden Road. 'Now just a minute' he said, 'You and your brother and your mates used to come out and pinch the peaches' but he said, 'We didn't mind that because you used to pinch the ripe ones which we couldn't send to market, so we just let you pinch em'. He said, 'But when the 40 thousand thieves come out' he said, 'they used to break the trees and everything, so we used to get the salt petre.' They used to pour the salt petre into the shot gun and boy if you copped that it really stung believe me. I never copped it but a mate of mine did. But - you know - they were fun days - now they pinch cars. Which is a lot different you know?

Q: Did you know some of the forty thousand?

Oh yeah there was Squizzy Taylor.

Q: They were local boys?

Oh yeah, they were all from Top Ryde. Actually what used to happen, the trams used to come up, in fact I think the clock is still up there where the bus terminus is up at Top Ryde near where Blaxland Road and Lane Cove Road is, I think the clock is still there. Well the trams used to come round the back way where the council chambers are and that was their terminus. Well the Balmain Tigers, they used to call them, used to come up in the trams and with copious amounts of blue metal and all this and as they come round the corner the forty thousand thieves would be there, they'd just fight each other with stones and everything. A couple of times there they put sleepers across the line, put the tram off the line and all that sort of thing. But they used to fight like mad, as it come up Blaxland Road towards the old Post Office, it would slow down up the hill, the 40 thousand thieves would get into the tram and they'd be fighting in the tram you know? I reckon they were the good old days (laughs).

Q: What did the police do?

Well the police used to come round, Sonny Clay and a few of the constables used to come round - and on the corner of Blaxland Road and Devlin Street - well actually that was later - but they'd move them on. 'Move on, move on'. Well, they'd move on, when the police had passed by they'd come back again, you know, they'd never move on. And Sonny Clay decided to - he'd fix em up, he'd get rid of em. So he used to go out and get stuck into em. He was shifted. Oh yeah, because as I say some of the 40 thousand thieves were Councillors' sons. Oh yeah, yeah, no worries on that. But oh no, they were terrors. They were terrors, no doubt about that. You never went to Gus Bowe's on your own, you always went with two or three of your mates, otherwise you'd come out and you'd get a belting, no worries on that.

Q: What did Gus Bowe do about it?

Nothing (Laughs) we used to say, "You go to Gus Bowe's office you'll be able to get a new suit". (Laughs) That was right too. He was a funny old fella. (Laughs)



Q: I heard he was very good to people.

Yeah he was, had a heart of gold, honestly he did, but ah, he built the - it was the Rialto Theatre in the Spanish style you know? And, oh no, it was a good theatre, we used to call it the 'fleahouse' it was full of fleas. The Royal wasn't far past it, you know, down there in West Ryde. And then you had the Eastwood Palladium, wasn't it? And that was where the Eastwood centre is. You know, just round there.

Q: And you frequented all of them?

Oh yes, wherever there was a good film you'd go.

Q: This was later on though, when you were a sort of teenager?

Oh before that, mum and dad would take us up, we always walked. We used to walk from Top Ryde home, never catch the tram that used to come down, we'd never catch the tram, we'd walk.

Q: Tell me about the some of the local businesses. You mentioned that there were a number of dairies round here.

Oh yes well there was Kelly's dairy was in between Deakin and Hibble Street off Adelaide Street, that was there for - oh right up till after the war. Old man Kelly - the boys were all pretty - not very tall but pretty big you know, all pretty big young fellows - there was Conchy, and Charlie and Joe and Maggie was the sister and West Ryde then had one hotel and it was Birnie's Hotel which was actually where Rydale Road comes up off the Victoria Road, well there was a railway crossin' there, well the old hotel used to be there and old man Kelly used to go down and have a few beers and tie his sulky and horse out up the front and many's the time you'd put Joe Kelly in the sulky, slap the horse on the rump and he'd go, take him home, and kick the front gate - they had a big six foot fence right their dairy, but he used to kick the front gate till someone came out to let him in. And that went on for years, you know.

Q: The whole family worked the dairy?

Oh yeah all the family - Joe, Charlie, Conch, Maggie and I can't think of their mother's name. But Joe was the father - and then there was Trotter's Dairy.

Q: How many cows would each of these dairies have?

Oh I suppose fifty.

Q: How did they all survive in what was a developed area?

Oh well for instance Boyle's Dairy was up at Hughes Avenue and Williams took over the dairy, pre-war because you're going back pre-war. I used to



work at Trotter's Dairy which was out at - in between the golf links and the houses that faced Wharf Road more or less up on to Victoria Road down.

Q: That's where the Melrose Park development is now?

That's right. I used to walk across every morning at 4 o'clock. I'd get out of bed, get myself two big pieces of white bread, spread it thick with butter and margarine and walk out there and start up and I used to walk to Eastwood, up to Rutledge Street and with a five gallon can and a pint measure, every morning to serve some of the customers up there and then the cart would pick me up, up there and I'd go round the run.

Q: That was quite a load to carry. How old were you?

Oh about 13 or 14.

Q: Did you do that through High School, did you?

No I went to Tech. Yes before I went to school yes. I used to get 5/6d a week for that, which was good money in those days.

Q: How many days a week did you do that?

Six. Saturday - Sunday we didn't do a round. Kitty his horse, she was a beautiful horse, a mare, and when she got to a bend she'd go flat out to see how fast she could broadside the cart. But after that I went and worked for Williams who took over from Boyle up in Hughes Avenue. His run was all over Concord. So we used to go across the punt and do all the run over in Concord.

Q: What time did that finish?

About half past seven

Q: Which punt are we talking about?

The Ryde punt, down near the railway. Oh yes we used to - it was pitch black in winter and that, rain, hail, sunshine you went. But a funny thing too, like, about the dairies you had the old cart, you had the milk cart and also a work cart. Now the work cart would take - it was about 2 foot high and 8 inches round, I don't know how many gallons of milk it took. And they used to take those round and drop them at certain spots. Now with Trotter one of the spots was near Maxim Street on Victoria Road. So you'd do your run over there and you'd come back, the cart would stop on the main road and you'd pull the tank out of the back of the milk wagon, tip the milk in (laughs) on the side of the road, put it back in the cart and away you'd go then (laughs). You can't imagine that happening now. But in those days there was no pasteurised milk or anything like that, you know. You got thick beautiful creamy milk. And then we had Lindsay's dairy was down opposite Andrew's Street in Wharf Road and behind him was Vine's Horse Riding School. Then you had Jenner dairy



Q: ---tell me about the horse riding school.

Well Vine's had a horse riding school which (laughs) - they only went a certain distance. (Laughs) Adelaide Street then, that was all paddocks, all round Spurway Street was paddocks, so you'd go Kissing Point Road, you could ride a horse along there, there was no ---

Q: --- so Ermington was even more rural?

