

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH

JAMES WATTS

Recorded June 1990 in Brisbane by Margaret Kowald

DARWIN, 1913 -

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NOTE TO READER

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(Yes -) round brackets indicate an aside or interjection from the other speaker.

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TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH

JAMES WATTS

RECORDED 21 JUNE 1990 IN BRISBANE

BY MARGARET KOWALD

SIDE A, TAPE ONE BEGINS

[Margaret Kowald]: Right, what is your full name?

[Jim Watts]: James Barclay Watts. I was born in Darwin on the fifteenth of January, 1913.

And who was your grandfather?

Fairfax Ingram [Hazzard] Finniss. He came from Mauritius in about [1882], to South Australia, where his uncle was surveying with Colonel Light. And he went to Darwin in 1883.

And what did he do in Darwin?

When he went up there, he just went up looking for work, more than anything. And he did work on the railways when it started, surveying - he wasn't a surveyor but he did work with the survey gangs. And after that he started in his own businesses with the Customs and the agencies, and different things like that. He was closely associated with V.V. Brown, old man Brown, and they were very great friends.

So did he marry in Darwin?

Yes, he married Rosetta Dwyer from Launceston. She was in Darwin as, like a nanny, [laughs] I suppose you'd call it, and she was looking after - I think it was Mr Stretton's children. And they met and married in Darwin - just the year of marriage I couldn't tell you offhand. And they had five children.

Right. And exactly what did your grandfather do as far as work goes, then?

Well, he was an agent, mainly, dealing with the Chinese and in the Customs - he was in Customs with a chap named Searcy, when he was the sub-collector of Customs there. And he was associated with many things there that - I mean, I didn't know them all.

As a child, what are your memories of him?

Well, I always thought of him as an old man because he had a big beard. And he lived next door to us - we always lived next door to one another.

And where was that?

In Bennett Street, just next door to Bell's Corner. But I mean, other than that, he used to wander away into the bush, shooting, and bring back a kangaroo for tea, or something like that. He was a great hunter; he used to do a lot of shooting out on the different stations. He was great friends of the Koolpinyah people - Herbert brothers - the old Mr and Mrs Herbert, and the two boys and the daughter - great friends of theirs.

And one of his children was your mother. (That's right.) What was her full name?

Alice Mona Watts - oh, Finniss, then.

And she was born -
Darwin.

When?

On the sixth of December, 1892.

And she died?

On the twelfth of August, 1940.

And she married your father - his name, full name?

Douglas Crombie Watts. He was born in Brisbane, at Red Hill - Jay Street, Enoggera Terrace, Red Hill, in 1885. I don't know the date of his actual birthday.

And he died, in -

February, 1930, in Toowoomba.

Now firstly your mother then. She was born in Darwin?

Yes.

And how many children were in that Finnis family?

Five children; two girls and three boys.

Your father, then, he came up to Darwin. (To Darwin.) When would that've been?

About 1910, I would say, and he was in the Commercial Bank - accountant and teller in the Commercial Bank.

And he met your mother -

In Darwin.

In Darwin, yes. Was he always in the bank?

Oh, no. Well, he was in the bank in Darwin, he married there, and my brother was born in 1911 - December, 1911 - and they transferred him to Broken Hill. And they got down there, they didn't like it very much, so they decided to go back to Darwin. He left the bank and became an agent in Darwin - his own business.

And what was he an agent for?

Oh, helping the Chinese import stuff from overseas, and he was in charge of the wharves - stevedoring - and worked with Jolly and Company, and you know, different agencies - he carried on all sorts of different agencies. He was associated with the unions when they were formed, and that sort of thing.

Now, he was Mayor of Darwin. What can you remember of his period as Mayor? You were a child then, weren't you?

Oh yes, I was only about four when he first became mayor [laughs], but over a period from 1917 until about 1930 he was mayor about half a dozen times, at least. 'Course they had elections nearly every year up there, for the council. And they appointed the mayor then, and different ones came into it - different mayors at different times - and they didn't last the twelve months, and he'd come back again [laughs].

So he wasn't paid very much for being mayor?

No, I think he only got about - if I remember rightly - I think it was only about twenty pound a year allowance, to do all their entertaining and everything [laughs].

And can you remember any functions that were there in relation to that?

Yes, he used to - well, in 1919 when they started flying from England, he met nearly every plane and entertained every man. And civic receptions and everything, he was in that - he and my mother were connected with everything like that.

And where were the civic receptions held?

Mostly the Town Hall - old town hall.

And can you remember anything about them?

Oh well, I can remember quite a few of them, but I mean civic receptions, I think, are all the same; they just go in and have

something to eat, and a few speeches, and that's all there was to it [laughs].

Now he was involved in the Gilruth affair. (Yes, very much.) What are your recollections of that?

No, well I don't recollect too much about it, but - 'cause I was pretty young then - I do remember him being connected with it. He and Harold Nelson - Harold Nelson was the main man; he was the agitator, actually. But my father was actually the go-between, really. He was a union man, but he was trying to stop any outbreak of violence. And he actually led the deputation [that] went into Gilruth to try and get things calmed down, and get Gilruth to come out and speak to the men. He did in the end, after a long period of time arguing with him, get him to come out.

But he was also sherrif at the same time, I believe, and that was what kept - he had to more or less try and keep the peace between everybody.

Can you remember some of the people that he had to associate with in his job as mayor?

Well, he was associated with everybody [laughs] in Darwin, because at that time there was only about a thousand people in Darwin!

