



During 1989 and 1990, Jack Darcey, an oral historian, travelled over 26,800 kilometres around Australia to interview a cross-section of men and women involved in various aspects of the fishing industry. Howard Smith also conducted three interviews in Western Australia.

These memoirs contain valuable and often colourful insights into the development of the industry.

The following people from the State of Western Australia tell their stories here.

George **Bass**

John **Bell**

Bernard **Bowen**

Derrick **Brown**

George **Challis**

Bernie **Clarkson**

John **Cole**

Francisco **Correia**

Judith **Dittmer**

Ken **Douglas**

John and Beth **Fitzharding**

Jack **Fry**

Irwin **Healy**

Ron **Heberle**

Arthur **Horner**

Dick **Hoult**

Peter **Jecks**

Bob **Jones**

Bill **Kent**

Brian **Leahy**

Jane **Liddon**

Mick **Lombardo**

Kimberley **Male**

Fortuna [Fred] **Marchese**

William **Miller**

Bill **North**

Bill **Overton**

Mauro **Pansini**

Peter **Parish**

Terry **Parish**

Savo [Sam] **Pavlovich**

Adelaide Jane **Renfrey**

Lionel **Renfrey**

Greg **Roach**

Chris **Russell**

Emanuel **Soulos**

Nick **Soulos**

Peter **Spurr**

Cheslyn **Stubbs**

Fred **Swarbrick**

Anthony **Tomlinson**

Vic **Wann**

Lee **Warner**

Tom **Wear**

Joe [Jack] **Weir**

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## Verbatim transcript of an interview with **GEORGE BASS**

### **TAPE 1 SIDE A**

**JD** This is tape one, side A of an interview with Mr George Bass.

Could you record your date of birth and place of birth?

**BASS** I was born in Fremantle on 9th August 1948.

**JD** And how long have you been in Dongara?

**BASS** I've been in Dongara for twenty-five years.

**JD** 25. And was your father a fisherman?

**BASS** My father originally was an engineer, constructing, construction buildings, conversion of agriculture equipment, market gardening equipment. He actually worked on the Kwinana Refinery, had major contracts on the Kwinana Refinery and moved into ship building later on his business. And once he decided to retire he retained one of the craft he built. And that's how I became involved in the fishing industry because he decided he didn't really want to retire after all and took over skippering that particular craft.

**JD** You took over skippering or your father did?

**BASS** No my father originally took over skippering and I came up for school holidays one Christmas and he had no crew. I had a couple of school mates with me and we worked on crew, we needed the fruit cases to stand on so we could reach the wheel and the winch and so forth, but we managed. And in actual fact one of my school mates is still here in Dongara, has his own boat now fishing himself. So from that Christmas holiday break it set my life style.

**JD** George, your grandfather was involved in fishing I believe?

**BASS** Yes, we only found out recently, the history wasn't available to us until my grandmother died, and all the relevant documents have come forward and we found that he was a lecturer at the university during the War and he was asked because of his nationality to cease teaching. So he had to make a living and he went fishing and being educated he had clues of how to preserve the fish and he was actually canning fish on the vessel itself. And unfortunately he was shipwrecked up at Port Gregory and although they made a raft and got one chap back to Geraldton safely, by the time the rescue parties arrived the other three chaps including my grandfather had been speared by the natives.

**JD** Goodness.

**BASS** So it's strange how things work out.

**JD** Yes. George was your grandfather from Germany?

**BASS** Yes that's right, yes.

**JD** Yes. And about what time in terms of years was this accident that cost your grandfather his life?

**BASS** Well I've got to admit I don't have those dates with me, I do have the papers, they're in Perth. I should have got them because I haven't had time to actually research them, but there are **West Australian** newspaper cuttings reporting the fact. It was, it would be probably sixty years ago.

**JD** Sixty years ago, yes. Thank you for that. Could you outline briefly some of the major changes that you've seen in these years that you've been involved in the industry?

**BASS** Well Jack I think the major change is when I started fishing we arrived in Dongara and the fishing community existed, but they operated on a day to day basis where they'd go out and catch their product and if they had a good catch for a couple of days or a day they were content for the rest of the week, that they earned enough it wasn't necessary to go to work. If the catches were poor they were working every day. And when they were good they'd just operate just enough to keep their lifestyle the way they wanted it. But as time has evolved of course the pressures have evolved and the effort has to be greater.

And I think closing off, making it a limited entry industry put value on your licence so that anyone who wished to become involved in the lobster industry had to start paying money for a licence whereas initially it was only a maximum fee for a licence to go fishing. And probably that was the major factor which has then had a flow on with, because the fishing industry started running as a business you have to be more efficient, you have to be competitive so you have to have the equipment as well to enable you to do that. And it just snowballs from there. We're modernising the fleet all the time. We're modernising our navigational equipment and every year there's something there to create a little bit more efficiency which in turn will bring about conservation measures.

**JD** George your boat the **Clive James II** is the largest boat, I would think, operating out of Dongara or out of Port Dennison to be more accurate, could you give us a run down on the boat?

**BASS** Well the boat's designed basically for comfort and efficiency, keeping both of those things in mind, because if we're efficient we're going to show a return, but we have to be also comfortable so we can be persistent in our effort. If we aren't comfortable we're not persistent and then we're not efficient as well. So the boat is, it's a high speed craft. It's powered by twin V12 Mercedes diesels. Cruising speed 18 knots. The horsepower of the engines, they're 480 horsepower each. We have a range of approximately 600 nautical miles. The boat is capable of loading the entire craypots, licenced craypots we're entitled to to carry at any one time. We can put all of them on

board and ship them up to 120 mile in one day and not lose a day's fishing. So that's really efficient.

**JD** Yes. How did the name **Clive James II** come about?

**BASS** Well **Clive James II** came about - my father died approximately 15 years ago and we had the original vessel that he built and when I became skipper I could see that we had to retain our efficiency, although we had an efficient boat in the industry at the time, a few years down the track it wasn't going to be efficient, so I decided to move into (it was a steel craft) I decided to move into the modern material, fibreglass at the time, and I built actually two craft at that stage. And I named one after my father, which was the **Clive James** and the other after my mother **Rose Margaret**. And then this latest vessel which is approximately seven years old I transferred the name of the **Clive James** over to the second boat which then became **Clive James II**. And the original **Clive James** is now named **Ann Lyn** after my wife.

**JD** Right, thank you. You've got some pretty sophisticated equipment on board, could you detail some of that for us?

**BASS** Yes, well it's a far cry to the old days where we had on the original boat a compass, which was an aircraft compass so you had to read back to front and a clock. And you set the throttle by the sound of the engine, because there was no rev counters on the engines those days and you steamed for four or five hours on a set course and then started looking for your gear. Today we have compasses with automatic pilots. We have sun logs, which actually measure distance through the water very accurately and to back all that up we have satellite metres of a destination.

**JD** Is that the one that has a memory bank that can find the same spot again next year perhaps?

**BASS** Yes, the equipment we're putting on board now it's computerised and we can actually store 4,000 weigh points or marks on the ocean where we strike good ground, retain that in the memory bank and go back to it at any time we wish. So, whereas the old days you might use forty or fifty pots to find a patch of ground you know is there, which allows you to have ten pots catching efficiently. With this equipment now we can just use those ten pots and go straight there and we don't have to waste the other pots looking for it. Because the old days we just couldn't get that accurate like today.

**JD** Is that gear in common use now?

**BASS** It is becoming common use, I think it will become as common as what radars have become. Compasses on a boat, I think every boat eventually will have a GPS system and for navigating purposes, which then in turn lifts the efficiency no doubt in the industry, so we're going to have to compensate.

**JD** Right. You carry radar?

**BASS** Yes, we carry radar. We have radar, radar with the system we have now isn't really necessary but it is handy on a real close quarters situation where you're coming into an anchorage, you're entering the Abrohlos Islands, you can turn the radar on and actually see the islands or see the channel markers even through the GPs systems would give you an accuracy that is correct and accurate. But you cannot totally rely on

it. The same as you cannot totally rely on radar. You still have to visually be on the look out and aware of your actual position.

**JD** Is there a system of radar beacons along the coast at all?

**BASS** No, no, in actual fact this coast here is very, very poor particularly around Dongara. Very poor for radar because of the low lying structure of the coastline, we're really limited to picking up positioning points for locating particular ground. Fishing further up the coast which we do at different times of the year, north of Murchison River along the cliffs and that, it's quite satisfactory the radar for accurate fixing. And also around Geraldton, there's some big hills around Geraldton area where you can pick up. But the GPs systems are just another advanced step and giving you that much more capability than what the radar does.

**JD** A vessel like this would be able to operate in weather that would have been quite impossible for smaller and less sophisticated craft, is that the fact?

**BASS** That's definite. The vessel, this vessel is designed to operate in all weather. In actual fact even the trimming of the vessel, we have live tanks down the rear of the vessel so that after we leave port and if we're hanging out for four to five days at a time as we load up with lobster the tanks become filled down the back and while on anchor during the night it sort of lifts the nose, the bow of the boat and gives you a better ride. And the whole fleet in this harbour now is capable of going almost anywhere they wish in the lobster ground within their fuel range of Dongara in just about any weather.

**JD** And the catch nowadays is stored in these tanks almost exclusively is it?

**BASS** Yes. I think industry is looking at ways of improving our productivity, and our productivity we can't catch anymore, we are at our limit as far as catching. If we start catching anymore we'll start depleting our stocks and we won't have an industry. So what we're looking at is the marketing side and the quality control to promote our income. And one means of doing that is supplying the lobster in absolute perfect condition. In actual fact we're now shipping lobster live to Japan, Taiwan and hopefully Europe.

**JD** There are still some markets for the frozen tails presumably?

**BASS** Yes, there's... Our biggest market in the past years has been America, but with the Taiwanese and Japanese entering the market a lot of our product is now going to those countries, but America is still our biggest purchaser of rock lobster and I think it will be appropriate that we start to look at introducing live lobster to America, rather than... Because it is a much better quality product than the frozen tail.

**JD** To come back to the boat, would you say it's an easy boat to operate in terms of the fishing operation?

**BASS** It's a very easy boat, we've designed it to be easy for the crew. I'm a great believer in doing it the easy way. Basically maybe I'm lazy [laughs] but I've designed it with the past experience I've had fishing in mind, and the future and I believe we have one of the most efficient and easiest operating vessels on the coast.

**JD** What about ease of maintenance?



**BASS** Ease of maintenance, this one is constructed out of aluminium. We have minimum maintenance on it. I think the ultimate boat as far as maintenance is concerned is the fibreglass vessel, they seem to have a little bit less. This particular vessel is painted which creates a little bit more maintenance but it does give the appearance of a nice, clean tidy boat though, and it's not a lot of effort, but just a little bit.

**JD** Maintenance of such things as the power plant and the equipment, is that readily available in Dongara?

**BASS** Well it's evolved as the industry's developed, services have developed in the community and we tend to use, because you can't down time for breakdowns, we tend to use the best of equipment so that your maintenance is kept down to a minimum especially during the season, you can't afford the breakdowns you must be operating the whole time. But there are facilities in town and if they're not here there's a forty mile drive to Geraldton and you can get most things there.

**JD** What sort of crew do you carry? How many?

**BASS** We carry two crew on this vessel, operating 130 pots this particular year, we'll carry two crew. I operate from outside, you know the outside position and assist in pulling I just don't only steer the vessel. And sort of watch the navigational equipment, sounders and that, I actually operate the winch and tipper so forth so that assists them. And it's basically all teamwork because you don't have to work eight hours a day. You have to pull your gear and reset and if you can do it quicker and easier and especially in the weather conditions we get in with the southerlies coming in in the afternoon, if we can get it done before then the days a lot easier.

**JD** What are the, what about availability of crew, is there a big turnover of crew members?

**BASS** Years ago we had big problems with crew because it was easy money to earn and they'd come and earn x amount of dollars. You'd train them, because it does take training, and does take time before they become skilled operators and they'd reach a certain figure that they've learnt and said "Thank you very much, I've enjoyed that," and off they'd go. So you'd have to start all over again. But now the crew are permanent. If for instance you do, somebody wishes to leave. I had one chap after a few years with me, this year, left, but he decided he wanted to travel around the world and he's on a world trip at the moment, a working holiday. But he'll be back. But when he did leave he had already lined somebody up to take his position, so you don't go looking for crew, you just look at what comes around because the word soon moves around that there's a job available and you make your choice from there.

**JD** Is it reasonable for a crew member to have ambitions that he would like to get his ticket and go onto to becoming a skipper?

**BASS** I think there's a lot of crew who are doing their tickets now. And I believe it's easier to obtain a position as skippering and eventually buying into the industry than what it was twenty years ago. A couple of factors, the crew are more permanent so they're getting their sea time. There are better training facilities for them to become educated in the field of seamanship. And then once they do move in and look at purchasing, finance - it is easier to obtain finance these days than what it was years ago. Although the price is a lot higher I think it's all comparative. We weren't paying

these sorts of figures we're receiving per kilo of lobster fifteen years ago, as what we're receiving now.

**JD** Just to finish off the crew side of things, fishing has always had a reputation of being a pretty rugged sort of an occupation and a dangerous one, does that still apply? It's pretty hard work still isn't it?

**BASS** Physically it's hard, but it's a healthy life. You're out at sea, there's no pollutants. You're not dealing with any chemicals. So long term healthwise and the activity involved keeps you physically fit.

**JD** What about accidents?

**BASS** Accidents? Oh, I've never had any major accidents on board in my experience of fishing. I have been involved in rescues where we have had fatalities of people getting caught up in ropes or boats going down. But, you're certainly much safer on a lobster boat out there fishing than driving down the road to go to work.

**JD** But that's a relatively recent development isn't it, that I think the accident rate has reduced in the industry hasn't it?

**BASS** The accident rate - yes possibly it has, probably because of the standard of the boats and the more experience, the better education. It has improved and we've seen the, probably accident rates in other industries increase possibly rather than decrease, so it's a two fold situation where's it's being emphasised that it's a pretty safe industry to be involved in. I believe anyway at this stage.

**JD** From what you said before I gather that you spend several days at sea on occasion, is that right?

**BASS** Yes, it just depends on the areas of operation. Our main fishing is, because of the boat, the size of the boat, it's a deep-water, what we call a deep-water vessel and probably 85% of our fishing effort is outside our thirty mile limit of the coastline and of course your expense of running backwards and forwards every day can become quite excessive unless you utilise the capabilities of the boat and anchor out. We don't tend to do it so much when we're operating out of Port Dennison, but at different times of the year we'll move up the coast and operate out of Murchison River or south passage, Sharks Bay, where we're a hundred miles from port. And then we'll go out and we'll stop there until we either load up with crays or get short on fuel, and then we'll go back and unload and fuel up. And that may be four to five days. We don't stop out any longer than five days because the lobster starts to deteriorate and you may start to lose some lobster.

**JD** But always it's crayfishing, you don't attempt any sort of other fishing?

**BASS** We do, we wet line. After we've finished, as a relaxation more or less, but it is still income coming in, we do drop a line and we make take an hour and a half to two hours just anchoring the vessel on a piece of ground that has fish. And we'll stop and catch fish. We actually market our fish from our residence here supplying the tourists. It's very disappointing when you come into unload your produce off the boat and you have a heap of tourists on the jetty and you've got no scales on board and no change on board because they're not the sort of things that sort of you like to worry about

when you get ashore. So I have facilities at our residence where I can tell them to go up to the house and they can purchase their fish from there.

**JD** Right. What sort of fish do you catch, George?

**BASS** Well we, the fish available to us are probably the main fish are the schnapper, groper and dhufish and the sharks. But all the fish we catch is marketable and it's good quality as well.

**JD** We've pretty well covered the economics of the exercise I think, but there's one or two things that you might like to mention. I'd like to know for example, what the replacement cost in present day terms would be for a vessel of this size and equipment?

**BASS** To replace this vessel, not including the value of the licence just the hull equipment necessary to fit out the vessel, you'd be looking at between three quarters of a million and a million dollars.

**JD** And the question of licences, I believe there is a ruling rate for the cost of a licence?

**BASS** Yes Jack, at the moment the market price is approximately \$8,200 per pot. Going back eighteen months that price got as high as \$10,000 per pot. And I, in the future I can see it getting back and stabilising. If the price per kilo of lobster is up this year we'll be looking again at the end of this year at approximately \$10,000 per pot.

**JD** That is the end of tape one, side A of this interview, please turn the tape over for the commencement of side B.

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## **TAPE 1 SIDE B**

**JD** This is tape one, side B of an interview with Mr George Bass.

George, we were about to talk about licensing and could you outline to us the basis on which a vessel licence is determined?

**BASS** The vessel licence was determined on the size of the actual vessel itself. It was three pots per foot of boat and that determined what pot entitlement that particular vessel was entitled to fish with.

**JD** Is that length overall, or length at waterline?

**BASS** No, that was originally the length was taken from the bow stem to the centre of the rudder post. So if you had for instance a boat that measured fifty feet from the bow stem to the centre of the rudder post, you had 150 pot licence.

**JD** Thank you. George costs obviously have escalated. Rising interest rates, for example, must be a problem for people who have had to raise capital.

**BASS** Raising capital for vessels isn't as difficult these days... I think the difficult stage is when they come to make their repayments with the interest rates, the sudden hike in the interest rates which we've experienced in the past six months is going to put

extreme pressure on a number of new investors in the industry in this coming season, and we are concerned about those costs. You are not only looking at interest costs, you're looking at harbour fee costs which the Government are at the moment introducing, substantial costs in harbour fees, insurance costs are continually increasing. So it is a concern to industry in general the way the costs are being enforced. Especially when you look at the industry being a primary producer. We are returning the best sort of dollars to the country which is fighting our deficit, overseas deficit, and yet the Government seems to have this policy because it is a producer and it is a money earner that it should be heavily taxed or charged, which could be detrimental to the economy in Australia overall. If there is enough pressure put on this industry that starts forcing fishermen out of the industry and then we could lose our markets because we're not supplying the product.

**JD** Is the involvement of overseas capital a worry in the industry?

**BASS** Yes, it has been a priority in the last twelve months, where we've had for instance overseas companies trying to buy into processing establishments which we have had foreign investment in the past, but particularly now some of the investment money that is coming in are end users, which they have a chain of restaurants overseas and they could manipulate the market, and in actual fact force people out of business. Whether it's the processor, the competition from the existing processors or whether it's the individual fisherman that they force out and then start moving into purchasing vessels. And we have to be aware of that danger that does exist that we could lose this particular industry to overseas investment.

**JD** And you would certainly need Government support on preventing that happening?

**BASS** We do. We definitely need Government support. We're using our West Australian Fishing Industry Council to support us on that fact. They do have very strong capabilities at negotiating at that level for us and we have had success.

**JD** Talking about the Government, what's the attitude of the industry to the regulations and surveillance by Government?

**BASS** Well policing, I suppose that's combining factors there. The actual policing of our industry. It's an industry that definitely needs protecting because of the money that's involved and no doubt we are recognised as one of the best managed fisheries in the world, but we do have problems through lack of facilities as far as policing is concerned. For this particular area for the last ten years we've been requesting that we receive a Fisheries Inspector here, because we have one inspector looking after 60% of the lobster fleet for a six week period at the beginning of the season. It's just not realistic to expect him to do that efficiently and protect our industry.

**JD** Right. For people who infringe the rules are the penalties severe enough?

**BASS** The penalties in my opinion aren't severe enough, because of the value of product. For instance if you do have that element and somebody is jumping a boundary, a line, getting in before the season opens somewhere and using too many pots, the benefit for him is substantial in his product, he reaps from that exercise. But the fines that are available are minimum to the sale of that product.

**JD** In other words it's worth the risk?

**BASS** It's definitely worth the risk. There's one advantage we have, but we haven't really seen it exercised by the Minister of Fisheries at this stage, is that the licence can be cancelled and taken away from that operator.

**JD** And that would be a very substantial loss to that fisherman?

**BASS** That would be substantial and you'd no longer have that element in the industry doing the wrong thing as well.

**JD** Right. George could you have a look now at some of the other problems that seem to be facing the industry? I have in mind things like the littering of the sea, the pollution problem, depletion of stocks and so on.

**BASS** Yes well, move in and do it in reverse if you like. I think the depletion of stocks, we really have to be looking at ways and means of protecting our stocks and making sure we're receiving enough recruitment each year to carry on the industry. We've talked about the efficiency of the craft which are being built today. The efficiency of our navigational equipment, so we have to look at means of conserving our industry and that, if we're going to introduce any conservative measure to be satisfactory to industry it would have to be an economical conservative measure introduced. For instance, if they wished to reduce the size of the pots so you couldn't catch as many crayfish that would be inefficient, because you'd still be out there pulling the same amount of pots using the same amount of bait and fuel and just catching less crays. But if they reduced, for instance, the number of pots you are entitled to fish with, you would catch possibly less crayfish. But you wouldn't handle the undersized and do damage to them, and of course it's more economical because you're using less gear, less fuel, less bait.

The pollution side of the question you put forward, I don't think to our industry at the moment is such a great factor. We don't have major industries on our coastlines, polluting. We don't catch lobster in bays and enclosed waters. It's an open environment and the weather structure on our coast would certainly assist with our prevailing regular winds. So I don't really see a pollution problem at this stage.

**JD** Could you enlighten us on the involvement of the practical fisherman in the organisation and control of the industry? Are fishermen represented on the various Councils and Government bodies?

**BASS** Yes, I think that's evolved from one of the first points I talked about how the fishing industry is now run as a business. If you have a lobster boat, you're a business person and that catching vessel is run on lines of a business and part of that business is to look after your interests at Government level and so forth. And we do, we have a local Association of which I'm President and through that local Association we have what we call a Rock Lobster Sub-Committee that attends our State representatives, West Australian Fishing Industry Council. And we meet at local level once a month, our committees, and then we also meet once a month at State level. And from that State level meeting we do have select liaison groups that negotiate with Marine and Harbours, Fisheries or CALM, whatever department or organisation we're wishing to discuss matters with.

**JD** Thank you. Would you say that the future of the rock lobster industry here in Western Australia is a rosy one?

**BASS** I think we have a very long term industry here. We've set our track record in the past. The groundwork has been done. The fishermen are aware of how fortunate

they are that our industry has been protected right from the beginning. The product we're producing is an unpolluted product coming from unpolluted waters and it's one of the best lobster fleshes in the world. I think you could compare it to a beast. If you cut down a beast you get the different cuts of steak and I think the West Australian rock lobster is the fillet steak of the beast.

**JD** Thank you George, and thank you for this interview. I realise it's a very busy time of the year for you one week before the opening of the season. Thank you.

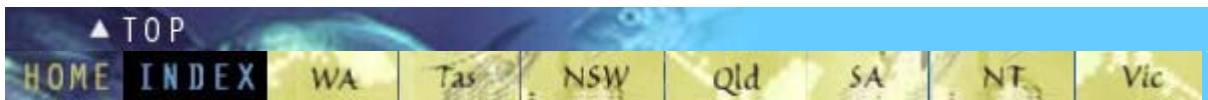
**BASS** Thank you, Jack.

**JD** That is the end of this interview of Mr George Bass conducted at Dongara, Western Australia on 7th November 1989 by Jack Darcey.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with JOHN BELL

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr John Bell, co-founder and presently manager of the Whale World Whaling Museum at Frenchman Bay in Albany, Western Australia.

Mr Bell was the pilot of the spotter plane used by the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company in Albany and figured in a dramatic mercy flight when he landed a small seaplane on the open sea in order to transport a badly injured whale chaser captain to hospital. In a very difficult cross-wind takeoff, along an 8 foot swell, the aircraft was severely damaged but Mr Bell successfully delivered his patient to Albany, a remarkable piece of airmanship.

Prior to joining the whaling company, Mr Bell flew for the rock lobster industry on the west coast; and although not mentioned in this tape, he was employed for some time by the Geraldton Fishermen's Co-Op in servicing the Abrolhos Island fishery.

Mr Bell is currently engaged in aerial assessment of the increasing numbers of Humpback and Southern White whales along the western and southern coasts.

Among his museum activities he is working on the restoration of a Catalina flying boat for a static display at Whale World.

There is one Tape of two sides.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is an interview with Mr John Bell. Mr Bell was the pilot of the spotting aircraft for the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company. He lives at Frenchman Bay, near Albany in Western Australia, and is interviewed here by Jack Darcey. The interview took place on the 16th December 1989.

John, could you record your full name, please?

**BELL** You've already got it - John Bell.

**JD** And your date and place of birth?

**BELL** Oh! Armadale, WA, 4.12.35.

**JD** Thank you! And have you lived in Western Australia all your life?

**BELL** Most of it, but not all. I was in the Air Force from 1951 to '58 in New South Wales and Victoria.

**JD** As a pilot?

**BELL** No, no. I joined as an apprentice straight out of school and was an armament fitter.

**JD** And what school did you go to?

**BELL** Well, from scratch?

**JD** Yes.

**BELL** Oh heck, I think my first school was the State school at Jarrahdale - just up from Armadale in the hills there. A timber milling town. A year or two.... I can't remember, you know it was a fair way back. I started school at Jarrahdale, then Mary's Mount - Catholic convent/boarding school in Kalamunda. After that, Christian Brothers, Leederville, for a few years; and then Perth Boys' High School.

**JD** After leaving school did you go directly into the Air Force?

**BELL** Yes, I'd only just turned fifteen and that was the minimum age. I was very keen on aeroplanes even that far back, so that was the earliest I could possibly get in. In fact, I applied when I was fourteen; I was fifteen in December and signed on the dotted line in January.

**JD** And how long did you serve?

**BELL** Oh, seven and a half years.

**JD** And when did you learn to fly then?

**BELL** While I was in the Air Force. Obviously I was keen on getting into the flying side of things but unfortunately I made a slight blunder having joined at such an early age as an apprentice, at the time I had the minimum qualifications. But over the next few years things sort of changed to the point where at the time I was eligible, after completing my apprenticeship, to apply for air crew, the standard meanwhile had climbed to at least one year university. So that put me in a very awkward position.

At the same time I started to learn to fly privately and ended up with my pilot's licence and eventually ended up with a commercial licence, and then decided, well if I couldn't get into air crew in the Air Force I might as well get out and try civilian life. Which is what happened.

**JD** And when you left the Air Force, who did you fly for?

**BELL** Oh, my very first job I worked for a crop dusting outfit in Victoria, only for a few months, actually driving their super loader - loading the aircraft. But the same thing there - I could see that it was going to be some time before I could get a job because there was a group of three brothers (all ex Air Force pilots) and they also employed another pilot as well, so there really wasn't much future there, or hope of getting into the flying side of things.



About this time I was offered a job back here in the West through friends of the family, so I came back to Perth and got the job, and spent two years then doing crop spraying in the season and a bit of charter work apart from that in the off-season. Mostly up and down the coast to do with the cray fishing.

**JD** What to do with cray fishing? It wasn't spotting?

**BELL** No, no. This was in the early days when they were starting to put in airstrips up the coast in places like Jurien Bay, Green Head, and all those. And the chap I was working for was right in the forefront of charter in those days. I think, apart from Jimmy Woods, he was about the first in the business. So I was primarily flying fishermen and bits and pieces for their boats and so forth up the coast to the cray fishing areas as far as Geraldton.

**JD** Right! How did you become involved in the whaling industry, John?

**BELL** Well, after a couple of years of that the whaling company here decided to buy their first aircraft and...

**JD** That was the Cheynes Beach?

**BELL** The Cheynes Beach Whaling Company, you're right. They had tried hiring, or chartering, aircraft for a couple of seasons with some success - so much so that they decided to buy their own aircraft, and I was offered a job through one of the directors who I knew. He used to come and go from Maylands the same as I did. So he offered me the job, which I accepted, and I came down here in 1962 as the company's first full-time pilot.

**JD** Before they used spotter aircraft, how was the spotting done?

**BELL** Well in the early days of the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company they didn't employ spotters, all their spotting was done from the lookout barrel, or the crow's nest, on the ship itself. But the company before Cheynes Beach, the Albany Whaling Company, I'm told by one of the members, employed somebody who went up onto one of the highest hills they could find around here and had a set of flags and they used to do the spotting from the hilltop.

**JD** A pretty primitive way.

**BELL** Very primitive, yes. I believe it was a guy called Buzz Farmer who was a fairly well-known identity and died a few years ago. He ended up retiring at Rottneest. Quite a character! A lot of people still remember him if you come across any old Rottneest identities. So he was involved in the Albany Whaling Company.

**JD** John, could you outline what you did as the aerial spotter?

**BELL** Well, basically of course, it was to find whales for the ships to catch, but that was only just a small part of it. That was the easy bit. Most days you could fly out and, providing there were whales around - I mean they weren't there every day because they were moving through the area - but providing there were whales around it was relatively easy to find them. Depending on the conditions, of course, on the day.

But after that it was a matter of observing them before the ships got to them and looking through them to pick out the most suitable. You might have as many as

several hundred whales around in the day, but because we were subject to a number of restrictions like minimum sizes, and we couldn't take cows with calves, and in later years there was even a maximum size in the breeding season to leave the big breeding bulls alone, and so on. It wasn't just a matter of finding whales, telling the ship and then going home, as a lot of people thought. It was a matter of observing them, picking out suitable ones and eventually, of course, the company operated three ships, so it was a matter also of co-ordinating virtually the three ships to best advantage. For instance, if there was only one big, suitable whale well you had to decide which ship, and of course that presented problems. You had to be pretty diplomatic at times. So that was basically it - finding suitable whales, and directing the ships to them.

But then the real job began, and that was that from the air quite often you could see whales under the water, because they tended to - when they were being chased - just drop below the surface and take off as quickly as they could and twist and turn in an endeavor to lose the ships. So most of them you could see from the air, so obviously by means of radio you could tell the ship what the whale was doing and where it was going, and that made them a heck of a lot easier to catch. So the aircraft was part of the catching process, not just finding.

And also, there was a third stage which was just as important as the first two, and that was after the whales were caught - because they were so big and heavy, and they had to be towed by the ships - they couldn't tow them and still have enough speed to catch any more. So as they were caught they were pumped firstly with a bit of compressed air to stop them sinking, because when they were shot they were about neutral buoyancy - some would float, some would slowly sink. So just a bit of compressed air to keep them up, then marker flags were put in them, and in later years, radio buoys attached, and then they were cast adrift so that later in the day - usually mid to late afternoon - the ships would have to go back and collect up the ones that they had already taken and cast adrift. And some days that might be as many as eight, ten, twelve whales. So that was no easy task because they are a lot harder to find just lying dead in the water than when they are in the group swimming along - splashing, blowing and sort of showing up in the sun. So that was probably the trickiest part - finding those whales at the end of the day and once again guiding the ships to them to collect them up to bring them in.

**JD** John, did you fly alone?

**BELL** Yes, most times. The pilot was also the spotter. Oh for economy, and really there was no reason to have a second person. Of course, we occasionally took company personnel, and on very odd occasions the public; but it wasn't generally encouraged, for obvious reasons - you know, insurance purposes, safety. And the other thing, of course, you might be out as much as six hours and doing steep turns for half that time at least; and there weren't too many people we found that could endure it. [Laughs].

**JD** Yes; enjoy it, anyway.

**BELL** Well, both. [Laughter].

**JD** John, what height did you fly?

**BELL** 1,500 feet we settled on as the best height. You can see them, obviously, better lower down but because, as I mentioned, the three ships and well.... sort of scattered around all over the place, you had to keep up high enough to sort of keep a picture of

what was going on. Mainly the relative positions of the whales, the ships, and both to the coast. So we found 1,500 feet was the ideal height. We could see them and sort of keep track of them.

**JD** What about weather conditions?

**BELL** Yes, it presented a problem. The season here - well, in later years on the Sperm whales - ran from March 'til December which includes, of course, all the winter months. So it was very much subject to the weather and we managed to get out an average of two out of three days; which meant, of course, we were out there some days when the conditions were far from ideal. As far as the spotting bit, of course, our main problem was visibility in the air. Some days the sea might be flat calm and quite nice, you know, for the whaling otherwise, but if it was cloudy - as you've probably gathered is quite often the case in Albany - yes, that did present problems.

**JD** What aircraft did you use?

**BELL** The company's very first aircraft was a Cessna 150, it was a very small two-seater aircraft.

**JD** Float plane?

**BELL** No, that was on wheels the very first season. But after that first season the company realised that it was totally inadequate and they didn't have a lot of money to spend in those days, but they did decide to upgrade to a Cessna 172 which was the next size up - a four-seater, bit more range, and as a safety factor (and also at my instigation) that one came fitted with floats.

**JD** Had you flown float planes before?

**BELL** No, no. I was quite interested in them at that stage having, when I went to school at Perth Boys, gone to swimming lessons at Crawley Bay and watched that Catalinas coming and going - and that was probably what sort of triggered my interest in aircraft and water borne aircraft in particular. So it just sort of happened by coincidence that the seaplane was ideal for a job. We used those seaplanes over a five year period. But at the end of that the company, once again, decided well, they'd made a bit more money in ensuing years and decided to go on to something a bit better again.

So after five years of the float planes, which were a little bit slow and also the endurance wasn't really enough, we went on then to Cessna 337 aircraft, which was a twin-engined aircraft, but not your normal twin. It has one engine in the front and one in the back - pushing, with a twin tail arrangement. The main advantage of that arrangement was that they are a lot easier to handle than the normal twin, and also it was one of the few twin-engined aircraft around that also had a high wing - which, of course, was very important from the spotting aspect. And they were reasonably economical to operate. Ordinarily they used more fuel than the smaller single-engined aircraft, but once we got out to the spotting grounds we were able to throttle back to minimum settings and save fuel, and therefore stretch out the endurance to as much as around 8 hours. So it was a much more flexible aircraft for the job. It meant you could get out there a lot quicker, throttle back and then stay out a lot longer. And it didn't overall cost all that much more to operate than the smaller seaplane.

**JD** And you stayed with that aircraft then until....

**BELL** Through until the company finished in 1978. The company used to trade their aircraft every two years because of the high number of flying hours involved. It meant then we were getting sort of new aircraft and having a lot less problems with maintenance, because at that time we didn't have an aircraft engineer in Albany. All our maintenance, we either had to fly the aircraft to Perth or, in the case of the seaplanes, that was another small problem - we had to get the engineers to come from Perth to Albany to do the servicing.

**JD** Were they serviced on the water?

**BELL** No, we had a facility at Lower Kalgan, near the bridge there, which consisted of a hangar and slipway with railway lines and a dolly, so that each evening we were able to winch the aircraft up into the hangar on the dolly, by means of an electric motor. It was under cover there and of course that was where the servicing was done, also.

**JD** That's where you landed and took off.

**BELL** Yes, in the rivermouth at Lower Kalgan.

**JD** What about the wheeled aircraft, where did they land?

**BELL** Oh, from the main Albany airport.

**JD** John, you figured in a rescue. There was a serious accident on board one of the chasers, and you landed on the open sea and picked up the injured skipper.

**BELL** Right!

**JD** Would you recount that story to us?

**BELL** Hmm. It was a fair while ago now.

**JD** I know. It was an outstanding piece of airmanship.

**BELL** I've even forgotten the exact year. '64 was it? Or....? It must have been around about that time because we operated the seaplanes from '63 until '68, so it was in that period.

Yes. one of our skippers - when he fired the gun - sort of stepped and didn't look down to where he was putting his feet and stepped into a vital loop in the rope as he pulled the trigger and - twang! Off went his leg. Which meant, of course, he was needing some pretty rapid, serious medical attention. I remember that day. He was chasing a whale and I was just hanging on. It was just about time for me to head in, it was towards mid-day and fuel was getting down. As he pulled the trigger I actually turned for home, and it was as I was flying away from the ship they called up and said, "Hey, the skipper's lost his leg. Any chance of a lift?"

Of course, already heading home left me with very little option but to sort of turn back and very quickly decide whether we could do this or not. It wasn't all that rough that day, as I recollect, but there was a pretty big swell running and, of course, that can present just as many problems as a rough sea. So I made a quick decision that I would land and then have another look at the situation once I was on the water,

because it always looks a lot calmer from up there than when you're sitting on it. So I did that. I landed, and still decided it was going to be touch and go. However, when we got to that stage I was virtually [laughs].... I was more or less committed.

I carried a rubber dinghy in the back of the aircraft for emergency purposes and we put that over the side and then sort of moved out of the way; then the ship came in and deposited the skipper in the rubber dinghy and one of the crewmen as well, to paddle him across to the aircraft. So the next thing they both climbed into the aircraft. And I thought, well this is going to be interesting because although it did a good job with one person in it, it was a fairly small aircraft - not a big engine - and sort of lack of power meant, you know, with a lot of weight, problems getting off even on smooth water.

But anyway, once again I thought, well we'll have a go. Which we did, with the other two guys on as well as myself. But I quickly realised that we had a bit too much of a problem - too much weight. So I had to go back and drop the other guy. And while this was going on I remembered reading somewhere (being a bit of a fanatic on seaplane operation) a technique used during the war in the open sea in conjunction with ships. If you got them to do a high speed run and then a quick turn at the end of it, it had the effect of flattening out the sea for a certain area. Of course, I had observed this on the spotting from the air, seeing the whale chasers running around doing tight turns; you know, this actually happening. So we then made use of that, which I found worked quite well and I was able to get airborne on the second attempt. It was only then, looking down, I saw a bit of colour in the water; and I thought, that's strange, that's the same colour as some of the parts of this aeroplane. [Laughs]. I still wasn't sure what I was looking at, and when we got home I found out that we'd left a wingtip behind. As we'd fallen off one of the swells on the first attempt to take off apparently, the aircraft slewed around into wind and at the same time sort of heeled over and the wingtip smacked the water and just wiped the fibreglass tip away.

**JD** They hadn't noticed it in the air?

**BELL** No, no, no. Just no affect on the flying. And also when we got back and sort of had a good look at the aircraft, found that the whole wing was wrinkled.... severely wrinkled, to the point where it had to be renewed. All very interesting but, you know, if the same situation came up again I'd probably not jump in. But in those days I was younger, keener - it was just one of those things.

**JD** Did you take off into wind?

**BELL** No. In the case of a swell generally the wind is at right angles which is a bit of a pity, and although aircraft always take off into wind this means taking off across the swells. That is just not on because unless you get off on one swell or less, it ends up where you are hitting the tops of these swells so hard (and I can assure you that water at speed is just like hitting concrete). And I also remember reading during the war where a lot of pilots had tried this technique, and even with big flying boats like Catalinas and so forth, they'd done severe damage to them.

So this was the main problem we had getting off - the fact that you're doing an out of wind takeoff. And when the wind is at right angles it means - this is getting a bit technical - but as you travel along the swell you end up with a slight down wind component, which all boils down to the fact that it makes it very, very awkward to get the thing airborne unless you have unlimited power, which I didn't.

**JD** Did you tend to bury a float?

**BELL** No. It heeled over a little bit and, of course, that has the effect of slowing it down again, but you can counteract that with ailerons. But the main problem was the swells were so big that as I throttled off from the first attempt, after I'd abandoned it, the aircraft then sort of.... the sea plane on the water without power just becomes like a weather-vane. The first thing that happens is you swing into wind. So that means we sort of went from the top of the swell and just fell down into the trough, and as it slewed around (as I mentioned), the wingtip hit the water with such force that it took the tip off and wrinkled the whole wing.

**JD** You're probably very lucky to get off.

**BELL** We were very, very lucky. In hindsight now it was putting not only his life at risk a second time, but my own. But as I say, it's one of those things - it's easy enough to look back at in hindsight and, you know, say that well probably you shouldn't have done it.

**JD** Did you realise that the man you put off couldn't swim?

**BELL** Not at the time, no. [Laughs].

**JD** How did he.... did he step into the dinghy? Or what happened?

**BELL** Oh, I can't remember precisely, but I probably would have sort of nudged the.... it was a rubber dinghy, quite safe to nudge with the float, so he probably would have stepped straight from the aircraft into the dinghy. Yes, he was a very brave man also, because of the fact that when you are catching whales you can imagine the sharks come from far and wide, and of course the same thing in his case. It was only later that he stopped and thought, well heck! [Laughs]. There could have been some big sharks swimming around - which there probably were.

**JD** When you got back to Albany where did you land?

**BELL** At Emu Point. On the radio we had arranged to have an ambulance and a doctor waiting. At Emu point it's on the way in and a good deal closer to the hospital. So the doctor and the ambulance were waiting at Emu Point. It was quite a suitable place to land, so I off-loaded him there and then flew on to the base at Lower Kalgan.

**JD** Did you run in to the beach?

**BELL** Yes, that springs to mind too. We nearly lost the aircraft - it ran into the beach and, of course, our main concern was to get the skipper out, and onto the beach and into the ambulance; and the next thing, I looked around and meanwhile the aircraft was about to float away. So I had to dash back and leap on board. All a bit disorganized at the time but we made it - just managed to leap off as the aircraft sort of took off the beach.

**JD** Quite a story, John.

**BELL** Mmm. It is interesting to look back at. (laughs). But I'd be in no hurry to repeat the performance.

**JD** Is there anything else that you'd like to say about your spotting experience?

**BELL** Oh, well, it was quite an interesting period of my life. Not too good for the whales. Of course, there's a lot of pressure now world-wide to stop the whole thing, but at the time we just considered we were fishermen. Like anything else, it's a natural resource that we were harvesting. But of course, now it's quite a dirty word. Not so much around Albany. I mean, a lot of people here their lives and jobs....

**JD** This Tape continues on side B.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**BELL** It was an interesting period in my life and one that I won't forget in a hurry. Of course attitudes have changed now, whaling is a dirty word all around the place. Not so much in Albany because so many people worked for the company and it was a whaling town virtually; so much so that when the company closed here in 1978 it had a drastic affect on the whole economy of the place. When we closed there were 102 people on the payroll for instance. Well you take that many overnight out of a town this size and there are severe ramifications; from which, frankly, the town is only just sort of recovering now - 11 years on. But we regarded it as just a living the same as any other fisherman harvesting a natural resource. Yes, very interesting.

**JD** John, you've been very much involved in a museum dealing with the whaling industry in Albany.

**BELL** That's right!

**JD** Would you like to comment on that?

**BELL** Yes. Well all that came about from way back in 1973, which was well before the whaling company finished. My wife and I decided to start up a little museum here. We could see, looking ahead, for one reason or another the whaling would probably come to an end - not so much for the reason that it actually did, but for any number of reasons. So along with the current manager at the time, who had also ideas of this museum bit, we did just that in 1973 and sort of gradually built that up until the company closed in 1978. It was obviously a lot easier to get that organized and under way with the company operating than it would have been if we had waited until it actually closed, because as you can imagine, overnight, all sorts of things happened. Things were sold off and rapidly disappeared, souvenired and so on, so we were fortunate in that respect that the museum was all up and running.

When they closed, though, the place sort of virtually died over the next couple of years. We ourselves tried to get a lease of land here but there were problems because it was a special lease for the purpose of whaling only. Without going into details, it wasn't possible for us to get the lease. Eventually, though, the whole place - or the improvements thereon - were gifted to the Jaycees (Junior Chamber of Commerce) statewide, the Jaycees organization. They came in, and after negotiations we decided to join forces, having already... having the basis for the museum here, and them then obtaining a lease of the rest of the place. So we got together and they raced around and dredged up some corporate sponsorship initially, then a bit of government help by way of the wage pause programme, followed by the CEP scheme, to the point where in

the last five or six years there has been well over a million dollars spent on bringing the place up to scratch and making it suitable for tourists to have a look over.

Bearing in mind it was pretty run down when whaling was operating, and more so for a couple of years after it, when all the more expensive modern gear was sort of taken out - and not very gently - roofs taken off buildings and left smashed, and so on. So it took quite a bit of fixing up to get it back to a standard suitable for a public facility. And along with that, we also obtained one of the three whale chasers and set that up on concrete blocks, high and dry, and also renovated that extensively. And around about the same time, again, we built the new entrance building/cum museum/cum restaurant that you see down there now, which of course wasn't here when the company was operating. So we like to think now that it's a world class facility. We get about, oh last year, 70,000 people through; which for a town this size we think is pretty good.

**JD** You are the manager of it, John.

**BELL** Right!

**JD** You are also very involved in restoring aircraft. Would you like to talk about that?

**BELL** Well, the rest of the background. Having joined the Air Force as an apprentice in 1951 that was actually the tail end of the wartime bit. We were still operating all the old World War 2 aircraft and I got quite interested in them. And at this stage I had the opportunity to obtain a couple of old World War II aircraft which I'm restoring. And also, from the involvement with the spotting side with the whaling company, I managed to get back a couple of the old spotting aircraft - in fact the first of the two main types that we operated over the years. They are now sort of set up in one of the old sheds down here. So the idea now is over the next couple of years to progress from that - put up a bigger shed and expand it as an aircraft museum as an added attraction to Whale World.

**JD** Anything else that you'd like to comment on?

**BELL** Mmm.....

**JD** Are you still flying, by the way?

**BELL** Oh yes. Funnily enough I'm still doing a bit of whale spotting.

**JD** Are you really!

**BELL** Yes. One of the old spotters down here still goes and quite a few years - back to 1975 I think, once again before the whaling company closed - I've been doing aerial surveys every year since the for Southern Right whales. That's not the type that we were catching here in Albany because they are very, very rare - at least they were when we started. Back in '75 you were lucky to see an odd one, but over the years the numbers are building up about 12 per cent a year, and now on each run which extends from Cape Leeuwin through to the other side of Israelite Bay (this side of the Great Australian Bight), I think the most we've seen is about 68 or 70.

**JD** Is that the Southern Right whale?



**BELL** Southern Right whale, yes.

**JD** What about the Humpback?

**BELL** The Humpbacks, the company here caught some of those up until about 1964 but they were also being fished by bigger countries and down in the Antarctic, and the numbers were starting to drop alarmingly in the early Sixties, so they were banned in 1964. For some years now I've been doing an aerial survey of those also, but that is only every second year, and that is not in this area, that is off Carnarvon.

**JD** Are they showing any signs of increasing?

**BELL** Yes, about the same again - about 10 to 12 percent increase. So much so that they are sort of being seen more and more all the time; and in the last twelve months various people in Perth, for instance, have been setting up whale watching trips out on boats so people can see them.

**JD** Are the Sperm whales coming again too?

**BELL** That we don't know. We haven't been out to their area, which is off the edge of the Continental Shelf. See that's about 30/35 miles off shore here. We haven't been out at all since we finished whaling in '78 to check on those, but there has been mention for the last couple of years of doing a survey. But it's a fairly extensive and expensive one and so far National Parks and Wildlife, who are responsible for this sort of thing, haven't been able to dredge up enough funds to do that. But it is a possibility in the next year or two.

**JD** John, how many hours flying have you got now?

**BELL** Heck! I've lost count, but in the order of 11,000 to 12,000 logged.

**JD** Right! Well thank you very much for all that.

**BELL** No trouble.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with John Bell, ex spotter plane pilot in the whaling industry in Albany. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey on the 16th December 1989 at Mr Bell's home in Frenchman Bay, Albany, Western Australia.

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with **BERNARD BOWEN**

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Bernard Bowen, Director of the Western Australian Department of Fisheries. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University and the Australian Fishing Industries Research Council. It is part of the oral history segment of the History of the Australian Fishing Industry being produced by the University.

Mr Bowen has had a long and distinguished career in research and administration in the Fisheries Department. He is highly regarded in the industry and has made an outstanding contribution to its development and successful operation.

The interview gives an over-view of the fishing industry in Western Australia, focusing on its management, current operations and some of the problems confronting it. Mr Bowen's involvement in and continued support of this oral history project has been invaluable.

There is one Tape, Sides A and B, the interview starts at 021 on the rev counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is Tape 1 Side A of an interview with the Director of Fisheries in Western Australia, Mr Bernard Bowen. Mr Bowen, how long have you been Director?

**BOWEN** Since 1968, Jack - that's 21, going on 22 years.

**JD** As Director?

**BOWEN** As Director of this Department. When I became Director it was the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, we had the two functions, but then in about 1983 when the Labor Government came in and they did some re-arranging of Departments and established the Department of Conservation and Land Management, it was decided that in fact the wildlife function sat more properly with the general functions of the National Parks. And so wildlife moved away from this Department; so then it became Fisheries Department by itself.

**JD** Right. You had been in the relevant Department before that, before you became Director?

**BOWEN** Yes I had. I joined the Department in November 1951, first of all doing statistics and statistics analysis in the Department, and then a few years later - in

1956 - I established the research expertise in the Department. I became essentially the first Research Officer for the Department, and then I remained a Research Officer (or in charge of research as we gradually added other people to the Department) both in fisheries and in wildlife through until 1968, when I became Director of the Department.

**JD** Was your background in the biological sciences or in economics?

**BOWEN** My background was in pure mathematics and statistical mathematics and that was my total University degree was in mathematics. At a later time I went back and did a full Zoology degree as well, so I ended up as mathematics and biological degrees.

**JD** Mr Bowen, I have just been in the northern part of the mid-west of Western Australia and looking into the rock lobster industry. That industry is widely reputed to be the best in Australia, the best managed in Australia, if not in the world. Could you make comment on that?

**BOWEN** Well, it is well managed. Nothing is perfect in this world and there are a number of things about the rock lobster fishery that one might perhaps like to do in other circumstances, but one has to look at the constraints that are built into a fishery - any fishery - operating on a natural resource. And the sorts of constraints that are built in are that there are a number of individual fishermen, so it's not a corporation running one fishery. The fishery is made up of between 700 and 720 individual fishing boats. So you've got this individual competition and that is, of course, a constraint to what one could do if one was actually operating the fishery as a corporation.

And, of course, one had to really understand what is happening to the stocks, and what's happening to the fishery as that fishery increases the exploitation rate; as the gear becomes better. And again this is all tied up with individuals wanting to get their share of the resource cake. So within those sorts of constraints it is a well run fishery, and a lot of that has got to do with the fishermen themselves, who are being educated to the value of having a well run fishery.

Yes, I've been involved in that rock lobster industry essentially since 1951 - I think I've been involved in almost every decision that has been taken since I joined the Department - because when I first joined the Department I was involved in statistical analysis of the rock lobster fishery as it was back in 1951. And I've been involved in that as a research officer, and as the statistician, through to becoming Director. And, of course, since becoming Director I've been deeply involved in it in terms of the whole management system.

**JD** One of the things that rather surprised me is - as an outsider looking at the industry - was the very positive attitude of the people involved at the workplace, if you like, to your officers and your Department. Why is that?

**BOWEN** Well, there's a couple of reasons I suppose, and it goes back to understanding what fisheries management is about. Whilst some people see fisheries management as being involved in the final decisions about the rules and so on, I see fisheries management and the responsibility of a fisheries manager covering a much wider area than that. I see the fisheries manager as having a responsibility to ensure that good research is undertaken so that the effect of fishing is known. I see him as a responsibility for ensuring that a good law enforcement system is developed; that there is a good communication system developed; that the staff of the Department have clear objectives as to what they are trying to achieve; that the industry knows

where we come from and what we are trying to achieve; and that, indeed, we are both wanting to end up in the one place.

We don't own the rock lobster industry in any means whatsoever. We provide a service to the industry; as a Government Department we provide a service and that service is in management, in co-operation with industry. I am very pleased, of course, when industry firstly does well out of that fishery, for that makes it easier to manage; and secondly, as they become very much part of the management of the fishery. That's what develops an understanding across the face of the two departments and the industry.

**JD** Thank you. I've also started to look at the northern prawning industry and I understand that's controlled by an Act of the Commonwealth Government. You are responsible to State Government - West Australian State Government. Are you involved in the administration of the Commonwealth Act as well?

**BOWEN** Going first to your specific question about the northern prawn fishery: no, we are not now involved with the northern prawn fishery. We were until quite recently involved in that fishery but what has happened over the last five or so years is that there have been mutual discussions between the Commonwealth and States to see what can most appropriately be managed by the States at the State level, and what can appropriately be managed by the Commonwealth at the Commonwealth level.

Now, fisheries such as rock lobster, such as the prawns off our coast, abalone, snapper, and a whole variety of fisheries are managed totally under the Western Australian Act with the Minister for Fisheries being the final controlling person. The northern prawn fishery, on the other hand, is mostly off the coast of Northern Territory and Queensland, with a little bit off the coast of Western Australia, but a very little bit. And the decision was made there because the Northern Territory and Queensland were involved - if you like, two States in that sense were involved - the most appropriate Act to use was not one or other of those two Acts of the Northern Territory or Queensland, but the Commonwealth Act. So it is the Commonwealth Act under which it operates, but the Commonwealth has established an Industry Government Liaison Group, so that there is a good discussion area goes along.

Now, Western Australia is not a member of that, it has just been rearranged and it was decided it was too big originally. We used to be a member but we are now not a member - and that's fair enough, the fishery comes into the waters off Western Australia to a very, very small degree. It's really mainly off Northern Territory and Queensland, so I've lost track a little bit of the northern prawn fishery. It's an interesting fishery.

**JD** Mmm. In my discussions with older members of the fishing community and the current group of owner/skippers, it is very evident that there is a marked change of attitude. Whereas the earlier days, it seems to me that the fishermen were fairly.... slack might be the word, about the depletion of stocks, but the current fishermen are very concerned.

**BOWEN** Yes, there's no question that, in fact, the industry is now much more professional industry. In the earlier day, when I first joined the Department, none of the fisheries around Western Australia were heavily exploited at all. You didn't need many rules to run a fishery under those circumstances. The prawn fisheries, for instance, weren't even started when I first joined the Department. They didn't start until the 1960's. The rock lobster fishery was really only just developing when I first

joined the Department and many more boats have entered the industry since then. It has been developed in geographical distribution to a great extent since those times.

Now under those sorts of circumstances people can be quite laissez faire about whether they obey or do not obey the law, because it's not all that important. The industry was still expanding, or even some of them are just newly developing and really you are finding out what these resources are about. But nowadays the capital investment is much greater, the exploitation rates are higher on most.... or on all of the major fisheries now; and thus it is tremendously important that - for the people involved - that they maintain the resource. The markets are now totally international in their concept, and so they are really in the big league of professionalism now, as distinct from a way of life as it was many years ago. But it's no longer that.

**JD** It is such a valuable industry to the national now, that it must warrant a great deal of research. Is that research taking place?

**BOWEN** Yes. You can always do more research, there's no question about that, and research directions tend to change also. What generally happens when you look at a fishery which is developing and going to become important, you attempt to understand the biology of the animal - where it lives; what age it is at maturity; how fast it grows; how quickly it dies; what are the major factors in ensuring that that is successful; what are the sort of factors that produce the variations from year to year. Those are the sorts of information which are totally essential for understanding the fishery, and it is sort of information which is obtained firstly.

But as the fishery becomes more heavily exploited you then have to really understand very precisely what the fishery is doing to the stock, because it becomes the major source of mortality. Just straight fishing as distinct from dying from old age. Fishing takes over as the major dominating influence on them, and therefore you move from biological research, you move into quantitative data, and you move into population dynamics, and you move in to all of that sort of stuff. You can always do more of that, but there is equally no research institute ever has the sorts of staff numbers that allows one to be quite flexible in the research one does.

One has to be very precise in the research you do, you have to be very disciplined, and we have attempted to do that. At the end of the day what we have tried to do, and with some success in recent years, is to actually not only try to understand what has happened as a result of fishing, but to actually predict what is going to happen in the next year and the year after that. Now that requires a very high level of understanding of the fishery which we, together with CSIRO [Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial Research Organization] Fisheries Division, have really moved to in the last 10 years, and CSIRO Fisheries Division have played a major role in that, and also the other division - the Division of Oceanography. The two divisions have really been an essential part in the whole research fabric for rock lobsters, and we are certainly thankful for that.

But they are not able to be as active in rock lobster research now as they used to be, and the State has to pick up that as well to a large extent. So we are now in the business of endeavouring to predict 1, 2 and 4 years in advance as to what the stock is going to be. Now, when you actually get to that sort of position it's at that level that industry really starts to appreciate the value of research because they have an understanding of what's likely to happen next year. But as soon as you, in fact, get that sort of information sorted out then there are a whole lot of other research areas that certainly come to bear on the subject.

Marketing is a very important element of getting good value from the rock lobster. The market has changed dramatically in the last 5 years in the rock lobster industry. All of the rock lobsters used to be detailed and sent to America as green tails; nowadays a large percentage of the animals go to Japan and Taiwan as whole cooked animals and whole live animals. Now to produce a rock lobster tail for the USA market the animals that come on board certainly have to be live and in good condition, but in fact if they've lost a few legs, it doesn't really matter (which happens when you pull rock lobsters out of a pot and you put them in a bag and so on and so forth) because what's going to end up is that that head and the legs are all going to be discarded and it's just the tail that goes to America. But when you go to the whole cooked market you have to have a perfect animal and so you really then move into a whole new area of handling the rock lobsters and the like. The same with the whole live animal, it has to be in a very good condition.

And then you have to get into the technology of how best to hold animals for the live export market and the like. And then added to that, of course, is this question as to whilst the boats are limited in number - and there's seven hundred and something boats - and whilst the numbers of pots are limited in number, the actual fishermen are always innovative in getting more efficient boats, more effective fish finding equipment, and so on. So you have to continue and always undertake research, because nothing is static in the system. The market is changing, the fishing power of the boats is changing, and so you can't do research and then sort of say, well, we've done research. Unfortunately! So you're always in the business.

**JD** Yes. How is the findings of research disseminated to the industry?

**BOWEN** We have, I suppose, two methods really. We certainly, at the end of each season, take ourselves on tour. There's a whole group of us go on tour right up and down the coast and we have one day seminars at places like Geraldton, Jurien, Ledge Point and Fremantle; where the morning session is given over totally to providing the most up-to-date information which we have on the rock lobster stocks; what we think might be next season's catch in a general way. And then we talk about the management in the afternoon, and we do all of that sort of thing. So we communicate that way.

We also, of course, have a Committee of advice. Whilst we go out and talk to industry, you can't at the end of the day, you can't just have the whole of industry making recommendations as to any changes in the laws which should take place. That role is taken up by what is called a Rock Lobster Industry Advisory Committee which is consisting mostly of industry people but I chair it. We have one other officer with our Department on it. But at the end of the meetings - the annual meetings - of that committee, we prepare an annual report to the Minister, which again goes through all the same sorts of things that we've given along the coast, and that is made a public document and that is distributed to every rock lobster licensee, or boat licensee.

And in addition to all of that we have our Journal that comes out every two months, six times a year, and that again has information. We endeavour to talk to people because that's the best thing to do, but we also do put it in writing.

**JD** Thank you. It's very evident that one of the great changes in the industry is the very high cost now of licences, boats and equipment; in other words in getting into the industry. Is that changing the character of the industry, would you think?

**BOWEN** Yes it does, of course. The cost of getting in to some extent reflects the value of the industry; it reflects what people perceive to be the potential of getting money

back on capital invested, and of course it provides for those who came in the early years of the fishery, a real capital growth investment. In the earlier days of the rock lobster fishery we made it a limited entry fishery and as soon as you limit anything you put a value on it. People were a bit critical because we were one of the first people really in the world to start managing our fisheries in this way. People were critical of the fact and saying that what we were doing was simply providing a windfall for those people who were in it and it was not in the best interests; and we should make mechanisms by which people weren't able to actually make money by transferring their licence, and so on.

They went through all that debate in the early years but in reality it was all really a load of rubbish, because whatever you tried to do, even if you'd said there will be no values and you won't be able to transfer, every other arrangement would be made - which in effect would be exactly the same thing. There would be boats that were leased; there would be boats passed over to families; there would be companies set up and people would change shares in companies; and so on and so on, so one really.... we were straight in to the fact that, in fact, it will become a sales or transfer thing, and it will be money involved, and that's one of the things that will result from having the limited entry.

One then says, of course - and quite rightly says - the amount of capitalization that is invested in the industry because the price goes up, does of itself put pressure on the industry. And that's perfectly true. If you have a person that has just bought into the industry (and paid a lot of money), he's got a very big bank account to pay and he fishes harder and so on. And we recognise that, and it is a problem. It would be certainly much easier for us if, indeed, the economic drive wasn't there. But that's really not the real world either, because the economic drive is there, and we have to take that into account.

And the value of getting into rock lobster fishery will go up and down depending upon people's perception as to whether the fact that they can make money on the capital invested like any other business.

**JD** There's clearly a good deal of concern in the industry about the inflow of overseas capital, particularly into processing.

**BOWEN** Yes there is, there certainly is. And the concern is not only by the fishermen and processors, the concern is by the Government as well, and by the Opposition also. This came out very strongly at the days leading up to the last State election when both the Government of the day - which is now of course the Government still - and the Opposition pledged to do something about it. And the 'doing something about it' really came down to me proposing, and it being accepted, that the most appropriate way to do it was not to try and write restrictive legislation into the Legislation itself, to provide wide ranging powers for the Director and the Minister in terms of renewal of licences, granting of licences, transfer of licences, in the processing sector. And then to spell out in a guideline document what we saw to be the better interests of the fishing industry.

That has now been done and the legislation is still going through Parliament, but the actual guidelines have been set down where it is said that we do not believe the better interests of the rock lobster processing sector (or the catching sector, for that matter) would be served by it being dominated by overseas capital. And whilst, of course, the business decisions which had already been taken - one certainly wouldn't want to retrospectively require sales of properties and so on and so forth. One has set out for what may be in the future - and it goes something like that there will be not more than 20 percent of the investment - any new investment - from overseas countries. And

indeed, the chairman and the majority of the shareholders and the office bearers will be Australian residents. Yes. It's a wider question, of course, this question of foreign investment and I wouldn't want to move in to that area. But for the rock lobster industry, I see the benefits of maintaining it as a Western Australian - or Australian - operation; and of course within that context they are Western Australians that operate.

**JD** As yet, the legislation is not in place?

**BOWEN** No. It's in Parliament, in fact I think it's being debated now. But it's certainly in Parliament and there is no reason whatsoever why it won't go through - I'm sure of that.

**JD** You mentioned that we were very much into the overseas export market in the rock lobster industry, and presumably in prawns as well. Should we be seeking to diversify those markets? It seems that they are very narrowly based on America, Japan and Taiwan, perhaps.

**BOWEN** Well, it was much narrower based before. There was 95 percent to the USA. That's the tail market. It is a bit wider. What you'll find is that in reality the growing Asian market is, of course, going to be a challenge always, and it's going to be increasing. And USA always has to be there as a market - it would be foolish indeed to move out and not keep that American market. That USA market is a must, it seems to me. But when one says why not diversify it - it was ALL USA market and that was really all the eggs in one basket, with a little bit of movement to Europe. And then it started to Japan, and then we had two markets, and it is only in the last two years that it has gone to Taiwan - so that's three markets.

There's always the thought of sales into Europe. Some goes in there - not large quantities - it's always a bit difficult. So I can see an expanding.... diversification, yes. Yes, I can see diversification; but I can also see USA and Japan being a fairly significant one all the time, and I think one would want to keep it that way. You certainly want to keep that USA market.

**JD** In the supermarkets and shops generally, there seems to be large quantities of imported frozen fish and not very much fresh fish from our own fisheries. Is that because of a lack of fish, or a lack of effort by the industry, or what's the reason?

**BOWEN** Yes. In the supermarkets you will find....

**JD** That is the end of Tape.... [1 Side A]

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## **TAPE 1 SIDE B**

**JD** This is Tape 1 Side B.

**BOWEN** In the supermarket you'll find very little fish which has been caught off the Western Australian coast. The quality fish that is caught off our West Australian coast is more likely to end up in our top priced restaurants and so so - direct to the



restaurants - through a number of the West Australian processing establishments that handle fish, like KFM and a number of others.

Most of the fish that you'll see in the supermarkets would be imported and the reasons are relatively simple. If you go to the west coast of Africa, or if you go to the west coast of South America, there you have two very big upwellings - the oceanographic currents are a cool or cold water coming and upwelling to bring to the surface nutrients that accumulate in the bottom layers of the water as animals die and the nutrients then move down into the water column. These can only be brought up again into the surface layers if you've got an upwelling current.

Now the fisheries off both of those sub-continents are very large indeed, we don't have that sort of upwelling so we certainly don't have even the potential for a fishery of those sorts of dimensions. It's simply the nutrients are simply not there. Our fisheries are really dominated by a current that comes from the north, actually coming downwards, called the Leeuwin current, and that's quite different in terms of nutrient levels than the colder water upwellings coming up from the south. Now, if you go to areas like the North Sea, again you get a turnover of the waters and a nutrient turnover, and so those are the places where you get the high quantities of fish.

What we get off our coast, of course, is the luxury items. We get rock lobsters, prawns; we get scallops, we get abalone - they are all the luxury items which are small in quantity, high in value and suit, of course, the sorts of way the Australian fishing industry operates. There is very little trawling of fish off the West Australian coast. If you go to the south-east corner of Australia you do get much more fish production of scale fish there and they land on the Sydney markets, the Melbourne markets and the like. But even with that, imports of fish are a dominating influence on the Australian scene and they always will be, I believe.

Now what that means is, of course, that there is a big import system that is built up; it is there, fish coming regularly. But it does mean then that those people who do try to catch trawl fish in quantity and put it on the market - as distinct from reef fish like jewfish and snapper and the like - those who do try and catch small quantities of trawl fish and compete with the imported fish are sometimes at a financial disadvantage, because the cost structures for those fish that have been imported are not quite the same as for those of the Australian operation. And so, yes, it will be imported and it does cause our fishermen who are attempting to take scale fish, and do take scale fish - sometimes.

**JD** There are some rumours, fairly widespread in the industry, that I've come across to the effect that some people are importing inferior product into Australia and then re-exporting it under the Australian sort of name, and thereby likely to damage our markets. Is that a real problem?

**BOWEN** I don't believe it's a real problem. Yes, you do hear the stories; and yes, if it did happen, it's a crazy thing to do; and certainly there are times when those sort of stories appear to gather quite a deal of weight and then they fade away again. And there may have been some sorts of circumstances which have been read as being just that; they'll be isolated cases, they are certainly not useful cases, but it doesn't happen in any marked way. But yes, if it did happen like that it wouldn't do our industry any good whatsoever and it should not happen like that.

There is, of course, a clear statement from the Commonwealth Department of Primary Industries and Energy as to what the rules are about importing. It is not wrong to do some sorts of importing and reprocessing and then exporting as product of Australia.

It depends upon how much reprocessing is done, and there are statements set out by that Department which clearly determine whether, in fact, when the product goes out again whether it simply says 'product of another country repacked in Australia' or 'processed in Australia with product imported from such and such a country'. Yes, there are all those sorts of arrangements. But simply to bring in a product, rewrap it and send it out as product of Australia is not a good thing; no.

**JD** Because of the increasing sophistication of the vessels and their equipment there must be increased demands on the skills of crews - skippers and crews. Is the upgrading of their skills, or the training prior to service in the industry, is it adequate?

**BOWEN** There is, of course, in Australia now the Maritime College which caters for the merchant navy and also for the fishing industry, and that's in Launceston - in fact the Chairman of the Board of that is a very well-known Western Australian fishing industry personality - Fred Connell. He does a fine job. They have good training courses there.

Now, there is also in our TAFE system here in Western Australia, and in other States, a training mechanism - mostly in the areas of basic fishing exercises wherein boat handling and gear handling and the like.... and also fish finding technology like sat-nav and the like, and the higher equipment as well. So that is all available, and of course fishermen obtain their skipper's certificates and so on.

The boats that are being used in our fishery here, of course, is mainly rock lobster boats and prawn boats, where given that they have their basic qualifications and their net handling abilities and their skipper abilities and so on, they (to a large extent) learn the rest on board the boat. Now, if you move into the very much bigger fishing industries whereby you really have got.... like Japan for instance - where you really have got the whole catching and processing system done on board a boat. The boat that goes for many weeks out to sea and of distant water fishing nations, they certainly have a bigger array of educational facilities. They have fishing colleges and the like right through to food fish processing and instrumentation, and so on.

I think our fishing industry really isn't big enough to have much more than we have at the present time. I don't believe that our fishing industry is disadvantaged by not having fishing capabilities. I do believe that our fishing industry, however, would benefit by having processing technologists a bit more available on tap than they currently have. The whole fish processing area (whilst when you take the rock lobster as handled extremely competently, and there's no doubts about that) when you get into some of the other canning areas and into trying to develop new products such as smoking and sashimi, and better preparation of scale fish that come on board; it would be beneficial to have one or two real competent food handling technologists that go in and enthuse, and educate, and increase the general handling of fish. That would be great.

**JD** Fishing has always been considered to be a rugged and sometimes dangerous occupation. Does your Department keep figures on the accident rate and lost boats, and that sort of thing?

**BOWEN** Not specifically, no. When it comes to loss of boats I'm sure Marine and Harbours does. No, we don't. Boats are lost, as you know, and quite consistently boats are lost. They are always going to be lost, I think, when you get small boats going in to reef areas and waves turn them over - and that's always going to be the case. It is quite dangerous there. It hasn't been a subject that has been on people's minds as a major problem for many, many years.

There was a Royal Commission into boat safety and so on - oh, back in the late Fifties, I think it was - and as a result of that Royal Commission (or whatever Commission it was, it may not have been a Royal Commission), as a result of that we, as a Department, had a section put into our Act that simply said that we will not relicence a fishing boat for fishing unless it holds the appropriate survey requirements, and so on, from Marine and Harbours, as an inter-link to safety.

**JD** Right! Is aquaculture in places overseas a threat to our industry?

**BOWEN** Oh yes. Oh yes, certainly in some areas it is a threat to our industry; depending upon which part our industry is aiming at. If you take a white prawn, e.g. a banana prawn - and you are putting that in the same sort of market as the developing prawn aquaculture industry from Taiwan, Thailand, China, the Philippines, then you are going to feel the effect as that industry rapidly increases. And the banana prawn that we get in the Gulf of Carpentaria is in that category and last year the prices.... [correction] earlier this year, at least.... the prices there suffered a dramatic turnaround which was really causing a lot of troubles for that particular segment of the fishery, where you are in the sales niche which has really not been targeted by the aquaculture area. That's a different system altogether. But in general, the overall effect on shrimps has certainly been found on prawns.

Lobster is not there - there's no aquaculture of rock lobster at the present time. [It's] not dreadfully easy to grow rock lobster from an egg. We've tried it without success, and other people have tried it - Japan, of course, is doing a tremendous amount of research on it at the present time. And CSIRO here would like to do research on it, and that's all good stuff. I think it will be some years before the question comes up as to whether the capture fishery is affected by aquaculture in rock lobsters, but there is no doubt that if you did have a flourishing and economic rock lobster aquaculture industry, you'd be aiming at a market which is currently being aimed at by our rock lobster industry - and that's the Japanese wedding market. Yes, I could see it having some considerable effect on that. If indeed aquaculture has developed like it has in prawns to a point where it was a relatively easily done system.

**JD** Is pollution of our waters a problem in the industry?

**BOWEN** Pollution of our waters over here is not a problem. You might have seen, some time ago, earlier this year, the difficulty that New South Wales had off some of its coast when they had sewage identification and the like. But that had quite a dramatic affect for the fishing industry off New South Wales because, indeed, people buying fish simply saw the pollution off Coogee as being synonymous with spoilage of fish right along the New South Wales coast. Indeed I believe their production dropped dramatically overnight. And they had to go out and convince the public that really they were very concerned about pollution - which, quite rightly, they were. But they produced this thing called Coast Watcher.

We don't have that sort of problem, but right around the world we have a problem of plastics and we're no exception to that - plastic tins and so on. And that is a major problem, it's just a dreadful thing that plastics end up in the ocean. It is worse in some other places, but that's no excuse for us having it at all, and our Department (together with other Departments) is endeavouring to hone in on an educational programme to ensure that plastic bags come back; to ensure that the plastic straps come back; that the plastic things that the tinnies get held in come back, and so on. Because they not only despoil the whole place but the plastic straps that go around bait baskets (bait

boxes) are particularly bad, in so far as fish, dolphins or big fish and dolphins, and so on, actually get them stuck around their necks and that is really very distressing.

