

AUTHORISED VERSION OF TRANSCRIPT

This interview with Geoff Cooper was recorded on November 4th 2004 for the Migration Museum. The interviewer was Lizzie Russell.

Geoff, where were you born?

I was born at Victor Harbour hospital on the fourteenth of November 1951.

What are your earliest memories as a kid?

I think the earliest memories I've got were of actually growing up at Goolwa that was before I was taken away obviously. I can remember all the lifestyle as a young kid growing up then.

What were your favourite things?

I had a mate of mine up the road there the Lundstroms, a very well known family, very well known fishermen down there and the mate of mine [was] Peter. We used to run amok as kids do, fishing, yabbing, swimming, just playing Cowboys and Indians and everything else. There was also the strong sense of the family that we had.

Who was in the family in the house?

In the family at the time because I was pretty nearly under the care of my grandparents, grand mother and grandfather because Mum was moving around a lot. Dad was from interstate so he was over in Victoria a lot working at various jobs he had going. So they are the ones I mainly grew up with, relatives in Victor Harbour, relatives just up the street from us, probably about three houses away.

Did you have any brothers or sisters living in the house as well?

No not as much because Dad had my eldest brother over in Victoria.

So it was a spread out family.

Yes we were spread out.

What was your life like at school for instance, before you were removed from your family?

At school I was just like any other kid from Goolwa who went to the Primary school. It was full on, you had your studies, you had your rotten teachers, as I think we had in those days. It was one where we just got caught up in Primary school life. That meant doing everything illegal that you could do as a kid or get into trouble for.

Of course

Like climbing pine trees when you are not supposed to, you had your mates that you played with just a general lifestyle.

How were you actually removed? What happened?

I remember the day actually, I mean it took me a while to sit back because I suppose when you are going through something like this you have a lot of blockages, you know your mind blocks off a lot of things. The day I was actually removed is so crystal clear now, I have relived it often. I was at school I had just gone to school normally I had my lunch in a little tin and everything else. It was after my grandmother died that's when they came and got us because she strenuously fought them not to remove us. The day at school started off just like any other day, the roll call, you march in with the drums and all that and I was taken out of school between morning recess and lunchtime –

The Head master or someone came and got you?

Yes, the headmaster and somebody else (now I know who it was) she actually came in with him. Me mate was sitting in the class and a lot of other kids that I went to school with were all looking at me, trying to figure out, what's happening? Where are you going? I just went – I don't know. Unbeknownst to me I wouldn't see them again, to this day.

And when could you talk to your Grandfather again?

I couldn't.

How long was it before you ever got a chance to talk to him?

I haven't.

So you couldn't farewell your family.

See I was taken out of the classroom and into the court system and that's where I saw Grandpa –

But you couldn't talk to him.

No, well to me at that age it was just a game, running around in the Court as a kid. You never had access to anyone or [to] the legal ramifications of what went on in there.

And you didn't know what it meant anyway – did they tell you?

No, to me it was just a game.

So what did the people say? You are coming with us?

Just would you come with us. I think it might have been the pretext – I knew I was going into the city but I didn't know why. They took us out of the classroom, they took us to be hot bathed and shaved our head and doused it with kerosene, Because they also thought we all had nits and everything else that went with it. But we got new clothes out of it, which was something. And then I was taken around to the Court

So you went home

They took us down the street to get new clothes and back to home, had another bath, then dressed [and] into the Courthouse at Goolwa. I was just running around, not knowing what game was being played so it made it hard.

Yes. What happened after the Court stuff was finished?

When the Court finished, it was into the back of the car with the person that was with us and the police officers and another official. So there were two in the front and myself and this woman in the back. All it meant was jumping up on the back seat and having a look out at Goolwa for the last time virtually, for quite a while.

How did your legal status change? What had the Court done to your legal status?

As the files documented when I read them, it said I was committed to the care. I was made a ward of the State from that point on.

So what was life like in the kid's home?

It was Glandore kids home and that's where I stayed, from what I can remember it was probably for a year or two. It was completely new obviously; there was plenty of excitement around the place because there was always something going on. At that point I didn't know that Glandore was a holding place for young offenders as well. To my eyes now reflecting on it, it shouldn't have happened. I think we should have been away from the young offenders. We were put at risk of the stuff that happened in there.