Well, let's talk about the Goose Club.

Well, the Goose Club, that was formed by Judge Mallam - well, then he was a barrister and solicitor in Darwin, R.I.D. Mallam - he didn't become judge until a few years later. And there was old Freddy Thompson - he ran the Northern Territory Times paper. And Norm Barrett - he was another barrister and solicitor - and my father. The four of them, they used to gather down on the Esplanade, near the government offices, on a seat there - an old garden seat - once a week, I think, every Monday night, I think it was - they used to go down there. And they'd discuss the different aspects of things that were going on, and you know, try and work things out; how they could better things for people in Darwin at that time. That's all it was.

I don't know why they got the name of Goose Club! [Laughs.]

Now your mother. What activities did she have in Darwin, that you can remember as a child?

Well, she used to entertain quite a bit, because people - when my father was working or anything, people - instead of having civic receptions, they'd come round to our place, our home. I remember when Kingsford Smith landed in Darwin once, that we went out and met him, and instead of a civic reception he came in the car with us, and came to our place and had a meal and that, at our home.

Now what was this home like? What was the house?

Well, houses in Darwin at that time were different altogether to what houses are now [laughs]. All you had were two big bedrooms in the centre of the house, and you had about a nine or ten foot verandah right round the whole of the house. And the verandahs were generally made out of bamboo; about three strands of bamboo, woven through wire, down, all the way around the house, and that's to allow the circulation of air through the place. And you didn't sleep in a bedroom, you slept on the verandahs. Sometimes the ladies slept in the bedrooms, but it was too hot. They were made of galvanised iron, roofs - no ceilings [laughs].

And the floor?

The floor was a wooden floor, just raised about twelve inches off the ground, that's all. But there were a lot of government houses that were real houses, but - built in the same style - but they were timber, and raised off the ground, up to about nine feet - eight, nine feet - you could walk underneath them. And that was to allow the circulation of air.

How did you go for mosquitoes, then?
We used mosquito nets.

Did you?
Yes [laughs].

And disease. Did you suffer from any - anyone suffer from ailments?
Plenty of [laughs] chicken pox, and measles, and mumps, and things like that. You got colds twice a year - you only had the two seasons, and if there was any change, we got a cold every year. And we used to get fever with them, what we called a dengue fever - aches and pains, but only last about a week and then we were right again [laughs].

There was one time when there was an outbreak of whooping cough, and measles, (Oh, yes.) and what-not. Did that go through your family?
I'll say! [Laughs] Yes, I had the lot [laughs].

You went to the school - the primary school?
Yes, and high school in Darwin. The headmaster there was V.L.Lampe - Vic Lampe. Joe King was the assistant, and oh, there were quite a number of other teachers there. Ernie Tambling - I think his son's still in Darwin.

Grant Tambling, is it?
Yeah.

You were friendly with the Lampe boys, were you?
Oh yes, very friendly with the Lampes, yes.

Can you tell us about them?
Well, the three of them - there was Doug, as the youngest, Norman and Les. Doug became government secretary, I think it was, in Darwin, in the end, just before he died. And Norm was a wing commander in the RAAF during the war. And Les, he was in the ES & A Bank, but he was also a commissioned officer in the war.

And you used to play with them. (Oh, yes.) What did you do for play?
Oh, we had pushbikes and we used to ride around the countryside and go fishing, or different things like that.

And sport?
Oh yes, played cricket together, tennis - Les and I used to play doubles at tennis. Norm and Doug didn't take much to sport. Les did; Les played a lot of football and that.

And you were also friendly with Mr Nelson, were you?
Well, my father was very friendly with him.

His son?
I knew the family very well, yes. And they were a little bit older than me. Well, when I say a little bit older - couple of years, I suppose, mainly. But I noticed - I was reading a book where they said he had five children, but I didn't know the fifth child; I knew four of them. I think they're getting mixed up with Titch, the little Aboriginal boy that they adopted; I think he was the

fifth one.

'Course Jock Nelson, his second son - youngest son, I think he's the youngest member of the family - he became a Member of Parliament later on in life. And then also Administrator of the Northern Territory for a couple of years.

So you didn't really know Jock very well?

Oh yes, yes. I knew him, yes.

You went to school with him?

Yes, oh yes. I met him when he was in Canberra, and went down and had afternoon tea with him one day at Parliament House.

Now, the Chinese community up there -

Yeah, lot of Chinese [laughter].

At school now -

They were very smart, very smart, the boys. Well, there was a boy there named Teddy Moo - his people used to run the bakery in Cavenagh Street - and he's got two sons, doctors here in Brisbane now, the two Moo boys - I think they were down in the Valley. They were; I don't know where they are now.

And so did anyone go away to boarding school?

Only three - now, wait a minute. Les Lampe went to a boarding - they had a scholarship every year. Actually it came in the year after I left school, and I left school at the age of twelve. I'd finished; I'd gone as far as I could go. Then the scholarship came in the year after I left school.

Les Lampe won the first scholarship; Norm Lampe won the second scholarship; and Doug Lampe won the third scholarship; and then a boy named - oh, what's his name - Hayles, I think his name was. I think he was one of the Hayles boys - he won a scholarship. And they all went to - except one - all went to Southport school, and the boy Hayles, I think it was, went to a Charters Towers school. And they were the only four that I knew of. There were others after it, but there was only one scholarship a year where they could go on and advance education at all. We only went to about the sixth, seventh grade up there, that was all.