**JD** Yes. Anything else that you would like to have recorded on this tape?

**BOWEN** Oh, only to say, I think, that the fishing industry in Western Australia is an exciting industry with some very competent people - both as fishermen and as managers. You've got people into the industry that really come from walks of life that have been very good training for them in terms of business, and it's really quite a pleasure to work with the industry here.

There is an aquaculture industry which is developing, of course, and that will be.... We really do lack water in Western Australia, that's a bit of a problem when you are trying to do aquaculture. We really do lack water, in terms of fresh water aquaculture. And when you move into the ocean aquaculture and you think of things like Atlantic salmon and the like, we're just a little bit too far north for them - the water temperatures are all wrong. So I'm not sure quite where aquaculture is going to move.

Because we do have a major aquaculture industry in the State if you take the pearling industry. The pearling industry is a real success industry, it's worth many millions of dollars to the pearl farmers and it is moving into a new era which really is as exciting as the rock lobster industry.

**JD** Thank you very much, and thank you for this generous use of your time.

**BOWEN** No trouble. Thank you.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Bernard Bowen, Director of Fisheries in the Department of Fisheries, Western Australia. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey in the Director's Office in Perth on the 16th November 1989.

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with DERRICK BROWN

### INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Derrick Brown of Australind was conducted at his home in Australind on the 12th December 1989 by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University and the Australian Fisheries Research Council.

Mr Brown is the Secretary of the South West Professional Fisherman's Association and is a licensed fisherman fishing the Leschenault industry in Bunbury in Western Australia. He is thought to be the only licensed commercial crab fisherman working at Australind on that estuary.

After service in Royal Navy submarines in World War 2, Mr Brown came to Australia and became a farmer before turning to fishing. He has given much thought to the fishing industry at Australind and, indeed, to the industry in general. His comments are intelligent, balanced, and based on much practical experience and observation.

The interview was conducted in Mr Brown's garden, which explains the background sounds sometimes discernible on the Tape. There is one Tape of two sides. The interview starts at 025 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is an interview with Mr Derrick Brown of Australind, recorded at his home by Jack Darcey on the 12th December 1989.

Mr Brown, could you record your full name and date and place of birth, please?

**BROWN** Yes. My name is Derrick, it's spelt the Scotch way - D E double R I C K, Walton Brown. I was born in 1924 along Tyneside in Newcastle-on-Tyne, so originally I'm a Geordie. My father.... all my father and mother's people were coalminers on the Northumberland coal fields and my father, my dad, was the first one to break with tradition and he became a civil servant in the Inland Revenue Department. We eventually went to London when I was 12 years old, in 1936; and I, of course, soon lost my Geordie accent and became really a Londoner.

**JD** And when did you come to Australia?

**BROWN** In 1949. I'd been in the Navy during the war and when I got out.... I was originally a clerk in the General Electric Company in London and when I got back after five years in Navy life I couldn't stand office life again, so we migrated to Western

Australia where my wife had an uncle who nominated us. He was farming and I fell in love with farming and that's all I ever wanted to do.

**JD** That was here, in Western Australia?

**BROWN** Here in Western Australia, in Bengar - just north of here. Eventually I thought I'd take on poultry and market gardening, which I did. However, my wife and I were separated and I was left with four children and found it quite.... too hard to carry on. I did various sorts of jobs - milk round, bakery, and eventually took out a licence to become an estuarine fisherman because it didn't need very much capital then to become an estuarine fisherman. That was twenty-four years ago.

Although you didn't need very much capital to become an estuarine fisherman, the truth is you need quite a lot of skill because in spite of the fact that we now have nylon nets and plastic corks, and our gear has improved immeasurably, you fish really the same way as they did in Jesus Christ's time. Because you use your eyes, your ears and your knowledge to find the fish - no echo sounders or sophisticated electronic equipment to tell you where the fish are. So I learnt the hard way and it took me several years really.

I used to do part time jobs in order to be able to feed my family because at that time my present wife had turned up and took me on with four of somebody else's kids - which is quite a task. And between us we started a little fish shop at the back of our house because we found that by processing the fish I caught I could get the maximum return from it. Most of our best money came from crabs - the crabs usually come in here between the end of November and Christmas time and last until the first rains - usually around about April, possibly May, and during that time we fish seven days a week. There's quite good money in crabs.

During the winter we fished very actively for the first few years and then as the kids grew up and got jobs we were able to sort of coast along during the winter on a minimum of effort and keep going, and earning most of our money - the bulk of our money - during the crab season.

We crab with drop nets here, we don't use tangle net, and that in this estuary is the best way to crab. We usually get out at about half past three/four o'clock in the morning for approximately six month of the year anyway, and we're usually home by about - between 8 and 9 o'clock. This is, of course, seven days a week. When we fish.... there are two methods of fishing. One is by haul netting, where you run a net over the back of the boat in a circle, and then haul it in. When you've still got a little bit of net in the water and got quite a small circle, say 40 metres wide, we usually splash with an oar and the fish get caught in what we call gill-mesh nets. The fish tries to get through the net, he reaches the shoulders and tummy, he finds he's too fat - at least that's the legal sized fish - he tries to back off, and as he backs off the meshes of the net slip under his gill. So this is what is called the gill-mesh net.

The other way of fishing when weather is too bad to haul for fish, we usually set net in the late afternoon or early evening in a straight line - your experience telling you the normal passage the fish take - and you pick it up in the morning just before daylight, otherwise the cormorants get at your net and take most of it if you happen to be late. So those are the methods you use for fishing.

**JD** What sort of fish do you catch, Derrick?

**BROWN** About thirteen different commercial varieties here. The main function of estuarine fishermen at present is to keep the rock lobster industry supplied with bait. This is where most of our fish.... 80 per cent of our catch goes to the rock lobster industry. The other 20 percent goes as edible fish. In the last few years we've done a lot to educate West Australian people into the benefits of fresh fish. Most of our edible fish is whiting - that's the one that's caught, and of course other varieties. We get our runs of tailor, herring, cobbler or catfish - all of these are very good eating, there's quite good demand for them.

All of the estuarine fishermen now have got a little.... [interruption of barking dog] - Sandy! We use different size mesh nets for different fish and the Fisheries Department have determined the legal sizes by making sure that young fish have had a chance to spawn, usually at least twice, before they reach legal size. So the sizes of our nets, mesh sizes of our nets, are set so that any small or undersized fish, those that haven't spawned, would normally go through and we finish up with only size fish. There is a percentage of wastage, of course, but very small. Usually if we're using size mesh nets the fish we catch are usually of a legal size.

**JD** Are the fishermen happy with that arrangement?

**BROWN** Oh yes, yes. The fisherman and the Fisheries Department over the years have more or less determined by general agreement what size a fish should be. Generally speaking, an undersized fish is not worth our while to process because most of us fillet our fish now. The average young housewife in the Eighties likes all her food processed and ready to throw into the frying pan. One of the domestic skills the modern woman doesn't have is filleting fish. So usually we form a partnership with our wives - the men go out and catch the fish and the ladies stop at home and process it, and sell it. And as I say, by selling it through this outlet we have at home we usually get a maximum return for our fish.

**JD** Do you sell all your catch from home here, other than what you send to Perth for the crayfishing industry?

**BROWN** Yes. Well, I don't go in for crayfish bait because most of the other fishermen have got families and the families work together. It's not possible for one man to handle big lots of what we call school fish, because there's but too much work in it. But the fishermen who've got families - father and sons - they usually keep the rock industry industry market supplied.

**JD** Derrick, do you fish in other estuaries, or on the beach, as well as here?

**BROWN** We used to at one time. I've never gone beach fishing because most of the beach fishing takes place during the crabbing season, and being on my own I chose crabbing because it was more lucrative than beach fishing. But most of the estuarine fishermen have got beach licences as well.

The Fisheries Department.... their management philosophy for estuaries is to reduce fishing effort in the estuaries, and in Leschenault here, we have what I call a fairly ideal situation. We believe that six fishermen could earn a viable living from the estuary here. At the present moment there are ten men and fourteen units - that's fourteen boats - but we only have three fishermen fish the estuary all the year round. The others, for seven months of the year, are fishing on the beaches either for salmon, or whitebait, or pilchard, for which there's quite a good market. So at the present moment we have a fairly ideal situation here.

During the high summer when a lot of amateur people are here crabbing, there's only myself, one fisherman, who fishes for crabs, and the other two fish spasmodically during the year.... during summer, rather. And so we don't really have any problem with the amateurs at all because they don't often see us. So there's no real conflict of interest there.

**JD** You are Secretary of the South-West Fishermen's Association?

**BROWN** Oh yes.

**JD** Is that an active body?

**BROWN** Not as active as I'd like it to be. I'm afraid fishermen very often have been apathetic, but economic circumstances lately is forcing them into a corner where they are forced to give more support to their Associations because of the number of problems we have. To enumerate a few of these, the amateur effort in estuaries and off the beach and inshore is growing all the time, so the catch effort is growing all the time. We have a lot of competition from imported fish now.

**JD** Frozen imported fish?

**BROWN** Frozen imported fish, yes. And this fish is very often cheaper than we can afford to catch and process it, so there's quite a conflict there of interests. But there again, the fishermen accept it because we know that the government have an open market policy with regard to imported fish. They can't do anything about this because in negotiating trade with our Asian partners the bargaining chips are oil, iron ore and wheat, and fish takes a back seat. So if we were to restrict or put an embargo on the Asian market, or the Asian imports into Australia, they would probably just say, well we don't want your iron ore, and we don't want your wool, and we don't want your wheat, and we don't want your.... So, hands are tied. So what we are doing now is looking more into marketing to find out if we can make our produce more attractive and at a cheaper rate, so that it can compete more fairly with the import rate.

**JD** They tell me that the Japanese people have turned away from frozen fish and prefer them to be on ice nowadays. Have you heard of that?

**BROWN** Oh yes, they pay Australian fishermen quite a fancy price for what they call sashumi, which is snapper processed a certain way. It has to be processed as soon as it is got out of the water and put on ice, and then it's flown to Japan; and it has got to be in absolutely first class order.... condition! Just as it came out of the water more or less. But they do pay a very handsome price for it.

**JD** What other problems do you see in the industry? What about pollution?

**BROWN** Well, I think being a young country, we've learnt a lot from Europe and America, and to a large extent we can avoid a lot of their mistakes. On the other hand, the environment here is fairly fragile and whatever we do seems to have a fairly dramatic effect on it. But just lately fishermen.... well, not the only ones, the whole population have become far more environmentally conscious, or conservation conscious, then we were.

We don't seem to have a great problem here. The only problem we had really was with SCM Chemicals, who produced titanium oxide for paint. But the effluent which goes across the pipeline is pumped into lagoons on the peninsula, on the western side of



the inlet, and that has only one soluble chemical in it and that is sulphuric acid. All the other chemicals in it are fixed, and it's just like you eating some gravel now, and you swallow it, and all it is going to do is come out the other end. It wouldn't do you any harm. And that's what happens here.

I've sent fish off to the laboratories in Perth whose insides, and lungs, and rib cages are stained with orange effluent that they've swallowed here, but there's nothing toxic in it at all. So really and truly we haven't got any problems, and in any case they've altered their chemical process to a chloride process and the effluent we are getting out there now is virtually saline. It's virtually the same as seawater. So provided nothing goes wrong in the works we haven't really got any problems. The estuary is in a very healthy state, the water quality is good.

**JD** What about litter from plastic?

**BROWN** I'm also a member of the Leschenault Inlet Management Authority, who have been appointed by the Waterways Commission to look after this waterway and the adjacent rivers, and our two biggest single problems are litter and vandalism.

**JD** What form does the vandalism take?

**BROWN** Oh, usually toilet blocks seem to be the most vulnerable, and the type of vandalism there is really horrific - smashing pedestal pans and scrawling all over walls; walls, and door, and pedestals have been smeared with excreta, etc, it's really quite... But we believe in Leschenault Inlet Management Authority that we'd rather have education than regulation, and to this end we have been... We've got a package out which we have given to the scientific masters at all the local schools on the environment, because we think that it's the children (the adults of tomorrow) who ought to be taught about the local environment and to be able to appreciate it. And we think that this will do more to stop vandalism and litter more than anything else, more than regulation and policing. Certainly!

**JD** Would you say that the community is becoming more conscious of the need to protect the environment than it once was?

**BROWN** Yes. Yes. Particularly in this last decade, the last ten years. In the Eighties I think the people have become far more environmentally conscious than they ever were before, and this has rubbed off on the fishermen, too. We are all learning.

**JD** What other problems, if any, do you see facing the industry, Derrick?

**BROWN** Oh..... [pause, thinking].

**JD** One of the things that concerns some facets of the industry is the inflow of overseas capital, particularly into processing.

**BROWN** Yes.

**JD** Do you see that as a problem?

**BROWN** Yes, and the fishermen have been strongly opposed to that. This year, 1989, we had an incident where the Japanese wanted to take over the rock lobster processing industry, or become the largest processor in the industry, and the Treasurer (Paul Keating) knocked them back, which was a good thing to see. It is

another thing that the industry is afraid of, along with all Australians, is the foreign take-overs.

**JD** It seems we need the capital but we don't want to be controlled.

**BROWN** Oh, we agree there. We think that the controlling interest should be Australian.

**JD** Yes, and I think that is government policy now.

**BROWN** I think so. Yes. Yes, we applaud that.

**JD** You were supported then.... the industry was supported by the government on that. What other government support do you believe the industry needs?

**BROWN** Well, the fishing industry really is a Cinderella industry. We receive no government support whatsoever. The immediate support we are seeking is that the fishing industry should become a properly recognised primary industry, and we get all the attendant benefits that the farmers are already getting. Such as tax off batteries, tyres, and 4-wheel drive vehicles in particular.

Last year a local member put through a Bill through Federal Parliament in the House of Representatives to remove the purchase tax from 4-wheel drive vehicles, but he was unsuccessful. But farmers are already getting this. The argument that we put up was that government should realise that because we are working with salt water we have a corrosion problem. The average life of a 4-wheel drive vehicle, particularly on beach work, is around about three years. So every three years you are up for a new vehicle, and the trade-in price you get on your old vehicle is not very great because of the corrosion. So we could do with some relief that way. But those are the immediate problems.

There may be some case for a subsidy of some sort, or at least for people who have courage enough to go exploratory fishing and open up new fisheries. We feel that they should get some government support to get the industry off the ground, or the activity off the ground.

**JD** Have you noticed any depletion in stocks in your time?

**BROWN** No, I can only speak for the estuary, of course. It's hard to say, because conditions in estuaries vary from day to day, moon to moon, month to month, season to season, year to year. A whole lot depends on water temperature and the salinity, and those sorts of things. But fish do use estuaries as nurseries. The young ones come in.... sometimes they come in to get away from predators too. This is why we use nets of a certain mesh size so that we are only able to take the legal size fish and leave the young to grow up and spawn.

**JD** Is there a need for more research into the biology of fishing?

**BROWN** Oh yes, yes. Most of the money that has gone on research in Western Australia has gone to the more lucrative industries like the rock lobster industry, because it is a multi-million dollar export earner. There has been very little done on estuarine fishing at all. There has been some research done on the take of snapper up

north, and one or two other fish, but most of the money has gone on rock lobster research.

**JD** Looking into the future, Derrick, how do you see the industry.... the part of the industry that you are involved in, shaping up? Will it continue to expand, will it stand still, or will it decline?

**BROWN** No. At the present moment it is what they call a limited entry fishery. As the fishermen die, retire, or go away, their licences are phased out. As I was saying, we think that you could viably support six fishermen in Leschenault Estuary. While there's a demand for rock lobster bait there will be an estuarine fishery. When that finishes, probably we'll see it phased out altogether. But I think that it will be for a number of years yet estuarine fishermen, because there is a demand for prawns; there is a demand for shellfish - particularly crabs, they're a good seller, so you'll always have somebody catching.

I fancy that, like a lot of other fisheries in Australia, it may become part time, where a man who has got a business, or a job, fishes part time. I think probably the days of the viable full time fisherman are slipping away.

**JD** Do you see a future for aquaculture?

**BROWN** Oh yes. Yes, particularly with oysters, and other shellfish too. And, of course, we have a thriving industry in marron already - that's a freshwater lobster. I think yes, definitely.

**JD** Would you like to mention some of the outstanding personalities you've known, or still know, in the industry?

**BROWN** One of the oldest fishermen.... oh, and he is into his eighties now, he would be Eb Smith from Busselton. There was a family of them. I believe his father was fishing before him, but in those days there was no such thing as a proper licensed fisherman. I think probably Eb and his brother were the first - Eb and Ken Smith - were the first licensed fishermen down to Busselton.

**JD** Would they be relatives of the late Geoff Smith?

**BROWN** No, no. That's a different family. In Bunbury here, the real mainstay of the fishermen were the Greek fishermen. These blokes that are fishing now, second and third generation, most of their fathers were Greeks.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**BROWN** .... and most of them were licensed around 1905. Some of them jumped ship when Greek ships came into port, some of them came here under their own steam. But they had a very, very hard life; quite often camping on their boats or along the shores of the estuary for days on end, because there were no motors then. They lived in Bunbury and they rowed the fifteen or sixteen miles up to the head of the estuary and spent the three days there fishing, and when they got their quota of fish, all they could carry, then they rowed home.

At first... 1905, I think they were only allowed to fish two days a week then. Then it was stretched to three days, and five days, and ever since then we've been able to fish five days a week - Monday to Friday. There's virtually no fishing, net fishing anyway, Saturdays and Sundays. This gives the waters of the estuary a chance to replenish the stocks of fish, and also gives the amateurs a bit of a go. [Laughs].

**JD** Can you recall any notable events that have happened in the industry in this area whilst you've been involved in it, Derrick?

**BROWN** Oh.... [Pause, thinking]. Not the most notable event, but the most notable effect is - I've learnt over the years that whenever man alters the environment, particularly the water environment, the aquatic environment, there is usually dramatic effects, and the dramatic effect in the estuary I think was in 1958. The cut was put in.

Now the cut was about, I think, 6 miles away from the original entrance to the estuary, which was down right in Bunbury. There was a channel there about 25 feet deep, and then when you actually entered the estuary it levelled out and averaged about 6 feet of water until another 6 or 7 miles up, and then gradually got shallower and shallower until you got to the top. Once the estuary water (which was refreshed with every tide) - and that's what happened when the cut was put in, the water was refreshed with every tide, right up to the head of the estuary. Prior to that unless there were very big tides the water was not refreshed right up to the estuary and on the west side, and particularly up the top of the estuary, it was semi-stagnant.

At that time there were a lot of bullrushes that seemed to like semi-stagnant water and in those days we had a terrific amount of catfish. It was nothing for a man to go out and get say 1,000 pounds [lbs] or 500 kilo of tails. That was the catfish headed and gutted.

**JD** That's what you call cobbler?

**BROWN** Cobbler. That's what we call cobbler now. Once the water was refreshed right up the top of the estuary the cobbler apparently didn't like it. The bullrushes died gradually over a period of a few years, and gradually the cobbler got less and less, and we catch very, very few cobbler now. But it just goes to show what a dramatic effect man can have on the environment unless they really know what they are doing beforehand.

That's the only big event I can say, or big occurrence. There weren't really any dramatic effect. The fishing and the management of the estuary have developed over a number of years - some thirty years - and gradually, as public demanded, and of course the amateur effort grew stronger, then gradually more and more restrictions were introduced to protect the stocks and protect the estuary as a breeding ground.

In those days, when I first started fishing, the man who had a boat - 25 years ago - was usually quite wealthy, because they were the only people who could afford boats. But now everybody has got a boat, and it's nothing in high summer for us to have over a 24 hour period some 250 boats going up the estuary, and they all take their two or three dozen crabs. Particularly on the long weekend in January, you probably have 25,000 crabs per day taken from the estuary. So it just goes to show, once they start coming in they come in all the time. They do become over exploited sometimes, and if you get a long weekend in January, then it might take them several days to pick up afterwards; but it's remarkable that they do considering the amount that is taken out.

**JD** And you actually notice the depletion after a long weekend?

**BROWN** Oh yes. Yes, very much so. It does get pretty well over-exploited during those long weekends. It does gradually recover again once the kids go back to school in February, and then it will recover for a while. As the weather gets colder the crabs tend to move down towards the cut for their great exodus from the estuary, and once the fresh water comes and is running in, it dilutes the salt water and they don't like that, so they generally head out into Geographe Bay again and they stay out there until the following Christmas when conditions are right.

Usually the crab likes, if you want to get technical, the water a couple of degrees warmer than seawater, and 18 to 20 parts saltier than seawater, and when you get those two conditions they come into the estuary almost overnight. They usually head up to the head of the estuary where the water is saltier and warmer, and as the summer weather warms up they gradually spread over the whole of the estuary. Then, of course, when winter comes they go back outside. It's more or less a cycle.

**JD** Have you learnt that from observation?

**BROWN** Observation, and the fact that I've done quite a bit of work with the scientists who have done their degrees - papers - on the estuary, and I'm very interested, and I've learnt a lot from them. But most of it is observation. Of course they consult us, because I suppose they feel that field work and theory go together if you are going to get a true picture of what is going on.

**JD** Anything else that you would like to mention about the industry, Derrick, before we finish?

**BROWN** Yes. A thing I am worried about is not just this section of the fishing industry - the whole of the fishing industry in the South-West. I feel it's dying, and I feel it's a shame, because it's a tourist attraction and it adds colour to this corner of Western Australia. Every community, I think, gets its character from the activities - you know, the farming, the forestry, the fishing and so forth - and that gives the place (or the community) a colour which is unique itself. And I feel that the fishing industry is possibly dying; and I regret that because it will be something gone from the South-West that helps to make the character of the South-West, because it's all a patchwork of industries and people, isn't it?

**JD** It is indeed, yes. Derrick, thank you very much.

**BROWN** It's a pleasure!

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Derrick Brown of Australind.

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with **GEORGE CHALLIS**

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr George Challis of Augusta. It was conducted at Augusta, Western Australia, by Jack Darcey on 13th December 1989. The interview is part of the history of the Australian fishing industry being produced by Murdoch University for the Australian Fisheries Research Council.

Mr Challis, who is aged 75 years, is a member of a well known Augusta family. His parents were involved in the Group Settlement Scheme of the 1920s in this area. George Challis grew up on their property.

Although involved in many other occupations in his long working life, Mr Challis has been engaged mainly in estuarine fishing in the Blackwood River Estuary. He has a wide and detailed knowledge of the fishing industry and still holds a professional fishing licence to fish in these waters - an occupation he greatly enjoys.

There is one Tape of two sides. The interview starts at 025 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is an interview with Mr George Challis of Augusta. The interview was conducted at Augusta by Jack Darcey on the 13th December 1989.

Mr Challis, could you record your full name and date and place of birth, please?

**CHALLIS** My date of birth is the 1st December 1914. I was 75 on the first of this month.

**JD** Where were you born?

**CHALLIS** I was born in Essex, England.

**JD** And what is your full name?

**CHALLIS** My full name - it's a long name - is George Joseph Alexander Challis.

**JD** And when did you come to Australia?

**CHALLIS** I came with my family in October 1923. We travelled on a P & O liner called the **Barabool**. My family consisted of six children and Mum and Dad. They sent us to this area of Augusta to a place called Kudardup on Group 4.

**JD** That's the Group Settlement Scheme?

**CHALLIS** That's correct. We started on Group 4 and remained there for nine years. During that time there were another three children born, so we finished up with six boys and three girls. Even today there are still four brothers living in the Augusta area. We have all succeeded in our lives and have benefited greatly from our parents' hard work in the early days.

I started fishing in the Hardy Inlet (or North Bay as it is sometimes called) with my father and eldest brother when I was eleven years of age. We only worked in a very small way because we were quite unaccustomed to any type of fishing at that time. We started with 60 yards of net and a small flat bottomed boat. The fish, as a food supply alone, was fantastic because they were hard times. You can imagine trying to keep a family on 3 pounds a week, which is all my parents were allowed.

We used to sell the fish in small parcels at a give-away price of one and sixpence a dozen. I took them around on my pony in two sugar bags. I tied them on the front of the saddle and went door to door. Of course the place was just bush with tracks running through it. As I said, my fishing career started from the age of eleven and then gradually built up through learning a great deal from fishermen along the way.

There were the Soulas' for instance. You tell me you know Manuel Soulas. I knew his father very well - Nick Soulas. He was a man that I think anyone in Bunbury who has been there any length of time would have known. Nick was a likeable fellow. He fished all his life. His sons have practically done the same thing. He was a great help to us by giving advice as to the length and depth of net to use and how to find fish. He did a lot for us. In fact he gave us a boat, which was a pretty big thing in those days. He passed away several years ago, but was one of the old fellows that fished the estuary quite a lot.

While my brother, myself and my dad fished, the other brother, younger kids and mum looked after the cattle, milked cows, and fed calves and pigs. Over the years we worked up to a stage where we became very skilled in the art of fishing and eventually we turned professional.

As far as the Blackwood River is concerned, some new residents and locals are under the impression that the professional net fishermen have a tendency to ruin or cut down the supplies of fish. During a rate payers meeting, these same people tried to close the river to the professionals, so I pointed out a few things about which they knew nothing.

For instance, every year the floodwaters come through. Most of the saltwater fish go out to sea, but a few hang in the very deep saltwater pockets. When they reach the mouth of the river there are sometimes anything from four to eight porpoises waiting for them. More fish are consumed in a couple of weeks than are taken by the fishermen in a whole season. Next there are the black cormorants. I was here when the first two or three pairs came into this area and now there are thousands. They are supposed to eat their own weight in fish each day, which amounts to about 7 pounds. You can imagine a few thousand of these birds operating and how many fish they would take out of the river. Also, there are the large amounts of fish caught by the amateur net and line fishermen. We won the case and the river remained open.

Life went on as usual until my people left Kudardup. I stayed in the area and fished with another family for quite a while and then I had my first break away. I did a variety of work such as a teamster in the wheatbelt with a ten horse team, sleeper

cutting out of Manjimup, carrying a hod for Hawkins and Sons, and working in the mines for three years before joining the Army. All in all, I've had a very full life and done everything I've wanted to do.

After the break, I came straight back to this area and fished commercially for many years until I went into the bulldozing business. I was a contractor for sixteen years, but still continued fishing during the three months or so when the ground was too boggy for bulldozing.

When I eventually finished bulldozing, I fished for a while and then went overseas for six months with my wife. I intended retiring but was conned into establishing a ferry service on the river, which I eventually bought. It was a huge undertaking because I had to build a jetty at Augusta, a landing at Alexander Bridge, and then negotiate with coach lines to build up a tourist outlet.

After that venture I definitely decided to retire but still take a small part in fishing. I don't do it really hard now. I pick my times and days and generally take one of my brothers with me. We have a few cans and catch a feed of fish, clean them, and give them to friends and relatives which keeps everybody happy.

Regarding the nets: they vary quite a lot in length. A good hauling net is about 500 yards long. The depth varies also. We work on mesh measurement such as 50 or 80 meshes deep. I would say the deepest nets never range any deeper than 8 to 9 feet or less than 5 to 6 feet. The meshes vary between 2 inches to 3 1/2 inches.

And to the types of fish that are caught in the Blackwood, I don't think there is any fish that you can name that goes into a river that I haven't caught. There are pilchard, whiting, mullet, silver and black bream, trumpeter, tailer, flounder, cobbler, skipjack, flathead and herring. I've caught a small hammerhead shark and a small grey nurse. I've caught a few pike, which is unusual in the Blackwood. I also caught, I consider, the first lamprey ever seen in the river. Thirty years later there was a write-up about two chaps catching what they thought was the first, so you can see how rare an occurrence it was.

**JD** A couple of questions. How far up the river do you fish? You start from the mouth, I presume?

**CHALLIS** No, Jack, we don't start from the mouth. Just this side of West Bay, which is about 2 kms from the mouth, the waters are closed to all professional net fishermen. I fished the Blackwood as far as Alexander Bridge and occasionally further to the rapids, which is as far as you can reach with a fishing boat. I only went there if the fishing was very slack and I'd go mainly for mullet. I'd leave home in the afternoon. There were no outboards in those days so I had to row the 14 to 15 miles, arriving at sundown. I'd boil the billy, have a bite to eat, then start on my way back. During the night I'd play it by ear. If I heard a mullet jump, I'd set the nets, but if I heard nothing, I'd go home with dry nets. Many a time I've rowed for 30 miles for nothing.

**JD** Were these gill nets that you were using?

**CHALLIS** Yes, Jack, they were gill nets. At one time I used a net with a big pocket in it for catching skipjack. I think I would have caught more skippy in the river than any other fisherman. I made a real trade of it. It was an art of its own to catch these fish and my biggest haul was about three-quarters of a ton, each fish averaging between 4



to 6 pounds. Of course the gill nets don't mesh fish of that size so I used a pocket. I guided them into the pocket by slowly closing the net behind them.

**JD** Can you recall how many people were professionally fishing the river in earlier times?

**CHALLIS** I worked the river when there were up to twelve boats on it. Some of the boats had two fishermen working them and some, like myself, only one. To my knowledge, there are only about 4 boats on the river at present.

One family called Price have more or less grown up here. They own a fish shop in town now. Norm Price, who is over 80, is retired in Mandurah. Colin, his son, has the shop and his son and grandson fish. So there are four generations of them that have been involved in the fishing industry.

**JD** Has the size of catches declined?

**CHALLIS** I know full well that this river is still as rich - or even richer - in fish today as it was in 1923. I'm still operating, so I have some idea. I can go out there and almost guarantee how many fish I can expect to catch.

One critic at the meeting complained he hadn't seen any big whiting in the river for a long time. I responded by saying that given 2 to 3 days, I would produce at least 100 pounds of whiting for anyone to inspect. As it was I caught about 200 to 250 pounds, boxed them and put them in a freezer in town. When informed, not one person from the meeting showed up to have a look.

Net fishermen are a benefit to the river because the lead lines on the nets stir up the minute life on the river bed, producing more food for the fish. If you concentrate on one area, you can get fish day after day, but if that area is not hauled within twelve months, the catches drop dramatically. There are huge amounts of whiting that build up during the winter in deep pockets up river from Molloy Island. These pockets are of depths up to 110 feet and are situated between banks that rise to within 6 feet from the surface of the river.

When the fresh water comes down in winter, the salt remains in the pockets and unless there is a heavy flood, the whiting will also remain in them throughout the winter. If they are washed out you can put a net anywhere, anytime and catch all the fish you can handle.

**JD** So the problem of fertilizer run off from the farms upstream is not a great problem here?

**CHALLIS** To be truthful Jack, I've never made a study of it. As far as the estuary is concerned, which is about 3 miles across at the widest point, I have seen nothing to date in the way of pollutants having any effect on the fish life. The only thing that comes down the river is slime weed, but that was happening long before fertilizers were used on the land. It is quite difficult to remove from the nets.

As far as pollution is concerned, I would say there are no problems at all at this end, but from the little I have heard in the Bridgetown and Nannup areas, there is a lot of controversy regarding pollution. I can't discuss it because I've never seen it, but if I did, I'd be the first to say something should be done.

**JD** Do you see the future as a pretty rosy one in the fishing industry?

**CHALLIS** Absolutely? Rosy would be the understatement of the year because I think it's paradise, the Blackwood River. There's nowhere in the world like it and I've been to many different countries. When I go on holiday, I can't wait to get home and put the net out and catch a fresh feed of fish.

There's only one thing that has hurt me deeply and that was the development of Molloy Island. I remember during my fishing career the hundreds of times I boiled the Billy and slept in wagga on the banks of that island when it was completely untouched.

**JD** What is a wagga?

**CHALLIS** It's just ordinary corn sacks, cut down the sides and stitched together so there are three in a row. It's like a big rug. I always carry two in the boat, one to place on the ground and one to cover me.

There was something special about Molloy Island. It is the only river island of it's size - 430 acres - in the whole of WA. I know a lot of it's history, such as the time in the 1830's when the Ludlows, Molloyes, Bussells, Davies, and others came to this area. This was the first settlement. There was Kitty Ludlow who, poor soul, went out of her mind. In those days they had nowhere to put her, so they built a shack on Molloy and left her there. Food was brought to her by her husband, but eventually she died and her remains are still there somewhere.

John Molloy had his shack there later and called it Possum Island for years. He and a couple of trappers caught possums and put them on the island so they could be killed and skinned in one operation, but Molloy was double crossed by the trappers and ended up making nothing.

When they wanted to develop the island, I tried desperately to stop it but it eventually went ahead and is now water under the bridge.

**JD** Sure! Well now, is there anything else you want to have on this tape before we finish?

**CHALLIS** There isn't anything I can think of at the present moment. What I have said pretty well covers the field.

**JD** Thank you very much for your contribution, George.

**CHALLIS** Thank you, Jack.

That is the end of this interview with Mr George Challis of Augusta.

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with **BERNIE CLARKSON**

### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is tape one, side A of an interview conducted with Bernie Clarkson, fisherman of Dongara, Western Australia. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey at Mr Clarkson's home on 6th November, 1989.

Mr Clarkson could you record your full name, date and place of birth please?

**CLARKSON** Bernard William Clarkson born the 10th January, 1946 in Geraldton.

**JD** And were your parents living in Dongara at the time?

**CLARKSON** Yes, my parents are an old Dongara family.

**JD** Were they involved in the fishing industry?

**CLARKSON** No, no they were in, they'd been farming all their lives. The whole family.

**JD** Your uncles were also farmers, were they? Did you have uncles on your father's side or your mother's side?

**CLARKSON** Yes my father's side, they were all farmers. They had the farm together, the four brothers, three properties in Dongara and one at Mingenew.

**JD** And your mother's people were they also farming people?

**CLARKSON** No my mother's father was a shopkeeper in Dongara many years ago, but they'd all passed on before I could remember them.

**JD** Sure. Do you happen to know when the family first came to this area? I notice a number of streets are named, well one street is named Clarkson Street, presumably after your people?

**CLARKSON** Yes that would be named after the family. My grandfather would have been here in the early 19th Century and bought the property where my brother's now living on a house on the edge of the property, and they've been here ever since.

**JD** Were you educated here in Dongara?

**CLARKSON** Yes, I did primary school in Dongara, then travelled by bus for the next three years to high school into Geraldton and up and down every day.

**JD** It's a fairly long trip. It's 66 kilometres each way isn't it?

**CLARKSON** Oh yes you get to know every bump in the road and corner just about, but.... I did the trip for the three years I did at high school except for the last six weeks before my exams.

**JD** So you had no fishing background?

**CLARKSON** No, no fishing background at all.

**JD** Well how did you come to get into fishing?

**CLARKSON** Well I suppose it was living next to the beach, and when I first left school the parents having the farm, I was going to be a farmer. And I went away for a couple of years in the Moora and Myaling district worked on farms. And then my father died and so at that stage I was still going to be a farmer I thought, but I did a working holiday around Australia for eighteen months with a friend whose father was a crayfisherman and just before we came back to Dongara he offered us a job on his boat. So we returned back to Dongara and I started crayfishing as a deckhand with a Mr Jim Bailey.

**JD** Is that the Jim Bailey that's still at Geraldton?

**CLARKSON** Yes, that's the same chap, yes. He's, oh retired now and spends most of his time prospecting I think in the Cue area. But I fished for him Oh just a few months, and I finished up. So I went back farming for a while again, but I also went fishing on weekends with another chap, a Mr John Cole. And then I eventually left the farming and worked on a boat as a deckhand full time.

**JD** What year was it, can you recall when you first went as a deckhand? About.

**CLARKSON** Well 1965, '66 whites, that I started off with Jim Bailey and then I went back, after him I went back farming, working on a farm for a couple of years. So it would be approximately oh about 1967, '68 I suppose that I started decking full time and....

**JD** That's twenty odd years ago.

**CLARKSON** Yes.

**JD** You'd have seen a lot of changes?

**CLARKSON** Oh yes, a lot of changes from how they were fishing then and also when I was a boy I suppose you could say, how they used to fish originally then. That was when the first fishing used to start in Dongara just about.

**JD** Could you briefly outline some of the major changes as you see them that have taken place since you joined the industry as a deckhand until the present?

**CLARKSON** Well bigger and better boats of course, and more electronic gear. In the old days you could nearly put a pot anywhere and catch crayfish to a point, but with

everyone fishing over the last few years and more sophisticated equipment more crays are getting caught and you have to work harder and look harder for the crays.

**JD** Is it the case that the catches per boat are more or less than they were when you first came into the industry, or are they about the same?

**CLARKSON** Oh, I think they'd be down a bit, but of course there's a lot more expense and work involved to catch them now. But the Fisheries Department have been fairly good in the sense that they're trying to keep the industry going and it's just about one of the most protected fishing industry's in Australia, I think. They've shortened the season. Or there's only so many pots per licenced boat now where when I first started you could have as many pots as you want to, there was no restriction, and fish twelve months of the year. But now they've, first of all they've cut the season down to nine months and they've too another six weeks off or approximately, oh it would be eight or ten years ago, give or take a year, and so now they're only fished seven and half months of a year.

**JD** You became a owner/skipper, is that right?

**CLARKSON** Yes, I bought my boat in the off-season of 1973.

**JD** That would have been after, what some ten years in the industry was it?

**CLARKSON** Yes, not quite ten years.

**JD** Not quite ten years.

**CLARKSON** No. It would be close to it. I fished a little bit when I first left school for a week and, but full time for, oh, it would be six years, or six or seven years I suppose.

**JD** Did you have much difficulty raising the finance for that venture?

**CLARKSON** Well that at that time it seemed pretty difficult. At that stage the price of boats were being sold at approximately a thousand dollars per licenced foot, which then if it was a 24 foot licenced boat, you're entitled three pots per licenced foot so my first boat was a 24 foot licenced boat, which entitled me to 72 pots, and I paid \$23,000 for it. But my wife and I literally scraped up \$2,000, we borrowed \$8,000 from Michael Kailis who was the processing factory, owner of the processing factory in Dongara, and \$13,000 from the Westpac Bank, which was then the Bank of New South Wales.

**JD** Did you have much difficulty in meeting your commitments financially?

**CLARKSON** No not really. The season was open for nine months of the year and what I caught fishing virtually paid the boat off, paid the tax bill and we lived off that during the cray season. But during the off season my wife who was school teaching sort of, I lived off her I suppose you could say with the help of other jobs around the place I could get for the three months of the off-season. But no, there was no real difficulties in paying it off, no.

**JD** Did you employ crew?

**CLARKSON** No. I worked by myself, probably thinking about it now I should have had a crew, but at that time owing the \$21,000 I was going to try and keep all the money in the one family and not have to pay it out to anyone.

**JD** It must have been very, very difficult and hard work and perhaps dangerous work to be fishing alone?

**CLARKSON** Yes, well it was hard I suppose in some people's eye but you get used to it, and I never worked very far off the shore. I worked fairly close and you just had to be careful when you're throwing ropes and floats off so you don't get them tangled around your legs. But if you're fairly careful and went along steadily instead of rushing and bussing it was okay.

**JD** Are there any fishermen fishing alone still in Dongara?

**CLARKSON** No, no not that I can think of, no. There used.... Even when I was fishing there was only oh three or four, maybe half a dozen that I could know of then that were fishing by themselves.

**JD** Did you stay with that boat all the time or did you buy another one?

**CLARKSON** No, as I said that had just about had it and the surveyor condemned it six months after I bought it, but I had a fair idea this was going to happen and so I bought another hull and replaced the hull of the boat with another one. Another second-hand hull which I had for I think it was about three years. And then I replaced that with another hull which was a lot better to work with. It was self-draining, faster boat and had better equipment on than my previous boat. And then I built a new one which I had for the last three years I was fishing for. A new aluminium boat.

**JD** Then you sold your boat and licence, I understand?

**CLARKSON** Yes I sold that in 1983 off-season, October, 1983. You'll probably ask me why.

**JD** I wondered why, yes.

**CLARKSON** Even though fishing gave me everything which I've got, I wasn't I suppose you'd say a real dedicated fisherman and at that stage I bought my, had bought my original licence for \$23,000 and over the ten years that I'd had it the value had gone up to, well I sold my op for just over \$200,000. Which to me was a lot of money and I would have kicked myself if it had dropped below any great amounts. I had a couple of things in mind to do which never eventuated, but a year or so after I sold out, the price of lobsters went right up again. The value of boats have gone up and today they're selling for about between \$7,800 to \$8,500 per licenced pot.

**JD** Goodness.

**CLARKSON** Last year it peaked I think. Some were sold for \$10,000 but they've dropped a little bit but they're still fairly dear at the moment.

**JD** For a young fellow trying to get started in the industry now, what sort of money would he need to have or get hold of?

**CLARKSON** Well it would be fairly hard to start in the industry for a young chap unless he had some fairly good financial backing from his parents or friends. Interest would kill you at the moment. When I borrowed my money I virtually put up a bit over ten percent of what the licenced boat cost me and that was only \$2,000 I had, but ten percent of today with the values of licenced boats, well you wouldn't get one probably under about six hundred to seven hundred thousand dollars up to about a million and a half, and for anyone to get ten percent of that, or if it worked the same way now as what it did when I got mine, you're battling to save that much money. And then if you did have enough, interest rates would probably kill you. So it would be fairly hard for someone to get into a boat unless they had their family or somebody with a lot of money to help them out. They couldn't do it the way I did it in 1973.

**JD** Right. Having tried these other ventures, you then decided to come back to fishing and currently you're still fishing as a deckhand I understand?

**CLARKSON** That's right. The first couple of years when I sold out, after I sold out, I did a bit of relief work on the boats, skippering boats when skippers wanted a holiday or if they were crook. And if the deckhands were crook or couldn't work I worked on the boats off and on for the first couple of years. It never eventuated the couple of things I had in mind after I sold out and one of the chaps that I did a fair bit of part-time working on his boat and skippering for him, asked me if I wanted to go full-time with him, and as I had nothing else in mind I went back full-time deckying and I'm still doing it today. But I'm still looking for something else that pops up.

**JD** Because it's so expensive to get started in the industry it must be holding a lot of Australians out, just that one fact, that it's so expensive, yet I understand that there's a lot of overseas money being invested in the industry here. Does that disturb you?

**CLARKSON** I don't know of any overseas money in it apart from trying to get in the factories, but maybe there is but I don't know about it. But it doesn't really disturb me no, I think if people have got to get money if they can't get into Australia they'll get it somewhere else. You can't stop, in my way of thinking, progress, you've got to go ahead.

**JD** Right. Not only the capital cost has risen quite dramatically but running costs must have also risen very, very markedly, would that be the case?

**CLARKSON** Oh running costs have gone up a lot, yes. Just putting your gear on your boat, the pots and things well that's not running costs but its initial outlay to get into, and you have to have new pots every, oh not new pots, but you have to have pots to work, but when I first started fishing they were something like about 15 or 20 dollars for a pot without ropes and float, and today you're looking at over 100 dollars per pot. The price of ropes and floats have gone up dramatically and your bait and fuel expenses have gone up as well.

**JD** And because of the increase in the value of boats and gear, insurance must have sky rocketed too?

**CLARKSON** Yes, insurance is fairly high. I've been out of it for four years so I couldn't tell you exactly what it is now, but it has risen a lot, yes. Particularly a few years ago there were a lot of, well quite a few boats lost at sea or mysteriously sunk in more so the trawlers in the north of Australia which sky rocketed the premium for the insurance, and I think that had a lot to do with why they're so dear to insure now.

**JD** Having been in both situations, owner/skipper and deckhand you've had an opportunity to see it from two sides. As a deckhand, are you paid a wage or are you on a share?

**CLARKSON** No, you're paid on a share of the catch. A percentage of the catch and you also pay a percentage of the expenses. Figures used nowadays around about twelve and a half to fifteen percent of the catch per deckhand, depending on the boat, how many pots the licence is and how many deckies there are.

**JD** Does that result in a reasonable sort of living wage for the deckhands?

**CLARKSON** On most boats it's a reasonable living wage, but nowadays the way other wages are, the cray season is only seven and a half months of the year, and as a deckhand you're on call seven days a week for those seven and a half months if the weather's right and the crayfish are there. And unless you're on a fairly good boat you can make as good or better money working elsewhere for the hours you put in.

**JD** Wearing your other hat now, from owner/skipper's point of view is it difficult to get suitable deckhands and to keep them?

**CLARKSON** No there's always deckhands around looking for a job and you get a lot of people travelling around Australia and from different countries some of them come from looking for work for two or three months, so there's no real shortage of deckies providing you look after them a bit, paying them and you catch crays.

**JD** Yes.

**CLARKSON** But nowadays you'll find more skippers are having the same deckie year after year, where a few years ago they used to have quite a lot of deckies at times. The same person wouldn't stop with the same skipper as long as they do nowadays.

**JD** Is that perhaps because there's not so much employment around as there was?

**CLARKSON** Probably something to do with it, yes.

**JD** It's becoming fairly common isn't it for a deckhand to become the skipper even though he doesn't own the boat. In other words to work another person's boat as skipper?

**CLARKSON** Yes, more so a few years ago than now, because there's so much money involved. A few years ago you could work a boat for someone once you'd done your twenty-four months sea time and got your tickets, you could skipper a boat on a percentage which at that stage was usually 60/40. 40% went to the boat owner and 60% went to the chap that was skippering it, and he paid all the expenses and the running costs of the boat except for major breakdowns. But nowadays with the price of lobsters so high, when I first started they were I think, just off memory about a dollar per pound, nowadays they're - I think at the end of last season was about eighteen to twenty dollars per kilo for the lobsters, people that own boats and want to put a skipper on would rather lease the boat out knowing that they've got the money for that year, than put a skipper on, when they don't know they've got no idea to a point what crays they're going to catch.

**JD** Who would they lease it to?



**CLARKSON** Anyone usually, or anyone within reason that had experience and got the money to put up.

**JD** There are requirements, I think you partly answered this question a moment ago - you have to have twenty-four months of sea time as a deckhand. You have to have your ticket you mentioned, is there an examination for that and training for it?

**CLARKSON** Now there is training for it. When I first got mine which was in a coxswains ticket that enabled me to take a boat up to fifteen tonnes in weight. I had to go to the Harbour and Lights and have a small exam and most of it was general knowledge what they asked. But I also did, I think it was 24 hours tuition of a Commander Grant in Geraldton, and it was up to him then after I went and did these few hours lessons with him where I was getting taught different things to whether he thought I was good enough to sit for the exam.

**JD** Was that Commander Grant at the Technical College? It was purely private....

**CLARKSON** Yes, he.... I don't think the Technical College was in Geraldton then and they weren't having lessons anyway for seamanship.

**JD** But there is now I understand some sort of training course in Geraldton Technical College?

**CLARKSON** Yes, there's a Tech College up there which do seamanship courses. I think it's over a period of about six weeks I think, just off memory, you have to do this course and then sit for the exams after that. But you've got to.... You get taught a lot more and have to know quite a bit more now to what I had to know when I did mine. I did 24 hours tuition over three days with Commander Grant which cost me \$3 an hour or something, I think it was, and so it didn't cost me very much at all. But now it's a few hundred dollars to do this course.

**JD** And the ticket is still valid?

**CLARKSON** Yes mine is at this stage with me for life unless something is changed. But it's been upgraded from what was called a coxswains ticket, mines now a Masters Grade 5, which still enables me to take out a 15 tonne boat. Up to 15 tonnes.

**JD** Bernie could we come to the question of Government enrolment or involvement rather in the industry? The rock lobster industry of Western Australia has the reputation of being the best managed in Australia if not the world, could you make comment on that?

**CLARKSON** Yes. It's one of the most protected fishing industries. The Government or the Fisheries Department own the, want so many million kilos caught a year. I'm not sure the figure, and they're doing a lot of things to try and keep it at that figure.

For instance, I mentioned earlier on about how the season was open slaver for twelve months and how they'd cut down to nine months and now to seven and a half months.

Also they've had regulations where you have to have an escape gap in your pot, so you're not handling the undersized crays as often as we used to when there was no escape gaps. When I first started fishing there was one escape gap, now you either have to have four, two on either side of your pot, or if you prefer to have one at the

back of your pot, you only have to have one escape gap either side and have one at the back of the pot, which is twelve inches in length, each escape gap.

Also the Government's taken three years ago, ten percent of everyone's licence of them, for twelve months or for one cray season, lobster season. And on paper you got that back again at the end of that season, but they're taking ten percent over a period of five years and this is the third year that it's been going on, so at the end of - after this season they've got two more years and every fisherman would have lost ten percent of their pot entitlement or quota. That idea I think is to keep the catch down to a certain level so it's not fished out, even though we're having less pots a fisherman are working their gear better and there still seem to be around about the same amount of lobsters caught. The year when the ten percent was taken off for the full twelve months, I think the lobster season wasn't much difference in total overall weight than what it had been before.

**JD** So it would appear that it's not a very effective way of preserving these stocks?

**CLARKSON** Oh, I think it's helping. There's not as many pots in it, but the people are working harder. But I think it's helping but it might sound as though it's not helping because they're still catching what they had been catching, around about the same total weight over the season.

**JD** The penalties for infringement of the regulations can be quite severe can't they? Up to loss of licence even, I understand?

**CLARKSON** Yes.

**JD** That is the end of the tape one, side A. Please turn the tape over for side B.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** We were talking about penalties for infringement of regulations, would you like to continue along that line?

**CLARKSON** Yes. The penalties are fairly or very high now, but a few years when I just, well when I was working on a boat a lot of people dealt in the cacker trade as it was called then. They made a lot of money out of undersized crays. They'd bring in three or four bags or half a dozen or so, cook them and take them inland to sell, which they did quite often, and if ever they were caught. Of course, there wasn't as many Fisheries Inspectors around then, but if ever they were caught the fine was that small, that it sort of meant nothing to them in comparison with the amount of money that they had made. But nowadays the penalties are that higher and the mark goes against your boat, and I think it's still on that the mark stops with that boat if it has a conviction and if the boats got two convictions, they probably wouldn't get the same price for it. And at sometimes the third conviction the licence is taken off the fisherman for a period of time.

But I think the Fisheries Department have got to get their act together a bit better because nowadays even though the fines are fairly heavy they don't get dealt with in court until a long time after the offence has happened and the fisherman, or fisher, yes fisherman concerned make a lot of money before they ever get convicted. So it's

in my opinion a mockery of the Fisheries Department going out and catching fishermen when they don't get dealt with, sometimes over twelve months or more.

**JD** Is there resentment among the fishermen to the Department and its Officers for the way in which the industry is supervised?

**CLARKSON** Not that much that I know of. This ten percent reduction of the licences there's a lot of flak went on around when that was first put out, and there's a lot of different ways where people were trying to (oh I can't think of the word) have or to get done to make, instead of taking the ten percent of the pots off because that's - ten percent of their pots we'll just say at 100 pots in five years time that licence over the five years the ten percent was getting taken off at two percent a year, so within - after the next two years each boat's going to lose their ten percent so that chap.... People who had a hundred pots are down to ninety and when pots are selling nowadays between 7,800 to about 8,500 that's a lot of money which the fishermen I don't think can get. So what's going to be done. Well if anything can be done I don't know, that's just going to be taken off them and I don't think they'll ever get it back. There's a lot of fishermen not happy in that sense.

But with their other ways of doing with the escape gaps and shortening the season I think they're quite happy with that. Most of the fishermen that are in it are just not for a quick quid for but to work over the many years are quite happy with them doing that, I think because they're preserving the industry. Some with have just got into licences and having these things done to them and they owe a lot of money are not too happy about it, but in the long term they should be happy.

**JD** From your very long and varied history in the industry what would you say are the major problems that the industry is facing currently?

**CLARKSON** Oh, expenses are a big problem and more sophisticated electrical equipment coming for the boats to use, or the fishermen to use on their boats it's going to make it a lot easier for the fishermen to catch the crayfish to find their little spots where they've caught good crays the previous year. There's one plotter out now which is operated on the boat but the satellites can pinpoint if they've caught fish somewhere say last season and they've got one of these plotters on board they can mark it into their plotter in the memory bank, and next year they can just got to plug that course in and the boat gets taken out to the exact spot within a few metres.

**JD** Within a few metres?

**CLARKSON** Within a few metres, yes. I reckon they're phenomenal. And if every boat had one of those I think over the next few years it will make it a lot harder to catch fish, because people are going back to those good spots, which admittedly not every year you catch crays off the same spot, but I think these plotters will make it a lot easier to catch crays and they're going to have to be very careful.

**JD** How do you see the future of the rock lobster fishing industry in Western Australia?

**CLARKSON** Oh I think as far as the catching of the rock lobsters, I think it will go on for many years, they'll be a good future in it. But the way the price of lobsters are now the average person can't afford to buy any. But I think as far as the future of catching them it's a good future. One of the reasons is the way the Fisheries is protecting it. Having it protected and looked after. I think there's a good future in it still.

**JD** Thank you. Is there anything else that you would like recorded? Any other views? If not, then thank you very much for a very interesting interview.

**CLARKSON** Thank you. Thanks Jack. My pleasure.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Bernie Clarkson, sometimes deckhand, owner/skipper and now deckhand again in the rock lobster fishery at Port Dennison, Dongara, Western Australia.

The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey at Dongara on 6th November, 1989.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with JOHN COLE

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr John Cole, owner/skipper of a rock lobster fishing boat operating out of Port Denison on the West Australian mid west coast. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey from Murdoch University and the Australian Fisheries Research Council and it was recorded in Mr Cole's home in Port Denison on the 7th November 1989.

Mr Cole is very prominent in the fishing industry in Australia having been President of the WA Fishing Industry Council for some 14 years and Western Australia's representative on the national body. He's also a member of the Rock Lobster Advisory Committee which advises Government on matters affecting the industry. Mr Cole's comments are wide ranging and cover many facets of the industry in Australia. What he has to say warrants close attention as coming from a person who's contribution to the fishing industry in the development of technology, in management and administration, and in the advice to Government have been of extraordinary importance. His knowledge and skills in these areas are solidly based on his long practical experience as a professional fisherman.

There is one Tape, sides A and B. The interview commences at 021 on the rev counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is Tape 1 Side A of an interview with Mr John Cole, President of the West Australian Fishing Industry Council and owner/skipper of a rock lobster vessel at Dongara, Western Australia. Mr Cole, would you recall your full name and date of birth and place of birth?

**COLE** My name is John Cole. I was born on the 24.1.1942 and I reside at 26 Point Leander Drive, Port Denison.

**JD** And how long have you been in Dongara?

**COLE** Approximately 35 years.

**JD** And was your father a fisherman?

**COLE** No. My father was actually a farmer but he purchased a boat in 1955 and the fishing tradition has gone on in the family ever since then.

**JD** Do you have other relatives in fishing?

**COLE** Yes I do. I have two nephews involved in it at present.

**JD** And could you detail for us how you came into the industry, when and what your role was to start off with?

**COLE** Well I first got involved in the industry when my father first bought his vessel. I was still at school and I used to go out on holidays and I took a liking to the industry, and it was in 1960 - September 1960 - when I left school that I went on the vessel he had, which was an 18 foot plank vessel. And I went on that with the skipper he had on board at the time because my father was never a fisherman. Then I eventually took over from him and worked that vessel for 5 1/2 years for my father before branching out on my own.

**JD** That was in this Dongara area?

**COLE** That was fishing out of Port Denison.

**JD** Port Denison! Did you also fish from the Abrolhos Islands?

**COLE** That vessel used to go to the Abrolhos Islands with another skipper on board prior to my becoming involved in it.

**JD** Yes! Are you involved in any other fishery besides the rock lobster?

**COLE** Wet line fishing for jewfish, schnapper and that sort of thing is a subsidiary fishery to our rock lobster fishing business.

**JD** And you've had a number of boats since that initial entry into the industry?

**COLE** Yes. I purchased a 25 foot vessel in 1966. In 1969 I had built a 29 foot vessel. In 1976 I built a 38 foot vessel. In 1986 I built a 48 foot vessel.

**JD** And that's the vessel you have now?

**COLE** That's the vessel I have now.

**JD** And what's her name?

**COLE** The **Stargazer**.

**JD** Thank you. You are owner/skipper of a rock lobster fishing boat, but you are also the President of the West Australian Fishing Industries Council?

**COLE** That's correct.

**JD** Could you outline for us the organization of that Council?

**COLE** Well the Council is a State organization representing the whole of Western Australia, it is made up of fishermen's associations that are set up all along the coast around the State - and, up around 27 I think it is from memory, fishermen's associations around the coast - and they are all in their own right members of the State Council. And we also have individual companies who are members of the Council making a total of about 43 members around the coast, and the State Council conducts

business on their behalf to the relevant government authorities and Ministers and so forth around Australia.

**JD** Is there a secretariat?

**COLE** Yes, we have a secretariat based at the Herdsman's Business Centre in Perth at present, made up of an Executive Officer, Assistant Executive Officer and an Administration Liaison Officer and a Secretary/Typist.

**JD** Has this council been operating for long?

**COLE** Yes, it's been going.... in fact we've just had our 23rd Annual General Meeting. It started in 1967.

**JD** And how long have you been involved in it?

**COLE** Seventeen.... I'm into my seventeenth year now.

**JD** And how long have you been President?

**COLE** Since October 1975.

**JD** Since October 1975!

**COLE** That's correct.

**JD** That's a long time.

**COLE** Yes, into my fifteenth year as Chairman.

**JD** And there are links with similar organizations in other States?

**COLE** Yes, originally we had what was called the Australian Fishing Industry Council which was a national body set up in Canberra and that had State branches, and Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria and the other States were all State Branches of that body. But that body folded after having a national conference in 1985 and we decided to restructure. It was at that stage that Western Australia became the Western Australian Fishing Industry Council rather than just a branch of the national body.

**JD** Yes, but you would still be involved in meetings with the other States through the National Council?

**COLE** Yes, we still meet in Canberra as the National Fishing Industry Council, and each State is represented by a delegate from their State and advisers if they wish to take advisers with them. In our case we usually go over, myself as the delegate and the Executive Officer from our State Secretariat as an adviser to me.

**JD** Could you outline some of the major activities of the West Australian Council?

**COLE** Well just as an example, one of the present things that we have on our plate at this stage is Marine and Harbour's fees for instance, they are trying to impose on the harbours around the coast. Just take our localized one at Port Denison, they're trying

to impose a fee for our mooring, on our own moorings within the harbour. And we're looking at that now and they're trying to charge to the industry the costs - not only maintenance of the harbour but also depreciation and interest on loans outstanding on that harbour.

Now it's part of our State Council's role to go to Government and negotiate with Government on these types of issues and we are at present involved with the Minister for Transport on that type of issue to get a fair deal for industry.

And on the national scene we look at export standards for our products, no matter whether it's lobster or prawns or schnapper, or you name it... abalone; we're looking at those standards on behalf of industry in general. We print a newsletter every so often, it comes out of State Council advising industry as to what is happening within the industry; what we're doing on their behalf. The boys in the office are all the time out in the field talking to the industry about the different issues. The Assistant Executive Officer is very au fait with conservation issues.

We've been very heavily involved - in fact we're the leading organization in stopping World Heritage taking place in Shark Bay. In conjunction with the Farmers' Federation, the Pastoralists' and Graziers' Association, the mining industry and those people, we all got together and formed a group called the Basic Industries Groups and with that strength we were able to convince Government that World Heritage wasn't the way to go in Shark Bay and we're assisting to put in place a different strategy for the conservation of the dugong and the stromatolites and those types of things. We do believe that there should be conservation of those issues but certainly not under World Heritage.

**JD** What about research? Is your organisation involved in research into the industry?

**COLE** No, we're not directly involved in the research, that's carried out by the Waterman's Bay Research Laboratories which comes under the Fisheries Department. They are funded from funds out of general revenue and they are also funded from the Fishing Industry Research Trust Account. That trust account gets funds from our industry by way of, for instance, the rock lobster industry; we pay a pot levy fee into that and I think this year the fee is \$17 per pot. We pay that into the research trust account and then some of that money is used for research purposes.

**JD** Is your Council involved in training activities?

**COLE** No, we were involved with the TAFE organization in Fremantle a few years ago and we used to provide scholarships to twenty students at the rate of \$600 per student per year. But I think it's like a number of these things, you have difficulties at times communicating with the principals involved and they weren't turning out the type of people out of the college that we would like to have seen turned out into the industry, so we withdrew our scholarships. But we still have a large input into the TAFE organization. In fact the liaison with them is improving now that the personnel have changed. Our liaison with them is improving all the time.

**JD** Are the training facilities adequate now? Are the people coming through that form of training adequate to the tasks confronting them within the industry?

**COLE** Yes, I think so. We had an opportunity a few years ago of getting involved with the National Fishing Industry Training Council. From a Western Australian point of view we chose not to get involved with that because it was administered from Victoria and some of their ways that they do things over on the Eastern seaboard is completely



different to Western Australia, and we had a very good TAFE organization here in WA, so we chose to support the TAFE organization. And they put mobile units on the road to put in training sessions in the outlying ports in the form of radar and technology courses and things like that. But they've got some excellent facilities in Fremantle, and they've also got some excellent facilities in Geraldton. They are looking, I believe, further ahead to perhaps at some stage establishing a small type of maritime college here in WA, which we are in negotiations with them on that at the present time.

**JD** Currently the maritime college is in Tasmania, I take it?

**COLE** Tasmania. Launceston in Tasmania.

**JD** Do we get any graduates from that institution into our industry here in Western Australia?

**COLE** Yes we do. There's a number of them. In fact we have a number of young fellows from Western Australia going to Launceston to partake of those courses. In fact there's one young chap from here just been over there recently to do his Master 5 ticket. There's a number of people from further down the coast that have been over there, studied, and then come back and working boats in WA in the lobster industry, prawning industry, and that type of thing. So yes we do, we do get people coming back from there.

**JD** Are they supported financially by their employers or do they do it off their own bat; or how does it operate?

**COLE** Mostly, as much as I'm aware of it, they're supported by their parents or the company they are involved with at the time supports them to go across and do those courses.

**JD** Yes.

**COLE** But it's a very excellent facility that they have in Launceston. It's top class. I mean, we tried desperately to get it in Western Australia at the time when they were building it but we didn't succeed. It is an excellent facility.

**JD** John, your industry would have considerable contacts I should think with Harbour and Marine Department, is that a happy arrangement?

**COLE** No, it's not. Sad to say, it's not a happy arrangement. We do not have a liaison with the Marine and Harbours Department now in the same satisfactory state as we had some six years ago. It's personalities, I think is the problem. We will get back to that. We are striving and we have a liaison group set up with them and we are striving to get back into that happy relationship that we had before where we can sit down around the same table and we can sort out the issues. And we shouldn't have to go to Ministers to sort them out, we should be able to negotiate with the people within the Department to do that; and at this present time it's sad to say that the relationships there aren't as good as they perhaps are with the Fisheries Department.

**JD** And the relationships with the Fisheries Department are good?

**COLE** They have been excellent. Excellent relationships. We've had a very good liaison and a very good working relationship with the Fisheries Department for as long as I can remember; ever since I've been involved anyway.

**JD** Thank you. Anything else that you would like to say in regard to the Council and its activities?

**COLE** Yes. The Council, perhaps in future we may start branching out a little bit further and doing a bit more promotional type of work, but that will require funds from industry to do that. We are already looking at that, we have been for about 8 months now, and the Fisheries Department had a report done by Peter Monaghan, overseas, on the marketing of rock lobster. We're studying that report and we're looking ahead to see if we can, as a State Council, assist the industry - not just rock lobster but all the different segments of the industry - and we have over 40 different fisheries in WA. So we're looking at perhaps initially starting with the rock lobster industry, being the biggest industry, and then expanding from that. If there is need for promotion in the rock lobster industry we start with that and then we bring in these other smaller industries, and hopefully we can assist them by promoting their products as well.

**JD** Good! Could we come back now to have a closer look at the rock lobster industry with which you are intimately connected in your role as skipper of a vessel? What would you say are the major changes that you've seen in your time in the industry, from when you entered until the present day?

**COLE** Well initially when I first became involved there were no restrictions whatsoever on the number of pots any one vessel could pull each day, or set in the water each day, and in 1962 they brought in restrictions on the number of pots each vessel could use and since then, of course, we are now going down the road of having a pot reduction programme of 2% per year and that's a five year programme. At the end of the five years there will have been a 10% reduction of pots taken place in the industry and that should be better off - the industry should be better off for it. I think in the last 2 1/2 years something like 53 boats, the whole licence has gone out of the industry. So we're not only reducing pots but actually the number of boats are reducing. A few years back we had something like 800 odd boats in the rock lobster industry, then it came back to 760, and now we're down to something just above 700.

**JD** Is that a trend that you think will continue?

**COLE** Well we're looking at it. From the Rock Lobster Industry Advisory Committee, which I also sit on as a delegate from the rock lobster industry; sitting on that I take part in the administration of the rock lobster industry and so we are looking at the five year programme taking effect and that runs for another two years and when that's taken effect, then we look at other options. And we're already discussing with industry other options that may need to be looked at at the end of that five year programme that's in place now, and whether there needs to be further restrictions on the number of pots in the industry, or whether it needs to be restrictions on some technology that might be used in the industry. All those types of things we have to look at from an administration point of view.

I think basically we've got to reduce the number of vessels. I don't know how much more - I don't think any of us know how much more - but it's something that we've got to keep a close eye on because of the technology growth in the industry, like all the latest equipment you're getting on board. A lot of people will say that the global positioning system, or GPS as we know it, is going to catch you more crays. I think that's a fallacy. It saves you money because you can go from point A to point B in a

straight line and more effectively and more efficiently than you could before. A lot of us had used equipment like the satellite navigation systems for a number of years, and they certainly help in the economics of the industry.

We from the Rock Lobster Advisory Committee angle, we have to look at all those types of things. Even the underwater cameras, and say, "Well, is the underwater camera going to be any benefit to a rock lobster fisherman, or a wet-line fisherman, or whoever?" The Rock Lobster Advisory Committee purely looks at the rock lobster industry. So all those different issues, we've got to keep a general eye on all those through the industry each day practically, or each week of the season, and just keep our eye out. And if there is something that may be having more effective effect on the resource in the water, then we have to be aware of that and make sure that we can counteract that because there's only a given amount of animals in the water that we can catch in any one year, and my understanding is at present we take about 80% of that product. So the management of the industry is critical and we have to be very, very careful in the decisions we make.

**JD** Yes, indeed, because there's an enormous investment now isn't there, in the industry; both in total and from the individual fisherman's point of view.

**COLE** Oh, that's right; in fact the total industry, I wouldn't hazard a guess what millions would be involved, but from the individual's point of view - I mean, you look at units now are worth up around the million dollars for a boat and licence and so forth. It's big dollars involved in it. Now the fisherman in himself is going to go out there and fish as hard as he can to get a return on his capital.

**JD** He would have to, in fact.

**COLE** He's got to. And therefore, from the administration side of things, we've got to be aware of all those sort of things and be careful because there's no point in overfishing that stock today and have nothing left for the generations that come after us. So it's a very important part that the Rock Lobster Industry Advisory Committee plays in administering that and make sure that the resource is protected.

**JD** John, could you comment on the escalating costs; things such as the costs of licences, the cost of insurance, high interest rates? Could you make comment on that?

**COLE** Yes, certainly. The high interest rates are not doing any primary industry in Australia any good at this point in time. I think it's hurting badly, specifically in ours.... certainly in our fishing industry at this stage. People that have bought into boats in the last few years are paying very high interest rates and I don't think that's going to do any good in the longer term. The higher the interest rates, of course, the harder they've got to work and it's very hard to turn around and say to someone, "You can't catch that many crayfish" (or lobster, as we like to call them), "you can't catch that many", when they've got an outstanding debt at the bank and they've got a bank manager breathing down their neck wanting them to go out and catch the crays to meet their commitments. I don't think it's good for the industry, but in this day and age and under the political system in which we live at present, a lot of people really haven't got much choice.

**JD** Yes. Have returns to the fishermen kept pace with costs? It doesn't appear that they have.

**COLE** No, I think the return on capital.... it would be fair to say the return on capital is a lot less now than what it was 10 or 15 years ago. There were very good returns in

those days but with the cost of licences and so forth today, the returns are nowhere near as good as they were then.

**JD** Could you make comment on the markets for our product?

**COLE** Overseas markets?

**JD** Overseas markets.

**COLE** I think we've got excellent markets overseas for our product, but whether we have enough of them is the point that I'm sort of more interested in. From our State Council's side of it I'm interested in looking at whether there are other markets available, because you must realise that the people who go overseas looking for the markets now are marketing people specifically working for a company, or two companies; they go across and they home in on a particular personnel or whoever they might be, who might buy their product in that country. And I mean they can only say, "Well, there's X number of tonne I can supply you." They don't really, as far as I can see, go out and look for a field where there might be a more affluent market and that's the sort of thing I think we should be looking at from a State point of view and saying, "Well, is it more efficient to send one person overseas for X number of months a year than sending five or six individuals overseas for one week a year?" And I think those are the types of things we've got to address; and we've got to try and get the returns back to the pockets of the fishermen, make them greater rather than be absorbed by the middle people along the line.

**JD** Do you get government support in developing markets?

**COLE** There was some government support, Federal Government support, at one stage in developing markets, but I'm not aware at this stage whether they're still getting that support or not. It was going to cease a few years ago.

**JD** And are our markets being challenged by other countries?

**COLE** Oh certainly! Cuba for instance; I mean Cuba used to produce about 500 tonne, they now produce something like 12,000 tonnes. A lot of their product goes on the eastern seaboard of America where most of ours goes on the western seaboard. But there is still a certain amount of competition in those. I mean you have New Zealand crays as well going into the Japanese market - live products competing with our live product from this State. You have product from South Africa and the likes going in. We also have product from Oman and these places that come through and then marketed as 'Product of Australia'. Those types of things we have to address and we have to stop having product from other countries being brought in here, packaged in our packets with 'Product of Australia' on and then marketed in the American States and other places.

I mean.... it's silly, it's stupid. Our technical people go overseas and they are assisting people in Cuba to manage their fisheries better, things like that. We're selling our top technology to other countries. I don't think that's good for our own industries in Australia. It's a bit like the merino ram being sold into China. I can't see in the longer term how that can possibly be beneficial to the merino people in Australia because they're going to be directly competing with them. So I think, you know, those sort of things that we should really seriously be thinking about in the industry - whether we should be selling our technology overseas to the likes of Cuba and these sort of places.

**JD** The West Australian rock lobster industry has a worldwide reputation in terms of product and its government (if you'd like to call it that) or management. Could you comment on that?

**COLE** Yes. I think we've been, specifically the West Australian fishery, we've been very, very fortunate I think in Western Australia in having Bernard Bowen as our Director of Fisheries for the last 20-odd years, 22 years I think it is now that he's been Director. He came up through the ranks and studied through the ranks. He's a scientist in his own right (before he took on the job as Director) and with that sort of background it's been very, very beneficial for the industry in WA, and he's recognised throughout the world for his abilities in that field. And the rock lobster [fishery] in Western Australia is held in very high regard wherever you go - throughout Australia and, I understand, overseas also, for the way it has been managed.

Some of the fishermen may not look upon it as being well managed, they'd rather go out there and do what they want when they want to, but I think from the Director's point of view he's done an excellent job in being able to do the research that's required and also chairing the Rock Lobster Advisory Committee and guiding that down the right path to protect the industry, he's done an excellent job. Yes, he's held in very high regard around the world.

**JD** Good. The development of technology, John, in terms of the operation of fishing and processing and so on, how much of that has originated here in Western Australia? And how much is importation from other places?