Oh yeah, yeah all round Melrose and that was all paddocks. Opposite where Silverwater Road comes in, all there, there was all a road through there and they were all cobblestones, no houses just roads, no gutters or anything like that just roads and (laughs) they had a - up on the top of the hill from Spurway Street, right up on the top of the hill towards the river there was a haunted house. Belonged to the militia pre-war and some of them would get up into the haunted house - now down opposite - I don't know the name of the street there - the back road through to - there's Spurway Street, there is a big chamber over the top, concrete blockhouse like over the top of the big water main that went into the Ryde pumping station and that had a big man hole in it, so that if you lift the cover up, some of the boys would get (laughs) up into the haunted house, some of them would get down this thing and shoot at each other with 303 rifles (laughs). This is not a joke, honestly. Nicky Spurway, Alfred Shoebridge Georgie Jake, myself - several others.

Q: They had ammunition?

Well we used to go shooting every Saturday at Chatswood or out at Liverpool and we used to sneak the ammunition out you see, the 303 bullets. When you think of it, it's a (laughs)

Q: And no one ever got hurt?

No one ever got hurt. We couldn't see each other we just fired at the - there were no houses only this old haunted house up there, the old haunted house. How people never got hurt I'll never know, you know, because those bullets travel for miles. I mean if we missed the house they'd go for miles and could've hit someone on the side of the road you know. It was just one of those things that happened (laughs). Well you know, there were quite a number of dairies.

Q: Were the dairies competing? Do you remember any arguments?

No, no. Trotter - went, he went from part of Buena Avenue, Burmah Road we called it and Chatham Road, up the top end of Chatham Road and then over the other side of the line in between Rydal Road and down back to the Fraziers Bridge which is the little bridge over the railway there and that was his area and part of Ermington. Williams' and Doyles they more or less were over in Concord. Jenner used to do all round here. No Jenner did all the way over the other side of Shaftsbury Road and part of Bellevue Avenue and Kelly



did all around - and Jenner used to go as far as Meadowbank too. So they had their areas to work in.

Q: It's hard to believe they could all make a living.

Oh yes they did.

Q: Because it's not as though it was densely settled.

No - well there was a fair few people here but there was still a lot of paddocks, you know. I mean - across the street here - there was four houses, that's all that was here, all the rest was just Chinese gardens. Down the bottom of Darwin Street that was all a red mud swamp.

Q: Did you know any of the Chinese well?

Oh yes, well there was Florrie, she was an Australian, she lived with Charlie, the house was in ---

Q: He was Chinese?

Charlie was Chinese, yes. The house was here in Darwin Street number 4, the second house back in Darwin Street and where their garage is at the moment was a well and that was filled in. Now as a kid I can never remember that well being empty, it was always full of beautiful fresh water.

Q: That was sufficient for him to water for an area that was how big?

No, no, no. That had a - I've got a two inch water main coming across the street here, I'm the only one in the street that's got a two inch water main because that was where the Chinese one came in, a two inch water main, and I had my bill where their meter came on. No they had all the water but they still had - I think they used that when they were doing their seeds and that and also for house use.

Q: How big was the block that he had?

Well from where these houses facing Adelaide Street start, right down to - I can't think of the Chinaman who had the little block down at the bottom.

Q: So it was a few acres, was it?

Oh yeah it was right from the top of Darwin Street here right down to the bottom of Darwin Street, right through to Huxley Street and right back up. Spurways lived on the corner of Adelaide Street and Huxley Street and the Chinese gardens backed right on to them.

Q: What was Charlie? What was he growing?

Oh everything, spinach, tomatoes, lettuce, cabbage, cauliflowers, you name it.



Q: Selling it at the markets?

Selling it at the markets, yep

Q: And how did he get it to the markets?

Oh I think there was - he had an old Chev truck - this fellow used to come in and pick it up, and take it in, in an old Chev truck.

Q: So they didn't take it themselves?

No, no, no, no. Charlie never had any transport. Then we had an old Chinaman, Choy, he used to come round once a week with vegetables.

Q: His own, stuff he grew himself?

I think Choy came from the back of Ermington. But every year he'd give you a stone, every family he'd dealt with he give them a big stone jar of ginger from China. It was beautiful ginger too. But old Choy come round, I remember - started before the war he came round.

Oh no, the Chinese gardens were here right up to - they were still going during the war. They fizzled out after the war like, you know they just - I don't know what happened, I suppose they got old and that, and then they started sub-dividing.

Down the back yard you can still see the beds in the backyard where the Chinese - and there's a drop down the bottom of my place about three feet, 'cause the old Chinaman used to make these level beds, so where that bank sloped down he wanted to make it level so he dug it down and the stuff was all tied up with flax, and they grew all their own flax. You'd see them stripping off the flax to tie up the spinach and everything like that. But we used to come in and (laughs) and pinch tomatoes and cucumbers and that (laughs) and up on the corner of Adelaide and Darwin Street there was no houses there, well the first 4 houses weren't there. So that was a paddock and they had a fence running along the back and old Charlie - they used to have copious amounts of rice, and they had an old tin bath that they used to throw all their old rice in. I don't know why, it was just there, and it was always full of rice. And of course - and there were all common lemon trees along this fence, and we used to play cricket there, and (laughs) and we used to start a fight, and we'd get this rice and throw it everywhere you know, and old Charlie used to get cranky with us, and it was Bluey Sails, Tommy Hawthorn, Jimmy Hawthorn, Gordon Smith, Ken, myself - Ken my brother, myself, Jimmy Ward and the Bible brothers, we were all playing cricket and Bluey, Jimmy Olsen's cousin, hit the ball and it shot over and hit the roof of Charlie's see? And old Charlie came flying out with a great hunk of stick and gave Bluey a beltin' and that was it we never played cricket there after that.



Q: What was he doing with the rice in the bath?

I don't know they just used to, I suppose cook the rice, what was over they'd throw out. There was a chap by the name of Honeysett, Joyce (?) still lives down in the family home in between Hibble Street and [tape break]

TAPE 1 SIDE B

and he'd get his cow and put it in everyone's yard of a night. And of course dad had a beautiful vegetable garden and we woke up one morning and the cow's in the yard, made a mess of the vegetables and that. In those days there was an earth closet - a toilet, so I got some, a couple of lettuce he chewed and the cow went in to get them so I closed the door and milked her dry (laughs). Oh old Honeysett came up, he went to town on it, dryin' his cow, 'what were they doin?', but everyone - Davis lived in the first place here and he had a Jersey in the back, so again I did the same thing, put it in the toilet and milked her dry.