Did you ever leave Darwin - travel away - as a child?

No. I didn't leave Darwin till - I was sixteen, before I left Darwin.

And what was that for?

That was when I took my father down - he was ill and I took him down to his brother down in Toowoomba, where he died.

And you went by boat?

Boat to Brisbane, and he went up by train to Toowoomba, and I went on to Adelaide, to my auntie. And I just got to Adelaide and I got word that he'd died, and I caught the boat straight back to Darwin; went straight back up, and was back in Darwin within three weeks.

What can you remember of the boat trip?

Oh, I actually had about four boat trips from Darwin after that, when I was in the NT Administration and the Commonwealth government; every three years you had a trip away south. And we used to try and get on the old Marella; that was the best boat to travel on. But there was the Montoro, the Mataram, the Manunda, the Malabar.

They were the main - and Marella, of course - they were the main boats - BP boats. But before them, there was the China line used to run to Darwin - the Tai Yuen, and Shang Sha, a few of those boats. They ran from Singapore to Sydney, and called in at Darwin.

And then from Western Australia, there was the old Bambera. She used to run to Darwin. And then after her, the Koolinda; when the Bambera was scrapped, the Koolinda came on, but they only ran about every two months from Fremantle up. That was the only time we ever got any fresh vegetables or meat; when the boats came in.

And how regularly was that, then?

Well, monthly from the east coast, and every two months from the west coast. But we did grow - well, the Chinese grew a bit of vegetable in Darwin, but not really enough to supply the whole town. And Verburg used to grow a bit on the Adelaide River.

So for keeping of food, there was no electricity.

Nothing.

So what did your mother do?

Oh, we had ice chests. Ice was made by old Felix Holmes [laughs]; he had an iceworks. He ran practically everything in Darwin at that time [laughs].

Actually, can you describe the Holmes estate in your time? Where it was, and

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Oh, yes. I can remember Felix Holmes very well. He was a fairly big - well, not a very tall man, but very, very stout - very big man. And he lived in a fairly big house, too; had a beautiful home there in Mitchell Street. And he had the butcher shop, bakery, soft drink cordial place. Later on he had the electricity - ran the electricity in Darwin. And he had a station out at Humpty Doo, where he shot buffaloes and kept his cattle. And he had the slaughterhouse - he ran practically everything [laughs].

When electricity started in Darwin, we paid one and six a unit for electricity. In those days one and sixpence was a lot of money.

And can you remember the connecting of it? (Yes.) Were you there for that?

Yes. Maurice Holtze was in charge of the engines, and they ran the lines all round - and it was all DC, there was no AC current at all - direct current. And the lights were flickering all the time with the direct current.

Alright, now you left school at twelve. What did you do then?

I started as a messenger boy in the post office. I was there for six months.

What year would that've been?

1926, early 1926 I started in the post office. And then I went from the post office - Leslie Giles asked me if I'd come over as a junior clerk into the NT Administration. So I went over there, and I stayed there until late 1930, working in the sub-treasury, mainly. And then from there I went - Bill West, he was the Works supervisor, he asked me if I'd go down to the Works department of the Commonwealth, and work with them. So I transferred down to there, then.

I went and worked in the Works Department, where I stayed until 1938, when I went out - I couldn't go anywhere, couldn't get on any further in the office there. I was as high as I could go, and I

thought oh well, its time I went out and learned a bit. So I went out with the surveyors, on the survey of the North-South road, from Darwin to Mataranka, and worked with two engineers - there was Kevin Graham, and Gerry Whitlock. He was an American chap, Gerry Whitlock.

And then from there I went on to the construction of the Manton Dam; worked with an engineer named Norm White. And then from there I went on into the Army in 1939.

Now this North-South road survey. How long were you away for that?

Well, we'd be out for about a fortnight at a time. We'd go out for about a fortnight, doing surveying, and after we'd do a bit of surveying we'd have - a gang'd come in behind us, cutting down the trees along the lines, so that they'd start to form the roads up.

It was all a dirt road, of course, done just with ordinary graders.

So you were actually straightening - re-surveying -

Well, we had to try and get a road through - we were trying to put an all-weather road through. And from Darwin to Katherine it was very very difficult, because of the number of creeks and that. And we were trying to work in the hills in the back of Adelaide River and around that area, right through the back where - the actual road does cover part of it now, what we originally did, but its not the full length of the road that we did; it has been altered a lot.

Can you tell us more now about your Manton Dam experience?

Yes, well that Manton Dam - Dr Woolnough, the Commonwealth government geologist, he came up to Darwin - he was commissioned to put a water supply through. Well, he was asked if a water supply could be put through to Darwin, because we were living on wells up here at that time.

So when would that've been?

Oh, the early 1930s - about 1933/34. And he was flying up, and he flew over the Manton catchment area. And he saw this break in the hills there, and he thought well, that'd be a good place. So he wanted to go and have a look at it. He asked me to take him out, and I went out with him, and had a look at it and he said yes, it looked quite good. And it was chosen as the area, and we started work on the dam out there, then.

'Course in that area there was no sand or gravel or anything - only just like a granite rock. And they had to dig all this rock out and put it through - they put crushers in and everything; we had to crush our own sand, and do all that on the spot. There was no concrete mixed by companies and brought to you; you had to mix it all there in mixers, and pour it. And once you started pouring concrete on the dam you had to go - you might do thirty-six hours without a break - straight through.

Was it a special way of constructing the dam?