**COLE** We're very, very fortunate in Western Australia in having the type of entrepreneurial people we have. The Kailis's and the likes. I mean, the knife that you kill the cray on at the factory, it's been all developed in WA. A lot of the stuff that we do within our factories, on our fishing boats, has been developed in Western Australia. I think Michael Kailis, actually, was one of the ones that originated, as I say, the knife for killing crays. Sure, there's been regulations brought down by the Department of Primary Industry to upgrade facilities in the factory, like stainless steel troughs and all this type of thing, but basically the know-how has pretty well developed from our own people in WA.

As an example, you take the pot-tipper on your Cray boats and lobster boats. That was, I think, twenty years down the track in Western Australia before it was originally promoted in the Australian fisheries for the people in Victoria and these places to use it.

**JD** That is the end of Side A Tape 1. Please turn this tape over for Side B.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## **TAPE 1 SIDE B**

**JD** This is Side B of Tape 1 of an interview with Mr John Cole.

John, we were talking about the development of technology in your industry that has taken place in Western Australia. There is one invention that I believe you were involved in and that was the development of a Cray box. Could you tell us about that?

**COLE** Yes, that's correct. When I first got involved in the industry the larger vessels (when I say larger vessels, vessels over 30 feet, which were large vessels in those days) used to use a skid rail system which went from where the tipper landed the pot right across the vessel, and the crew would stand the other side of the vessel and sort the crays. It never seemed reasonable to me that the crays should slide all the way across the deck and their legs and everything get damaged under the pots as they're sliding across the planks. So I developed a system where the pot came up on the tipper and then was just taken from the tipper, slid back the width of one pot, and the crew then sorted the crays and everything into a box right there; so that you could still pull another pot while the crew was still sorting that pot. At least the crays weren't shoved right across the boat and their legs and everything else damaged, because the thing in the back of my mind always was the fact that we have to produce a top quality product and the less you knock that animal around the better the quality is going to be. So I developed that on the other boat and just about everyone in the industry is using that type of system now. I don't think you see a skid rail across a vessel anymore.

And I also went into Cray tanks on this vessel. It had aluminium containers down in the deck, below deck, and when the deckhand sorts crays at the cackerbox, the sized crays go down a telescopic chute and that goes down into these tanks below deck which have circulating water, and the water comes through the holes [in the bottom] of the tanks and then flows out through the top and **drains to the side of the boat**. At the end of the day you switch off the electric clutch on the pump and you pull a lever next to the steering wheel inside the vessel, which operates a tap below the tank and allows the water to gently settle out back into the ocean. You take the lid off the tank and you pull those containers out individually and put lids on and go straight to the factory with them. You don't have to handle the product again, so the product really only gets hand touched once by the crew until it hits the factory; which to me is producing a top quality product.

**JD** And both of those were your inventions?

**COLE** Yes.

**JD** Congratulations! That's particularly important, of course, for the Japanese market, isn't it?

**COLE** It is, it is important; because you must realise to get top money for your product you must get it to the factory - possibly with all the horns on and no legs missing - and if you can do that and the product is still in top condition when it gets to the factory it then goes into holding tanks, and they've got more chance of survival. But the more the human hand touches that animal the less likelihood you've got of that animal surviving.

**JD** Thank you. You mentioned Mr Michael Kailis, and I know he lived and worked here for a decade, and still his reputation in this area among the fishermen is tremendous.

**COLE** That's correct.

**JD** Why is that?

**COLE** Oh, Michael Kailis originally, when he came to Dongara as a young man of around 30 years of age, he got involved in not only purchasing a factory that was started here, but he also took on the job as Secretary of the local Fishermen's Association, and my father at the time was the President of that association. He didn't

want to be seen as a processor, you know - buying crayfish, paying out money. He wanted to be part of an industry as a whole, developing the industry or the township around an industry, and he took a lot greater interest than some of the processors along the coast, and he got involved in the community in general. He was for a couple of years the Secretary of the Association and used to promote the Association to wherever - Government bodies or whatever. And I think that was an excellent start, and those of us that were involved in those days still hold him in very high regard. In fact I've been fishing there now myself since 1967.

**JD** Thank you. John, could we move on to other problems facing the industry? What about the question of depletion of the stock?

**COLE** Depletion of the stock, I think, has to be the concern of every fisherman in Australia. We in the rock lobster industry have been fortunate in having the administration in place to be able to take care of the depletion of stocks up to a point. It is still always a concern. I think I said before that we take something like 80% of the available resource each year. Other stocks - shark for instance, in the shark fishery down south, which is now a limited entry fishery, has been for two years. The stocks in that are at dangerous levels. We have to reduce the amount of effort, in other words the number of boats and the amount of nets that those people run, in order to protect the stocks. The abalone fishery around the coast and the beach and the reefs near Perth; I mean THAT is in a bad way. That's got to be protected not only from the professionals but also from the recreational people, because if we kill out that stock it will never be rejuvenated again.

The schnapper fishery, that's come under a limited entry regime in the last couple of years in Shark Bay. I mean, that's operating fairly efficiently now as far as I'm aware. The only one we've got left out of the 40 odd fisheries in this coast is up off the Pilbara coast, the trap and line fishery up there. That is gradually being brought into a limited access type operation. But the protection of the resource should be paramount in every fisherman's mind, in every administrator's mind, because it doesn't matter where you are and what product you are fishing, if you over-fish it you will never be able to go back on time and pick up the threads again. And I think we, as fishermen, must be very, very conscious of that and where possible protect the resource.

**JD** Is there a problem with pollution in Western Australia waters?

**COLE** Yes, there's to me minor pollution in Western Australian waters compared to what I've seen overseas, but I think we've always got to be very, very careful about what we drop over the side. For instance, the plastic wrapping around our bait, fishermen must be very conscious that they bring it home and put it in rubbish bins where it can be destroyed on the beach. The amateur people that go to sea with plastic bags from Coles New World or somewhere or other on board, must be conscious of the fact that they should take them home because ultimately they'll end up on your beaches. Or, as some people have seen, straps around sharks and damaging the shark around the dorsal fins and so forth. But pollution - it is something we must be very much aware of and I think if we take that into account now, at this early stage, we can keep it under control in Australia and not let it get out of control like it has done in some other countries.

**JD** There seems to be some considerable degree of concern in the industry at the incursion of overseas capital, and hence ownership, into the industry in Australia. Is that a real problem?

**COLE** Yes, I think it is and I was involved with the.... earlier in the year when the Japanese people Chunagon were trying to buy into three licences owned by Planet Fisheries. The fishermen in Geraldton and Jurien Bay and Fremantle came out very strongly against allowing more Japanese investment into the lobster fisheries by way of buying factories.

I happened to be involved in representing industry on the Commonwealth level to both the Foreign Investment Review Board and also to Paul Keating, and we were fortunate that he reversed the decision and stopped that taking place. The thing that interested me at the time was the Foreign Investment Review Board said their view was that the foreign investment when it gets into the lobster fishery was no different to the foreign investment that's already taken place in the meat industry and also into the coal industry. They could not see any distinction between them. We were very fortunate in being able to get Paul Keating's ear and convincing him that there was a difference, and he agreed there was a difference and stopped that. It was interesting to read in the paper not so long ago, where the meat industry now is coming to the same conclusions - that they should not have had foreign investment in their meat industry.

**JD** Yes. It would certainly change the character of the industry, wouldn't it?

**COLE** It certainly did. Well it did because Chunagon was already involved when they bought the licence from the Superannuation Board, which was International Fisheries, I N F. They bought that licence about two years ago. Industry didn't even know that that licence was being offered to the Japanese at the time, but the Superannuation Board had a large investment in that, so it was theoretically offered by Government to Japanese. But when we stepped on the Minister's toes at the time and said, "Not on!", it had already gone through and he denied knowing anything about it. But he supported us to the hilt when we wanted to go and talk to Paul Keating about further foreign investment.

**JD** It's interesting that nobody seems to know just the degree of foreign investment there is in Australia.

**COLE** I think you're correct in saying that, because I don't think anybody knows. I had the opportunity the other day of posing the question to bankers in Geraldton at a seminar. "Why do we have to let foreign investment into Australia?" Their answer to me was, "We've got to, we're in such a bad way financially that we have to." I'm always of the opinion you don't sell your assets, you lease them; and I think that's what we should be looking at. Either leasing them, or taking in a percentage of foreign investment. We are now getting through Parliament legislation that will allow the Director of Fisheries in Western Australia to have authority over whether he transfers the licence to a foreign company or otherwise. If it's not in the better interests of the rock lobster fishery, he does not have to transfer the licence. If he does transfer the licence the foreign money in that company is only allowed to be 20%.

**JD** In other words, the control of the industry will remain here?

**COLE** The control of the industry under that legislation will remain in Australian hands at all times, and I think that's beneficial to our industry. The worry we had with Chunagon buying into the Planet Fisheries licences was that they were an end user. They ran twelve restaurants in Japan, so they theoretically bought the product, processed it, put it through their own middle company into their own restaurants in Japan, and they could ultimately dictate the price back to the fishermen.



**JD** Right!

**COLE** We don't want to be in that position.

**JD** Are there any other problems that you see looming, either already here or in the future, in the industry?

**COLE** I think we've got to be very conscious of the amount of expended money in the transportation of lobster, backwards and forwards, up and down our coast from factory to factory. I mean at present a Fremantle factory is drawing crayfish from the Abrolhos Islands and they cart them all the way back to Osborne Park for processing. I think that's the most hideous thing I've seen in my life. If we're going to get a top quality product it must be processed as quickly as possible, and I think we're transporting our product - there are trucks from here going south, and they're passing trucks that are coming from the south to the north and things like that. I think we should try and resolve those issues amongst industry so that we get a more viable type of industry.

I think the marketing of some of our fish - our wetfish products and things like that - we've got to see if we can promote a little. You must appreciate that we are now competing with fish coming off the Chinese joint-venture vessels out of Broome, something the WE didn't even know in Western Australia at first was even going to take place. I became aware of it when I was in the East in May, they were using nets that weren't the same standard as what our own fishermen had to use. We were given assurances at the time that they were told they had to put on new nets by the end of May, which I understand (or I'm led to believe) has already taken place.

I think we've got to be very careful in allowing foreign ventures like that to land their product on Australian markets because it is detrimental to the local fishermen's product going on to the market. Having said that, we have to appreciate that we import 60% of our fish. If the fish coming off the foreign vessels is going to replace some of that 60% it will be fine; but as far as I can see it's additional to that other fish. So we somehow have to still allow foreign... allow imports to provide the fish to the consumer but at the same time we have to protect our own fishermen, and that's where our State Council plays a role in doing that. And we're still in negotiations with regard to legislations at this stage to try and protect our local people.

**JD** John, is fish farming perceived as a threat for the future?

**COLE** I don't think so. It's a bit like crayfish farming, lobster farming, or whatever you like to call it, one or the other. I think fish farming is in the Asian countries more where they've got the lower labour costs. Our labour costs and so forth to produce anything here are astronomical in Australia. If we're talking about producing crayfish or lobster in farms, the lead time up to an animal that would be sized to be able to market is about four years. To feed an animal that long and get a return on it is very doubtful. I think marron farming, and things of that [nature] - there's probably merit in going ahead and doing further research on that. We've already had a number of companies involved in that type of thing in WA. There's a lot of them gone out of it and gone broke, but I think somewhere along the line one will probably crack it one day and find a method by which they can make a quid out of it. But I think what will ultimately be the deciding factor is the cost of labour.

**JD** Yes. Talking about labour. The fishing industry and its associated industry must be a very substantial employer of labour in Western Australia.

**COLE** Yes, it certainly is. We employ a lot of people, not only on the vessels going to sea but also in the factories and so forth; engineering shops and everything around that support the industries. I'm not quite sure what the multiplying factor is, probably 4 to 1 or something like that I would think.

**JD** A fairly recent development perhaps, in our fisheries, although that's been around for a long time in fisheries overseas I understand, is the role of women. Is that becoming evident to you?

**COLE** Well I think women have played a major role, I think, in our industries over a number of years. We have got, in the lobster industry, we have got a number of woman actually skippering boats; and in the prawning industry we've got a number of women. And some of the companies will tell you that some of the skippers in the prawning industry are women. And I think that's good. A lot of the business administration and the keeping of books and things like that, they're all carried out by women in the industry, and I think that's good. I think it's excellent, actually. It certainly doesn't do any harm.

**JD** Are they well accepted by the men in the industry, would you say?

**COLE** Yes, yes. I mean, in the marketing field we've got a woman - Nancy Reid is involved in marketing and has been very successful at marketing lobster and prawns and things overseas. And she's been well accepted, which is quite odd because a lot of people were saying she wouldn't be accepted by the Japanese. But she's very highly respected by the Japanese as a marketing person. The skippers that we have in the industry are very well respected by the men in the industry.

**JD** They don't mind having a lady skipper and doing as they're told?

**COLE** No, no. I don't see anything wrong with that at all.

**JD** I don't see anything wrong with it, I wondered if the guys were happy about it. Look, could you just make a comment perhaps on another major group - the Aboriginal people and their involvement in the industry?

**COLE** Aboriginals at present don't have great involvement in the industry. We have got a.... there are a couple of, certainly not full-blood Aborigines; there's quarter-caste or something like that that are involved in the industry as crew and things like that. But there certainly are not a lot of them. Once you get up around Shark Bay and these places, my understanding is the Aboriginal people still have the only right to go and kill a digong whereas the white man Europeans can't do that. But their involvement in the industry is not great.

**JD** Anything further that you'd like to mention and have recorded on this Tape, John?

**COLE** Only to say that I think the recording of this type of information is certainly very important because there are people within the industry who have already passed on, who could have put on tape a lot of very, very valuable information. I mean, even though I've been around the scenes for 35 years I'm relatively a newcomer. There are people who were around before the turn of the century; prior to the war (the last war) for instance, that could have put forward a lot of information on to tape for this locality of Port Denison.

We have names up on the obelisk up here of the Money brothers who disappeared at sea. We have their descendants involved, of course, here in Port Denison now. They may be able to give you some information. But I think it's important that we get as much of this information as we can on tape today and that we keep up-dating this information every number of years - five years, or ten years, or whatever it is, for future posterity because it's very important.

**JD** It's an industry of rapid change, isn't it, in many different directions - in technology, markets, in availability of fish? In all sorts of things.

**COLE** That's right, it is. And it's changing so rapidly I'd almost hesitate to say that, you know, it should be every five years we should be updating it because technology is changing so quickly. If we can keep this sort of information in archives or wherever, it's always going to be there. But I do regret not being able to bring forward those older identities that could have provided us a lot of information of the 1920s and '30s and so forth. In the real sailing boat days we didn't have engines in our boats. There were people in this harbour, for instance, used to row their boat and then pull the sail up and sail to sea.

**JD** Yes.

**COLE** When I first became involved there were still a few boats around that used to actually stop their engine every time they pulled a pot. When I first started we used to pull our pots by hand, we didn't have winches on board, we used to pull them by hand. And these particular people that used to stop their engines, they used to pull their pots by hand. And they used to have a local bloke here who used to trap rabbits, and he's sell the rabbits to the fishermen for a shilling each, or something, and they used to use those as bait.

But I mean all that's gone now. The people that were involved in those particular things aren't with us today, which I think is a shame.

**JD** It is, it is indeed. And it's too late.

**COLE** It's too late.

**JD** Although we are still getting some of the old identities who have long memories and record fascinating facets of the industry, as you've done today, John. Thank you very much.

**COLE** Good. Thank you very much for your time.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr John Cole, President of the West Australian Fishing Industry Council.

END OF RECORDING

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with FRANCISCO CORREIA

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Francisco Correia of Bicton, Western Australia. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry. It was conducted in Mr Correia's home on the 22nd November 1989.

Mr Correia is a very prominent member of the Portuguese community in Western Australia. He had a great deal to do with the migration of many Portuguese people to this country and with establishment in the fishing industry in Fremantle and north to Carnarvon, as well as their involvement in the banana growing industry in Carnarvon.

Mr Correia was a leading figure in the epic voyage of the fishing boat **North Cape** from Cape Town in Fremantle in 1952. On this voyage (which took 75 days) he brought with him 23 Portuguese people, most of whom entered the rock lobster industry in Western Australia, and in which they and their compatriots now operate some 40 boats.

Mr Correia was active in establishing the Portuguese club in Fremantle and was its first President. The Club has played an important part in the social and cultural life of the Portuguese people in this part of Australia. Since his retirement Mr Correia has resumed the role of President of the Club and still occupies that position, which is an important one for Australians of Portuguese background living in Western Australia.

There is one tape, and the interview starts at 023 on the rev counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Mr Correia, would you please record your full name?

**CORREIA** My name is Francisco, [pronounced Francisquay].

**JD** And when were you born?

**CORREIA** I was born 1914 in Portugal Madeira.

**JD** That's the island of Madeira was it?

**CORREIA** [Unclear - very strong accent hard to translate from tape].

**JD** Were you a fisherman there, before you left?

**CORREIA** No, I was never a fisherman. I was a farmer.

**JD** A farmer!

**CORREIA** My father was [a] farmer and I worked on the farm. A banana farm - a banana plantation.

**JD** Oh right! And why did you leave?

**CORREIA** Well, I leave because I see the French because of the Suez specially [unclear] and Africa so near. It goes well to make good money in the outside world so I go too.

**JD** Yes, and when was that?

**CORREIA** This was 1939.

**JD** How did you get to South Africa?

**CORREIA** Well I get my permission to come to the Portuguese Angola [unclear], but from there I want to go to Cape Town. Well, I tried to get.... what do you call? I buy a passage to go like leave the country, I pay for a passage. I get to the Lourenco Marques and they never let me to go ashore because I never get the visa from the Government. I have to back to Angola.

Well, all my money be spent, I say, "Well I can't go back to Angola now, you got to jail me because [unclear] I have a right to be on board." The Captain this ship say, "Well this man you can't put in jail him, to be free on board." And they put one of the mans on board. I can go anywhere, but I can't go to the shore. I told myself, I have to go shore when the ship be there for a while. And I keep see which way I can get away from the ship. But the Captain he put one man of the crew. I can go anywhere, the money goes behind me all the time, see.

I tell myself the night time, before the ship is supposed to go somewhere, I was in the front of the ship. The mans watch me coming back to talk to the man, "Where are we going now?" I jump over the ship, from the ship to the shore. I had few friends there say, "Well he jumped the ship." I come to this place, he give me address, got friends there. Go to see these friends there and I stop there.

And from there I stay Lourenco Marques. I want to go to South Africa. Well I find a way to go to South Africa, because there I have the brothers-in-law in South Africa - he want me there, and I go to see him there. I be four years there without permission to be there. After four years I find all complete.

**JD** And then you decided to come to Australia?

**CORREIA** Well, after twelve years I want start in the crayfishing business, but South Africa I can get to the fish but I can't export. I want to catch and export myself because the money [is] in exporting; because South Africa pay readily to many catch of the fish. And export the fish if you want to make the money.

And then I hear this place we catch crayfish, while second place was Australia - Western Australia. Well I came here to see which way it was [to] catch of the fish, what quantities you catch. Well I got this information [unclear]. I stop here, but after a time I go back to Surwat [?] We have a boat, fishing boat, there in South Africa and the crew here not too much, because the fishing boat here was foreign sands working. Was very great fishermans. I told myself, well we got some cousins and things in Portugal, better to bring them here.

I got the permit from Government here; I go back to South Africa, South Africa to Portugal. I engage all these people and brings them to South Africa. From there we come down by boat to Australia.

**JD** Were they all fishermen in Portugal?

**CORREIA** Yes, all fishermen.

**JD** All fishermen?

**CORREIA** Well some one of them not fishermen but become like a fisherman. I bring most of relations.

**JD** And what boat was that that you brought over?

**CORREIA** North Cape.

**JD** North Cape! Could you tell us about that vessel, what size it was?

**CORREIA** Boat was 75 foot long and that was a good sea boat, it was more trawl [unclear]. The trawl at the back, the front is very weak. The weather was very untoward but anyway we arrive here - it take 75 days to get here.

**JD** Seventy-five! And when did you leave?

**CORREIA** When....?

**JD** From South Africa. When did you set sail?

**CORREIA** We leave South Africa. First I come here to see in 1951, and I go back. When I come with the ship - 1952.

**JD** And did you sail, or did you have engines?

**CORREIA** Both.

**JD** Both! And how many people were on board?

**CORREIA** We have on board 23 peoples on board.

**JD** Were they all men, or men and women?

**CORREIA** There was one woman and a little boy, a boy from one of the mans comes on board.

**JD** And what was the accommodation on the ship like?

**CORREIA** Well accommodation - none was too good and none too bad, just... [laughs]. Just tries best to...

**JD** Did you have bad weather on the voyage?

**CORREIA** Yes, we be a lot of time stop in port because we can't get through because the weather was bad. We had to wait for good weather. And then keep moving.

**JD** Where did you actually leave from in South Africa?

**CORREIA** Leave from Cape Town.

**JD** Cape Town! And then you went up the east coast?

**CORREIA** And then we come to Mauritius. From Mauritius to Rodriguez Island, and Rodriguez Island straight to Western Australia.

**JD** And did you have plenty of stores on board?

**CORREIA** Yes, we carry quite a lot of stores but not there to control - I let the people use what they like. [Laughs].

**JD** What about water?

**CORREIA** Yes water we used to carry.

**JD** You had plenty of water?

**CORREIA** We never had short anything because everything we have control, we control.

**JD** And did you have any trouble with the boat on the way over?

**CORREIA** No, we never have much trouble because have two good mechanics on board. We had enough rain. Everything comes.

**JD** Did you have radio?

**CORREIA** Yes, I have a radio.

**JD** Did the South African authorities know you were leaving?

**CORREIA** Well they knew, because one I bring all these people to [unclear] up there. They be cleaning, the boat had been there about.... I can't remember. But the men finished the boat and then come back.

**JD** And they didn't try and stop you at all?

**CORREIA** Oh no, no, no, no. I had permission already from here.

**JD** Did the Australian authorities know you were sailing the boat across?

**CORREIA** Yes, they know because I tell them what I going to do. Because when I come here I ask for permission to bring this 15 fishermans. I never say how many crew be with the boat, and to bring the boat here. And they give me a letter - yes, you go to Australia and bringing your men and your boat.

**JD** And where was the boat built?

**CORREIA** Well, this boat was quite old boat. It was built in South Africa quite very old. It was built I don't know.

**JD** You bought it in South Africa?

**CORREIA** We bought it in South Africa.

**JD** Was it a single mast, or double mast, or....?

**CORREIA** Single mast. It was like a trawler - trawling.

**JD** Oh yeah, right! And were they one engined or twin engined?

**CORREIA** One engine.

**JD** Diesel?

**CORREIA** Diesel engine.

**JD** And it performed alright?

**CORREIA** It performed quite good. We had two good canvas on board and it make everything go.

**JD** Did you pass many other vessels on the journey?

**CORREIA** Well, we never see many of the other vessels.

**JD** It would be a pretty lonely sort of a trip!

**CORREIA** When I put my foot here, he give me Australia to do another trip, I don't think I would. [Laughter].

**JD** No, I bet not. And did you ever get lost at all?

**CORREIA** No, I never get lost.

**JD** You knew exactly where you were all the time?

**CORREIA** I came the boat because I want to show the boys the canvas in the boat. I came in him to make him [unclear - sounds like scuffelto]. Because see world, busy sea world - we should be alright. Like I never come with hims, I think with the route.



**JD** Were you the captain of the boat.

**CORREIA** No, no. We have a captain.

**JD** Can you remember the names of any of the other people on board?

**CORREIA** Oooh.... I can't remember the names now.

**JD** No, no. I thought that many of them would still be in Western Australia.

**CORREIA** Oh yes, a lot of them still in Western Australia. But the names - I no remember.

**JD** Right. And whereabouts on the West Australian coast did you come to?

**CORREIA** Fremantle.

**JD** You came straight to Fremantle?

**CORREIA** Straight to Fremantle. And from that time in Fremantle, I stop in Fremantle, stay in Fremantle.

**JD** You've always been in Fremantle?

**CORREIA** Always in Fremantle.

**JD** Right. And you went fishing then?

**CORREIA** Yes, for a start I be fishing.

**JD** And what happened to the boat eventually?

**CORREIA** Well, we had the bad luck with the boat. The first year the boat caught fire. We got that boat, and then we got another - buy another - two catcher boats, because this was a big boat, a big freezer. And we got two small catcher boats to catch for the other. This big boat caught fire and sink. And then we keep the other two boats.

**JD** You were fishing out of Fremantle?

**CORREIA** Out of Fremantle.

**JD** North, or....?

**CORREIA** North.

**JD** What, up Lancelin way?

**CORREIA** We started in Lancelin and at that time the crayfish industry was open up in Lancelin. From Lancelin north, nobody knew anything about. And then we go to Lancelin, and from Lancelin we go to Jurien Bay. We were the first ones to go to Jurien Bay. And then keep going north and north.

**JD** Right! To come back to the voyage, were there any illnesses on board?

**CORREIA** Well, one man he got very sick - got seasick. I see, and thought he going to die. But he was alright. He was only one who was very [sick]. [A third person entered the interview at this stage, speaking Portuguese].

**UNIDENTIFIED PERSON** He don't like the weather. He's still alive.

**JD** How did the people keep themselves occupied on such a long voyage on a small ship?

**CORREIA** Well keep looking to the sea, and keep steering the boat, and each one he got his time to steer the boat.

**JD** And work around the place?

**CORREIA** Work around the place, yes - cooking and cleaning, always something to do. Otherwise in pray. [Laughter].

**JD** Were the people frightened at all on that voyage?

**CORREIA** Well sometimes it make you frightened, to tell you truth. Because we was lucky, we could get the very strong weather - wind - but it was before we got wind from the back. It was from the front, I don't think we can make it. From the back it be pushing the boat.

**JD** Did you go well south or did you come straight across?

**CORREIA** Well, from Mauritius we come to Port Rodriguez and straight to here. Straight to Fremantle.

**JD** Would you remember what latitude you were about?

**CORREIA** Well I forgot what it was.

**JD** No, OK. Anything else you'd like to say about the voyage, first of all?

**CORREIA** Well, I don't think I've got much to say because most of it been forgotten. [Laughs].

**JD** Can't think of anything else that was important? What were your main worries on board?

**CORREIA** Well main worries - everything come right. And I got weathers to...

**JD** Were you happy when you got here? I bet you were!

**CORREIA** Oh yes, it be alright.

**JD** Were the people pleased that they'd made it?

**CORREIA** They be pleased to be here.

**JD** So what did they do when they got here into Fremantle?

**CORREIA** Well, when we got here we start to fix the boat properly because the season, the crayfish season, was full at that time. I forgot I meant to arrive here and the season was closed. In June, July.... about July.

**JD** That's about the worst time of the year, isn't it?

**CORREIA** Yes. We prepare the boat, clean. We never took a preparation of the boat, we make the preparation here. And then waiting for the November month to open for start of [the season].

**JD** Where did the people live? Did they come ashore?

**CORREIA** I have house in Fremantle, everyone live in the house.

**JD** Was it in Beaconsfield area that you and your people lived?

**CORREIA** No, it was north Buckland Hill, [unclear] we bought a house there.

**JD** Did they all go fishing? They wouldn't all have gone fishing, surely?

**CORREIA** All start fishing. But after the boat sink we never have place for everybody that all had been involved crayfish, went find a job somewhere else. You can find a job, just keep quite, rest and look for some other jobs.

**JD** One of your brothers came with you, but you had six brothers and they have all ended up in Western Australia.

**CORREIA** Yes, all ended up in other thing. One who start fishing. I have a brother - the one who come from Venezuela here - he no like the sea, he got the seasick. Well I told myself, what you going to do for him? It was no good putting him in waves. Where we come from we have a plantation, a banana plantation. We see bananas in the shops and say, well, where these bananas come from? From Carnarvon! Where's Carnarvon? Oh, 600 miles north.

I tell the brother, we go see how they grow bananas there. I bring my car, on the boat I bring my own car. Well we go to Carnarvon. At that time the roads was very bad, they say you can't make it in one day. It takes two days to get to Carnarvon. We look all plantations, see prices [of] plantations. I ask him - this you like? Oh yes, I like to own this. So we see a plantation, we bought a plantation.

**JD** Oh! And there's quite a community of Portuguese people in Carnarvon?

**CORREIA** At that time there was not one.

**JD** No, but afterwards?

**CORREIA** After we got the plantation we take seven Portuguese people there to work, and then we bought another one, and another one - 'til we have three plantations there.

**JD** Are they still up in the Carnarvon area?

**CORREIA** We still got two plantations there. We sell one because the brother is now retired.

**JD** Yes, there seems to be two communities of Portuguese people - one in the Fremantle area and one in Portu.... [correction] in Carnarvon.

**CORREIA** All in [unclear].

**JD** And then there was another sizeable community in Sydney, I think.

**CORREIA** Yes, Sydney. The people now in Portugal say well, Mr Correia, he goes to Australia but this and that. He told us Australia just a small place. There's people now going to Australia who come to Fremantle thinking it is a small place. When they come they find themselves in Sydney. We in Western Australia. Someone of them ring - aye, all my friends, I got Marie coming, I got my sister here, and some keep stopping there. One stop there, he brings his friends there and that's why they split.

**JD** Were the people in Sydney, were they from Madeira too?

**CORREIA** Yes, from Madeira; and also from the mainland. It was when I get all those peoples from Portugal to Australia, Australia they never even heard of it. The name of Australia never before. [Laughter].

**JD** Did you get any assistance from the Australian Government?

**CORREIA** No, no assistance at all.

**JD** And how did you find Australian people? Were they different, or....?

**CORREIA** Oh, all good peoples. No complaints at all.

**JD** Could any of your people speak English when they came?

**CORREIA** No, not one speak English.

**UNIDENTIFIED PERSON** I think my niece speak a little bit.... [lapsed into Portuguese]. No, very little.

**JD** Did I hear, years ago, that there was a Priest on board?

**CORREIA** No. Not true.

**UNIDENTIFIED PERSON** Not true.

**JD** Anything else you'd like to tell us, either about the voyage or about your time in Australia?

**CORREIA** Well, I like Australia. I never change Australia for anything else.

**JD** You're glad you came?

**CORREIA** I was alright in South Africa, too, but Australia just the same.

**JD** And is the Portuguese community thriving, is it going along alright?

**CORREIA** Yes, all going alright. [Another lapse into Portuguese with a third person]. All these peoples are bringing.... see Zonda here [unclear] brings all his wives, and some others - Marie bring the girlfriends. We got Marie, all start of them.

**JD** Are there still a lot of the Portuguese people in the fishing industry out here?

**CORREIA** Yes, still quite a lot. Of course a lot of them they buy their own boats, too. We got about thirty-five Portuguese boats here; [unclear] and fish is on board.

**JD** About thirty-five boats!

**CORREIA** About thirty-five, maybe forty.

**JD** Gee! Mostly fishing from Fremantle?

**CORREIA** From Fremantle. We've got few prawning also. Carnarvon.

**JD** And they would be mostly relatives of the people who came with you originally, would they?

**CORREIA** Yes, we start off all from relatives, and then comes friends and....

**JD** Sure! It's a great story. It's a good story.

**CORREIA** And after we got plantations we got peoples to work on plantation.

**JD** Did many of the people who came out go back to Portugal?

**CORREIA** I don't think. Some of them that makes his mind to go to Abrolhos, they there for few months....

**JD** Then come back again!

**CORREIA** They come back again! [Laughter].

**JD** Right. Anything else then that you'd like to say about anything.

**CORREIA** Well, I don't think I've got much to say because I've forgotten all.

**JD** Tell me, what would you say is the main problem that faces people coming to this country, as you came?

**CORREIA** Well.....

**UNIDENTIFIED PERSON** We don't speak English.

**CORREIA** No, to come to Australia you have to pass so many points, and for these points in these parts somebody [? unclear], because if one does not [? unclear] they don't pass the points.

**UNIDENTIFIED PERSON** .... people from Portugal better have now.

**JD** Yes indeed. Well, thank you very much, that was very, very interesting.

**CORREIA** Well, thank you for the job.

**JD** I'm glad we got it on tape. Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Francisco Correia. The interview was conducted at his home in Bicton by Jack Darcey on the 22nd November 1989.

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with JUDITH DITTMER

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Judith Dittmer, lady owner/skipper of Windy Harbour on the south coast of Western Australia. The interviewee was the daughter of a lighthouse keeper and was brought up mostly in lighthouses in remote areas of Western Australia.

She became a qualified nursing sister and volunteered for duty with a medical team working in a Vietnamese hospital during the Vietnam war. Upon her return to Australia she became a qualified skipper and owner of a 30 foot fishing boat operating out of Windy Harbour, where the weather conditions are often severe. She engages in a variety of types of fishing and usually works alone.

In addition to her employment in the fishing industry Judith Dittmer acts as relieving sister in the Health Department's nursing post at Northcliffe.

Her comments on the south coast fishing industry are perceptive and valuable. She is a remarkable personality and has also included piloting aircraft in her range of activities.

The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey at Northcliffe on the 16th December 1989 for Murdoch University and the Australian Fishing Industry Research and Development Committee.

There is one Tape and the interview commences at 023 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

*JD* This is an interview with Judith Dittmer of Windy Harbour. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey on the 16th December 1989 at Northcliffe, Western Australia.

Judith, could you record your full name and date of birth, please?

*DITTMER* Judith Ellen Dittmer, and date of birth is 17th December 1944.

*JD* And where were you born?

*DITTMER* I was born in Bagot Road, Subiaco at King Edward Memorial. [Laughs].

**JD** Were you parents both Australian?

**DITTMER** Yes.

**JD** Were they involved in the fishing industry at all?

**DITTMER** My father was before he went into the lighthouse service, he was a salmon fisherman. He was one of the first south coast salmon fishermen actually, and he also had a boat and did a bit of long lining, a bit of shark fishing.

**JD** Where from?

**DITTMER** Out of Bremer Bay, Doubtful Island, 13 Mile Beach, 14 Mile Beach down around Doubtful Island. He also salmon fished at Hamelin Bay too, at one stage.

**JD** Did you live on the lighthouse stations?

**DITTMER** Yes.

**JD** Which ones?

**DITTMER** Started off at Eclipse Island - we did three years there - I was 3 [years old] when we went on, I was 7 when we came off. Then we went to Cape Don in the Northern Territory - we did three years there. Then we came back down to Cape Leeuwin; went back up to Cape Leveque; back to Rottnest Island - six years on Rottnest. Back to the Leeuwin, and somewhere in between there we did another stint at Cape Leveque, but I sort of got sent off to boarding school so I lost track of that. But yeah, I would have been about 21 or 22 when my father retired from lighthouse service and I was 3 when he started, so he worked for a few years.

**JD** It was a pretty lonely life, was it?

**DITTMER** Oh, a great life. Yeah, I loved it.

**JD** Did it affect your education?

**DITTMER** No, Mum taught me correspondence for five years and then she sent me to boarding school. So no, it didn't affect my education.

**JD** Boarding school in Perth, presumably?

**DITTMER** Yes, that's right.

**JD** When did you train in your nursing career?

**DITTMER** 1963 I started at Royal Perth.

**JD** And what did you do after that?

**DITTMER** I did three years training and stayed on an extra six months. I did an extra six months in neuro surgery. Then I went to the country because my parents were at Cape Leeuwin at the time and we had a property at Augusta. I went down there and I



was there for three days, I think, and the matron asked me to relieve at the Augusta Hospital and I finished up doing eighteen months at Augusta Hospital.

Then I took off and went around Australia - took six months, finished up in Brisbane and did my mid [midwifery] in Brisbane, and that was in '68/'69. When I finished mid I did three years in theatre in Brisbane, and then I did a stint in Vietnam for six months, working as a theatre sister.

**JD** With the Army?

**DITTMER** No, as a civilian. I volunteered as a civilian with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs it was - or External Affairs in those days.

**JD** Were you treating civilians there, or....?

**DITTMER** Yes. There were six doctors and six sisters, and we were working in a Vietnamese hospital run by the Vietnamese. The only thing we ran were the theatres.

**JD** Pretty tough sort of work?

**DITTMER** Oh yeah. Yeah, it was an eye-opener, put it that way.

**JD** Then you came back to Australia. Was that at the end of the Vietnamese war?

**DITTMER** 1971 that was. Yes, getting towards the end. I came back to Brisbane, was in Brisbane for a month then I came back to Western Australia.

**JD** Still nursing?

**DITTMER** My mother was down at Windy Harbour at that stage and I went down there to catch up with her, and I was supposed to be home for a couple of months holiday and I've been at Windy Harbour ever since. [Laughs]. I had a complete break from nursing for about two years. You know, when I got back to Australia and down to earth type of thing, I just felt I couldn't go back into nursing for a while.

And that's when I got into the fishing, because Bill Overton was down there and I started going, just going out for a bit of fun with him, and then decided that I wanted to do my sea time and get my tickets and so on. And so that's what I did.

**JD** What tickets did you get?

**DITTMER** Oh, I got Skipper Grade 2, which is now Grade 5, and Engine Driver's Ticket, which is necessary if you're going to skipper your own boat. Marine Engine Driver's Ticket that is.

**JD** And you skipper your own boat?

**DITTMER** Yep. I own my own boat, thank you very much, I'm not paying it off. Then I actually skipper it, yes.

**JD** What size boat is it?

**DITTMER** It's only 30 foot - jarrah plank. A slow old boat, but it does me. It's big enough for me, I can get into enough trouble with that.

**JD** Do you work on your own or do you have a crew?

**DITTMER** I wet line, hand line, drop line. I do all that on my own, yes. But after Christmas I normally cray, and I try to keep a deckie when I'm cray fishing. It's very difficult down here because it is not like the west coast, it's very spasmodic type of craying and we don't get a lot of good weather, so it's very difficult to keep somebody. You know, you can't guarantee them an income all the time so you've got to get somebody that's either not working or someone that's perhaps just left school and still looking for a job and that sort of thing. Normally we pay them a share - you know we work on a share basis - so when we fish they get money, when we don't fish they don't, sort of thing.

And then I normally cray from January through until about the end of April, because after April we start to get big seas and lose too much gear.

**JD** How many pots do you work?

**DITTMER** I've got sixty in the limited entry area, which is from D'Entrecasteaux to Cape Leeuwin, and I've got ninety-three east of D'Entrecasteaux. Normally I work the west section, the limited entry one, but last year I did work a few pots down in the east zone one.

**JD** Where do you send the catch to?

**DITTMER** Perth usually. There is a little bit of local market, but usually Perth. Kailis & France are the people I deal with.

**JD** Do you send it up by freezer truck?

**DITTMER** No, I take it up myself.

**JD** Do you?

**DITTMER** Mmm. Oh, we are very limited with what transport we've got around here. Normally what we do is, there is another chap that crays and we work it between us. We hold them in holding pots until we've got sufficient to guarantee a trip and then one of us takes them up.

**JD** About how often would you go up?

**DITTMER** Probably about every two to three weeks; especially before long weekends, Easter holidays, things like that. Because in holdings pots they are very vulnerable to local talent scouts.

**JD** Are there any other people fishing at Windy Harbour?

**DITTMER** Oh yes. From September through to December there's probably about five or six boats. They come down from Augusta. They are shark fishing. There's one chap that is here nearly all the time, he's a shark fisherman, and there's another chap that has been at Windy Harbour for many years who has more or less sold all his licences but he still has the salmon licence for down there. He hasn't got his outside licence any

more, his deep sea licence. He's still got a salmon licence. So probably there's three of us there most of the time.

**JD** Do you fish for salmon off the beach?

**DITTMER** No, again that's another limited entry type thing, and I don't have the licence for that.

**JD** What sort of wet fish do you catch?

**DITTMER** Snapper and jewfish, mainly - or scale fish as we call them - and whatever else comes along. You know with drop lines, working drop lines, you tend to get quite a variety of fish. You get queen snapper, and groper, and kingfish, cod, nanugai, shark - get some shark but not a lot of shark.

**JD** Do you try for tuna at all?

**DITTMER** Well, I did have a 5 tonne quota but the government in wisdom decided we don't need that any more, so they've taken that off us. So, no I don't - but we are allowed to still catch the other types of tuna, we're not allowed to catch the bluefin tuna but we are allowed to catch the other types of tuna.

**JD** And what is your market for the scale fish?

**DITTMER** Perth markets.

**JD** Are there mulies around here?

**DITTMER** Yeah, there are quite a few large schools actually, but nobody fishes them out of here. No one has yet. I dare say some of the Albany chaps will eventually because it's getting a bit limited down there. On the sounder there shows large schools. You know, you quite often can see them, too, in the water.

**JD** Is your boat well equipped for this sort of work? You mentioned a sounder.

**DITTMER** I've got coloured sounder. The only thing I haven't got, I haven't got radar. Probably it would be a help. I normally only fish daytime and I do most of my fishing by visual, by landmarks and compass bearings and that type of thing. For the size boat I think I've got sufficient equipment. I mean, you can go overboard about equipment and you can get over capitalized.

And the way the fishing industry is going now I think you've got to look at, with a small boat and small business, you've just got to look at scaling down, you know, and just keeping within your limit. My boat is slow but it is economical. There's only me, so the overheads are not great, so I don't really need to catch a lot to keep ahead.

**JD** Have you noticed any depletion of stock?

**DITTMER** Oh yes, I think there has definitely been depletion of stock, I think that has got to happen. It has to happen because of the, you know, like the amateur fishing for example. Certainly with snapper - when I first started down here we could go out and catch fifty snapper by 2 o'clock and be home. Now if you catch fifty snapper it's an extremely good catch. One particular patch that we fish down here, I've been out

there and I've had ten boats around me. And if they all catch ten fish each, that's a lot of fish going out of that area. So it's only natural that it has got to deplete - yeah!

**JD** Do you think they catch only for their own use or do they sell them?

**DITTMER** Oh no, some of them sell them - I know that for sure. But there is a limit to what you can do about it. The Fisheries Department, the local inspectors, are all aware that this happens but apparently with the laws you have to actually catch them selling the fish and it's very difficult to do. There's definitely a lot of people that catch fish that, you know.... they are obviously selling them.

We had one chap down here just recently, two weeks on his honeymoon. He was out every day. Well, it's a bit strange when you are on your honeymoon to be going out fishing every day. I mean, you might like fishing but obviously he was catching to sell because he was catching quite a lot of fish at the time. He was going out in some terrible weather. Weather that I wouldn't go out in. So yes, definitely, there's quite a few that do sell. There's a lot of people that just go out to catch a feed, and that's fair enough - I fully understand that and I'm quite happy about that, but I certainly get a bit annoyed about these people that go out and sell it.

**JD** You come under the Bunbury Fisheries Department office, do you?

**DITTMER** Well, my big boat is registered with Bunbury, the area actually ends here, but I've got two smaller boats (two net boats) that I net in Broke Inlet during the winter, and they are Albany registered. So I'm sort of half and half. [Laughs]. Two lots of returns! One lot to Albany and one to Bunbury.

**JD** Judith, how do you feel about the inflow of fish from overseas - frozen fish?

**DITTMER** Oh, we are not very happy about that at all, any of us, because it is dropping the price of our fish, particularly this fish the Chinese are bringing in. Apparently they are trawling up north there, and trawling a lot of small snapper and dumping them on the markets down here. Fortunately, my prices have held pretty good, but they are hand line caught fish and they are well looked after, and I think that's the only thing - plus the fact that I've got a reasonably good name up there with selling fish. And that's helping to hold my prices up. But I know, you know, the shark and all that sort of thing.... the prices have dropped something terrible. I think the government should be looking after us not everybody else.

**JD** Do you think the fisheries generally are well managed from a government point of view?

**DITTMER** There's plenty of managed fisheries. [Laughs]. But as to how well managed they are - that's another thing. I think they've probably gone a bit overboard with managed fishery.

On the south coast you really need to have a little bit of everything to make it viable, but with these limited entry fisheries it has confined us to one fishery and put a heck of a lot of restrictions on us, and made it very, very difficult. And the way it is going at the moment it is just squeezing most of us out of it. Particularly small operators. And it looks like we are going to finish up with just a few big boats and that will be it - which, to my way of thinking, is a bit silly because a few years ago I could afford to employ a

deckie all the time, now I can't afford to employ a deckie at all. And I think if you talk to most of the fishermen they will be saying the same story.

Oh well, it has got to be managed fisheries, so managed fisheries it is. But I think you can go overboard with it, and I think probably they have. The fishery itself, especially on this south coast - I can't talk too much for the west coast because I haven't fished much there - but on the south coast I think it limits itself because of the weather. For a start, there is a limited amount of days you can fish, and also because the stock is scattered. You are searching far and wide to get enough to make it a viable sort of thing. So I think it limits itself, it weeds out the ones that can't make it. Or the ones that go in with too many overheads. And I think without too much of a problem it sorts itself out. And we've seen in recent years, the good fishermen are still in it. There's no two ways about that, but quite a lot have dropped by the wayside.

**JD** What is the relationship between the fishermen and the Department [Fisheries Department]? Is it satisfactory or could it be improved?

**DITTMER** With the local inspectors I don't think there's any problem because those chaps are there, they are on the scene; they know what goes on, and they know what the people are going through. With the Department in Perth (and it is the same with all government departments, I'm sorry to say), but they just have no idea whatsoever. Whether it is because they don't get out and get around and see what goes on, but a lot of these people that are managing these fisheries, I doubt if they've been on a boat half of them. I don't even know if they know what a shark reel looks like, you know. Or a cray pot. Except out of a book. And this is a lot of the problem.... there's too many up top and not enough out in the field sort of thing.

The inspectors in the field, they understand. They know. And it's the same with Marine & Harbours - the chaps, the surveyors, the ones that come out to us, they know what's going on. They understand. But you are dealing with head office all the time, and that's where the problem is. But it is not just the Fisheries Department, I can assure you. [Laughs]. It's the Health Department, and every other government department - Marine & Harbours! You know, every other government department. It's the same thing all over. Too many people up there and not enough out here sort of thing; and not enough people that understand the situation. Put it this way, they need to get out into the country and see what goes on. But you can't do that, I suppose, when you've got a big Department with a heap of people working in it.

**JD** Looking into the future, you don't seem too confident about the future of the fishing industry along the south coast.

**DITTMER** No, I'm not. [Laughs]. No. And I don't think many of the fishermen are. I think you'll most probably get this opinion from a lot of the fishermen along the south coast, because the whole thing - the economic situation - is forcing us out of it. I mean, I'm obviously looking at another five years if I'm lucky. And that will suit me fine. But I really don't want to get out until I have to get out. I enjoy it. I love it as a matter of fact. With all these restrictions coming on there's a list to what you can do. You just can't keep going on if you are going to go backwards.

I'm lucky, I'm fortunate so far. I own everything and I've managed to keep ahead of the problems that keep cropping up, but I just don't know how long for. At the moment I would say I'm just going along even keel, certainly not making any profit, but I'm going along even keel and I'm happy with that, because I like the way of life. And I think any fisherman that stays in the industry, that's the reason they stay, because they like the way of life. I mean, there's very few fishermen that are

millionaires. They might be on the west coast, the cray fishermen - yes! But certainly not on the south coast. No!

As far as the future of the fishing industry is concerned well - especially on the south coast - I just don't know. I am NOT confident about the future of it. Certainly the stock is being depleted. We've got the Japanese, and the Taiwanese, and the Chinese coming in and fishing the place, it's all putting more and more pressure on it. These managed fisheries and limited entries are putting more pressure on it. A lot of people buying in because they think they are going to make a fortune, and then when they get in they find out that they've got to fish more, and fish longer, and fish harder, and it puts pressure on them and pressure on everybody else.

**JD** What other problems do you see in the industry? What about the influx of overseas capital? It is perhaps not as evident on the south coast.

**DITTMER** It probably isn't. Are you referring to the Japanese getting in on the markets up north and that? Yeah! Probably! Well, as I say, we haven't seen much of it yet on the south coast, but I don't doubt that it will come in. Yes, it probably is going to create a problem, there's no doubt about that. Personally I think that we should be trying to finance our own things, but I guess if someone comes along with X amount of dollars, people are going to sell out to them, aren't they? Whether they are Japanese or what they are. People are going to sell out to them; particularly if the situation gets worse, as it is doing.

**JD** You seem to need the capital but don't want to lose control of the industry.

**DITTMER** Yes, that's right. Yes. You know I think a lot of people when they see the dollar sign, you know that's it. They go for it. I'm lucky in a way, I suppose, dollars - while they are necessary - don't mean a lot to me. Probably because of my little stint overseas I've learnt that there's a bit more to living than the dollars. But unfortunately we need them to keep going. You know, I'm a true blood Australian and I'd like to keep it that way for sure. Yeah.

**JD** Judith, before we finish, is there anything else that you'd like to mention and have recorded on this tape? What about some of the people you've known in the industry?

**DITTMER** Oh yes, I've met quite a lot of interesting people. The man that I did my apprenticeship with, as you might say, Bill Overton. He's one of the old type fishermen. The chap that you were talking to in Augusta - Arthur Horner. They are all the old characters, the old type fishermen. And I think it's a pity that we are losing those sort of people because they had a lot of regard for the industry. They looked after the industry, and I've learnt a lot off them, that's for sure.

We've got a lot of young tearaways in the industry now. I guess you get it in everything but there are a lot of people that are just in there and they don't think about the future. They don't think about conserving. It's pity that we are sort of losing these older people; but well, that's the way it goes, isn't it?

But yes, there have been some interesting people along the line. I can't sort of think of too many off hand; I've met some characters over the years, that's for sure. [Laughs].

**JD** Turning away from fishing a little bit. You learnt to fly didn't you?

**DITTMER** You've been delving up some history here! [Laughs]. Yes, I did. I had a bit of a go at the flying.

**JD** Whereabouts?

**DITTMER** Up here at Manjimup. Manjimup Aero Club. Oh, I actually did a bit of flying in Vietnam - unofficially. I learnt to fly helicopters and aeroplanes over there, and I sort of got the liking for it. And when I came back I decided to learn to fly, yes. Actually I had about 44 hours or something like that, up. I went solo. I was on the verge of taking my licence, but I just got to the stage where it was becoming too expensive to run up to Manjimup every weekend. I was committed to my fishing as well, and I just didn't have the time off to do it. But I enjoyed it. It was good.

**JD** You also man this nursing post?

**DITTMER** Oh yes, I just relieve here now. I did do five years full time here when I wanted to buy the new boat.... of the bigger boat. I had a smaller boat and I wanted to buy a bigger boat. The intention was to work two years but then I had to buy a vehicle. And I wanted to own my boat, I didn't want to have to be paying overheads, so I stayed here for five years. But now I just do the odd day - do a bit of relieving now and again, that's all.

**JD** You have a pretty varied and interesting life, don't you.

**DITTMER** [Laughs]. Yes, well you have to. I like a challenge. I've always liked a challenge, and if there's no challenge well you get bored. But I certainly like a challenge. I'm just trying to work out what I'm going to do in my retirement to keep my interest up. [Laughs].

**JD** Are you thinking of retiring?

**DITTMER** Oh well, I think I've got to be realistic about it. After all I am female, I mean I know we are not allowed to discriminate any more but I've never forgotten the fact I'm a female. I was a bit sorry when they changed it to fisherperson, because I used to go to meetings and there'd be forty men and myself and the men would have to get up and toast the women and I'd be the only one sitting down. Now I've got to get up with the men. Still, that's the way it is.

No, you've got to be realistic about this. I mean I'm physically not as strong as a man is, although you've got machinery and things to do the work. So certainly I've got to think about looking at retiring. I don't want to, and I'm not going to until I have to. But yeah, I've got to think about it.

**JD** Do the guys accept you readily in the industry?

**DITTMER** Yeah, they seem to. They are pretty good. Most of them are. If someone runs down the beach and offers to help take the dinghy or give me a hand, I don't knock it back. [Laughs]. I accept that. The people at Windy Harbour - the guys [fishermen] at Windy Harbour - are great. They're very good. But all round I think with most of them I've been pretty well accepted. I think they think if a woman is stupid enough to do this, well they'll have to put up with her. [Laughs].

**JD** Do you know any other women skippering their own craft?

**DITTMER** I don't at the moment. There used to be a couple of girls working on the west coast, crayfishing. They were, I believe, skippering their boats. I don't know them personally. But I don't know of anyone on the south coast. There is a woman net fisherperson in Denmark. I think there's possibly one or two others, but I don't know of anyone at the moment skippering their own boat. That's not to say there isn't.

**JD** There are a few skippers of prawning trawlers, north, at the moment too.

**DITTMER** Yes, the girls seem to like the prawn trawlers. There's quite a lot of girls work on them, and there's quite a lot skipper them, too.

**JD** I know they are highly regarded in the prawning industry.

**DITTMER** They are pretty good workers, I believe.

**JD** Alright, thank you very much for that interview.

**DITTMER** You're welcome!

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Judith Dittmer, lady skipper of Windy Harbour. The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey at the Northcliffe Nursing Post, on the 16th December 1989.

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

Disclaimer







## Verbatim transcript of an interview with KEN DOUGLAS

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Ken Douglas of Dongara, Western Australia and is part of the oral history segment of History of the Australian Fishing Industry being prepared by Murdoch University for the Australian Fishing Industries Research Council.

Mr Douglas represents newcomers to the ranks of owner/skippers in the rock lobster fishing industry on the mid-west coast of Western Australia. In his discussion he outlines the financial difficulties confronting people entering the industry and in addition makes thoughtful comment on any other aspects of present day rock lobster fishing. He perhaps typifies the new breed of fishermen in what has become a highly efficient and highly capitalized industry. His co-operation in taking part in this project (particularly at this very busy time of the year, just one week before the opening of the fishing season) is appreciated.

The interview was recorded in Dongara, Western Australia on the 7th November 1989. The interviewer was Jack Darcey. There is one Tape, Sides A and B.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

*JD* This is Tape 1 Side A of an interview with Mr Ken Douglas, part owner and skipper of a rock lobster fishing boat at Dongara, Western Australia.

Mr Douglas, could you record your full name, date of birth and place of birth please?

*DOUGLAS* Kenneth William Douglas, 6.2.1956, in Nedlands, Western Australia.

*JD* Thank you. Were your parents involved in the fishing industry at all?

*DOUGLAS* No.

*JD* And how long have you been in Dongara?

*DOUGLAS* Since Easter 1980.

*JD* Have you been fishing all that time?

*DOUGLAS* For all but about three months. The first three months.

*JD* Did you come up here to go fishing?

**DOUGLAS** No, no, we opened an insurance brokerage - myself and another chap - insuring fishing boats.

**JD** I see, and you had a centre here in Dongara?

**DOUGLAS** Yes, we had an office in Dongara.

**JD** And decided you would rather go fishing?

**DOUGLAS** Yes. We had a few altercations and I basically just went and got a job as an interim thing working on the deck, and that was the last time I ever got off the boat just about. [Laughs].

**JD** Yes. So you started as a deckhand quite unskilled and....

**DOUGLAS** Oh, totally.

**JD** Without any knowledge really of the industry.

**DOUGLAS** No, no knowledge of the industry. I'd done a fair bit of sailing and ocean racing as far as the handling of boats went, but as far as the actual fishing industry goes, no, I had no knowledge whatsoever.

**JD** And who did you start with?

**DOUGLAS** A chap by the name of Bob Hope on a little - about 32 footer with 66 pots at that stage, I think.

**JD** And fishing from Port Denison?

**DOUGLAS** From Port Denison Marina, yes.

**JD** When you started off as a deckhand you started simply to get a job. When did you start to get ambitious and want to have your own boat?

**DOUGLAS** Probably after about a week of doing the job. I really enjoyed the job as soon as I started doing it, and really from just about the beginning of my fishing career I suppose you'd say, I was quite keen to get further on in the industry.

**JD** Did you get your tickets?

**DOUGLAS** Yes. I got my tickets in 1983; as a Master Class 5 and all the associated marine engine drivers, and radar, and radio tickets and all that sort of thing.

**JD** And when did you first skipper a boat?

**DOUGLAS** I did some relief skippering in 19.... roughly about the '87/'88 season I think it was, or it might have been '86/'87 season. Just working on the deck and the skipper had a bit of time off and I'd take the boat out for a few days then he'd come back. I'd go back on the deck and he might go away for another week or so. Basically that was the first time.

**JD** Right. And when did you acquire your first boat?

**DOUGLAS** We are just starting our third season; so you can work that out from there. [Laughter].

**JD** Yes, sure. It's an enormously expensive undertaking. I've been talking to a good many people in the industry now and it's very evident that the costs involved in getting started are enormous. Would you like to expand on that as you see it, and the problems that a young person starting off has?

**DOUGLAS** Yes. It is enormously difficult. I've been very fortunate in the fact that I have a close friend who had sufficient money for us to get into a boat. We also were fortunate in the fact that we bought it probably 50% of the current value of the industry, so we didn't have the same outlay as someone getting in now would be. In my opinion it's not possible for.... I know probably up until about ten years ago it was possible for a guy to go decking for a few years and sort of save up enough money and eventually own his own boat, or buy his own boat and pay it off. But obviously, well it's certainly not possible these days, which once again I say, I was lucky that I had a friend that was prepared to back us into the industry.

**JD** And is the boat that you're purchasing a large boat?

**DOUGLAS** It's 46 foot with a 99 pot concession.

**JD** It's quite....

**DOUGLAS** I would say it would be average for the industry.

**JD** Yes. And is it relatively new?

**DOUGLAS** The boat was built in 1983 so it was probably relatively new two years ago, but relative to the rest of the fleet I would now say it would be back amongst the average age of a boat because a lot of new boats have been built the last couple of years.

**JD** What sort of construction is it?

**DOUGLAS** Fibreglass.

**JD** Fibreglass! Built locally?

**DOUGLAS** No, built in Jandakot by Riverfront boat builders.

**JD** And what about equipment? Sophisticated equipment?

**DOUGLAS** Probably not as sophisticated as a lot of the fleet now. We haven't, mainly due to financial considerations, haven't been able to increase or, you know, put any new electronic equipment on. We have a couple of echo sounders; one colour, one black and white, and a radar, and the associated navigational gear, but we don't have satellite navigation or GPS or anything like that.

**JD** No.

**DOUGLAS** So I would say it was probably standard equipment compared with most of the fleet.

**JD** Yes! About what the average boat here would have?

**DOUGLAS** Yes.

**JD** Where do you fish?

**DOUGLAS** Generally from either Freshwater Point, which is 22 miles south of Dongara, or Cliff Head, which is about 3 miles closer. Just depends whether we're fishing in the deep or in the shallow water.

**JD** The question of costs and the escalation of costs. Things like interest rates, insurance, moorings, all of that, seems to be of considerable difficulty in the industry, even for well established fishermen. For a person starting off, such as yourself, it must be a great headache?

**DOUGLAS** Oh, it's an enormous problem, Jack. We.... you've probably heard, we've just been hit with another bill from the Marine and Harbours, which for our boat is near enough to \$900; plus conservancy fee, which they've always been charging. So that's basically \$1,000 a year just to anchor the boat in the harbour without shifting it anywhere. On top of that, when we first bought the boat we had sort of massive start up costs; you know, establishment fees for loans, stamp duty, which were fairly substantial amounts. You know, over.... stamp duty was over \$20,000. And it is an on-going thing. The costs of running the boat aside, just as you say, things like insurance. Interest rates haven't hurt us at all because when we started off we got a flat rate of interest, a fixed interest rate on the loan, so that hasn't affected us at all. If they're still high in another three years when we renegotiate the balance of the loan it will hurt us a bit, but at this stage that's not hurting us.

You know, really just the ancillary costs of running the boat without actual maintenance and working of the gear is very substantial. It does hurt us, it's a major part of our budget every year.

**JD** Sure! It must be very important indeed to have a good season when you are starting off; or a series of good seasons.

**DOUGLAS** Oh, it's absolutely vital, obviously. We have substantial commitments every year to the financiers of the boat. Any poor year, particularly if we got a poor year and had a poor price at the same time, would be quite disastrous. You know, we'd probably have to look at selling the boat I'd say.

**JD** Things like major breakdowns would set you back very much?

**DOUGLAS** Yes. Oh yes. We've suffered a couple of them since we've had the boat and unfortunately the motor's not as reliable as it could be. We've had.... Oh, probably three or four fairly major sort of headaches with the motor over the last two years, two seasons, so really that's sort of something you've just got to accept. There's nothing you can do about it, you've just got to pay it and hope that you recover the cost on the catch.

**JD** It's pretty typical of primary industry throughout.

**DOUGLAS** Oh yes, absolutely. There's nothing you can do about it, so you've got to just sort of bite the bullet and keep going.

**JD** Ken, are there many young fellows trying to get started, such as yourself?

**DOUGLAS** Yes. There's plenty trying. There's a few probably around about my sort of age and experience in the industry who bought in around about the same time as we did, who are in a similar situation to what we are. I think that there's probably - I wouldn't like to put a percentage on it, but people that have.... their fathers have got boats and they've either taken their father's boat over or the father's bought an extra boat. Now that there's the higher value on the industry they can afford to borrow a bit more and, you know, the price of crays is fairly high. And they can afford to buy the son a boat and have two boats, paying off one, particularly if the father's been in the industry for a long time. They've got no commitments on the original boat and they can use the two boats to pay off the one boat. So that would account for a fair percentage of younger ones in the industry I would say.

**JD** You certainly need substantial backing.

**DOUGLAS** Oh, absolutely! You can't afford to go and borrow, say, a million dollars to buy a cray boat because the interest rates would just kill you. You'd never be able to survive. It's not viable in that way, you've got to have a certain amount of cash up front to keep your interest payments down.

**JD** Is there much movement in and out of the industry?

**DOUGLAS** Oh, not a great deal considering.... Well, I can only talk about the local industry. No, I would say probably less than ten per cent of the boats change hands each year. You know, as I say, I'm only talking locally. Oh, it would be substantially less than ten percent I'd think would change hands. No, it seems to be fairly static as far as the owners and ownership goes.

**JD** Do you fish for a Co-op or a private company?

**DOUGLAS** No, a private company.

**JD** Private company, yes! And the price of the product would be of crucial concern to you?

**DOUGLAS** Yes, that is one thing that does make a large difference, obviously. It seems to be that in generally bad years the price increases. It's certainly a supply and demand thing. If everybody's having a bad year well the price will increase, and if everybody's having a good year, conversely it will decrease. I'd say most guys that had been in the industry for a while would find that their income would be fairly static, I would say.

**JD** And do you wet line fish at all?

**DOUGLAS** Yes, yes we go netting for sharks in the off-season.

**JD** Is that a worthwhile sideline?

**DOUGLAS** Not this year, no, we had very poor weather conditions this year and last year wasn't much better, but given reasonable weather I think it could be a reasonably productive sideline. But only as a sideline, I wouldn't like to do it full time.

**JD** No. Anything else that you'd like to say on the economics of the industry as you perceive it from where you sit?

**DOUGLAS** Well, only that it's - you know, as I just reiterated - that it is very difficult for anybody without any backing. Well it's impossible if you've got no backing and a substantial amount of cash to get into the industry. It's just not viable to go and pay \$8,000 a pot and expect to be able to pay the boat off, let alone make any sort of a profit in any time. That's the crucial difference between now and when I started ten years ago, and it's just not a viable industry to go in borrowing 90 percent of the capital. That's the big difference now as opposed to say ten years ago, when it was... perhaps you could go and buy a boat for maybe \$140,000/\$150,000 with a licence. Even if it was only a small one you could gradually pay that off and then build it up, but now a small licence you're still looking at six or seven hundred thousand dollars, and obviously everything else hasn't gone up - income hasn't gone up that much for working on the deck in that time. So it's probably out of the reach of the guy starting with nothing.

**JD** Yes. Could we have a look at labour problems, if they exist? How many crew do you [have]?

**DOUGLAS** Oh yes, one during the cray season and two during the off-season for the shark netting.

**JD** Do you have any difficulty in getting suitable people?

**DOUGLAS** No, not at all. No, I would say it would probably be the other way round, there's more suitable people than there are decent jobs.

**JD** And are they local people or....?

**DOUGLAS** Yes. Well my deckies are long term residents here.

**JD** Are they!

**DOUGLAS** Oh, I tell a lie. One guy who did a bit of shark fishing this year is only sort of reasonably new, he's only probably been here for maybe two years I think. But the rest of them have been here.... one guy's lived here all his life, and the other guy's been here for about ten or twelve years.

**JD** So in the old days there used to be an enormous turnover?

**DOUGLAS** Yes, it doesn't happen any more. I think the thing with that is, Jack, is that we've paid.... I paid my deckie during the cray season last year somewhere around \$30,000, so he would consider that a fairly reasonable income for eight months work a year, and so people aren't turning the jobs over so much.

**JD** Right. Do most of the deckhands work in other jobs in the off season?

**DOUGLAS** Yes, most guys do.

**JD** So that.... [interruption] sorry!

**DOUGLAS** One of my deckies is a qualified electrician so he does a little bit of electrical work around the place during the off-season. A bit of work around the farms, sort of lamb marking and all that sort of thing. You know, just any sort of general labouring jobs that are going.

**JD** Though on an annual basis a deckie on a reasonably successful boat could expect to get quite a comfortable income?

**DOUGLAS** Oh yes, yes. That's right.

**JD** They are very much in the hands, however, of the skipper and his skills and the boat and its ability to go to sea.

**DOUGLAS** Completely. Yes, they're paid a percentage of the catch. I think you'll find probably 100.... oh, probably 95 percent of fishermen pay a percentage of the catch now. Purely based on what we catch is what they earn.

**JD** On the catch, not the profits.

**DOUGLAS** No, the catch. The gross, whatever we gross they get a percentage of that.

**JD** Ken, there's a considerable influx of overseas money in the industry. Does that disturb you?

**DOUGLAS** Yes, I'd like to see it kept local. Are you talking about the processing side of the industry or the catching side?

**JD** Well, the industry generally. I think it's mainly in the processing that it's happening.

**DOUGLAS** Yeah. Well I'm not aware of that. I know that there's one factory that's been bought by an overseas interest. Yeah. It worries me that the.... in one way, that overseas interests could laterally control the industry, being from catch to consumer. But on the other hand, I would like to see some sort of involvement because I feel that the processors are probably not as competitive as they might be. I feel that they could possibly stand a little bit more competition from someone who wasn't connected with the industry for a long time.

**JD** An industry such as fishing needs a lot of support industries, sort of peripheral industries. Are supplies and maintenance and service generally, is that sufficient in this area?

**DOUGLAS** Yes, oh yes. I think so. It's improved dramatically over the last four or five years. I would say it's quite satisfactory now. Perhaps we might have to go to Geraldton to get odd things, but that's only sort of three-quarters of an hour drive up the road, anyway. But Dongara and Port Denison are quite good now with the general things. There are certain things, like for example, servicing life rafts which obviously have to go to Fremantle, which can't be done here, it's not worth setting up to do it. But just for general supplies, mechanical repairs, any welding, boilermaking, anything like that - yeah, I think it's terrific actually.

**JD** Of course, Port Denison is one of the larger rock lobster ports on the coast, isn't it?

**DOUGLAS** Yes, yes.

**JD** If not THE largest.

**DOUGLAS** Well, I think you'd probably have to say Fremantle and Geraldton would probably be larger, but we're probably one of the biggest smaller ones I would say.

**JD** But there's a lot of sort of out stations, aren't there?

**DOUGLAS** Oh yes. Within 60 miles going south there's probably ten or eleven other moorings, eleven say. But, you know, they all use Dongara as a basic service centre.

**JD** What about the sort of support, or infrastructure that government has to provide, such as roads, navigation aids and so on. Are they adequate?

**DOUGLAS** Yes. Roads aren't a big problem. Obviously most of your work's at sea anyway. Navigation aids - quite adequate, I mean, if you fish around here you know where you're going anyway, there's not really a need for markers for reefs because the nature of the fishery demands you know where you're going all the time. So I don't think there's a great deal for them to do. The harbour management here is adequate, I guess you could say.

I'll get back to another point. I feel we pay a bit too much for what we get out of the thing, but that's a problem that's existing at the moment.

**JD** You're talking about the mooring?

**DOUGLAS** Yes, mooring fees, that stuff. I think that will probably be resolved, you know one way or the other within the next couple of months.

**JD** That's a newly introduced cost, isn't it?

**DOUGLAS** Absolutely brand new cost, yes. Yes, it's a brand new cost, yes. [Laughter]. I'll say no more about that one, my thoughts on that.

**JD** Can we look at some of the other roles of government? This industry, the rock lobster - western rock lobster - industry has a worldwide reputation as being a very well managed industry. Is that evident to you?

**DOUGLAS** Oh absolutely, yes. You see it in other fishing industries, you know the local wet lining industry, and I'm being involved in the shark fishing myself, you can see it's very well managed. Reasonably sensibly, I think. They don't seem to go too far overboard; some of the things I don't agree with but, you know, it might have figures that would prove me wrong but for the long term management of the industry, yeah, I think they're doing a pretty good job.

**JD** It does imply surveillance, doesn't it?

**DOUGLAS** Yeah, oh yeah. I think probably these days it's more self regulatory than anything. If a fisherman sees someone else over-potting, you know, due to the fact that pots are now \$8,000 each and if someone like myself wanted to go and buy another one that's what it's going to cost me, and I see somebody just throwing a few



extra in and catching plenty of crays with them, I'm not prepared to take the risk to do the same thing, so I will put him in to the authorities if I feel that way. If I feel that he's doing that. So from that point of view, and I think you'll find most fishermen would be the same. So, you know, from that point of view it's pretty self-regulatory.

As far as the under-size situation goes, I think you'll find that that's not a great problem anymore. That was more of an old term problem before deregulations came in and that's gradually just gone out with the old fishermen. And really that's.... fishing in the wrong areas is a minor problem, although they have had a few problems up the north end of the island here, but I don't go up there so that doesn't greatly affect me anyway.

As I say, I think probably most fishermen make a reasonable living, particularly if they've been in it for a while. There's no need to cheat on the system. So as far as surveillance goes, I don't really think it's a great problem. It's got to be there just as a deterrent sort of thing.

**JD** Yes, sure. For those who do infringe the rules, are the penalties severe enough?

**DOUGLAS** No, not by a long shot. No, I'd like to see much heavier penalties. Triple or quadruple them at least, in my opinion. Everybody who's in the industry knows the rules, if they stick to them they've got nothing to worry about. For example, if someone goes and over-pots, or springs in some undersized crays, then they get fined maybe \$500 or something, when they've made that money twenty times over before they've been caught. They're just not concerned about \$500 fines. It's no deterrent whatsoever.

**JD** It's worth the risk?

**DOUGLAS** Oh absolutely. You know, if they were fined maybe \$20,000 or lost some pots off their licence or something, well that would make them think - well, they wouldn't do it. They wouldn't be prepared to risk \$8,000 a pot. So from that point of view I think the deterrent, the penalties, are just absolutely pathetic. They're virtually non-existent as far as the fishermen are concerned, the people that are inclined that way.

**JD** How do the professionals view the amateurs?

**DOUGLAS** That's not a bad question! I, personally, don't have anything to do with them because I don't fish out of an area where there are amateurs. Oh, I think, generally speaking, there's not a problem. I believe they catch something around about two per cent of the total catch each year, although that's probably five or six years old that figure. But I certainly don't have any problems. As I say, I fish 30 miles from the nearest town and there is just no problem; and I fish in deep water most of the time anyway, so they're never out there, obviously. But you know, you get a few fishermen who have a bit of a fish around the reef and around town here and might drop a few pots off, or pull a few amateur pots and that, but I think most fishermen are pretty [unclear].

**JD** It's not a major problem.

**DOUGLAS** We envy their political clout. [Laughter].

**JD** Ken, how do you see the industry shaping up in terms of the problems facing it? I have in mind things like depletion of the stock.

**DOUGLAS** Well, all I can say, Jack, is that last year - according to the Fisheries research and CSIRO research - was the highest pluralist count they've ever had since they've been taking figures. I think 1972. So really it appears to me that depletion of stocks isn't a problem if we're having record years 17 years after they've started taking figures. I think the best thing that Fisheries have ever done is increase the number of escape gaps in the pots, I think that makes an enormous difference. There's not the cackers being handled, which, when you consider the amount - we probably throw back seventy to eighty percent of what we catch.