So if you slept in a dormitory, all the kids would be mixed no matter where they came from [or why they were in there]

It was divided into two areas; you had Small boys and Big boys. Big boys was where a lot of the main offenders were, a lot of them were waiting to go there or on to Magill. It was like something out of Dickens, we didn't know who they were. There was the excitement of things going on, there were other kids, white fellows as well. They were ready to be adopted out or fostered out as well. We all lived in our little dormitories, something like four or five in Small boys.

And where did you get your schooling while you were in Glandore?

In Glandore we had actual classrooms set up. A lot of us were going there and a lot of the older boys didn't need to go there, they tried to keep it as normal as they could. I

remember the teacher's name, which was Mrs, McKinnin, it has just come back [This remembering the past] is doing funny things to me. We did normal studies, you keep yourself occupied by going to school and you just wait [to be] fostered out.

What was your health like when you were a kid?

As healthy as anybody else, we used to eat a lot of bush tucker.

Even in Glandore?

You got the normal colds and things like that. I was pretty sick there at one stage, I knew I had to go into [the] sickbay and that was probably one of the worst memories I've got.

Do you want to talk about that?

No, not just yet.

No [we can] leave it.

How was it being fostered out, how did that happen?

Before even getting fostered out, when you were in the kid's home, they used to tell you, you may be going out. On Sundays you go to your church thing in the morning, Sunday school in the morning and then you go and get dressed and you all wait out the front by the office because you may have a sponsor who will come and pick you up and take you out for the day. But we were usually just sitting under the trees waiting until lunch time and [they] said OK go back in and get your play clothes on and get into it. It was continually like that for a year, we used to have Christmas shows, I remember the two that I went to. It was with Colebrook kids, you know the aboriginal kids at Eden Hills.

The day came when I was told I was being fostered out. I knew very little about them, I met them on the day that I actually did get fostered out. They took us out of Glandore, went into the old clothing store in Rundle street down the side of Pultney street, the old offices there – was it Malcolm something.

Malcolm Reid's?

It was underneath there. I went in there and they fitted you out with clothing. I didn't know where I was going but I ended up going up to Bradbury.

Were you frightened? A lot of kids would be terrified.

To me it was adventure again because I knew I was going to get out of the kids home. I didn't know what was going to happen, obviously. Even now, reflecting, the school colours at Scott Creek [school] were red and white and yet they gave us blue and gold because that was Stirling's, (laughter) madness it was. Even growing up there then, it was a fairly hectic life because they lived on a small farm so we had our responsibilities.

So you were not the only child they fostered.

No, there were five of us there.

Were they kids that you knew?

No they were all strangers, the ones that were there before us had been there quite a while, since they were babies a couple of them and there I was, coming into a completely different family, but the good part about it - if you could see any thing good about it, was that they were aboriginal kids as well.

It was hard.

When I nicked off, when I took off – ran away from the foster parents. I got about 68 km in a day; I was about 10 [years old]

Did you know where you were going?

Oh yeah – I was going home, I got caught at Tooperang, My wife and I just recently did a count to see how many kilometres I did get. So I actually went from the top gate - drove back along the road I [had] followed, that's how I knew it was 68 km.

Gee.

Pop didn't know anything about that, when he did find out though, it broke his heart.

Mm, so someone picked you up on the road or something?

Somebody saw us ducking under a bridge –

You are saying 'us', was it more than one child?

No it was [only] me, it's just a term [of speech] I guess.

Somebody saw us and they went back into their farm probably and called the police.

The fellow came back out of the farm and parked the car down the road and I wasn't going to move until he went and on the other side there was a police car from Strathalbyn.

When you got back to the foster house did you get into trouble?

I got a flogging, literally. I couldn't go to school for the rest of the week.

Because of that?

Yeah it was pretty bad. It was a Sunday night that I got picked up and returned to them and I got flogged that Monday morning and couldn't go to school.

Did you stay with that foster family?

Yeah, I think I thought Hell, if you move you probably get worse, it soon got out of my system. I couldn't get any mail - the mail I was getting was getting as a fostered kid was all heavily censored, the dates and any reference to the address.