Yes. We constructed it as actually a miniature Boulder Dam - same as the one in America. There's no reinforcing steel in the actual dam wall. There is a bit of reinforcing steel in the back part, where they got the pumps and that, to get the water out. But in the dam itself its all done with what they call cyclopiian concrete. You laid a six-inch layer of concrete right across the whole length of the wall, and then you put big rocks - stagger them - all the way across. And you put concrete all around the rocks and vibrate it, with vibrators under the rocks and that, and

then put another six-inch layer over - stagger them all the way up. And that's how that wall was built, and its still standing today.

How long did the dam take?

Well, it was only just being constructed - it was only up to ground level - when I left there, 'cause we started about twenty-five feet down, to get on to solid rock - and it was only just coming up to ground level when I left there in '39. So I don't know exactly - it was just after the war started that they rushed it - to get it through for when war broke out.

You were talking about having wells prior to that, at home. Where was your water supply then, for your home?

In our back yard [laughs] - the well was in the back yard.

How far down?

I think it was about thirty-five feet, thirty-five/forty feet. And the water in Darwin was in limestone, and I don't know of anybody from Darwin who's got false teeth. I've got all my own teeth. My grandfather had all his own teeth. My mother had all her own teeth. All my people've got their own teeth. That's from all drinking the lime water.

But we didn't drink it directly from the well; we used to use what they call drip stones. They came from up in Singapore area. They were made out of sand, like a sandstone, and they stood on a frame - and you had a jug underneath - and you filled up in the centre of it, and the water filtered through the sand and dripped off the bottom of it, into a jug. And that was going all the time; we'd keep that full and we'd have beautiful fresh water all the time.

So how did you go for bathing yourselves, then?

Oh, we had water - reticulated water from the well. We had a tank above it. We had a pump that pumped the water up from the well into the tank, and it was reticulated. We had three houses on our well. There was Mrs Bell, and ours, and my grandfather's, next door; we were on that well.

Now, socially in Darwin, when you were working. What did you do for social activities?

Oh, played cricket, football, golf, tennis, [laughs] swimming, shooting, out catching crocodiles, chasing buffalos - did everything!

Now fishing - where did you go fishing?

Well, when I was a boy I used to go away for two or three days with the Abos [laughs]. They were always looking for me [laughs].

Where did you go?

Oh, go away in a canoe somewhere across the harbour, or in the mangroves [laughs].

Oh, what did you catch?

Oh, barramundi, and crabs - land and cooked them on the shore, on Shell Island [and stayed] for a night or two [laughs].

So you didn't go down to the rivers, or -

No, mainly in the harbour. Used to [line] fish mainly off the wharf - off the old wharf. You'd get plenty of fish from there then, those days.

And the Aboriginals that you went with then. Where did they live?

Well, I mainly went with a chap named - oh, I forget his name now; he was a half-caste boy. Actually, he was a returned soldier from the First World War. He committed suicide in Darwin. His father was at Government House; his father and mother worked at Government House, as servants there. Robert - oh, can't think of his name now [laughs]. (Doesn't matter.) I'd go away for a couple of days with him, and we'd spear - or the day we'd come home, we'd spear some sting rays and bring them back for everybody, and all the Aboriginals around.

So how did you catch the barramundi?

Oh, spears. All spearing. No lines - all spears.

You'd have to be accurate, wouldn't you?

Oh, yes [laughs].

Now buffalo shooting, then. Where did you go for that?

Humpty Doo, mainly. I used to go out - George Goodman was the manager at Humpty Doo, and was a very good friend of ours, and we used to go out practically every weekend to his place, and go out buffalo shooting. Often when I went on leave from work - we used to get four months every three years - that's the only leave we got. And instead of coming south, I'd go out buffalo shooting. Go out and stay with George, and he'd have a - see, buffalo hides in those days were very, very high priced, and very precious, because it was used as [leather] - all the machinery was run by belts, and the buffalo hide was used for the belts - it was absolutely outstanding. And it was shipped overseas and made into leather.

All those stations there - Koolpinyah, Humpty Doo, Marrakai, and all those stations - all had to get a certain number each year to pay for their running. And I used to go out and shoot there with George Goodman. We'd shoot from horseback, and also on foot.

And the purpose was just for the skins? (Skin only, yes) So did you skin them, then?

Yeah, skin them and bring the skin back, and then lubras'd clean them off, wash them, salt them down with dry salt, and fold them, and then just keep them.

And where did they go from there?

Shipped away to Sydney, then from Sydney they were shipped overseas.

Did you ever eat the buffalo meat?

Oh yes, yes. They're very good, beautiful.

People in Darwin - did they eat buffalo meat?

No, not very much. No, we ate bullocks. Only on the stations. Even then, I mean they'd take the rump or the fillet steak out of them - that's all we'd take. The Aboriginals'd take the ribs, and we wouldn't worry about the -

As a Commonwealth employee, did you get any - you got the leave every three years - would it've been paid leave, south?

Yes. Fares paid both ways, first class.

Did you find most people went south? (Yes.) Was it unusual to stay?

Oh no, a lot of people did stay in Darwin, but mainly there were people from south who came up to Darwin to work, and went south for their leave, or went home again - transferred back. Like in the Post Office, they only came up for a period of three years and then they went back again, and the Eastern Extension Telegraph

Company was the same. They used to come up and stay a certain time, and went back down south.

Where did you find most of the people came from? Was it South Australia?

Mainly, yes.

