

NORTHERN TERRITORY ARCHIVES SERVICE — ORAL HISTORY UNIT

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH

MARGOT MILES

Recorded October 1994 in Tennant Creek
by Francis Good

**TENNANT CREEK, 1932—
TENNANT CREEK HOTEL
MINING**

30 minutes
1 digital audio tape (DAT) cassette

Series: NTRS 226; Item: TS 835

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NOTE TO READER

This interview was recorded on a portable digital audio tape (DAT) recorder, using two microphones.

TRANSCRIPT METHODOLOGY:

A first draft transcript of the interview recording was compiled by the Oral History Unit of the Northern Territory Archives Service.

Transcript policy (in brief) is to reflect the speaker's words **verbatim**, although minor false starts and repetitions, if they occur, are not included. The first draft was proof-read to tape by the interviewer, and a printed copy of the proofed draft was then provided to the interviewee for final clearance.

This final version of the transcript includes corrections made by the proof-reader; none were requested by the interviewee.

The following typographical rules apply:

- **Boldface type** has been used to indicate the interviewer's questions and to visually separate them from the responses of the interview subject; the interviewer's name and that of the respondent usually only appear in the body of the transcript at the commencement of the interview.
- Square brackets indicate an insertion of material not in the original recording. For example:
I came to Darwin [in 1960].
This indicates that the words *in 1960* were not spoken on tape.
- An ellipsis indicates that material in the recording has not been transcribed. For example:
I came to Darwin in ...
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- Dashes are used as punctuation marks only.

Readers of this transcript of interview should bear in mind that it is a verbatim transcript of the spoken word and reflects the informal conversational style that is inherent in oral records.

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TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH

MARGOT MILES

RECORDED 20 OCTOBER 1994 IN TENNANT CREEK

BY FRANCIS GOOD

[This recording was made on digital audio tape (DAT). The total elapsed recorded time from the commencement of the tape is shown at regular intervals in this transcript at the margin. Time notations shown in bold indicate the location of DAT index points marked on the tape.]

DAT CASSETTE BEGINS

00 m 16 s

[Francis Good]: Alright Margot, we can start recording now. Could you just tell us first of all, for the sake of the tape, your full name and your date of birth, and where you were born?

[Margot Miles]: Its Margot Sylvia Miles. I was born in 1910, and I was born in Geelong in Victoria.

And did you grow up in that area?

No, no, no. My father was at the war and my mother moved to Adelaide and stayed there. She really came from Mt Gambier, but things weren't so wonderful as they are now then, and of course she had to go out and earn a living when we lost our father. So we grew up in Adelaide, which is a very nice place.

When did you come to the Territory, and why did you come?

Oh well, I come about __ I think it was about 1932. I worked in John Martin's, in Adelaide, making school uniforms. ... But of course things were in the middle of a Depression then, and so they could only employ girls for two days a week, which you got about ten shillings a day.

So I seen the advertisement in the paper, wanting a housekeeper for a new building in Tennant Creek. I had to go to a [place] in Hindley Street, who were wine merchants, to be interviewed, and luckily I was selected.

Ten pound they gave me to get to Alice Springs. I was very worried because I never had a pair of shoes — there was only cardboard soles in them. But I had some money over after I booked on the train — which was the Ghan, one of the first trips — so I bought a pair of shoes for seven-and-six, which worried me all the way up to Alice Springs, because I'd spent the firm's money.

Could you tell me what it was like to travel on the Ghan in those days?

Well, it was very hard but it was most enjoyable. There was no sleeping arrangements, it was carriages, and those old-fashioned carriages had seats running straight up the carriage. They stopped at different stops, and you could always get hot water at the engine; the engine driver would give you the hot water when he stayed — if you had a billy can that is — you could go up there and get a billy of water and put some tea in it.

But they had different stops, like Port Augusta, different stops like that — and Oodnadatta; they stayed there, and you could walk over to the hotel and get a meal. But there was no food at all on the train — you kind of had to carry it with you. It was a very good type of people, because they were all bush people.

What was it like when you got to Alice Springs? What happened there?

Anyrate, there was a man there to meet me who __ he went looking for me and found me. He was a mail man from Alice to Tennant. He used the most bad language I'd ever heard of in my life, because I was horrified. But it didn't matter because it was on open __ it had no cover over it at all, it only had a windscreen on it. All he said was: 'Keep your bloody hat on' all the time to me, you see. And he told me these anthills was Aboriginal graves. It was beautiful country, oh, it was wild then you know; no made roads at all, it was just rock and bull dust.