Q: Didn't he stop after that?

No, no, no. Everyone found his cow in their yard, used to open the gate, put the cow in and so he knew where it was for the night you know.

Q: How self sufficient was your family, with their vegetable garden?

We never bought any vegetables, that was, everything. Mum grew flowers and that, but vegetables, potatoes, pumpkins. We used to grown African cucumber, that's the one with all the points on it. We grew everything, you name it, radishes.

Q: What about the surplus?

I used to sell that. I used to go down with a little billycart of a Saturday morning. All round here, I'd get sixpence for a lettuce, cucumbers were threepence, all depended on the size. Beetroot, they were sixpence a bunch and then by the time I'd finished - over the years, lettuce went up to twenty cents and you know the price went up on em.

Q: Were you allowed to keep the money?

Oh no that went into the coffers. I got sixpence for that to go to the pictures, for doing that. It was a beautiful barrow he made. It was made out of Kauri pine with ball-bearing wheels on it. In those days ball-bearing wheels were pretty hard as well.



Q: Where did he get these skills, your father?

Oh I don't know he - actually he used to - we never went to a bootmaker, he used to mend all our shoes and stitch them. He wasn't a carpenter but he made cupboards and different things like that and the old hanging safe, you know they used to have hessian down the side, that was the meat safe with the water on top and it used to just keep cool. I remember when we had the ice chest we also had a plaster of paris top and bottom round dish thing and that used to be a butter cooler, used to soak that in water, put your butter in it and it would keep cool for 24 hours.

As I say the depression was there and I used to walk from here over to Melville Street where Bragg's bakery is on the corner to get our bread of an afternoon. I'd go straight over there from school. We used to get the cottage loaf with the twist on top and that was gone by the time I got home. We used to have billycart races down Adelaide Street with Gordon Smith, did Gordon tell you about that billycart racer he used to have? He had the fastest billycart in Adelaide Street.

Q: Who made the bilycarts?

Kids. We used to find an old sheet of galvanised iron, put a couple of pieces of timber in each end, fold it up and knock the nails together and then wait for a hot day and get the bitumen off the road to fill all the holes in it, and we used to go over to what we used to call 'The Island' over at Homebush where the Olympic's goin' up, we used to go across there just chasing pigs.

Q: How did you get across?

In the canoes.

Q: Gosh - nobody ever had an accident on the river?

Yep I've been in the river a few times.

Q: You could all swim well?

We had to. But I mean these things, once they sank, that was it. We'd have to row up the island and someone would have to come over and get us (laughs). And a fellow down Adelaide Street had a beautiful big canoe and if anyone got into trouble over there he used to let us take the big canoe over and bring the fellas back. But you see a lot of pigs used to get away from the abattoirs and they used to be in the swamp in the mangroves. It was all mangroves over there, and we used to go in there and try and catch em, you know? But that was just making fun you know.



Q: You didn't catch any I assume?

Oh yeah, we caught a few, we didn't do anything with em, we let em go again. Well if bought a pig home I'd be shot (laughs).

Where all the factories are opposite the wharf at Meadowbank, that was all timber yards. McKenzie's and Ellis's, people used to make big rulers and that. The logs used to be floated up the river and right along to Hunter's bridge were these great oregon logs right out in the river and we used to run along these, you weren't supposed to - the watchman he - oh I've been down in between em. (Laughs) Hard to get out believe me. On the railway bridge there are wind braces and they're about four inches wide and they go from one pier to the other, criss-cross like that, across the bridge, we used to slide out on those and hole a three inch or four inch nail up on the railway line and when the train was going across - and make spear heads. Put wire on those sticks and we'd go over and catch fish under these logs.

Q: What, the friction sharpened them did it?

Well the wheels going over, see it would flatten them out like a spear head. No, that's not good enough, no. And I look at that now up there I look at that little tiny bit of steel we used to slide out on - oh boy!

Q: Was there a competitive atmosphere that you know, you had to do these daring things?

Oh yeah I think, some. Well I suppose your mates and that you know, you go with your mates and that and that's what we'd do, we'd go across the (laughs) - the steam trains used to have a waste - the drivers and that used to wipe their oily hands and that on it and throw it out. Well on the eastern side of the railway bridge is water and on the western side is the gas and they've got a walkway we used to go across. We used to go over the other side of Rhodes of a night and light a piece of this waste and go like mad across the walkway on the gas pipe and there little holes in it (laughs) we never ever got caught, but a couple of fellas got caught by this detective.

Q: Did it start up any sort of a blaze?

Yeah, little tiny flames.

Q: Just little ones?

Yeah yeah, little holes in it. And they all got caught but I went home and the coppers had come in and say, 'Bill is Owen at home?' 'Yeah' 'Has he been out tonight?' 'No'. 'Are you sure?' 'No'. 'Well we caught this bloke down at so and so and so and so and he gave his name as Owen Bennett (laughs). We used to do that all the time. Gordon would go and give my name I'd give Mick Spurways name or something like that (laughs). I think the police knew something at the time who we were, no worries. But I mean oh, if you did



something wrong you'd get a good kick in the backside and that was it. But now you can't do it.

Q: What did your father think?

He was a J.P. (laughs)

Q: Some parents today might think that you know, this is uncontrollable behaviour (laughs).

Oh no, we were controlled. If you were told to be home at 11 o'clock at night or 10 o'clock you were home. No worries in the world.

Q: But your father never gave you lectures about behaviour?

No, but a few belts (laughs) for doing the wrong thing like. The police brought us home a couple of times, you know we'd be making a bit of noise somewhere and they'd put you in the old Chev car they had and take you home. That was it, you were punished by your father, by your family, a good kick you got. And, no you respected the police. Now they're not respected.

Q: And you respected your father too?

Oh my word.

Q: But it didn't stop any of you?

Oh well we didn't do any real bad things, you know, we pinched fruit and different things like that. (Laughs) Might let a few cows out from someone's place, now and then. (Laughs) But I mean, you know there was nothing bad about it you know.

Q: Well you told me about starting up the chooks in the morning, did you do that when you got up?

Oh I'd actually get up about five o'clock in the morning - I was only a nipper then - five or six or something and crow pretty good and I used to start our roosters off crowing and that'd go right round the district, you could hear em for miles around all around the whole area you'd hear all the roosters start up you know. Dad used to go crook, I used to get into trouble for that. Waking everyone up.

Q: What about livestock around here, there must have been some?

Oh there was a lot of horses. People had horses.

Q: Who rode at the riding school? Who were the clients?