SIDE A, TAPE ONE ENDS

SIDE B, TAPE ONE BEGINS

Now, with sport.

Well, football was a big game up there, but that was played in the wet season in Darwin - the opposite to what it is down south. In the wet season because the ground was soft from the rain; in the dry season it was as hard as a rock, and you got too much gravel rash [laughs].

What sort of football was it?

Australian Rules - only played Australian Rules up there. And a terrible lot of the people from south, they played down south, and had some very good players up there. But they had three teams when Vestey's was going - Vestey's had a team. And then there was a team, Wanderers; that was the Post Office, but they used to take some of the coloured boys in with them, and Chinese boys and that, to help them out, to form the team. And then there was the BAT, or the Eastern Extension Telegraph Company, but they were called the Silvertails, or the Waratahs - they were the silvertails, they were all [BAT and] government officials.

And after Vestey's closed down the team was named Buffaloes. There was the Buffaloes, the Wanderers, and the Waratahs. The Buffalo team was mainly the coloured boys. And I think its still going in Darwin, if I -

Oh yes, those names are very familiar to me.

Well, Buffaloes were the team that - mainly half-caste boys and the Chinese boys.

Who did you play for, then?

Well, I played with the Buffaloes for a while, originally, when they were first formed. And I played for Wanderers, too. But Waratahs - when I was in the government offices, I had to play with the Waratahs. That was important - absolutely essential! [Laughs.]

And what sort of rivalry - who were the best?

Oh well, different ones won different years, and that. It was six months of football. Then there was tennis that went right up to A-Grade - what we called A-Grade up there - pennant tennis, and A-Grade tennis. And the women played tennis, and they had social clubs and different things.

Now with football, where did you play?

On the old Darwin oval. Its the one on the Esplanade, around near the Darwin Hotel.

And what about tennis? Where was that?

That was over there, too; tennis courts were on the old [oval] - and there [were] also tennis courts at the Presbyterian Church, down at the corner Woods Street and Mitchell Street, I think it was.

What were the courts made of?

Concrete, concrete courts.

Any other sport?
Cricket.

And that was played on the oval as well, was it?
Yes, that was on the oval there. Yes, everything was held on the oval at that time.

And did the heat affect you?
No, not in any way at all. No, we didn't worry about the heat, the heat was good [laughs]. Oh, we'd often play on there in terrific thunderstorms, and lightning, and people were getting knocked over with lightning and that [laughs]. We still played on [laughs].

Now with your brothers and sisters, can you just run through them, please?
Had an elder brother - he was the eldest in the family.

His name?
Donald. And he died about three months ago, in Sydney.

Did he stay in Darwin?
Yes, he was there practically right through the war, in Darwin.

What did he do?
He was a painter in the Works Department. And during the war he was driving for somebody up there, I don't know who - I can't remember who it was; I think it was somebody in connection with Ansett. He was one of their drivers, and he was there when Darwin was raided - bombed and everything. And I know that Ansett wanted him to drive for them - well, this man wanted him to drive Ansett buses when he came down, take them up to the Northern Territory - but he didn't do it. He came into the office in Sydney, in the Works Department down there, for some time, too, after the war.

And then you were second in the family, (Yes.) and then who was next?
My sister Vera. She's married to engineer Jack Haren, that did the water supply in Darwin, and she lives on the Gold Coast now, down Broadbeach. And my other sister, Muriel, she's married to my wife's brother [Lynn Baker], who lives [near] Sydney, [at] Tuggerah Lakes. And my youngest sister, she was in Darwin, but she died about two years ago, [in] Darwin.

And who did she marry?
Tommy Thompson. He was in the Post Office. He was there when it was bombed, actually. I don't know how he got out of it [laughs] - he did.

And socially, with your brothers and sisters - I mean did you go to dances together?
Oh, yes, went to dances. One of the biggest events of the year in Darwin, was the Bachelor's Ball. Oh yes, every year we had that. That started eight o'clock at night, and went all right through till daylight next morning. Went straight to work from the ball [laughs].

What did you wear to that?
Oh, white suits and black ties. Oh yes, you'd get dressed up for that.

And what did the women wear?
Oh, they were all dressed up in evening dress. (Gloves?) Yes, yes, it was very, very posh [laughs].

Where was that held?

Soldier's Hall. The old Soldier's Hall. That was where practically everything was held. Didn't use the Town Hall very much for social [events].

And what sort of band would be playing?

Mainly piano, or flute, and guitar, I think it was, something - there wasn't a very big band - drums. But it was good enough for us [laughs].

And the pictures - you went to the pictures?

Pictures, yes. One picture show, no roof on it, tin walls - old Don Theatre. That's where the Don Hotel stands now. And that was run by a chap name George Wedd, and he had his own little engine outside that ran the electricity for it. And it was all open air, and when it rained you put your umbrellas up, and sat under the umbrellas there.

Was it segregated, the seating?

Yes. The back part was like - wooden benches ran up the back, from the top of the wall down to the floor, and the Aboriginals sat on one side and some of the other whites on the other. But down the bottom part were canvas chairs, and they were about two shillings each - the canvas chairs - and sixpence up on the bleachers [laughs].

And what did you do at interval?

Well, went to the Chinese shops around the place, and got drinks and lollies and things.

Now picnics. Where did you go for that?

Mainly - well, we used to go to the mouth of Rapid Creek - that used to be our main swimming hole. Used to be a big hole in there - in amongst the rocks - and we used to swim in there. Used to go there quite often for picnics.