I was frightened to ask him if I could get out and go to the toilet, but I had to in the finish. He gave me strict orders what to do, and what not to do when I was there. [Laughs] Now I'm old I think of it and I laugh about it, you know. He was a married man — his wife was in Alice Springs. We got to Barrow Creek and we had a meal there.

What was at Barrow Creek in those days?

A hotel. The same man that built the Tennant Creek one — he also built one somewhere else but it was knocked down. Of course, they're marvellous buildings you know, because they're still standing. Its only the people that buy them now that knock half of them down. We had something at Barrow Creek. They're all built on the same principle; beautiful concrete floors.

Then in the night time, after a very rough ride, we arrived in Tennant Creek. The boss, Alec Scott his name was, he was waiting up for us. He cooked me some bacon and eggs, and looked me over, you know.

05 m 00 s

And he said: 'Do you drink alcohol?' I said: 'No' Lucky for me, because my mother would never allow that you know — she was a very strict woman. Told me where to sleep. 'Two pound ten a week you get' he said, 'and everything found.' Of course, I already knew that. I thought it was a fortune you know.

The next morning I was awoken and looked out, and there's a thousand goats out there, out in the street. It was as rough as rough you know, but these goats, they were all looking at me through the mosquito netting. But I could hear these men talking, and they said: 'Did the new girl arrive?' [Laughs] And they said: 'What's she like?' They said: 'She's pretty skinny' — [laughs] something to that effect.

Anyrate, I had to get up and help get the breakfast — never knew where a thing was or anything. Four shillings a meal it was: bacon and eggs, porridge, toast, everything. It really was a beautiful dining room.

Yeah, could you describe the hotel for me, what it consisted of and so on?

It had three bedrooms, and a big beautiful billiard room, and a kitchen. Of course, in those

days there was no refrigeration or anything like that. You kind of had Coolgardie safes, which had wet hessian draped over it, and that kept it cool. But people never seemed to notice that, you see. But all their gear came up on big trucks about once a fortnight or a month; mostly consisted of potatoes and pumpkins — that's the only thing that carried really, but there was no refrigeration.

06 m 41 s

So you were saying the meat was mostly corned beef?

Yes. There was no butchers in the town, but later on the man that ended up in Parliament, he used to go out in a ute and shoot cattle, and carve it up out there and bring it back, and sell it from the back of the ute. Of course they had to cook it immediately, because there was no way of doing it. But the corned beef they used to dry salt — beautiful corned beef you know — and hang it, of course. You hung it, and it could last you six months. All the stations did the same thing. But as time went on, of course, a butcher came there and made sausages and everything.

Well, that was very modern for you.

Yes. But the cooks, you see, they were bush cooks, and they knew what to do. They had no toasters in those days — you stood in front of a roaring fire and toasted it on a fork. No-one seemed to take any notice. Of course, they hadn't lived in more __ the towns were more modern, the cities, you see, and they hadn't experienced that. Of course, to go into that country then, that was a very rough living — but mostly men it was, looking for gold.

Well, how long were you actually working at the hotel then?

Well, I thought I worked there from ten to fifteen years — but I can't remember now you know. But I worked there for a long while. Camelia¹ worked at one period — her husband had a gold mine out in the Honeymoon — I suppose she told you all of that anyrate.

But different women that came into the town that didn't have any money __ not many single women there you know, but there was hundreds of men. Of course, women would begin to think they were Greta Garbo, or Marilyn Monroe, they had that much attention paid to them. A lot of married women. A lot of people came from across Wyndham way. Well, most of the men was between fifty and sixty — they were old prospectors. They came from Palmerston River and everywhere, because they had __ there was a gold find there.

Now, who actually owned the pub when you first arrived?

Jack Noble.

Could you tell me about him? What sort of man was he?

He was the skinniest man out, and he was just like leather, you know. But he was a wonderful man really. He came from Derby in Western Australia, and he used to break horses over there. They told me he used to ride his horses right down into the river, and there was cliffs, and the horse would fall and Jack would jump, and the horse broke its back. He also owned an oxen team.

¹See separate interview with Camelia Meyers. — *Ed.*

He and this Alec Scott that managed the hotel for him, that's how they first made their money you see, carrying parcels and everything to stations. But they only had the oxen, as they called them, oxen teams. They had big whips, and they used to crack their whips over them you know.