Oh well, we used to go and hire the horses. The kids used to hire the horses and they were (laughs) they were shockin' horses, never looked after very



well. You'd only go from Andrews Street, I'd suppose you'd go as far as Kissing Pt., Road and Park Road up near Dundas way, Telopea way and the horse would turn round and come back. (Laughs) You couldn't stop em. You could stand up in the stirrups and pull their head back under their body and they still wouldn't stop you going home.

Q: That was the level of their energy? Were they undernourished?

No, no, no, no. That was just, that's as far as they went. They wouldn't go any further.

But after the war - no it was pre-war in the militia I was in the second division AASC down at Marrickville and we didn't have horses we had trucks but we had spurs and leggings and double bandoliers and all of this and I was going with a girl by the name of Marie Grimman from Arkley Street and we hired these horses out at this stage, Spurway Street then was mud coming down from up Marsden Road way, it was all red mud, and we were coming down there and Marie's horse started to get away from her, so I dug the spurs into this horse I had right in front of this house where some kids were having a party and of course when I was going up the horse was coming down, when I went down the horse was coming up, so I went in the middle of the road in me uniform, mud everywhere on my uniform, but I had to walk back, the horse just went home. He never stopped or anything he just went home down to Vine's place. Got into trouble then, for puttin' the spurs in him. (Laughs) But I mean things like that, that was just fun you know. I mean you could ride anywhere here. You could ride a horse along Victoria Road there was hardly any traffic, imagine riding a horse along there now, it would be shocking.

Q: It was a two lane road wasn't it?

Yeah that's right. Actually I think they got paid for putting bends in it because if you go along Victoria Road where you go off at Kissing Point Road you'll see a crack in the concrete, the old road, it goes right round over then it comes round like that. A real 'S' bend. And that was right a couple of those into Parramatta. You still see them in the road where they you know, cut down, and of course when they put the new road through they just went straight through without any bends in it. Oh no, we used to have some fun.

Q: Was it a smelly area then?

Nope - not really. Oh no there was no smells or anything like that. Up in Adelaide Street here on the corner of Bennett Street and Adelaide Street on the right here, that was a tea-tree scrub all through there. There was only - Blochs were on the corner and then the Smiths had the next place, there was nothing in between those. Then Sevenoaks was the next from right up the top of Adelaide Street.



Q: Now Sevenoaks had a slaughterhouse?

Yes that was up where the Church of England church is in Dickson Avenue and he also had down in Bennett Street where the flats are on the corner, that was his yard where he used to keep his bull and that. He got gored once there very badly. But he used to bring the cattle down and go to the abattoirs.

Q: Where did he bring the cattle down from?

I think he'd actually go out and buy them from different places like Castle Hill and that and Dundas and all round there, that was all rural and there was animals everywhere. Lots of stock.

Q: And he walked them did he?

He used to walk them - come in by horse - bring them in. He might leave them in his yard overnight in Bennett Street and then take them on to the abattoirs in the morning or something like that.

Q: But he did sometimes slaughter?

Oh yeah - he didn't slaughter all the time. It was just known as Sevenoaks Slaughterhouse. And where the Church of England hall is there was a big row of lovely green trees which had these hard nuts we used to call bush nuts. We used to use them in our catapults and also eat them. They were macadamia nuts and no one ever knew they were macadamia nuts. They were about 3/4 inch around, they were terrific.

Q: Where were these catapult fights on?

Oh (laughs) everywhere. I mean when the sewer was going through me brother was in the - imagine the toilets they had in the old days, they were shocking. Just where the telegraph pole is in Owen Street, Kim was in there and he opened the door to see who was coming in. Gordon Smith had straight as a . . . with a catapult, he was number one and of course Kim opened the door, bang, caught him just over the eye with a stone. But no one was ever badly hurt, you know, you'd cop a stone on your back side and get a lovely bruise and everything you know, but we used to fight each other. I was a bit younger than them so I used to be - you know - you'd keep out of the way a bit.

Q: It sounds like a very masculine world?

Well the girls - no the girls used to come and play with us and all that - cowboys and indians and all that. And down in Robbo's - Robbo owned a big block of land there and in between Federal Road and Grand Avenue that was all loam. And we used to - how we didn't get killed I don't know - we'd tunnel in maybe six or seven feet and then dig out a big chamber inside and that was our cubby. How it never caved in on us, well I'll never know.



Q: What did you dig with?

Little shovels. Mum's pick up shovel. Anything at all you know, but it was soft and sometimes we'd have a cave-in after the rain so we'd cut a few shrubs down and put branches across and then put galvanised iron over and cover it over with dirt again. That went on for years doing those things you know.

Q: Your mother must have been very tolerant was she?

Mum was very tolerant. Every Sunday night after the war we used to play tennis and all the boys would come in, there'd be about six or eight of them. Dad used to love bread and he'd mix say golden syrup or honey with the cheese and spread it over his bread and that was Billy Bennett's special. The boys would come in, dinner would be finished and all the boys would come in after tennis and they'd sit down at the table - and well it was just a fun thing you know, that was mum. They had dinner and no one brought anything. Mum would just - and this was pre-war too they used to come and do these things. And mum used to - they used to get fed and everything on Sunday night and that was it.

Q: Were you conscious that other families were having a really bad time in the depression? Can you remember any examples of it?

Yeah - well the Johnson's they lived down the bottom of Adelaide Street, they had I think about 6 kids and they were very badly off. We used to give them vegetables and things like that. Sid Moss was very good he used to give the really down and out - and there were quite a few of them - give them meat and that to keep them going.

Q: This was the butcher?

Yes the butcher. I think the business men down in West Ryde too used to do the same thing, used to help them you know. But there was quite a few. Mrs Downey lived down the road here and they had a bit of a garden and she used to take stuff down to them too, you know.

Q: How did the families react, because it was charity, and people hated charity?

Oh well I think a lot of it was a bit of a barter system. I'll help you with something and you help me like, you know, they might dig your garden or something like that for you. But I can go back years ago too when the old swaggies would come round. We could go out and leave the front door open for a week, all the windows open and no one would go into your house. And an old swaggie would come round and knock on the door and say, 'Mrs have you got any jobs for me, can I chop some wood or do something for you?' 'No'. 'Can I have some sugar and tea?'. And you'd give them a piece of bread and that and some tea and sugar and away they'd go. They'd never come into your house. You couldn't do that now.



Q: There was no theft that you knew of?

No, no, not. You could go away - I used to go down to Kelly's and pick up the dry dung and set it alight out the back and the smell of it was for the mosquitoes. You never had any fly boards or anything like that. And you'd put that out the back - whichever way the wind was blowing, you'd put it out the front or the back and you'd never get any mosquitoes in your house. But you'd sleep with your doors open at night and no one would come in.