So someone got a pen and scratched out -

It was censored from Welfare, the address they gave Mum and all that, was PO Box 39 Rundle St.

Your family wrote, but you would never have known how to get to them, [done] quite deliberately.

Yeah it was deliberate and that also happened with other kids in the family as well. It was common practice, I find out now.

What was school like then and as you grew older into a teenager?

We went to Scott Creek Primary. It was great, you had your mates from the local area that you played with on weekends, that you played cricket and footy with at school and cricket on weekends. Schooling was great - that was Primary school. Next step obviously, was going into High School. I wanted to go to Urbrae because of the Farming Studies taught there.

You took a bus down?

No, Dad used to work in town, my foster father used to work in town and we used to go down with him and come home in the afternoon or catch a bus at times. The thing was that when he moved from the job he had in the city, to working on the Fruitway site and the high school site out at Heathfield, it was then that I went to Oakbank. But it wasn't until recently that I found I was exempted under the Act and I was allowed to go to those high schools because I wasn't considered to be an aboriginal person.

Perhaps we ought to deal with that bit first, what exemption meant. Obviously a good thing in that you could go to that high school but some of the things were not so good were they?

No, I think in those days the headmaster had right of veto, or right of say [about] who goes to their school

Did they.

Yes, which something strange for me and I even remember people that came over from Hungary at the time. They came with bare feet because of what was happening over there. Not knowing why I could go to these schools, because it was a matter of just going and enrolling and Welfare would kit you out in uniform. Then finding out

just recently the reason why I could do that was because I was exempted because I had come under the Aborigines Act [before].

Do you know when you were exempted?

I was exempted under the Act when they tried to find all of my family. There were other brothers and sisters that I knew had been in the Homes as well. Because we were committed in the care we were exempted under the Act.

So all the kids were exempted at the same time.

Yes.

By chance, you met your sister at the Show.

Yes, we were only talking about this just the other day, I was telling what I was going to do here and she remembered that day. She said she just knew who I was straight away.

You were walking along at the show –

I was actually on a merry-go-round of all things, as kids do, and she sprung us there. She called out my nickname and she reckons my head just spun around and she knew she was right. For the rest of the day at the show she took us around and paid for a hell of a lot of things.

She was a lot older than you, that sister?

She had my nephew (he was a baby) in the pram, young Jeffrey, it was awesome. She said then, “Stay where you are”, because I just wanted to go, but she was in the Navy at the time, so I couldn’t just go and live on the Base. She said “Stay where you are because you will meet us again”. How prophetic was that? She didn’t want us to go back to the stuff that was happening around my mother’s life at the time.

So she was trying to encourage you to have as good a life as you could, with a good education.

Yes she said “Have as good a life as you can and get as much out of it as you can, that is all you have to do and you will meet us again”. I thought, how can I meet you again,

But it happened anyway.

**That was one day that you spent with her and after that you didn’t see her again
Until Christmas 1974**

Was that by chance? How did that happen?

I was in the Army and every year the Army gives you a return airfare to your next of kin. Not having anybody, mates would say “You are always working Christmas and stuff. Why don’t you come back to my place?” His place happened to be in Perth at the time so I had a return airfare. The scabs sent me home by Hercules anyway so it wasn’t a comfort flight. (Laughter) I was over there and we were heading back to Melbourne for New Year. We pulled up here in Adelaide, [as] we were coming through and we stayed with another mate of mine. He is like a brother, we see him as often as we can, he is out here at Nuriootpa so there is no reason not to go and see him as much as we can. We were staying at his place and [there was] a movement of people coming down from Darwin staying out at Northfield hospital, at that time. They were billeted everywhere. Every now and then I would jump on a bus and go into town and all these Aboriginal people would jump on the bus as well, out at Northfield and as we do, we would acknowledge each other, they were complete strangers to me. Probably after the second week they were there, my mates former girlfriend [who] worked as a hairdresser down at Arndale, she had an Aboriginal lady in the chair (my Aunty) [she was] talking to her as she was doing her hair and she said something like, “My boyfriend’s mate is Aboriginal” and as you do [my Aunty] said “Who’s that” thinking that she might know them.