10 m 00 s

Then, of course, the horses came, and they had trolleys then, until the motor cars arrived. Of course, it wasn't country for motor cars; too rough. Although today they've got the most beautiful roads in Australia, through the Territory, I think.

So, how long did Jack Noble actually own the pub?

He would have owned it for seven years. Of course he would have sold it only for Alec Scott, because he wanted to sell it and Alec Scott wouldn't let him. Because he was his mate you see — he used to drink a lot, Jack, and he'd have only frittered the money away. Anyrate, eventually they sold it to a chap named Ken Milne — he was a bookmaker in Alice Springs. He paid twenty-five thousand for it.

How much was that?

Twenty-five thousand pound — which was a big lot of money in those days, you know. ...

11 m 02 s

He was a bookmaker, yes, and he took off back to Palmerston Roads, Jack Noble. Of course, he dithered around you know. He used to ride a bike stuffed with spinifex, because he couldn't buy tyres, and all this. But he was a man that __ he was more a natural man — and he didn't have much sense because he drank a terrible lot, you know.

Alec Scott stayed there for a while, [then] went back to Derby where he came from.

What sort of man was Alec Scott?

He was a dead __ he was a Communist. He used to preach to me about Communism you see. And he used to get all the communistic papers. There were about four men in Tennant Creek that had that __ in those days, they were mad on that collective farming that was very popular in Russia. They used to get the newspapers — couldn't read Russian of course — but there was a lot of men that really believed in that kind of thing, Australian men, in those days.

He used to give them to me to read. But of course they had no toilet paper in those days, and I used to put them down the toilet; and that's how I knew all about collective farming, reading down there. And we used to use tissue paper that came wrapped round apples, and all of that kind of thing you know. But there was very few newspapers here, because they had to come up from Alice Springs, and they were old stuff by the time they got here. Yeah, but everyone liked the newspapers. But he used to get the most. He had them posted to him, all these Russian [laughs] newspapers.

But I must add one thing that was very good about the Tennant Creek Hotel. It had the biggest ladies' toilet — it was half as big as this room, in half. I don't know why that is. They had pans in those days, and there was a big broad seat on it.

But what happened there, what we used to do — the women that worked there, the men used to get very drunk and they'd go home and thrash their wives. So we told the wives, you see: 'You come down here, and we'll look after you.' So we used to stow them in the toilet, of course. The men used to come back and rage around looking for their wives, and they never dreamed of looking in the toilet. They used to bring their kids and a blanket and they'd camp there for the night.

There wasn't many women that drank, and there wasn't many women on the staff, so they had plenty of room. I don't know why he built the __ they was, in each pub, they were so big — the toilets, ladies' toilets. The men was just at the back of them.

Ladies' toilets, there weren't very many of them in other places in Tennant Creek though, were there?

None at all. Not a bit. Everyone would duck behind __ it was very hard you know, they used to have big dances in Tennant Creek, and all the men used to go one way and the women the other. But the women used to have to go and sit down in the scrub; of course the men, they were alright you see; all they'd have to do was pull it out, kind of business, but the women had to squat. I lost a dress on a thistle bush one night — I got up and left a dress behind. But they never catered for that kind of thing. It was a great big dance hall, you know, and not a toilet in sight.

You must have had a pretty good time in the dance hall though?

Oh, wonderful! Because there was not many women there you see — men wasn't allowed to dance together, in those days. Oh, wonderful. We used to have big balls, you know. Everyone was a good dancer; Jack Noble was the worst. [Laughs] He'd come and do one of those Russian dances, and they'd put him out, because he used to swear when he fell over, and all this business. But it was a community effort. It was done for the school, it was done for different things people used to get up.

15 m 00 s

But there was a marvellous thing between everyone in the town; everyone helped each other. If anyone's husband shot through they'd go and get enough money to put them on the train. Things like that you know. They're marvellous — people that live on goldfields are like that, I think. I went to Kalgoorlie once and they were just the same. I don't know about Mt Isa — I think it had a bigger population you see, and it started in a different era than Tennant Creek. Everyone knew everyone in Tennant Creek.

[portion of transcript edited out]

16 m 22 s

Anyrate, when I got sick of working in hotels, and having a laundry and that, I went to work at the paper shop which was run by Lil [Liz Traynor?]. The planes used to come in in the middle of the night then, and they'd go out and get the papers and bring them back to me. I used to start work at four o'clock in the morning, and end about five at night, but I liked it.