Q: And so in the depression there wasn't any rise in crime?

No, no, I don't think - to me there was no crime. As I say the doors were open no one would come into the house. As I say the swags would come round, they were like gentlemen you know? Well we used to still pinch fruit and everything that was different (laughs).

Q: You also mentioned to me that the cattle droppings were popular as a fertiliser.

Oh yes especially you'd have the baker and the butcher and the rabbitto used to come round once a week and clothesprops used to come round once a week and they were all horse drawn and there'd be a scurry out, you'd get the shovel and the bucket and run out and pick up the droppings and that went into the garden, there was no worries on that, especially when the cattle came through there were droppings everywhere.

Q: That was Sevenoaks taking his cattle back?

Actually there was quite a few - wasn't only Sevenoaks there was - big mobs used to come through you know. I can remember Adelaide Street as a dirt road, then in Grand Avenue they started a quarry, or the council started a quarry and Adelaide Street was hand packed with sandstone. Well mum's little brush and shovel is in there somewhere (laughs) I lost that in there. But the tractors and the graders and all that, they were pulled by horses. It was all dray work, there was no vehicles it was all horse and dray to bring up the rock and everything and the fellas just hand packed the whole street. And that went on everywhere. That took quite a while doing that. But all of Adelaide Street was all brush box trees, and of course when they bitumened, they were dug out and got rid of.

Q: How many cattle could fit on the punt at a time going across to Homebush?

Oh a fair few because it was a fair sized punt. There was a lot of slipping and falling on the punt believe me, there'd be a heck of a mess when they went off but they'd just hose it off and the cars and everything would go on whatever's there, people.



Q: The cattle would have been perhaps as important, or more important, than the other vehicles?

Well see that was the main road Bowden Street and then - I think it was called, I'm not sure I think it was called Blaxland Road there, on the other side, I'm not sure and that used to go down through the railway line there and around on to Concord Road, and to get to Homebush they used to go down to Nth Strathfield and go across that way along the Parramatta Road to the abattoirs, so you can imagine what Parramatta Road was like, it was rather messy and they didn't have trucks going around washing the roads down.

Q: The abattoirs were approximately where the markets are now weren't they?

Oh no the abattoirs were where the Olympic village is. Actually the administration part is still there, that's the head office where they worked from. They had a whistle, and everyone knew what time it was by the whistle over the abattoirs, and after the war they had the sirens and every now and then the siren still goes off.

Q: Tell me about running away?

I was about 14? and I can't remember why. I don't think I had a blue, I think George Jake and myself, George lived down in Hay Street, I don't know whether we just wanted to get away from home, we were going to Queensland and I took my brother's bike. In fact we made a tandem. I used my brother's bike took the front wheel off and put it on the back of George's bike and made a tandem out of it. I sneaked out tins of sardines, baked beans and by the time we got to Berowra we didn't have any food left. We'd eaten it all and we were sitting on the side of the road. I'd taken dad's old watch, Merv Black had the hire car service over at Ryedale Road over where the mower place is and he heard about it so he got into a hire car which was an old Dodge and came up and found us at Berowra and brought us home. I said don't say anything and I'll go and sleep in the garage. When I woke up they found me and the first thing Dad said was "where's my watch?" I got a bit of a hiding for that. That was it and I got into trouble from my brother for taking his bike. Oh no, it was just something that happened.

Q: Do you remember what you felt that propelled you to do that.

I think we wanted to get away and go up to Queensland, we'd heard so much about Queensland. When we were about 12 we'd mapped out a route to go to Darwin on our bush bikes, round through Adelaide. This was I suppose a sequel to it. We couldn't go there and the roads were pretty good up to Brisbane, so we reckoned we'd go to Brisbane.



Q: Was your older brother a fairly adventurous kid.

I don't know what he got up to when I wasn't with him. I think (laughs) he used to get into a bit of trouble to. I think myself, George Jake and Alphie Dunn used to get into a bit of mischief. It wasn't bad mischief, it wasn't pinching people's goods.

Q: But the relations within the family were good, weren't they?

Oh yeah, I remember we used to go up to a shop up at the top of Adelaide Street, we used to buy Coe-ee cigarettes, he used to sell you one out of a packet. You used to be able to go in and buy a penn'orth of broken biscuits and get a big bag of broken biscuits. We used to go in and say I'll have one of those and one of those and one or the other fellas would be over the other side taking something.

Q: What was your father like? Give me a picture of him?

A very strict man really. Dad didn't have a happy life as a kid, he believed in that's it and that's it and that's how it would be done. Strict but you had to do the right thing. If you were told to be in at 10 you had to be in at 10. Half past 10 you'd be in trouble. The boys most of them had bikes and they'd ride past us yelling 'hey Baldy Bennett's battleship we had a painted battleship grey.

Q: What was painted battleship grey?

The house

Q: And what was this name Baldy?

Well he was bald like me

Q: Oh Baldy

They used to call Baldy Bennett's battleships. Another thing we used to do, those days you could get basket bombs, crackers we used to go round blowing everyone's letter boxes up. I made a letter box bombproof, had a wire bottom in it. Next door had a beautiful letter box, really good strong one. The boys put a couple of basket bombs in that and it went off like a balloon. They put one in ours and boom it didn't blow up. They came back and put a wad of paper in the bottom and ours got blown up to.

Q: Do you think it was because things were strict, that perhaps some of this was rebellion against authority?

I don't know so much, it could have been a little bit, oh no you'd go out hiking and get up to mischief with the hiking.



Q: Where did you hike?

From Berowra down to Bobbin Head, and Kur-ing-gai to Bobbin Head. Used to go up the mountains hiking

Q: Weekends or all day

Just all day. We used to go up to Berowra Waters and hire an old putt putt and Dad had some navy hammocks, we used to use that as sail, cut some scrub and make a mast and the cross trees and we'd sail down to the Hawkesbury.

End of Part 1



TAPE 2 SIDE A

Q: Were there family holidays as well?

We used to go down to Mackerel across from Palm Beach, we used to camp down there.

Q: Went across by ferry?

No we used to across with a fisherman, Noel, he used to come over in his boat and take us over. A coastal boat used to bring in the supplies for the fishermen.

Q: And you fished off Mackerel Beach, because there's quite good fishing still.

We used to make spoon weights, row out in the boat or dinghy, drop the line over with 4 or 5 hooks, just stake that on the beach put the line around your big toe and go to sleep. Wait for the flathead.

Q: What did you mainly catch?

Flathead and leather "johnnies" a few bream. Old fishermen used to smoke them in a tin hut, tin chimney, the hut had a tray and they smoked the fish, tasted beautiful.

Q: So there were fisherman camped along there? They had huts?