**JD** Do you?

**DOUGLAS** That's an enormous bloody amount of crays that you're handling.

**JD** Mmm.

**DOUGLAS** And you know, I think that's probably been the biggest thing. Really, depletion of stocks to my way of thinking - we fish in an area which is a nursery basically for crays, and we are often getting pots with seventy to eighty small crayfish in them - it just doesn't seem to be a problem as far as I'm concerned.

**JD** Good. So the management practices and the regulations appear to be working?

**DOUGLAS** Most of them, yes. You know, the pot reduction scheme is a bit of a waste of time but all the other measures they've taken seem to be going very well, particularly the escape gate. That's the crucial one as far as I'm concerned.

**JD** Yes, talking to other people, it seems that the reduction in the number of pots is having the desired effect because people are simply spending more time at sea.

**DOUGLAS** Precisely! I mean, most people know what they've got to catch, what they want to catch, the people who own the boat and don't have that many commitments know what they want to catch to live the lifestyle they want to live. And people like myself, who have got to catch as much as we possibly can, anyway. So really the pot reduction scheme.... how can I put it?

Before it came in, probably people would fish very hard when the crays were running and then would not even work hardly in say January or May, those two poor months that we have. But now you'll find that most people, instead of leaving their pots out in the deep water and just going and pulling them every three or four days, they're coming back and working every day in the shallows and possibly putting more pressure on the shallow ground than would be if they didn't have this scheme.

**JD** This is resulting in an increase in cost to the fishermen, too, in the terms of running costs and so on?

**DOUGLAS** No, not an increase, although we bought 99 pots and this year we've only got 93. So it does obviously affect your catch run. If you're in a position like I am and you've got to work hard all the time anyway, which is probably - I don't know - maybe 20 percent of the industry, that's all.

**JD** That is the end of Tape 1 Side A of this interview. Please turn the Tape over for Side B.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## **TAPE 1 SIDE B**

**JD** This is Side B of Tape 1 of an interview with Mr Ken Douglas. What about litter in the sea, is that a problem?

**DOUGLAS** No, no, I think it's a decreasing problem, Jack. Years ago I think with the less sophisticated packaging people didn't worry about it too much and it probably wasn't so much of a problem then. With all the plastics and more sophisticated packing these days I think it's taken a while for the fishermen to sort of get their act together and realise that it is a problem and that it does cause damage. But I think, probably in the last few years that has happened and fishermen by and large now take all their rubbish ashore. There's very few people - very few professional fishermen throw rubbish over the side any more. There are facilities at just about every anchorage to dispose of all the rubbish so you find that most fishermen bring it in.

**JD** And, in common with the rest of the community, they're much more conscious?

**DOUGLAS** Much more! Oh absolutely, yes. You know, we have sort of been slung at in the papers a bit by the media a little bit that we do this, so I think that the guys that were doing it probably realise that it's not the right thing to do and they're much more conscious that way.

**JD** Ken, what other problems do you see in the industry?

**DOUGLAS** Not a great many problems, Jack, I think. As we were saying, the depletion of stocks, to my mind, doesn't appear to be an issue at this stage. We seem to have good years and bad years and general cycles of things. As we were saying, you know having a record year last year - a supposedly record year - the pluralist count was, so that doesn't appear to be a big problem.

I think the regulatory bodies have got to go a little bit easy. You know I think if they're starting to think about another pot reduction scheme, I don't think that will do anything except just upset the fishermen. I don't really think it has any great effect. Aside from that, really, marketing is obviously ALWAYS a problem; that's sort of out of our hands a little bit. We have to basically trust the processors on that side. Providing they do their bit for the industry and we do our bit, I really think it's quite a viable and reasonably lucrative industry once you own everything.

**JD** Sure! So the future looks pretty good?

**DOUGLAS** Yeah, I'd say so. For the industry as a whole I can't foresee any problem at this stage.

**JD** Good! Anything else that you'd like recorded?

**DOUGLAS** No, not really Jack. As I say, everything sort of seems to be going along okay. As far as getting into the industry goes for young guys, I think that's probably a little bit out the door now. I don't think that will ever change. It's just going to be one

of those things where you do require a large injection of cash to get into it. And apart from that, no.

**JD** Right. Well thank you very much for your contribution to this project. It's been a worthwhile one. Thank you.

**DOUGLAS** Very good.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Ken Douglas at Dongara. The interviewer was Jack Darcey.

NO FURTHER RECORDING

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with JOHN AND BETH FITZHARDING

### INTRODUCTION

This interview of John and Beth Fitzharding was recorded by Jack Darcey in Dongara on 7th November, 1989 for Murdoch University and the Australian Fishing Industries Research Council.

John Fitzharding is a very prominent member of the fishing industry at Port Denison, Dongara, Geraldton and the Abrohlos Islands. He is the Chairman of Directors of the Geraldton Fishermen's Co-operative and a member of the Fishing Industry Advisory Committee in Western Australia.

In addition to his involvement in the fishing industry he is a well-known boat designer and boat builder in this mid-west coast region of the State and for many years has served on the Irwin Shire Council in Dongara, including five years as its President.

He has long experience in the rock lobster fishery, both on the coast and on the Abrohlos Islands. His wife, Beth, has been closely associated with her husband's enterprises and with his very considerable contribution to the management of the fishing industry here and to the community generally.

There is one tape, sides A and B. The interview starts at 020 on the rev counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is tape one, side A of an interview with Mr and Mrs Fitzharding at Dongara on the West Australian mid-west coast. The Fitzhardings are the owners of the fishing boat **Hero** and they are also boat designers and builders.

John if I could ask you first, would you record your full name?

**FITZHARDING** John Berkeley Fitzharding

**JD** And place of birth?

**FITZHARDING** Was Perth.

**JD** And Beth?

**FITZHARDING B** Just Beth, I was born at Goomalling.

**JD** Right, thank you. Were your parents both Australian?

**FITZHARDING B** Yes.

**FITZHARDING** Yes.

**FITZHARDING B** Mm, fifth generation.

**FITZHARDING** English Australian.

**JD** Fifth, West Australians? Yes, good. Did you have any family connections in fishing before you entered the industry yourselves?

**FITZHARDING B** No.

**FITZHARDING** No. Well my father has always been a keen amateur fisherman and we've always been very involved in yachting.

**JD** Yes.

**FITZHARDING** I'd sailed a lot before I came up here, started fishing in boats and that sort of thing, that sort of background.

**JD** Your father's very well known in yachting circles, isn't he?

**FITZHARDING** Yes, yes.

**JD** Commodore of Royal Perth?

**FITZHARDING** Royal Perth.

**JD** Was he the Commodore when the Australia's Cup was....?

**FITZHARDING** No, but he was involved with all the America's Cups through Alan Bond's challenges right from 1975, I think, when they first challenged. It might have been earlier than that.

**FITZHARDING B** No Dad was Commodore of Two Rocks Yacht Club with the first challenge when Alan Bond challenged as Commodore of Yanchep Yacht Club.

**FITZHARDING** Yacht Club.

**JD** He's also a well known architect in Perth, isn't he?

**FITZHARDING** Well, I studied architecture for a short time, and quantity surveying for three years altogether before I came up here.

**JD** Yes. What brought you here John?

**FITZHARDING** Oh I came up to Geraldton to build a crayboat for a distant relation of mind that I'd met by coming up to Geraldton... I came up to Geraldton and worked in the Geraldton Fishermen's Co-op, processing crays. And I came and built this small crayboat, a twenty-five footer which was about the size in those days for Ollie Hewitt

in his backyard. And then the next year I worked with his son who was only seventeen, who'd taken over his previous boat, because in those days it was pre-1963, you didn't need to have a licence, you just needed to have a boat. And he was too young to have an engineers ticket, so I, because I was twenty-one then, got my engineers ticket and worked with him. And the next year we built our first boat, the next off season in 1961.

**FITZHARDING B** In Locke Street, Perth, in the back yard in Claremont. And...

**JD** Yes. Were you married when you came up?

**FITZHARDING B** No, we spent our courtship building the boat. Not terribly romantic [laughter]. It was different.

**JD** Certainly different.

**FITZHARDING B** It was very different because I didn't have any sea background at all, apart from being keen on swimming and my father calling me 'Sharkbait'. But, yes that was interesting.

**JD** John that wouldn't have been your first assay into boat building would it?

**FITZHARDING** No, no, I've been... I built my first boat when I was about seven or eight. But I used to build small boats and yachts when I was a teenager and sell them to other people, you know.

**JD** Yes, right. And did you say you started off in the fishing industry in the processing works?

**FITZHARDING** Yes. Just doing the processing line of the job at the Co-op.

**JD** In the Co-Op?

**FITZHARDING** In the Co-op. Mm.

**JD** And how long did you stay doing that?

**FITZHARDING** Oh, only for a couple of months. Two or three months, just during the end of... That's the 1961 season, it must have been. The 'island' season.

**JD** And then you built your own boat, fishing boat.

**FITZHARDING** Well, no the next year I worked with - I built this boat for Ollie Hewitt who's one of the older fishermen in Geraldton; he's dead now. And the subsequent season I fished with his son. And the next off season we built our own little boat.

**FITZHARDING B** Which is still here.

**FITZHARDING** I didn't have enough sea time. You still needed to have some sea time to get a ticket, well to be able to sit for a ticket. It's pretty easy to get but you just needed a little bit of sea time. So another old character worked with us in the 'whites' out of Dongara, a guy by the name of Ned Kelly, who's a retired National Bank Manager in Geraldton. He'd retired early and went farming in Chapman Valley. Then

he sort of retired to Perth, but he used to like an excuse to escape from his wife and get away up the coast. And he had a yacht, **Scandal** which we lived on board and a Pelican dinghy we used to sail backwards and forwards in the harbour there. And all the other people used to have to scull, you know, because you didn't have outboards in those days. They'd all be sculling in the Southerly, and we used to sail past in this little Pelican trainer [laughter]. So we were a bit of a novelty here, and that was the year after Mick Kailis first came here. [And started M.G. Kailis, which was previously Yaminis Bros., who did a midnight flit, leaving a lot of fishermen with rubber cheques.]

**JD** Oh yes. You started fishing here, on your own account...

**FITZHARDING** On our own account.

**JD** In Port Denison?

**FITZHARDING** Yes. We'd, before we were married, because Beth was still an air hostess with MMA in the old early days of the DC3s and things, so she used to come up sometimes when she had days off.

**FITZHARDING B** We did have Fokker Friendships and Fellowships, thank you.

**FITZHARDING** Fellowships too. The distant relation that we built this boat for when I first went to Geraldton, Ollie Hewitt, is one of the more interesting characters, and what his family had done though! He and the boys all went fishing, but they came from Coolgardie where they'd been for a long time as gold miners and prospectors. And I think oh, probably most people don't realise, but in those days it was illegal to sell gold except at State Batteries, and Ollie and his brother-in-law had a show for years and years out from Coolgardie. Then the demons [old police] were just about right on to him he reckoned, [laughs] you see, so it was time to get out. They got their hands right up the stove and nearly got the gold, you know [laughter]. Because in those days the price was fixed at 32 pounds and you could get 50 or 60 pounds in Singapore if you could get it there. So there was quite a big black market in gold.

Anyway, they were all very good shots, great bushmen. A fascinating old bloke to go driving with. You know, the eyes would be just all puffed up and you'd think he wouldn't be able to see anything out of them, but you'd drive along the road and he'd see things that you wouldn't see. But anyway they came to Geraldton, all the family and camped on the beach at Drummonds Cove which was just north of Geraldton. It's got houses and things now, but Smugglers Cove it's also called on the old charts. They were on their way to Darwin because they were going to go up there crocodile shooting. That was when people were making a lot of money out of crocodile skins. Anyway they stopped there and had all their gear and the whole lot. You know all their kids, and the blokes coming into Drummonds Cove from just out on the bank that runs North of the lighthouse in Geraldton, with up to five and ten bags of crays in little sixteen footers just pulling 25 pots by hand. Well this looked pretty good, so they bought a sixteen footer and got into it. His youngest son is still fishing at North Island, but the other ones, one's died, and Ollie's dead now.

**FITZHARDING** And one's retired. There was a lot of people in the early days in Geraldton particularly, Yugos (Yugoslavs), Finns and Swedish guys that were working at Norseman Gold Mine and Kalgoorlie, when they first migrated, came into fishing at the Abrolhos. There's a lot of Scouwegians, as people call them, [laughs] in Geraldton that came from that area. And that's another sort of people came from Big Bell when that closed down to Dongara and Geraldton. You know, Jim Bailey's one of the older



ones, but he's retired from fishing now. However his son's still very prominent in the industry.

**FITZHARDING B** And Jim [Bailey's] gone back to prospecting.

**FITZHARDING** Jim's gone back out to Cue and he does a bit of gold mining out there. He was one of the early fishermen in Dongara. He actually lived where John Cole lives now. His [youngest] son's still in the industry, and he started fishing with us when he left school. So it sort of all goes on... but lots of people came from Big Bell and lots of people came from the other gold mines when gold mining turned down.

**FITZHARDING B** But it's surprising, you know, when you look right into the industry that there aren't too many that fishing's been handed on to them.

**JD** No.

**FITZHARDING B** They all came into it [from other jobs] and when we first went to the islands and you had to build your own camp over there. I call it 'camp' because that's what you do, you camp there. We had the wiring for the electricity done by a retired electrician and you just got every [thing done by a fisherman with other skills]. Almost every industry was involved in the fishing industry. Now we've handed it on, as you know our son is fishing now, but there aren't too many third generation fishermen. You just kept getting people coming and getting into the industry.

**FITZHARDING** From other trades.

**FITZHARDING B** It's just from other trades, started off as a hobby or, you know, "We'll do this for a couple of years because the money's good", and they're still here. Like the prospectors. A lot of bushmen came into it.

**JD** There seems to be a sort of affinity between mining and fishing too?

**FITZHARDING B** Strangely yes. I wonder what it is.

**FITZHARDING** Yes, I think it's similar... There's heaps of fishermen now because we've such a long off season, all charging around [out into the bush prospecting]. Half the people around here just disappear into the Murchison during the season.

**FITZHARDING B** And go prospecting.

**FITZHARDING** Yes, mucking around and prospecting, you know. Perhaps the money is the attraction. We went actually for the first time, went for a holiday up there, and you can see it's lovely out there in the spring. It's a reason to go out there. But they'd really go up there probably just to get gold because it's the hunting instinct like fishing.

**JD** And a change of scene.

**FITZHARDING** Change of scene.

**FITZHARDING B** Very much so. Mm.

**FITZHARDING** Lovely

**JD** And after, what is still a pretty hard industry to work in...

**FITZHARDING** Yes.

**JD** They would need a break I imagine.

**FITZHARDING B** Yes.

**FITZHARDING** You need to go and do something different.

**FITZHARDING B** And you're still fighting the elements even though you've got bigger, better boats and... No I shudder to think that we went to North Island on a little twenty-five footer that did eight knots.

**JD** Yes. This is on the Abrolhos Islands isn't it?

**FITZHARDING B** Yes, yes. And this is our original boat. We've only had three the whole time because we build them to last. And they're still all going, the other, the previous two. And you know, they now go from Dongara and cruise at 18 knots.

**JD** You people would have seen enormous changes.

**FITZHARDING B** Oh absolutely.

**JD** In the industry...

**FITZHARDING** The first little boat that we built when we were engaged is parked right on the edge of the road between here and Dongara.

**FITZHARDING B** Half way up...

**FITZHARDING** The pale blue one.

**FITZHARDING B** The little blue and white one.

**JD** Oh yes.

**FITZHARDING** Looks pretty old. That's it.

**JD** You built that?

**FITZHARDING B** Yes, that's the one built when we first started.

**FITZHARDING** That's the one we built in Locke Street in Claremont. It's bondwood.

**JD** It's bondwood, yes.

**FITZHARDING B** Yes.

**FITZHARDING** It's not a commercial boat anymore it's just used for...

**FITZHARDING B** Pleasure boat fishing.

**FITZHARDING** Amateur pots and stuff for fishing.

**FITZHARDING B** And **Leander**; our second boat, is up at Shark Bay.

**FITZHARDING** With one of the Houltts, one of the original fishing families up there's got it for net fishing.

**JD** Yes.

**FITZHARDING B** And of course, now we have **Hero**, Leander's lover.

**JD** Yes. [Laughs] Oh yes, you'd have seen lots of development in the sort of operation of fishing too, I would think?

**FITZHARDING B** Mm, well when...

**FITZHARDING** Well this all changed... Well it has but I mean it's just got more sophisticated.

**FITZHARDING B** Well, no, but it was unlimited before.

**FITZHARDING** Oh well when we first came, you see...

**FITZHARDING B** And then they...

**FITZHARDING** In 1963 the first regulations to really limit the growth of the industry were brought in, mainly - not mainly but entirely prompted by pressure from the Geraldton fishermen. It's not a criticism of the southern fishermen, but it's a fact and they would admit it, even now, even the more sophisticated ones. But every regulation that's been brought in has been called for by the Northern people and resisted by the Southern people.

**JD** Has it?

**FITZHARDING** Every one, every one.

**JD** Yes. Why would that be John?

**FITZHARDING** Well, probably in the early days there was a different sort of person in the two areas. I don't want to appear to be differentiating people, but there were different sorts of people with entirely different philosophies. You know what I mean?

**JD** Yes.

**FITZHARDING** There was sort of different backgrounds.

**FITZHARDING B** Attitudes.

**FITZHARDING** And the attitudes were entirely different and probably the area around Geraldton as people fished around Geraldton and Dongara which were established places, where once people got north of Yanchep, or even Yanchep. Yanchep was rugged, you know. You could hardly get to Yanchep in the early days and there was no civilisation there and they were just on their own, you know. She was pretty backwoodsy. When you got up to Cervantes and places like that and Jurien Bay, the fascinating stories of the old blokes that... They had to go in through Moora to get to Jurien Bay...

**FITZHARDING B** Bush tracks.

**FITZHARDING** Through bush tracks.

**JD** Sand tracks, yes.

**FITZHARDING** Tracks they'd made, you know.

**JD** Yes.

**FITZHARDING** And she was a pretty funny sort of operation and they didn't really care too much about rules, because it didn't seem to be appropriate. Whereas up here I think people had a longer view of the industry. There's no doubt... We had friends that had... the parent of some kids I went to school with in Perth who had an interest in the Golden Gleam Fishing Processing Factory in Geraldton which as just been sold by Michael Kailis. That was probably the major private buyer in Geraldton after the war. In fact anyway, to end that story, and this parent told me when he'd heard that we were going build a boat and go crayfishing, he said, "Look", he said, "you're mad. It's stuffed. It'll last two years." Because at that time everybody with a dinghy was putting out and going for it. For instance Sam De Souza who I was just telling that we'd built the boat for, his brother, had just built a 60 foot aluminum freezer boat. Because in those days you were allowed to process at sea, which was a big bone of contention between the catcher boats and the processing boats. Because we had to measure three inch carapace crays whereas they had to only produce a five ounce tail. Not necessarily did a five ounce tail come from a sized carapace.

**FITZHARDING B** Carapaces, yes.

**JD** Yes, yes.

**FITZHARDING** When it didn't weigh 5 ounces, they used to cut slivers of tails off other undersize and stuff it into it until it got to five ounces. [Laughter.] So okay, in the early days they were the forerunners of the industry, because there wasn't roads and processing factories the freezer boats developed...

**FITZHARDING B** They were essential.

**JD** Yes.

**FITZHARDING** The Jurien Bay grounds were first opened up by two or three processing boats, or large vessels that weren't really catching boats, they just processed on board, and the catcher boat supplied them.

**JD** Yes. And would feed to them, yes.

**FITZHARDING** But anyway there was no pot limit and most people probably worked 120 pots with a quite small boat. But the Portuguese being more adventurous or seeing more opportunities, they got double crews on and slowly put out about 600 pots and they used to just pull 'til dark and the next day they'd start pulling the ones they didn't pull the day before it. And you know they caught a lot of crays. More crayfish would have gone over the tipper of the old **Lady of Fatima** than any other boat on the coast.

**JD** Yes?

**FITZHARDING** Absolutely. Well it's been going since 1958 when they built it, or 1959. They're in a bit of doubt about that. A long time, thirty years.

**JD** Yes, sure, sure.

**FITZHARDING** And all those pots, and you know.

**FITZHARDING B** But then they started... The government became involved to start limiting it somewhere, and started looking at the long term view, and consequently over the last 25 years, all restrictions have come in, which is good.

**FITZHARDING A** The first thing that happened they just stopped the increase. In '63 they said, "There's no more boats," so it was frozen at 846 boats, something like that number. And then it was obvious that people still had lots of pots so in 1965 they said, "Well everybody, whatever length their boat is overall now, can have three pots a foot." And that was also pushed strongly by the Geraldton area. We were just beginners, but we supported it. We were just kids. We had a twenty-four foot boat, so we got 72 pots.

**FITZHARDING B** And I was crewing for John at that stage.

**FITZHARDING** Before this we worked up to 100 pots or 120 pots. And that was the second year. So we must have got the boat in '62. And in the '63 season we only had three pots a foot which was 72 pots.

**FITZHARDING B** We were still, we were working over a hundred pots because I was fishing with you and I found it very difficult and when they brought in the restriction we were down to 72 pots, I breathed a sigh of relief, because I couldn't handle that number.

**JD** Yes. They were big heavy pots too.

**FITZHARDING B** Oh no, he lifted, he lifted them.

**JD** Oh, you didn't lift them.

**FITZHARDING B** No, it was just a long day.

**FITZHARDING** Not as heavy as the pots we have today.

**JD** Not as heavy?

**FITZHARDING B** No.

**FITZHARDING** Smaller pots.

**JD** Were they ti tree or cane or..?

**FITZHARDING** No, we always worked with batten pots.

**FITZHARDING B** We've always had battens.

**JD** Yes.

**FITZHARDING** The Geraldton people always worked batten pots.

**FITZHARDING B** Stick pots are hopeless.

**FITZHARDING** It's only just in the last few years that batten pots have moved into the Southern Fishery.

**FITZHARDING B** Because a lot of people say, you know, they argue about the type of pot, and they reckon stick pots are the ones that catch. But when we first started off, we were very poor and we brought second hand pots. I hated them because you'd put your hand in and then you had to chase the crays around to catch them to bring them out. Whereas with a batten pot, over the tipper, you'd take the door off, tip all the crays out, sized and undersized and octopus and everything else that was in there, into the cracker box, and then the pot would be baited and taken down the back, you know, and stacked. And then you sorted out what was in the box.

**JD** Yes, sure.

**FITZHARDING B** Well we used to do it straight away.

**FITZHARDING** There used to be a lot of cackers in those days.

**FITZHARDING B** Oh, a tremendous amount, because we didn't have escape gaps.

**FITZHARDING** We had no escape gaps, you see.

**JD** Oh right.

**FITZHARDING B** So you were talking about the restrictions, the first restriction were the number of boats; then the number of pots; and then they said. "Well, we've got to look after the little crayfish." So then we had to put in escape gaps, and there were tremendous arguments over all this. Anyway...

**FITZHARDING** Same as there was a few years ago, when we put three escape gaps in.

**FITZHARDING B** Oh and then the size changed.

**FITZHARDING** You know, the fishermen all thought they were going to go broke again; it was going to be a drama.

**FITZHARDING B** The size of the gap changed as well. They changed the size of the gaps.

**FITZHARDING** That's correct. The size of the gauge, had never been changed. There was an argument [advanced by some fishermen, particularly Max Biernel for a Jarger gauge to let more escape, which has never been adopted.] The escape gaps had been increased [to 55 mm, but was reduced to 54 mm].

**JD** Yes, so that bigger crayfish could escape, yes.

**FITZHARDING B** And more crayfish can escape.

**FITZHARDING** Many of us would like to see it a little bit bigger, even. I mean you still would lose some size, but many more undersized escape.

**JD** All this, this...

**FITZHARDING B** There was one escape gap, now there's three escape gaps.

**JD** All of this was intended to conserve the...

**FITZHARDING B** Absolutely, yes.

**FITZHARDING** That's right, yes.

**JD** The remaining stocks, wasn't it?

**FITZHARDING** And John's been involved in that because he's on the Rock Lobster Advisory Committee and that consists of - what CSIRO, Government people and...

**FITZHARDING** No, it doesn't.

**FITZHARDING B** Research guidance.

**FITZHARDING** Primarily, in the old days it used to be three fishermen, two processors, the Director of Fisheries and the Chief Inspector. That was all it was. But it's been, by pressure of the Fishermen's Associations who thought that it wasn't democratic, which they may have been right but I don't know whether the end result was any different, but it's turned into a cast of thousands now. You know, it's a Cecil B de Mille production.

**JD** Is it? Yes.

**FITZHARDING** And it's too big. It's a worry to me.

**JD** How's it funded?

**FITZHARDING** When we made the early decisions - they were difficult decisions to make. We took six weeks off the end of the season. And, you know, that was pretty traumatic, because everybody was affected differently and it was impossible to make a reduction in the season that was equal to everybody's. It just wasn't, you know?

*JD* Yes.

**FITZHARDING** And we had a lot of heart searching to go through to get to that stage. We've got so many now I don't think you'd ever make a decision because you just can't [get agreement]. And it's a worry for me because in the future more effort will have been taken off because the efficiency of the industry is increasing, so we'll need to do something. Last time we took then [10% of the pots away, which is still swelling at 2% p.a. there was nearly a riot!] You know there were petitions to Parliament. There were people standing at Parliament. There was all sorts of things. Their throats were cut. You know, [they thought] it was the end of their world! The next year we had the best year they'd ever had with ten per cent less pots! It was just bullshit, but they just [could understand the need]. And we could take forty percent of the pots off everybody so we're all equal still, and we'll catch the same amount of lobsters.

*JD* Is there any evidence that the stocks are being depleted?

**FITZHARDING** Oh....

**FITZHARDING B** Well, yes, I think that's why they bring the restrictions in.

**FITZHARDING** There's two things about it. It's very hard to measure the stock, but it's certainly been heavily exploited. Well I'm sure it is. But it's very hard to measure to whether the stock is being depleted. It's a difficult thing to do. I mean three years before the Southern Blue Fin Tuna Fishery collapsed the scientists were saying that the bio-mass was secure. That's how much they knew about it. And we all said, "Oh that's bullshit." You know because you could just see [the reduction in the juvenile fish swimming down the West Coast].

**FITZHARDING B** You could see it.

**FITZHARDING** From the ten juveniles we saw swimming down our coast it was bullshit. But they knew. I don't know how they knew but as it turned out they obviously didn't know. So it's not an exact science. Nobody can go out and say well there's x million lobsters out there because you just can't do it. We've got very sophisticated means of measuring it but it's still not adequate. So okay, what we're really saying is that there's an exploitation rate which is increasing all the time. Now, we've got a good handle on that by returns. You have to make monthly returns, and so you can measure how many times a pot, how many million pots are pulled out of the water every year, because you know how many days, if the fishermen have been reasonably honest with their returns, how many days they've gone out and how many pots they've pulled each day. Now at the minute we're going through a process of lopping two percent of everybody's pots every year, but that is only just keeping balance with the extra number of days that people are working.

*JD* So that it's not really...

**FITZHARDING** But we're nowhere near the potential for every pot to be pulled every day. The last time we looked at it we were pulling about 14 million pots a year or something like.

**FITZHARDING B** Pots pulls.

**FITZHARDING** While the potential was about eighteen and a half million, so you're....



**FITZHARDING B** Yes, still better...

**FITZHARDING A** A bit slack to take up, you know? And you're sort of getting the young blokes that are leasing licences from people or if they've got an overdraft, if they're going to go every day because it's just never too rough. Because you can, even with little boats, you can go every day if you really want to. It's uncomfortable, you know, you get a bit of a hiding. Where as the people who haven't got the big loans, will say, "Well it's not a very nice day. There's not many crays, so we'll have a day off."

**FITZHARDING B** To change the subject a wee bit, the Rock Lobster Advisory Committee consists of fishermen, the research guys, Government guys, as I was saying, and they held meetings in each main centre at the end of the season. So the research blokes put up their viewpoint, [fishermens views are discussed, options for the future, etc.]

**FITZHARDING** [The research team are] not really on the committee, they just [contribute information]. The committee's quite small but they have all the advisors. But Beth's quite right, I mean [the coastal four, as it's known, is a focal point each July].

**FITZHARDING B** It's part of the group that [are generally well respected by the Industry].

**FITZHARDING** The information is disseminated pretty well, [with all the electronic aids].

**FITZHARDING B** They put forward the information, but they're not members of it, but they come along every year and they put up the research that they've found. Like John was saying the pots pulls or how the crays are escaping from them; pot procedure.

**JD** Is that a different body from the Council?

**FITZHARDING B** And then.... Oh yes.

**FITZHARDING** Oh absolutely.

**FITZHARDING B** Oh yes.

**FITZHARDING** [The Committee] is a statutory body.

**JD** Yes.

**FITZHARDING B** And they put it to the fishermen that perhaps we should bring in another restriction and then they've got a voice to say "Look we agree, we don't agree", blah, blah, blah, and each centre has its own and at the end of that they all meet in Perth, the Rock Lobster Advisory Committee. And the fishermen and members are from each centre along the coast and then they make a decision which as to be a pretty general decision, because you're never going to please anyone. But the thing is that we've got a good rapport with the Fisheries Department and we do have [a strong voice]. Sometimes they don't take any damn notice at all anyway, I mean that's happened. But generally, you know, the fishermen can have a direct input into what happens to their industry.

**JD** So to a degree....

**FITZHARDING** The Rock Lobster Advisory Committee was a general Fisheries Advisory Committee. I think [it] was established in the late '40s to advise the Minister. And this one, has become more specifically the Rock Lobster Advisory Committee, before I was on it, which was probably in the '50s. I'm the oldest serving member now, and probably, I've been on it for sixteen or seventeen years.

**JD** Yes, yes. So it would be true to say then that to a considerable degree the industry is self-regulating?

**FITZHARDING B** Mm.

**FITZHARDING** Well... It is really. I mean the pressure came in the early days from the fishermen. Now, well probably in the early days, there wasn't much research done at all, but the fishermen didn't need to be Einstein to figure out what was going on. You know, just everybody was pouring into it; it was just going to be a disaster. And firstly the Government of the day grappled with it and Bernie Bowen [the present Director], was involved then but not as the Director. He was the research person. He's not a biologist but he was an economist, but anyway Bernard was responsible for a lot of the research that implemented the escape gaps. But Alec Frazer was the Director then and the impetus really came I think from the fishermen. But what's happening is that we're getting more information from the scientists, because they, you know, they're very dedicated guys and their information is good and it's a very good research effort. The whole of the work on the breeding cycle was done by CSIRO in the past, but they've stopped doing it now. And State Fisheries [have done all the work on Juveniles]. But they are really saying, "Look you guys you've got to pull your head in a bit." And many fishermen really don't want to, they just want to roar off. Well some of them do, but a lot of us are saying, "Well these guys are right." But the reality of it is that most of us can see that while we may not get benefit from us being conservative, we can only all lose by being adventurous. We're far better off in the long term to be cautious, because we're all in for the long term. I mean we've just bought another boat for our son, and we're in to it for a long time to pay that back [laughs].

**JD** Sure.

**FITZHARDING** And we've got to survive. You know we don't want just a couple of years of good years.

**JD** Tell me, John, it seems to me talking to fishermen that the - what I call the larrikin element is much less evident in the fishing community now as to compared with years ago?

**FITZHARDING** Yes. Well the colourful characters have probably gone.

**JD** Yes. People are very concerned...

**FITZHARDING B** Businesslike [laughs].

**JD** For the future of the industry. Because I suppose they have a very large investment in it?

**FITZHARDING** Well some have, and some [although the value is not really relevant unless you're buying or selling]. The fellow that's been in it for thirty years hasn't put a large investment into his boat even though [it has become valuable.]

**JD** Well it's valuable wasn't it?

**FITZHARDING** Well he doesn't think so in his own mind. Until last year when we bought the other boat for our son, it was really immaterial to us because we didn't want to sell the boat. We really only ever put in, not a lot of money. Even with the pots there'd less than three or four hundred thousand dollars of actual money that we've put into our own outfit, and probably less than that, over a long period of years. And we aren't going to sell it so it meant nothing to us. But the only time we really needed any money, was when we had to bloody well buy one! And then it meant.... It was a drama, you know, it was a lot of money. And it's worked the other way, hasn't it? Made us poor! Even though you've got the asset to borrow against it's still a big commitment.

**FITZHARDING B** You're working harder to pay it off.

**FITZHARDING** So what I'm saying, the guy that's still cruising along as a fisherman doesn't see that really as being - well I suppose he does in his mind see it as an asset, but it's not because he's ever going to sell it. He just wants to be a fisherman.

**JD** But a fellow trying to get into the industry..?

**FITZHARDING** Very difficult.

**FITZHARDING B** Just hard.

**FITZHARDING** We needed two boats to even have a chance of buying one and surviving. Really, you only do that for your son, you're not going to as an investment.

**JD** No.

**FITZHARDING** ...for someone to go and work.

**JD** No right.

**FITZHARDING B** At one stage we owned two boats and we found it didn't work out, because really the crayfishing, you've really to to be in control of your own boat and what you're doing. Another skipper doesn't look after the boat the same. Well this is what happened in our case, anyway, and we thought, look this is crazy. And then John had an accident and the easiest thing to do was to sell one boat and just keep the one working. Several times over the years we've considered getting another boat and just thought, "No, no, far better to be in control of your own."

**JD** Sure.

**FITZHARDING B** I mean that's not the way everyone thinks.

**JD** No.

**FITZHARDING B** And then, of course, when our son got to twenty-one and said he definitely wanted to come fishing, and we had to re-think the thing, and said, "Oh I wish we'd bought one years ago," because the price has gone up so much.

**JD** Just the, apart from the cost of the boat, the....

**FITZHARDING B** The licence?

**JD** Cost of the licence is so high.

**FITZHARDING** Well that's what I mean, the whole deal.

**FITZHARDING B** That's the price, not the boat.

**JD** Yes, yes.

**FITZHARDING** It's a lot of money.

**JD** People say you would need something in the order of a million dollars?

**FITZHARDING** Well, no, probably.... It cost us \$800,000 I suppose to get organised and operating efficiently.

**JD** John if we could come back to you own career in the industry. You mentioned earlier that you started off working on the processing, in the processing factory for the Fishermen's Co-op in Geraldton. I believe you're no longer in that sort of area. What's you function now in the Co-op?

**FITZHARDING** Well now I'm the Chairman of Directors, which I've been for three years, I guess, but I've been a Director for a long time.

**JD** That's a pretty long way from being the, probably the first hand.

**FITZHARDING** Yes.

**JD** Yes.

**FITZHARDING** Yes actually it's quite interesting how I got to work up there, because what happened was, a group of kids that I sailed Gwen 12s with in those days, all came to Geraldton for the Easter Regatta, which was a pretty big deal, which they, still have, but it was a pretty big deal in those days in Geraldton. Would go up at the end of the sailing season and one of the kids fathers was very involved in running Gwen 12s which was quite a strong fleet in those days, had a fleet of trucks that used to transport the lobsters down to Perth and the bait up. Western Transport it was called in those days.

And so anyway I said wanted to come up here, because I'd been working for this boat builder in Perth and I'd finished with him, and I'd decided Geraldton looked pretty good. So he said, "Well I know Jack Miles who's the foreman at the Co-op, I'll get you a job." So anyway I went back to Geraldton after Easter and I camped where the truck drivers used to stay when they were overnight because they used to work in Perth most days, the truckies, transporting product from Robbs Jetty down to the ships in Fremantle. Then at four o'clock they'd load up the bait and drive to Geraldton and camp overnight. The next morning they'd load up the crays and go back. So they used

to overnight at the back of the Victoria Hotel. They had a room there and they used to get a feed at the Vic, or over the road at John's Cafe which used to open for breakfast at six o'clock.

Anyway, I worked up the Co-op, and Jack Miles was one of the characters of the industry. He was the Foreman at the Co-op for 25 years, I think. He's recently died. But before that he was the Foreman at Lancelin Products in the early days for the industry at Lancelin. A certainly well-known fellow. His son-in-law's Bert Boshetti, one of the Directors at the Co-op still.

**FITZHARDING B** Bert has prawning boats too.

**FITZHARDING** Yes. But anyway that was how we started and then we sort of fished for the Co-op. We've fished for the Co-op ever since we started and they loaned us a bit of money when we first got started. It cost us 1600 quid to get started, pots and boat and everything, licence. [Laughter.]

**JD** Yes, there's been some changes.

**FITZHARDING** Yes. It was still a lot of money in those days.

**FITZHARDING B** But it was a lot of money to us.

**FITZHARDING** We had to... My father guaranteed us for a 1,000 quid, which was a fair bit of money, because it was the cost of a Holden Car!

**JD** Yes, right. Yes [Laughter].

**FITZHARDING** It's not that much.

**JD** John, you've also been very much involved in Local Government here, haven't you?

**FITZHARDING** Yes, in the Irwin Shire. I think it was eighteen years I spent on the Council. It seems like that anyway.

**FITZHARDING B** Mm, sixteen

**JD** Are you off it now?

**FITZHARDING** Yes.

**FITZHARDING B** Retired this year.

**FITZHARDING** Retired last year.

**FITZHARDING B** This year.

**FITZHARDING** Or this year. This year, yes.

**FITZHARDING B** But during that time, because we had to fight very hard, we've got the Marina in Port Denison, because naturally the Shire consisted of mostly retired farmers and, very little else really, and John was a fisherman. And he said, "Now come on it's a fishing port as well." And so he was fighting on behalf of the Professional

Fishermen's Association, Dongara Fishermen, as well as getting his oar in on the Council. And it was a very proud moment when that was opened.

**JD** I'll bet. Yes.

**FITZHARDING B** Yes.

**JD** I noticed on some of the sort of plaques on walls of buildings, John, you're mentioned as Vice-President.

**FITZHARDING** Mm. I was Vice-president for a number of years and then President for five years.

**JD** Yes, good.

**FITZHARDING** But it's always been my belief that you shouldn't, particularly those sort of jobs, that you shouldn't go for a long time. There's been a history of Local Government in this area where one bloke will do twenty years as a President, which is pretty dispiriting for the young blokes. He's probably doing a good job, but you know, [but doesn't give others a chance].

**FITZHARDING B** Well you retired as President but stayed on.

**FITZHARDING** Stayed on the Council for a few years and...

**FITZHARDING B** On the Council, for another four. Oh another six years. Yes.

**JD** Yes, a good long stint.

**FITZHARDING B** Yes, but trying to encourage people to say "Hey everyone can do this that's on the Council." But unfortunately when John retired the same man's been on, and he's been trying to get off but each time he thinks the young ones are going to take his job, they "Oh, no, no, no." [Laughter]

**JD** Is the... Have you detected a change of attitude on the Council, more prone to be supportive of the fishing industry?

**FITZHARDING** It's much better now because there's more fishermen on the Council.

**FITZHARDING B** And business people, which there wasn't before. I mean really...

**FITZHARDING** But the franchise has changed in Western Australia for good or evil, depending on what your point of view is. But since the Labor Party's been in power the franchise is quite altered where the weighting towards property ownings has diminished, just one man one vote in effect but it's probably... It's probably not so bad. I think it's worked reasonably well here. I think probably in outback areas like Wiluna and Sandstone they probably disagree, because it's a different thing. But it's worked alright here through the friendship that exists between the rural people and the townspeople.

**FITZHARDING B** Mind you before it was mostly the retired cockies who had the time. That's basically what it boiled down to.

**FITZHARDING** The times a big problem, you know?

**JD** That's another thing, yes.

**FITZHARDING B** It really isn't now. I mean we've got business people and we've had women on the Council all the time too. Well from perhaps fifteen years ago. But, you know, and they all complain and say, "We didn't realise how much time you had to put into Council." And we said, "Well, [we've known for a long time!]"

**FITZHARDING** It's very difficult for fishermen because, country local authorities operate their meetings during the day because it suited farmers, and because....

**FITZHARDING B** They're long meetings too.

**FITZHARDING** It's better to come in for one day than drive in for short meetings. Many urban councils run it on committee systems with one hour meetings in the evenings, which suit urban people; it doesn't suit rural people. So, you miss the whole day's fishing. That's just a thousand bucks or a couple of thousand bucks gone, you're not going to get it back again. Whereas a cockie, his crops are still growing or he... it's not quite the same. It's difficult for him when they're busy, it's just the same, but it's just a straight loss to a fisherman, particularly when I've had to come in from the Islands. It was a pain really. I missed some meetings, I just couldn't come, but you don't like doing that too often.

**JD** And if you've got to put a substitute skipper on, it's money out your pay.

**FITZHARDING** Well it's not like that. Crayfishing's not like prawning where [each day is separate]. It's a different thing, working pots. It's very individual.

**FITZHARDING B** You've got to be in complete control all the time.

**FITZHARDING** You know, you can put a bloke on for a week, but it's very hard to... Well you can certainly shift all your pots and put them in easy places to go and pull. But you might as well not bother about it because he's not going to do very well, and he doesn't know what to do with them. Whereas prawning you sort of say, "Well go up and down on these radar bearings," and you can go up and down with all the other lights and probably you'd get something. But crayfishing you have your pots spread individually and it's difficult. It's sometimes difficult for me to pull the bloody things never mind [a beginner]. [Laughter.] You know, it's quite hard to find them and I sort of know my way around just looking at the echo sounder.

**JD** Right. John could we have a look at your other major interest, your boat design and building?

**FITZHARDING** Yes, it's just that I've always been interested in building boats ever since I've been a kid and designing boats and we've always designed our own boats. Even from the first one...

**FITZHARDING B** People have wanted John's designs and we haven't had time. We built one boat a year.

**FITZHARDING** We haven't had time and its...

**JD** Yes.

**FITZHARDING B** Because, you know, we were building them ourselves.

**FITZHARDING** It was difficult to get boat builders who wanted to build to our design. Because most boat builders are lined up with other designers, for instance Len Randall, who's pretty old, or Phil Curran. I nearly took an apprenticeship with Len Randall [before I came to Geraldton].

**JD** Yes?

**FITZHARDING** As a naval architect. That was our plan and the...

**FITZHARDING B** Originally.

**FITZHARDING** Was to come and make a few bob crayfishing and then go to England and study naval architecture, but we never did that.

**FITZHARDING B** Never left crayfishing.

**FITZHARDING** Did just as well too, I think. [Laughs.] But anyway I designed a boat for... After we built **Hero**, I designed a boat for an acquaintance from further down the coast who'd looked around and he was fairly discerning and he liked **Hero**. He said, "I want one of these but in aluminum," and he'd organised Steve Ward to build it. So I designed that boat for him and then we designed a few more that Steve Ward built. And then he got tied up...

**FITZHARDING B** And he got involved with the yachts again.

**FITZHARDING** Building twelve metres and...

**FITZHARDING B** America's Cup.

**FITZHARDING** And at the same time some other friends in Geraldton had built a tug for themselves, and a big crayboat. One of the early fishing families, the Newbolds in Geraldton. They built the tug because they had the towage contract for the Geraldton Harbour, in aluminum. And then a mutual friend said, "How about building, in aluminum. And then a mutual friend said, "How about building me a crayboat?" And they said, "Well..." He said, "I wouldn't mind one like Fitzzy's." Or "Get Fitzzy to design it." So that's how we first started and we finished up forming Geraldton Boat Builders, which we're partners in with the two Newbold boys and Terry Bromley who's the boat builder.

**JD** Oh.

**FITZHARDING** And so, we said, "It's a good opportunity really," because it's very hard to [get our designs built]. Before that we'd actually got a video made at great cost by a friends, with the intent of going to Perth and sort of publicising ourselves with boat builders, and say, "Well here we are. Here's another designer, apart from Phil Curren and Len Randall." We didn't have to do that because that would have been a lot of pain. It's difficult to build a boat when you're not there within reasonably proximity.



**JD** Sure.

**FITZHARDING B** It's easier to see what's going on.

**FITZHARDING B** So it's been good for us, being a development thing, [and very satisfying].

**FITZHARDING B** Well we've built, what forty boats in that time.

**JD** Have you really?

**FITZHARDING B** In four years. Mm.

**JD** That is the end of side A of tape one of this interview. Please turn the tape over for side B.

This interview continues on [Tape 1 Side B](#).

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with JACK FRY

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Jack Fry of Pearly Crescent, Lynwood. Today is the 21st November 1989. The interview is conducted for the Australian Fishing Industry oral history project.

Jack and his brother, Mick, went to Shark Bay with their father after World War 1 and worked in the commercial pearling industry. They later moved into the commercial fishing business and opened up the first fish freezing works in Shark Bay. Both brothers continued fishing until the late 1960s.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**HS** Jack, could we begin with some biographical details? Where and when you were born.

**FRY** 18th October 1905.

**HS** And could you tell us a little bit more? What is your full name?

**FRY** John Harold. It used to be Worth Fry, but when I joined the Army I just put the name down as John Harold Fry and cut out the Worth; and since then (when I got out of the Army) we decided that I'd cut out the Worth and leave it out.

**HS** Is that the same for the whole family?

**FRY** No, some of them still carry it. My brother still has the Worth in his name.

**HS** Right! And your brother's name is Mick?

**FRY** Gerard Worth.

**HS** Gerard?

**FRY** We call him Mick.

**HS** Ah, that's his nickname.

**FRY** That's his nickname.

**HS** Right! So in order to find any records about your brother we'd have to look for Worth Fry?

**FRY** Worth Fry with him, yes; two Christian names.

**HS** And you mentioned earlier that he has written a book or some publication.

**FRY** Yes, about his life in Shark Bay. It's about his own happenings in Shark Bay. A few other names come into it because they come in through it, into his story.

**HS** Right! Do you have any other brothers?

**FRY** I did have one, he died in Shark Bay about 35 years ago.

**HS** And any sisters?

**FRY** Four sisters - all dead.

**HS** Were any of them interested in fishing?

**FRY** Well, they were in Shark Bay while we were pearling for a start, and they used to do opening pearl shell. Those that weren't going to school would open pearl shell.

**HS** Could you tell me when you first went to Shark Bay?

**FRY** About March in 1918. My dad went up there pearling with another chap. They had a boat bought through the repat [Repatriation Department] and a pearling lease in Shark Bay to go. All the leases in Shark Bay in those days were leased rental.

**HS** And I believe you went up also with some of his brothers?

**FRY** His brothers were up there. My father's brothers were there. Bob Fry, he was a fisherman; and Andrew Fry, he was also working in the pearling.

**HS** Were they older brothers?

**FRY** Much older than him, yes.

**HS** And was that the reason for you going to Shark Bay?

**FRY** No, as a matter of fact he was there when he was a boy originally.

**HS** Your father?

**FRY** They were pearling up there. They were there when the pearling practically started in Shark Bay. They had pearling boats, had pearling leases. Well, in those days it was just open slather - there were no pearling leases as they made it later. Each person had to pay rent on a lease which was his and only his, and nobody could work on it.

**HS** What period was that?

**FRY** That was around.... well, that was still on when we went to Shark Bay in 1918.

**HS** And when were the leases introduced?

**FRY** I'm not sure about that but it must have been in the early 1900's I think; because it was just open go before that.

**HS** Right! So when you went there you were about 13?

**FRY** I was about 13, yes. I didn't go to school, I left school at that time. I had to stay home and open pearl shell. [Laughter].

**HS** So your father wanted you in the industry. Were you interested?

**FRY** Oh well, it wasn't a matter of being interested.

**HS** You had no choice?

**FRY** I had no choice. We were there and we had to do what we were told in those days. I just didn't get up and do what I liked, [laughs] like you do today.

**HS** And your mother, was she involved?

**FRY** No, mother wasn't. She died many years before that. As a matter of fact my dad was in the police before the war in Roebourne and Port Hedland. He was Sergeant of Police in Broome, and then he was transferred to Collie. From the North - while the winter was on - down to Collie, in the middle of winter; and, of course, my mother couldn't take it down there - she got pneumonia and died, and that was the end of the family. So we were all just separated then - went to different schools, different orphanages. My father couldn't look after us by himself so we just went to the orphanages, which didn't do us any harm.

**HS** Where was your father born, Jack?

**FRY** He was born on Garden Island, he says. He always maintained that he was the first white child born on Garden Island and nothing could shake it from him. He said he was. But we've been through the Births and Deaths and all sorts of things and trying to find his record, but there wasn't any record of his birth. We haven't found a record of his birth yet.

**HS** Is there any record of your mother's birth?

**FRY** Oh yes, I suppose there is. Her name was Amelia Peirl. P E I R L.

**HS** That's a coincidence!

**FRY** Yes.

**HS** In the name. Peirl.

**FRY** Oh yes, but it's spelt different.

**HS** And where was your mother born?

**FRY** Well I'm battling.... I just don't know.

**HS** So your father was born on Garden Island?

**FRY** He says he was born on Garden Island.

**HS** And was his father in fishing?

**FRY** As a matter of fact they were all mixed up in the police somewhere or other, when they all came out from England. His father and his mother. I haven't got any record of any of that about them. But I understood that they were all connected with police, from England. You know, when the immigrants were coming out. And they came out with them - probably. As policemen.

**HS** Just getting back to Shark Bay. Just specifically where, at Shark Bay, were you operating from?

**FRY** From Denham.

**HS** From Denham!

**HS** Denham. Well when we first went there it was called Freshwater Camp and later it was named Denham, after Harold Denham the Surveyor.

**HS** And what type of luggers did you have?

**FRY** Well, they weren't luggers really, they were cutters. I've got photos of them there. And they were about from 25 to 35 feet, single masted, and used to carry staysail and mainsail and jib. Depended on the weather, because you had to drift with the sail, dragging dredges. And if they were very strong winds you'd reef down and just have enough sail to keep you going.

**HS** And how many cutters did you have?

**FRY** We had two; but all told, when we were pearling, there'd be around about thirty altogether.

**HS** And the pearling grounds. Just exactly where were the pearling grounds?

**FRY** Well, there was a place called Useless Inlet, they had a lot of pearling leases in there. And then there was Cape Banks, open ground, where anyone could work; and they'd all go down working there. Used to work from Monday to Friday, come home and unload on the Saturday; and the womenfolk used to do the opening of the shell through the week while the boat went out again on the following week and got more shell.

**HS** Right! Could you explain the whole operation to us?

**FRY** As a matter of fact, the dredges were made on an iron frame and the wire was twisted. You made the dredges yourself with wire - twisted wire - to make a bag that would fit on the back of the dredge. You'd drop five or six of these over the side, have

them all along the side, and you'd drift fast enough to keep them from coming too far off the ground so the edge was like a knife blade - a big - a big, wide blade about two foot six across. And they'd drag along the ground at an angle which would pick up any pearlshell, or anything that was loose on the bottom. And then you'd pull it up, empty it out, throw it over, sort the shell out, haul the next one, do the same with that, until you got to the end of where the shell were. Then you'd pull all your dredges on board, sail back to where you started from and start again - drifting, with the sails.

**HS** And what period of time would that have [taken]?

**FRY** Oh, sometimes it would only take ten minutes, sometimes it would take you thirty minutes. Then you'd sail straight back and start off again. And you'd be doing that all day.

**HS** The capacity of the cutter was 40 or 50 sacks?

**FRY** Oh, the amount of shell you'd get depended on the quality of the shell. If the shell was good, fairly big shell, they'd be scarcer than where the shell was grown very thick - they'd be very small. But you'd keep only the old shell. You had to sort them - take the shells which were old enough, otherwise you'd be in trouble for taking undersized shell.

**HS** And how many workers would you have on a cutter?

**FRY** Only yourself and one man. The skipper and one deckie.

**HS** And that would be usually your father and yourself, or....?

**FRY** Well, as a matter of fact, for a start it was just the father, and he had a partner. And they used to go out and we stayed home and did the opening of the shell. And then later on we moved away from Denham and went and camped right close to where the lease was so that we could save time. We built a house and had plenty of water and everything, and we camped away from town.

**HS** And that was at Useless Loop?

**FRY** Useless Inlet. Useless Loop is where the salt is. Where the salt works is now.

**HS** And how long would it take you if you camped away, how long would you be away?

**FRY** Oh, we used to stay away for about three months. You'd come back into town when the ship used to be in, to collect our stores. All the stores used to come from Perth by ship, there was no overland service in those days. And they'd come up by the ship about once a month. One of the State boats would call in, or one of the Singapore line would come in, and the lighter would meet the ships and pick up the cargo, sort it out, and you'd get your cargo. We used to buy in quantity - you had to because you only got a ship about every month.

**HS** So life was a bit hard, was it?

**FRY** Oh no, it was pretty tough but it was all right. It didn't do anybody any harm.

**HS** What was the market for the shell? Where did you....?

**FRY** Well, that had to be shipped to London. Had to do it up in sacks. Sort it out, clean it, take the barnacles off it, chip all the edges and put it into sacks, and ship it to Fremantle, and then it would be trans-shipped to London. You usually shipped it to the agent that you had, where you used to get your stores from - W D Moore, or somebody like that. And they'd send the stuff up, they'd ship your shell, and when the cheque came back they'd take their share and send you the balance.

**HS** Do you remember the price of the shell at that time?

**FRY** Well, it would depend on the size. I think the best price they ever got for Shark Bay shell would be about 50, 60 pounds a ton. In those days it was a pound [£].

**HS** And what size were the bags?

**FRY** They used to hold about a hundredweight. A sack.

**HS** And you made a good living from that?

**FRY** Just a living. There was never any fortune made out of pearling in Shark Bay. It was just a good living, but no fortunes.

**HS** On the shore side of the operation you had the younger members of family?

**FRY** You'd have a shed on the beach, and the shell would be unloaded in there and as they were opened the oyster was put into barrels to rot, because a lot of the pearls were embedded in the oyster - which you wouldn't see when you were opening. You had to just flick the shell open and if you saw a pearl you picked it out, and if you didn't it went into what you called a 'pogie pot'. And then it was boiled down when it rotted down properly and all pearls and the sand would drip to the bottom, and then it would be spread out and you'd sort the pearls out from the sand. But you got a lot more pearls out of the boiling down than you would out of the opening, except big pearls.

**HS** Oh, that's interesting! And how big was the works there?

**FRY** Oh, it was not a matter of works - everybody had their little shed and their pogie pots, and did their own thing.

**HS** Was there a lot of competition?

**FRY** No, there was no competition because everybody had their own leases, or worked open ground.

**HS** So there wasn't any...?

**FRY** There was never any arguments or fighting or anything. There's no competition in it. You worked as hard as you could for yourself.

**HS** Right! Do you remember some of the others involved in the industry at that time?

**FRY** Hoults, Flethers, Henfrys. They were all pearling.

**HS** And did they come from Perth, or were they local people?

**FRY** Oh no, they all come from all around. You know. A lot of them might have been born in Perth but they all originated from the early settlers. All the families.

**HS** And that period we are talking about now is still up to the Second World War?

**FRY** Yes. The Second World War, that's when people couldn't send their shell away because of the shipping, and from then on it sort of dwindled and there was very little that went on. Some of them had to go and do a bit of fishing, you know. They were catching snapper and the government had a boat that was picking the fish up and carting it to Perth. A boat called the **Era**. It used to call up there and pick up the fish, take it to Geraldton, and from Geraldton it would go through to Perth like the Geraldton fishing boats.

**HS** So when did you change from pearling to fishing?

**FRY** Well, we were pearling for about 13 years, but in between time we used to do a bit when the ship called in - we'd go out the night before and we'd have an order for say about a thousand pound of fish for the ship's use. Or two thousand pound, or whatever. And we'd go out and we'd just catch snapper. The snapper was so plentiful in those times. We'd just catch snapper and take it - uncleaned, they'd take it as it was - I think it was about fivepence a pound we used to get.

**HS** This was just before the Second World War?

**FRY** Oh yes, round about then. When the Second World War started, well pearling wasn't very good at all. They couldn't ship the pearl you see, and the pearl market wasn't very good that you could make a fortune out of that, so they just had to rely mostly on shell to make anything out of it.

**HS** And the fishing? You were in snapper fishing?

**FRY** We used to go out and catch snapper for the steamers. That was about once a month. But then after that time my dad got an idea that he ought to start a freezing works. Although there was a canning plant going in the early days, 1918, because they had a little canning plant on it - a boat called the [pause] I'll think of the name in a minute. I was only thinking about it last night. **Torrence!** That was the name of the boat. The **Torrence**. And they had a little canning plant on [it]. It used to only can mullet, though. That went on for a few years until she blew ashore in the 1921 willy willy [or what would be known as a cyclone today] in Shark Bay. And that was the end of it - they didn't carry on any more, on her.

And then another party started a canning plant at a place called Herald Bight on the Peron Peninsula, and they went on for a couple of years but didn't do much good out of it.

**HS** Do you remember when that was set up?

**FRY** Oh, I just couldn't give you the exact date but... it would be around about 1930; something like that.

**HS** And your father's freezing plant?



**FRY** No. He started that around in 1927. He had this place built and started off freezing fish, and we used to ship them on the steamer, when the steamer came in - about once a month the steamers used to call. That didn't last very long because the price was [very low]; there wasn't enough in it to make anything out of it at all. You know, to pay for the plant and that sort of thing. So we only kept it going about two years and then we gave it up and somebody else took it on, and they went on for about twelve months and they gave it up, too, until a chap by the name of Spavin took it over. And he had [it for] quite a few years.

At the present time a lot of the fishermen have got their own little freezing plants that they put their own fish in, and freeze them, sort their fish themselves and then it's carted to Geraldton. They get it carted down to Geraldton. There is a freezer there [Shark Bay] that buys fish at the present time, but I don't think they've got [many boats catching for them]. They might have two or three boats fishing, but that's about all. Most of the others have got their own little freezers.

**HS** And for the fishing you must have had other boats rather than the cutters, or did you use them?

**FRY** The same boats.

**HS** The same boats for fishing as for the pearling?

**FRY** Yes. They put their ice boxes in the same boats. At the present time some of the fishermen I speak to have got some of the Geraldton cray boats that they've bought in Geraldton, and they're faster and carry more. So they switched over to them because they got a much better price for their stuff at the present time. When we were fishing we used to get a penny-farthing a pound for whiting. A penny-ha'penny [halfpenny] a pound for mullet, and tuppence [two pence] ha'penny a pound for snapper.

**HS** This is the 1930's?

**FRY** That's in the early ['30s] when it first started out, yes. And after that the prices went up a little bit. The freezer started, and they built another freezer, and another company came in. But there's never been any wealth in it, except for the ones that are there now. They've got the whole place. There's only about six or seven fishing boats there working at the present time. They've got the whole place to themselves, they freeze their own fish, send them down, getting anything up to \$1.50 a pound for their stuff, where we used to get a penny-farthing. [Laughs]. So we were there in the wrong time.

**HS** What did you do during the war? The Second World War.

**FRY** Well, my brother stayed there. I joined the Army and went over to the Middle East, New Guinea. And then I got a letter from the Fisheries Department asking me to apply for a discharge because they were running short of fishermen. So I did that. After a time I got out and went back to fishing.

**HS** What year was that?

**FRY** I joined the Army in 1940.

**HS** And the discharge?

**FRY** And discharged in about 1943. I did nearly three years in the Army. I went back and started fishing. The brother was still there.

**HS** You went back to Shark Bay?

**FRY** I went back and joined my brother again. He was still fishing all through the time of the war. In Shark Bay.

**HS** You said earlier that your father had kept some diaries.

**FRY** Yes, well he always kept a diary of everything that happened. His brother Andrew, he kept a diary from the time he went to Shark Bay. And, of course, he died in a home in Geraldton and we were in Shark Bay and he was in Geraldton, and by the time we got to Geraldton all his possessions had been destroyed. Diaries and all went! Nothing left! Which was a shame, really, because there was really history in those diaries.

**HS** What year did your father die?

**FRY** August 1951, aged 77 years.

**HS** And did he keep fishing right up until....?

**FRY** No, he left Shark Bay after a time. The brother and I started fishing together in this boat and he left and went down to Safety Bay - he had a house down in Safety Bay, living down there for a time. But then he came back to Shark Bay and was there for about six months. He wasn't very well, and he went to Geraldton - to this home in Geraldton - and that's where he died.

**HS** During your time, pearling in particular, were there any stories, special stories, that you you'd like to tell?

**FRY** No, except the 1921 willy willy when all the pearling fleet got wrecked. [Laughs]. We were camped away at that time, our camp was called Cosy Corner, it was a very good, safe anchorage. Usually the boats used to go home on the Friday but, of course, this blow turned up. The willy willy started on the Wednesday - and they were all caught out, so a lot of the boats - about five of the boats - came to our camp because it was a safe anchorage. And by the time the blow was over there were only three of them left, the rest had blown away, dragged their anchors, and gone over - got wrecked up on the beaches. So there wasn't much fun in that.

**HS** Were people injured?

**FRY** No, nobody was injured, but their boats were all wrecked. The didn't have to drift very far before they were on the opposite beach, on the lea beach, and a very high tide when the boats went up, and then when the tide went out they were left stranded high and dry hundreds of yards up.

**HS** How would they get themselves back into the industry? Was it a big investment to....?

**FRY** No, not really. Because most people had two boats and one boat would be working in this Useless Inlet and the other one would be working on what we call the Cape Banks, so they still had one boat left. Some of them lost all their boats, but they

went ahead and bought another boat. Because boats in those days weren't very expensive. Not like today. To buy a boat that you paid about five hundred pounds for in those days, it would cost you about \$20,000 or 30,000 today.

**HS** Did you have to get a bank loan, Jack, to set yourself up?

**FRY** For the pearling?

**HS** Yes.

**FRY** No, Dad got help from the Repatriation [Department]. He was in the Army in the First World War and when he came back and got retired from the Army he got this assistance from the Repatriation. He and another Allan Murray. They got help from the Repatriation to buy a boat.

**HS** So your father's boat was passed on to you?

**FRY** Yes and we also bought another boat the **Gala** from a chap by the name of Houlit. I've got the pictures there, I'll show them to you later on. And we worked together for quite a few years. And then we had this boat called the **Seaplane**, well we sold her to a fishing company there, and they didn't even get a week's work out of it. They put it on the beach and wrecked her - she was wrecked on the beach, because they did what we told them not to do when they were redecking and doing a bit of repair work on her. However, we told them not to take out a certain beam out of the centre of her, which they didn't take any notice of, and as soon as they took it out she just sort of fell apart. So they were the losers.

**HS** Are there any other stories apart from the 1921 catastrophe, that are special memories for you?

**FRY** Except that we went to Carnarvon. The dad and I went to Carnarvon. We knocked off the pearling for a while because there was a company started fishing in Carnarvon and he loved fishing, and we went to Carnarvon and fished there for 12 months.

**HS** The end of Side 1 Tape 1.

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## **TAPE 1 SIDE B**

**FRY** We got an icebox in the boat and went down to Carnarvon and were fishing there - just snapper fishing - with this company that started there, Bennett brothers. We used to work out of Carnarvon but we still had to go to Shark Bay to catch the snapper. We'd be out for a week at a time, pack the snapper in ice. And we'd go back and unload, have a day or so in Carnarvon, and out again. Finally they went broke, so we went back to Shark Bay and ended up pearling again. We still had our pearling leases, and we had to have all our pearling gear. I was only about 20 then. I was away from home all the time.

**HS** How did you find that?

**FRY** Not very good at all, I didn't like it much. Well there was nothing I could do. We'd go to Carnarvon, and I didn't know anybody in Carnarvon, and it was just a matter of going out working and going back to Carnarvon, unloading, and loading up ice again and getting out and going again. That's about all we were doing. Coming and going. It

wasn't very successful in that business down there because I don't think they knew much about it.

**HS** Did you ever think about moving somewhere else?

**FRY** Well, there wouldn't be any reason for moving anywhere else because the fish were in Shark Bay if you wanted to be fishing, or you wanted to be pearling, and that's where you'd be. There's still lots and lots of pearl shell in Shark Bay. If anybody wants to start again, it's there.

At the present time, I believe there's a company there that is doing culture pearl - like they do up in Broome. They did have a place close to Monkey Mia (where the dolphins are) and they were doing a bit of culture work there. Anyhow, they got a cyclone and that washed that out and blew it all away. And they moved off to another area down along the coast a bit. Apparently they are still going, but they've just got a sand track into where they are working because they don't want anybody in - they don't want anybody there seeing the work. But we, the wife and elder son and I, we went to Monkey Mia last Christmas and went down to where this pearling camp was, just to have a look and see what they had been doing. There was a lot of pearl shell there that they'd been doctoring - you know, putting things in them; and all the shells and things, they were all washed about and broken up, smashed. There's still just a few pearl shell lying around but there's nothing in them, of course.

**HS** Do you remember when the cyclone was that you were referring to?

**FRY** It would have to be around March before we went up that year. Usually the cyclones come in there around about February/March, into Shark Bay. If they get through at all.

**HS** What was that year?

**FRY** 1987.

**HS** The year before last! And the company?

**FRY** Oh I have no idea, I wouldn't know the name of the company. As a matter of fact, they weren't very popular up there for some reason. They didn't want anybody to go anywhere near them. I don't know how many people were in the company, or what they were doing, but they were trying this culture business.

**HS** So Broome was never an alternative for you?

**FRY** No. Broome was diving, and Shark Bay was dredging. There was no diving in Shark Bay, it's all done with dredges. The same as they do in Tasmania where they [dredge] the scallops and things, they dredge for scallops in Tasmania and those places. It's done the same way. The dredge is dragged along the bottom. Of course the scallops there, I believe, are fixed - not like they are in Shark Bay. Lots of scallops in Shark Bay, but they are in schools, they move about all over the place. They tried that there, too, but it didn't work in Shark Bay because there is something wrong with the scallops there, they've all got worms in them. Some disease they've got!

**HS** That raises a question as far as the environment goes. Have you seen, during your time, significant changes to the environment where you've been fishing?

**FRY** No, no. Nothing different as far as I know. But apparently these scallops are the only thing that have got worms in them, for some reason. Although why they are in them, I wouldn't have a clue. There's plenty of them there, too, and fairly big scallops. They did try them once and, of course, when they brought them in they had to get their worms out of them so they put them into big tubs of caustic soda so that the shell would open and the worms would float out. And there was a terrible lot of them, too. But I never heard of any of them going on the market, or heard very much about them at all.

That was the company that had the freezer there, and they were also doing prawns. They had some prawns coming in from some of their boats, unloading at Monkey Mia and carting the prawns over to Denham and treating the prawns there. It didn't last very long there, though, they all went back to Carnarvon. Had a bigger plant there.

**HS** After your father died in 1951 did you continue fishing in Shark Bay?

**FRY** Oh the brother and I did, yes. We continued with it. We were fishing for a chap by the name of Bill Johnson. The other freezer was still going but this Johnson had a freezer too, he used to cart his own fish to Perth. A freezer truck! And we fished for him for several years.

**HS** When you say you fished for him, what...?

**FRY** We sold our fish to him.

**HS** Right! Was there a co-operative?

**FRY** No, no. There was nothing between the two freezers. He had his own market and they had theirs. He carted his own fish to Perth, he had a freezer truck. He had a freezer there and he used to freeze them, then load them in the freezer truck and cart them to Perth himself.

**HS** And the other freezer?

**FRY** They used to freeze theirs and cart theirs to Perth too.

**HS** Do you remember the name of the...?

**FRY** Oh, it was S Sparvin, the one.... and the other one was Johnson.

**HS** Did they take all types of fish, Jack?

**FRY** Yes. At certain times they'd get a bit overloaded with mullet or something like that, then they'd knock you off that. You'd have to go on to whiting. But whiting usually is the main fish in Shark Bay. Yes, they never seem to get less for some reason.

**HS** So just exactly in what part of Shark Bay are the different fish that you've caught? The whiting....

**FRY** No, they were all practically in the same areas. You'd find mullet there one part of the year, and whiting will be there. Whiting are there nearly all the year round, but

they do school better in the winter. Some places you catch more in the summer. Different areas where they go for shelter.

**HS** So what time in the morning would you start?

**FRY** Oh, early sunrise.

**HS** And would you be out....?

**FRY** You'd be out nearly all day, only sometimes you'd get an early school. You know, you pick up a school quite early and it would take you several hours unmeshing them or packing them in ice. We used to have to pack them in ice. And most of the boats at that time, when we were there, were carrying anything up to two to three thousand pounds weight in their iceboxes. Sometimes you'd get that much in one haul. Sometimes it would take you five or six days. Some weeks you'd go out the weather wouldn't be so good and you'd be out for about four or five or six days, and still not get a load - just a few hundred pound.

**HS** Is that five days a week, or six days a week?

**FRY** Yes, five days a week. But sometimes you'd be only out two days; sometimes you'd just go out the one day and back the next and have got a load. It depended on how lucky you were to just strike a school. Some of the people knew more about where to go than others, but they'd all be watching you to see where you were coming from. [Laughter].

**HS** That seems the same today.

**FRY** It is the same today.

**HS** Did you have any special spots?

**FRY** Oh yes, we had quite a lot. We had quite a lot of snapper grounds that the others didn't know, that we'd found and kept to ourselves. Used to sneak and get them at night time. Had them landmarked and sneak on to them, and sometimes if there were no boats around you'd get on to them in the day. You had to watch what you were doing, because they'd be on your back quick and lively.

**HS** I guess you wouldn't reveal the secret spots if your brother was still there.

**FRY** Oh, the tourist knows them all now because they're up there and they've got echo sounders and all sorts on their boat now that you'd have a job to hide anything from them. A couple of our main places, they know now; they all go out to them.

**HS** And you kept fishing right through the fifties?

**FRY** Yes, until 1968. We've been down about twenty years now, down here in Perth. Well now it's '89, so when we came down here we'd been fishing for quite a while after the fifties.

**HS** A long while!

**FRY** Yes. And, of course, I had four boys and they all had to go to school. When they got to a certain age in Shark Bay, well they wouldn't learn much more so we took

them to Geraldton to the school there - the boarding school - we sent them down to Geraldton. And when they got old enough, when they all got old enough, there was only one left that only had to go to school, so we thought, well we can't have them in Shark Bay and we don't want them to go into the fishing and that sort of thing, so we moved down to Perth.

One of them finished up working in a bank, and he didn't like that, so he got a job with an advertising company in Perth. He had ambitions of his own and he thought that their operation in Perth wasn't big enough so he thought he'd go to Melbourne and see what he could find there. Now he's with a big company in Melbourne and he's done very well. He's had a trip around the world out of it. Over to Malaysia; South America; New York; he's had quite a good spin out of it. So after a bit of a run around the world he decided it was time to settle down, so he settled down in Melbourne. We were over there a couple of months ago staying with him for a while. He's doing very well out of it, too. He just loves the work, puts the time in.

**HS** And your other three sons?

**FRY** One's in Geraldton, he's a shearing contractor - he's got a couple of shearing teams. One's in Queensland - he's got his own [prawn trawler, the **Mistral**]; he's the only one who took to the fishing, he's got a prawn trawler in Queensland - Cairns. And one is an Heavy Duty equipment mechanic, he's working here in Perth. They all picked their own jobs; jobs they like, and they do them well.

**HS** What's your son's name in Queensland?

**FRY** Phillip.

**HS** Phillip Fry! And where does he operate from?

**FRY** Out of Cairns. Up to Cook Island. He used to go up into the Gulf of Carpentaria. Right up the top.... Cape York.

**HS** The Gulf of Carpentaria?

**FRY** Yes, the Gulf. He was working up there for a firm once, running one of their boats and he used to do a lot of prawning there in the Gulf. And then he bought his own boat and he didn't go up to the Gulf any more, he just works out of Cairns - up the coast from Cairns and around those islands. But at the present time it's not very good. There isn't much of a market for their prawns at the present time, for some reason, and you've got a closed season now - they've got a three month closed season. He'll be home for Christmas, though. The others have all got their own jobs and they like them and they stick with it.