AUTHORISED VERSION OF TRANSCRIPT

As soon as she said the name, my Auntie just cracked and said "That's my nephew and I haven't seen him since he was a baby." So she said, "Oh, I'll get him to come around and see you"

So this day I got home I [had been] in town, after acknowledging these same people, and I met my mates from the Army and did what we did in those days, just drink and play up. We got home and Wayne (Wayne Cailes, that's me mate's name) came in, he had the biggest grin on his face. He had the latest Torana, so it was pretty hot looking and if I was driving I would have been picked up anyway because they would have wondered where I had pinched it. [I] walked into his house and he just walked into the kitchen and threw me his car keys, with a big smile. I said OK "What's next" he chucked the street directory over and he was still smiling and laughing around and I said "All right, Big shot what are you doing?" and he said "You can have the car for the rest of the week mate, this [address] is your Auntie's" I said "What? I don't know the name even" So I said I would do it the next day because I was trying to build up to see how I was going to handle it. So I cruised around there and she was out watering the lawn and I remember pulling up "Mrs Power?" and she said "Yes" and I said "I'm Geoff Cooper" With that the hose went one way and she let out a big scream and said "Come inside, come inside" She told me who she was and about five minutes later (I didn't know the step uncle was making a call to my sister's place) and getting my sister and Mum and a couple of cousins -

Wow!

And a couple of the little kids and they all came round. It was a culture shock for me because I didn't know anybody. It was sort of like going from living an independent life, not knowing if you had anybody still around. Because at times in those days kids were told their parents had died, or family had left and gone elsewhere. Yeah, when they came in, it was a hell of a culture shock. So I went back to me mate's place after meeting Mum and me sister and them. I said I would go back the next afternoon just to get it out of my system. [Wayne] said "Oh I thought you were going to stay there" I said, "Mate, I didn't know them, it's hard but I will go back and see them". So I went down to see them again and they said "Your relatives are here as well, from Darwin" I could remember them as a kid when we were growing up, when they used to come down from Darwin. So me sister took us back up there and I met my cousins and Auntie.

Up to?

Up here at Northfield. These were the same people that I had been saying G'day to for the past two weeks, not knowing they were my first cousins, and we had seen each other on the bus.

How old would you have been then?

Probably in my mid twenties.

So you caught up with a bit of your family then. Have you caught up with all of them? All your brothers and sisters?

Yes, but I understand we've got a step brother over in Deniliquin and my brother over in Carmaragunga, he knows and he has met him and told [him] how many brothers and sisters he's got on this side.

It's quite a mob isn't it.

Yeah there is.

Now you keep in touch and see them?

Yes but you know it's not the sort of sibling relationships that you have.

More like making friends with an adult, not the same closeness.

There is but there isn't. I sat down with my sister, like we were saying, it can't be undone. The way that I have handled it is, I've just accepted that pretty early, I can't change it, nobody can. But I sat back and realized I can't do anything about it so why bother digging into it. They know that if anything happens I'll be there and vice versa that's the way it is. It's just an understanding that you have.

You haven't got any together memories but you've still got that strong link.

Like my nieces that passed away over in Victoria, when I went there for the last one that passed away. My nephew [and I] were sitting down talking, 'Mum and Dad, we said we knew you would be here Uncle Geoff for us'. And my sister she knows [too], I think the world of her.

It's a hard story though.

What changed legally when you reached eighteen?

When I was eighteen I was out of care. The Minister –

So even though you were exempted you were still a State ward.

Yeah, until I was eighteen, then we weren't told what our rights were or anything else.

They didn't sit you down -

Because I was in the Army anyway, I joined at seventeen and a half – eighteen. There was that - you could see which way you were going [with] your life, if you do stick it out. I was working up on the highway out of Crafers; doing maintenance on the freeways it was a fantastic job, brilliant job, because you were always outside. We had close mates, most of the guys up there were my closest mates - still are, and they were Italian blokes, Germans, Dutch because of the way they were treated in the fifties and the sixties so we were pretty close but we were all part of the Bridgewater community at the time. Growing up and doing that, I started drinking with older people, not flat out drinking just social but you could see which way we were going and I thought I don't really want this to happen. You need to do something; my mates were apprentice builders and all that type of thing. I just knew that I didn't want to get into this life, so I thought I'll go into the Army. So I went down and saw the Welfare officer and told them what I wanted to do and he just said "Well, if you show you are committed enough and fill out the papers and bring them here, we will sign them so you can get in". It's funny that I only got my military papers back for the six years that I was in, probably at the beginning of the year.