How did you get there?

Oh, by car. We had an old 1914 Dodge [laughs] - you could hurl everywhere in it. I think its still going in Alice Springs now! [Laughs.] (Really?) Yeah. Was last time I was up there, I saw it there. But yes, we went there, and to Howard Springs, and out to Koolpinyah Station - different places - and the Howard River, Humpty Doo. Any of those places we'd go for picnics.

Was there a problem with stingers in the sea, for swimming?

Oh yes, in the wet season. But they didn't worry us [laughs]. We used to go swimming just the same; we'd get stung, and race out and put hot sand on it, and it was alright. We'd get welts on our arms and that. I remember my uncle getting stung; he dived in once and got stung all over his arms, and got it round the wrists, and he nearly died. He [was] vomiting, like black ink from it. And there was one boy that died; he dived in and got [stung] around the chest. It killed him.

But normally, I mean we used to use cast nets for catching prawns and that, round there, and you'd get stingers in the nets all the time - we never worried about them; just pulled them out and threw them away.

And where did you go swimming?

Well, we started swimming down at Fort Hill, old Fort Hill, where the jetties are now. They were the original baths; that was just made out of wire netting on sticks around. And they shifted from there to Lameroo Beach. They built the baths at Lameroo Beach with a

concrete wall, which would retain water at low tide, and like wooden slats all the way around, close enough to keep the stingers out, they said, but they used to get in. But actually, it was more or less a shark-proof place than anything else - sharks and crocs.

What can you remember of the Aboriginal compound at Kahlin?

Well, actually I remember when the Aboriginals were camped at Lameroo Beach - I can remember as well as anything. Well, I don't know whether they were all there then, I mean, because I think a lot of them were at the compound, but there were a lot still camping at Lameroo Beach.

And I remember the police tracker named Big Foot Charlie. Our boy we had working - I think he was a Wagait, came from the Wagait tribe - and he came in one day and he said: 'Boss, Charlie bin told they're gonna take his kidney fat'. You see, the Aboriginals used to kill each other for their kidney fat. That was for putting on their body and decorating themselves up with, and quite a lot of them killed for that. And we said: 'Oh, he won't be killed - he's a police boy'. Any rate, the next day he came in and he said: 'Charlie dead'. We said: 'Why?' He said: 'Somebody kill him and take him for kidney fat'. That was a tracker, and they were at Lameroo Beach. Then they shifted them; they made them get out of there and go to the compound after that.

But I remember the compound - old Bob McDonald, he was in charge of it there. And he used to walk round with a stockwhip around his neck, and if they didn't do what they were told, they got a crack with the whip [laughs].

Did you have people working for you in the house?

Oh yes, yes. They didn't live with us - like, on the property - they used to come in of a morning, and go home in the afternoon, to the compound. The compound was out at Myilly Point - Kahlin compound.

What did they do in the home, then?

Oh, they did housework, and yardwork, and a bit of washing, or something like that. Different ones, like if you had a boy, or if you had a lubra - see, the lubras did washing, and that sort of thing, and a bit of washing up in the kitchen, but the black boys generally did the yardwork.

Did you look down on them?

No, no. No, we never looked down on them; we used to more or less go with them. I mean, as far as I'm concerned the Aboriginal's as good as anybody. I mean, if you did want anything done, if you showed them what to do and did it with them, they'd do it as good as gold, but if you left them on their own, they'd naturally sit down and wouldn't do it. But I always found - I've never had an argument or a row with any Aboriginal in my life.

Did they stay for long?

Yes, they'd work for a year, and then you'd let them go home. And you'd give them a bag of flour, and sugar, tea, and tobacco. That's all they want, and away they'd go. Or they might want a bit of calico - red calico - that was their main thing - red calico for the lubras [laughs]. They used to wear the red calico round their waist.

But I can remember sitting on Bell's corner one day, and three or four Aboriginals came along the road with the lubras, and little piccaninnies sitting on the shoulder - and I guarantee that they

could hardly crawl - just sitting on the shoulders, with two hands full of their mother's hair. The Aborigines and the lubras - not a stitch of clothing on - and the old buck carrying their spears, and she was carrying the swag and everything on her back, as well as a kiddie. I can remember that as well as anything - walking down Bennett Street.

[PAUSE]

And they had corroborees, didn't they?

Yes. Well, had corroborees about once every two or three weeks, down on Mindil Beach. That was ceremonial. Of a Sunday afternoon, all the white people used to walk out from the town and go down there and watch them. But if there was a death, or anything like that, they'd put on a special corroboree. And if there was a row amongst the tribes they'd put on a real fight down there - spears, spear one another [laughs]. You could go and watch that, too, but you're not supposed to - you had to be careful! [Laughs.]

They got quite violent?

Oh yes, very. If one got hit, well of course they'd have to go until one of the others got hit. Oh yes, it was - never seen them killed, but I mean - they were very - oh, wonderful the way they could miss spears. I mean they could knock them off with a stick, with spears coming towards them. They were very good.

So is that area in fact a sacred burial ground?

It was, yes, it was. There'd be a lot of Aborigines buried there. That's where the casino is now.

You were there when the guns were put - emplaced.

I was there when the guns landed in Darwin; I was in the Works Department. Actually took them out to where they had to go - East Point and to Point Emery, out at Larrakeyah. Had two six-inch guns at Larrakeyah, and two six-inch guns at East Point.

And they landed off the boats.

Boats, yeah.