**HS** Oh, that's good. You continued fishing until about 1969, at least the late Sixties.

**FRY** Yes, I came down here, but then my brother still stayed there. He was still in Shark Bay, fishing. And I'd got up around about April - I'd go up to Shark Bay and stay with him for about three months while the season was good, fishing from shore with a speedboat and towing a small dinghy with a net. In other words, we'd just go out and back in the same day every day - just work that way - until the season started to dry up a bit and he'd carry on and I'd come home.

**HS** So it was mostly net fishing?

**FRY** Mostly net fishing, yes.

**HS** And what types of nets were you using?

**FRY** Well, mesh nets. For whiting it had to be no smaller than one and seven-eighth inch. It's different measurements today, I wouldn't know about those measurements - metres and centimetres and all those sorts of things. I didn't even bother to think about them. [Laughter]. And mullet would be three and a half inch - mesh and tailor. Bream would be caught in whiting net, they could sort the sizes quite easily. But mostly whiting. Sometimes you'd go for mullet; there'd be a big lot of mullet and you'd go out and hop in and get your cut out of it. Yes, there are some very huge schools of mullet up there at times. We got 7,000 pound one day in one haul of mullet.

**HS** And did you clean the mullet?

**FRY** No. In the early days we had to clean everything except whiting. It had to be gutted and scrubbed. But these days they don't clean anything. They've got different methods to what we used to have. Their fish are much better than what they used to be when we were there. Our fish - we just caught them, washed them, and tipped them into the icebox and put cracked ice on them and that sort of thing. But today they carry trays in their boat - in their net boat - with them, and as the fish come out of the nets they are straight on to the trays, washed. Those trays all go into the icebox, when they're unloaded they just lift the trays out, the trays go straight into the freezer as they are. So much less handling. A much better method - the fish are much better.

**HS** And have you always used the same nets?

**FRY** Yes. Ever since we were fishermen we've used that size net. They tried to introduce for whiting a two inch net, but it was too big as you lost too much legal size fish.

**HS** And the material?

**FRY** Oh well, for a start it used to be all cotton, and then we got into the new stuff.... what do you call it? Nylon! We got into the nylon nets. With the cotton net we used to have to either tan them or tar them and that shrunk them quite a bit, which wasn't a very good thing. Then we had to use a larger size to make up for the shrinkage. They nylon nets didn't shrink, they were the size all the time, and less work with them because you didn't even have to bother to have to hang them out to dry them and that sort of thing, and they'd last a lot longer. A little bit more expensive, but lasted much longer.

**HS** So you saw a better return?

**FRY** Oh a better return for nylon. Yes.

**HS** So life became a little bit easier, did it?



**FRY** Yes. Less mending, they were stronger; and less trouble. You didn't always have to take them off your boat and hang them like you would a cotton net. You had to keep them as dry as possible all the time, otherwise they'd soon rot.

**HS** Jack, what did you do when you weren't fishing, during your years up there? Did you have.... was there very much entertainment?

**FRY** Well in early years there wasn't very much entertainment. We had television towards the end, and radio. You know! But years before that in the early time when we first went up there, they used to have dance nights - weekend dances. And they had cricket, and tennis, and that sort of thing.

**HS** I guess you were pretty busy with your children, anyway!

**FRY** Yes, you can say that again. Yes, but the fishermen used to be out as much as possible. You'd get good weather and you'd go out, and it doesn't matter what day it was. If it was Saturday, Sunday, or anything else and you were ready to go, you'd go again - while the weather was good. The only way you could do any good out of it was to work while the going was good and while the fish were there.

A lot of people, they used to just go out and, of course, the weekend they'd have to go to the pub. Put in a couple of days at the pub! And while they were doing that, my brother and I (we didn't drink), we used to be out as soon as possible; so as soon as we got the chance to go out again we'd be out again. And, of course, the wives had to look after the children. Not like in the pearling days when they had to go and open shells. They didn't have any work to do except to look after the kids. [Laughs].

**HS** And as far as inspectors from the Department [Fisheries Department] are concerned, did you have a good relationship with their inspectors?

**FRY** Yes, they were all good. Yes, they did their job and if you were bringing in anything undersized they let you know about it quick and lively. But we had all good help from them.

The old chap who was up there when we first went to Shark Bay, Wally Edwards, he was a real old character, that bloke.

**HS** He was the inspector for that area?

**FRY** Yes, for Shark Bay. That's when the pearling was on and a bit of fishing was on, too. He was the inspector then. Oh, several of them came up there and they were very good chaps.

**HS** Do you remember the names of some of the others?

**FRY** Oh, not off hand. My memory is not as good as it used to be, it's getting a bit stale [Laughs]. If you might be able to mention some, you might know some of them in there at the present time.

**HS** Well, they are probably too young. Neil McLaughlin?

**FRY** Neil, yes.

**HS** You know Neil McLaughlin?

**FRY** I know Neil well. Yes, Neil McLaughlin. I knew him well.

**HS** Well, I guess he's a youngster compared to....

**FRY** Yes, Ernie Little was up there for a while. He was up there when they were tagging whiting, I think. The brother took them around, they went on to a tagging business. Tagging whiting, checking on the whiting for some reason or other. [Other Fisheries men: Ernie Little, Barry Baines, Desmond Cavanagh, Ron Smith, Jack Bramley.]

**HS** There were a number of enquiries over the period of time you were up there as far as the fishing industry was concerned. Did you ever have anything to do with giving evidence to enquires, Royal Commissions, or anything like that?

**FRY** No, I've never been mixed up in anything like that.

**HS** So why did you choose to come down to the suburbs of Perth rather than live in a place like Geraldton?

**FRY** Well, I was retiring, I was at the retiring age, I was over 60 - as a matter of fact I was 64, I think - and the wife wanted to come down and bring the boys down so that they could find work down here. So I thought, well, I was going to retire so I might as well do it now and be done with it. I got a war pension. I had certain war injuries which helped it a bit, and got a little bit more. We got assistance from Repat for the house, to start off. And we've been here ever since. I've never wanted [to go back to Shark Bay.] Never worried about going back to Shark Bay. And I've never worried about catching fish, [Laughs] although I've been in the river a couple of times having a go at the prawns. [Laughter].

**HS** So you are still involved in a little bit of fishing!

**FRY** As a matter of fact, the second son came last night to get the prawning net, he'd wanted to go prawning in the river last night. They've got their licence to catch prawns in the river. He said, "If we get over 4 gallons I'll come back and give you some" but he didn't arrive; so I don't think he got 4 gallons. We've been down a few times, but not in the last three or four years. It's got a bit beyond me, dragging that net in the water.

**HS** Well, yes, it would take a little bit of strength, wouldn't it?

**FRY** We had a go at it for a time, and the wife used to join in. She used to get in and have her pull, too.

**HS** Was your wife involved in the fishing?

**FRY** As a matter of fact, she was born in Shark Bay. Her father owned the hotel for quite a number of years, but before that he was manager of several stations up there - sheep stations. He was manager on Dirk Hartog for a time; he was manager on Peron Station, and then he bought the hotel. He had the hotel all during the war. It was more of a home for him than a business, that's the way he sort of treated it. People used to go up there and it was just like going into a home for a rest. That was the way

he used to treat them. Wouldn't put his price up on anything because of the war and everything else. Just one of those good old sorts. He was very popular.

**HS** You met your wife in Shark Bay, then?

**FRY** I met her in Shark Bay, yes. After the war. She was in the Army too - she was in the AWAS for a few years, and then she had to [resign]. They had to get her out of the Army to help them run the hotel. Her parents were getting on a bit. Had a bit of a job getting her out, too. Then the Fisheries wrote to me and asked me to put in for a release because they were running short of fishermen for some reason or other, and I got out.

**HS** Do you remember when you were married?

**FRY** Yes, as a matter of fact I do. It's 44 years ago [1945]. [Laughter]. As a matter of fact it was 44 years on the 14th of this month.

**HS** Well, you have a good memory.

**FRY** Yes. I can remember that, anyway. [Laughter].

**HS** The interview is continued on Tape 2.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

This interview continues on [Tape 2 Side A](#).

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with IRWIN HEALY

### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is an interview with Mr Irwin Healy, commonly known as Sonny Healy. This is tape one, side A. The interview is conducted by Jack Darcey.

Mr Healy could you give us your full name and place and date of birth, please.

**HEALY** Full name, Irwin Francis Healy. Date of birth, 24.8.1916. Place of birth - Dongara.

**JD** Your family has lived in Dongara for several generations now.

**HEALY** Yes.

**JD** When did they first come?

**HEALY** Oh, well my Dad was born at The Grange in Dongara. Um, and my Mum was born in Dongara.

**JD** What was your father's name then?

**HEALY** Irwin, just Irwin Healy. Yes. Mum's name, Ada Francis Healy.

**JD** Ada Francis Healy. How many brothers and sisters did you have?

**HEALY** Three brothers. Four, there was three brothers and three sisters.

**JD** Your father came here, did he come to take up land or to the fishing industry, or why did he come to Dongara?

**HEALY** No, he was born in Dongara.

**JD** He was born in Dongara?

**HEALY** He was born in Dongara at The Grange. What was known as The Grange.

**JD** So your grandfather....?

**HEALY** My grandfather he came from Ireland.

**JD** To Dongara?

**HEALY** To Dongara, yes.

**JD** Do you know what year?

**HEALY** No I don't know the year he came here. But he was born on 21.5.1861 at the.... And he was a Manager of The Grange at the time. My Dad was born on 27.1.1885 at The Grange. Mum was born at a little farm called **Mayflower** on 15.6.1886. Her maiden name was Rowlands.

**JD** Thank you. Were any of your people fishing from Dongara?

**HEALY** No, they were all farms. All farming. As a matter of fact I don't think the fishing industry was ever thought of in those days.

**JD** And how then did it come about that you entered the fishing industry?

**HEALY** Well, for years we worked on farms, and I said the wife one time, well, we invested in a crayfish boat which we bought off Jim Bailey. **Couri**, he used to call it **The Couri**. And I think we bought it for three hundred and fifty pound, I think at the time. And we used to lease it. We were leaving it to a couple of chaps here for twelve or eighteen months.

**JD** Could you say about what year you first went into the industry?

**HEALY** 1959.

**JD** '59.

**HEALY** 1959 we shipped it to Dongara. We got sick of farming and decided to have a go at crayfishing. So we came in 1959 and that's when I started working crayfishing on **The Couri**.

**JD** And you started as the owner and skipper.

**HEALY** As the owner, owner, skipper.

**HEALY I** No, as the deckhand.

**HEALY** No. I started as a deckhand but the skipper I had on it at the time was supposed to have had his ticket and then when the inspectors pulled him up one day, he told me he never had a ticket, that he was colour blind. So I decided to run the gauntlet and skipper it myself and do time on my own. As a matter of fact I think I paid more in fines for the first two years than I paid in tax! I used to get dobbed in every oh, month or something or other and an inspector by the name of Miles Crawford used to come down from Geraldton and book me. And it used to cost me, I think ten pound a time for a fine. So we used to pay the ten pound and just keep on fishing. And eventually he got sick and tired of me, and dobbing me in that he told me, he come down one day and said, "I think you'd better go up and sit for your cox'ains ticket." So he was a very obliging sort of a bloke, Miles and he gave me a list of all I had to learn, or know about a cox'ains ticket, an engineers ticket. So eventually I went to Geraldton and I got my own cox'ains ticket and my engineers ticket.

**JD** Were you being fined because you were skippering the boat without a ticket?

**HEALY** Yes, yes. I never had a ticket and I was still skipping the boat, yes.

**JD** And that was illegal even in those days?

**HEALY** That was illegal, yes, even in those days. That was illegal, yes.

**JD** Right.

**HEALY** And the locals, the locals them days didn't like to see anyone getting into the industry and there there was quite a few of them used to put me in every month, or a couple of months. You know, ring them up and tell them I was still fishing without a ticket. So that's how it was those days [laughs].

**JD** Was there many boats fishing from Dongara?

**HEALY** No, there was.... As far as the local boats there was a bloke of the name of Jack Henebry, Cedric Johnson, Frank Munny and myself. Jim Bailey and myself. That was about the only four boats that used to anchor in the whole here. Then a few more came. There was Johnny Coles, he was next I think. Keith Miller and then they started to.... Quite a few used to come down from Geraldton for the white crays. And then they, Normie Munny started.

**JD** Is Harry Munny....?

**HEALY** Yes, Harry Munny used to, he was with his dad, Frank Munny. Frank used to be a wet liner but he started crayfishing I think it would be about 1959 too. And I think, I think then we used to get about 2/6d a pound, or 2/6 a pound to, I think it was 2/6 or something like that we used to get.

Deckies wages were two pound a bag.

**JD** Was there a processing plant here in those days?

**HEALY** No, no we used to send them to Geraldton for a start. And then a bloke name of Yammer started up a processing factory in Dongara. He went broke so then Mick Kailis came. That was in 1962. Mick went around to the few fishermen that were here and explained what he was about, starting up a processing factory. Them days, he said, "I mightn't be able to pay you for the first year," he said, "but stick with me," he said, "and I'll see you through." Well he did. A lot of the fishermen that are fishing today would not be fishing only for Mick Kailis, because he used to finance them for their groceries.

**HEALY I** He bought them everything.

**HEALY** He bought them, yes, he used to buy their.... In the off seasons he'd pay for their groceries and house rent or milk bill or bread bill or whatever it was. And that's how a lot of them have still survived today through Mick Kailis.

**JD** Was he actually fishing here himself?

**HEALY** No, no, he never had any boats himself. He wasn't fishing himself, only the processing factory. And anyway, all that money that Mick used to pay out to keep the fishermen in the industry, it was all interest free. Those days he never used to charge any interest regardless of the amount you owed. Or if you went and borrowed money

of him, he'd never charge you interest. As a matter of fact when I got my first boat built in Fremantle, that was the **Miss Irwin** Mick financed me for that, which was only \$9,000 those days and that was interest free until I'd paid for it. Which was, didn't take long those days, because there were plenty of crays, not a good price, I think it was about 30c or 30, 2/6 or 30p or something like that, them days.

**JD** You've been retired from the fishing industry for some years now, haven't you?

**HEALY** Yes, 1977 I retired.

**JD** And your son took over from you?

**HEALY** My son-in-law.

**JD** Your son-in-law?

**HEALY** My son-in-law took over from me. I put Kevin into the industry. Bought Kevin a boat.

**JD** Kevin is your son?

**HEALY** Yes, Kevin my son bought him a boat. Put him into the industry, or helped him anyway. My son Irwin, we put him into the industry. I eventually bought another crayboat after the **Miss Irwin, Tiki**, I bought that from a chap by the name of Keith Warnock. I worked that and I let Irwin work my original boat, the **Miss Irwin**.

And then we also put Donald into the industry, that would have been about 1960, somewhere about 1960.

**JD** That's another son is it?

**HEALY** That's another son. I bought a boat of Mr. Cliff Barrett at Dongara, **The Monsoons** they called it. It was an old sailing yacht converted into a crayfish boat and I gave that to Donald. He used to fish in Cliff Head, and, but he didn't stay in the industry that long, he got a bit sick of it I think, and a bit frightened of the sea so after about five years he got out of it.

**JD** In those days when you were buying these boats and setting your sons and sons-in-law up in the industry, was there a licencing system?

**HEALY** Yes, yes.

**JD** Were the licences very expensive then, or are they much more expensive now?

**HEALY** No, you could buy.... **The Tiki** I bought from Keith Warnock, the boat, 75 pots, that was 25,000. The **Lina** bought for Kevin in Geraldton. That was a 72 pot licence, boat and all, all the equipment, that was 25,000.

**JD** Is that dollars or pounds? Dollars?

**HEALY** Dollars. Yes, yes, dollars.

**JD** So it was relatively easy financially to get into the industry in those days as compared to nowadays.

**HEALY** Yes, very easy. But the first year I had the **Miss Irwin** there was no pot restrictions and they were pretty casual in those days. They, when they were bringing in pot restrictions, so many pots per foot, all I got was a letter from the Fisheries Department, asking me what length my boat was. If you could have said fifty feet and they would have gave you a licence for fifty feet. But they just took your word for the length of your boat and so you got three pots per foot. Whatever, you said, you told them, see?

**JD** What other major changes can you recall from those days to the present?

**HEALY** Oh the bigger boats. Bigger boats they're getting, the bigger and the equipment. All I had the first year, I had the **Miss Irwin**, very slow those days. Nine knots was our top speed, but all we used to have was a wristwatch and a compass we had no other gear. No such things as sun logs or anything in the beginning. And we used to fish up to 45 mile out, which was four hours steaming, so that meant we had to leave here at half past three in the morning and we'd just about beat the sun home [laughs]. But now the big change is they do, over the years they've got really big boats, fast boats. The same trip that used to take me four hours now does the, takes the son-in-law or Kevin two hours at the most. And in a lot of comfort. We had no comfort. We used to mostly stand up all the time. We had no seats or no comforts aboard. And tarred rope and the first two or three years I was in the industry we used to have sisal rope or tarred rope. I just can't recall when the nylon rope came in, it would about 1965 I think, nylon rope came in. Otherwise we used to have tar rope, tarred rope or sisal rope.

**JD** Yes.

**HEALY** Which was, oh well if you put 25 pots on board you had more rope than you had pots, you know. And all the blokes on the winch, no automatic winches. The chaps winching on the winches with this tarred rope they'd be no skin on their hands, no skin on their feet. The tar used to burn all the skin of their hands and their feet. Yes.

**JD** Did you have ship-to-shore radio?

**HEALY** No, not when we.... No, no, no two-way radio. No not when we first started. It wasn't compulsory to have them.

**JD** Were there many accidents in the industry in those days?

**HEALY** Yes. There was quite a few. One particular one was when the sister boat to the **Miss Irwin** disappeared out here. The **Kathy Joe**. That was swamped in a big sea and the three lives lost. I think there was three blokes on it. It belonged to....

**HEALY I** Ken Foster.

**HEALY** Kenny Foster. One of his sons and these two deckies they disappeared. They never ever found those. But then there was odd ones used to be at the Islands, I think. I didn't know much about those at the Islands. But, a few amateurs. There's been a few amateurs. But many of the fishermen those days. They had more respect for the sea, I think, than what they've got today.



**JD** Did you ever fish from any other place? Did you go to the Abrohlos for example?

**HEALY** No, no, no. All Cliff Head and Dongara.

**JD** And did you catch any other type of fish other than rock lobster?

**HEALY** No, only to pass time or something, you know. Just pass time for a bit of fish to eat or something. There was quite a few.... Plenty.... Any amount of dhufish those days, they were plentiful.

**JD** They're not now?

**HEALY** Not now, no, no.

**JD** Could you make comment on the sort of gear that the fishermen have available nowadays? I believe there's some incredible electronic equipment.

**HEALY** The equipment they've got today is miles ahead of what we ever had. As I.... They've got their comfort, put the comfort first. They've got big aircraft seats, what they call aircraft seats for comfortable seating. They've got gas stoves. They've got refrigerators. That's their comfort. Nice bunks in their boats where they can have a bit of a snooze. Also they've got radars. They've got coloured echo sounders, black and white echo sounders and some other little gadget they've brought onto the market which I think they say you can put it in your pocket or something, or your lunch box - that's for finding little patches out in the deep water. You can go back to them year and year within, I think they lob you within 30 metres of the little patches or something or other. And, but they cost about \$6,000 so I don't know whether there's many fishermen have got them or not.

But anyway all these comforts and the speed of their boats now. Where we used to do nine knots they do up to twenty knots and the length of their boat, you'd just about.... The boats we used to work them days you'd just about sit them on the deck of some of the crayboats that's operating out of here now.

**JD** Back to your days as owner and skipper, did you have difficulty in finding suitable crewmen?

**HEALY** No, no. They had real.... Those days you had to be a real good deckhand to get a job. You had to be able to.... As a matter of fact they had to come in and help you with, paint your boat, scrape all your boat down, do all the repairs on your boat. Help you paint your boat. Do all your gear. Help prepare all the gear. And there was no wages for them those days. I never used to get paid for it. And they had to be able to do all the rope splicing and all the repairs on your ropes and floats and all that sort of thing. Well that was all done for, part of their job. If they wanted a job as deckie, that was part of their job.

**JD** They were on a share were they?

**HEALY** No, no. They used to get.... The most I ever paid them, I think. What they used to pay was two pound a bag.

**JD** I see, yes.

**HEALY** Those days. But as the time went on I think it got up to about \$5 a bag. It used to go up.... Once crays started to go up well so the deckhands wages used to go up in comparison. But they never got anymore than 5 or \$10 a bag while I was fishing.

**JD** You mentioned that when you first went into the industry there was very little Government regulation...

**HEALY** No.

**JD** But it did come.

**HEALY** It did come, yes. The first.... It came in about 1962, I think it was. But previous to that the season was open twelve months of the year. There was no, no, the season wasn't cut down. Then they brought in the season. They used to close the end of August. Then they brought in the end of July, I think. And now they've cut it down to the 30th June. But when I first came here it was open slava for twelve months of the year.

**JD** And the regulations were designed to maintain the number of crayfish. Is that so?

**HEALY** Yes. Well there was no regulations on.... The only regulation was the size. You had to be a certain size, but the inspectors from Geraldton.... The inspector used to come down from Geraldton. He used to have a raid on us now and again to see we had all sized ones.

**JD** He was the man that used to catch you from....

**HEALY** He was the man, Morris Crawford. He was the chap used to catch me for not having a coxswain's ticket. But they used to.... A lot of the fishermen used to get rid of a few furies as they called it. The ones [laughs] just undersize. There was a lot of cackers used to go from Dongara those days up to about 350 dozen a week. Something like that. We used to have cookers in the bush and as a matter of fact I was telling a bloke yesterday, Miles Crawford had the best nose of anyone I've ever known when he used to come down. He could smell crayfish cooking a mile away [laughs]. But they were pretty free and easy days and I don't think the.... I don't think my honest opinion that the taking the undersized ever done the industry harm.

**JD** Right. What would you see as the main problems facing the industry nowadays?

**HEALY** Well the main problem I think is the deep water fishing. Years ago they never used to touch the deep water and so the, the stocks of breeding crays and the jumbos, or whatever they got, part they got to do it, they were all untouched and so we were getting.... Well in my opinion we were getting plenty of crayfish, you know, being produced all the time.

**JD** Would you say the catch, the total catch has reduced? Or has it stayed about the same?

**HEALY** Oh, I think its reduced to what they used to get years ago.

**JD** It certainly would have.... It appears to have reduced in terms of what each boat caught.

**HEALY** Yes, it appears to. Yes, yes, I think so. But now they, all their sophisticated gear they can fish a lot harder. Rough days we had to stay home. Now it doesn't make much difference whether it's rough or not, the boats and equipment they've got they fish every day, especially through the winter. They don't have days off, like sometimes we'd have a week off if it was too rough to go out or something like that in the winter time. But now they, the boats they've got they can fish every day.

**JD** Do you ever regret having gone into the industry?

**HEALY** No, no, it was beautiful. It was real, a real beautiful life it was.

**JD** Was it?

**HEALY** Yes.

**JD** Yes. Anything you'd like to say about the industry in your day or in the present day?

**HEALY** Well, no I don't think there's very much. But I think all the harm that's been done to the industry is the deep water fishing. As I said, now they stay out there the spawners, most of the spawners now are only, are only barely sized crayfish. Years ago you'd go out there on white cray season and you'd get up to 15 to 20 bags a day if you wanted to bag them up, the spawners you'd get 15 to 20 bags of spawners a day. And you'd probably get a bag of jumbos as well. But them days are gone. I think they've overfished the deep water and that's.... Well that's my opinion anyway.

**JD** Do you think the industry will survive?

**HEALY** Oh yes I think so with the restrictions they've got now, With only.... With a, you know, the season shortened the season. I think they'll survive alright. They'll probably keep about the same as they are. They have been for this last few years I think. The boys said about average, stop about the same.

**JD** Thank you Mr Healy for a very interesting interview.

That concludes this interview with Mr Irwin Healy commonly known as Sonny Healy in Dongara, Western Australia, conducted at his home in Dongara by Jack Darcey on 6th November, 1989.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## Verbatim transcript of an interview with RON HEBERLE

### INTRODUCTION

Mr Heberle is a thoughtful and knowledgeable fisherman with much personal experience in catching, transporting and marketing of fish in this part of Western Australia. His contribution to the History of the Australian Fishing Industry is a particularly valuable one. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 024 on the revolution counter.

This is an interview with Mr Ron Heberle of Albany, conducted by Jack Darcey in Mr Heberle's home on the 15th of December, 1989.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Mr Heberle, would you record your full name, please?

**HEBERLE** Ronald Leslie Heberle.

**JD** Thank you, and your date and place of birth?

**HEBERLE** I was born in Perth on December 24th, 1913.

**JD** And were your parents Australian?

**HEBERLE** Yes, both parents were Australian.

**JD** Were they involved in fishing at all?

**HEBERLE** No.

**JD** So you were born and educated in Australia, and when did you enter the fishing industry?

**HEBERLE** When I was seventeen. I'd been working as a junior clerk in the Civil Service, and it was during the Depression, and the Government decided to retrench in the Civil Service, and the action they took was to sack all the seventeen year olds who would have been put on the permanent staff that year, and put on juniors of fourteen years of age. I went fishing from then. My grandfather owned a property on the banks of the Serpentine River which enters Peel Inlet, south of Perth near Mandurah. I'd been associated with three parties of fishermen that used to fish from my grandfather's property that had camps there for some years. I used to go down there for school holidays and so on, and I'd go out in the boat with them, and really enjoyed

it. I went down there and one of them gave me a job as an assistant at a pound a week and tucker. After about six months of that I started on my own.

**JD** In the same area?

**HEBERLE** In the same area. It was very much a subsistence endeavour, but there was no work. You couldn't get work anywhere in the city, or anywhere else for that matter, and at least I could send fish up to my parents and family in Perth. We had seven children and they could eat some of it. That's how I started fishing.

**JD** You've spent most of your fishing career, however, on the south coast I understand?

**HEBERLE** Yes, yes, I have. In 1932 my father had failed in business. He was a mechanical engineer and bought a motor works, and had been sold up by his creditors, and he had 78 pounds clear from his life's work. We answered an advertisement for fishermen to go to Esperance to fish for a fishing company.

My dad had always been interested in fishing but hadn't done any professional work much. He used to come out on the boat with me a bit, on weekends and that. We were one of eight fishermen that were hired.... We weren't hired, we were taken to Esperance and we could start fishing there for this freezing company. Within twelve months we were the only two survivors, and we fished there for a number of years.

Eventually we bought an old vehicle and we started a regular fish supply to all points in between as far as Kalgoorlie. We could only maintain that in the cooler weather. We gravitated from there over to Hopetoun and we bought a better truck, and we started a fish supply as far as Wagin through all towns. Another brother had come in to fish with us and he and I maintained a door to door basket delivery of fresh fish, and my father sold fish in the main street off the truck. It was the first ice-box that any professional fisherman south of Perth ever had - for necessity, of course.

We maintained that supply for eighteen months and then we moved to Katanning. It was a much better town, and we started fishing alternatively between Hopetoun and out east of Katanning, at places like Cape Riche and Bremer Bay and Doubtful Island and various rivers and estuaries. This meant we had to transport the boat and the gear and everything on the truck, and the fish as well. We had the boat on top of the icebox and every time we got to town we had to prop it up in the air with two sticks to lift the lid off [laughs] to get to the fish out and drop it down again. But it saved double handling. We eventually set up in Katanning and moved our family there.

I've documented all this. As a matter of fact it's been printed in a publication financed by the bicentenary year historical effort by the Katanning Shire, and I can supply a copy of that. That gives a coverage of about 23 years of the family endeavour fairly fully. It has a lot of very interesting anecdotal material in it which is the basis of human endeavour, and has been in this State. Unfortunately the anecdotal material had to be limited. The story had to be two thousand words. I could have filled a book on the interesting things that happened to us. Some of them were very tragic, could have been fatal, but we can always laugh about them afterwards. But that covers a period of about twenty odd years only.

I had qualified for air-crew training during the War and was enlisted in about 1942. Trained as a pilot, went to England, and came back and had the opportunity to do a lot of things, but I decided to go back to fishing. Mainly because that's what I wanted to do. The fishing changed very rapidly as far as the over all fishing endeavour for all

fishermen in the State in the post-war years where pre postwar it was mainly a subsistence endeavour. As my father used to say, "What I like about fishing is that in the good times you earn enough to keep yourself in misery in the bad ones." We did a little better than that but most fishermen were at that level.

Anyway the postwar years took off and the advent of a fish cannery here at Albany gave an impetus which influenced me to shift my family from Katanning to Albany here.

*JD* Was that the Hunt's cannery?

**HEBERLE** Yes, yes. The big problem always was markets, transport and fluctuating prices. With overheads which couldn't be avoided it was not unusual to send a fairly large consignment of fish to the market and hardly pay your way. In fact, very often the more you caught the less you got for it, and if you could produce nothing but high quality fish and not too much of it, you could do very well. But you can't do that, and you've got to take what you catch. So when Hunt started here - and they were buying all fish not only canning fish - they were buying Australian salmon which there's never been a market for, except for a hundred or so, there were thousands of tons available. They were buying Australian salmon and they went into Australian herring. They were buying shark and all other fish, which meant that we had a market. Admitted the prices weren't terribly high but they could take the quantity, so what's the difference? You know, I mean.... Well, within five years fishermen went from having the backside out of their pants and driving old jalopies to having brand new five-ton two-speed axle trucks, and new boats and new everything! The original salmon were caught with [ex Army surplus camouflage nets.]

And so we had a lucrative market with Hunt's Canning Company. Whilst many fishermen were very critical of Hunts, it is my conviction that Hunts put the fishing industry on the map as far as the Albany region is concerned. They were astute businessmen and they were out to make money, which isn't unusual. There were times when things happened.... when the relationship between the fishing industry and the individual fishermen at Hunts, that I didn't approve of and was highly critical of and did my best to have them changed. At least you could always talk to Hunts. But they did a tremendous amount of good for the industry. They introduced innovative practices which were NEVER available, and as far as I know are not available anywhere else in Western Australia. You could bring a truckload of fish in, have them weighed and walk up and get your cheque. Most other fish-buyers want about 40 days before they settle. They financed a lot of fishermen against their fish account. They provided them with [boats and] hand-made hemp nets.

I was mentioning earlier about we were using ex-Army camouflage nets. In the postwar years there were no nets available at all, and we were buying these nets that had been handmade by old people and women and children and that during the War, as a war-effort deal by people like the CWA and all those. We were joining all these together - they were all different sized meshes - joining them together and using them. They were great heavy things. Once you shot them and got them wet you couldn't shift them again until you dried them.

Well, Hunts came on the scene and they got on to Italian net-makers and imported Italian hemp which was much stronger and about five times less weight, and they had these nets made up exactly as was needed. They made these nets available against their fish account and they financed them buying boats and so on. Whilst it was in their own interests, it was very much in the interest of the fishermen because in those

days fishermen couldn't borrow a cent. It was too high a risk and nobody would lend a fisherman anything.

Well Hunts have gone. They built up a great empire here but old Dan Hunt died and his younger son died in an accident and his elder son and his wife wanted to shift to Perth to educate their children, so he went too, and the whole company went down, and it collapsed. We don't have a cannery here now but we do have Kailis France, one of the biggest fish companies in Australia. It's taken over part of what Hunts owned, and they accept fish and freeze them, and transport them to Perth where they can them. And we've got five small fish buyers who are mainly interested in buying bait for rock lobsters, and they buy salmon, and act as agents for people like Heinz and Greenseas over east. They buy small quantities of salmon, maybe a hundred ton a year. They buy herring for rock lobster bait, and one or two of them buy wet fish. Over all this the fishing industry has become much more stable and the fishermen are much better off than they ever were before, and we can thank Hunts for that in my view.

The fishing industry here has had a lot of ups and downs. We've had a number of companies that have tried with trawlers. They've all foundered, mainly because the people involved weren't fishermen - that's in setting them up - and they assumed because we had a big blue ocean outside our back door it had to be full of fish. Well, fishing isn't like that. There's a lot of fish there but there's a lot of water, and you just can't assume because the water's there, there's a lot of fish.

Well, the first trawling companies worked in the Bight and they couldn't sell the fish because it was all rubbish. Very, very few fish of the quality that the public want, and they just couldn't quit it, and their three trawlers were eventually scuttled here. Then later on we had another company start up called the Anglo-Australia Trawling Company. That came out with slightly better equipment. These old trawlers were redundant in England. They would have been put on the scrap-heap. They started again and they were better equipped and they got involved with a government financed and sponsored fish-processing company who set up in Albany, and they caught fish and sold them to the subsidiary and then processed them. Well, the same thing happened, of course, the fish weren't the quality that was required, and not the quantity that was required. There was an over-supply of fish they couldn't sell, and an under-supply of fish they could sell. So they started buying fish off the local fishermen as well.

Now all this gave an impetus to the fishing industry development. Roads were developing all along the coast and the fishermen are very enterprising people, because of necessity. Fishermen made tracks into various places which I've documented. We had Hunts operating, we had these people operating, and so the fishing industry just took off.

Well, that company collapsed and Hunts bought out the processing section and they moved into vegetables, beans and peas, cauliflowers and so on. They used that extra freezing space and capacity for the flush runs of salmon. Prior to this Hunts, when we had a flush run of salmon - and anything up to 200 tons of salmon could be caught in one day - they would accept all the fish that was caught for one day, and then close receivals. They'd have fish lying on the concrete floors, all the rooms full and it would take them three days to clean them up, and so we'd be stopped from fishing, and there'd be fish swimming by everywhere. Well, the fishermen didn't like that much. But if they only could look back to just a few years before when they couldn't sell any, which they couldn't, most fishermen couldn't do that, they would have realised just what a valuable asset Hunts was.

Well, Hunts eventually geared themselves up by building up the other processing works, so they could handle all the fish that were caught. Well, those were the days. The industry is critical in as much as all fishing is, if the fish aren't there you can't catch them. It's as simple as that, and often when the fish are there it's difficult to sell them all. A lot of fishermen seem to think that somebody should step in and fix all this up for them. It's not on. It's not practical at all, and that's something the fishermen have got to learn to live with. Well, they haven't. A lot of them still haven't learned to live with this.

But by and large, from my experience and certainly whilst my family has been as successful as most in some areas, there are one or two families around the coast that have been much more successful financially than we have. We've been quite successful financially. We've never borrowed any money. We've never bought anything on credit and we pay our way. If we want something we wait until we've got the money to pay cash for it. We've never stuck our neck out, to put it crudely, and we've survived, and this is the story of the majority of the fishermen in the whole area. There's a few that have gone under but, by and large, the average fisherman in the Albany region, is doing quite well.

With the decline of Hunts and the replacement by Kailis France, the mulie industry which had been developed by Hunts, really took off. A major factor in this was the decline in the tuna industry which Hunts had developed and fostered and which had built up from a matter of five boats to about seventy.

**JD** Operating out of Albany?

**HEBERLE** Working mainly at Albany, yes. There were a few working out of Esperance, and quite a few Albany boats used to go to Esperance for part of the season, and then come back here for the other part. Up to three thousand tonnes of tuna were being caught. This took the pressure of a lot of the other smaller production parts of the fishing industry because the fishermen had the money to go into the more lucrative side of it. But it also had a lot of drawbacks in that it had brought in a lot of what I call "exploiters". People who have finance available and who get into anything they think they can make quick money at. So we had doctors and dentists and accountants and farmers and so on financing a fisherman with a tuna boat which might cost 20 or 30 thousand dollars - the fisherman had a licence found him - and got into the tuna fishing industry. This is how the number of boats went up so quickly. But most of those were fly-by-nights. While they were making big money it was fine, as soon as it wasn't they got out of it.

The fishermen eventually bought out these people and went on their own. But the Commonwealth Government torpedoed the tuna industry bringing in quotas off the Albany area; we'd been operating on a junior immature stock of tuna.

**JD** Is that the yellowfin?

**HEBERLE** No, bluefin. The bluefin is the most important tuna in the world. It's called the "chicken of the sea", it's the best flavoured tuna of any and so it's the tuna that the public buys in preference to others. The tuna industry's declined. We've got about four boats working. Well a lot of those boats, they sold their quotas to people over east because the quotas weren't viable, and they went into mulie fishing. The mulie fishing took off locally and it's probably been the most lucrative and the most stable branch of all the fisheries that I've talked about. However, that's in trouble at the moment.



**JD** Because of depletion of stock?

**HEBERLE** No, no, no. As far as the stocks of mulies are concerned, which are sometimes called "Australian sardines" - they're much bigger than a sardine - are the most prolific fish in the ocean here. They're here in millions of tons and you can visually see them on some quiet evenings when the sea is glassy, and no wind, as far as you can see, you can see great schools breaking the surface. If you get a pair of binoculars, you can look out and you can see fifteen to twenty schools one behind the other. Some of them might have 20, 30, 50 ton in them. They've never been fished. The fishery has been based right here in the harbour, right at the back door, which has been very convenient. But more and more boats got into it and finally the government has restricted the number of fishermen who could fish, and they've restricted certain fishermen who could only fish in certain areas, and all that.

What's happened is that this local area's been overfished because it was convenient, and the fish are just not coming. But they'll be going about out there. Well, some fishermen are catching them. An off-shoot of the mulie fishing has been a group of farmers starting off at Bremer Bay, and whereas in the Sound here there were always the three slack months, at Bremer Bay there seem to be mulies there all the year round. They've got three boats of their own and I understand they've got four or five boats from Albany out there now, and there's about eight boats working and they're going full bore. But the government's restricted the fishing there too, and the local fishermen aren't allowed to fish there. It's a small area.

I am not being critical about this. I think that the pioneering fishermen who proved that a fishery is viable in an area, should be protected from those that as soon as it's proven, they all want to rush in and torpedo the whole thing. I believe that that sort of orderly fishing is the way to go. In fact a lot of this is happening in this State. But fishermen in Western Australia are - and I'm talking generally now - probably the most highly regimented of any industry in Australia. We don't disagree with all that, not at all. With a lot of it, industry asked for it. The harvesting of fish is based on a term called "sustainable yield" and that means that you can skim off so much per cent of the stock, and as it's self-renewing, the fishery can go on for ever. It means that there's no over-fishing which is a very loosely used term. Quite often quite wrongly used in my view.

We have a lot of restrictions that we don't agree with. The whole problem arises from the fact there are so many amateurs today that fish - something like about 30 thousand in Western Australia - I don't know how much fishing they do. Some may only go fishing when they go on their holidays, some may just fish every weekend or every day for all I know, but they're very vociferous and a very well organised crowd, and they have the votes and they get to the politicians, and they get legislation in their favour. Whilst the fishing industry in the past was very much... very poorly organised and very little liaison and a lot of rivalry, that's changed. We have groups like the WA Fishing Industry Council - originally it was the Australian Fishing Industry Council - and we have a Fishermen's Association. We have a very strong one in Albany. Yesterday we had a meeting with the Minister here, and discussed certain matters of concern.

The big problem as I see the industry and the future of it is....

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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**TAPE 1 SIDE B**

**HEBERLE** The problem as I see the future of the industry is - and this is paramount - is to retain the access to shore-based fishing grounds all along the coast, and that's currently under threat through the Department of Conservation and Land Management who are seeking to take over all unvested Crown land along the whole coastline including the whole of the south Nullarbor. In their proposals they are threatening to restrict access to professional fishermen, which they can do legally, and which I have no doubt they will. They don't see the fishing industry as being necessary. They don't attempt to justify the philosophy that tourists can go through land under their control at the coast and so on, but fishermen can't. This subject is something which I don't propose to dwell on too much because I could speak for an hour about it.

But one of the other problems which has been addressed is liaison between the amateur sector. Not only is it up to groups like WAFIC and groups like the Fishermen's Association to liaise and consult and negotiate with amateur groups and tourist groups, but it's up to the individual fisherman to behave in a responsible manner in their associations with the public, because where I was talking about the early days of fishing in my family, you never saw another person. In the coverage that I've mentioned of **The History of the Country Fish Supply** it records where we had a couple of breakdowns and were stranded for X number of days along the main road between Ravensthorpe and Esperance. We were there for four days and not another person came near. And I can recall another occasion when a box with some bread and meat and provisions and blankets and pillows dumped on to the back of the truck, going down to the fishing grounds. When we got there it had fallen off and we didn't know where it was so we just managed without it, and three days later when we came back, it was sitting in the middle of the track upside-down, and the dingoes and foxes had been scratching everywhere but not another vehicle had come along, and everything was still good in the box.

That's all changed. These days wherever you go there's a lot of people, and most people are tolerant of the fishing industry, and most people are delighted to be around when they see some fish caught. In fact it's quite embarrassing to try to stop them from trying to help. It's also, with the sort of mechanisation we have in our net-hauling these days.... Where we used to haul by hand once and then we went on to using winches on trucks and four-wheel drives, and then hauling with four-wheel drives backing up the beach towing a net on each side, now mostly using a tractor on each end. This means that the tractor's backing up the beach and the driver's watching the nets, and with women and children all around the beach, you know, and even when you stop.... When we've got fish bundled up and we want to move a tractor, it's not unusual to find a couple of kids playing underneath the back wheels, digging sand-castles. So the public are there and the public have got to be got on side, otherwise the fishing industry as I know it, and what my life and family's life have been based on, will disappear.

This causes me considerable concern, even at my age when my future is very limited. It causes me concern because I'm one of the very few people that are old enough to remember how it was, and know how it is, and to think what it's likely to be in the future. That worries me and my wife thinks it shouldn't worry me, but it does worry me, and I can see no reason why the fishing industry shouldn't continue for ever as I know it. But it's going to be a battle.

**JD** Ron, just before we finish, are there any personalities that you feel should be recorded, their names at least, that you've been involved with?

**HEBERLE** Well, look, I have documented all that. If you like I can read them out.  
[Pause]

This is written into a story. It's the evolution of the development of the industry along the coast and whilst the fishing industry had nothing to do with it initially, it couldn't have happened without other people. The fundamental, of course, was the establishment of the settlement in 1827 here. We can't ignore that. But it was the people that set up in this town, the merchants and the people that were anxious to develop land, that moved out.... All the development was east in the early days. There was no development whatsoever west of Albany, it was just a mass of swamps in the winter and difficult terrain and so on. All the development was east, and the people that were responsible for it were.... They had to be everything. They were very versatile people. They had to be. They were people that could turn their hand to doing anything, making something out of nothing, improvising and so on. It was those people, those few and I've got a list of those here.

The early pioneers were the Cheynes, the Moirs, the Welsteads, the Hassells and the Dunnes. Now that's from Albany to Ravensthorpe, those people. These were the INITIAL people. A lot of others came later but they were the people that moved out from Albany and fished. Well, they established the tracks, they established the homesteads and most of what.... Their produce and so on was by sea. So they established themselves at places along the coast where it was possible to land something by the sea which is quite obvious that that had to be. I mean you can't land goods on an open coastline. So we had places developed liked Two Peoples Bay and Cheynes Beach and Cape Riche and Bremer Bay and Doubtful Island and Hopetoun. So there were people close to all those places. Some of them within a few hundred metres of the beach, others a few miles away, depending on water. Water was the essential ingredient. If you didn't have water you didn't set up anywhere - permanent water.

Quite obviously, in time all these places were going to become very important to the fishing industry for the same reason. So you see the fishing industry developed much later, but it was these original pioneers of the farming groups and so on, and the whalers and the sealers had a lot to do with all this. They were working along the coastline long before it was ever established here in 1827. They had the same needs, the same necessity for good sheltered harbours to work the whales, which had to be brought ashore and chopped up and cooked up. There had to be water and there had to be wood, and there had to be shelter for the boats and so on. So we can say that the early settling and the early industries of the whaling and the sealing and the farm husbandry, was something that caused the fishing industry to develop.

Well, from those people - those in the original five - we [pause] come back to the Albany fishermen. The first fisherman that appears to have established himself was an ex-whaler named North, and his fourth generation are still fishing here. He fished around about and his wife lived in the town, and when - they sold the fish to the shipping that was coming to Albany en route for the eastern States - and when his wife saw the sails of a ship coming in (with a telescope) she would go up on top of Mount Clarence and she would haul up a white flag. Her husband would be fishing in Oyster Harbour or somewhere, and he would immediately come back with the fish, knowing he could sell them.

From him we got back to people like the Westerbergs who are still fishing, and the Muchmores still.... All these people still fishing. The Westerbergs, the Muchmores, the Swarbricks. Johnsons were very early in the business, the Martins and the Burrs. Nearly all of these families are still fishing here, so fishing hasn't been a sort of fly-by-night thing, it's been a way of life of families. We're talking about the period when the

mail steamers came here, and that provided a market for big quantities of fish, fresh fish, during 1851 to 1880 and, of course, the number of fishermen were boosted by the fact that there was this market.

We had regular mail steamers calling, and something that gave an impetus to the fishing industry here, was the fact that the Muchmores - very enterprising people - built a freezer down on the foreshore at the bottom of York Street, or just a little bit round the bay. They still live near where the **Amity** is, they still own property there. They built a freezer there and made ice, and they came to an arrangement with the Westerbergs to fish at Bremer Bay in the estuary, where they could keep the fish alive in pens, and they used to go round once a week by (they built a sailing ship here themselves, a small boat) with a load of ice. They'd pick up the fish, box them all up in ice, and they would sail them around to Hopetoun which is only about 100 odd kilometres. [There was] a good harbour there with a jetty and they could land them. There were seven thousand people working at Ravensthorpe on account of the mining industry, and there were three trains a week. They could send fish up there and that showed a lot of enterprise. This was way back in the early 1900's. When the rail-line came through from Broken to Albany they were able to send fish to Kalgoorlie, because they had the ice. So all these things sort of kept the progression of the industry going.

So these few families that were involved are the people that should get the credit. Now today with Albany with a population of sixteen thousand or so, most people don't even know these.... They wouldn't know, wouldn't want to. You never read about anything like this in the papers. I mean we've had the bicentenary celebrations. We've had centenary.... Not a word appears about this sort of thing. It's a part of history that should be recorded and that's why I'm so pleased that it's happening, it's happening now. Whilst the people I'm talking about would have never ever dreamed about being recorded in history, and they would never even have wanted to be, they should be, and so this is happening.

I'm not going to dwell on the latter day fishermen such as my own family, but I would like to mention some of those that were responsible for the development of the fishing industry to the west. This didn't happen till the late 1800s, mid 1900s, when the timber industry took off and Millers built a railway line to Denmark. Then, of course, we had the progress of the Group Settlement Scheme which opened up a great many small farmlets to the west of Denmark out as far as Walpole. Whilst all this might seem incidental to what we're talking about, in fact it was paramount, because it was this development that also enabled the fishing industry to develop behind it. So the whole of the coastline was opened up by the compounding of the progress from the beginning and whatever the endeavour was, what everything centred on was, the fishing industry sort of - if you like - rode in on the back of it. But, of course, there was a lot of pioneering to be done by the fishing industry.

So I want to mention these families to the west who were responsible for this. We had the Smiths who are still fishing, a big family on fishing and farming in the Denmark area. We had the Sharps and the Bensons and the Swarbricks who were related to the Albany Swarbricks. They were an extremely enterprising family. Apart from fishing which they initially went there for, they launched into a guest house, a timber mill, and a pleasure boat operation in conjunction with fishing. They eventually became boat builders and are now designers and builders of high quality racing hulls in Perth. It all started with fishing.

There are a lot of people that I haven't mentioned who should be mentioned, but I'm dealing mainly with the pioneers, and maybe somebody else might like to mention

those. But today, of course, the whole industry has become so diverse and so many people in it and the production is out of all.... beyond any concept of the original pioneers that it would be. This is the story, of course, of progress anywhere.

**JD** Ron, thank you. That was a great run-down of the history of the fishing industry along the south coast. Thank you very much.

**HEBERLE** It's pretty brief and pretty rambley but anyway, you've got a copy of this.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Ron Heberle of Albany. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University and the Australian Fishing Industry Research Council on the 15th of December, 1989.

END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with ARTHUR HORNER

### INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Arthur Horner was conducted in Augusta, Western Australia by Jack Darcey on the 13th December, 1989 at Augusta. The interview is part of the history of the Australian Fishing Industry Project by Murdoch University for the Australian Fishing Industry's Research and Development Committee.

Although of necessity brief, Mr Horner's comments give an insight into the labours of the fishermen in this area in earlier years. He covers many facets of the industry and raises a number of matters of current concern to the fishing community in this part of the south coast. His positive comments on the officers of the Fisheries Department in Western Australia and in particular on the contribution to the industry by the Director, Mr Bernard Bowan, are typical of the many similar comments made by a very high proportion of the fishermen interviewed in this project.

Mr Horner gave this interview at the cost of a good deal of personal inconvenience. His contribution is a valued one and his effort is appreciated.

The interview starts at 045 on the revolution counter. There is one tape.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

This is an interview with Mr Arthur Horner of Augusta. It was conducted by Jack Darcey at Augusta on the 13th December, 1989.

**JD** Mr Horner would you record your full name and date and place of birth please.

**HORNER** Arthur Francis Horner. Born in West Midland 25th August, 1914.

**JD** Thank you. Were your parents Australian?

**HORNER** Yes, yes, both Australian.

**JD** You were educated in West Midland, were you?

**HORNER** In the Midland Central School; later at Perth Boys' School.

**JD** When did you leave Perth Boys?

**HORNER** 1929. I started an apprenticeship as a carpenter in the Midland Railway Company which was situated in Midland.

**JD** How did you come to enter the fishing industry?

**HORNER** Well, I'd been a very keen amateur fisherman all my life since I was a little kid. I used to haunt the creeks and river round West Midland right from when I was about six years old I suppose, so the interest was there. After returning to my job after the War, I became quite dissatisfied with the style of employment and the lack of interest that was in the same job, in which I was five years prior to that. I got my long service leave, but prior to that, I built a fifteen foot boat which I was going to use during my long service leave in Augusta. So that sort of set me going in the thoughts of fishing in the ocean.

While I was down here in Augusta on my long service leave I decided to build a cottage from which my brother and I would have our holidays. During that time, having a little bit of time to spare, I used a set line with this fifteen foot boat out in the bay catching sharks and hand fishing for herring, whiting and so forth. As money is always fairly short for building material, I decided to sell the catch and buy timber out at the mill. My wife and I would fillet the fish, run out to the mill, go round the residents for which they were very grateful, because fish was fairly short those days and with that money we'd buy enough timber on the trailer to come back and get on with the house.

From the end of that period after the holiday was over I went back to my job again. Having had a little taste of the fishing I was quite dissatisfied, so we decided we would make a move and we came down and bought a guest house in Augusta. My wife was a wonderful manager and the guest house was quite a success. During that time I was able to more or less serve an apprenticeship in the fishing down here. Even though it was only a fifteen foot boat with a three horsepower motor, it was a very, very seaworthy boat built on the plans which I got from Savage and Company in Victoria.

**JD** This is an open boat?

**HORNER** It was an open boat with a three horsepower Chapman motor and a big pair of sweeps which I always took with me. Fortunately it never broke down. Well being prone to a little bit of sea sickness those days, I had to keep on the move so I fished all the winter for pike.

For the first three years I did nothing but fish for pike which were very, very plentiful down here those days. The service to Perth was two trains a week [onto] which we loaded our fish using big wooden boxes with plenty of ice which meant that the fish always got up there in good condition. Well after graduating from the pike, in that time I'd got my sea legs a little bit, so I started looking for Jewfish, groper, snapper and so forth.

**JD** How far out did you go in this fifteen foot boat?

**HORNER** Well, I only fished for pike in the bay which was only three or four mile out but once I found where the bigger fish were, I was going out to about twelve or fifteen mile which was much further than the local fishermen, who had 22 foot boats. Of course they all reckoned I was crazy, that I'd either get washed down to Herd Island or finish down in Albany somewhere but I became very weather wise. I never bucked the barometer. That's a thing, I more or less treated as my bible. Whenever the barometer told me not to go out, I didn't go out. So therefore that's why I'm still on two feet here.

Once I'd found my way outside I decided a bigger boat was necessary so I bought a 22 foot boat with a sail from a chappy by name of Jim Goodlad in Bunbury. It was one of the old cruisers from the Swan River, old **Corona** built by Tommy Wran. Well it was a wonderful sea boat and having the sail, it meant that you could go out and drift and almost stand still once you learnt to use your sails.

Those days of course there was no such thing as echo sounders. You had to learn to read your ocean to see what the bottom was like and read a chart. Once having found one place on your chart you marked that and worked to the next one.

**JD** This was fishing for jewfish?

**HORNER** This was fishing for jewfish. I made those my main target because they were the top price fish. They've always been the premier fish in Western Australia. With them of course came your snapper at different seasons and your groper and kingfish were at different times of the year. The jewfish feed and live on different types of bottom. In the spawning season you'd get them right out in the open on the flat country on the ribbon weed. Then once they'd finish spawning they would come back onto the heavier rock, so the winter and summer fishing were totally different.

Marketing of the fish was not always easy; having to load heavy boxes. We used to usually work on about 100 pound per box. In the days of the train we had to load them into a brake van from a trailer. It wasn't easy work. My wife, who was only about eight stone, took one end of the box and I took the other and we'd rustle it up onto the back of the trailer first of all and then from the trailer up into the brake van. When you had about ten boxes of those to do each time the train was on, it was pretty heavy work.

**JD** Before that you'd have processed the fish would you, you'd have....

**HORNER** No. They're all gutted and cleaned and well and truly scrubbed. They had to be in perfect condition for keeping and for receipts up in the market.

**JD** You did that as well as catch and....

**HORNER** Oh yes, you did that on the way home. You'd tie your tiller and it was usually, oh anything from two to three hours trip on the way home which gave you plenty of time to clean your fish and another thing [that] was most important; keep your fish well and truly away from the sun. You know, while you're fishing out there, plenty of cool water on them, and kept them bagged and out of the sun and it made that you had a really fresh product when you got home.

**JD** You'd have had a long day at work too, wouldn't you?

**HORNER** Well, I'd sometimes leave at about half-past two, if I was doing a long trip.

**JD** In the morning?

**HORNER** In the morning, yes, and get home at dark; sometimes after dark. It was long hours. You'd go twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours sometimes but those days travelling was fairly slow with only a sixteen horse power motor and the sail. Sometimes it was to go about 25 mile and do your fishing then get home and many, many times you'd go all day and [it was] very unproductive but when it was time to come home you'd hit a patch so you'd stay there and you'd still be fishing at dark. Of



course naturally my wife used to worry if I didn't get home by dark, but still she learnt to live with that.

Then the fishing in respect of the cartage of the fish altered quite a bit when the Railways went on strike. It was the Railways who went on strike and then they shifted to road transport. Now that gave us four transports a week which was much faster. It got the product up to Perth right on the dot when the markets open at 6.00 o'clock. It made trading much easier.

**JD** Were they freezer vans or trucks?

**HORNER** No, no. They were closed in trucks but it was fairly quick and we always, even though we kept our fish in freezers, iced in the earlier days and then I got my own big freezer. The fish were frozen and I always iced them as well as them [being] frozen.

Well then later on the transport refused to take fish because it made the vans very smelly, naturally with the ice water running off, in conjunction with other stuff they carried. It was upsetting other people so they refused to take [them] and we had to cart our fish to Perth ourselves. That was long haulage. You'd do it probably twice a week. Once the freezer was full you had to quit your fish. That meant leaving at 2.00 o'clock in the morning and getting up there for the opening of the markets at 6.00 o'clock and unloading your fish and then you'd come home and go to work again.

**JD** That would really be hard work, wouldn't it?

**HORNER** It was hard work, yes. Well then from around about 1960 when crayfish started to bring a reasonable price, even though we're what you would call tail end Charlies down here for the crayfishing industry, I started to crayfish. For a start off we sent our crays to Bunbury to restaurants up there. Well then the prices got better so it made it worth taking them through to Perth. We held our crayfish in large holding pots and when you'd get a ute load, or a reasonable amount, you'd take them through to Perth. I started taking them to Perth. Then later on we got back to Mandurah. They came down and picked them up in Mandurah, and then later on again they came down and picket them up at Bunbury. Of course this was because prices were high. It made the processors vie for the product and it was worth their while to send a truck down and pick it up from all the fishermen down here. There were seven licensed crayfishermen in the Bunbury area, all doing reasonably well so it made it well and truly worth their while to bring either a light truck or a utility stacked up.

The crayfish of course became very popular with everybody; not only the fishermen but the amateurs as well. With Hamelin Bay being a fairly popular holiday place, it made it pretty risky holding your crays over there. You'd leave your holding pots and come home at night time and in the meantime somebody'd come out and nick one of your pots. I lost \$1,000.00 in one night over there. So it got so bad that every day I went through to Bunbury. Either my wife or myself took the load, whatever we had. Even if it was only two bags it was still worth taking through there to quit them.

That would mean [a] pretty long day also because you had to be on your boat at daylight to get going. You'd probably get back about 2.00 o'clock in the afternoon; trip through to Bunbury and back again. You'd be home about 8.00 o'clock and on the days that I didn't do that I'd go up the river netting for bait because you'd use a lot of bait and if you could strike a good day you'd get five or six hundred pounds, well that

would do you for the week. When the netting wasn't good you might have to go up nearly every day to get enough bait to keep going.

**JD** How many pots would you have been pulling?

**HORNER** I was allowed 64 pots. That was my licence. In the first couple of years I couldn't fit a winch onto my boat, that was the old 22 footer so I had to pull all those by hand. That, [laughs] gave you pretty calloused hands and pretty good muscles too I might add. Not out of deep water, mostly out of up to ten fathoms, no deeper than that. I didn't fish very deep. I kept inshore because of the size of the boat and with the easterly winds over there nearly all the summertime it meant that I could pretty well work every day. Had I gone further out, there's quite a few days where you'd only pull half your pots. So pulling, even though you mightn't get quite the number of crays fishing in close, at least you could work every day.

Then from the 22 footer I built myself a 26 foot boat with a decent diesel in and a winch and that made things much easier. As a matter of fact that boat is still going down here to the present day; the same motor and the same boat. It was washed up on the beach down here about a fortnight ago on one of the blows and it only loosened two screws. So I felt that it was a reflection on my building and I was quite happy with that.

**JD** What sort of construction was it?

**HORNER** It was a chine boat, plywood, but everything was glued with araldite and screwed. There wasn't one joint in the boat that wasn't glued and screwed. It was a really good boat. It was a wonderful fishing boat too. A good drifter; not a fast drifter which meant that you could go out there and fish all day and you didn't roll your eyeballs out like the old 22 footer I had. That was a round bilge and oh gee they rolled, those things, but this boat was very, very steady; very reliable too. It'd take a very, very rough sea out there.

Well I don't know that that was any indication of the amount of fish it caught, but of course with the advent of echo sounders, that made fishing much easier. Whereas before you would have to take landmarks at right angles for preference to get a decent mark, with the echo sounder all you needed was one line to run down to pick up our marks within, you know, hundreds of yards of where you were. Of course the echo sounder doesn't always prove that you can catch fish either. That can lead you up a gum tree a bit because at different times of the year jewfish react to different weather conditions. When the big seas are running you don't go to the high spots. They go right out on the flats so therefore you chase them out there.

In later years a big turnboat has come in the fishing industry. That came with the advent of the fishing nets for sharks. Now that started off in a small way down here around the Augusta area; one boat, two boats, three boats and it's finished up now that there's seven boats operating out of here and in all there would be about fourteen miles of net being set every night on a good night. Now these nets are made to sit on the bottom. They're heavily leaded and with a change of tide they're bouncing along on the bottom and it's almost like putting a scarafier across the bottom of the ocean. It's killing a lot of growth and with the growth being killed, you don't get your octopus and cuttlefish that come in for protection, and no cuttlefish, no octopus, there's no fish. Now these boats started off working their nets in round about, oh under twenty fathoms for quite a few years. Well then they killed that bottom or frightened the fish out or whatever. They're now working out in about 40 fathoms and they're putting

more and more nets out to get the same amount of shark that they were getting, say fifteen years ago.

I don't know where the industry is going to go from here once they deplete those sharks because they're a very slow grower. Last year they had a very flat patch around about Christmas time until about May then all of a sudden the sharks came from nowhere and the whole of the markets were flooded. Where they came from, nobody seemed to know but over the last ten years there's been a marked reduction in the number of whiskery sharks which they mostly rely on down around this area. So I don't know what the outcome is going to be. I think it will have to be that they go much deeper and compete with the overseas trawlers that are being allowed into the country at present, which I think is detrimental to our own resources. The fourteen Chinese boats that are up at Broome operating from there, I saw the product being brought in last year and there's no doubt about it, they're absolutely scooping the pool up there. Unless something is done to control them with what they're doing and the way they're doing it, I think that Australia's going to be in trouble if they let too much of this type of thing into our waters. Unfortunately of course there hasn't been enough money about for our own fishermen to be able to pay the couple of three million which would be necessary to get that sized boat to go out and fish in the deep water. These are very big boats that are coming in up there, these Chinese trawlers, and they would stand up in any weather. Until such time as we can get finance to put our own men out into there, there's no way that we can stop them coming in.

That is one of the things that I think faces remarkable changes here. The eastern states trawlers are now going out into four or five hundred fathoms, where they were ten years ago, working in under one hundred fathoms. So it's chasing the fish further and further out. Where the end will be, nobody seems to know.

I must pay tribute to the efforts that our local Fisheries Minister has put into it, Bernie Bowan. He's known throughout the world really for the efforts that he's put into fishing. He built our local fishing up, especially the crayfishing industry which was fairly chaotic when he came in as Director of the Fisheries in Western Australia, but he licked that into shape and it is now considered probably the best run fishing industry in the world. Had it not been for the timely intervention of Bernie, I think that our crayfishing would have been down the drain because there was such a traffic being done in undersize crays and undersize meat that it would have been very, very detrimental.

Not only in the crayfishing, he's taken a big interest always in the Fishing Associations. Our Sou-West Fishing Association here has prospered under his guidance and his, well, fatherly interest that he's taken in it. At any time he's always, and his administrative officers, been very, very helpful and very willing to attend any meetings or anything that was needed for the benefit of the fishing industry.

**JD** Thank you. Anything else that you'd like to mention before we finish up?

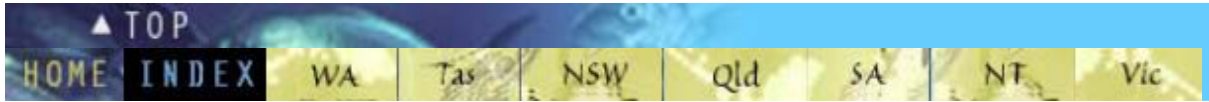
**HORNER** Well, there's only one thing that I would like to say and regarding myself. People ask me when I was going to retire. I said I retired when I started fishing because fishing was my hobby and it's been my life and as a foundation member of this Association and a life member of our Association, I'm still able even though I've retired from the fishing, to take a very keen interest in everything that's being done in the fishing industry and that's what I hope to be able to continue to do.

**JD** Good. Thank you very much for this interview.

**HORNER** Thank you.

END OF TAPE

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with DICK HOULT

### INTRODUCTION

Dick Hoult's grandfather came to Shark Bay 140 years ago cutting sandalwood and pearling. His father continued in pearling until the War brought about the collapse of the pearl shell industry. After the War, Dick entered the beach seining fishery out of Denham, and has continued in that industry ever since, now together with his three sons.

He has been President of the local Fishermen's Association for many years. He's a Shire Councillor of long standing and has been Shire President. In the early part of the interview he speaks of the pearling industry of Shark Bay and of the distinctive methods employed in collecting pearl shell here.

The family introduced the jet boat to beach seining and in this interview Dick Hoult explains the changes that innovation has brought about. He also tells of the worries of the Shark Bay fishermen in regard to markets and overseas' competition and the proposed World Heritage listing of the Shark Bay area.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Hoult's home in Denham on 13th of June, 1990. There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Please record your full name and date and place of birth.

**HOULT** Richard Owen Hoult, born 23rd of the 5th, 1926, in Denham, Shark Bay, Western Australia.

**JD** Born here?

**HOULT** Yes.

**JD** There wouldn't have been a hospital, of course?

**HOULT** No hospital, but there was a doctor at that stage.

**JD** And were you brought up in Denham?

**HOULT** Brought up in Denham before finishing school in Perth, at Aquinas College. My family moved to Perth also at the time because of the influx of the War in 1939. The

pearling folded up which my Dad was his business, in the pearling. It folded because the markets were in Europe, in Germany and England. Of course, when that folded up they moved to live in Perth.

**JD** How long did you stay down in Perth?

**HOULT** Oh, about four to five years.

**JD** Then came back after the War?

**HOULT** I came back.... during the War it was, before the War ended. It would have been about '44 I think, somewhere around then. I went jackarooing on stations, sheep stations first, for a few years, but it wasn't until 1946 that I took up the fishing.

**JD** Dick, before we get on to your career in fishing, your family's been in this area for many, many years. When did they first come to the Shark Bay district?

**HOULT** Well, I'm not quite sure of the exact date, but my grandfather was here approximately 130/140 years back. He came up with his father and they were sandalwooding in the Gladstone area in Shark Bay.

**JD** [unclear]

**HOULT** Yes, but my grandfather came up with him and as far as I recall, I've been told by my father, he was sandalwooding out of Gladstone. That was in the Wooramel area in Shark Bay. They were cutting sandalwood and carting it back to Fremantle in the square riggers evidently in those days.

**JD** Did he get involved in fishing here at all?

**HOULT** No, my grandfather didn't get involved in the fishing. He took up the sandalwooding from then on. He then got into the pearling. There wasn't any actual scale fishing going on at that stage. It was pearling. He was into the pearling and he later got into the pastoral industry, and it sort of.... my father took up the pearling and spent his life here until the onset of the Second World War in '39 and then moved to Perth.

**JD** The pearling here was a bit different than the pearling further north in Broome say, in that it's not diving for pearl shells, is it?

**HOULT** No, it's not diving. The method was they had dredges, small dredges they're called, and they would drag them across the shallow banks in shallow draught boats, and the depth of water would probably be a metre to two metres or three metres. They would drag them (one boat, probably a 30 foot boat was the average size) they would drag about six dredges (four to six dredges) slowly with the sail up, and this sheet out so that the boat just went along very slowly almost sideways. As these dredges filled up with shell, they were pulled on board by hand, and emptied out, thrown back, and then you sorted the shell and the barnacles and the younger shell were thrown back, and you kept the mature - the good shell was stacked on the deck.

**JD** Did this happen on a sandy bottom or on a reef?

**HOULT** No, a sandy bottom, sand and seaweed. But the other method too, that was carried on in the winter or the time when the tides were higher, but in the summer

some of those banks went almost away to just a few inches of water, and when that happened the method was to walk in the water, and gather the shell by hand until the tide came in too high you couldn't do that. But you'd get probably half or three-quarters of the day in with that method.

**JD** The boats used wouldn't have been the north west lugger, would they?

**HOULT** No, they weren't the north west lugger. They were smaller boats, about 25 to 30 foot, shallow draught, probably two foot six, three foot of water, so they could negotiate these banks. They had a centre board in, of course, to sail into the wind when you were in the deeper water, but there were no big luggers in it.

**JD** They were after the shell, weren't they?

**HOULT** Yes, the shell was the main product actually. The pearls were fairly small, seed pearls most of them, but you got an occasional good pearl, good quality one, which was worth money, but the main product was the shell, because there were pearl shell buttons in those days. All of the shell wasn't good. They mainly went for the white shell, and the yellow were discarded, and this is how Denham became known as the Pearl Shell Terrace, the main street in Denham, they paved the Knights Terrace with pearl shell, discarded pearl shell, and it was there for many, many years, until 1947 I think, when the main roads came through from Hamelin Pool. They sheeted the sandy road right through, and they went right through town and dug up our pearl shell road, and all that.

**JD** It seems a shame now, doesn't it?

**HOULT** It was a shame. It would have been a very good tourist drawcard today.

**JD** The pearl shell that was taken here was a different oyster from the Broome oyster, I think?

**HOULT** Yes. I think the only difference was the size actually. They were pretty small here in comparison to the Broome ones, probably about the size of the palm of your hand, most of the shell here. That would be a fairly large one.

**JD** Was the oyster itself edible?

**HOULT** Yes, the oyster was edible. Even today we still eat them, and cook them up, curry them, whatever, they're quite tasty.

**JD** Is there an industry here now for pearling?

**HOULT** No. There are industries here, but not that method. It's a different method. They have... as far back, I think about seven or eight years, they have gathered the shell and they cultivate them, or they're seeding them with pearl, not for seed pearls but for what they call blisters. The glue I think, glues small implement on to the shell itself, and then it's covered by mother of pearl over a period of a couple of years.

**JD** It's a cultured blister really.

**HOULT** Yes, it's a cultured blister.

**JD** To come then to your own time in fishing, could you tell us the species you caught, and the method you used?

**HOULT** That is the net fishing you mean?

**JD** Yes.

**HOULT** Well, I started off fishing in 1946 actually. In those days there was no hard surface road into Denham, and we were fishing on the Monkey Mia side actually, and the fish were loaded on a truck (an icebox truck) at Gladstone, and then transported to Geraldton. Mainly mullet we were catching then, but all species went, of course, whiting, mullet, but mainly mullet it was, whereas there were other fishermen operating in Denham that were selling to a local freezer works, and they froze the fish, of course, in there, and transported them out by State ship. Some were even, I think, sent to Melbourne. Whiting (selective whiting) they were packed in pine boxes, small pine boxes, with cellophane in between each fish so that they wouldn't stick together, and these went direct to Melbourne.

**JD** The whiting that you were catching, they would have been a school whiting, would they, or were they a sand whiting? They wouldn't have been the King George?

**HOULT** No, not the King George. They wouldn't be the King George. They were school whiting, we called them actually, but there are different species in Shark Bay, distinct species either the sand whiting or school whiting, as we call them, they're the main ones. Then you get the coarse scale whiting. They've a rougher scale on them. They're unpopular mainly because of the fact that they're hard to get the scales off, so the filleters.... and another problem with them is the skin is rougher, or thicker skinned, and when you put them in a pan they curl up. They tend to curl up. They're not popular, but there are quite a few around. The other one is the trumpeter whiting, but not many trumpeters. Mainly it is the school whiting (or sand whiting) they're the main species.

**JD** And what about the mullet? Do you catch a lot of mullet here?

**HOULT** Yes, there's a lot of mullet in the Bay. There always have been a lot of mullet, quite good mullet, good-eating mullet. We use.... the actual size.... the minimum size is roughly about ten inches, but the fishermen here, we work on.... oh, it would be about a fourteen inch fish or something, fourteen or fifteen inch. We use a three and a half inch mesh net to catch them, which we've been doing over the years way back during the '40s, '30s, and it's kept our stocks of mullet in the Bay very buoyant. We figured that by catching the bigger fish, the better marketing, a lot better for the market, and it's leaving more stocks (more breeding stocks) in the water, so you can't really go wrong with that system.

**JD** What other species besides whiting and mullet?

**HOULT** Oh we get bream, the yellowfin bream, tailor, skipjack. They're the main species.

**JD** Have you noticed any change in the stocks, the quantity of fish that are around?

**HOULT** Well, there's no doubt, I feel that the stocks have been depleted and when I refer back to the '40s or the '50s, but there have been a few problems over the years, and one of the biggest problems that the fishermen felt, was the onset of the Shark



Bay saltworks, which began up here in 1960. What happened is when they set up the saltwater, they had a method of cutting off estuaries with levee banks. The first one they cut off was Useless Loop, which was an area of probably... oh about four to five miles. It would be about one and a half miles wide. They cut it off completely, filled it in, and they set up their salt maturing ponds in there. That was a good fishing area and a good nursery area, but it's completely destroyed.