Yeah, they had huts, about four fisherman at Mackerel.

Q: Would they have been professional fishermen?

Professional fishermen, yeah

Q: They weren't families camped there during the Depression?

No, no the fishermen lived there, we used to go down there for years. Noel was there for as long as I can remember cause there was only one way across, the ferry or the fishermen used to go over and pick you up.

Q: How did you get out to Palm Beach?

A chap by the name of Jamieson used to take us. He used to load up and take us out and pick us up when we were coming back.



Q: You camped did you? You had tents?

We had tents. That was terrific, you never cleaned the fish, just brought them in and put them on the coals and just peeled the skin off and you had your fish. No frying fish, it was terrific.

Q: How long would you stay there?

A fortnight

Q: What about other supplies

Oh we used to take all our our supplies. Down from Mackeral is The Basin, Noel used to take us round to the shop there. You could butter, whatever you wanted there. There was kangaroos, wallabies, all built on now.

Q: No it's all National Park

Drive down

Q: No you can either go by boat or walk down

Right, right. Gee that's goin' back, I haven't been over there since pre-war.

Q: What was the popular family holiday? Once a year, twice a year?

Once a year, every Christmas we'd go down, then the war broke out, well we didn't go back after the war.

Q: I wanted to ask you about the plane crash?

Oh years ago, I think that was about 1935 or 36, they used to land on the golf links there little Push Moths, I think they called them with two wings. This day this fella was muckin' round lopping the loop and next minute he disappeared and we heard bang bang, we all flew over. Roberts' lived opposite the Adams that had the post office in Wharf Road, where Aeroplane Jelly is now. This fellow crashed into their back yard onto their line, just rolled right over. He just got out, sittin' there no worries, they just pulled the plane to pieces and took it away. No one was hurt, it just came down. That was a highlight of the week. Gee a plane crashing. The whole golf links was covered with people running over to see this accident. Grown ups, kids and they all went over to see the plane crash.

Q: That's the most exciting event you can remember.

That was one of the most exciting. I remember when I was four I got hit by a car, Sammy Fulford hit me. Took me down to Balmain Hospital.



Q: That was the nearest hospital, this was before Ryde Hospital

Yeah, yeah, that was in 1927, that was the year that Dunlop Perdriau caught on fire and I can still remember the ambulances bringing all the burnt people into- in fact my sister was only talking about it yesterday and she said "what do you mean you can still remember". I was in the ward and I was in the bed near the window, she said that's right and I can still remember that.

Q: A lot of people killed?

I don't know how many was killed but I know that there was people everywhere burnt.

Q: The working conditions were appalling weren't they?

Were they ever!

Q: I did hear form somebody that the worst places to work in the area were Dunlop Perdriau and Lysaght's Wire Factory

Would've been too.

Q: The teachers even used to say to kids do get on with your work or you'll end up?

They were known as slave houses, but down here at Meadowbank where the Tech is now, the TAFE is, that used to be the carriage works.

Q: That was the railway carriage works, yes?

Yeah and tram cars and that was there for years and years.

Q: Was that a bad place to work?

I don't know, I can only remember it as a kid. There was a factory down in Meadow Crescent, Fryers had that engineering works down where all the flats are now. So there was little factories all round the place, not like it is out at Ryde. Well actually my grandfather, where the Ryde Bridge goes through, Church Street near the bridge there's a two story house there, well he had that. That was pulled down to let the road go through.

Q: What were the important employers around here would you have said.

Well there was the carriage works, West Ryde Pumping Station



Q: Where was that?

Still there Water Board, that was steam, Wizzell had the contract to take all the ash away. Most of the paths, when you put a path down you rang Wizzell and got a load of ashes and made your concrete out of ashes.

Q: So he sold.

Oh yeah he used to sell it. That was right up till after the war he was still carting ashes out of there, still steam. Round here there was a tank works over here where the Leagues Club is, that was a tank works and they were putting the sewer through.

Q: Making what sort of tanks?

Galvanised water tanks

Q: And that would have been mainly skilled work, that would have been?

Oh yes they used to employ quite a number of people there, making the tanks, they used to go all over NSW really. West Ryde siding that was busy, never stopped with the goods going in and out. Another one was Swain's Nursery out on the corner opposite Tip Top Bakery.

Q: Out towards Ermington

No opposite Tip Top Bakery on the corner of Hughes Street. There were a couple of wrought iron works round the place.

Q: Were you conscious for instance that the people locally worked in these places or did they work further a field like your father?

No a lot of the local people worked in the local area, like the Water Board most of them were local, tank works were local, a lot worked on the railway, then the council during the depression they had the big quarry down in Grant avenue, which used to blast and get the rock out.

Q: That was one of the relief work, was it?

Yeah, yeah, yeah and they employed quite a number of people to. A lot of people worked over in the Rhodes area in the timber yards and the flour mill and at Timbrol that was a chemical works.

Q: Was that considered a terrible place to?

Yep, and also Tulloch's. Tullochs were



Q: Carriage works too, weren't they?

After the war they made carriages, pre war they made all tools, crow bars, shovels, you name it.

Q: Phillips is on the site now, I think

Yep, yeah the new big building there and that was a slave house too (Tullochs). Dozens of people worked from the West Ryde area over there, and there was another factory made all little gadgets, that was just near the punt, that was a fair sized factory. A lot of people worked at Ellis's Timber Yard and Mackenzie's had a big area there.

Q: These were closer to Meadowbank.

Yeah they used to go over on the punt, ride their bicycles, that was about all that was around here I think. The Gas Company had a big depot up at Bowden Street and that employed quite a few people. And garages, there was one or two garages, there was one at Ermington in front of the golf links, that was a Texaco, where the motel is now and had a Shell garage next to the White Furniture place. There's a florist there now.

Q: But most people would have been traveling by tram. I assume your father did to the city.

Well no, he used to go by train. I can remember the steam trains, and steam trams coming down from Top Ryde and going back to Sydney on the rail. They used to come in from Ryedale Road and just recently they're pulled down the tram shed that used to be there near the chemist. I thought it was going to be left there as a bit of history. But someone decided to burn it a bit, so they pulled it down.

Q: And most of the kids you were at school with, boys and girls at West Ryde School, what kind of ambitions did they have?

I always wanted to be a steam engine driver (laughs). They were pretty ambitious quite a few of them, my brother had his own business a craft shop at Eastwood, Gordon Smith he worked at Hoover he was one of the bosses at Hoover. A lot during the war went up through the ranks, Army, Navy and Airforce and after the war we didn't really get back together again.

Q: Were most of them staying on at school, beyond the minimum 14?

Not really, no, I got my QC and I went up to the...