And how were they actually carted there? I mean, they were very heavy.

Oh, they brought their own transports with them from south, big trucks. I think they were big Leyland trucks with, like carriers on the back - sort of a semi-trailer thing that they were carried on.

Was East Point used for recreation?

Used to be, yeah, originally. There's a little sandy beach there. In the wet season, big surf used to run in there from the monsoons. We used to swim out there, off the rocks, in the surf there.

Coming back then, to Vestey's, at the meatworks there. You were there when that was going, weren't you? Were you associated with Vestey's at all?

No, not very much, no. I knew the people - I think old Conaher was the general manager there, and I think Gowdy was the assistant. I remember them, but - the main thing I remember about Vestey's was when their big sort of a mess, and living quarters for the men - got burnt down. It was a big - about a five-storey building - it was the biggest building in Darwin. Actually, there's a photo in the book here of it.

And it was burnt down when they opened in 1925, I think it was - the second time. And it was burnt down there one evening. Lucky

nobody was hurt, but I think the men actually set it on fire!
[Laughs.] And we all rushed out from town to have a look at it.
But the actual working of Vestey's, I never went into the place
at all when it was working.

Chinatown. Did you ever go there?

Yes. Yes, there's a bootmaker down there, Ernie Lee - he wasn't a full Chinese, he was part-Chinese. And he was married to a white woman, and he had a son named Bobby. We used to knock around together. And Bobby died about four years ago, in Pine Creek; he was growing fruit up in Pine Creek and had a store in Pine Creek. Yes, we used to go down there and play - old Ernie Lee used to go fishing a lot, with my father - and Bobby and my brother and I used to play round there. Bobby had a dog, and we used to go out with the dog, hunting in the bush there. 'Course, round Darwin it was all bush then; one mile out and you're out in the bush.

The Chinese shops - what can you remember of them?

Well, Fang Chong Loong was the big place where they used to make all the clothes. He was the main person that'd do all the clothing for Darwin, practically. Oh, Wing Chong Sing did a lot, too, but not nearly as much as Fang Chong Loong. And another thing in Darwin - we never carried money; it was all credit. Everybody lived on credit up there. Every shop you went into, you didn't pay any money for anything; you just put it on the slate and every month you got a bill. And if you paid it within a month you got two-and-a-half percent discount.

And people were generally good with that credit? I mean, everyone paid?

A lot of them during Vestey's time I believe got away owing a lot of money; clearing out and that. Actually, there's a big story in one of the books here about Bob Toupin clearing out, when he was there, and he was Mayor of Darwin.

So did you feel that you were one of the well-off people in Darwin, as far as finances go, or - ?

Well, yes, we never wanted for anything; never wanted for anything at all. I mean, we always had what we wanted. I mean, we weren't wealthy, by any chance; I mean, there was not much wealth around at that time. But I mean, we never wanted for anything at all. We had everything we wanted. And 'course my father died when I was only sixteen. From then on we had a bit of a struggle for a while.

Yes, now what happened then? Did your mother have to work?

No, she didn't work, no. I was working, and my brother was working. But that was just the time of the Depression and there was no welfare or anything. I think my brother got a pound a week for a day's work, or something; that was all he got. But luckily, I was working all the time, and I think one of my sisters was working.

Can you remember people coming from the south, during the Depression?

Yes, they used to come up there, but they didn't stay there because there was nothing there. People coming from outback, on the stations, and that sort of thing, but they were better off out in the bush than they were in town there.

I suppose you were one of the lucky ones, having a government job?

Yes, I never lost a day's work right through the whole Depression; I was very lucky.

Did you feel that the Chinese were wealthy?

Well, to a certain extent, yes, but they never showed it. I mean,

they were quite generous people, the Chinese. I mean, the Chinese New Year was a terrific time in Darwin. Goodness me, there [were] parties, and everything! All the white people joined in with them, and they'd have their dances through the street with the dragons, and we'd all be in under the dragons, and playing around with them. And crackers, and then go and have a big dinner with them at night. Oh, it was a time of it. They were really wonderful people; never had a moment's trouble with any of them.

Now the hotels in Darwin. Can we just go through each of those?

Right, there was the Terminus Hotel, in Cavenagh Street. That was built alongside the tree of knowledge; the tree of knowledge was outside the hotel. And then there was the Victoria Hotel, in Smith Street, opposite the Star Theatre. And then there was the Club Hotel, round in Mitchell Street.

Originally, all the hotels were owned by the government. When Gilruth's time - they forced him to sell them privately. And the first person that I remember having the Club - I don't actually remember, but I know was in the Club Hotel - was old Mrs Bell. That's Heather Harris' mother. She and her husband were there for a while.

Then the Parers came, and they bought the Terminus Hotel in Cavenagh Street, and the Club Hotel, and they ran that for many, many years; ran the two of the hotels, the families. And that's when Claude Cashman came to Darwin, and he was staying at the Club Hotel, and he met his wife there - she was Beryl Parer - and they were married.

Because then he - did he get the newsagency then?

No, he was in Jolly's. He was what they call a counter-jumper there. He was in the drapery part of it, selling stuff there in Jolly's store. He came up for Jolly's store.

Adams and Foster had the paper shop, then. Then Cashie started in it; he bought them out and started up.

So the hotels, then, we've done, have been the Terminus, and the Don (No, not the Don.) - no, the Vic (Victoria, and the Club.) and the Club.