From there they went to Useless Inlet, and they began a series of levee bars from the top of that. The first one was about five to six mile from the very top. Then the next one was about another five mile, and another one about another five mile again from that and, of course, we feel this had a big effect on our fishery because approximately six to seven years after all this, we had a big downfall in fish catches. It dropped.... the catch through the '60s was about a million and a quarter pounds per annum, and this dropped to about half, virtually over night.

We don't say it was all due to the fact that our nursery areas were cut off, fish destroyed and this type of thing, but at the same time as the salt began and the prawning (the trawl prawning) began in Denham, and there was an influx of amateur fishermen as well. If you add all these together, it had a pretty drastic effect on our fishery we felt.

**JD** Are there mangrove areas in the Bay?

**HOULT** Yes, there are quite a lot of mangrove areas in the Bay.

**JD** Have they been destroyed at all?

**HOULT** Well, they were in the Useless Loop when they cut that off. That was a very good mangrove area in there within that. Of course, that was why it was such a good fish nursery.

**JD** Could you.... there's been a very marked change in the method of catching fish here in recent times. Could you tell us what the previous method was? Then the introduction of jet boats, and the difference that has made, because you pioneered them, I understand?

**HOULT** The jet boats, oh yes, or my family did. Well, as I recall as a boy, when ..... I think there were only about three fishing boats, that is scale fishing boats, operating then in the '30s. The rest were.... the pearling was in operation then, of course, and there were only about three boats on the scale fishing. Well, their method in those days.... of course, there were no motors up here, and they used to actually have a sail in the net dinghy, and sail along in-shore to look for fish and catch fish.

But from then on, like in the '40s during the War, just after it, got to small engines in your dinghy, Simplex and McLeay engine, just a single cylinder engine, and that was the method to go along. We used to use cotton nets, of course, in those days and there was a bit of a problem [laughs] with your mesh sizes, because you'd buy say a two inch net for whiting, and we used to treat them to make them last longer.

**JD** What tan them, did you?

**HOULT** Tan them. We use to tar them, or creosote actually up here. Some people would tan them but it was a bit of a problem to get bark and that around Denham to do this, so we used to use creosote and, of course, that method used to shrink them

which.... We had a few problems there until we sort of woke up to what was happening and had to get bigger nets so they'd come down to the correct size.

But even in those days we had shorter nets. There was abundance of fish with schools easily found and easily hauled, but as time went on, of course, we got to getting longer nets, the fish were more spread out, they were more flighty, I suppose, with the noise of engines, this type of thing, so we had to get longer nets to get them in.

But the method in those days, actually, was.... especially for whiting, we would actually get on the hill, and walk along till you sighted a school of fish, and your deckie would ring your dinghies, pole them quietly so you wouldn't disturb your schools. If he sighted a good school he would just poke around quietly and net them that way.

**JD** And you would haul it by hand on to the beach?

**HOULT** Yes, always pulled by hand. Even today that is the method, hand-pulling. There's no winches or anything like that. It's all hand-pulled.

**JD** Did you ever drive along the beaches with a four-wheel drive vehicle with the dinghy on board, looking for the schools?

**HOULT** No, we've never done that. It would be a bit difficult in the terrain of Shark Bay, because you've got hills some places you couldn't get along in the four-wheel drive, but the only method actually with vehicles, is you just.... some fishermen.... There is only, I think, only one left actually in the Bay at this stage that hasn't got what we call a mother ship, that is a.... say 30 or 40 foot boat with ice boxes in. That is our method. We have a.... actually the licences are unit licence in the beach seine in Shark Bay, which a unit consists of a mother ship with accommodation and everything aboard, and ice boxes probably capable of carrying up to two ton. Then you have a netting dinghy. Today's method is a jet boat of approximately seventeen foot, and a smaller netting dinghy of about twelve foot.

**JD** Also a jet boat nowadays?

**HOULT** No, there's only one jet boat, that is the seventeen footer. The other one is towed by the seventeen footer. It's just a smaller netting dinghy to carry your whiting net actually. You see we use for mullet, tailor, and bream, we use a three and a half inch net mesh size. That is on your jet boat, your bigger dinghy (seventeen footer) and on your twelve footer we carry the whiting net which is two inch mesh.

**JD** And those two, will the jet boat and the other dinghy, feed to the mother ship?

**HOULT** Yes, then we.... when we leave port to go fishing, we tow the jet boat and the smaller one, they're towed by the mother ship, the mother boat.

**JD** And how long do you spend at sea?

**HOULT** Oh, only two to three days, sometimes four.

**JD** Depending on how....

**HOULT** Depending on the school of the fish and how much fish is around, or the weather condition mainly. But it's not with today's boats that we've got. We've got fast boats capable of up to twenty knots, some of them, and it brings everything much

closer and consequently you're only.... at most you're only an hour or two away from port. It's not a long way you go.

**JD** How many men would operate that unit?

**HOULT** Only two men, but provision is allowed for three men in our licensing system. We can have a three man crew, but no more, otherwise you could be looking at perhaps, say you've created two units instead of one. With that method you're allowed three netting dinghies and three crew, but no more than that. That is the maximum.

**JD** What difference has the jet boat made?

**HOULT** Oh, it's made quite a difference in the fact that they don't draw any water, when I say any water, probably six inches of water. You can get in a lot closer to your fish. You can travel a lot faster with them. You can cover a lot more ground in the one day which has become a necessary factor because of the scarcity of your schools of fish, so you can cover a lot more ground, and for instance, if you're anchored somewhere and went fishing, you could probably go up the coast for ten or fifteen mile, and there's no fish, you could be back to your boat probably in ten minutes, and fish somewhere else before the tide went out, because we've got to work with the tide here. We have not a big rise and fall but it is a approximately six foot on a spring tide, so we can't always catch fish at any time. You've got to work with your tide. If the tide is too low the fish just don't come in on the banks.

**JD** So you've got the mother ship where the fish are frozen?

**HOULT** No, they're just iced, not frozen because we.... see, the method is to keep your fish fresh because some of them are sold on the fresh fish market, that is on ice, and some are moored into the factory where they're processed. They fillet the whiting mainly, so they've got to be fresh not frozen.

**JD** The whiting are filleted? Do they sell any in the round?

**HOULT** In town?

**JD** No, in the round, the whole fish.

**HOULT** Oh yes, yes, quite a lot have been in the past sold in South Australia mainly. Actually up until.... oh up until two or three years ago, most of the whiting was sold in South Australia where even whole it was processed over here and then distributed sort of to South Australia, Melbourne and Sydney markets.

**JD** What's your market now?

**HOULT** Well, our market now, is locally actually. I've got to.... I think it's best to go back a bit to the method which was used before, because in Shark Bay we've had one or two problems with freezing works, mismanaged and that type of things, and a lot of them went bankrupt. So some of the fishermen, ourselves mainly, we set up our own little freezers and froze our own fish, and distributed it on different markets. Well, that was the method we were doing up until.... oh last year actually, about eighteen months ago. We were freezing, freezing and catching, our whiting, whole whiting, freezing them and they were being sent to South Australia to Capol, Safcol and

Computos and these fellows, who thawed them out and processed over there, and then distributed on the eastern states market.

The reason with whiting, the only fish that can contain their quality with that method is whiting and guardfish, so that is why they do it. They say it's guardies and whitlee, that's what the processors tell us that they can be frozen, thawed out, processed and re-frozen and do not lose their quality.

**JD** And are you still doing that?

**HOULT** No, we're not. What's happened now in the Bay, all the fishermen have sort of got together, we have one freezer, freezing works in Denham and we.... the reason this has happened is because we've had problems with markets. Most of the fish now has been going to fresh fish through the markets in Perth. This is the way the schnapper has gone, and most of the big fish, and even some of the whiting now. So that is the reason all the fishermen have pooled together to try and keep the market stable, and what we've gone down to now, is to brining our fish, actually brining the net. Under this method we have to have a smaller ice box in our jet boat that will hold, oh approximately a thousand to fifteen hundred pound of fish in brine.

**JD** That's a chilled brine?

**HOULT** Yes, just a chilled.... When I say "brine" what we do is just use ice in sea water to bring the temperature down to probably one or two degrees, and consequently as we haul fish the fish are tipped directly into the brine which pertains to quality fish, and from there, they're taken back to our mother ship, placed in trays, and iced, and put in your ice box.

**JD** And then when they come ashore, they're frozen?

**HOULT** No. In some cases, yes, but mostly when they come in to Denham, they are unloaded off into the factory and they are either placed in a cool-room which is kept from one degree to zero, and they're packed then in ice boxes and sent down to the fresh fish market as fresh fish. Some are processed (mainly the whiting are processed) in Denham, but the larger fish (the big fish as we call them) mullet, bream, tailor, skipjack and others are sent to the fresh fish markets in Perth.

**JD** This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## **TAPE 1 SIDE B**

**JD** Dick, is there an export market at all for whiting?

**HOULT** Well, not at this stage there isn't, but I recall earlier, quite a few years back, the Japanese were interested in Shark Bay whiting, but only the small whiting - I say small, I prefer to approximately eight or nine inches, or even smaller. But the fishermen in Denham weren't interested in this because the main factor being it would drastically reduce our fish stocks, whiting stocks, we decided and, of course, the fishermen decided not to go ahead with this for that reason, because we are working on, in Denham actually, on a minimum size whiting of ten inches, though the regulation size by the Fishery Department is only eight and a half, we prefer to work

on a larger fish to preserve our stocks. And also the fact that the Australian market is more leaning towards a larger fish, above ten inches. So for that reason we prefer to stick to the larger whiting and not supply any market with small whiting.

**JD** Dick, the fish that you send down to Perth presumably goes by road transport in freezer trucks. Is it auctioned down there?

**HOULT** Actually it's not auctioned but it could be because it goes to.... What's been happening, it's been going to the fresh fish buyers, that is Kailis, Festival Fish; but what they've been doing is setting a price, because they may get one ton or they may get up to four or five ton of fish, and it's up to.... Then they set a price and buy it and distribute it themselves at that rate. It could be auctioned but I think if a big heap of mullet in particular went down in one hit you might find your prices sort of down to rock bottom, if there was a big lot. The method used was to negotiate roughly the price before the fish went down to sort of keep it a bit buoyant.

**JD** And if prices are low, say there's a glut on the market, then you hold it in cool store here until the prices improve. Is that it?

**HOULT** Yes, well, either that or we'll leave it in the water, so not catch so big a quantity.

**JD** Is there much variation up and down in the prices?

**HOULT** Well, not under that method we were using, that is knowing a negotiated price before it went. There was a fluctuation, of course, because bigger lots would have to come down a bit. Not a lot, but at different times of the year though, when fish were scarcer, the price comes up a bit then.

**JD** Are there any closed seasons?

**HOULT** No, [laughs] no closed seasons in Denham. This is something that we have put to the Fisheries Department actually, but we've struck a snag there because actually, when the last three licences were issued, the Fisheries' officers up here, being at the time, asked our Association did we ever think of a closed season and, of course, we said, "Yes, certainly we did." So they said, "Okay, give it some thought and let us know your requirements." We did that. We asked them for two months of the year, October, November, I think it was, and consequently time went on and on, a few months, and we got no answer, so we had to give them a reminder again, and when they came back to us, the answer was, "Yes, certainly, we'll endorse your licences," meaning they would close it for the professionals but not the amateurs. So we said, "Oh no, we'll give that a miss because we feel we wouldn't be achieving anything at all. If it were to be closed it should be closed for everyone to give it a spell."

**JD** Would you say the Fisheries Department takes notice of the fishermen's organisations when they bring in management techniques?

**HOULT** Not always. In some cases I think they do. That particular instance was one where they did not, and though we've tried since, we've asked them but they sort of fob us off all the time on that one. I presume it is pressure from the Government, I suppose, because the Government is very reluctant to upset tourists we find, and I think that's one of the reasons they are signing off that one, but I don't see why

because the ultimate aim is to protect the fishery, protect your fish stocks, and that's going to be beneficial to tourism as well as professionals.

**JD** Is there some degree of conflict between the recreational fishermen and the professional in the Shark Bay area?

**HOULT** No, there is not a lot of conflict between the actual amateur fishermen and the professional fishermen, but there is a bit of friction (I wouldn't call it conflict) but there is a bit of friction with the tourist operators in Denham because they feel that the fishermen (the professional) are a bit anti-tourism I suppose, but all we are trying to achieve is some method of protecting the fish stocks of Shark Bay for everyone.

**JD** Would you say there's a problem with litter in the ocean in this fairly enclosed water?

**HOULT** Well, there's not really a problem at this stage, but it's been looked at for quite a few years by the fishermen themselves. Actually nearly all the fishermen (that is the local fishermen) have rubbish bins on their boats and they do not throw particularly plastics over the side, because one or two have been caught in the past with plastics being sucked up in their water cocks, over-heating engines and this type of thing. So they're very well aware of that problem, but there is a bit of a problem we find with the charter boats and that sort of thing, but it's not real bad at this stage in Shark Bay.

**JD** You're in an area that's prone to cyclones, Dick, are they a real problem for the fishermen?

**HOULT** They're not really a problem to the fishermen because most of the fishermen that operate here have spent many years.... Most of them have been born here actually, and they're well aware of cyclones, and they certainly respect them. Every boat has got a good solid mooring down, and we carry adequate anchors while we're out at sea, but we're always well aware of the weather and watch the barometer and listen to the weather forecast, and certainly if there's a cyclone brewing even well up north and that, we've always got an eye on it and we certainly head for port if it's getting close.

**JD** There's adequate protection here for vessels?

**HOULT** Yes, it's a very good anchorage actually at Denham, or even places out at sea in the little inlets and the estuaries there are good anchorages where you can get behind the little nooks and corners away from cyclones. But you must.... you certainly need a lot of respect because they can get very vicious and dangerous.

**JD** To come back to marketing for a moment, and the associated problems with that, there's quite a lot of fish imported into Australia from overseas' countries. Does that worry the fishermen here?

**HOULT** Well, actually it is worrying us at the moment because we are having problems with our markets at this stage of the year particularly with the whiting. We feel that the import of fish being dumped on our local market is affecting it quite a lot, particularly this year because of the economic problem I think in Australia, and probably there are quite a lot of families in Australia can't afford to pay a high price for fish and consequently they're buying the cheap imports rather than the local fish. We had a problem, oh something like a year or eighteen months ago when the Chinese boats dumped a lot of fish at Broome and this local market, it caused a problem

especially with the fresh fish that was going down from Denham, because the local boys in Perth sent up semis and bought most of the fish off these boats, and consequently it flooded the market in Perth, and had a pretty drastic effect on our fishery in Denham.

**JD** What, reduced the prices that you were getting?

**HOULT** It reduced the prices, yes certainly, and sort of stopped it because the buyers had their.... got their supplies of fish and they sort of didn't want any more, so we were stuck there for a while until it sort of eased off a little bit.

**JD** That's not happening now, is it?

**HOULT** No, it hasn't happened now, not so much now at all, but I think the biggest effect now is the imports of frozen fish that's coming from other countries, New Zealand, South Africa and these places, but it's much cheaper than the local fish. Although the quality isn't as good it's still selling I think because of the hard economic times.

**JD** It seems to be remarkably cheap compared with the local product [unclear].

**HOULT** Yes, no doubt, mmm.

**JD** One of the matters of concern in this area is the move towards World Heritage listing for Shark Bay. Do you share that concern that it might affect the fisheries here?

**HOULT** Yes, we certainly do. Actually we've had a.... there's been a lot of discussions in Denham over the past two years or so regarding World Heritage. Some of the stories we hear, the problem is we don't know which is fact, which isn't, what to believe and what not to believe, but we believe, we have been told, that in Kakadu for instance, they closed the barramundi fishing and the fishermen were thrown out without any compensation whatsoever. But then we were also told that fishing is allowed in the Barrier Reef in Queensland in a World Heritage area, so it's sort we're facing the unknown. We don't know what to believe in it.

**JD** Is your fishermen's organisation actively pursuing that problem to get more information?

**HOULT** Yes, we certainly are. Actually we've had a visit from Senator Richardson last year, and although he was pretty reassuring, he did not say whether we [laughs] whether the fishing would stop or wouldn't. He seemed to indicate that it would be able to continue because what they were looking at with our method - I'm talking now about the beach seine fishing because our method of net fishing it is very undamaging I would say to the bottom, because every net is pulled by hand and in shallow water, and there's no hauling on seaweed banks because it doesn't really work. The seaweed would tend to keep your leadline off the bottom a bit, and your fish go underneath, so all the netting is done on sand banks or a bit of flat rock and that type of thing. But there's certainly no damage to the sea-bed at all because it's pulled by hand, it's shallow water. If it were to hook up anywhere you'd walk out and unhook it and consequently there's no damage at all. The Government and the government departments are quite well aware of this and most of them have sort of reassured us that we are pretty safe, that is in the beach seine fishing.

Dick, you've got a couple of sons in the fishing industry, have you not? Are they in a good industry would you say?

**HOULT** Yes. It has been good. Let's face it over the past twenty years or so it's been a pretty good industry for the fishermen in Denham. They've had a good supply of fish, the market has been pretty good, and prices pretty good. It has been good but it's a bit wavery or shakey at the moment I think, because of World Heritage hanging over us, marine parks being established, marketing problems we have struck this year, so it's a little bit, you know, dicey I would say at this stage, although I think the marketing situation will settle down, but once we are reassured as to which way World Heritage and the marine parks are going to go, I think we will know exactly how we stand then.

**JD** Dick, is it very difficult for a young man to get into fishing in these parts nowadays?

**HOULT** Yes, it is a bit difficult because under our restricted entry fisheries (that is for the beach seine fishery in Denham) the method is that it's a restricted entry fishery which means the licences are not transferrable. That in itself means we have nothing to sell. We cannot sell our licence but the way it works is these licences can be handed down in a father, son and grandson line, or grand-daughter, whichever. But in our family we were fortunate because my two eldest boys had come into the industry before the restricted entry came in and we had two more boats in our fleet. I had one and the two boys had one each. That gave us three boats, but the youngest son actually was keen on football and he finished up in Perth playing football in the league. Consequently when he did come back three or four years ago, he could not obtain a licence. So what happened, I took him in with myself on a partnership basis and so what will happen now, when I retire he will just carry on with my licence and boat.

**JD** Unless you have a fisherman father your chances of getting a licence are fairly remote?

**HOULT** Yes, it is fairly remote. There is a method. If the fishery is buoyant or becomes buoyant, perhaps some fishermen retire and have no sons to hand down to and consequently the licences diminish, the Fisheries may review it and decide to advertise for two or three or four licences, or whatever. Applicants can then apply and they will probably choose the number they require to put into the industry if that is the method they go, but I'm a bit sceptical on this because I fear that there is a danger that our fishery could be phased out under the same method if the Government or the power that be wished to do that.

**JD** Simply by not reviewing the licences?

**HOULT** Yes, simply by not reviewing licences or calling for applicants. They could gradually phase it out over the years.

**JD** Dick, you and your family before you, have been in Denham now for a long, long time, and you're very well known in this area, of course. Have you become heavily involved in the community?

**HOULT** Well, I presume that you would call it heavily involved. I've been the President of the Denham Fishermen's Association for something like 30 odd years or so. I'm still there [laughs]. I've been on the Shire. I was President of the Shire for one year. I was a Councillor in the inaugural Shire for five years, but gave it a miss because it was pretty time consuming, but then I wasn't very happy the way things were going in the town a few years back, and felt that I had to get involved again, which I did. So in '83



I put up again and got in, and I've been there ever since, but I feel I've got two years left to go on Council and by time that I think, I'm getting a bit long in the tooth, I may give it a miss again.

So it is interesting though being on Council, particularly at this stage with the threat of World Heritage hanging over Shark Bay and the introduction of marine and national parks. It is quite an interesting time to be on it, and I feel I've got something, or a great deal to contribute.

**JD** I don't doubt that, Dick, and thanks very much for this interview. It's been very, very interesting to talk to you and I hope everything continues to go well for you.

**HOULT** Good, thank you.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Dick Hoult of Denham, Western Australia.

END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with PETER JECKS

### INTRODUCTION

Peter Jecks represents a new generation of Australian fishermen. Currently he is involved in the rock lobster fishery out at Dongara and the Abrolhos Islands, and in schnapper fishing out of Carnarvon on the west coast.

He and his associates have set out to become self-sufficient in terms of catching, processing, transporting and marketing their products, and have achieved that aim through the application of intelligence, business acumen, and hard work, plus some assistance along the way through family and friends.

In this interview, Peter outlines his own career and in doing so, gives an insight into a significant part of the Australian fishing industry. He deals with many matters of importance, including management, marketing and the need for industry inputs into policy making. He also deals with the topical issue of the proposed World Heritage listing of Shark Bay and its anticipated effect on commercial fishing.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry, and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Jeck's home in Carnarvon, on 11th of June, 1990. There are two sides of the tape and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Peter, would you record your full name, and date and place of birth?

**JECKS** My name is Peter Douglas Jecks, born on 2nd of November, 1955, at Carnarvon Hospital.

**JD** In Carnarvon?

**JECKS** Yes, at Carnarvon.

**JD** But you haven't lived your whole life here?

**JECKS** No, I left Carnarvon at the age of six weeks, and went down to Esperance. My father travelled around a fair bit through his earlier days, because he was in the teaching profession. So I travelled wherever they went [laughs].

**JD** So you would have been educated all over the State pretty well?

**JECKS** Yes, this State, and overseas, and the eastern states.

**JD** Whereabouts overseas?

**JECKS** I went to.... We lived in New York while my father did his doctorate over there. I was eight or nine years old when we came back.

**JD** Have you happy memories of those days?

**JECKS** I had a good time, yes. The most interesting time of my school career was the American way of education which is now becoming the way of education here from what I can see our kids doing. No, I certainly enjoyed it a lot more than the three "Rs" we did here. I enjoyed school there.

**JD** And what did you do with yourself after you left school?

**JECKS** Oh, I was [unclear] when I left school.... sort of everyone expected I would go on to university and do something. I finished my Leaving and I didn't do exceptionally well in that at all, and I just couldn't really make up my mind what I wanted to do. I wanted to be involved in nothing. I went into jewellery and I was in the jewellery business for quite a while. I was involved in the teaching of scuba diving. I was one of the earlier teachers of that, and I also in the cross-over times of this between the diving and the surfing and that, used to work deck on some boats out of Kalbarri. That's where I first started fishing. I never dreamed I'd be a fisherman. I thought you had to have a father who was a fisherman to be a fisherman. So that never eventuated and then I did a bit of diving. We were sponsored. We went in national diving championships in Tasmania in 1979/1980, over the Christmas time, and I went over with a woman by the name of Donna Morrison, who's ex-husband is still very much involved in the Federation of Australian Underwater Instructors' Group. In fact I think he's now the head figure of it.

We went over there and we took out every event between the two of us, except the spear fishing which.... I wasn't interested in spear fishing. We came back and got sponsorship by a variety of companies. We had Berger Paints and Star Boats and so forth, and we started travelling Western Australia, much the same as you've been travelling, but we were teaching diving to the country towns, where nobody at that stage was doing it.

As that was sort of coming to an end, because that was supposed to only be a twelve months' exercise (we went into eighteen months) I went back to fishing again, and where I started fishing was at Exmouth. I worked on the trawlers at Exmouth and finished my sea-time up there. Then I left Exmouth because the prawns got so bad, and I came to Carnarvon again actually, and I worked down here for another season. That was the year I was due to get married, and the general manager of Marquell Rosses which is now defunct (I don't know if it is in all of Australia, but in Western Australia, they've sold out totally) Peter Wrights was his name. He asked me whether I was interested in driving one of their boats for them, and my comment was I never had any intention of setting foot on a trawler again as long as I lived. I didn't like the night work that much. I did it for the sea-time, and also the money was quite reasonable then.

I went down to Perth and got married, and about six weeks before I was married I bought my first boat and borrowed 15000 dollars. I remember [laughs] I've never been so frightened in my life. Sandy was a nurse. She was Charge Sister at the Para-Quad Centre, and she supported me for.... literally for four years through the beginnings of the throes of the fishing where I had my own boat. It wasn't easy at all. I had a lot of help from a man who I consider is fairly highly respected in fishing.

That's Bobby Stone, who fishes out of Mandurah, and Bob was one of these guys who would always give you a riddle and give you two points but wouldn't give you the third one. If you would work the third one out he would then progress and tell you something else. So you had to go out to sea and work it out before you.... He'd never just tell you anything because otherwise he reckoned you'd never learn it. His comment was, "It's five years before you even see a dollar out of fishing." Well, I agree with him [laughs] totally, and I actually always pass that bit of wisdom on to anyone that's thinking about getting into fishing, because it's not an industry where you come in to if you haven't got somebody that's in it. It's very, very hard to survive through the first bit, and that's where I was very lucky with Sandy working and earning a very good wage at this stage.

Then we started with the family so, luckily that gave me the first [laughs] four or five years of our marriage before we started on that. Then the fishing became more profitable as my experience had increased, and I'd sort of decided what stages of fishing I wanted to do.

I came to Carnarvon, I think (I mean 1983 was my first season up here) with.... I'd just bought my second boat and that was a boat called the **Alba Marina** which was built by a family very heavily involved in fishing, the Riccardi family. It was 22 years old when I bought the boat, and it would be one of the best plank boats on the coast at the time. It's now sunk actually. It sunk two or three years back off Esperance, and I was sort of pretty sad to hear that went down, because that boat gave me my start in fishing. It was a very good boat. My first boat wasn't a very efficient boat, but being a novice in the industry, they're the ones who always buy the duds, and I happened to buy one. But it got me started and the new one we equipped with a big freezer and so forth, and I came to Carnarvon, and I'd also made up my mind because of Bobby Stone, to go to Onslow, and my comment to my father when I said I was going to Carnarvon was.... he said, "Oh, you're mad. You don't want to go to Carnarvon. You were born up there, it's like the black stump of the never-never." I said, "It's changed a bit, I think, since you've been there." Then I said, "Well, I'm also thinking of going to Onslow," and, of course, that quickly.... "Oh no, just go to Carnarvon. Don't go to Onslow whatever you do!" [laughs].

So the reverse psychology or whatever you wanted, I ended up here at Carnarvon and at this stage, you know, Dad was always interested in what I was doing, being an only child, but still hadn't got too much involved in the fishing at that stage. He was a very good backstop for me all the time in fishing, helped me out wherever he possibly could in matters that weren't related to fishing themselves, but in getting finance and so forth, he was very, very good at that.

As the sort of the time went on, we came to Carnarvon, we went to Onslow. At Onslow I didn't catch a thing. I literally hardly even paid the fuel up there and back. My first year up here I wasn't allowed to use fish traps, because of a bluff by the Fisheries Department, which through some.... oh, underground work, I suppose is the best way to put it, I discovered it was a total bluff by the Fisheries that we couldn't use traps, so I quoted a letter to them, the clause in the gazette that it had been put in, that I was allowed to trap as long as it was three miles out off of the Australian coastline, because that was in Commonwealth waters. There was no Commonwealth Act saying I wasn't allowed to trap.

So I started trapping with the help of Alan Andritch, who once again he's a fisherman of old. He's been at it over 30 odd years, and he was another person who helped me in my formative years in fishing. I got up here and couldn't catch a thing in a fish trap. Experimented to a great degree with traps, you know, recorded.... and I've still got to

this day every record of every fish trap I have ever pulled, and every fish that I've caught has been numbered. The Research Department have got those numbers on computer disk. I put the whole lot on computer, and used the D Base 3 Programme, and came up with a very, very efficient trap summit. So the Fisheries Department tried to do something about those things but they never bothered to sort of follow through. Most of the fishermen now use a very similar design to what we came up with.

**JD** What were you trapping?

**JECKS** Mainly started with schnapper here, and you know, the first three weeks, it was comical. It's something that no-one to show.... not knowing where to go and what to do, but it took three weeks of real frustrating fishing to twig it. Once I'd twigged it it was like, you know, you couldn't stop. It just was very easy to do and very simple, but a secret you just don't pass on to other people. That's the biggest thing about the fishing industry, there's just so many secrets that unless you're very friendly or.... Some are very hard to pick up, but bit by bit they all come if you keep working on them.

**JD** Are you still trapping?

**JECKS** No, trapping's now a thing of the past for us. We trapped here and at Onslow, because Onslow the shark problem was that bad. Everyone told me that trapping wouldn't work at Onslow and it was the greatest satisfying part of my earlier years in fishing. We got up there and we caught generally about two to two and a half ton a day of fish, over half of it being red emperor. So we'd come back you know, after two to three days with a full load of fish and everyone else would just sit in there just going.... not quite believing what was happening.

Everyone up north now traps. It solved the shark problem completely. Everything you can catch you can get to keep. It's an efficient method. The only problem is it scales the fish. A lot of the thing about it was damaging the fish, but the scientific reports prove they'd been damaged. So that's now good and going. I have never had any intention of going back up there, but the younger guys have.... you know, they had no options other than to go in off, so they've gone and they're doing well and I'm happy to see them.

But trapping's now been replaced in Carnarvon with the Japanese market that's been established for the fish last year. There was about 168 ton of fish sent by the local factory called Kai Fresh Fish to Japan. I'm involved with two other families up here, that's the Cockman family and the Chitty family. Between us we own 144 ton of about a 420 ton fishery. So we own a sizeable piece of it. To be able to give marketers or buyers, a fair amount of supportive if they come up with the right things.

So I've gone a bit far forward, I got into crays. I've been in crays now, this is my fourth.... I've just done my fourth season and my father actually talked me into crays in 1982, but I wanted to buy a bigger boat. I didn't want to do cray fishing. I still don't particularly enjoy cray fishing [laughs]. Cray fishing is a very lucrative industry if you own your licence. I wished I had bought a cray licence in 1982, but if I had have, I wouldn't have done what I've done, so I don't ever regret that. I ended up in a very good fishery, schnapper fishery, which to me, is better managed now, better controlled and a lot happier atmosphere because there's only so few in it. There's not the rivalry or the bitchiness or the little politics that goes on in the larger fishery, such as the crays.

*JD* What port were you cray fishing out of?

*JECKS* I cray out of Dongara. That was a bit of humour really because we just decided to buy a cray licence. Dad had tried to talk me into it for about three or four years (into the crays) and every time I'd say, "No, no, no, I'm quite happy doing what I'm doing." We built a boat, the **Douglas Alan**, before I started craying, and that was supposed to be the biggest kept secret ever, the name of the boat, **Douglas Alan**, that being my father's name. That was something that I think he took as a fairly great honour, so much so that six weeks before the launching of the boat, I was told about twenty times how I spelt Alan, to make sure it was painted correctly on the name, so that when he came down it was A L A N. It wasn't A L L E N or A L L A N or E L L E N or.... you know it had to be A L A N.

*JD* Where did you have it built?

*JECKS* I had it built in Perth by a guy that had actually gone sort of.... he hadn't actually gone bankrupt, he'd gone broke a few years before, and he was just starting up again. He's now running Image Boats. It's now called Image Boats, when they built my boat it was called Aqua Marine. Bill Plug, and he built a good boat. He built two actually side by side. The other sister ship to mine is now over east. The guy that bought that, he met up with hard times, and basically had to get out of the industry to pay his debts.

But we only bought the crays when we priced the new boat. This is what happened was, we priced the new boat of about 78 footer we were looking at, a catamaran to fish up north. When we got the price of that of about just under \$700,000 we said, "Well, we can buy a cray licence for a lot less," at that stage. It was a good move. We spoke with the Cockmans who are friends of the family's, and he was just shifting into the "B" zone which is various [unclear] which I'm sure you know about now you've travelled round. I needed a cray fishing licence which would be compatible with my schnapper, so for us it was an "A" licence, the Abrohlos Islands, to be able to fish in conjunction. So what I do, I fish now until into May, and then as soon as I've sort of finished at the Islands, I then forward straight on through to Carnarvon, because we get up here to catch the quota and we go on home from here, then fish again off of Dongara.

Dad became a partner.... well actually, we formed a company about three years back (it might even be four) and I kept saying the tax advantages of this industry are phenomenal, and [laughs] he now agrees with me. We've.... you know, it's one of those industries where cash just gets eaten up, but it just gobbles.... you end up.... you can spend so much money so quickly without even realising, and all of a sudden you think, "Jeeze, we've just spent \$30,000 more than we had!" So you know, we've had to buy.... we buy fairly heavily to get into the crays. We've bought for the schnapper because in conjunction with the other two families, we have a fully self-contained ice-works which virtually now supplies the whole of the schnapper fleet with ice, and the factory next door to that is nearly complete. But that will be a DPI factory so if at any stage for something that goes wrong with the current situation we supply to, we are fully self-sufficient, and I think most important thing I've found in this industry is self-sufficiency. If you're not self-sufficient, they screw you for a couple of months. That's really what happens.

Now we've become more self-sufficient, we've.... and I've got a few enemies too, as I've gone through, there's no doubt about that. Basically because I've worked hard, and names that you were talking to me before, are some of the people. There's a lot of people that have got a few bad words about them too, but they've done well through

just sheer hard work, so all of those people I admire that you spoke about, and they aren't people that just give up, you know, which.... They can go back to when there were 63 boats fishing in this harbour. Now they are down to about ten of us, but out of those 63 boats, those that were unlucky enough not to be given a schnapper licence, or didn't have the foresight to go and buy a schnapper licence (we were only given ten ton, we bought 40 ton) I'd say about two thirds of them are now out of the industry. It's similar to those ones that dream they are going to make a million dollars when they work for themselves on a boat, but never do.

My biggest problem in fishing now, is the fact that my family's getting older. The youngest son, he's just started school, and I don't like dragging them out of the school from one to the other each year, but he seems to have settled in, so we're very happy with that, so we will keep him going out of that. Mum and Dad come up here each season. Dad retires in another three years and then he will be up here for the whole season each time. It's good having him here and it's not good having him here. The problem is that I'm as strong willed a bastard as he is, and so we tend to end up in some pretty good "discussions" is the best way to put it. I certainly have the greatest respect for him and I think he has respect for what I do in my fishing. He certainly never talks down about it. I think he's quite proud that we're involved in fishing.

We got into the retail trade about.... oh, three years ago. We opened up a second shop, but at Warwick shopping centre. We've got one at Whitfords and that's not an industry that is easy to do without, once again, family involvement. We don't have that large a family. Sandy, my wife's father, he's been running the Whitford shop, and overseeing Warwick, but Warwick got shut down. We ran it for twelve months and it just wasn't economically viable. The economic climate came at the wrong time [laughs] for that shop, as many people are finding out. The Whitfords' one still goes on its own. We actually got into the shop with.... oh, I suppose with the naive idea that we could supply it with all the fish. Unfortunately, the best laid plans never seem to work, so we came to a bit of a stop on that one. It was cheaper to buy fish than it was to sell it fish from us. We get more money for our fish than we can buy fish for, half the time. So it's actually more economically viable to just do it that way. We still do send some fish down to the shop, but we certainly don't supply the shop with anything near its need or....

Unfortunately Sandy's Dad's taken a little bit ill, so he's going to be leaving the shop, which I don't look forward to actually. I felt safe. Well, we've had someone there that's not going to be touching the till. Dad seems to believe he'll get it in hand, which I'm sure he will. It's also good for Dad as far as having something to do when he does retire. You're talking about him retired and that. Oh an active brain just doesn't stop because you stop working, and when you get a guy who's quoted as working "eight out of every seven days", he's [laughs] just not going to stop in two seconds. I hope that we can manage to maintain and keep the shop going. He's got his books that he does as well, but otherwise he'll probably send me bloody crazy up here all the time. Next he'll want to get a boat of his own.

I'm hoping.... it's very hard.... I would like my children, if they want to, to become involved in fishing. I believe it's a VERY good industry to be in for anyone. That was one of the reasons for getting the cray licence, and we may at one stage in the future, buy a boat, and we'll then have.... but that won't be until we've got one that we've got now, paid for, the licences and so forth. So we then have two boats to pay one off, because I don't believe we can afford it any other possible way.

On the marketing side of the schnapper fishery which is one that I've been involved through now for quite a while, was going back to when we first arrived here, the

marketing was extremely hard. We had to have our own fish bins to get the fish to Perth. We had a lot of trouble buying ice, because there was no ice-works in town, and so what we ended up doing was we ended up buying all of our own bins, and what the buyers in Perth would do stop you from fishing, would be they wouldn't send the bins back. So we kept buying more bins, and they wouldn't send them back, and we keep buying and buying bins, and we kept sending these bins down to them, to the stage where they eventually said, "Look, we've got to send this guy back some of his bins," and so we ended up with the control of about 30 odd bins at one stage, that we were using, and where we had our problem was with the ice, the way we overcame that was with the bins, we were getting them coming back with ice in them, or buying ice from the ice-works and coming back up.

As every year as soon as the season started the price of the fish would just collapse. We'd go down from where you'd be getting three dollars, two dollars fifty a kilo for your schnapper, to where you'd go down as low as 70 cents for all the fish that was landed there. The main buyers were the fish markets, K F M was at that stage (or still is) and the others were basically just small operators on the side, but K F M were the big buyers at the time. There are very few of the little buyers. As a matter of fact not very few, there aren't any of the little buyers in the fishing industry, except if they're employed now by a variety of firms. K F M over the years, like most industries (most buyers of seafood) somewhere along the way they get a dirty name with the fishermen, and they certainly seemed to do some things that weren't quite right by a few of the guys up here, according to the fishermen. They may not think that way.

But we started employing our own truck. We had a twelve ton truck that we used to pay him for the trips, you know, drive it down and bring it back, so we always got our bins back, and it was a record of all fish. There was one time we sent down four bins of fish, It was about 1600 kilo I think (just under 1600 kilos of fish) which we paid the freight on, we put the ice on, we've got records on, and we still haven't been paid for it, and that wasn't an unusual situation. They still to this day, some of them still pull stunts, where if they've got too much fish they won't send the bins back.

As each year progressed a new buyer would come along, and the best and most promising that ever came along was a company by the name of Rand, which the main player I suppose, in that field, was a man by the name of Don Rogers - known as "Naughty Don" from Naughty Don Toyota. He decided he was going to branch out into the world of seafood, to combine his transport industry with seafood, so he could send over seafood to the eastern states. He's the one that probably started up and opened up the eastern states' market, but in doing so, really got Carnarvon schnapper a very bad name. Because of Don there was 46 out of 63 boats fishing to him against the advice of myself and half a dozen other guys that were fishing here full time, you know, each season, and we were well known for our catching abilities, the best way to put it. We used to catch very well with the fish traps. We advised against buying so many boats because once the fish started to run, he wouldn't be able to handle it because his comment was, "Oh no, not a problem. We can handle type anything." I said, my personal comment (he flew me down actually to Perth to discuss it) I said, "You just don't realise what it's like in Carnarvon with the schnapper until you've actually seen it."

Anyway he had, in five days.... I arrived back here and three days later the schnapper started, he had in five days, 228 ton of fish at the jetty, and he was like a little boy with his pants down, and they had semi-trailers going everywhere with it, and they just couldn't sell it. They froze about 180 ton of it. He was committed to paying two dollars a kilo at the end of each week, on the fish, plus 40 cent kilo bonus for those that had contracts. We had contract with him. He flew me down again, and said, "Look



you know, we can't afford this," and I said, "Well, you're the one that's made the comment. You flew me down last week, and I said you're mad to take on all these guys." So he said, "You go back to the fishermen for me, please, and say look, we'll give them a dollar now and a dollar at the end of August, and the bonus that's due it, later on." I said to him, "Well, I will but if you put egg on my face, I'll be the first person to hit you through Dunne and Bradstreet." He put egg on my face and I was the first person to hit him through Dunne and Bradstreet, which Toyota (thank God for Toyota) didn't like at all. That his name was associated with Toyota cars was also being dragged through Dunne and Bradstreet. So Toyota are the ones that got us our money to my belief.

Don was a very honourable man. He wanted to pay us, he just didn't have the money. He got on to Brian Coppin, who is Western Underwriters and involved in Broome and other things, and I think in Vox Adeon, and borrowed about half a million in dollars to finish up his debts and so [unclear] and all the actions were dropped. I felt very sorry for Don, and he possibly may or may not over the years [laughs] forgive me, but he wasn't being advised very well. He didn't understand what was happening to the fishery, but he was a great motivator and a great trier to do what he did. I just wished that it had worked, and if it had of been done on a small scale, it would have, and I believe he would have become the biggest marketing force from Western Australia in the eastern states.

We've just started to overcome the bad name of the schnapper in the last couple of years, because we are now exporting to the eastern states, our fish, and we are being asked for fish. We're getting phone calls now where as before we always had to ring to sell it, now we're being asked, "Will you supply us with some of your product?" The reason being the fish is never more than twelve hours old when it hits the jetty, and the majority of it, of course, is now packaged for Japan, by Kai Fresh Fish, and K F M are doing some on behalf of two of the fishermen, and Kailis and France are doing some on behalf of the others.

**JD** This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JECKS** With the Kailis and France, there's two boats supplying them. The rest of them selling up to Kai Fresh Fish. We.... I've, well I suppose it's I. I've, because of my time in this industry have got to know a few of the various fish buyers who have passed me on to other fish buyers over in the eastern states and so forth, and we're now supplying them with product which this year, Kai Fresh Fish have been packing for us on our behalf, and we're paying them to package it and so forth to send over there, to do it. It's more to help with the glut situation that does arise in the fishery from time to time, and also to get rid of the fish that is not suitable in colour or shape for the Japanese market.

The Japanese market are very particular on their colour, size and shape of their fish, and so we have to be a bit choosy, but we tend to throw the very large fish with the big bumpy heads, back, because they're not really marketable for any of the fisheries that we're in (or any of the markets we have, sorry) to sell these. So that sort of thing.

Now we're sending fish.... with the advent of these polystyrene boxes that we can air-freight fish anywhere in the world, and it's opened up unlimited markets. We're looking at Italy. We've looked at Honolulu but we've got a problem there with the size, the minimum size of 41 centimetres. They don't want fish over about 36 centimetres, so the New Zealand market takes care of that pretty well. We're trying into other European things. We're trying to get in before the E E C closes which is next year. I think '92, you have to have.... you get shut out by, so we're trying for that. Our factory will be able to handle any of that sort of stuff, you know, but that's really on there.

The main advent in the marketing side in the last sort of couple of years, really has been the fact that we've gone from where we used to have to gut and gill all the products, to where now the fish is taken in what they call a green state, or it is sold with the guts in. It's taken a while to get the market to accept this in Australia. In fact Sydney, we have just got Sydney to accept it in the last three weeks. It's taken all that time to win [unclear]. Melbourne's been taking it for the last couple of years, and South Australia, they've just taken it for the first time this year, gut in. So we're now getting to the stage where everything's gut in.

The main reason for it being done gut in, is it increases the shelf-life of the product by some four to five days, as long as the fish is handled correctly from the moment it's caught. The moment you put a knife into a fish, there's an immediate bacterial breakdown starts in the fish itself, so you end up with a product that is nowhere near the quality of a gut in fish. One thing the Japanese are good at is how to handle seafood, and they don't take it gut in for no reason, other than the fact that it comes out as such a high quality product in comparison with the gut out. It just has to be handled right.

**JD** Peter, in the fishing industries that you're involved in, would you say they're well managed, and what is the Fishermen's Organisation's input into that management?

**JECKS** Well, I mean, you would already know the situation with the crayfishing industry. That's very well controlled and very highly regarded in all scientific circles around the world as far as the management controls and that are concerned. With the schnapper being a very small fishery in comparison to most fisheries in Western Australia, you're looking at roughly, you know, with the little bits and pieces, 500 tons a year that would be taken out of the Bay, of which about 400 odd tons marketed properly, and so the management of this fishery has taken some doing.

Before I was actually involved in the fishery, the fishermen of old were pressing very hard for the Fisheries Department to bring some closures in and some cutbacks on the industry. As in most cases with any government department, they have this tendency to shut the gate when all the cattle bar about two or three have left the paddock. But this is what they were afraid was going to happen with the schnapper fishery. They really firmly believe that it maybe that case, as is the case with so many fisheries in Australia, but it's been proved otherwise now. The management regime, that they did a five year research programme on the schnapper fishery, had to wait for scientific evidence, and this is always the bone of contention with fishermen. The fishermen say, "Shut it now, let's do the scientific research, THEN if we can re-open it we will," but the Fisheries always say, "No, we will do the scientific research, THEN if we finally have to shut it, we will." The trouble is it's always too bloody late, because everyone tries to jump in on the bandwagon to get a licence in the fishery, so you end up with the fishery just about being killed.

In the final year before management took over, there was round about eleven or twelve hundred ton taken out of the fishery that they believe has got a sustainable yield of about 550 ton. So the management took some time, it took a fair bit of verbal bashing by fishermen. It took, I suppose the fisheries, by the time they'd had it through with us, they'd had a fair bit of flak back from some of us. Some of us pressed politicians very hard to push our own barrows. I'm not necessarily referring to myself there, just what happened in the industry. There was a lot of backstabbing going on because people were.... everyone, as is human nature, was looking out for their own future in the industry, because they didn't really care too much about the future of the industry. They were more interested in their own future, and this sort of continued on and on and on, and after much harangue the fishery was shut down, and they finally listed the people who were to be involved in the fishery.

I fortunately was one of those. There were 32 licences in all, I think it was, that were granted, and there were a few that were done in on appeal, and so forth, that gained access at some time in the future.

To cut the numbers back, our first suggestion to the Fisheries (we had one of these round the table meetings) was that we have a [unclear] buy back scheme, so that if someone wanted to get out, then you had this ability to remove a licence when somebody wanted to come in. The other thing that was brought in by some of the older fishermen, which I didn't like because I was one of the younger fishermen, was this "A" and "B" zone licences. "A" zone being access to the whole fishery for all the year, "B" zone had limited access to various areas which weren't the key primaries to catch in. You had to go an extra twenty mile and the ground wasn't as good, and so forth. So I wasn't particularly happy with that, so I appealed on that. I was granted a temporary access to the "A" zone fishery, much to the disgust of the "A" zone fishermen. I wasn't alone in that. There were a few others that were granted access as well. We put forward a fairly strong case.

So anyway that got settled and then that all got squashed after one year, and we were back to the drawing board. In the meantime the idea of the quota system was hatched up, and we looked at this quota system that had been done with tunas, on the tuna fishery, and it started to gather a bit of momentum. Slowly but surely, there were fishermen saying, "It's not a bad idea, this quota idea, because it will then be a thing." The Fisheries were saying, "It's too hard to control, it costs too much to manage and it's one that the fishery doesn't earn sufficient income to bring in to the State." It was at that stage when there was no exporting of fish being done, so it was just State income. It wasn't going overseas. There was no export incentive for the Government to become really involved in it.

As the bickering, I suppose, went back and forth, there was a letter that was drawn up and drafted.... My father had a fair amount of input in that. He's very good with words and in writing things according so that government offices will listen to them, basically because of his position that he's had. I mean he's the Director of the Westralian Advanced College of Education, and he also has been at times, the Chairman of the Library Board, the Chairman of the Secondary Board, the Chairman of the Advanced Education Board, the Chairman of the Primary School Board, and I believe he's on a couple of others that I can't think of the names now. So he's a guy that doesn't have a lot of time. He's also now the Secretary of the Carnarvon Schnapper Fishermen's Association, and I don't think they'll ever get a better secretary because he's a way with words, and the letters as far as defeating government departments is rather efficient for our system, is the best way to put it.

The fishermen are very conscious of the conservation side of the fishery and so we've had to fight very hard for this quota system. They eventually agreed at a meeting in Denham, when Peter Rogers attended, and if he hadn't been there I think they feared violence for some of the Fisheries' people that were there. It was the first meeting ever attended by all fishermen involved, and I mean all of them. This was even the guys that had very limited access to the fishery. They were very.... This was the meeting, this was the big one to decide what was going to happen, and they weren't prepared to let us have a go at what we all wanted, that was the quota system, and it was through Rogers (Peter Rogers) and I admire the man for getting up and finally, for once, accepting what the fishermen were asking for, instead of just listening to what the scientists were saying, but taking some heed of what the guys who are out there all the time catching, were.

So he sort of passed on to the person of who he was in charge of, thank God, that he suggested that it might be an idea of we were given a trial run of our quota system. So they gave it to us and we have progressed from there, where we now have a quota system which is very efficient. They seem to be very happy, the Fisheries policing officers find the system very easy to operate, and control us, because basically we're all considered to be thieves and rogues as far as when it comes to trying to pinch an extra dollar. Fishermen are actually very good at policing this fishery themselves, because there are so few of us in it, we tend to.... if someone steps out of line without informing any government official, we generally bring the person back in line fairly quickly with some sort of insinuated situation which might occur if they don't toe the line. We've only had a couple of instances and both times they have been dealt with before the Fisheries even knew they'd.... the Fisheries found out some time after what had occurred, but nothing could be proven or done by that stage, but the fishermen knew within about ten minutes, so it's very hard to escape from that.

The management is continuing to become easier and we're also getting a situation now where we're asking that the fishery be quoted for a twelve months, seeing we're currently allowed to fish on a quota system from 15th of May until 15th of August. We actually gained at our last season's meeting, a two week extension on that, and it was to make the marketing side of it.... The Fisheries Department is starting to finally acknowledge that they have to be (unfortunately I think in their eyes) involved in some consideration for some marketing aspects of the fisheries. They just can't say, "Well, we've got to do this to save the fishery," it has to be done for the marketing side of it as well. So they gave us two more weeks. We pleaded for four, we got two. This is what it's been all the time, you know, ask this and you'll get half, so everything we want now, we ask double, and we hope we get what we want.

We're hoping this year that the season will be extended another two weeks but that remains to be seen what happens at this meeting. Unfortunately this year, there weren't a lot of guys started right on opening day, so it gives the Fisheries a little bit of management there. But they are starting to listen more and more to us. The management of our fishery is now so good that the fish stocks have rejuvenated beyond comprehension. We've got to the stage now where all of us can see in the foreseeable future that we will be - through our own instigations - will be given more quota, because at Carlecks we have a unit, and a unit is currently worth one ton. Those units may be increased at some time in the future by, you know, by another point of a ton, or point two or point three, because the fish can maintain the fishing level, and the idea of a good managed fishery (or a well managed fishery) is one that is balanced in being able to maintain, and is returning the maximum benefit to the fishermen, and as this one is also involving export, it's to the State as well, of the export income that comes in. It's there. It's easy to see. The fish catches this year have been phenomenal, also management, I'm very happy to say, has worked very well. I'm also very happy to say that finally the Fisheries Department are starting to

liaise a lot more with the fishermen on, you know, the things. Up until now we've had a bit of a battle, but we have won at long last.

**JD** One of the matters of concern to fishermen on this coast is the overseas interests that are fishing in our waters. Would you comment on that?

**JECKS** There's only one real case that's applicable that I know of to me in any great concern and that is.... I think it's actually stopped this year, was where the Government.... they do "sweetheart" deals every now and then, is the way we see it. Not the State, the Federal level. They allow foreign fishing interests to come into the State and fish, and what they did was, they allowed the Chinese trawlers to fish up north. Up until then it had been the pair trawlers and so forth, and it gets a bit.... it's a bit of salt in the wound really when you have 54 or something, as it was a few years back, of Taiwanese pair trawlers destroying our northern waters, and then.... this is the sort of comedy of the whole error, they start imposing restrictions upon West Australian fishermen because the foreign fisheries to such a degree, last year when they had the Chinese up there, supposedly not to affect any of our markets or anything, every fish-buyer that I know in Perth, bought some of the Chinese fish at prices that we can't even afford the fuel that we had to, for the prices that they were selling at.

The best thing was that because of the prices that they got paid for the fish.... I mean they were landing the stuff at the rate of about 400 ton a month in Perth. Perth cannot absorb that much old fish, so the price went from being two fifty to three dollars down to about 50 cents most of the fishermen were getting for their product. There was a lot of screaming and carrying on by the fishermen so the best thing was the Chinese in particular, got paid this price, and they have I believe, I wouldn't sort of be held to ransom over this, I believe that they have been quoted as saying that they're not coming back because it wasn't economically viable. Well, all I can say is thank God it wasn't economically viable and I hope it maintains for the Australian Government in future to liaise a bit, because there was no liaison at all. In fact W A F I C, which is the West Australian affiliate of the Australian group for the Australian Fishing Industry Council, they fought very hard to have this sort of stopped, and the marketing to be done as it was, because it's of detrimental.... and it made a big impact on the fishermen. Some guys actually got out of the fishery because of the thing and you know, I feel that these sort of things should never happen without consultation to industry.

The other main thing that sort of interests me the most, is this World Heritage thing that once again Canberra seems to have this thing where we, the fishermen, aren't being consulted. W A F I C is trying in all their.... with all of their effort they can put in to it, to get some input by our industry into it, because it affects a lot of people, not just the fishermen in this case. If you get World Heritage into the Bay where they say, "We only want to do this, we only want to do that," the first thing was that the "Greenies" is the best way.... they said, "Look, we don't want to stop the fishermen." The next thing is you're seeing that the "Greenies" are suggesting that you should ban trawling, or put a moratorium on it.

So the fishermen prove that trawling isn't doing any damage to the ground. Well, and this is the most hypocritical statement I've ever come across, and this is exactly what happened, and so we're in a situation now where you've got 38, I think it is, trawlers that operate in the Bay. There's about fourteen or fifteen schnapper fishermen. There'd be another half a dozen, we'll say, mackerel fishermen. There's the net fishermen down at Denham which number some twelve or fourteen, I'm not sure of the exact figure. They're all affected by this and they keep saying, "It's not going to

affect you." Well, it does affect us because I also fished up out of Coral Bay with a couple of the other guys, and it's already affected us up there, because they've turned that into a marine park, and that's just a marine park. That pushed us out totally, so that fishery now is no longer being touched by fishermen. We are still allowed to fish it, there's no quarrel about outside. We can still fish the grounds. There's only one problem in that to sell your fish you've got to bring it on the land, and it's a bit hard to bring it on to land when you're not allowed to go through this marine park with your fish.

So that sort of thing, they've asked the fishermen.... they haven't said, "You can't bring it in," but they've made it fairly clear they don't want you to bring this fish through this marine park. One of the guys actually stopped fishing up there last year because of that incidence. So I am concerned at the World Heritage. I don't believe it is a necessary thing that be done. I can't see why we should give control of a very large piece of our State which has a very large export earning potential. I mean you take the prawn industry in this bay alone. I don't know what it would bring in, but it's not a small amount of money that it would bring in, you know, we're talking millions of dollars. The schnapper fishery that started off as a \$500,000 fishery is now up to the stage of being worth (export dollars we're talking here, not what it brings back to the fishermen, but export dollars) where they're getting about \$12 a kilo for the product, so you just do your own mathematics on that, and you can start to work it out. I mean all we've got to do is to start to get to the New Zealand price where they're getting about \$20 a kilo and up and up it goes.

Those sorts of things have to be taken into consideration. The scallops, they've gone from \$6.50 in the last sort of five years up to this year their price is \$21. So the World Heritage thing, I believe simply - my own personal feeling - it shouldn't even be looked at. It's something that hasn't been consulted. I mean they're trying in every way, shape and form, to say they are consulting. Well, I've never been asked. I've been invited along to two meetings that have been organised by W A F I C but they were only sort of things where we were getting our chance to have a word with a C A L M officer, and a Fisheries officer. It was nothing to do with a Federal, you know, on a Federal level. So W A F I C is fighting it hard and I think they actually even started a fighting fund which they've been on to the various associations and so forth to send money, and also on the fishermen.... I think they've asked every fisherman for \$100, and I think they asked the associations for \$1000, and the processors, I think they asked for \$10000, and they've been publishing who's been donating and hopefully it will be fought.

They've fought on other things such as diesel rebate and so forth, and they've won, and this is going to be something once again that will unify the fishermen to some degree, because it's something that.... It's like car accidents. It's easy to say, "Oh it doesn't affect me," but you've only got to look at the listings they've done down on our south coast where they've just wiped out entire generations (three generations) of salmon fishermen, where they've said, "You can't use these beaches anymore," or the restrictions are going to be imposed upon you where it's not viable to do it.

So to me, Government has a few things to answer for before they suddenly go and snap people's livelihoods off. They just keep continuously pressurising the small businessmen. Most fishermen are small businessmen, that's all they are, and they have this sort of inbuilt thing in their mentality, "Ah well, we'll just charge them more." You know, when you start getting such things as your harbour fees and so forth going up by sort of 300 to 10000 per cent in twelve months, things need to be looked at, and that's once again no consultation with industry, and there's been a big furore with the Minister (I think it's Pam Beggs who's now handling it) and she's agreed to look at

it, BUT on the proviso first off, that all fishermen pay their current dues, which once again is a bit rude, as far as I'm concerned, from a fisherman's point of view, where we've being charged nothing and then we get charged \$6 and then all of a sudden they want to charge us \$57 a day to tie up on jetties, something that's been on that one.

There's one thing I suppose I better clarify. You get used to speaking to people who are dealing in my industry all the time, like all professions we end up with our own jargon or slang. The World Heritage listing that we're talking here, is actually involving the Shark Bay region and it's not just the waters either, it's actually the pastoralists that are being affected by it as well. So it's the whole of the Shark Bay/Carnarvon region that is being affected, and until such time that somebody can come up with something that can be done to protect the fishing industry (which I don't believe the State will allow it to go through, because of the money that's there to be caught out of it) then it's all going to be kept hopefully very closely guarded and we won't be affected by it, but it's something that we do feel.

With the future prospects for the fishing industry as I see it, I see a great future for the fishing industry. My personal feeling is and I've got a very young family - I've got one boy six and the other three. Most fishermen want sons. They hope for sons, not that they regret if they get daughters, because at this stage it is one of the industries still there that is NOT dominated by women to any extent at all. There are very, very few women. In fact I know of only two women that drive boats, and you know, it's an industry where they are becoming more and more involved as time goes by. I'm sure by the time that my boys become of age to work on boats if they so desire (which I hope they do and I haven't done all this hard work for nothing) then I believe there will be women driving boats.

I certainly can't see with the way the management regimes have been put in place, and the way that fishermen now have sort of lifted themselves, is I suppose the best way that I can think of saying it, from where we used to walk around with holes in our pants and no shoes on our feet, and we lived in shacks on the coast and we squatted on Crown land, we now own our own houses, and we can now afford to buy ourselves a new pair of pants every year, and you know, so the prospects are getting better, the income is becoming better, but the biggest problem facing the entire industry, is the financial burden for anyone young coming in to it. Unless you have a family that can give you the financial backing, or unless you are lucky enough to have a family that is already involved in the industry, it is going to be very, very hard for anyone to come into the game as it is. These days a young person who....

If you've got a young person who wants to try and get in, who's going to have a heck of bother, I sort of.... as I said before, I'd like to see one of the boys at least, go in fishing, basically because I really had to fight hard for any of the knowledge that I've learned as I've gone through and tried the variety of fisheries I've been through, until I arrived at this.

I haven't actually listed them as I've gone through. I started off with shark-netting and doing some bait-netting and doing wet line fishing. I've tried drop line and I've tried long lining. I've done a schnapper fishery. I've been involved in the trap fishery in Carnarvon, I've been involved in the trap fishery on what they call the Pilbara trap region. We've bought into the cray fishing industry and I've settled back now to the two fisheries that seem to be (the best way to put it) the most profitable, or economically viable, as far as I'm concerned - that is the schnapper and the crays. The crays I find a bit boring. The schnapper I find exciting, but if one of the boys wanted to

go in, just to be able to pass on the knowledge, it's one of those differences where you never stop learning.

A guy, 65 years old, or a guy, 25 years old, it makes no difference, they never know enough. You just learn each time you go to sea. I mean, I've fished out of here now for a lot of years, as far as I'm concerned out of this bay. I went to sea this season, and ran over a lump that I asked three other fishermen about, and not one of them knew about it. So those sorts of things. There's just so much hidden under the water and so many aids these days, with electronics to help us see what's hidden under the water, but you just don't.... It's like playing a guitar or typing on a typewriter, you just don't pick them up and say, "Now, I can do this," it takes time to learn, and so it's something that I certainly.... You know I've seen fishermen who've had no family to continue on in their chosen profession, and I'm sure it's going to happen [laughs] to a lot more people as the time goes on.

The prospects for the young people coming in to the industry have to be exceptionally good, because management controls have been realising that they must be put in place, or it's been realised they must put in place, to maintain the viability of those industries. There are fisheries on this coast that are not going to be around by the time my boys start fishing - I keep saying "if" my boys start fishing. I probably shouldn't say it anyway, I mean every father thinks their son will do the same, but there's going to be fisheries that will not exist for them to fish in, but they will have at least the opportunity, providing I don't die within the next few years, to go in to those industries, and hopefully return a good industry.

One thing I was going to say back there was, a fisherman who is of young and unmarried status, finds himself considered by quite a few women these days on the coast, to be quite a good catch. Girls can.... they sort of meet a young guy who has a very good life-style - I'm talking about crays here in particular - if they've got their dad's boat to drive, they go to work, they work for six months of the year. They do about two months of off-season work, then they just basically go on holidays, and they work out how to spend their money. So it's getting better. I just wish that I'd started ten years earlier, and I've still got about.... I've estimated my time fifteen to twenty years of fishing left in me, and I know I'm going to see a phenomenal amount of changes in that time, so I hate to even think what it's going to be like by the time the boys start fishing. The boats and the equipment are just changing at such a rapid rate that it's frightening.

**JD** Peter, thank you very much for a most interesting interview, and I wish you all success in the future and the future for your sons. Thank you.

**JECKS** Thank you very much.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Peter Jecks of Carnarvon, Western Australia.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer







## Verbatim transcript of an interview with BOB JONES

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Bob Jones of Dunsborough, Western Australia conducted in his home on the 12th December, 1989. The interviewer was Jack Darcey recording for Murdoch University's history of the Australian Fishing Industry which is being produced for the Australian Fishing Industry Research Council.

Mr Jones is widely experienced in a number of fisheries in Western Australia including salmon fishing, trawling for scallops, prawning, shark fishing and diving for crayfish. A cerebral vascular accident has left Mr Jones with a slight disability which he is overcoming and which has not prevented him from continuing to fish, although other members of his family now carry on the main part of the business.

Mr Jones was under considerable stress during the interview as he had just received news that his son-in-law, an owner skipper of a prawning trawler had become seriously ill on board his vessel and was still two days' steaming north of Geraldton. That incident is an illustration of the hazards that still attend the occupation of fishermen in this country.

There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 026 on the revolution counter.

This is an interview with Mr Bob Jones, fisherman, currently of Dunsborough, Western Australia. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey at Mr Jones' residence on the 12th December, 1989.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Mr Jones could you give us your full name please.

**JONES** Robert Percy Jones.

**JD** And date and place of birth.

**JONES** I was born in Margaret River on the 12th April, 1933.

**JD** Were your parents Australian born?

**JONES** My parents are both Australian born, yes.

**JD** And were they involved in fishing?

**JONES** No, no. I am the only descendant of my family that got involved in fishing.

**JD** But you have a son and other relatives now in the fishing industry?

**JONES** Yes. All my family which is my wife and a daughter and son are involved in fishing.

**JD** How did you yourself come to be involved in the industry?

**JONES** Well Jack, it's a strange way that things start off because I was born of a farmer's son and I was very keen on swimming and through the implications of spear fishing and one thing and another I got involved in a salmon team swimming a line ashore through the breakers to start the net. That was my first involvement in fishing, was to jump into the water and to go through the breakers and bring the line ashore.

**JD** Where was that Bob?

**JONES** That was at Hamelin Bay, Jack back in about 1952, '53 it would have been and Tommy Meagher, an old time fisherman; he's dead now but he was the skipper of the team at the time and he was pretty rough but a good fisherman, Jack.

**JD** And you carried on in the salmon fishing?

**JONES** Yes I carried on as a member of the team for three or four years and like a lot of other people in life I saw opportunity there and I branched out and made my own team and I actually started my own team fishing at Smith's Beach in Yallingup.

**JD** Would you like to give us an outline of your career in the fishing industry? I know it's been very involved and wide ranging. Could you give us a run down on it?

**JONES** Well Jack as I say, I started in '52, '53 and I've fished now from Esperance to Exmouth Gulf, Jack. I went from salmon fishing to Exmouth Gulf in the off-season. When I say the off season, this was from possibly end of May until November till when the crays started. The cray season starts on the 15th November and I've always been involved up until lately with the crayfish. I had quite a seasonal fishing career in salmon fishing from February till the end of May and then going to Exmouth from approximately June till October fishing for, well prawns, sea mullet and whiting for M.G. Kailis at Learmonth.

**JD** What was your role there? Were you a deckie or skippering or what?

**JONES** Jack it's a strange thing mate. I don't think its.... Not too many actually could say what I'm going to tell you but it's quite fact. I have never worked for a boss in my life. I've always been my own boss. I've never had another job since I was married other than fishing and I've never earned money from any other source other than fishing to, you know, to compliment my income.

**JD** Yes. So you were skippering a boat?

**JONES** I have a Grade 2 Skipper's Ticket. I started off with a Coxan's Ticket but have sort of increased it and at this stage I have no further ideals to go bigger as I'm in the retirement stage now. So that's the story of my tickets.

**JD** How did you come to come down to Dunsborough then, Bob?

**JONES** Jack it was.... Dunsborough's pretty close to my home town which is Cowaramup There I went to school and I guess it's always a saying "there's no place like home" and Dunsborough, well it's been one of the greatest salmon beaches on our west coast and being that I've been involved in salmon fishing, I came here to Dunsborough every year [for] seasonal work. Around about sixteen years ago I bought some land here and a house and I've retired here in Dunsborough. I'm very, very grateful to be in such a wonderful place.

**JD** You like it here obviously?

**JONES** Oh it's marvellous. It's really the Gold Coast of Western Australia.

**JD** Yes. You have a son now in the industry, don't you?

**JONES** Yes. I have a son, Larry. He's been involved in fishing since he left school. He left school at the age of round about sixteen and he went diving for crayfish with myself off of Bunbury and after a few years he wasn't very wrapped in the idea of crayfishing diving and he couldn't see any future in it, which I don't blame him, but he left the fishing industry then and went to an abattoirs and spent a couple of years in the meat industry but that's another story. He didn't comprehend staying on land and from there we endeavoured to get him into the crayfishing industry and he bought a licence, a cray licence, and has since been involved in his own affairs.

**JD** Could you tell us something about this diving for crayfish?

**JONES** Well Jack, it's very unique. I think I was probably the first one in West Australia ever to own a professional diver's licence. It was a funny way of how I got the licence but these are the things that happen in life. Up until that time I was licensed to salmon fish or net fish but never had a crayfishing licence. Around about 1960, doing some amateur fishing out of a small boat, I discovered a big colony of crayfish out from Bunbury through a water glass. Being that I had not very much money at the time and people were very sceptical about potting crayfish in this area at that particular time, I could see no other way of catching these crayfish other than diving for them. So I went into the water and I spent sixteen years diving for crayfish.

I had a very lucrative business with them, but going back to how I got my licence: It was one day I was coming in in the afternoon around about 4.00 o'clock at Binningup and there's a small reef which we used to come through with the boat between the breakers and a small landing. On this landing was a single person and I said to the guy that was with me, "I'll bet that's a Fisheries Inspector" and he said, "Ah get out with you". I said, "Well you'll see" and I went ashore and yes the guy came down; presented his badge and said he's a Fisheries Inspector. I had about five bags of crays in the boat at the time and I won't mention any names of who he was but he was very good to me. He said "You know you're supposed to have a licence to catch that many crays? What do you do with them"? I said "Well, what do you think I do with them? I can't eat all those." I said, "Well I've got no chance of getting a cray licence, have I"? "Well" he said, "have you applied for one"? I said, "No I haven't". "Well" he said, "Perhaps it would be a good idea for you to apply for one and go from there". I applied for one and believe it or not, for two pound I was issued with a crayfish licence.

**JD** Was it for diving on the crayfish or....?

**JONES** Yes and I also had a.... They gave me a professional licence for diving but they also gave me a licence for 57 pots.

**JD** According to the length of your boat?

**JONES** Yes. According to the length of the boat, yes.

**JD** This business of diving for crayfish, what depths of water would you be diving in?

**JONES** Mostly Jack I dived in around about 60 feet of water. I spend around about, oh three to four hours a day underneath. Speaking of the bends, yes I finished up with the bends in latter years but I did have about fifteen years of bend free era. I broke every rule in the book as you can well imagine but like other fishermen I'm just as silly as ever and I don't know whether it's through diving or what it is but it was certainly an experience all of its own.

**JD** Was it skindiving or were you in a helmet?

**JONES** No. It was skindiving with a hooker. I'd have a deckie in my boot and he would follow me around while I was under the water and I would hook the crays and put them in a bag underneath the water and when I had a catch I'd bring them up to the boat.

**JD** That's a bit [of an] unusual way to catch crayfish?

**JONES** Well it was and it wasn't Jack because off Bunbury in that era, for some reason or other fishermen had the idea that crays would not pot. It was noted that they just would not pot and being young and fool hardy well I could see that diving was the way to catch them and they were plentiful. There was no doubt about that. They were like picking bunches of grapes there was that many of them. There was no difficulty in getting four or five bags a day.

**JD** Is it still done?

**JONES** No Jack, no. I would say about '75.... In the early '70s the Fishery Department believed that it was too lucrative a way of catching crays and it was a way of perhaps of cleaning the crayfish out and they wanted to do away with the two licences that were issued at that time. It was to Steve Riley; he had a licence for diving and myself. We agreed to forego licensing or forego the diving for crays for a full pot licence of which the Fishery Department granted me 80 pots and Steve Riley 75.

**JD** It's a worthwhile grant now days, isn't it?

**JONES** Well yes. I don't have the licence now as my son-in-law took over the crayfishing some years ago. I ventured on to purseining mulies.

**JD** Down here?

**JONES** Yes, yeah. Here in Geographe Bay.

**JD** Yes. Is that what you're still doing?

**JONES** No Jack, no. I'm semi-retired now. I have been trawling in the Bay for scallops but there's been quite a kerfuffle in regards to some of the public not wanting us to

trawl for scallops and I have been waiting for the outcome of the Environmental Protection and the Fisheries Department, Government Department's ruling and what's going on. Just recently I have been issued with a scallop trawl licence and I will probably go back into trawling for scallops.

**JD** Yeah. They're plentiful down here are they?

**JONES** Ah they're seasonal same as anything else Jack. You have your good years and you have your bad years. At present they're very scarce. The big ones are very scarce out here but last year we had a wonderful spat season and the future looks very rosey.

**JD** Do you catch any wet fish?

**JONES** Ah, not a great deal Jack. I was shark fishing for quite a while but they brought in a new set of rules in regards to the shark fishing with net and unfortunately they issued me with only 900 metres of net and it's not lucrative enough to carry on with so I've got a licence for shark fishing but I don't use it.

**JD** No. Bob, you've been in the industry in a variety of roles for a long time now. You'd have seen many changes over the years. What would be some of the major ones?

**JONES** Well some of the major ones that I can talk of would be in the salmon fishing. Number one was back in the early '50s. The gear was of cotton and hemp and the old type ropes. There was hemp ropes and manilla and that sort of thing, whereas today it's all nylon and whereas it would take four or five or six men to lift just the pocket of a net in the early days, one man can handle a pocket these days because of the nylon. It's very, very strong. There's no doubt about that. It can withstand the huge swells and the weight of the fish and it's made fishing, with the four wheel drives of course. The four wheel drives are another thing that's come into the era and they've really taken the backbone breaking effort of manpower out of the work.

**JD** What about prices and markets Bob?

**JONES** Jack I'm very disappointed in regards to the way that the Government and the Fisheries Department have treated us in regards to the salmon fishing and their prices. More so the disposal of our fish I would say because in latter years we were able to sell our fish on the open market. I probably was one of the pioneers of the salmon fishing teams to sell my fish as cray bait.