Q: That was your Qualifying Certificate, high school?

No that was with the primary, I got sixth class and then I went to the tech.



Q: That was Hornsby Tech

Yep, yep

Q: But that was a full secondary programme, they were offering, the technical school

Well you had metalwork, carpentry work, I enjoyed carpentry work. I started that just pre-war and as I say I went to A E Pyke after the war.

Q: Do you think that the war in a sense gave educational opportunities which kids may not have had?

In the army and in the other forces they had classes more or less and you could do carpentry, I did welding and metal work, When I came out of the army they put me through an aptitude test, and they said you'd make a good mechanic. I said I don't think I'd like to be a mechanic. I wanted to be a carpenter.

Q: You went back to what you'd started as.

Yeah

Q: Had you worked for Pykes before the war.

No I worked for a small builder at Eastwood on trial for 6 months while I was in the militia and I was in camp and war broke out and I never came out until 1946.

Q: What made you get into the militia? Were you mates joining as well?

No George Jake and myself.

Q: George Jacobson

George Jacobson he lived in Bennett Street, we'd been to school together, fought like cats and dogs. Every second day we'd have a fight, we're still mate. We joined the 18th Battalion up at Eastwood. Harry Chiltern was the commanding officer. I was only 12 and I joined the cadets. My cousins were in it and they dobbed me in. So Harry said well look, we'll have to kick you out and take all the money we gave you. Fares were given to you in little blue tickets.

Q: This was to go up to regular training sessions.

Yeah, they were paid in tram tickets and they were tuppence. Anyway, they dobbed us in. I was shooting 303 rifles when I was 12 year old.



Q: Was that the reason you think you joined, the weapons.

It sounded a good idea, being in the army. I don't know why we joined, it could have been for excitement, you'd go to camp once a year for a fortnight.

Q: When were the training sessions held, after school hours or at the weekend?

Oh this was of a night and then you'd go out shooting of a Saturday. We used to go to Gladesville, we'd have tournaments. Harry said well look you and Jacobson are under age. I can court martial you more or less or I can transfer you. Where we be transferred. Well he said Major Bailey is in charge of Second Division AASC at Marrickville, he said I can transfer you down there. So we transferred down to there. I was supposed to be 16. I was always tall so was George. Cadets had khaki tunic with a cream colour patch. Militia had a blue tunic, slouched hat, spurs, leggings, double bandolier, breeches I think.

Q: It sounds more glamorous

Well that was when you were 18. So I became a militiaman

Q: What age were you a militiaman?

16

Q: So you stayed in the cadets until you were 16?

No I was supposed to be 16 when I joined them, and 18 to join the militia, I was only what 15, something like that. We were driving trucks, not horses, used to be horses, that's why we had the spurs, you can imagine driving trucks with spurs on. We used to go to camp once a year, we'd do once a week, 3 hours of a night down at Marrickville and you also paid in tram tickets. You never went anywhere, you just used these tram tickets, you wanted to go on a tram to Sydney, how much to Sydney, say sixpence or whatever it was a shilling, that's 6 tuppenny tickets. You could use them anywhere. I was in camp when war broke out so I stayed in camp.

Q: But you would have been under age

I was too. (Laughs)

Q: Well under age

No, only a couple of years (laughs) that went on everywhere.

Q: I don't know how you had time, if you were apprenticed, you must have been going to Tech at night.

We went to tech once a week, down at Leichhardt.



Q: Petersham was it?

No it was Balmain, no it was Balmain in Balmain Road, I went back there after the war too. The builder I was working for had a job at little Dick Street, I can't think of the firms name. Build some office in there.

Q: In the city?

Yep, this was in Chippendale. I was only 14 started work at 11 o'clock and worked till 6 o'clock in the morning. Can you imagine an apprentice doing that now. I went to Balmain to do metalwork first up. I gave that away and went with this builder.

Q: Did you have an Intermediate Certificate before that.

No only the Tech Certificate. Stanton was the builder, I was going to start Tech with him and he got this job at Chippendale and we worked for 7 months doing these offices. In those days there was no concrete floors. Amenities were shocking.

Q: The which were shocking?

Amenities

Q: Wasn't the union involved in any of this?

No the union in those days I think was non-existent in a sense.

Q: Depression had a severe effect on...

Yeah, yeah I've been in one place in Leichhardt. This is going back, they were making the bolts and nuts for the Harbour Bridge. I finished work with Stanton at 5 o'clock of an afternoon then I worked till 10 o'clock with that crowd. So I had two jobs.

Q: Why were you so keen to do two jobs?

Money, I wanted to buy a push bike (laughs)

Q: How old were you at the time?

Oh 15

Q: How did you buy your first push bike, with the milk money?

Well that helped but I never got a bike until I was about 14 and a half. Out of that 5/6 I used to pay Mum three shillings board. That was a lot of money in those days, but I got my push bike, it was a racer and I used ride with a crowd that used to race along Kissing Point Road, down Victoria Road, along Kissing



Point Road, road races, had a ute in the front and a car behind you and the cars just went round you. I used to practice of a night as well as go to tech, no go to army, every other night I could I used to ride from here round through Parramatta, back up through Concord Road and back up here, maybe twice. Training for the road races

Q: You must have been superbly fit to be able to do that.

I wouldn't say that

Q: Two jobs plus all that exercise

On this job with these big bolts, you had a machine that just put the nuts in and you pressed a button and the things came down and did themselves. It wasn't hard as long as you kept it going that was it. I didn't do it for that long, I think I did it for about three months.

Q: But you must have left school on your 14th birthday, like most kids did at the time. And the ambition was to get money was it?

Well you wanted things, you had to get the money. The builder I got 7/6 a week. That was working at night. You never got overtime, that was just a wage.

Q: You weren't thinking about the long term at all, that it might be a good idea to get a trade?

I wanted to be a carpenter and then of course the war broke out. If war hadn't have broke out, I think I would have been in a trade earlier

Q: It would've been quite possible to pick up an apprenticeship at any time?

Oh, yes the trade pre war and just after the war, you didn't go out of your area to work. I might work for Sharp the builder. You wouldn't leave your area.

Q: There was plenty of casual labour available?

You didn't stay with one builder, you'd finish one job. When I went with A E Pyke things changed, big factories were going up everywhere and go all the way out to Botany to work.

Q: You were actually apprenticed to Clive not his father?

No to A E Pyke, I was with them quite a number of years.

Q: The firm was doing well after the war.

Yeah, yeah old man Pyke was a character, he was an Englishman and if you were on the job you didn't say Good Morning Mr Pyke , you waited until he



said good morning Bennett, good morning sir. He was like that, but a fair man, one of the best fellows I've ever worked with.