This year?

Yeah

Why was that?

I just thought I would get them.

Oh, I thought it took that long for them to get them to you.

Funny part about it, the Minister at the time that did the big final signature on it, was Robin Millhouse, bit of fate there.

What was [being in] the Army like?

The Army to me, was my family, everything you did you did it all together anyway. You ate, you slept, you partied you looked after each other.

So you made good mates there.

Very good mates, one of the blokes that I met in there - we were away up at Alice Springs – we took all our armoured vehicles up there [and] we were out in the middle of nowhere and we were talking about each other's lives 'cos we were having a few beers sitting in the cab of a truck talking away. He said "Oh I was in kids homes" and I said, "So was I", it turned out that we were in the same kids home at the same time.

Amazing – small world isn't it.

The Army is a great thing, even people today – people say what about the racism and stuff – and I say in the army there is only one colour and that was green. You are there, who you are, what you do, not if you are any cultural group or whatever, you are doing the same job as anybody else so there is obviously that respect. There is also the respect that you give others and that you get back in turn which really makes it because it was my family.

And did you learn useful skills, practical things?

The useful thing it did, was give me that sense of belonging [and] the sense of discipline that comes with it obviously, the balance and the work ethic, you know who you are, you know you have got a job, you know what you are doing for six years even though it is completely different day in and day out. You just know your job and you just perfect that job and it really does give you that sense of belonging. Even today as we speak I've got mates that I haven't seen since 1976, we email now and thank God for that and I ring up a good mate of mine that we see at regular [intervals] three years without an angry word being said, You ring him up now and it is just like – How are you going mate? So you have got real mates not acquaintances.

What memories do you have of your March Out?

Well all [through] the Basic training it was where they tested you. It was the time Vietnam was still going, we had a hell of a lot of National service men that were dropping out, Regulars were dropping out as well but it was where they tested you.

Can you give an example?

Some of the things they get you to do is like – you are different, you are an Aboriginal person in an all white platoon so there is a Range flag that has got to be put up on the top of a hill, it has got to be flown so you [have to] run it up to the top and back here again before the Range firing starts. You had to do things like that, they make sure you go through the first part of the muddy mess so your clothing can absorb all the mud and the crap. It is all the funny things that happen as well that they do to test you. I had a case [when] it came to room inspection, every time we had a room inspection [which] was pretty near a weekly event. This bloke would come in and say, “Your stuff is not properly folded” bang, bang, bang [pulling clothing from the locker]

He was a higher rank?

Yes, he was the NCO instructor; he was a corporal who did the room inspection, flicking stuff out. I said to me mate that was in the room [who] said, “Why does he keep doing that?” I said “ He is just testing me because I am a black fellow” and he said “ No, it can't be, you must have something wrong with your clothing” So I said “Alright, during the week we will swap” (in basic training there is nothing to really identify your stuff except your name and number on the clothing at the back somewhere). I said, “Watch this”, so we swapped. Every thing was folded absolutely great so I used all of his gear in my locker and he had all mine. Friday came along and the normal thing happened he came into the room inspecting and said “You still haven't got your stuff folded” bang, bang, bang – and mine, which was in my mate's locker, it was still there. So I said to him “there you go”. He said he would not have believed that.

I wonder what they thought you were going to do. Were they trying to provoke you to complain?

I think it is just in terms of testing you, just to see whether you can handle the life virtually and whatever is going to be chucked at you because you just didn't know at that point. That happened on a regular [basis]. At our March Out parade we had a Corps allocation that lets you know what unit you are going to be in and which Corps.

We had a big Barbeque and the instructors were all invited, we had another couple of days to go before we marched out. He said “I tried everything with you” and I said “Yes I know” and there was no animosity. I didn’t hate him for anything because to me it was just the way the game is played.

But some people would.