I had quite a lot of trouble in the early days in regards to transporting the fish to Perth as there was a law that said that no fish was to be carted passed a cannery. In the early times the cannery was at Busselton but it never ever produced canned fish and it later went into a receival depot. Anyway the Government did see fit to grant me a licence to send my fish to Perth and the moment that was done the price went up nearly double; a little bit of competition against the canneries.

Since that time the Department and the Government have brought in a law whereas fishermen can only sell their catch to the cannery and not to any other source other than food fish. The moment that this law was brought in, our price dropped down to a bare margin of \$150.00 a tonne whereas it was \$450.00 a tonne before. We as a fishing organisation have tried for years to have this ban lifted. Today we have authority to sell eight tonnes on the open market but this eight tonnes in price wise would be worth 25-30 tonnes selling to the cannery.

Yes I'm very disappointed in not having free enterprise in marketing fish. I think it's a political thing. It's not as though the fish wouldn't be caught otherwise. It's just that competition makes and keeps things honest.

**JD** Would you like to make other comments on the involvement of the Government in the industry through the Fisheries Department?

**JONES** Well Jack there's not much I can say in regards to the Government through the Fisheries Department as you are well aware that we have Ministers of the Government for fisheries but I'm sure that they follow the Directors' of Fisheries' involvement and there are spokesmen for the Fisheries Department. I'm sure that the Fisheries Department make the bullets and the Directors fire, I mean the Ministers fire, them because a Minister doesn't stay in the portfolio for very long. He's there today and gone tomorrow. You get one Minister and he just starts to get to know what's going on in regards to the activities and the problems of the fisheries and then his portfolio is changed and you've got a new one. It's very disappointing in that regard.

**JD** What are some of the other problems that the fishermen face? What about the question of overseas products being sold in Australia?

**JONES** Yes Jack there's no doubt about the overseas product. It plays a very, very sad opposition part to our selling our fish here in Australia. As it's well known, it's far cheaper labour from Vietnam and some of those places out there and unfortunately our local factories that do take our fish or buy our fish, they're not behind the door in importing opposition's products and putting it on the market. At present I believe that the Chinese are up in our Northern Territory catching some huge tonnage of fish and these are on our local markets today. So, yes Jack, it's detrimental to the local fishermen and you can't blame the restaurants and hotels and one thing and another for buying imported products. It's good. There's no doubt about that. It's well presented and it's very economical.

**JD** Is the return to our fishermen stable or is it less than it used to be or more than it used to be?

**JONES** Jack in some fisheries it is very stable. I would say the crayfish industry and the prawn industry, the scallop industry. That seems to hold its markets very well. Any crustacean seems to be very, very solid but our wet fish industry has the.... that's our shark and our wet fish, it has the opposition from the imports of overseas products.

**JD** Whereas the others that you mentioned, we also export don't we?

**JONES** We export them. We don't import them. We don't import crayfish. I don't think we import too many scallops and prawns. We definitely don't import prawns. They're all locally caught in the Northern Territory and Exmouth and Eagle Bay, Carnarvon.

**JD** What other problems do you see? What about pollution?

**JONES** Jack I think pollution's just a known word at present. It's a word that means so very, very much yet it's an unseen source of detrimental activity to our waters and nobody, especially Government Departments, they don't want to know about it.

**JD** No; but do you think it is a problem?

**JONES** It certainly looks like it could be a very big problem in different areas. I would say that probably here in Geographe Bay we are just on the balance of a very big problem with it being that it's a shallow bay and sea grasses and one thing and another could be killed off by the poisons and the insecticides that come into the Bay from the outgrowing farming areas.

**JD** What about litter in the ocean? Is that a problem?

**JONES** No Jack, not at present. Not here in this area. I feel that, well I speak of south of Perth and as I have said earlier in the piece, I've dived a lot in the ocean and you see a few bottles at times on the bottom and that sort of thing but no, you don't see a great deal of litter. There's no doubt about it the tides and that will bring in the plastic bags which float and that type of stuff that will float but it does seem to an individual to be a lot but the ocean's a big area of water. We put everything into one little percent of it and it looks bad.

**JD** You don't pick up many fish that have been....

**JONES** Banded. No I've never got any. I have seen photos of them but no, I've never caught any.

**JD** Anything else you'd like to say about the industry in general or about your particular part of it?

**JONES** Well Jack, the way I see the industry at present is it's getting very hard for the individual fisherman to survive. The laws whether from the Government or from the Fishery Department have increased. Working pressure has increased. Costs have increased, licence fees; everything has increased yet I don't feel that the fish prices have kept up with the inflation in that way. I feel in the future, and this is my own personal views, that come around 2000, most fishermen will be fishing for companies and not for themselves.

**JD** Yes. Yeah that's a fairly widely held view.

**JONES** Is it?

**JD** Yes. There's considerable concern about the inflow of overseas capital into the industry. How do you feel about that?

**JONES** Well overseas capital, if it's for the good of the individual fisherman, I would say well, well and good for it but if it's to put the individual fisherman out of business, well then, you know, I can only say it's detrimental because the Government haven't put very much into fishing at all in actual terms to the every day fisherman.

**JD** I think the concern is that Australians might lose control of Australian fisheries.

**JONES** Yes Jack. Well when I was a boy Jack we were fighting the Japanese. My friends and father and relations and that were OK in the services fighting against the Japanese and I thought we'd won the War but today the Japanese are far in front of ourselves in development and money wise and the way it was said later on after the War that they couldn't win the War by force that they'd buy us out and it certainly looks like it's coming true.

**JD** Could I just ask you to cast your mind back to some of the notable people that you've known in the fishing industry in the past or in the present.

**JONES** Yes Jack. Well I'll go back to one of the Ministers and that was MacKinnon. He was Minister for Fisheries, I would say back, oh a lot of years ago; probably around '68, '65-'68, and he was an absolute terrific help in my opinion for the fishing industry. He....

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JONES** Graham [MacKinnon] was a man that spend a lot of time.... Actually he was very interested. When I say that, he was one man that I can recall that would call a spade a spade. He was involved in the prawning venture of M.G. Kallis era from, I suppose that would have been around about the '58-'60s up at Learmonth. I can remember Graham flying up there on quite a [number of] occasions for the different meetings and one thing [or] another. To me he was one person that stood out in regards to Ministerial effectiveness.

**JD** Anyone else that you'd like to have mentioned?

**JONES** Well Bernie Bowen, he's our present day Minister. Yes I've full marks for Bernie in regards to his controlling of the crayfishing industry and the prawning industries. He has done a wonderful job in holding those industries together and today they are very, very viable and they're an ongoing part of our fishing fraternity. Unfortunately I feel that a lot of his time has been put into these two portfolios of crayfishing and prawning and the wet fishing has been left on the side road as you might say. It is now coming together. There is a a lot more effort being put into it now in trying to control it and [it] probably give[s] ongoing fishermen a better chance to survive but in the past it has been let go sadly.

Problems such as pollution in the Bay and different parts of our coast is one thing. I'd like to see recreational fishermen['s] efforts monitored by our Government and therefore money should be put aside for the information deriving from pollution and also from recreational effort. As you are well aware, in the last fifteen years or so recreational fishing has tenfolded, perhaps twentyfolded but today every second person has a boat. They all go fishing, mostly with outboard motors powered and as people are using outboard motor[s], you'd be well aware, if you put it in a 44 gallon drum of water and run it for two or three minutes, the top of the water is nothing but scum in regards to the oil that has come from the petrol. So 10,000 times that in one day in the ocean and there's a lot of oil spilt into the ocean and that's just one little point in regards to pollution and one way it gets there but there are a lot of other ways in regards to drains and rivers that come from our market gardens. There's insecticides and sprays that come down our waterways and it all must be detrimental to our sea grasses and one thing or another.

**JD** Would you see noise pollution from boats' motors as a problem in fishing?

**JONES** Very much so in the salmon and herring fishery. Very much so. These type of fish are very susceptible to sound and an outboard motor will disturb a school of



salmon or herring from as far away as four or five hundred yards. Yes Jack, it's very detrimental - noise.

**JD** Right, anything else Bob?

**JONES** Jack I probably could go on all bloody day with little things and that. No I feel that if I've helped you out in the few things that I've spoken to you [about], I'm very pleased to be of help to you. I'm still in the fishing industry. I hope to still be part of it for quite some time to come. All being well, I'm up here next time you come around.

**JD** Good. Thank you very much Bob. You have been a real help. Thanks.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Bob Jones of Dunsborough, Western Australia.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with **BILL KENT**

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Bill Kent, ex-tuna fisherman of Esperance and ex-president of the Western Australian Tuna Fisherman's Association. The interview was conducted at Mr Kent's home in Esperance on the 11th January, 1990 by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University and the Australian Fisheries Research Council.

Mr Kent entered the fishing industry with a background in farming. He became involved with the tuna fishery on the south coast of Western Australia in the early days of that industry. He was an enterprising and innovative fisherman and gained wide experience in the tuna industry, remaining in it until three years ago when the introduction of severe quota restrictions resulted in a marked downturn in catches. His comments are well considered and based on much research and experience.

There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 019 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

This is an interview with Mr Bill Kent.

**JD** Mr Kent, could you record your full name please.

**KENT** My name is Arnold William Kent. I was born in South Australia, Adelaide on the 23rd March, 1929.

**JD** Were your parents Australian born?

**KENT** Both parents [were] Australian born.

**JD** When did you come to Western Australia?

**KENT** The family moved to Kalgoorlie, Western Australia when I was about four years old.

**JD** And you were brought up in Kalgoorlie?

**KENT** Brought up in Kalgoorlie on the goldfields.

**JD** And educated there?

**KENT** Educated at the South Kalgoorlie and Kalgoorlie Central Schools.

**JD** What did you do when you left school?

**KENT** Left school at a early age, 13, to go onto a property at Dalyup in the Esperance area.

**JD** How long did you stay there?

**KENT** I was there till I was about seventeen years old.

**JD** And then what did you do?

**KENT** Then I worked on the Main Roads and the Bow family in Esperance for quite a few years until I acquired a property at Grass Patch; a property of me own.

**JD** It was from Grass Patch that you came into the fishing industry?

**KENT** It was from a farming background that I eventually entered the fishing industry.

**JD** How did it come about that you entered fishing?

**KENT** Well during me farming days I developed a pollen allergy to dandelion pollens and wattle pollens that made me fairly ill for three or four months of each year. It was suggested by one of my doctors that I look at the sea for a future without the pollen problem.

**JD** So you chose Esperance?

**KENT** Yeah, being in Esperance quite a long time, I chose Esperance. I knew some of the fishermen in Esperance and were able to do trips on their boats to see if I could stand the sea and from there I went and bought me own vessel.

**JD** And sold the farm?

**KENT** No. I kept the farm. The son took the farm over and I went fishing.

**JD** What sort of fishing were you doing?

**KENT** I started off as most Esperance fishermen did as a mixed fisherman basically; crayfishing and shark fishing, bit of hand line fishing. Between the different industries we're able to survive in the fishing industry.

**JD** About how long ago was this Bill?

**KENT** That would be about fourteen years ago when I first started fishing.

**JD** What are you doing now? You left the industry, at least temporarily didn't you?

**KENT** Yes. At the present I'm not fishing. I finally went into the tuna side of fishing and concentrated solely on the tuna and when that gradually broke down I left the industry for the present time but I intend to go back in.

**JD** Yes. You were involved in the fishermen's organisations and on committees and things of that sort weren't you?

**KENT** Yes. I put as much as I could back into the industry through representing the industries. I was President of the Esperance Professional Fishermen's Association for quite a few years; represented the tuna industry at Canberra level for the meetings in Canberra and Port Lincoln in South Australia.

**JD** What are some of the other major fisheries that are conducted in the Esperance area Bill?

**KENT** The major fisheries in Esperance now is shark and crays. The tuna industry's gradually broken down till there's only, I believe, two vessels left in the tuna industry in Esperance.

**JD** Could we talk about the tuna industry. You were involved in it very heavily and you were there during the time when quotas were introduced. Could you tell us about that?

**KENT** Yes. I cray fished and shark fished for three or four years and then I read an article by a Mr Jack Robins on the tuna industry in Western Australia. After reading the book put out by Mr Robins I realised that the tuna migrated past Esperance and that there had to be a future in the tuna industry in Esperance. There was already a small tuna industry going in Albany at the time and I knew some of the tuna fishermen there and they came across to Esperance and showed us how to catch the tuna in Esperance. That's how Esperance first got started into the tuna industry.

**JD** The Jack Robins that you mentioned, was he with the Fisheries Department?

**KENT** Yes. At the time Mr Robins was with the Fisheries Department and done the studies for the Department on the tuna in Western Australia.

**JD** What areas did you fish for tuna?

**KENT** Fished the local area basically from Albany to the Great Australian Bight which covers a fair bit of the south coast of Western Australia.

**JD** How far out to sea did you operate?

**KENT** We used to fish from the coast to the Continental Shelf which varies in distance up to seventeen mile in Albany to the Shelf and as far as 60 miles in the Esperance area to the Continental Shelf.

**JD** When you landed the catch, how was it transported and where to?

**KENT** When the tuna industry first started in Esperance it was pretty chaotic to get your product from Esperance to Albany to Hunt's Cannery or to Kailis & France in Scarborough Beach Road in Perth. It was transported in trucks direct from the vessels; loaded onto the trucks, covered in ice and sent through in that manner. That's when the industry first started.

Then after a while Kailis & France, through effort from the Association and meself personally, they set up the first big brine handling system in Western Australia for

freezing the tuna before it was transported. Once that was all set up the transport become much easier to handle. It all went away in twenty tonne lots in stillages.

**JD** What's a stillage.

**KENT** A stillage is a container that holds a tonne of fish; a tonne of frozen fish per stillage. The truck bodies were made to hold twenty of those to transport. The transport become much more easier to control and handle after that period.

**JD** And they were all sold to Kailis & France for canning?

**KENT** In the early stages Hunt's Cannery in Albany were still involved and Kailis & France in Scarborough Beach Road and they used to compete for the fish and that was perhaps better for the fishermen, but as time went on Hunt's went out of business in Albany and Kailis & France took over the complete receivals of all tuna caught in Esperance.

**JD** What method of catching was employed?

**KENT** The method of catching was the pole method, known as the pole method where you frenzy the fish behind the vessels and just....

**JD** Frenzy them?

**KENT** Frenzys means[?] a feed frenzy to attract them to the vessel and then you pole them on with barbless hooks; you just pole them straight onto the vessel.

**JD** Do they use netting techniques here?

**KENT** No, no. There's no pursaning of tuna in Esperance in those days and there still isn't, though the South Australian's the only one that used pursane nets for catching tuna. We used to use a mulie bait system to attract the fish to the vessels and get them to frenzy so that we could pole direct onto the vessel.

**JD** So you'd come across a school and then you would start a feeding frenzy by bait and then pole them.

**KENT** That's correct, yeah. You would trawl lines behind your vessel till you got strikes or the fish were attracted to the lines. Then you got your strikes and you'd take the vessel back to the position where you got the strikes and that's where the schools of tuna would come up by attracting them with mulie bait. They would end up in a feeding frenzy. If you knew how to handle the fish you would create a.... Till you get them into a feeding frenzy and then you could just pole them on as fast as you could go. That's how we caught them.

**JD** How long would a frenzy last?

**KENT** A feeding frenzy lasts, in the main, a fairly short period of time but once you've got them to the vessel and the feeding frenzy gradually dies off, you just keep the fish there and you can keep poling them. Even though they've stopped the feeding frenzy, you just keep the bait going in a bit at a time to keep them at the vessel and you can keep poling them out of the water. Sometimes it lasts for five minutes. Sometimes it'll

last for an hour but it's very touchy again to keep them to your vessel all the time so that you can keep poling.

**JD** They'd be a skill in it.... experience would count?

**KENT** Yeah. I would say there'd be a fair bit of experience and skill to be able to hold the fish to your vessel so that you can just pole them on.

**JD** How many crew would you be employing on that sort of exercise?

**KENT** Usually the small boats in Esperance would only have three people on board. Odd ones would have four but mainly the vessels here were of a small size and they'd have three people on board. That would be including the skipper.

**JD** Could you describe the pole.

**KENT** Yeah. The poles used to be bamboo in the early stages. They were a bamboo pole about eight to nine feet long with a trace on that would be about five feet and on the end of the trace would be your barbless hook to pole. In the later stages we ended up with fibreglass poles that lasted much better and didn't break so often and were much more better for the fishermen to use.

**JD** So it's quite a short length of line attached to the pole?

**KENT** Yeah, quite a short length of line. It varied a little bit depending on the size of the person using the pole. If he was six foot tall he'd be able to handle a longer pole. A smaller man'd have a smaller pole but it didn't really matter because the fish had to come right to the vessel. You had to be able to just drop over the edge of the vessel and pole straight aboard.

**JD** And they would just throw them on the deck and then have a go at another one?

**KENT** Yeah, as fast as you could go. A good poler would have a fish in the air when he caught the next one in the water; before it had time to drop off and hit the deck he'd have another one on the hook ready to pull them aboard.

**JD** Must have been quite an experience?

**KENT** Yeah it was; quite an invigorating experience. It really got you going.

**JD** Was it a day time or a night time thing?

**KENT** Daytime; always daytime. The fishery or the fish, you could attract the fish at the first streak of daylight and you could catch them any time during the day till dark but once it got dark you couldn't attract the fish to your vessel.

**JD** What sort of tonnage were you catching?

**KENT** In the early stages we would catch.... the vessels were only capable of carrying anything from two to three to about five, six to eight tonnes but after a few years bigger vessels were brought into the industry and the tonnages increased accordingly. There was no sign of lack of fish in those days that I'm talking about.

**JD** Was it a seasonal fishery or was it throughout the year?

**KENT** Basically it was a season. Your peak fishing time would be from December through to April, May the following year so you had about five months fishery of the peak period, although the fish were available at other times but in much smaller quantities. It was unviable in the other period to try and catch them.

**JD** Did the weather stop you going out very often?

**KENT** The weather in Esperance is quite touchy as you probably know. The weather used to effect the fishing quite a lot. When it got too rough it was too rough to attract the fish to the vessel and the fish would keep away. The weather was a big factor in the tonnages that were landed in Esperance.

**JD** What sort of prices were you getting in the early days for tuna?

**KENT** This will be a bit hard to believe but when I first looked at the tuna industry I was offered round about \$300.00 a tonne to catch the fish. When I started the price actually dropped to \$100.00 a tonne. Nobody wanted them and then when the fishery got going it ranged from that as a peaked low and when I finished fishing it was about \$1200.00 a tonne. I've been finished for about three years or so now.

**JD** How did it come about that quotas were introduced?

**KENT** Quotas were introduced by the Federal Government. There was meetings between the Japanese scientists and Australian scientists and the New Zealand scientists that indicated that the tuna industry was becoming over exploited. The Japanese claimed that their long line vessels were getting less and less of the larger fish. The Japanese were quite concerned, as I understand it, that the Australians were catching more and more of the recruitment stock fish or the juvenile fish. That became a great concern to Japan and the Australian scientists started to look at the situation and agreed with the Japanese that the industry would become less and less viable, or the fish would become more and more less in the water and therefore the fish would break right down if they didn't control it.

**JD** What was the effect on the fishermen in Esperance of those quotas Bill?

**KENT** When the Federal Government first brought the quota in they allocated a State quota. I just forget the exact figures but Western Australia got a tonnage of 2,000 odd tonnes. The Australian quota, I just forget the exact figures. However they brought it in as a State quota and the better fishermen still survived quite well but the following year they brought in individual transferable quotas - ITQs they called them. The way they allocated the quotas out, it destroyed or put a lot of people in Western Australia in an uneconomical situation. Therefore a lot of them sold out of the industry.

The effect on the fishermen was really drastic. Some of the South Australians come across and bought the quotas off Western Australian fishermen at about.... between \$800.00 and \$1,000.00 per tonne was the price that the West Australians were selling out for. Meself, there was no way I would sell and I tried to encourage everybody else not to because I could see that the quota system would increase the tonnage value as time went on. That proved to be the case in future years. Now when the fishery was operating in Esperance, there were up to a hundred vessels operating in Esperance, licensed tuna vessels. Soon as the quota system come in, it dropped drastically down

to about 30 and at the present time there's only four or five vessels left in the industry in WA.

**JD** What sort of quota do those four or five vessels get? It would vary I imagine?

**KENT** I'm not quite sure of the quotas that are left on the vessels. People have bought quotas, sold bits of quotas, so I don't really know the tonnages that are left but the cut in quota since the quotas were originally put out is something like about 60 odd percents been taken off them since the quotas were first introduced so they're down to a very low level now of tuna quota.

**JD** What about prices, current prices?

**KENT** Current prices for tuna, southern blue fin tuna for smoking purposes is round about \$2,000.00 per tonne. The sushimi market in Japan, if they can get the quality fish suitable for the Japanese, can be anything from, I believe from about \$20.00 up to \$60.00 odd per kilo but the fish that the Japanese want's very hard to come by, to get the quality fish that they want.

**JD** Is that a question of size or age or what?

**KENT** Yes. Size is the important factor. The Japanese, they want fish from 30 kilo plus and the fat content's got to be at a certain level. It is a very specialised market and quality is the major factor with the Japanese. Very hard to meet their requirements, to get the big money.

**JD** Other than the sushimi market, what else do we do with the catch? Where do we market it?

**KENT** Well there's Kailis & France are the only operating cannery in Western Australia and I don't know how much they handle now. Some of the tuna is sent to South Australia or the Safcol Canning in [the] eastern states somewhere. I'm not sure quite where. They have closed down in Port Lincoln but I believe they operate in Eden or somewhere else they've got another cannery. Some of the tuna goes over to the east so that's the only markets left that I know of for our tuna.

**JD** There is some kind of smoking process taking place in Esperance isn't there?

**KENT** Yeah. There was a fellow by the name of Morrie Green who started a smoking business in Esperance. Concentrated on tuna, very successfully and created quite a good market for smoked tuna. However that's changed, not that the product's any different, but the company situation changed and Morrie Green is no longer in the company and it hasn't been anywhere near as successful as it was when Morrie Green was running it. The establishment is still in Esperance but has just changed hands and [been] taken over by new people and hopefully for the tuna industry, it will get back to where it was and want quite a lot of the tuna.

**JD** Is that to meet a local demand, a West Australian demand or is it exported?

**KENT** I'm not quite sure whether they got to the export stage but it was going Australia wide. It really took off and was creating quite a lot of interest. I'm sure they were trying to create an export market but whether that succeeded or not, I wouldn't know.



**JD** Bill where do you see the tuna fishery going in the future?

**KENT** Well in my opinion the tuna fishery is finished at the time being. At the levels of allowable catch it is practically unviable for fishermen. The only success that could be achieved in it would be to meet the Japanese sushi market. That's my opinion. If you can't catch for that market, the fish required by the Japanese, I don't think anybody'll make any money out of it at all. In future years when scientists keep reviewing the situation I'm positive that the industry will build up again and it will take quite a long time in my opinion; ten twelve years; might even be longer but I'm sure the fish will recoup and regenerate and there'll be a tuna industry in the future.

**JD** Bill can I ask you how you feel about foreign incursions into the fishing industry in this country.

**KENT** It creates quite a lot of concern in the fishing industry of foreign influences. I'd like to just mention the Japanese having fishing rights within the 200 mile limit into long lining of southern blue fin tuna when the Australians have been quoted to the state where they're almost out of business. It doesn't quite seem right to me that that should happen. While we're on the subject I'd just like to mention that the Chinese in the north have rights to land a percentage of their catches that is caught within the 200 mile limit, put onto the markets in straight competition to the Australian fisherman and there's proposals and submissions made by people around the southern area of the State for rights to allow the Russian trawlers to come in and be serviced and unload [a] percentage of their catches onto the Australian market. As a fisherman, or an ex-fisherman, or a future fisherman, I think it's drastic that these things should be considered and I don't really think the Government understands the full consequences of allowing that type of thing to take place.

**JD** What other problems do you see, particularly in the tuna industry, but extended beyond tuna into the fishing industry generally? What about depletion of stock?

**KENT** Yeah, that's a very good question and it brings up the whole subject of management. The depletion of the tuna stock is something that I have followed very closely. While I was an acting fisherman I took special note of recruitment stocks. The scientists were saying that the recruitment stocks were dropping off. It was not apparent in the beginning but I'm starting to believe that it is becoming noticeable of the drop-off in recruitment stocks. I still don't really consider it's as bad as they say but it does appear that the tuna recruitment has slacked off to what it used to be. Therefore it is very important that it be monitored closely to make sure that it is happening and if it is, the appropriate steps be taken. At the moment I'm inclined to think that the steps that have been taken were taken in a panic rather than a fully assessed reason for the quota system to be really implemented, but it is important that fisherman always watch that they don't over-exploit their fisheries; very important that they don't.

**JD** Do we market our product well?

**KENT** Not really. I think the marketing situation could be improved a hell of a lot. The handling of the product is not always the best and fish is a product that needs to be handled correctly. There's a lot more education put into it these days than when I first started fishing but it still could go a long way yet.

**JD** Do you feel that the industry is well managed or not well managed?

This interview is continued on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**KENT** You [were] referring to the management side of the fisheries. The management in Western Australia has leapt ahead in leaps and bounds; may be for the better, may be not at this stage which created a lot of confusion in the industry. We've just had limited entry shark fishery brought in in certain areas of WA. In the Esperance area we've just had a limited entry cray fishery introduced. Now the problems that I say with the management, unless it's carried out on the strict lines where people forfeit a certain amount on transfers, it'll defeat its purpose. The people that buy it have got to fish twice as hard as the people that were in the industry to meet their financial commitments.

At the present time the management schemes brought about more fishing effort than what it was planned to do to cut down fishing effort. That will straighten out in the future. Fisheries have gotta be managed and it's just a matter of getting the correct method to do it.

**JD** What's the relationship between the Fisheries Department and the fishermen? Is it a positive one, a productive one or is there opposition between the parties?

**KENT** Well when you're in a situation of management being brought about there's always conflicts and arguments on what's right and what's wrong and how it affects the individual fisherman. This puts pressure on departments. They're doing as they think best by their superiors and it's hard for individual fisheries inspectors to get the message across that it is for the best but it's a thing that's.... I can't see a real problem in our own particular area but there is that feeling there that we're getting pressurised by Fisheries Departments.

**JD** Do fishermen have an opportunity to have an input into decisions that are made?

**KENT** Well the Department would like to think so but I really don't believe so. We're asked our opinions on a lot of things and then the decisions get made. Maybe there's some notice taken but in most cases you'll find that the decisions are made from head office in Perth.

**JD** In your years in the industry, you must have come across some outstanding personalities for one reason or another outstanding. Can you mention some of them?

**KENT** It's a pretty basic industry I was involved in, the tuna industry mainly. The beginnings of it I think would be perhaps.... The McKenzies, a fellow by the name of Don McKenzie. Him and his sons were the first ones that I knew of in Esperance to take much notice of tuna. They perhaps rate as one of the best fishing families. The Albany fishermen come along and started it but I can't really point out any absolute outstanding people.

**JD** Bill is there anything else that you'd like recorded on this tape to do with tuna or with the industry generally?

**KENT** Well the tuna industry.... I believe there's a future in it but it's going to be a long time in the future before it really gets going again but I do believe it will. I'll prove.... the stock numbers will be the thing that'll that one. As far as the fisheries at the moment, their dead in my opinion but that's only a temporary thing. When all the management schemes are sorted out and the fishermen sort themselves out, the survivors will always survive and there'll be a good industry. I can see a lot of future in the fishing industry.

**JD** You've enjoyed your time in the industry, haven't you?

**KENT** Absolutely. Starting off as a cray fisherman and a shark fisherman didn't really excite me but when I got into the tuna industry, it really got me going. I really did enjoy me years as a tuna fisherman and I'll never see them again [laughs]. I'm a little bit too old to wait the length of time that's needed for the tuna industry to get back to what it was. I don't think it'll ever go back to the real old poling system. The value of the product must be considered more seriously than it was in those days and that's why it'll never go back to what it was. That's about the comments I'd like to make.

**JD** Well thank you very much for this interview and best of luck for the future.

**KENT** No problem. Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Bill Kent, ex-tuna fisherman of Esperance and ex-president of the Tuna Fisherman's Association. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey at Mr Kent's home in Esperance on the 11th January, 1990.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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## Verbatim transcript of an interview with BRIAN LEAHY

### INTRODUCTION

Brian Leahy is the manager of Nor-West Seafoods Pty Ltd at Carnarvon, Western Australia. The company is part of the Angliss Group.

Mr Leahy came to his present position after wide experience in Australia and overseas, much of it in the fishing industry. Nor-West Seafoods operate a large prawn trawling fleet in the Shark Bay and Exmouth Gulf areas, and processing in Carnarvon for overseas' and local markets, mainly prawns but also scallops.

In this interview Mr Leahy discusses the operation of the company and also more general matters of concern in the fishing industry: management regimes, competition from cultured prawns, availability and training of personnel and the recreational fishing effort for example. An issue of major concern in the Shark Bay area is the proposed World Heritage listing of the region and Mr Leahy deals at some length with the concerns of the fishing industry in respect to that proposal.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Leahy's office in Carnarvon, Western Australia on 12th of June, 1990. There are two sides on one tape and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

*JD* Would you record your full name, date and place of birth, please?

*LEAHY* My name is Brian John Leahy, born on 26th of October, 1949 in Cairns, Queensland.

*JD* Were you brought up in Queensland?

*LEAHY* Yes, in Cairns.

*JD* And you were educated there entirely?

*LEAHY* Yes.

*JD* And what did you do when you left school, Brian?

*LEAHY* The first job was with QBE Insurance in Cairns. That was from December, 1966, until August, 1972. I then transferred with them to Papua New Guinea, based in Port Moresby, for two years. I then left that company and returned to Cairns where I

worked in a family business with my first wife. We then left that business and embarked on an eighteen month working holiday in Europe. We returned to Cairns at the end of 1976. The first job that I took upon return was in the factory office of Penpack Ocean Products Pty Ltd, which was another operation of this company.

**JD** That's this Nor-West....

**LEAHY** Nor-West Seafoods which in turn is part of the Angliss Group in Australia. After some eighteen months in the factory office, an opportunity came to take the position of factory foreman, which I did and spent two years running the processing activities of that factory, which received product from our own company trawlers' operations which were mostly in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and also from quite a large number of privately owned trawlers operating on the coast of Queensland and also on the Gulf of Carpentaria.

**JD** Your factory was at Cairns?

**LEAHY** Based in Cairns, yes. After about two years in the factory another opportunity came to become the assistant manager of the operation, which I took, and that involved spending quite large times at sea, both on our own trawlers in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and also overseeing the operations of a mother shipping operation which used to run from Cairns up the east coast of Queensland into the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Torres Straits. I did that for about two and a half years.

The middle of 1983 I transferred to Auckland, New Zealand, to take over the management of a small company that was part of the Angliss Group operating in New Zealand.

**JD** Still on seafoods?

**LEAHY** Still on seafoods, yes. Its main roles were the importation of products from not only this company here in Carnarvon, our other seafood based operations within Australia, further processed product, crumbed and battered seafoods and also the processing of locally caught fish for export. A great majority of it being fresh chilled fish going to the eastern seaboard of Australia, Japan, Honolulu and United States of America. In February, 1986, I re-transferred from there to the current position of manager Nor-West Seafoods, Carnarvon.

**JD** And you've stayed in that position with the same company on this side? This is a new side, isn't it?

**LEAHY** This is a new side, yes. We've just moved in here less than one week ago. The whole operation was based on Babbage Island, Carnarvon, which is about five kilometres out of town, but we've re-located all of our operations apart from the processing to the new site here in the Carnarvon small boat harbour.

**JD** Is the processing going to come down here as well?

**LEAHY** The plans allow for that to happen at some time in the future, but there has been no decision made as to when that will be, but it will be not in the near future.

**JD** As manager, you will have had an input into the design of the complex, have you?

**LEAHY** That's right, yes, a very heavy input, as did the rest of the senior staff and virtually have been.... well we are responsible for exactly what you see here today.

**JD** It's early days yet, but are you happy with the way it's operating?

**LEAHY** Yes, yes well, we're probably only less than two thirds moved at the moment, but yes, there are no major problems. We seem to have done a good job [laughs].

**JD** And your major interest here is prawns I understand?

**LEAHY** Right. That probably accounts for about 80 per cent of our activities, although scalloping forms a major part of our operation as well and that's the major by-product. Of course, there are other by-products such as squid, cuttle fish and other commercially saleable scale fish.

**JD** And you handle all of those?

**LEAHY** That's right, yes.

**JD** Through the processing works and send them off to the market.

**LEAHY** And through our own marketing arms.

**JD** Yes. Your market for prawns is mainly Japan, is it?

**LEAHY** Yes, Japan still is the major market, although in the last two or three years we have diversified to break the stranglehold, and there are quite a lot of prawns now going to Europe, especially to Spain, some to the United States and, of course, the Australian domestic market is fairly important.

**JD** What about scallops? The scallop industry is going through a very difficult time in the eastern states, mainly apparently, through a decline in the stocks. Is there any indication of scallops here declining?

**LEAHY** Every scallop fishery in the world does not perform consistently. For a number of reasons the eastern states scallop fisheries that you refer to, one of their problems is the method of fishing.

**JD** Dredging.

**LEAHY** That's right. In that they in the past have used dredgers which are not allowable in Western Australia. We catch them with trawl nets and it makes quite a significant difference. The dredgers, of course, are very efficient. They are being dragged along the bottom so the scallops which are laying on the bottom are collected. Also it does quite a lot of damage to the bottom itself, which then in turn must have on-going effects. The situation in Western Australia is with our trawl and the scallops are actually only caught while they are swimming.

**JD** It's a bottom trawl?

**LEAHY** The net is going along the bottom but the net is set up off the ocean bottom itself. The only scallops which are caught are those which propel themselves up into the current flow and are actually swimming around. They are the only ones that collect in the net. The ones laying on the floor itself are not touched. In every sweep of the

trawl only a certain percentage of the scallops are actually caught, the ones that are swimming at the time. The ones that are laying dormant on the bottom are left alone, so it's less efficient but it allows, I suppose, a bit better consistent catch. The main effect on the scallops in Shark Bay is the effect of the Leeuwin current which flows down the coast of Western Australia from the north to the south and depending on its rate of flow, it acts like a venturi effect on Shark Bay, sucking water out or forcing water back in, and the scallops are, of course, greatly affected by that flow and the distribution, of course, is reliant very much on that. So that is the main effect on the scallops here. The average catch is about 250 to 300 tonne.

**JD** What's that a year?

**LEAHY** Per year, yes. That is of scallop meat, roe off. The scallops are all shucked roe off, as the main market is Hong Kong. Last year the scallop catch was 120 tonne. The previous year, 1988, was approximately 760 tonne, so you can see it's a very large fluctuation. We are very fortunate in Shark Bay on both the prawns and the scallops, in that right from almost the first day trawling activities commenced in Shark Bay nearly 30 years ago, management techniques were set in place by the West Australian Fisheries Department, and we've got an on-going reasonably stable fishery. We've had it for nearly 30 years.

**JD** Brian, about how many boats would be trawling for scallops?

**LEAHY** Fourteen.

**JD** Fourteen?

**LEAHY** Yes, this is now a limited entry fishery, and there are fourteen licences fishing specifically for scallops, although the 27 prawn trawlers that are licensed to fish Shark Bay can also take scallops.

**JD** Do those boats, are they company boats or are they owner operated?

**LEAHY** Both.

**JD** Both, and do they all supply to you or are there other processing plants?

**LEAHY** No. At the moment we have only one scallop trawler out of fourteen and seventeen out of the twenty seven prawn trawlers.

**JD** So there are other processors in scallops?

**LEAHY** That's right, there are other companies that may have one or two scallop, or prawn vessels, but in the main outside our company, they are all single owners.

**JD** Are there limitations on the size that may be taken in scallops?

**LEAHY** No, the only limitation is the seasonal open and closure time.

**JD** What about the net mesh?

**LEAHY** Yes, all the nets are regulated by the Fisheries Department. The size of the material, the mesh, the size of the net is all regulated.

**JD** And the market is mainly for Hong Kong?

**LEAHY** That's right, the majority of scallops going from Shark Bay are exported to Hong Kong or on to the Australian domestic market.

**JD** You have a large operation here. You must employ many people, both at sea and in the processing and handling the catch?

**LEAHY** That's right. This time of the year is the peak of the season. We have around about 250 people employed at the moment.

**JD** Do you have trouble getting suitable people?

**LEAHY** Yes, that is a problem. Less so in the catching side. Our own skippers have been with us for quite a considerable number of years and the turnover there is quite small. The crews are still fairly regular as well. There are quite a number of those who return every year and a few of those are up and coming skippers. They are doing their sea time, they are sitting for examinations, so we always have a follow through of people doing that. The major labour problems occur within the processing side where at the moment we'd have about 80/85 people employed. Three quarters of those are female (the rest are male, of course).

**JD** Do they come back year after year?

**LEAHY** Some do.

**JD** They'd be casual?

**LEAHY** Casuals. They're all employed casually for the season. In the four years that I've been in Carnarvon, there's never been any more than roughly 50 per cent of the people working in the processing sector which are locals, that's full time locals. We are reliant for the other 50 per cent on itinerant people coming through, and that's changed in the last four years as well. There used to be a number came up from Perth every year and worked the season. We don't see those any more. They've obviously taken probably more permanent labour down in the metropolitan area or somewhere else. So we are now almost totally reliant for the other 50 per cent on itinerant people, foreigners or Australians sort of having a working tour round Australia, and they can be here anywhere from a day to three or four months. But generally the average is probably two to four weeks. It's created problems for us. By the time we train them up then they leave us, so a fairly high turnover but Carnarvon (not only in this sector but in other areas) is seen as just a place to pass through, not to stop.

I must say on top of that whilst we struggle for labour it's common knowledge that there are always round about 700 people who are registered with the Social Security in this town.

**JD** But prefer not to work in the fish industry?

**LEAHY** Prefer not to work.



**JD** Would you say that in the Australian Fishing Industry we handle our product well and present it well?

**LEAHY** Yes, we do. We present it and handle it very well, especially in the prawning industries, although not in every case. I have visited some ports north of here, because we do buy product from other ports, Nickol Bay and Onslow, and the handling techniques there are not good. So there's been quite a bit of training or an attempt at training those people to present their product better, but the old school are very hard to change. But where we run a company operation the payment is not only based on the catch, it is also based on quality and our own crews are well aware of that responsibility.

**JD** Does the industry promote its product to the community sufficiently well?

**LEAHY** No, I don't think so. I think I saw a very good case of marketing whilst I was in New Zealand. The New Zealand Fishing Industry Board did an excellent job, I thought, in promoting their product, not only abroad, but within New Zealand itself. I've not seen anywhere near that standard achieved in Australia.

**JD** Do you think there's a need for better training in the processing and presentation of the product?

**LEAHY** Well, within our own operation we do carry out quite a lot of training. It's on-going from the moment you sign on the employment form. We have induction procedures and on-going training right through, and we move people around within the processing sectors weekly so that they don't get tired of the one job. But when you boil it down it's a fairly simple process. There are no great skills involved in processing prawns. The other areas, the fishing operation, of course, they are quite skillful and a skipper, to achieve a Skipper's Ticket, now must have spent 40 months at sea, which is virtually almost six seasons here, with a seven month season. They then, of course, have to pass the required examinations for that level of ticket. As I said earlier, we've got quite a number always coming through the ranks doing that, so we see at this stage that there is still a good on-going flow.

**JD** Brian, there's a considerable importation of aquacultured, or farmed prawns from Asia into Australia now. That must be a worry to the industry.

**LEAHY** Not really. Australia is a nett importer of prawn. In other words we import more prawn than we export. The prawn that is imported (generally coming from south east Asia) tend to be the smaller varieties going to restaurants or for the crumbing and battering line, whereas we (or our mangement programme in Shark Bay at least) move towards producing the largest prawn possible which is highly sought on the export market, simply because the cultivated prawn can't achieve those sizes economically. So this is very important for our future, in that we continue to do this. It is the only way that we can combat at this stage, the cultivated prawn production.

**JD** There's a (or there seems to be) a considerable move towards prawn farming within Australia too, in some of the northern areas. Have you considered that? Is it a worry at all?

**LEAHY** It's a worry, although to my knowledge, there is no-one that has managed to really achieve prawn cultivation in Australia to the extent that the Asian countries have, but it will only be a matter of time. Our company has some ten years ago, tried

or been involved in that. It was unsuccessful, but I do perceive that there will be a time it will come.

**JD** The fishery, as you've mentioned is (and has been for 30 years) closely managed by the Fisheries Department, with input from the industry. Is it a successful management regime?

**LEAHY** Yes, quite successful. I don't think there are probably any fisheries in the world that can say that they have survived for 30 years. The management is on-going. We still don't have exactly the same management practices that we had 30 years ago. As a matter of fact, just prior to the start of the season this year, eight prawn trawlers were removed on a voluntary buy-back scheme, to lessen the effort in the fishery. The reduction in effort was mainly brought about by technology. There's always been limits on the size of the nets, the number of boats, the size of the engines, but technology in the way of radar, sounders and sonars, are very hard to regulate and it's mainly for this reason that that effort of eight trawlers has been removed.

**JD** Was that a combined decision between industry and Government?

**LEAHY** Yes, the management is always a combined decision. The Department of Fisheries and Industry work very closely and amicably and always have done, on the management measures.

**JD** That's not a typical pattern in some other parts of Australia, is it?

**LEAHY** No, it isn't.

**JD** What about the relationship with other government departments, Marine and Harbours for instance?

**LEAHY** The same applies at least in Shark Bay and Carnarvon. We have a very good relationship, not only the company, but the fishing industry. On a local basis anyway, we have a very good relationship, although we do have problems. Of course, the fishing industry must operate out of the Carnarvon small boat harbour. For some time now the main channel leading in to the harbour has been silting up, so much so that already since the start of this season, something like seven or eight trawlers have run aground in mid channel, and there's been quite a lot of lobbying being done in an attempt to fix that up. Tenders have gone, or been advertised, but at this stage, it's unlikely that any work will get done until later in the season. It's a major concern to us, of course, having just spent two and a half million dollars relocating, knowing that it was there but not being able to get anything done, but we were already committed so.... at this stage, we haven't had any problems ourselves. Mainly the larger private trawlers are the ones having difficulties at this stage. Unless something is done soon, we will not be able to get in to the port.

**JD** Government charges have escalated considerably in some respects, haven't they?

**LEAHY** That's right. On the 1st of July last year, some port costs increased by up to 600 per cent locally. I must say a little bit on the defence of the Department though, that the charges prior to that were a little bit ridiculous, but probably the best way would have been to increase them over a longer period rather than one dramatic step.

**JD** One of the problems confronting the industry in this part, is the World Heritage listing of Shark Bay. That would be a very major problem for your company, would it not?

**LEAHY** That's right. It's a major problem not only for the company but the whole of the fishing industry. You have to realise that the value at the moment of the fishing industry to Shark Bay, is around about 40 to 45 million; it employs up to 500 people, capital investment of about 100 million. If you look at the other areas of Australia that have been World Heritage listed, and what has happened in those areas, then certainly we are fearful of that coming to Shark Bay.

**JD** Do you see any conflict of interest between the fishing industry and tourism?

**LEAHY** There is, but not directly with the prawning activities. The prawning and scalloping activities take part in the deeper water which is not readily accessible by tourists, but the major problem will come with the in-shore fisheries, the scale fisheries, where the large number of tourists and amateur fishermen, of course, are unhappy with activities (commercial activities) taking place in those areas. But at this stage, we haven't come across a problem in Shark Bay.

Further north, the major problem tends to be the other way, whereas the commercial fishermen see the activities of the amateurs as being detrimental in that people come up with freezer trailers and stay as long as they've got them filled, and then depart back to Perth with huge loads of fish.

**JD** Can they sell their catch, do you think?

**LEAHY** Well, I wouldn't really like to comment but it must go somewhere and some of the freezer trailers I've seen going back south, they couldn't possibly eat that much - but maybe they have a lot of friends.

**JD** This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## **TAPE 1 SIDE B**

**JD** Brian, I understand that before World Heritage listing came on the scene that there was a Region Plan drawn up for this whole Shark Bay area. Is that the case?

**LEAHY** That's right. The Region Plan was proposed by the West Australian State Government. Some three years ago the development of that commenced. The prompter for that was World Heritage listing. There was talk of that some three years ago and the State were most concerned that there was no real proper management plan, hence the development of that to possibly thwart World Heritage listing coming on stronger. As it's turned out that's exactly what has happened. But the Region Plan was prepared by the Department of Conservation and Land Management and the Department of Land Administration, and very importantly, it was prepared in very close consultation with all the basic industries that exist in Shark Bay, and the people that live in Shark Bay.

**JD** Including the fishing industry.

**LEAHY** Including the fishing industry, yes. So we are most supportive of that Region Plan and we cannot understand why World Heritage listing needs to be involved at all in the area. We have a very good plan which takes into account all the requirements of both the people that live here and those that want to come up and enjoy the area. The areas which need to be looked after and protected, are, and yet the industries which have been here for (some of them) up to 100 years, can go on in their traditional ways.

**JD** Is that Region Plan fully developed or is it still a review?

**LEAHY** It's still being developed. The major stage we're going through at the moment is formulating the boundaries of the marine park. The initial boundaries proposed by Conservation and Land Management Department did not conform with those that were required by the fishing industry, but the major problems in that area have been resolved and there's still some further discussions to go, but in the very near future there should be agreement on those.

**JD** Was it envisaged that there would be an authority set up that would control that development or would it be controlled by say CALM?

**LEAHY** No, the authority is National Parks and Nature Conservation Authority. They are the people that will manage the area and the make-up of that authority, of course, does include people from the Conservation and Land Management Department. It also includes quite a number of conservationists. Unfortunately as far as the fishing industry goes, we do not have a representative on it. Up until about November, 1989, we did have a representative. He was from the West Australian Fishing Industry Council, but just prior to the issuing of the Notice of Intent for the boundaries of the marine park, the make-up was changed and we lost our representative, and he was replaced by a representative from the amateur fishermen. So, on top of everything else, this is a major concern to the industry, in that in such an important event as the Region Plan and the marine park boundaries, we have an industry worth 40 to 45 million dollars annually, employing up to 500 people, the industry does not have a representative on the body that is going to manage it.

**JD** But industry is still pushing for a representative?

**LEAHY** Oh yes, it's a very important point as far as we're concerned. Not only to shape the boundaries so that our traditional fisheries can be retained, but to have a voice in the management of it which we don't have at the moment, which I think is nothing less than shameful.

**JD** If World Heritage listing takes place, how will that affect the development plan - or the Region Plan?

**LEAHY** The politicians tell us - and I must say this is just prior to the Federal election, the build-up to it - the politicians (both State and Federal) assured us that if the area was listed, then the World Heritage listing would mirror the Region Plan and therefore, also the marine park that forms part of the Region Plan, and that it would be controlled by bilateral legislation. Any changes to the management would have to be first passed by both Houses of the West Australian Government before Federal Government could get their hands on it. But the industry as a whole remains quite cynical not only to the politicians, but to that bilateral legislation, because there is nothing to assure us that it won't be any different to the other areas in Australia that have been listed so far.

**JD** There is built into the plan, is there not, of provision for review?

**LEAHY** In the management of the marine park, the Conservation and Land Management regulations allow for a review within ten years, but that review can take place at any time in the ten years. The marine park as it stands at the moment, does allow for commercial activities (including trawling) inside the marine park, but industry is not prepared to go that track because of that regulation reviewing the management. We feel that that can quite quickly be changed and I must say, it can be changed without consultation with industry. So we're quite fearful of that and that is why we wish our activities to continue outside the boundaries of the marine park.

**JD** Industry is still fighting the battle?

**LEAHY** Industry is still fighting the battle and will continue to fight the battle until an agreement is reached from all parties.

**JD** What is the organisation within the industry that is taking up the cudgels?

**LEAHY** The main spokesperson for all West Australian fishing is the West Australia Fishing Industry Council, WAFIC.

**JD** Have you had any feedback from the local community in Carnarvon and Denham, say, as to their reactions to the proposed World Heritage listing?

**LEAHY** In the last three years I've attended almost every meeting to do with Region Plan, World Heritage listing and marine parks, including a number of public meetings held in Denham, and those public meetings, there's a good cross section of those people that reside in Shark Bay, that is fishermen, pastoralists, tourists and people who just live in Shark Bay because of it's quiet lifestyle, and it was 100 per cent totally against World Heritage listing. Every public meeting I've attended has endorsed that 100 per cent, including the people like our current Environment Minister (State Environment Minister) Bob Pearce, who in front of some 400 people one evening, stated that if the local people did not want World Heritage listing, then the State Government would not support it. Now unfortunately, Mr Pearce has somewhat stepped back on that matter under pressure from the Federal Government.

**JD** But the community was happy about the Region Plan?

**LEAHY** Totally happy. The consultation there was tremendous. Everybody had their say in forming it. The plan totally reflects what the people of Shark Bay see as being the best for everybody.

**JD** Brian, clearly the whole question of the Region Plan and World Heritage listing, the marine park, is of vital concern to the fishing industry in these parts and, of course, it's of concern to the conservation lobby and the community generally. Let's hope it can be resolved to the satisfaction of all, if that is possible. Could we turn to another matter of importance? That's the question of employment of Aboriginals in the fishing industry. Does your company employ Aboriginals?

**LEAHY** Yes, we do employ some. It's nowhere near as many as what we'd possibly like to have. The Aboriginal population of Carnarvon is about 25 per cent, so they really are a large part of the community. As I mentioned earlier in this interview, we are always having problems with attaining enough employment, especially in the processing sector through the season, and in the past we've instigated a number of

attempts to promote more employment from the Aboriginal community. They haven't been a great success. They may have been initially. At least two occasions, I know we started off with certainly more than we normally have, but the position fairly quickly reverted to its usual content. The numbers that are actually working with us at the moment will probably now be somewhere around about only a dozen or so; mostly female. Those people are I suppose, are mostly more coloured than Aboriginal. The number of full-blood Aboriginals in Carnarvon whilst being great, is probably dominated by the half-caste and it's generally those coloured people though, that have inter-bred, that work for us, that blood being mixed from Malays, Kopangers, Chinese. Going back almost 100 years, those families still reside here. But we have really made intensive efforts in the last few years to attract more people, but not a great success. Within the actual fishing sector on the trawlers there would virtually be nobody.

**JD** Just to finish off the interview, how do you see... do you have confidence in the future of the industry in this area? Do you see any room for expansion, for example?

**LEAHY** No. There is no room for expansion of the fishing industry in Shark Bay. It is with its current management, at its maximum sustainable yield, and will not increase, certainly from wild stocks. There have been attempts at cultivation of one operation based in Carnarvon - farming oysters. They've been here for some four years now, and they still have not reached their commercial stage but they are always confident. Other trials are continuing with the seeding of rafts full of scallops, so it's to be hoped that possibly that might be a productive avenue sometime in the future. But the wild stocks have been at their maximum sustainable yield for some time; that includes the scale fish, the main fish being schnapper, the same with the prawns and scallops. It's well controlled and regulated now to about 450 tonne per year. But the greatest immediate problem we have is the possible imposition of World Heritage which could possibly mean the removal of not only the fishing industry, but the basic industries in the region.

Outside of that, the other problem is the competition by cultivated prawn production, mostly in south east Asia. The total output in prawns in Shark Bay is some 2000 tonne. Last year the output of cultivated product from Thailand alone, was 100 thousand tonne. So as other countries gear up then the problem becomes greater, but we are confident we will survive by our own management measures by producing the largest prawns of the best quality.

**JD** Let's hope so, and thank you very much for this interview. You've raised very, very important issues. Thank you very much.

**LEAHY** Glad to be of help.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Brian Leahy of Carnarvon, Western Australia.

END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with JANE LIDDON

### INTRODUCTION

This interview with Jane Liddon, lady skipper of the fishing boat **Skippy** was recorded by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University as part of the Australian Fishing Industry Council's History of the Australian Fishing Industry project.

The interview was conducted on the verandah of her home in Glenfield, Geraldton, Western Australia, on the 8th November 1989. The venue is in a bushland setting overlooking her anchorage on the West Australian mid-west coast, which explains perhaps the bird calls and dog songs that may be in evidence in the background. Jane Liddon is no dilettante, she is an experienced and successful skipper of a rock lobster fishing boat operating along the mid-west coast and from the Abrolhos Islands. What she has to say about her vessel and techniques she employs, as well as her comments on the industry generally, are relevant and historically significant. She presents here an enviable lifestyle and is a relaxed, interesting and personable young woman with whom it has been a pleasure to talk.

There is just one side of one tape. The interview commences at 025 on the rev counter.

This is Side A Tape 1 of an interview with Jane Liddon. Jane is the skipper of the fishing boat **Skippy**.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

*JD* Jane, would you record your full name, place of origin and date of birth, please.

*LIDDON* My name is Jane Liddon. I was born in Dover, England, in 1950.

*JD* Thank you. Both parents were English I presume?

*LIDDON* Yes.

*JD* And how did they come to bring you out to Australia?

*LIDDON* My father emigrated with my mother and all the children, and my mother's sister, when I was six and we came to Geraldton to actually go fishing because my parents.... well, my father and my mother's sister had been fishing in Dover and doing salvage work, and they decided it was too cold. [Laughs].

*JD* Yes, and the whole family came out, did they?

**LIDDON** Yes we all came to live here then; and later, more members of the family - my grandmother came, and my mother's other sister.

**JD** So pretty well the whole family is out here now?

**LIDDON** Yes, that's right.

**JD** Do you have brothers and sisters?

**LIDDON** Yes, I had a brother who used to skipper one of these boats but he's dead; and I've got two sisters. One who has skippered another crayfishing boat and also another one who's skippered a small boat the same as this one.

**JD** You would have then lived most of your life in the Geraldton area? Went to school here? Is that right?

**LIDDON** Yes, I went to school here and then I left and went to art school.

**JD** Art school, did you?

**LIDDON** Yes.

**JD** Where?

**LIDDON** In James Street in Perth.

**JD** Oh, right!

**LIDDON** And I did that, and then I travelled a bit and I started teaching. I taught at first in India, in a little place called Auroville. I taught art there. And then I started teaching.... for about six years I did that, in Fremantle then, after India. And then I started fishing.

**JD** You taught in government schools, or private schools, or.... ?

**LIDDON** No, I taught in private schools - Lance Holt.

**JD** Oh, right.

**LIDDON** And the Fremantle Community School. I taught there for five years.

**JD** About when would that have been?

**LIDDON** Half way through '70 to '81.

**JD** Jane, how did you come to be involved in fishing yourself?

**LIDDON** Well, I couldn't help it really. From when I was six we grew up loving the islands and spending every spare moment of holiday and half the time doing correspondence living there when we were children.

**JD** Was that the Channel Islands?



**LIDDON** No, that's the Abrolhos Islands.

**JD** Oh, of course!

**LIDDON** You see, yes.

**JD** Oh, I though you meant back in the old country.

**LIDDON** No, no. Here. When I was six I arrived here; I was still only just starting to grow. So we spent our whole childhood at the Abrolhos Islands when they seemed much further away because the boats were slower in those days, and the season was longer. And so we all grew up playing in dinghies, and making rafts and building our own little pots. We just grew up doing it. And my aunt, she had her own boat then, so to us it was just a normal thing that people did. That's simple. [Laughter].

**JD** And your sisters also were involved in the industry?

**LIDDON** Yes, both of them. Both in the crayfishing industry. I think Anne's also worked in tuna as well.

**JD** Are they still in the industry?

**LIDDON** No, no. I think Anne probably will be, she's got a young child at the moment; but my other sister's now in New Zealand.

**JD** But out of fishing?

**LIDDON** Yes, out of fishing.

**JD** And to come back to when you were adult and you'd sort of taught for a while, why did you leave teaching and come into fishing?

**LIDDON** Basically because I was going to get.... to divide my labour more evenly and I was going to have more time to do my own painting, and the work period would be more intense. But then I'd have half the year that was my own time, with my money I'd earned in the other half by working so hard. So I decided.... just that it was a time in my life when I'd got sick of teaching and wanted to do my own work - painting - and that just became the most obvious thing to do.

**JD** Do you still paint?

**LIDDON** Yes. Well it's still the reason why I fish now.

**JD** And do you exhibit?

**LIDDON** No, I've been selling them, though.

**JD** Have you?

**LIDDON** Yes, I'm selling them from my house and from the framer's. It's worth quite a lot. A lot of them get sold [laughs] from him while they're getting framed.

**JD** What do you do, landscapes, seascapes?

**LIDDON** I've done quite a few paintings of the islands. Yes, landscapes. And quite a few Indonesian.... yes, landscapes basically; sort of buildings as well as the land. And the sea, of course.

**JD** And when you came in sort of professionally to the fishing industry, did you start off as a deckhand?

**LIDDON** Oh yes, you have to. Yes, I started off.... I mean I worked as a deckhand in little bits when I was young.... before I was 12. And then I had my first real deckhand job with my aunt when I was 14. And then after that I often worked the whites.

**JD** Wouldn't it be very heavy work for a girl of 14?

**LIDDON** Yes it is pretty heavy, but when I was 14 I think I would probably have got a lot of help because Moo had been working - Moo is my aunt - had been working on her own, so, you know, I probably wasn't very good when I was 14.

**JD** And then you took your ticket?

**LIDDON** Yes, I did that. Yes. Much later.

**JD** And then skippered the same boat, was it, or a different boat?

**LIDDON** Yes the same boat. Well, it's a different boat now, but it was the same. I also skippered another boat, my father's boat, **Yellow Bird**. But they're all similar boats, they're small, aluminium, jet boats; 25 foot with a 351 Ford it used to be, now it's a Chevy engine. It's a car engine really, and a Hamilton jet from New Zealand. My father, when he first came to live in Geraldton, was also a shipwright and so he built a lot of boats in Geraldton and he gradually evolved the perfect boat for working the Southern Group Reef. And that's what we've got now; which is an aluminum boat that you can't really hurt. It doesn't matter how many times you hit the bottom, and there's no propeller to knock off, so you can get into little holes and places where it's shallow, and in the foamies, on top of the flat plate reef.

**JD** Right! [Do you] catch a lot of crays?

**LIDDON** Well that's the only reason we do it.

**JD** Is there anything else you can add about the jet boats because I haven't spoken to anyone else that....?

**LIDDON** Well, they're small boats basically. They can't range far and carry their pots and fish a big area, but they're built specifically. We only stack on maybe six or seven pots and move them about, but range over a big, long sort of half moon reef, twelve miles long, and so you've got little places all along where you use one pot to cover seven different spots, depending on the conditions. So you move them in and out rather than have great lines out to sea. It's not a very high-tech type of fishing because we don't use many aids, only our memories, and judgement depending on conditions on the day; knowledge of the conditions.

**JD** So it's a little more like fishing in the old days.

**LIDDON** Yes it is. Yes it is a bit more like that. But also in the old days people fished deep water, whereas I fish mostly where I can see. I can see everywhere I set my pots, I can see the bottom. I sit them next to little particular places that I know are there, caves and things.

**JD** Because the water is particularly clear on the Abrolhos.

**LIDDON** Well, most of the time, yes. But you do get a big swell and it silts up a bit.

**JD** The season starts in March, does it not? I've been told.

**LIDDON** Yes, the island season. So we, because we've got such a small boat, we can't really fish a long white season and follow the crays out like the big boats do, so we only fish from now until Christmas. That's six weeks or so; and then we pack up and we go to the islands, and the island season begins on March 15th.

**JD** Do you steam across?

**LIDDON** Yes.

**JD** And the fishing that you do on the coast here, is it north or south of here, or both?

**LIDDON** Well, I personally fish north, inside the oakagee up there's shallows and lumps that you can fish inside first before the whites start. I fish there for a little while and then when the whites all come out of the sand and start moving, I move out; only usually to 10 or 12 fathoms, that's about it. Because at this time of the year it's very windy and the southerly comes in quite strong, and that little boat's really made for inside water. You can't go out in the screaming southerly, it's like a little wild horse.

**JD** Yes. Your anchorage can be seen from your front verandah here where we're sitting.

**LIDDON** Mmm. Very convenient.

**JD** Do you move your anchorage throughout the season, other than to go to the islands?

**LIDDON** No, no. We don't. We have done in previous years, sometimes we've been up and fished Kalbarri and Moo used to go down and fish at Cliff Head, but these days we don't. We just fish here. That's sort of convenient.

**JD** Right. And you have a deckhand?

**LIDDON** Yes. At the moment my deckhand is my son. He's having his year off.

**JD** How old is he?

**LIDDON** He's eighteen.

**JD** And he's leaving you next year to go to college?

**LIDDON** Yes. Oh, well, he's just having.... he didn't want to go straight from school to university.

**JD** Will you have any difficulty getting another deckhand?

**LIDDON** [Laughs]. Oh no, no. No difficulty at all.

**JD** Have you ever had male deckhands that were not family?

**LIDDON** Oh yes. Mostly. I mostly do have male deckhands who aren't family.

**JD** How does that work out?

**LIDDON** Oh it's fine. Most problems I have had.... one deckhand who didn't really like - decided he didn't like - working for a woman because he didn't, you know.... he felt he should be driving and I should be doing the work. [Laughs]. But most of them were quite happy. I usually have one deckhand for quite a while.

**JD** They don't sort of leave quickly?

**LIDDON** No. No it's not a problem.

**JD** Good.

**LIDDON** It's quite a nice job, that's why. In some ways it's nicer than going and stacking all your pots on in great long lines out to sea. And you see lots of dolphins and turtles, and you see the bottom, the shark, fish. It's sort of, if you like more enjoyable. Usually my deckhands are surfers as well.

**JD** And your working day perhaps wouldn't be as long as some of the other boats?

**LIDDON** No, we haven't got as many pots so they don't earn quite so much money but they've got some of the day. Usually I come home early enough to go surfing - that's what I'm saying. [Laughter]. And it's more pleasant than going out in the really deep water. It gets pretty sloppy where we are but it's just, you know, nicer.

**JD** Are there many days in the season when you can't get out because of the weather?

**LIDDON** Only usually in June. I don't work the whole of June any more because of that. I usually.... we get our sort of quota in by the beginning of June and come home. The rest of June the weather's usually so awful and the crays are mostly caught by then as well.

**JD** Yes. And you finish then in June?

**LIDDON** Yes, bring the boat home; put it up the back there on the hard.

**JD** Take it out of the water?

**LIDDON** Oh yes. That's what's so good about it really, and then you can switch off; you don't have to think about that until the beginning of next season which is six months away. So it's quite good.

**JD** What about the maintenance of the boat?

**LIDDON** Well you do that pre-season. I mean, what we do is we take it, we pour oil down it, so you fill the whole block up with oil. Take the starter motor, alternator, the carby off. You know, wrap them up in rags and put rags down the holes, just to sort of close it up, and just leave it. You have to do maintenance every year. You have to have bits of welding done; and have to change engines fairly regularly because they're only petrol engines, they don't last long.

**JD** What about the hull?

**LIDDON** Oh, the hull is aluminium. We can just cut a bit out and weld another bit in, it's very good, I mean we hit the bottom a lot.

**JD** Do you?

**LIDDON** Yes, because we work on a reef half our pots are in very shallow water on top of the reef where you often bang it. It's a hard plate where the foam is coming over it, so there's rock, but there's crayfish there, you see. There's only a few boats - two boats - who can do that now. They've all gone big and that's our main advantage, that's what the boat is for, for those places, because they are worth it. We can make a living from that. There's more and more big boats. See at this time of the year you can catch a lot of crayfish by being able to put all your pots on your boat and follow the crayfish. Whereas the way we do it at the islands, which is our main season, is more they come in and fill all the places up again. We catch those ones and next year they are all filled up again, and you go and catch from the same places.

**JD** Jane, do you make your own pots or do you buy them in?

**LIDDON** No, we use quite a lot of stick pots which we buy secondhand and then cover them with wire, because they're very tough in the breakers, they just roll and you can go and get them and put them back there again. They don't smash up.

**JD** There wouldn't be many fishermen still using stick pots would there?

**LIDDON** Oh quite a few.

**JD** Are there!

**LIDDON** Yes, there's quite a few. A lot of the Italian fishermen here who fish similar ground use stick pots.

**JD** When you say stick pot, does that mean....?

**LIDDON** Those round sort of ones.

**JD** Yes, are they cane or ti tree?

**LIDDON** Ti tree, yes, with cane necks.

**JD** And is ti tree still readily available?

**LIDDON** Well, it seems to be. They must be cutting it from somewhere. They are still clearing land, aren't they? [Laughs].

**JD** Yes, well they are. And do you actually make the pot?

**LIDDON** No, no. I have made pots, I used to when I was a child - make my own pots. Moo showed me how to, my auntie; she made hers then. But we buy them now. We usually buy secondhand stick pots and cover them with wire netting which makes them quite strong and you can't smash those.

**JD** I don't suppose you'd need winches?

**LIDDON** Oh we need winches, they're heavy, because a lot of them where the... There are big breakers at the Abrolhos Islands because they've come from Africa and it comes up fast, it shelves steeply from very deep to quite shallow, so they really... When you get a big swell your pots wash right over so they need to be able to stand up to it, and that's what those particular kind of pots are very good for.

**JD** Do you ever scare yourself?

**LIDDON** Oh, I've had a few scares. [Laughter]. I'm not really scared of dying, only scared of just having the embarrassment of rolling the boat. It happens every year, somebody does it.

**JD** Do they?

**LIDDON** Oh yes, it's quite a wild reef the southern Abrolhos. All the reefs there. Oh every year more than one person rolls the boat in the breakers there.

**JD** Do they have fatalities?

**LIDDON** Oh yeah, the odd one. Yes. I mean this boat's been rolled several times but not by me, because we've got flotation in them and when they go they go upside down and float upside down in the water. So you can go and climb back on them and wait until someone comes and pulls you along. Better than having a life raft and the boat goes to the bottom and you're left with the life raft. [Laughs].

**JD** Yes. Jane, you would have radio wouldn't you?

**LIDDON** Yes, we've got a radio.

**JD** And you don't live on the boat when you're at the island?

**LIDDON** No, live on an island. There's a lot of small coral islands and we live on [them]. And my father and Moo, my aunt, have lived on one there since.... for thirty years, in 1956 we first went there. So it's been like part of our world.

**JD** Sure. You'd miss it wouldn't you now?

**LIDDON** Oh yes, you miss it if you don't go.

**JD** Jane, what else would you like to comment upon so that it's recorded on this tape, in regard to the industry? Either in the past or the present.

**LIDDON** I think the Fisheries Department has done a very good job in conserving the crayfishing industry and I dread to think what it would be like without them. And also, I don't know, Bernie Bowen has really done a good job in looking after the islands, I think. You know nothing has happened there very much and the fishermen have gradually become more aware over the years of what a valuable resource it is, and I think the consciousness is there now for it to, you know, only get better and cleaner. I think early on things weren't very good for a while, but it was only some fishermen always.

As regard the industry. The only thing that worries me a little bit about it at the moment is the split pricing that is occurring with the fact that the Japanese are prepared to pay so much for the very small crayfish. I don't know what really, in the long term it's going to make the big boats try and fish the inshore areas really hard and I think that, in the long term, might damage the industry and I don't know how it will be resolved. If it was just Fishermen's Co-ops they'd just probably average to one price and pay one price, but because there's a lot of.... well, it's big business, so there are a lot of companies prepared to pay an exorbitant price for a very small crayfish, so it is going to make people try and catch those little red ones which are very much inshore crayfishing. I don't know.

**JD** Fishermen nowadays often have enormous debt and in order to service that debt they just have to catch fish, don't they?

**LIDDON** Yes, well that's true. Anyway, I mean, it's fishermen who have bought into the industry fairly recently would have enormous debt. Most fishermen who have been in the industry for any time I shouldn't imagine should have enormous debt.

**JD** No, no. It's the very high price of licences.

**LIDDON** Yes. Yes, that's right.

**JD** That seems to be the major problem for the new person coming in.

**LIDDON** Yes that's right. Also it is a very competitive industry and they are getting bigger and bigger, and faster and faster. But we've sort of.... my father also owns a small boat like this. We've done a tangent and we've kept our fisheries small and not high-tech, more to do with remembering. But I really still fish in an old, like you say, in an old fashioned way and I like it like that, and I think it is right for us.

**JD** And you've found a little sort....

**LIDDON** Niche!

**JD** Niche, in the market....

**LIDDON** Yes, that's right!

**JD** ....and in the industry.

**LIDDON** Yes, that suits - that I like the style of. And my family does too, because, yes, it's a lifestyle as well. We're not just into it just for the money, not at all. You

know a lot of it is a lifestyle, otherwise we'd have, you know, a huge boat with more and more pots.

**JD** And a huge debt, and a lot of worry.

**LIDDON** Yes, that's right. We've chosen a different way to do it.

**JD** Oh good on you. It's been great to talk to you. Anything else you'd like to say before we finish?

**LIDDON** There's nothing that I can think of in particular.

**JD** Just tell me about this **Lady of the Reef**?

**LIDDON** A video made by a team of French people and it was made for Telesea, a French programme about the sea. I think they worked with Taimac in Perth, which is now called Western Images, and they produced a 48 minute sort of video called **Lady of the Reef**. The French director did several and they were a series called **Portraits**.

**JD** And you were one of the....

**LIDDON** Yes, I was the.... And my father is in it quite a lot as well, and it's quite a good video actually. It has been on television in France and I've got hundreds of letters from people wanting a job. [Laughter]. Because they were very lucky while they were there, it was fantastic weather. If you live on this coast you know that calm weather is fairly rare and they had five flat, glassy days, one after the other. So they probably thought it was always like that. The only thing they were sad about was that the swell wasn't larger. [Laughter].

**JD** That was a great experience for you.

**LIDDON** Well they made quite a nice video which for us, for the family, is sort of like a bit of history. We'll keep it. It's quite nice.

**JD** Yes, lovely! Jane, do you have any plans to leave the industry at all?

**LIDDON** Well not yet. It's a very good way to make a living I think. It suits. I like the work because I really love the islands. I don't particularly like the whites, fishing on this season is not my favourite, but it's short - I do have a fairly short day. But I love the place, that's what it is about fishing there and I know all the different packs of dolphins and things, and because I've grown up there it's very familiar.

**JD** Yes, it's home in a way.

**LIDDON** Yes.

**JD** Jane, thank you, it's been a delight to talk to you.

**LIDDON** Oh well, thanks.

**JD** Thank you.



That is the end of this interview with Jane Liddon. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey at her home at Glenfield, Geraldton, on the 8th November, 1989.

END OF RECORDING

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with MICK LOMBARDO

### INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Mick Lombardo was recorded for Murdoch University as part of the History of the Australian Fishing Industry being produced by the University for the Australian Fisheries Research Council.

Mr Lombardo is a member of a very prominent Fremantle family. He was born and educated in Western Australia and entered the fishing industry when as a boy of thirteen years, he joined his fisherman father, Vincenzo Lombardo, with whom he served a long apprenticeship, and gained much hands-on experience in many facets of the industry on the west coast.

More recently he and his family have diversified their business interests into many other endeavours, and for the most part have been highly successful. In many ways the Lombardo story is also the story of the fishing industry on this west coast. The family members have prospered as has the industry, but not without a great deal of hard and sustained effort. This is evident in the account recorded on this tape. It is a story of outstanding achievement and a very significant contribution to the history of the Australian fishing industry.

This interview was recorded by Jack Darcey in Fremantle on the 29th of November, 1989. There is one tape of two sides and the interview starts at 025 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Mr Lombardo, would you record your full name and date of birth and place of birth, please?