But Jack Noble, by then, he'd gone through most of his money, and he came to me and said:

'Marg, you got any money?' I said: 'Oh yes, do you want some?' He said: 'Yes. How about lending me twenty pound?' I said: 'Well, what's the good of lending it to you Jack, because you'll go down to the pub and shout everyone a drink, and that's the finish of it.' 'No', he said, 'I'm going on my honeymoon this time.'

I said: 'You're not?' He said: 'Yes I am, I just won myself a gin. I want to buy a box of beer and a few blankets and take her out bush for a fortnight.' [Laughs] Of course, I did see him in the fortnight's time, and he nearly died by the look of him — certainly had a good honeymoon! Of course, he didn't take any food with him, so he used to have to go out and stab the rabbits with a stick, and the black gin would cook them for him. I didn't call that a honeymoon! [Laughs]

That's interesting that there were that many rabbits around even in those days.

Yes. Also there was here a very small wallaby, and it lived in the Honeymoon Range, you know. It was about — now its not there now — about that [high]: lovely little thing.

So it would only be about kind of knee-high?

Yes. Now, I have never seen one for years, because the prospectors killed them all, and ate them. See, they killed the big kangaroos, but these small wallabies they were easy. They could sharpen a stick and throw it, and kill it. You see the big ones, it takes more than that to kill them. And there was hundreds of them. But its a shame — I think they just wiped them all out you know.

But there was rabbits here, and they killed all them too, because they didn't have any money to buy anything to eat. They had flour, that was all — they could make the damper. But as far as meat was concerned they lived off the land. But not any dingoes. They never ate those. What they killed them for was their pelt, and they tanned them up and laid them on camp floors: beautiful. But they never ate them.

I really think, I've never seen a wallaby out on the Honeymoon Range for about twenty years. Its a shame — I don't know enough of them to know what their name was.

You were actually cooking for the mines at one stage too, weren't you?

Oh yes. Noble's Nob — I cooked out there; and I cooked out of different mines. Noble's Nob, they had hundreds of men, you see — that was a big contract. Another girl and I — her name was Kit Fisher — and we made a lot of money out of it. I built a new house in Tennant Creek with it.

So what were the facilities like out there at Noble's Nob when you were cooking?

Very good. Big refrigeration, they had big stoves. Of course, they [had] three hundred men — you see you had to have three meals a day for three hundred men.

Now what years would this have been, roughly?

I forget it, to tell you the truth.

We're talking about post-war, are we? After the war?

After the war, yes. It would have been ten years ago, for me anyway, because the other girl has died since then. But it was an immense job, and we worked very hard.

20 m 00 s

Mostly new Australians, you see, that they engaged. They weren't miners, they were surface workers. But the real miners — there's a man, Paul Ruger, he's the Mayor now, his father was a boss there — they were genuine miners.

And of course, they used to pinch the gold. One of them had a dog trained there. When the whistle would blow at four o'clock, the dog knew that his master was going to knock off, so the dog would come and wait at the pit-head. And this bloke would throw stones at him: 'Go home! Get home you mongrel!' Nobody knew they was bits of gold! He'd come afterwards and start to collect them all. [Laughs] I thought that was very clever. But nobody knew at the time, you see.

Yes, it wasn't __ gold stealing at mines is not regarded as a crime amongst miners, you know — not company-owned mines. They reckon they work hard enough to get all they can. That's in Tennant Creek — I don't know about anywhere else. I think other mines that have hundreds of men, like Kalgoorlie or Mt Isa, they wouldn't get [that].

They went down in a bucket for a long while in the Noble's Nob, until they put the lift in to lower them down. And they used to put them in their lunch bags and everything: bits of gold. Now and again the management would go through all the camps — and instead of them getting rid of it quickly they'd just chuck these stones under the bed — any men found with a gold-bearing stone would be sacked.

21 m 40 s

Tell me about the living conditions for miners out on the mining camps?

Well, the ones that prospected for themselves, [it] wasn't too good. Because you see, some of them, you know, they chased gold all their life. When they found it they were disappointed, they didn't want to do that really, because they only went away and wasted it. But it was the searching for it that intrigued them, and got them. They always got up every morning and thought: 'Today's the day, you know, I'll find it.' They used to tell me about this. 'I think I'll find it today Marg', they'd say, if they camped in the pub. And out they'd go. There was a couple of really good finds.