Q: He treated his apprentices really well

He treated everyone well, but he was the boss. And you doffed your hat when you spoke to him otherwise you was in trouble.

Q: How did you get your apprenticeship?

I think I went out and saw them.

Q: He was well known?

He was out next to where Macquarie Centre is. He had a big workshop out there, Clive then built a place down towards where Dick Smith is. Clive went and bought himself a sheep station. The firm closed up more or less after that.

Q: You must have done your training full time after the war.

No, no first of all you did six months and then I did 3 nights a week.

Q: So it was like an pre-apprenticeship, six months, then you started on the job, plus three nights a week

Yep, I went right through Tech got my trade certificate and I'd been in the trade all my life.

Q: It's Melbourne Cup Day, how important was the SP bookie business around here?

There were a few SP bookies but Sid Moss who at the butcher shop at the top of Adelaide Street, this is going back pre-war actually. The Melbourne Cup was the same as it is today.

TAPE 2 SIDE B

Police knew he was a bookie so they decided to catch him, but an old tramp came in one day and Moss sees he was a bit down and out and all that and could he stay there for a while and Sid said, 'Oh yeah' but he couldn't put him up. So the old tramp made a bit of a shelter by the line over in the paddock opposite Adelaide Street and he was there for weeks. And Sid was feeding him and giving him meat and all this and tea and sugar and all that.

Q: So this would have been during the '30s sometime?

Oh yeah, yeah it was in the '30's. And (laughs) the booking there one Saturday I suppose or what Friday, and I remember Mrs Moss ate a lot of the bets, she swallowed a lot of the bets (laughs). They caught Sid, this tramp



came over with several old fellows and they were all policemen. So this detective was lying there for weeks and they caught him. Oh - that was another exciting time.

Q: Was that the end of the business?

No he kept going after that.

Q: What did the police do? Were they paid off?

Yeah I think so. I think the police in those days turned a blind eye to those things.

Q: And your wife also grew up round here?

No my wife was actually born in Cabramatta, her Dad got killed early in her life and they went to Newcastle and lived at Belmont for years and after the war they came back here and I used to go to Miss Dale dancing. I learnt dancing.

Q: Where was Miss Dales?

Miss Dale was in Leed's Hall which was near the hotel and that's where they held the dances. Then she went over to the Masonic Hall over at West Ryde. She reckoned I was the only person that could put quick steps into fox trots and fox trot steps into waltzes. I had funny feet. That's where I met my wife.

Q: All of you went dancing a lot?

Well Dorothy my wife has quite a few medals for dancing, but I never got any medals. That's how we met.

Q: When you got married you had this block of land or you bought it?

I bought it just after the war, 1949 as an investment. I could have bought every block in the street for 50 pounds. There was nothing here. Dad said you don't want to waste your money. We got married in 1952, I was born just around the corner in the two story place there and we built here.

Q: The family remained obviously very close and close to the area.

Yeah, yeah

Q: Were there a lot of family gatherings in your childhood, Grandparents and so on?

Oh, Yeah, yeah I remember my grandmother living up on the corner here. I don't remember my grandfather on dad's side. I don't remember my mum's parents because they all passed away before I was old enough to remember. All our aunties and uncles, you'd go and visit you aunties or uncles and



cousins you'd always take jam or bread and when they came to your place they always brought something. Always at each others place, weekends. Uncle had a big property out the old Berowra Road and me being in the Militia, I'd go to Chatswood, shooting on the weekend and Mum would say you'd better go and see your Uncle Arthur, he was a major in the army. He must have watched me walk up the lane and as soon as I got to the slip rail he call "straighten your back and swing you arms". I had to march up there and if I didn't boy was I in trouble.

Q: He lived up here, even though he had the property at Berowra?

No, Uncle Arthur lived at old Berowra Road, Asquith. We used to walk for miles to get to his place. I'll never forget Uncle Arthur.

Q: Did the whole family gather at Christmas or such events?

All get together.

Q: But when you were a child was Christmas important?

All the family got together for Christmas. It was an exciting time, waking up and getting presents, other people coming in, you'd give them presents, they'd give you presents. Those days I remember crying because I couldn't eat any more pudding, no more threepences. We always had a crowd at Christmas.

Charity Creek was all mangroves, prawns, fish mullett. Christmas time on the Christmas Tide we'd go down and in no time we'd have 2 buckets of prawns.

Q: This was eaten on Christmas Day

Yes it was. The Christmas tide might be there for a week, the fish were beautiful, clean fish but now you couldn't eat them because of the pollution.

Q: The river must have been polluted then?

No, no the river was pretty clean then.

Q: People have talked about the offal that was thrown in?

From Homebush, that used to go down on the tide on the other side of the river on the Rhodes side of the river. The pollution from the Parramatta end in shocking, because of all the houses built years ago that was all paddocks, poultry farms and dairies and cattle and orchards. All you see coming down the river now is plastic boxes and plastic bags. The river is really polluted now. Those days you could swim, only swam on high tide because of the mud on the bottom of the baths. The abattoirs didn't have much problems, the sharks got a fair bit of that, down there at Andrew Street, we used to catch six foot eels.



Q: Gordon Smith mentioned the eels, he said you used to give them to the Chinese gardeners. What did they do with them?

Eat them, they loved the eels. I tried it, but it was a bit too strong for me. They'd give you vegetables for the eels. Had to be careful how you caught them because they could be pretty vicious. We used to go out North Ryde to Shrimpton's Creek catching mud jumpers.

Q: How did you get out there?

Walked, I used to pull a billycart from here to West Pennant Hills up near Murray Farm Road. I used to get a potato bag of mandarines and a potato bag of oranges for two bob. Pull the billycart up there, pick them up and bring them home.

Q: And you sold them

All the kids used to get them, all the family used to have them. That was nothing to walk that far.

Q: Do you recall that there were people during the thirties camped up along the Lane Cove River there up at North Ryde.

I remember Day saying there was problems out at Lane Cove with people living on relief. You heard about them. We had out a Rydalmere near the railway there was a camp of them out there. We were told not to go out there, there were a lot of "roughies". I don't know if they were or not, they had a hard life same as everyone.

I think everyone during the depression had a pretty tough time. Even though Dad wasn't out of work we only had the basics. I can remember bread and drippin' you used to enjoy that and it didn't do you any harm because we walked everywhere and burnt it off. I remember as a little kid having baked flour as a sweet, baked flour and milk. Chokos, everyone grew chokos, winters day you'd come home from school and Mum would have a big pot of chokos and white sauce. That was it.

Q: Well thank you very much Mr Bennett, I think it's been great to talk to you.

END OF INTERVIEW