Now, the Don Hotel - Christina Gordon bought - May Brown came down to the Victoria Hotel. She was at Pine Creek. She was Mrs Seale at that time, and he died, I think. And she remarried to a chap named Brown, and they came down - they had the Pine Creek Hotel. And they came down from Pine Creek, to Darwin, to go to the Victoria Hotel.

And then Christina Gordon, she took over the Pine Creek Hotel, and then she bought old May Brown out. Mrs Gordon had two sons, and one went away to south, and he got married. And when he came back Mrs Gordon decided then that they'd go into the Don Hotel. The Don Hotel was built by - I think it was Snell - one of the contractors up there. And Mrs Gordon bought it out, and it became Gordon's Don Hotel.

And the Club Hotel, then?

Oh, the Club went right up almost to the war years, and then Micky Paspalis bought that. Well, he bought it out and re-built the whole place into the Darwin Hotel; its the Darwin Hotel now.

So were you there during the changeover?

I was there when Micky started all this, yes, yes.

Did he actually pull the other one down?

Yes. Well, not for a start. He built onto the back of it, I think, for a start, and then pulled the front of it down afterwards. The old place was only a ramshackle sort of a place, you know; it wasn't a very good place at all. Not modern, or anything like that - very old.

The Administrator's house - did you ever go there?

Government House? (Yes.) Oh, yes, used to go there quite often. I used to have afternoon teas and that, there, with the ladies and that - I'd go with those [laughter.] But I remember when Horsborough was up there, and the North Australian Commission - they were investigating the north, just after Gilruth. And he had two sons, and I used to go round and play with them - play tennis - and go round to their place quite often.

And what were your recollections of going to Government House?

Well, we mainly played tennis and then just sat out on the side and had a glass of lemonade, or something like that, and a bit of cake or something. But other than that, I never had anything to do inside, with the people there. I remember when Wardell was there - as Administrator - went around a couple of times. I used to go to his office - he had an office built just down either side of it, and he used to work in there quite a bit.

Did the general people in Darwin, were they - did they feel that they could go to the Administrator's house, or did they feel as if he was quite - ?

Oh, by invitation, by invitation.

He was still quite superior as far as that goes?

Yes. There actually was quite a class distinction in Darwin. I mean, there was, as I said, the silvertails - the BAT and the government office people.

What did BAT stand for?

British Australian Telegraph, and it was also called the Eastern Australian Telegraph Company. BAT - they all used to call it BAT for short [laughs].

So there was them -

And the government - all the government officials. They were all silvertails [laughs].

And who were the next lot down then?

The Post Office. And they were next door to one another [laughs].

Where did the bank people fit in?

Well, the banks were the silvertails too. (Were they?) Yeah.

So what came then, down below the Post Office?

Well, then there was generally the - you know, wharf people, and labourers, and things like that.

Where did the shopkeepers fit in?

Well, depends. See you had the Chinese shopkeepers and you had the white shopkeepers. Well, the only white shopkeeper that I can remember, that had a store there for many, many years, was A.E. Jolly and Company. They were at the corner of Bennett and Smith Street, now opposite the Commercial bank. And Mrs Bleezer started a sports store there.

But earlier on in history, Solomon had a store there. That was in Smith Street. And then Luxtons had a store there; that was down

in Smith Street, also. And P.R.Allen had a store there; that was round in Mitchell Street. And out towards the Two-and-a-Half Mile - One Mile, we used to call it - was old Presley; he had a store. And they were the only white people that had stores up there. But Jolly's was the main one. But the Chinese were the people that had the stores there, and they were the ones that most of the people dealt with.

As far as food and clothing?

Oh yes, yes. (Anything like that?) Everything. But in those days, I mean, you dealt with a store there, and at Christmas time you got a ham, and you know, a real Christmas hamper from every store that you dealt with.

So okay, Christmas Day. It was very hot, so what generally happened?

Well, in my time you used to put a nine-gallon keg on the end of your table, set your table with all the Christmas goodies, and you'd go out. Different people go to different houses all over the place. You mightn't meet up with the people from the house you go to. You go and have a drink and have something there, and then go on to the next house, and just wander around house to house [laughs], and then you'd have a big Christmas dinner at night, at home with your own people.

And did church come into it at all? (Who?) Did you go to church? Was Darwin very religious?

Oh yes, at midnight. They used to have a midnight service at the Catholic church, and the Church of England. But we used to go to church on Christmas Day, Easter.

But the religion up there - I mean, the Catholics and the - everybody got on. There was no distinction, or any animosity amongst each other, up there at all. Old Father Henschke - he was the Catholic priest up there - he used to come around home, and stay and have afternoon tea with us, and that. We were Church of England - he'd come around - and Kentish, I think it was, the Presbyterian man - he'd come around, and everybody mixed together.

Father Gsell, he was over at Bathurst Island. I remember him as well as anything - great big black beard down here. Brother Smith - I remember him when he was in the Navy! He was in Darwin in the Navy, with the old Geranium, when they [were] doing all the surveying of the Australian coast. And he was a wild man! Drunk! Swear! [laughs] And the next thing we knew of, he came up as Brother Smith from the Catholic church. And he went over to Bathurst Island - he was a changed man - and they started a sawmill over there, cutting timber, and he cut his left hand off. I went down on the boat with him, to - he was in hospital for a while in Darwin, then we came down on the boat to Sydney.

And so the religions, then, would've been (Only the three.) just the Catholic, the Church of England -
And Presbyterian.

SIDE B, TAPE ONE ENDS