Some people definitely would yeah, bastardisation is the big word they use, that happens regularly, and I have seen the worst. I just let him know. I said you know all those times that you were flicking my clothes out [of my locker] particularly in the last three weeks and he said “yeah”. I said the clothes you were throwing out, were my mate’s over here and all my clothing was in his locker. He just cracked up, we both did and he said, “You are a sneaky little bastard aren’t you”. I said, “That is how it goes corporal”.

But you survived.

Yeah, you move into your units and you go, it is just like a job and you really do get into it, you are who you are.

What was your career and education after the Army?

When we got out I didn’t know what I wanted to do. Once I found my family and I started coming home every Christmas and seeing my folks and getting used to Mum and my sisters and stuff like that. I knew I had to do something, not stay in the Army as mates of mine did, and some of them still are. It was something different I knew I had to go. I didn’t know what it was but I do now – what I am doing. Something like twenty years working with indigenous people, which I absolutely love doing. It is that that got me out and made me move on. To sort myself out, to get rid of that military mentality I went and worked in the Commonwealth Railways.

What does the military mentality mean to you? Doing what you are told?

Regimented, doing what you are told with no questions asked. When they say jump [you say] how high? All this type of thing, taking an order without question, you are told to do something and you just go and do it. It was getting that ingrained stuff out and I was part of it, making sure [other soldiers] did the jobs that I asked them to do. It was getting rid of all that, that’s why I joined the Railways. It was at Lake Eyre South out past Maree, at Curdiemurka and Beresford. I was out at Beresford first and the beauty of that – a lot of sections of the Railways have got those old water softeners for the steam engines that they had at a lot of sidings and we happened to have one where we were. They had these big flat-topped mountains sort of thing. On weekends – you do your work all week and at weekends I used to go walking, just to get that army stuff out of my brain, just walk, walk, walk clear it up. I was up there about eight months before I went into the bright lights of Maree, it was good.

What about Curdiemurka?

It was actually a siding and that’s where they have the Curdiemurka ball, the dance under the stars. It is funny that people are paying to go out there and I was being paid to go there and work on the old railway line. It is one of the places, because of the solitude that is out there, [that] you do find yourself. You do end up doing a lot of thinking and a lot of reading and you get [things] out of your system. When you feel right you can come back into society. I mean if you have a look today with the amount of Vietnam veterans that are out there somewhere.

Yeah, trying to find themselves.

Let’s face it, it was probably one of the messiest things they have ever been through in their lives. When we compare that to what is happening in Iraq, the boys say they had it a little bit easier. There is going to be a lot of coming out of this one too, I would feel.

What was your life like after 1977?

It was great. I went to Uni.

What were you studying?

Community development in the Aboriginal Task Force part of (now the Uni SA) the old Institute of Technology. It was doing Social work type of things [we] were getting snaffled up quickly by Government agencies because they needed people in those areas to get away from just having bums on seats. You were actually needed to perform jobs. Since then it has just been the biggest turnaround in my life because I have met my wife and all that. I have travelled interstate playing Footy.

Where did you play Footy?

In Darwin, the Darwin football club. My Uncles and my relatives are all Buffaloes. The young fellow that plays for the Crows – Andrew McLeod that is his team, his Dad was our team Manager when I was up there [Andrew] was just a baby, he played football with my cousins kids, it is a big thing. It was just me and my wife stabilisation.

You were living in Darwin at that time?

I was up there, then I came back to Uni, but I stayed here because this is where my family is. I haven't been back up there I think, since I left, that was about 1982 –3. It really has benefited me more because the jobs that I have been doing – work up at Pt. Augusta, work for the CES Pt. Augusta, Marla Bore, Cooperpedy, Oodnadatta and then down to Pirie and up to Broken Hill, you meet a lot of people. It really has cemented my place, I know where I am and who I am.

How long have you been with Disability Services?

Not long, probably only about six months, I worked in Corrections as the first liason officer they had in Programs. We had a liason officer working in Community Corrections at the time, Debbie Rose; she is now working over in the West. She came and head hunted me to see if I would like to get out of CES after about five or six years to come into Corrections because they needed somebody to work within the prisons. We had the Sansbury Association running and things like that, as part of Programs I would go around and see those guys to see if they needed any help. It turned into sort of band-aid work that happened in Corrections at the time with the Royal Commission so I was moved round a heck of a lot. I was called in to some threatening situations, where people have self harmed pretty badly and talking to staff as well and sitting in cells with prisoners who have wrecked their unit, even their own cells, all that type of thing, which actually drove my wife wild.