But the living quarters that the real prospectors made, they were very good. They slung wire netting in boughs of trees, and they had camp fires. And always one was a cook. If things were tough the bloke that cooked the most, they'd send him out to get a job on a station, you see, because he could cook. Anyone that could cook bread always got a job on a station, in those days. That's where he'd gather all his wage. He might stop there for three months while the others was prospecting the field.

But you see, prospecting has a fascination about it. Now there's no prospecting goes on here now, because they're all held by leases, which is a terrible thing, I think. But the prospecting, and the finding the colour: that's what men lived for. That type of man. It would be horrifying to some men, but they grew up on it, and they loved it. And they loved the camp life too, you know. They used to take all the beer back with them, and all this business.

Yes, it seems for all the effort they went to get gold and to have a find, that if they ever came into the money they were pretty quick to spend it too.

Definitely. Yes. Now Alec Scott, he was a pretty good old bloke. There were a lot of old fellows prospecting, and of course, they got so old they couldn't work any more. There was no pensions or anything in Tennant Creek, so what he done: there was about five of them, [and] they lived on the verandah of the hotel, just in ordinary beds, and underneath the mattress was their clothes.

See, this is the time I worked there. They were very respected men. Alec Scott — they had to sit at the head of the table; any table they sat at they sat at the head of the table, because they'd grown old in the money that was circulating or making the town. Of course, they died eventually.

The money I made out of the book, I bought plaques and put them up the cemetery; because they were like fathers to me, you see, and they had no-one. So I put them up there. It cost me about a thousand dollars, and I thought they were well worth it too, the respect. They were old gold miners.

And they virtually had no other means of support, but they were being looked after?

Yes, by Alec Scott. He looked after them, he provided meals for them, and I washed their clothes. They only had a suitcase you see, or a swag. In the meantime, over the years, well, the pension — they got the pension, the different ones that grew older in the town.

25 m 00 s

See, today the pensioners get a marvellous __ I think, in this town, I don't know about the other towns in the Northern Territory, I suppose they're all the same. They have a beautiful nursing home here, everything.

What is it about Tennant Creek that's made you stay here for all this time?

People, I think. I always think in myself that God must have smiled or put his hand down on just where Tennant Creek is, because its such a happy place, always has been. People help each other all the time. You walk up the street and everyone knows you; you walk up in a city and no-one knows you. Everyone knows everyone. And if you don't know them, you stop and talk to them, or say 'Hello', or 'Where do you come from?'

See, a terrible lot of tourists here, and you kind of claim them, and they'll tell you. They're quite happy to talk to you. I was running the pensioners' book stall in the main street, and they used to gather round and talk about where they'd been. They come from Alice Springs, and they come from Darwin, and 'How was it?', and all this. Its a feeling of being wanted in a small town. I don't know about other places — I suppose they are in the Territory, like that, are they? A community kind of a __ but they're all made welcome here.

You actually __ from your book it seems as if you fell in love with Tennant Creek from the moment you arrived?

Oh, definitely. Mostly with the naturalness of it; beautiful sunsets, and all these things in their wild state. No-one ever thought of shooting anything much in those days — they had to shoot something to live — but the birdlife was terrific. But people, of course, wiped that out themselves. You see, when Tennant Creek started, well all the wild things left. See how

they wiped those little wallabies out? But they have to, to live.

26 m 58 s

[If people feel] they want to be wanted they should come to Tennant Creek, especially old people. You see these nice flats they provide for everyone, and they take care of them marvellously, you know.

I've been away three times from [Tennant Creek]. I built myself a home in Port Douglas, and when the news came on about the weather in the Northern Territory I'd sit and cry. I was that homesick. So I sold the damn thing and came back again.

Oh, well, I thought I was missing something out there, so I did it again: went back. And a mate of mine struck gold — he found Poseidon — Ken Shirley, you see. Well he said: 'If you're so damn mad to get back there, I'll give you a house' — which he did. He was married of course; his wife was my mate. So he gave it to me, but I couldn't stand it again, I had to give it back to him. I said: 'I'm terrible sorry.'

Of course, everyone that's been here has got some corner of their heart in Tennant Creek. I don't know whether its because they enjoyed their young life here, or they liked the people. Its something, I always think, because everywhere I go, and they know I'm from Tennant, they'll come and see me and ask me: 'How is this one? How is that one?' I love it, even now. I've got my burial plot out there.

28 m 17 s

DAT CASSETTE ENDS

INTERVIEW ENDS