Do you find your life in the Army and your life earlier, have made you a fairly sturdy sort of personality?

Yeah it did, it came in a sense where I knew what my own strengths were so I never went out of them and I knew that other people have all got different strengths, all got different lifestyles. You know that when they do want to see you about something how important it is that you say, Yes you will [see them]. It is the old thing, before I started I used to talk to people at my rugby club that were Correctional officers and things like that – So how would I work if I went in there? They said, “Never promise them” –

Unless you can deliver

Yeah, it is the old thing – a No can be undone and a Yes can't, so I always remember that and I still practice it today actually.

Yeah, it is a good rule.

Yes

Do you still have contact with most of your old mates?

Yeah I still talk to them. The fellows that I was raised with up at Bridgewater the Italian bloke he is in the Pub just around the corner, the old Historian. It was funny how I met up with him, I hadn't seen him since the mid seventies and I was at home watching the flash floods they had at Gawler and they had this publican that got on saying [things] and I said to my wife "There's bloody Norm, he and I, we grew up together" We were a bit younger but he was always with us, playing footy and cricket for Bridgewater, so I said "We will have to drop in" And a real funny thing happened this day, it was hot, we were going for a drive as a family so we can talk about stuff. We pulled in at the pub up at Gawler and I walked in. He had his back to me but as soon as I saw him I knew him and he had the regular old bar flies sitting along [the bar] and he was talking to them so I said "Listen mate, I don't want to waste your time but do you serve blackfellows in this pub or not? There are a lot of pubs I know that don't". The old barflies they just all moved away and Norm, he didn't flinch he just turned around, looked at me, and said, "Only if your name is Cooper mate, how are you going?" (Laughter) And the barflies said, "Jeeze, we thought there was going to be a punch up"

And they didn't want to get hurt.

Yeah, well, I know Norm; he is a bit of a goer. It was good catching up with him and he said "Where in the Hell have you been", he shouted us drinks and any time I go anywhere near him I walk into the Pub and say Goodday it is always "This is my [shout]"

It is good to have that sort of friend isn't it?

What are your hopes for yourself and the next generation?

The reason I am doing this, as we have discussed before is so my daughter has got something that says this is Dad's life, even though she knows. There are a lot of people out there who just don't really know what happened, I'm finding even at Julia Farr where I am running a Program. It is just [my] hope that people realise that there are people out there that have suffered like this, a lot of people like me can just get on and live their life. There are other people that are suffering because of it and rightly so. It is just an awareness thing, we know what has happened, we can see why some people can be angry about it. People say "You are different, why are you different?" and "I say I'm not different, we have had the same lifestyle, it is just that some of us have better coping mechanisms." A lot of people have given up and I don't blame them at all and for them I will always have that sympathy, empathy. I know, I understand fully and I know that these poor people just no matter where they have turned, they have always been up against the wall. They have been in worse situations probably than I have ever been in. I just hope we do get some [one who has] compassion that does apologise, to me it doesn't mean much but for a lot of other people the apology will.

It matters a great deal.

And even for me saying that, it is hard because if this fellow that we have now said it [that] would mean nothing but if someone did come out and really apologised –

That meant it

And meant it, then I would really accept it but we all live our lives, we all get on with it and you try hard, just to make sure it doesn't happen again especially with young kids. You may treat them harshly but you would fight to prevent them doing to your child, what happened to you.

How old is your daughter?

She is only thirteen, they say "She is just like you" and I say, " Don't ever say that".

Oh, do say it, you have got the right spirit.

She has. She has got that sense of pride of where we are all from. Growing up when you never had an identity [compared with] now when we have one of the richest cultures and a surviving culture at that and we are all part of it. Now with my identity making me a different person because I do know who I am, I do know what I want - it is just the weirdest thing for me.

Have you been able to get access to the records that were kept [about you]?

That was one of the most daunting parts I think. For years working out at Elizabeth F.A.Y.S. as a social worker I always encouraged the kids that I had, to read their files at any time because they have to know what is going on. I never had that opportunity so it came to the point where the manager out there Geoff Wells and Supervisor Mike Green they all said "Coops, you've got to get it" because a kid questioned me one day. He said, "How come you haven't got your file? How come you haven't read your's?"

Mm, good question.

Except I didn't know whether they existed, so I checked up with a mate of mine who works out at State Records he said "Yeah, I'll give you a buzz and let you know if there is" and he returned the call and said there was. So I said to Mike, I started getting more apprehensive when you are in a situation doing a 'Need care' application as I had done on me, one story I wrote was virtually the same as my own. Except that it was now and he was a little white fellow. They [the documents] didn't answer a lot of questions but the questions that I had burning they definitely did.

Some of the stuff had been blacked out and some of the records had been taken away?

Yes, you can't access them under F.O.I. but it really set out how hard my family tried to get me back, because when you are growing up you think - Why did they let me go? Didn't they try hard enough? And I did not know until literally two years ago.

Even in 1923 they were trying weren't they, with that petition.

Yes, it is all that stuff and I am only finding out now. My files, I use them when we are doing co-presentations with the staff of the Migration Museum, it is absolutely brilliant. Because these people are getting a lot of information that they never knew anything about and me putting the aspects of my file out, [it] puts the personal slant.

They really appreciate it, the Migration Museum [staff] it adds wonderfully to their stuff.

They are a fantastic crew, they really are. I love doing it with Lata and Sue and especially Rosa because they care so much about their work and it is so positive.

And they are telling the right generation, the truth.

When these people give feedback like last week's presentation and it was all excellent. They said, "The blend of history wasn't rammed at us, wasn't thrown at us" It was presented, this is what you can access by going through the library or whatever and with me putting in my part, there is a face to these Acts. Most of the stuff they talk about, I know people from those areas.

And now [staff] from the SA Housing Trust go and the Police trainees and the Judges and people go.

Corrections too, we were running them there, that's where I first met Rosa four or five years ago. With her coming in doing that [program] I did not know what to expect but being a part of the team and presenting the information it is so relaxing for me and I feel comfortable doing it with them. There are strangers out there when we are doing it but [with] people like Lata, Sue and Rosa because I can sit there, I know these

AUTHORISED VERSION OF TRANSCRIPT

people and I know that what we say is historically [correct] it is not pie in the sky stuff – like how would you know – it has been exposed and it is great.

Are there any other ghosts you want to put on the record?

Yeah there are, I have got to front going back to Glandore, I have been there a couple of times but my hair stands on end because of the stuff that happened, all the abuse and things that you experience going through the place but I know I have got to go and see the outcome to it. I have to go back to Goolwa, I've got to go back into that classroom (not that exact classroom because that has been built over now) but I have got to go back to the school and talk to the Principal and see what has happened.

Those are a couple, and I have also (as I was saying before) got the name of a mate of mine that was in the classroom the day I was taken out, I have his address and phone number but I have got to ring him, I don't know how to go about it. There are those three mainly, but there are still a lot of ghosts to get rid of. It is being comfortable going back to these places [and] meeting up with these people again after such a long time span and to know that this is what did happen to me that day I was taken out. To be able to say that and feel comfortable saying, if I hadn't been removed I would be an old scholar going back to reunions, 'Welcome to Goolwa' or something.

Well Geoff, thank you very much for putting all that on the record.

I think about two to three years ago you could have asked me to do the same thing and I would have said no, because of apprehensiveness. It is since I have been working with Rosa and all of them I have [become] comfortable doing it. It is not what happened to everybody but this is what happened to me.

And this is how you dealt with it.

Somebody else in the same period may have had it differently and even the younger kids today. There isn't an Aboriginal family here in South Australia that hasn't been affected somewhere or other by the stolen generation. It is history you can't change it.

Thank you

Thanks for that mate.

[Is there] any thing else that you want to say?

I really want to acknowledge my wife Lesley in all this. She is the one who got me to get it all out, she is my strength.

It is good to have someone with you.

It is great to have someone walking with you, we have been together for seventeen years and it has been fantastic, so I just want to thank her.