**LOMBARDO** Yes, my full name is Michele Lombardo. I'm known as Mick Lombardo and Michele is spelt MICHELE. My date of birth is the 17th of the 4th of 1937, and I was born in Fremantle.

**JD** And were you educated in Fremantle?

**LOMBARDO** I was educated in Fremantle. I went to Beaconsfield Primary School and afterwards to Fremantle Boys' High School.

**JD** And where were your parents born?

**LOMBARDO** My father was born in Cappo del Lando in Sicily and my mother was born in Bunbury or just.... I believe it was out of Bunbury at a place called Mornington Hills.

**JD** When did your father come to Australia, Mick?

**LOMBARDO** My father came here in 1926 on a... well I believe it was a sailing ship, a cargo ship, and he jumped ship in, I think it was Bunbury, possible Busselton, but he was down that way.

**JD** He was a seafarer?

**LOMBARDO** Yes, he was. He was only a young fellow.

**JD** Have you other members of your family... What I mean is, the Lombardo name is very well known name in the fisheries in this State, and I don't doubt in other places, are they your relatives?

**LOMBARDO** Yes, my father had only one other sister. He had no brothers, so he is a Lombardo, and we were the first Lombardo in the local phone book and the other Lombardos that are fishermen are in fact, my brothers.

**JD** Do you have children of your own?

**LOMBARDO** Yes, I have three children two boys and a girl, and my younger son, Peter, in fact is now running our fishing fleet.

**JD** What's your role in the companies that you oversee now?

**LOMBARDO** Well, I'm the owner of the company and I don't get too involved in fishing these days. I am committed to my shipyard. I have a shipyard which builds fishing vessel and of late these have mainly been export orders, and we are just completing an order for ten 25 metre trawlers for Indonesia.

**JD** Are these built in Fremantle?

**LOMBARDO** They're built just out of Fremantle in Cockburn Sound, and my shipyard's name is Ocean Shipyards WA Pty Ltd.

**JD** How long has it been operating?

**LOMBARDO** We built our first ship in 1969/70 and we have been operating since then, initially right in Fremantle in Mews Road. In fact that yard was tidied up and cleaned out for Dennis Connor to win the America's Cup from, and Dennis was based at that yard. We moved down to Cockburn Sound and we have continued to prosper since moving down there. We are building larger ships.

**JD** About how many ships would you have produced?

**LOMBARDO** We've probably produced... In twenty years we've probably produced about, probably about 40, maybe 50 ships. Something like that. Mainly prawn trawlers but we've produced survey vessels for the government. We've built small barges and we've built lots of off-shore survey vessels that worked, and still work, in the off-shore petroleum industry, and in fact, I was the very first fisherman to be employed in the off-shore business. In 1964 we were fortunate enough to have a steel vessel. It was very modern and I was enterprising enough for the oil to charter that vessel, and that year saw us go all the way up to Darwin, and then work all the way back to the Monte Bello Islands on exploration. Those were the days when seismic was done by dropping

50 pound charges over the side. Today that has turned into very exciting oil fields, platform.... Woodside gas platforms, BHP Jabaru oil fields off Darwin. In fact all of that was because of that initial exploration.

**JD** Could you have a talk about your early career? I understand you left school quite young?

**LOMBARDO** Yes, I left school about twenty days before I was fourteen. I was very determined I was going to go to sea. I spent all my weekends, when I wasn't working at another job trying to make some money on the breadcart, selling newspapers, I used to sell books on the ships. But any time when I was free, I was in the fishing boat harbour, and I was always determined I would go to sea. Consequently I didn't wait till fourteen which was the leaving age. Twenty days before I was off to Lancelin and I started work for my father on a 30 foot vessel called the **Estralita**.

**JD** And you've gone on from that start....

**LOMBARDO** Yes, I carried on and we.... In 1952 we built one of the very few freezer boats. My father [was] in partnership with three other people and they built a freezer boat called the **Carmella**, and that more or less saw the beginning of an area where just about every fish you bought was frozen. We used to crayfish in the summer and we used to go Shark Bay catching snapper in the winter. Sometimes after the snapper season we would have our dinghies and go into Shark Bay netting, and we would do one or two trips netting for mullet, whiting and tailor. Then we would get back to Fremantle about the end of September, October, and start crayfishing again in November.

**JD** Then you went into the prawning, I understand.

**LOMBARDO** Yes, I think we first tried prawning in 1963 and in that year - once again another pioneering effort from Western Australia - we went together with a fleet of other vessels, we were employed to go all the way to the Gulf of Carpentaria which believe me in those days, was a long, long way. We did some exploration for banana prawns and what is now known as the Gulf of Carpentaria Fishery. However, we didn't find a lot of prawns and it was some years afterwards that the fishery did get under way.

**JD** Did you diversify into processing?

**LOMBARDO** Yes, we processed aboard in those early days of freezer boats as they were called, and we used to process at sea and in later years, we actually processed prawns on shore, and today we still export under the Lombardo name or the Seafeast brand. However, when the market demanded unprocessed product it was a shame, but it did to some extent see the end of a lot of processing in this country. That was probably about six years ago and now, in 1989, it would appear that processing is again coming into being and I believe that the next few years will see the processing of prawns happening again on shore at Fremantle.

**JD** At what stage did you come ashore, so to speak?

**LOMBARDO** I came ashore for what you might say.... the last time was in about 1966. At that stage we had moved from being the skipper of the vessel **Nelma** and we bought a vessel called the **Andrew**, and then we bought a vessel called the **Nellvyn**, and I was more or less running those three vessels out from the **Nelma** using our radio. By this time that initial exploration voyage on oil exploration that we had done

in 1964, to me seemed like a pretty good business to be in, and because of that I saw fit to start an office on shore.

**JD** You've been involved in fisheries for other countries, or adjacent to other countries?

**LOMBARDO** Yes we have. We've bought and processed prawns in Indonesia and we are currently managing vessels in Indonesia. Part of our package when we sell ships to foreign countries - fishing boats - we do like to put in a management team and to make sure that those prawn trawlers are successful.

**JD** Was it one of your ships that was attached in the Gulf during the Gulf War?

**LOMBARDO** No, at that stage that vessel which has been mine previously was owned by my brother, Vince, and it was hit by a rocket and I think the skipper.... yes, the skipper was killed at the time.

**JD** You would have seen many, many changes in the fishing industry in this State. What would you say are the major ones?

**LOMBARDO** Well, I suppose the major change over the years has been the method of licensing. Whereas in those very early years everybody just went fishing, and was allowed to do whatever he wanted to do, could catch whatever he wanted to catch, today that's not the case and all of the ocean is more or less divided into blocks, and people have a licence to fish a certain species and they can't fish another species. That I suppose is the biggest change to fisheries. Also I guess the amount of product that was caught in my days, as a young boy, especially in the 1952 to 1962 here, it was nothing to us to be able to catch 80 - and possibly we could have caught more - maybe 100 bags of crayfish.

**JD** In a week?

**LOMBARDO** In a day, in a day, and those were the years that we were processing our crayfish at sea and we didn't.... We were just trying too hard with our product, and when we were processing we handled the crayfish too much, and we spent far too much time. Consequently we couldn't process all our crayfish, consequently we couldn't pull all our pots each day, and we only pulled as many pots as we could that would handle the lobster. If only we could have those days back again.

**JD** Costs have escalated enormously haven't they? Including the licence cost for instance.

**LOMBARDO** Yes, that is the case and fishing.... We were very, very lucky and I don't care what anybody ever says, in those days we worked hard, we never made a lot of money but you might say that the industry was at least fat. Today it is very, very easy to lose money. If you have the wrong engine burning too much fuel, all those things come into account today. But in those days we never worried about of those things and we never passed a fuel bowser, we always took on fuel and fuel was ninepence a gallon, and didn't really matter anyhow. But today it's totally, totally business out there, because of the shortage of the product compared to those days.

**JD** It seems to be very difficult for a young person to break into the business, because of the cost of getting started in terms of the licence particularly, and the high interest rates.

**LOMBARDO** That is so, and I don't believe that any person who hasn't made his money somewhere else will ever go from deckhand to owning a trawler any longer. There's no answer to that, it's just impossible, and to some extent a shame.

**JD** Does it mean that they'll become company-owned vessels?

**LOMBARDO** That's exactly what it means and there's no way of ever undoing that because people now, have paid millions of dollars for the right to fish, and the only way that the government could change it would be to give those people back their money and let young people in. But I', afraid that won't happen.

**JD** There seems to be a considerable degree of concern in the industry at the inflow of overseas' capital, particularly into processing. Is that a real problem?

**LOMBARDO** Well, I am one who doesn't see it as a real problem. I don't think that will ever be a concern, because there will never be enough product to satisfy the markets. However, I think it's probably one that's got to be watched. I think there is too much hellabudoo made about that situation.

**JD** Are our overseas' markets under threat from other countries' fisheries?

**LOMBARDO** Well, they are today, but I think we.... This particular year has been a very, very bad year for prices of prawns, and so bad to the extent that nearly nobody has made a profit. They're just hanging on. So yes they are, and you have the aquaculture and bad buying policies of Japanese where they have possibly got a year's supply of shrimp - or prawns as we know them - in store. All of those things, but it will rise again.

**JD** Any other comments that you'd like to make on the economics of the industry, either in the past or the present?

**LOMBARDO** No, I believe that the Departments have to just keep watching the amount of effort being put into catching, because that's really what it's all about. When I started fishing our little boats used to do about eight knots, and they couldn't go for more than three hours and pull their pots and get back home but, of course, those lobster boats today are all high speed, doing 25 knots. They're in and out and they're all over the ocean and they've got echo sounders. We never had echo sounders. Now they know precisely where to drop their pots, so the Fisheries Department has to watch that effort, otherwise it will not be an industry.

**JD** From what you say, you have a pretty positive attitude to the Fisheries Department and the control of the industry?

**LOMBARDO** Yes, yes, I think we've probably got the best Fisheries Department in the world from a point of.... Well, without doubt, we've definitely got the best lobster-managed fishery in the world, but it's one of those things that must be continually watched because when licensing was brought into this Western Australia.... For instance, take Lancelin Island. It was just a little village and a round about 25th of April/early days of May, before the first storms came, we all packed up and came back to Fremantle. These days Lancelin is a town. They have schools there, and people

never leave there. That is their home. Consequently they leave their pots out now till the end of June, which is the end of the season. They're dragging more, so the Fisheries must keep seeing all these things and those are the things that have changed the rules over the years, and people wonder why Fisheries do it, but in fact, it's just over the years, and people wonder why Fisheries do it, but in fact, it's just continuous effort that's been put into catching.

**JD** Could we have a look at the people situation? About how many people would be directly employed in your part of the fishing industry?

**LOMBARDO** I don't have a lot of people employed any longer. We hit our peak about 1984 and that year I saw the end of what was known as the Lombardo Marine Group of companies, and we were very big in the industry. It consisted of myself, my brother Vince, and a brother Ric, and an outside guy called Vic Garbon, and that year we sold off half of our off-shore business which built up very big. We had about twenty vessels working in the oil exploration industry. We sold half of that off to Singaporean interests. At that stage my brother, Vince, thought that he would like to take over the fishing fleet. I was fairly tired and I agreed to that, and my brother, Ric.... We had also built up a hotel and hospitality interests, and my brother, Ric, took that part of it over, and I stayed with the shipyard.

But at that particular time we did reach our peak. We had about fifteen hundred people working for us - not all on fishing mind you - we had a lot of people employed in the building of the North West Shelf. There were many, many foreign vessels which came out to build those projects. We managed all of those ships and their crews, because of the complicated union system of rostering seamen and seafarers' benefits, and all of that. We were awarded all of the management of those vessels. Soon we got to the stage where we had about ten prawn trawlers, and a processing factory that was going night and day in fact, processing prawns. But from that point on I let go and today I also have my son working for me. I have built two trawlers for the Gulf of Carpentaria Fishery, and I control a public company that has another vessel in Shark Bay, and I also own a small Persane vessel - Persanes for Pilchards just out of Fremantle.

**JD** Is that a relatively new industry, the pilchards?

**LOMBARDO** Yes, it's been around for some years, more or less started off as fishermen catching pilchards for their cray bait, but today it's a licensed fishery and my vessel is one of eight that is licensed for the west coast metropolitan area. The pilchard is a very seasonal thing. He's either there or he's not. If he's there he's there in big tonnage or he just doesn't turn up at all, and the last two years has been grim, but that doesn't mean that next year they won't be there in full flight.

**JD** Do you employ many women in the industry?

**LOMBARDO** In our day on processing we probably had about 50 or 60 women working for us, and they were a very, very good workforce. They were a better workforce than male. They caused you less problems. They liked their work. They needed the money and consequently they were always a pleasure to employ. On our fishing boats that go to the Gulf of Carpentaria, on each boat there, there are one or two girls, and they're normally very astute girls that come out of university, that type of thing, just want to get away, and they work very hard.

**JD** Is the labour force stable nowadays or is it...? It used to be in the early days a pretty in and out sort of thing.

**LOMBARDO** Well, in the early days we all worked very hard and that was our business way. It's a lot harder today to employ people that want to go to sea and work like we work - well they don't work because the boats are automated these days - but it's a lot more difficult to get a more reliable person that it was in the old days.

**JD** Because of the increased technology and the sophistication of the boats and gear that you use, is it the case that there's an increased need for training for crews?

**LOMBARDO** Yes, I believe that there is, but we didn't need that training because we seemed to be closer to the skipper. We were shouted at and screamed at from morning to night and we learnt the hard way. I suppose if you shouted and screamed at these guys today they'd just up and leave. In those days we copped it and we were taught that way, and being a son, it was nothing to get a sea-boot across the back of the neck or whatever, you know, it was pretty blinking hard.

**JD** There would be "questions in the House" if it happened nowadays I think.

**LOMBARDO** I believe there would be [laughs] but it was a funny thing in those days that.... today when we send a vessel to sea, we provide all the bedding and that, but in those days every fisherman took his own mattress and rugs and pillow, and it was common as soon as there was an argument, the skipper would say, "Well you can get your mattress and go!" That's how it was.

**JD** Could you comment on the infrastructure in fishing in these remote areas? Things like navigation aids and roads and port facilities.

**LOMBARDO** Well, when I started fishing the vessels didn't go too far past Shark Bay. There was an odd vessel or two.... in fact my father was one of the early ones to proceed up as far as North West Cape.

**JD** This interview with Mr Mick Lombardo continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE ONE SIDE A.

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## TAPE ONE SIDE B.

**LOMBARDO** As I was saying on the other side, my father was part of one of those boats that went up as far as North West Cape. They used to go up there netting along the beach, catching all sorts of fish, mainly mullet and tailor, and garfish were very prominent. In those days we had State Shipping Service just like we have now, but in fact some of the ships were not too much bigger than our own boat, and we used to load our catches into a vessel called the **Kaibra**, and **Kaibra** would bring that fish back to Fremantle. The prices in those times - and that was probably about `53 - prices were about one and threepence a pound on an average for our fish.

**JD** That's scale fish?

**LOMBARDO** That's scale fish, yes. Scale fish we used to net off the beaches. We'd get about one and threepence a pound. Snapper was about the same except that there was one year there in those early `50s where some sort of import ban was placed on



imported fish - a tariff or something - but we actually got two and threepence a pound for our fish. But that was only for a short while.

**JD** We've talked about some of the problems that are evident in the industry, depletion of stock for instance. What about things like pollution? Do you see that as a problem?

**LOMBARDO** No, I see it not as a problem. Fishing.... I see that there's a problem. At this time there's a lot of throwing of plastic bags over the side, and stuff like that, but I haven't actually seen the pollution. I think we've probably got the most unpolluted bunch of waters in the world in fact you know, and it is a good selling point from our point of view to the Japanese and that, that we are in unpolluted waters.

**JD** Should we be trying to diversify our markets to say, rock lobsters?

**LOMBARDO** Well, we have certainly done that in the last few years. Up until this year I have processed lobster. I don't any longer process, but it's come a long way since about 1946 when.... I think '46 was about the year they started rock lobster tails - or rock lobsters in cans - to America. This resulted from the Americans being here during the War, liking our lobsters and for probably the next... oh, the next 35 years I suppose, it was just total rock lobster tails - or crayfish tails - they were always crayfish and then through an Act of Parliament the name was changed to rock lobster. But from the very first day even when we started sending crayfish tails to America, the boxes - and they were timber boxes, slat boxes, - they always said rock lobsters. That's why they changed the name, but anyhow about.... probably about six years ago, probably about '82, something like that, it started to change, and France started to take cooked crays from us - or cooked rock lobster. Then the Japanese started to get into the cooked rock lobsters, and then we saw the year - I think '88/'89 season - Taiwan entered the field and there were very few tails sent to America. In the last five years, probably starting about 1985, we've seen a very big increase in love rock lobsters being sent to Japan and other countries. We've sent them as far as Switzerland in fact, and these rock lobsters will stay alive if everything is totally right with them for about 54 hours. That has proven to be a good money earner.

**JD** At present we're able to sell overseas all the catch in rock lobsters?

**LOMBARDO** Yes we are. We can always sell them. However, they go up and down in prices and this year saw - or the year gone by - saw prices very high. We saw them even out and then we saw the tail part come very good - the rock lobster tails - that that was because we'd sent everything else out in cooked form or live to other countries. So it was just one of those things.

**JD** Any other problems that you see confronting the industry, either its prawning or its rock lobster?

**LOMBARDO** I only see the personnel problem, and we did talk about it earlier, the training. I think that we've probably got to get proper trained disciplined persons, and I think the industry has to then make sure that somehow those people are properly rewarded for what they do. Because of the Workers' Compensation Act and all those things, we only contract to our skippers. Our skippers then contract to the crews. We never really know what the crews are earning and we don't know really what the problems are.

**JD** So there's no really recognised avenue of promotion from deckhand right through to skipper?

**LOMBARDO** No, there's none of those things. The company has really no part in that. We never really know who's good and who's bad.

**JD** What do you see in the future for the industry?

**LOMBARDO** Well, we always believe that the industry has got as far as it's going to go and then all of a sudden somebody finds something else. We saw about three years ago, 1986, we saw some very, very big catches of prawns taking in up to five hundred and a thousand metres of water. That saw another fishery start. However, economic times are not good and whilst there's still fishing, it hasn't boomed like it possibly should have because no doubt if it had of boomed, by now they would be in two thousand metres and God knows what's in two thousand metres. So no doubt there's still plenty of things left in the sea.

**JD** Would you say enough research is being done into new fisheries or marketing or whatever?

**LOMBARDO** I would say [laughs] there's nearly nil research being done, and if today a fisherman has an idea that he can do something with a certain new fishery - a new type of fish or whatever - the Department is very much not anxious to issue him with a licence because they don't know anything about that fishery themselves, and to some extent we're faced with a typical exercise of this nature at the moment.

**JD** Anything further before we finish that you'd like to have recorded?

**LOMBARDO** No, I would just like to say perhaps a run down of what I saw from the time that I was about.... I suppose I can clearly remember back to when I was about six or seven, and I can remember the fishmarkets. There were no breakwaters except for a very small breakwater on the north end. I saw the Army fishing fleet - or the Army boats all tied up in there - and some of the fishermen who fished for the Army during those War years. I can remember the Norwegians and some Italians who were fishing, the ones that weren't interned during the War. I can remember always after a very big storm in the winter months we would come down to the harbour and we would always just without doubt see a trawler that had broken away from its moorings, and had gone up on the rocks and was smashed to pieces. I would say nine times out of ten, but I might say ten times out of then, the vessel would belong to a Norwegian or a Scowegian captain who had hastily got ashore to have a few ales, and forgot about how the boat was anchored.

The years after that we saw the breakwater go out from the south and when they built the fishing boat harbour breakwaters, they just left an entrance for the boats to come through. However, they saw a situation where nobody could tie their boats up inside because of the surge that was caused, and then in later times, a couple of years later, we saw the breakwaters cross over each other, and what have you.

I remember that first vessel to ever go to Lancelin Island was a vessel called the **Ida Lloyd**, and that was about `46 I believe - `46/`47 - and they used to catch their lobsters and bring them to Fremantle and they had them processed for the American market, and a chap called Rodrigues purchased them. I think he was a brother to a prominent magistrate, Rodrigues. Anyhow we also saw that year the company that

bought them went bankrupt, and the fishermen never got paid, and my father then didn't even really know what bankrupt meant. Anyhow they didn't get their monies.

Then the next significant event in the lobster industry there saw the ex-servicemen coming back after the War, and they got grants from the government and they purchased some of those Army vessels that had been built during the War. They were a vessel about 66 foot in length. They put freezers in to them and they went fishing and they were all a great bunch of people, and my father showed them how to catch lobster and those things.

We then saw the years go by where they moved from Lancelin to Green Island to Cervantes to Jurien Bay to Beagle Island; all done by freezer boats. They were either "mother" ships or they were just freezing their own. There was the **Eureka**, the **Kingfisher**, the **Cenoma**, **Bluefin**, **Lordstar**, **Ecro**, all big boats, and very prominent. It was the way to go. However, as years went by the freezer boat became a dirty word. They said they were processing undersized lobsters at sea, and the Fisheries went to great pains to see that all of those licences were brought in over the years, and today a lobster freezer boat is non-existent.

The Fishery and my farther and a fellow called Fred Cato, found a lot of lobster up in Shark Bay, and that was in the `50s. A lot of lobster and I can clearly remember coming home one year in the early `50s - probably about `54 - and it was late, it was September, there hadn't been any lobsters round for a fair while, and we actually got ten shillings a pound for our lobster tails, and that was a breakthrough. Today, this year, they're currently about twenty dollars a pound because the Americans are still in pounds. In those days - back in those old days - I knew every vessel, I knew every fishermen, and every time a vessel was launched we all poured through it. But then as the years went by, we lost contact and I think today, it's just one of those things. You don't necessarily know anybody out there anymore.

**JD** Could you just briefly mention some of the prominent names of the people that you can recall?

**LOMBARDO** Yes. There was fishing, there was Carlo Miraglotta, Cono Glorioso, the Papagallas, the Paparellas. Paparellas was a big family. In my times they had a boat called the **Fleetwing** and they built a boat called the **Canberra**. Those were the days that after the cray season finished, in about the last days of May, we would go up to Shark Bay and we would catch these fish, all snappers, all the winter, or go to Shark Bay netting. They were great times. We worked very hard and we could not see the landmarks to go on to the patches before daybreak, so we sort of timed it go get there at daybreak, and fished all day long up until we could not see that land again, and then we would head in. We were only about half an hour off the coast. Wherever we were only about that far off the coast, and we caught up to - by handline - up to about a thousand snappers a day, sometimes only 200, sometimes only 500. But then it was back-breaking to gut and scrub every snapper - and we didn't use to eat till maybe eleven or twelve o'clock at night - and pack all the fish away. Then we would have to get up - in the days of the freezer boat - we would have to take the fish out and put a new lot of fish in and what have you not, and then we would be back up again at five o'clock in the morning, and start to get ready, sharpen our knives, get our fishing lines and hooks and all the good things ready.

As a young guy I, we'll say always liked to make some money, I used to pray for just a little bit of bad weather, which hardly ever came up at Shark Bay, but just to get half a day off was something. We'd fish for a month straight - 30 days straight - and then take off for Geraldton. Today we see all those boats using the port at Carnarvon, all of

those boats they still fish for snapper up there, more or less a day fishery these days. But we never ever knew Carnarvon. We didn't go to Carnarvon because there were no facilities and we hauled our fish all the way back to Fremantle.

My father was quite a pioneering type always looking for new grounds. But getting back to the people that were out there, and after the War when the **Kingfisher** came along, they were a great bunch of people. There was Jack Arcus. That name was a bit famous because they became... His sons were Arcus Refrigeration, made the refrigerators. There was Bruce Ardagh, there was Colin and Russ Wheeler, there was old Joe Annear, and one other guy - I've just lost his name - but they were the **Kingfisher** crew. They were all ex-servicemen and they were mother-shipping in Lancelin. I learnt that they would pay me more to help process the crays so I used to stay on that mother ship while my father went out and pulled the pots. They also had morning teas and lots of fruit cake, all those sorts of things which I thought was a bit better than being on a little boat bobbing round.

But there was Bob Sawnier on the **Eureka**. Peter Vinci was another family of pioneers. There's lots and lots of fishermen that today.... It is very unfortunate that that base of.... Whilst in those days it was very.... and prior to the end of the War, and even after the end of the War, except for those ex-servicemen, it was very strange to see an Australian fisherman. They were nearly all Italians, and what concerns me is that none of those Italian families really moved into any big time fishing. They just tended to go about with their small boats and that sort of thing, whereas all the big fishing companies today are owned by Australians, and none of the Italians really got involved except from myself and I've since sold out anyhow.

**JD** For a boy who left school before he was fourteen and went fishing, you've done pretty well, Mick.

**LOMBARDO** Yes I have. I've had plenty of worries at times [laughs] but I'm more than satisfied today with what I've done, and I'm flamboyant, I'm not mean. If I want something these days I buy it. I don't worry about the consequences or anything like that. I have done extremely well especially in just the last few years. It's been wonderful and I have got a fishing project for the coming year, and if this tape is not going to be played to anybody we'll talk about it now.

**JD** Thank you, Mr Lombardo, for a most interesting talk.

**LOMBARDO** Thank you, Jack, it's great to say something and I'm very much for getting the history of fishing recorded, and I wish you every success in being able to get hold of some of the older fishermen, and anybody who can give you any history on the river fishing down south. It was a very important part of the fishery in those days, but I'm afraid a lot of those people are now gone. Thank you.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Mick Lombardo of Fremantle, Western Australia. The new fishing project mentioned near the end of this recording was not discussed further on this tape. With Mr Lombardo's agreement it is hoped to record an account of it on a subsequent occasion.

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE ONE SIDE B.

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with KIMBERLEY MALE

### INTRODUCTION

Kimberley Male is the managing director of the firm of Streeter and Male, a very well known enterprise in Broome and in the pearling industry generally.

Kimberley's grandfather came to Australia in the 1880s to assist in the conduct of the Streeter family's pearling, pastoral and merchandising interests. The Male family eventually bought out the Streeters though the families have retained their close links to this day.

Three generations of the Male family have been very much involved in the business, sporting, parliamentary and civic affairs of Broome. A tradition now being carried on by Kimberley Male.

The firm of Streeter and Male is still very prominent in pearling though now the emphasis is on cultured pearl farms and in this interview Kimberley Male provides some fascinating insights into that industry.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded in Mr Male's office in Broome, Western Australia on the 4th June, 1990.

There are two sides on one tape and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Can I ask you to record your full name, date and place of birth please?

**MALE** My full name is Kimberley Ansell Streeter Male born July 4th, 1942, Perth, Western Australia.

**JD** Thank you. That name Streeter has been connected with the Male family for a long time hasn't it. Is it in connection with your grandfather and father's partner in the business?

**MALE** Streeter was a successful London jeweller who had interests throughout South East Asia and had a sole charter to fish pearl shell in the Dutch East Indies for which he used to have to pay the Prince of Wales 33 percent of his gross to cement the arrangement and on hearing that there were large takes of pearl shell and pearls at Cossack in Western Australia, set off from the Florries Islands in Indonesia in 1878 to

shift his operation to Cossack. In late 1878 he arrived at Roebuck Bay and having had some trial dives off Broome decided not to go any further south but commenced operations in Broome in early 1879. That was Edward William Streeter.

Edward William Streeter engaged my grandfather, Arthur Male, from Devon, England, to come to Australia in the late 1880s to manage his affairs and my grandfather did that for some years and later before the turn of the century, brought out his brother, Archie, to manage Streeter's interests which by that time, had included Roebuck Plains and Hills Station.

Before the turn of the century Streeter admitted my grandfather into a partnership of Streeter and Male and that included pearling, pastoral and merchandising interests and following a visit here, in about 1921, E W Streeter's son, Tom, and concluding Tom's work at Roebuck Plains and returned to the UK, the Streeter family in 1923, sold out their interests in Western Australia to the Male family, but the firm name of Streeter and Male has continued ever since. Further to that, [the] eldest son, starting with my father, then myself and then my son, have included amongst their other names, the name of Streeter and our connection to this day, is one that includes visits to Australia and to the UK by both sides of the family and we retain that close connection.

**JD** The name Male has been very very prominent in the history of Broome for a long time now. Both your grandfather and your father and now yourself have been very prominent. Could you tell us something about your grandfather and father's involvement in the town?

**MALE** My grandfather was on a very early Roads Board but went into the state arena of politics as the Member for Kimberley which, in the days when people thought it was a long ride by horse from Perth to Fremantle, they probably hadn't reflected that his rides were from here to Wyndham in his electorate. His brother, Archie, was closely involved also in the Broome community and was a Shire president in his time. They were succeeded by my father who had 31 years on the Shire Council and the Road Boards of Broome, most of which time he spent as president and was elected the first Freeman of the Shire of Broome.

My father was a fairly keen sports person in his younger days. His main interest being cricket and he played a lot of tennis. He became a life member of the Broome tennis club and in his more senior years, he was for many years, the president of the Broome Turf Club and became a life member of the Broome Turf Club. He was presented for his services to the community of Broome, an OBE, and as the Honorary Consul for Japan in Western Australia, he received the Third Order of the Rising Sun as a decoration from the Emperor upon his retirement.

**JD** He was also very much involved with the pearling industry, was he not?

**MALE** Yes, he was very deeply involved. He was the president of the Pearlers Association for many years.

**JD** But he was the pearling master for a large number of vessels was he?

**MALE** Yes there were Streeter and Male's vessels. There were many vessels that Streeter and Male ran on their books in joint venture with other people and there were vessels that he ran and vessels that he ran in joint venture with other people that he was responsible for.

**JD** Could we turn now to your own career? You were born in Perth. Were you brought up in Perth or in Broome?

**MALE** No, while expecting me, my mother was evacuated from Broome during the war. I was, as previously stated, born in Perth, but at the end of the war in 1945 just as soon as people were allowed back to Broome, we came back to Broome as a family, to live.

**JD** Your father stayed in Broome after the attack by the Japanese on the flying boats and aircraft in Broome, did he not? He was the Shire President I think?

**MALE** Yes, my father was the Shire President at the outbreak of war and he was one of a group of volunteers who stayed on in Broome during the war, maintaining a refuelling service for the Australian Air Force and they did refuelling duties for the Dutch a Air Force who were flying people out of Indonesia and I believe that they were left in charge of whatever had to be done to destroy the facilities that were in Broome should there be an enemy invasion.

**JD** And your father stayed here throughout the whole of the war years did he?

**MALE** Yes my father with a group of long time citizens of Broome stayed here throughout the war.

**JD** And were you educated in Broome yourself or did you go back to Perth for education?

**MALE** In my time there wasn't secondary education in Broome so I took secondary in Perth and I did a years study in Perth in 1962 (tertiary) returning here to stay permanently from December of 1962.

**JD** And when you returned to Broome, you entered the family business? Is that what happened?

**MALE** Yes, I worked in the family business in 1961 and from 1963 have remained so.

**JD** And now you're Managing Director, you said?

**MALE** Yes, I have been Managing Director since 1976.

**JD** And have you retained, or has the family retained its interest in pearling?

**MALE** Yes.

**JD** In recent years there's been quite a major change in pearling. Now it's largely a matter of cultured pearls. From whence comes the oyster stock for the cultured pearl farms.

**MALE** The main area of collection for live stock or cultured pearling farms is from about 65 miles to the north of Broome to a 100 miles south of Broome.

**JD** Was that the area that in the old days was the source of oysters and pearl shell or pearls?



**MALE** In earlier days they probably fished further afield than that. They probably fished up to 100 miles or more north of here and up to 250 miles south of here because they were interested in collecting quantities of shell. Today the fishing effort has gone back to those areas that have been the highest areas of reproduction and regrowth of shell and those areas that have been fished down in shell size in that.... they are now fishing in an area where there is a very even sized regrowth and a lot of chicken shell to be pulled up of the size type that is most suitable for the cultivation of round pearls.

**JD** The old pearling lugger was a well regarded vessel. Is it still in use?

**MALE** There are a couple still being used but they are being replaced by a larger type of vessel very similar to a prawn trawler with obvious economies and comforts and a capacity to work in heavier weather conditions.

**JD** What about diving methods? They don't still use the old helmet diving techniques do they?

**MALE** No. They have moved away from the hard hat, full dress and half dress style of diving to hooker equipment, with hooker hose.

**JD** In earlier times the Japanese divers had a great reputation in the industry as being the best in the business I understand. Are there still Japanese divers involved?

**MALE** Not in the sense that they are indentured. There are a couple of Japanese still involved but they are people who are Australian citizens.

**JD** During the history of the industry, there have been very great fluctuations in the markets and in prices for shell and it's been mainly the shell I understand that has been the target of the pearlers. What's the situation at the moment? Is it average, is it better than in the past? Is it changing? Is its prices?

**MALE** Yes.

**JD** Talking about the shell - the shell only - what are the markets that you pearl in Broome supply? Where are they?

**MALE** The main market has been the USA and the UK and Europe. More lately the Japanese market has strengthened and that represents the main manufacturers of shell inlaying.

**JD** And is there competition in those markets from other countries?

**MALE** Yes. Mother of pearl shell is found in the warmer waters of South East Asia around Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and the southern side and western sides of New Guinea and the fishing effort in these countries affects the price of mother of pearl shell.

**JD** To turn to the actual pearls, what determines the value of the pearls and where are they marketed?

**MALE** The value of pearls is firstly determined by size and the Japanese are producing from their accoia [sp] oysters up to nine millimetre but generally up to eight millimetre in size and these are the pearls that are within reach of the purchasing power of the man in the street. Australia is one of the South East Asian producers of pearls. A type

of pearl known as the South Sea Pearl and these are from nine millimetres up in size and fortunately many of the producers in South East Asia have a type of oyster that produces predominantly gold, yellow and cream pearls which are not the most desired colour and these pearls find themselves into the middle range jewellery market. The Australian pearl which comes out of a *tintarda* [sp] *maxima* oyster produces a pearl white/silver in colour which is the most desired colour in pearls and produces pearls that are of the world's best standard and occupy the top end of the market.

Australian pearl producers have by far, the highest costs in the world of live shell from the wild to use and they have the highest costs of pearl production but fortunately, they occupy the top end of the market. By means of comparison an Australian worker in the pearling industry may enjoy an income of \$60,000 a year whereas our competitors in Indonesia are paying one of their very best \$60 a month.

The quality of Australian pearls apart from the fact that we have the best oysters in the world to use, is maintained by virtue of the fact that we have enjoyed a position where we have maintained access to and the employment of the best technicians in the world from a pool of international technicians, which is all important in the type of product that you finally harvest and these technicians earn in excess of \$100,000 per annum each.

These technicians are Japanese but they represent people who have had a minimum of four years training prior to being recognised as fully fledged. However, through a technological transfer the production of half pearls is being done increasingly by Australian technicians.

**JD** What about research? Is there much going on in that field?

**MALE** There has been government sponsored research into the causes of mortalities in pearl oysters and that research ended up centering around the effects of viruses and the identification of debris and the methods of limiting the effects of build up debris and more latterly, there was research to equip the Australian pearl producing industry with knowledge on how to propagate oysters for the production of pearl shell. The government programme was successfully completed and a paper produced and it was given to the industry to run with because our competitors in South East Asia have this technology and it was felt essential that if they started to mass produce oysters, with the resultant uplift in pearl production and if there was a run down in the wild stocks of oysters in Australia or some other type of cost explosion in the collection of those oysters, that they'd be equipped with the technology and one firm in fact, Atlantic Fisheries, now has a spat producing programme but they are still faced with the very very expensive grow out process in Australia which costs considerably more than collecting oysters from the ocean floor in the wild.

**JD** What do you see as the long term future prospects for the industry?

**MALE** I think that the industry has a long term future providing the government issues fewer rather than more new licences, particularly during such periods as at present with buoyant prices to ensure that there's not over exploitation of the resource and government has a responsibility upon it in the future to regulate the number of oysters that are used for pearl production from propagation and industry has a very big responsibility on its shoulders particularly in terms when there are down turns in the market to market responsibly and not to sell in any haste.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** To come to your own personal involvement in Broome, have you continued to the family's long time concerns for the well being of the town?

**MALE** Yes. From a young age I've accepted official office and responsibilities within the community within such organisations as the tennis club, and turf club which I had acted as their president for many years. I was part of a group of people who started the inaugural Shinju Matsuri Festival. I have completed five years as the deputy and six years as the Shire President and currently I maintain an interest in what's going on around the place. The family still is the donor of the Broome Cup. I'm the patron of the Shinju Matsuri; I'm patron of the Broome Bowling Club and the Broome Surf Life Saving Club and the Broome Tennis Club and I'm in my eighteenth year as a Broome Shire Councillor.

**JD** Congratulations on all of that. The development of Broome's been quite phenomenal. Are you happy with the way it's shaping up?

**MALE** Yes, I'm happy with what's gone on here. Nostalgically, it's a little bit difficult to accept the changes to some of our environs, but thinking of the broader benefits when I had concluded primary school here, there was no option but to seek secondary education outside of Broome and I was one of the very few and privileged that knew if I wanted to use my secondary education that I had an opportunity in Broome. Today, we have a very much expanded economy, we have a very extensive small business sector, particularly a multi-skilled light industrial area and the opportunities for people and education and particularly, in employment, have been very much enhanced in the town.

**JD** Thank you and thank you very much for this interview. It's been a great pleasure to talk to you. May I wish you all success in the future.

**MALE** Thank you, it's been my pleasure to converse with you.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with FORTUNA [FRED] MARCHESE

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Fortunato (Fred) Marchese recorded on the 31st October 1989 at his home in Willagee, Western Australia. The interview is part of the Oral History segment of the History of the Australian Fishing Industry being produced by Murdoch University for the Australian Fisheries Research Council.

Mr Marchese is 71 years of age and was born in Western Australia of Italian parentage. He is a well known Fremantle identity and has close ties with many people in the fishing industry. He has an excellent memory for names and events, and is a fruitful source of information about the industry in Fremantle during the 1920s and '30s.

Prior to his service in the Australian Army during World War II Mr Marchese worked in the fishing industry, both afloat and ashore. His father was also a fisherman and seafarer. Postwar, Mr Marchese worked on the Fremantle waterfront and was a prominent member and committee man of what became the Painters' and Dockers' Union. He was a close associate of the late Paddy Troy, who's name will be long remembered in Fremantle.

This interview was conducted by Jack Darcey. There are two tapes.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Mr Marchese, could you tell us your full name, where you were born and something about your early family life?

**MARCHESE** My name is Fortunato Marchese, I was born at Wellington Mills on the 22nd April 1918. My late father was Salvatore Marchese, my late mother Guiseppa Marchese. My elder sister was Basilia, she was born in Italy [9.12.1910] and came to this country at the age of two in 1912 with my late mother. My eldest brother, Santo, was born in Fremantle [9.11.1914]; my sister Vincenza and myself were born at Wellington Mills, she was born on the 24th May 1916. My brother Silvio, or Salvatore, he was born in Geraldton on 28th June 1922. My brother Joe was born in Fremantle on the 25th December 1925. My youngest sister, Mary, was born at Mornington Mills on 11th March 1928.

There were two other children that passed on as infants. One was Marianna and the other, the boy, was Antonio.

During my early life we shifted from place to place, timber mills to Fremantle, from Fremantle to Geraldton, back to Fremantle, back to timber mills then back to Fremantle again. Oh!

**JD** Was your father a fisherman in Italy before he came out here?

**MARCHESE** Well actually speaking, I doubt very much. He probably did a stint of fishing but at an early age he went to sea on windjammers. In fact what he didn't know about boats was nobody's business. And of course, as I said, eventually he went into the Italian Navy and he served in different parts of the world and eventually went to China. And then when that finished he came to Australia.

The early fishermen fished at Rockingham. Not all of them, quite a few. They used to call them the Rockingham Company and they used to fish along Point Peron, Safety Bay and around those areas. In fact they had a hut on Point Peron where they used to live. Of course in that particular era, it would be before my time, fish was.... well, they couldn't give it away, really. And then sometime later he took on a cray boat call the **Malatesta**, and he went craying for a short time, but I think they used to do fishing as well and bring fish in alive because they used to have a well, and they used to carry schnapper or jewfish, whatever.

At an early time there the Fremantle fishermen, as I said, they were going through a very hard time because there was not much value, but still that was their life and that's how they survived. Dad.... now this is hearsay, what my dad used to tell me. He used to catch schnapper and sometimes (for a bit of recreation) they used to be anchored there - in fact they used to pull up on what is the Esplanade today - and he used to pull up down the bottom of Cliff Street. And I believe he used to barter a schnapper or a jewfish for a jug of beer at the old Pier Hotel which was on the corner of Cliff Street and opposite Croke Lane in those days. I believe also that the early fishermen used to tie up or anchor on the northern side of the south mole in the harbour in those days. This was told by my late father.

He also told me at a later time, in fact at the time I was fishing with him, and we were up at the back of Garden Island, more to the southern end on the bank there, the Five Fathom Bank, and it was quite a nice day and I noticed this rip nearby where we were doing a bit of fishing. I said, "Gee, dad!" Of course you couldn't go too close on account of the sea, because there's always that danger of the ocean breaking over you, and it was the old **Orizaba**, that went aground in 1905 my late father told me, and he was fishing out there that particular day. Of course the **Orizaba** brought a lot of migrants to Australia; in fact I knew some of the men that came out on it and quite a few of them were only boys really. Only bits of kids.

**JD** Were you line fishing?

**MARCHESE** Yes. As I said, I didn't do a lot of fishing, I'd be an impostor if I said that, but I did go for a little while and I gave it away when I was about sixteen.

**JD** When did you start, Fred? When you left school?

**MARCHESE** When I left school. And my dad.... of course that was the in thing those days, they generally sent the boys or the children with a relation or something like that, and I went with my late cousin, Joe Marchese. He had a Cray boat called the **Lavina** and, of course, those days they pulled their pots by hand. By memory, they used to start at the back of Carnac Island, or thereabouts, Carnac and Mewstone, the Stragglers, and gradually make their way out to the west point of Rottneest and then

gradually travel east on the northern side of Rottnest. And then by April they used to start bringing their best pots home. The ones that had had it, they'd patch them up with a bit of sisal or a bit of lashing, and they used to throw them about north-east of Rottnest, from memory. And in the good days in the winter months they'd go and pull those pots and probably do a bit of fishing around that area.

As I said, I didn't go for a long time and then when I... I think by that winter, I ended up going fishing with a couple of other people and we used to go piking and, of course, a bit of skippy fishing, or on the reefs, etc. But on the inside of Garden Island, inside of Carnac, and the Stragglers, with these two elderly people I used to go with.

**JD** Fred, what sort of return did you get for the fish you sold in those days?

**MARCHESE** Well, to be quite honest, as a lad I was lucky to get a couple of bob - two and sixpence! five shillings! [25 cents, 50 cents] for my effort, you know, fishing. There wasn't....

**JD** A day!

**MARCHESE** Oh no, no. This is the end of the week when we used to.... what do you call 'em? When we used to turn around and split up what money was there. Of course, I was only a kid and of course in those days a kid could be getting - or a young lad could be getting - a quarter share, a half share, and that was it.

**JD** You were paid on a share basis were you?

**MARCHESE** Yeah. Either a quarter share, halves; full share only came eventually when a person was more mature and more of an adult. You know what I mean?

**JD** Sure!

**MARCHESE** But it was more a share basis. In fact I can tell you something else, too. My late father, with his other two friends, they ended up buying into a boat called the **Rosella**. It was a lugger, could have been an ex-pearling lugger, and of course they fished together; and without boring you, quite often they'd sell their catch and they wouldn't have enough money to pay for their stores and ice (which they used to take). And it was quite possible that what stores were left over when they came home, they'd split up to take home to their family. So, moneywise, there wasn't a great amount of money given out. I think it was just a survival.

**JD** This would have been in the early days of the Depression, wouldn't it?

**MARCHESE** Yes. Well another thing I can relate to. Of course as I said, this is going back to when I was in the 11, 12 until I was about 13 1/2. I used to go down and help my late uncle. He used to supply fish to hotels in Perth and other areas also. And of a morning, because there was nothing for my brothers and me to get up as early as half past four, half past five, and go down the markets. I used to push my uncle's cart because he used to pay me ten shillings [\$1] a week and buy me clothes. And it used to be a real eye-opener to see how life was. My late.... a cousin of mine, or cousin of my mother's, his name was Peter Travia, he used to open the market up of a morning.

**JD** Is this Perth or Fremantle?

**MARCHESE** Fremantle, yes. And the people he was working for was Willis and Grieve. They were auctioneers or accountants, whatever. And he'd open the market and is used to be quite comical of a morning. They used to have what they called a sliding door, he used to get through a portable door first, get inside, and open the sliding door. But it used to be quite comical because the men that were fishing, they wanted to get places on the tables for their fish, and of course they'd all be pushing on the door and there'd be a bit of cursing and so on going on. But eventually the door would be pushed open. It was a sliding door, and it used to be quite comical. There'd be men running, dogs following them, and of course a lot of fishermen would have their paddle in their hand because they used to scull their dinghies to their boats, and they'd fling themselves on the table to get a position on those tables. And of course they'd try to get the closest....

**JD** To the auctioneer's office?

**MARCHESE** To the auctioneer, see? Which was the nearest to the office. And, of course, during this time there'd be fish coming in; the fishermen would be pushing their trolleys - there used to be a trolley on the train line. They used to go out to the end of the jetty, load the trolley and they used to take it off near the.... where the market was, see. And, of course, it was Depression time and one of the things that I'm always reminded, is the people that came out of the Esplanade, where they had been sleeping all through the night. And it was really sad because those poor people, they had nowhere to go, there was no work for them. And if I told you they slept under the trees, of course when it rained - well they had to run for cover where possible.

And, of course, people would then be there to do their buying. You'd have people come from all the areas from Perth, maybe sometimes a bit further up, all along the stations between Perth and Fremantle. And, of course, once again prices were very limited, as I think I mentioned to you earlier. I can remember as a boy, schnapper a penny-ha[lf] penny a pound; and jewfish tuppence farthing. Whiting....

**JD** That's the price the fishermen used to get?

**MARCHESE** That's right, yes. And, of course, like herring and whiting - they used to bring maybe one and six, a shilling, sixpence, ninepence. It all depends. The herring season.... well, it was too ridiculous for words, you know, what they used to get for them.

**JD** One and six, or ninepence, for how many fish?

**MARCHESE** I'd say about a dozen and a half, at the most two dozen. Cobblers, maybe threepence.

**JD** Each?

**MARCHESE** No! A heap.

**JD** Good heavens!

**MARCHESE** Crabs - similar.

**JD** What about crayfish, did they pay well?

**MARCHESE** Well crayfish they used to sell independently. I think I used to hear them talk about ten shillings a dozen; maybe a bit less.

**JD** A dozen!

**MARCHESE** Yes. But when they used to count crayfish, the jumbos they used to count one for one. When they went into the whites, the smaller crayfish, they used to give them two for one. So therefore if they asked a dozen they'd get two dozen. And then for a period of time they'd get a crayfish which was in between the jumbo and the small one, and they used to give them three for two. So if you got a dozen crayfish, I think at that you'd get eighteen.

**JD** And they were sold fresh, were they?

**MARCHESE** Oh, they were alive.

**JD** Alive!

**MARCHESE** Oh, gawd yes. And of course the people took them, whatever they had to do with them, well they only cooked them - there was nothing else. No such thing as processing at that particular day. And.... what was I going to say? [Deliberating]. They used to take them and do what they had to do with them. As I said, there wasn't a great price for them. There was a time when they used to try and sell them in the markets, and what they used to do, they had to get sticks because crayfish when they're alive they jump like billy-oh. So what they'd do, they'd cross the sticks somehow and they'd be about three sticks high. I think the sticks used to be about two to three inches square, probably two inches square, and they'd make about that width I'd say [indicating size], about ten, at the most twelve inches. And they'd chuck in what crays they had - half a dozen, a dozen, whatever the case may be. And, of course, that wasn't much cop there either.

**JD** Was there a market for shark?

**MARCHESE** Not in those days. You used to hear people saying oh, they sold shark, but the shark was a gummy shark and, between you and I, gummy shark is nice to eat. Because I can remember dad - we were only kids going to school - and he used to catch shark, gummy shark, and he used to fillet them and hang them up to the stays and dry them. And in the winter months they used to soak it and we used to cook that. [Unclear] it never killed us. [Fish such as rock cod, Johnny Dory, gummy shark and other types, were often salted or treated and hung up on the stays to dry. The gizzard, wind bag, roe of mainly dhufish; the Chinese mainly bought the dried wind bag and gizzard which was much sought after, most for home use.]

**JD** No. Did you catch school shark as well, Fred?

**MARCHESE** Well the school shark you are referring to are gummy shark. There used to be big sharks swimming around and you'd hook one now and again and bring it ashore, and we used to give them to the crayfishmen for bait. See they used to get sheep heads, bullock heads and, of course, the.... what do you call 'em? The freak part of them, for bait. Then they also got a lot of shark bait, and of course shark bait - between you and I - doesn't last too long in the water because the crays tear it to pieces. In fact, if you'd seen the bones of sheep heads and bullock heads, gee it was just like ivory within a day or two.



**JD** Fred, were there fishermen in other places further up the coast?

**MARCHESE** Well, as I was saying, in those days here the fishermen.... the pattern was this as I know it, but I'm not saying I'm a hundred per cent right. But the fishermen used to fish in the Fremantle area. The ice boats would go as far as Cervantes - in fact Dongara and all that area. And which would suit them better, sometimes they'd go to Geraldton and upload their fish, most times they'd come to Fremantle. Once the time got up to April they'd start getting ready to go to the Abrolhos Islands, [and Shark Bay. Boats also fished south as far as Albany; probably not as many that worked north of Fremantle.]

**JD** They were fished even in those early days?

**MARCHESE** Oh yes. And of course there were fishermen in Geraldton that fished there all the year round. There were times where some of them even came to Fremantle. Some of them went to Shark Bay and there were times when they used to come down this way with their catch, or they'd decide to come down this way to do a stint of fishing. See, there's always people that fished in different areas. As I said, the fishermen from here went to Abrolhos - some went to Shark Bay - in fact I remember my brothers, they used to go to Shark Bay on different boats, and to the Abrolhos Islands, and of course fish was sent down by train. They used to pack everything in the wagons and they'd break ice over the top of them and the fish used to come to Fremantle and then the people in the fish game - you know, the fish shops and so forth - they might have had a contract or some verbal.... what do you call 'em? And they'd get their fish from different boats.

**JD** Fred, later on you worked in the fish markets in Perth, I believe?

**MARCHESE** No. I worked.... I did a stint with National Fisheries because through my friends that lived next door they got me about - oh, maybe three weeks, work up there, and during the time we'd go down to the markets which was opposite the Royal Hotel, and that's where they used to pack their fish in boxes and send it to the country areas. They'd also do a bit of cooking their crays, or plucking chooks. There was a variety, you know, to cater for the public.

**JD** Right. When you first went into the industry was it mainly Italian people that were fishing or were there people from all over?

**MARCHESE** Oh no. There was a variety of people, that's why I say there's so much to cover and unfortunately there's some people that it would be hard to relate to because they've passed on. There may be some older people than myself that could relate to them, but there were Italians, there were 'Slavs, I even knew of Greeks. There were Norwegian people which contributed greatly to the game. It's unfortunate that I can't remember their names. I know there's one bloke around Fremantle - somebody, somewhere - Andy somebody, but I can't remember his name. There's another bloke I remember used to be fishing - his name was Gus Ode and he was also a shipwright. That was his trade, and he went fishing. [Len Swanson, Andersen senior, deceased.]

There was another bloke by the name of Sonny Boy, that I remember. But he was not the oldest, if you understand what I mean. Then there were other people that were involved on different boats. What was I going to say?.... I think there were Norwegian people on a boat called the **Coolgardie**, but the **Coolgardie**, by memory, I think got lost. It could have got lost with all hands. There's another chap, I think he lives out

Mandurah way, a Neil Chapman, that I haven't seen for years; whether he's still going or not, I wouldn't know.

There's another chappie I know, and I believe his father had the first freezer boat and, by memory, I think it was called the **Theo Christi**, and the chap I'm referring to (he lives out east) [Fremantle] is Joe Annear. Now he'd be a person who'd be quite handy for you to get in touch with. And, of course, as I related to you before, there are people older than myself. If you like I'll mention their names.

*JD* I'll get them later on, Fred, if you don't mind.

*MARCHESE* Yes, Okay! So, if you understand what I mean, there's a lot of information out there and this information can be given to you by people more learned than myself. I make that clear, you know what I mean?

*JD* You do alright! [Laughs]. Look, could you tell us something about the boats and gear that you used to use?

*MARCHESE* Well when they used to make Cray pots in those days the neck of the pot was made out of cane. Then they used to go out and get what they call ti-tree sticks, and most of the kids in our leisure time, we used to help them peel - you know, pluck the smaller branches off them. They used to have a long, what would you call it?... tank affair, I suppose about 18 inches in diameter, maybe a little bit more, and they used to put them in there to soften them somehow. They used to boil them and besides that they used to do their ropes - they used to do them in a sort of a tan affair.

*JD* That is the end of Tape 1 Side A of this interview with Mr Fred Marchese. Please turn the tape over for a continuation of the interview.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

*JD* This is Tape 1 Side B of an interview with Mr Fred Marchese. Fred, we were talking about gear and you were about to tell us about how the ropes and floats were handled.

*MARCHESE* Well, as regards the corks - they had to be cut, they had to put a hole through them, and they used to sort of cut a bit out of the top part of the cork so when they put the sisals through they used to have to pull it tight like sort of a slip knot. And they used to pull it very tight when they used to have knots on the end when they'd finished, and of course that was left, see, when they tied the corks together. Because then they had to have the ropes - which they used to get coils of - and they used to run them out on the footpath and stretch them because they had to splice eyes in them, or turn around and put a back splice in so the rope doesn't sort of uncoil. And of course, what they used to do then, they'd tie the pot in a manner.... they used to put like a.... (I think) a clove hitch, with a hitch behind it and then a bole on, and then they used to run.... They used to stretch the ropes first, by memory, I'm almost certain they used to stretch the ropes. As I say, the corks would be put on last, if you understand. Let me get this.... I'll just ease up for a minute. [Deliberating].

So as I say, with the gear, they'd have it all ready - the tanning would be done, the corks would all be tied. I just can't remember exactly whether they used to set all the gear up at home or.... I've got an idea they used to set it up as they were going out to the fishing grounds. Because they didn't do it all in one day - they might take so many pots out one day and so many pots another day. Besides the pot, when it was completed, they had to turn around and put two bits of timber on the bottom of the pot and, by memory, I've got an idea they had to bolt it somehow. And beside that they had to put some ballast in the pot so that it would sink. So normally they used to be.... I don't know whether you know the railway line, they used to be like.... the parts how they join them together.

**JD** Oh, fish plates are they called?

**MARCHESE** Something like that. So that was about it. But as I say, when they started (in the days I'm referring to) they used to start west of Fremantle, anywhere between [Carnac and] Garden Island to outside the Stragglers, or south of Rottneest, and they used to make their way to the west end of Rottneest, and then by the time summer..... I mean winter, they'd be getting close to the northeast of Rottneest where all their old pots would be dumped there; the ones that they could do up they'd do up, and during the winter months when there was a nice day they'd go out and pull them.

**JD** Was the season restricted by law in those days?

**MARCHESE** Well, I wouldn't say one way or the other because I'd be lying. But there was no doubt in my mind that round about April they brought most of their gear ashore. What gear they had left would be what they'd do up themselves. But, of course, there might have been others that had a different view, but that's what I remember when they used to bring their pots ashore. In fact, when I think back, I think those people (even though they mightn't have been as educated as we are today), I think they had the right idea. Because by April, apart from a few pots, they'd given the game away. See?

**JD** Yes! Fred, fishing has always been hard work and dangerous work.

**MARCHESE** That's right.

**JD** And your own family had some tragedies in fishing, didn't they?

**MARCHESE** Well, as I said, just after the war my late brother, Silvio, (his real name was Salvatore but he was always known as Silvio to all his friends and school kids, etc) and unfortunately he had been discharged from the Army at that particular time. He left home; with others.... (it's only natural others got involved too) and they more or less went to get help [to] get this boat off the beach at Cervantes and, of course, the tragedy happened and that was the end of those poor so-and-sos. The only person that was saved was the bloke who was a shipwright; I can't think of.... His name was.... Back was his surname, I can't think of his Christian name at this moment. [Len] And you wouldn't read about it - I spoke to this person after it happened and he told me when they came to the surface my brother was alongside him. And he said my brother told him, he said "You'd better swim; swim for the dinghy." There was a dinghy floating nearby. And he said, "When I turned around your brother had disappeared". But whether he had - it was quite possible he had rubber boots on. And of course it was a very, very sad time for the Italian community, and others, in Fremantle; because they were either from families or they were parents - a parent of families, you know what I mean?

*JD* Sure!

*MARCHESE* And it was a very, very sad time. I know it was very upsetting, oh dear it was!

*JD* Yes, yes. Fred, have the boats improved much over the years?

*MARCHESE* Oh well, I think it's safe to say that they've gone ahead in leaps and bounds because when I'm referring to they were sail and paddles, there were odd boats that had a motor but, as I say, you could count them on one hand.

*JD* Paddles! Do you mean paddlewheel?

*MARCHESE* Oars. I beg your pardon.

*JD* Oars. Oh, they were rowed?

*MARCHESE* Yes. Of course what had happened, as soon as it got calm out would come.... the 18 foot paddles would be on the deck, you'd grab one, then you'd try to help the boat along. You didn't turn around and.... you weren't going into a race, but all it was was to more or less just keep going. And as I said, of course, once again too, the Cray boats were very few. Between you and I, see even in my time I can remember three or four boats getting built but the boats that were really craying had an early period. You'd be lucky if there were ten boats, and I can mention the people that had the boats. Do you want me to?

*JD* Well, yes.

*MARCHESE* As I say, there was Migliori - there were two brothers; they both had a boat. One [Salvatore Migliori] had the **Wander**, the other brother [Antonino Migliori] had the **Stella**. There was Mr [Camelo] Miragliotta, he had a boat called the **Sydney**, and Mr [Guiseppe] Lopes had the **Advance**. Camarda [Bros] had the **Bruno**. A chap [Salvatore] Cicerello had the **Progress**. The Iannello's had the **Dante** [Calegero Iannello]. There was another bloke, Nicolina somebody, he had the **Malatesta**. The Vinci's had the **Jenny** [Camelo Vinci]; the **Hood**, I think, was a Frank [Francesco] Vinci by memory. And who else was there? Then there was the **Derna**, the Merendino's [Antonio Merendino]; the **Conticiano** was another one [owned by Gaetano Travia. Antonio Pensabene had the **Columbia**, Paolo Merlini the **Australia**, and other boats were the **Pensabene** and **Merlino**. Some boatbuilders, past and present, are the Manolas, Bill Langley, Ron Fisher, Brozevic, J.Johansen, Back Bros, Thompson Bros, J.Camarda and Harry Griffiths.]

And, of course, in that mid-thirties onwards, well there was the odd boat getting built. And as I said, after the war I got out of touch because I went into another industry and even though I knew people, I'd got out of the industry, if you understand what I mean.

*JD* Yes. Were the boats built here in Fremantle?

*MARCHESE* Well, as I say, the ones that I remember like the **Dante**, they were built in Fremantle. What else was? You've got me now! There was bloke by the name of Bill Langland building boats, the **Hood** - that was built in Fremantle [by Ron Fisher]. And

of course there were others. But as I say, this particular time I'm referring to up to the forties, there wasn't a terrible lot of boats - cray boats. You know what I mean?

**JD** Sure! They would have been wooden hulled boats, wouldn't they?

**MARCHESE** Oh yes. See these early ones they were clinker built. Then you got the carvel - the **Hood** was a carvel-built; so was the **Derna** and the **Conticiano**, [Progress, Dante, Australia, Columbia.]

**JD** About what size would they be, Fred?

**MARCHESE** Oh, I'd say around.... some would be a little under 30 foot; some could have been 30 and a bit more. I think by memory the **Hood** would have been more than - well over 30 foot.

**JD** And how many pots would each boat run?

**MARCHESE** Well as I said, as a young lad I think the **Lavina** that I used to go out with, they'd be flat out if they had between 15 and 20, that's all. And I think the others....

Oh, and another boat I forgot to mention was the **Columbia** - that was a carvel-built boat owned by the Pensabene's, by memory. So, if you understand, I mean it's not easy sometimes to relate because you'd probably be missing somebody for sure. But your best shot would be when you get in touch with others because they might relate to something that I've already missed.

**JD** Yes. There would have been other boats fishing from Dongara and Geraldton as well, wouldn't there?

**MARCHESE** Oh for sure!

**JD** And, Fred, how many men would work a boat? Say a 30-footer?

**MARCHESE** Well the most I ever remember on a boat, and this would probably be mainly ice boats, would be four. But mainly I'd say three. The Cray boats could have been even down to two, but normally two or three would be on a Cray boat. The ice boats, I'd say the most - four. And, of course, as I said, they'd leave and they'd probably be away anything from two or three weeks. Sometimes, if something happened, they might be a bit longer. Most of their jewfish they used to get from around Cervantes way, I believe. But as I say, by the time the war started I think schnapper was up to about sixpence, and probably jewfish about sevenpence ha'penny or thereabouts.

**JD** A pound?

**MARCHESE** A pound, yes. Crayfish, as I said, I don't think even at that stage they would have gone much more than ten or twelve bob [shillings] or something of nature.

**JD** A dozen?

**MARCHESE** A dozen? Because, as I say, when I went to work at Paino's in the mid-thirties, well you might have heard what prices they were paying, but sometimes you don't take any notice; because I was there for nearly five years at Paino's. I don't

know whether you know, but today they are Sealanes. The children have taken over; they've done a very good job, the boys.

**JD** Fred, later on you were involved with Paddy Troy. Could you say something about that?

**MARCHESE** Well what happened, eventually I did a stint with Paino's (or Fremantle Fish Supply) after I got discharged - in fact one of my boss's sons was Anthony Paino. At the time I was working at Elder Smiths's, in fact one of my officers was in charge of the platoon not the battery!

Oh.... the crowd I was with. And when I came back to Elder Smiths's I saw this bloke walking around and he called me over. I ended up getting a job there - on the wheelbarrow. So anyhow, while I'm there, Anthony asked me one day, said, "By the way Fred, I'm going to Sydney to get married" he said, "would you fill in for me while I'm away?" So, you know, being good mates and easy going, I said, "Yeah, that'll be no trouble!" So I went and worked for him (for his family) until he got married. But I ended up staying there, I'd say, almost close to twelve months. Very close to it.

So, eventually, I could see no future in what I was going because I was only working for wages which weren't the best, and I took something else on which was not easy, also. So I went down to get casual work. Of course there were people in the Union at that particular time....

**JD** Was this on the wharf?

**MARCHESE** Yeah. At that particular time there was a Union down there which used to do the cleaning, fitting, painting of ships.

**JD** Was that the Painters and Dockers?

**MARCHESE** Well at this particular time they were Coastal, Rivers, Harbours and Docks. That was the Union, see? So they used to pick up what they used to call 'outside the yard' when labour was needed. The members would get picked up first and, of course, in those days they used to refer to the labour as 'free selection'. And of course, well they'd go down if there wasn't enough labour inside the yard, they'd come outside and pick up outside. So I did this for a while.

I wasn't a member of the Union; but one day they wanted some workers to go out to the quarry. They were getting the South Fremantle powerhouse built and they wanted workers out in the quarry. So I turned around and I got picked up, see. And so did others. So I went out to the quarries and, of course, I wasn't a member and I asked one of the chaps how do I become a member of the Union. And he said, "Well, when you get out there you'll probably see a bloke out there that does a bit of running around for the Union" and he said, "See him." So when I got out there I saw a particular bloke by the name of Andrews and myself and others became members of the Coastal, Rivers, Harbour and Docks. And I think I stopped out there for about six months.

And, of course, in those days you could hand in your book and leave the industry or.... and when you wanted [to] all you had to do was pay a shilling and get your book out again.

**JD** Oh!

**MARCHESE** So eventually I went back to the pick-up in Fremantle, there was still free selection and free selection - well, you know what happens when things like that [exist]. If you're lucky you get a job. If you're not so lucky you don't get a job, and there are all sorts of things [that] come into it. So I went back there again and, to tell you the honest truth, I eventually left there. I handed my book in, and I went to work in the goods sheds at Fremantle, in the railways.

**JD** Oh, right!

**MARCHESE** So I suppose I might have been there for about ten months or thereabouts. I used to work in the goods sheds, and of course I'd also be out the front of this place when the train went through. You had to go and wave the flag and stop the traffic from going through, etc. Anyhow I was there, as I said, for about ten months, and eventually I got a letter to say whether I was going to come back to the industry or give it away altogether.

So I took another jump at it and I went back to the casual yard and eventually, or at that time, Paddy Troy became Secretary. Up to then things had been pretty hard, really. I think one has to give credit to Paddy for what he did. The first thing we created was a roster - in fact I never forget the night at the Trades Hall in Fremantle. [It] was a summer's night and, of course, we were just across the road from the Esplanade Hotel, and the windows wide open, and of course the roster had been put to the meeting and we had to vote for or against it - and you'd be surprised the problem that [there] was to get a roster. But anyhow, after argument for and against it was passed, and to me that was the greatest thing that ever happened to the dockies at that particular era. Because everyone had a number and it was put on a board and of a morning when there was a pickup everybody got the opportunity of getting a job. The only thing on the board was you had to have riggers, you had to have winch drivers and things of that nature, you know, and with all due respects I think the roster was a very good thing.

Eventually we went up to Parliament House in Perth and this is through the efforts and organizing of Paddy. We were trying to create what they call 'appearance money' - you know, because every morning you went there and you got nothing for it. If you went home you still had to get your fare in or whatever, and so forth. So eventually we went up to Parliament House and with a bit of pressure on politicians, etc., we got what they call 'appearance money'. In fact, by memory - I wouldn't say I'm a hundred percent right but I think I'd be pretty close to it - Paddy had to go round and get politicians to vote in our direction. I think Paddy had quite a lot (or most) of the labour people, and I believe he went up the line somewhere and he got a person [who] was of a different political party, but he got another person to vote in our favour and we eventually got appearance money.

And, of course, it went from one step to another eventually. We got a guaranteed wage, but I think before the guaranteed wage we started getting holidays - which we never used to get. Then we got a guaranteed wage; eventually long service [leave], and eventually sick days. So when you relate to this it was a big achievement. But as I say, it wasn't an easy thing to get all these achievements. In fact at one time our Union was deregistered.

**JD** Yes?

**MARCHESE** And it was deregistered.... we'd gone out with the waterside workers on account that some people were evicted from their home or homes. By memory it could have been a place in High Street near Parry Street. By memory! But then again....

**JD** About when would that have been?

**MARCHESE** Aw, gawd! I'd say it would be around about.... [pause]; I wouldn't say for sure but I'd say in the mid-fifties.

**JD** Right.

**MARCHESE** Another thing I remember we did.... but now I've jumped a bit. But prior to all these things occurring to us we marched down to Social Security in Queen Street, Fremantle, because (as I said) at that time we weren't getting any money. But anyhow, I think what the idea was was to put ourselves down for some payment. But anyhow I think we were told that if and when some work that occurs through the month, you know what I mean? There's certain work.... you might get work in the wool stores at a particular time; work out Robbs Jetty at a particular time, and so on, they'd let us know. But anyhow, to cut a long story short, I think we just persevered and we eventually got these things that I was referring to.

**JD** Good! And it was largely under the direction or with the assistance, anyway, of Paddy Troy.

**MARCHESE** Oh, there's no doubt about that. Without him I doubt whether we'd have got the conditions we did. He was the instigator and he knew how to work things out. Of course I was on the committee at that particular time, with friends of mine.... who was he? There was the late Neil Grainger, who was president; Denis Dougherty, he was on the committee; myself; Billy Gray comes to mind; another bloke by the name of Jack Coventry; and who else was there? It is quite possible I might leave some out because.... [Others were Stapelton, Armstrong, Andrews, J.Colgan, H.Martin senior, J.Light deceased, G.Passmore, W.Capes, F.Marchese.]

**JD** I suppose they'd change a bit, anyway?

**MARCHESE** Oh they'd change. Then there was.... you forget some of them.

**JD** Sure! Could we just back-track a little bit. You told me before that you and your brothers served in the Australian forces during the war. Would you like to say something about that?

**MARCHESE** Well, I wouldn't say I was a hero - but like other Australian servicemen you can only go where they send you. But I was camped up at Buckland Hill for a while; I was in what they call anti-aircraft. But prior to that I was at Narrogin, I was in what they called the field artillery and they had sent down there to get people - because they'd bombed Darwin and they wanted people to go into the 'ack ack'; so they went to the field artillery. So fortunately with me I put in for it and I got sent to Buckland Hill - and there were other people too that came there also. And I was there for quite some time before they sent us to Darwin. By memory I think I got to Darwin in February 1943. At that particular time it was what they called an operational area, Darwin. There was some bombing but I wouldn't say there was a great amount, but it was surprising that there was, you know.... it was kept up from time to time.



Sometimes you had enemy planes went to a place far south - there's a place called Fenton. Adelaide River was another place that used to get bombed. Kamali Creek. I was at a place called Livingstone and Hughes. In the later part that's where the Spitfires used to be landing, that was their airstrip. There was.... what was the other place now? There were Mitchell bombers - they were parked near Hughes strip, by memory; and of course down Kamali Creek, I think they were the Beaufighters, by memory. And I think there were other bombers in another area - it can't come to me the name. As I said, after Darwin sort of.... in the latter part of '43 I think it ceased to be an operational area.

**JD** That is the end of Tape 1 Side B of this interview with Mr Fred Marchese. The interview continues on Tape 2 Side A.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

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## TAPE 2 SIDE A

**JD** This is Tape 2 Side A of an interview with Mr Fred Marchese.

Fred, we were talking about your war service in the north and I think you mentioned you were about to go to the Eastern States for further training.

**MARCHESE** That's right. Well I got to the Eastern States and I went to various places such as Bathurst. I started from Rooty Hill, they sent me to Bathurst, Liverpool, then up to Greta, and from there I went to Queensland; I think there was another place - Logan Village could have been another place I went to. But anyhow, eventually doing my training in Queensland, I went through like jungle training and use of most weapons etc., at Canungara in Queensland. Then I left for the Pacific Islands. I left on an American liberty ship called the **Sea Ray**. When we left Queensland, well as I say, I got a good view of the.... what's all that beautiful rockery in the ocean there? [Pause].

**JD** The Barrier Reef?

**MARCHESE** The Barrier Reef, yes. Went past the Barrier Reef which was a big eye-opener, and eventually hit New Guinea and I think we pulled up at Madang. Madang, Milne Bay, and eventually we pulled up at another island further up called Biak Island, and from Biak Island I eventually went to Morotai where I stayed there for most of the time, I'd say. In fact I was waiting to get transferred to a unit or platoon or whatever, but of course it's not easy when these things occur. In fact at one stage they were talking about sending us to Singapore, but of course things happened for our betterment. And I did a few patrols on Morotai Island, used to go out and stop over night, probably stop for about a fortnight on what they used to call the perimeter, and then you'd get relieved and have a bit of a let-up.

And anyhow eventually, God help us, the war ended. They dropped that bomb on Hiroshima and of course it quickened things up. And the next thing I know they're sending us to Ambon Island, and I left Morotai Island on a ship called the **Westralia**. And you wouldn't read about it, I ran into a few blokes I knew on it. One was Mr Mews (he used to be a builder, a boat builder out south), [Fremantle] and a couple of blokes I went to school with. I think a bloke by the name of Jackie Segrue; Joe Green was another one I met.

So eventually I went to Ambon Island and the purpose was to accept surrender terms. Of course the Battalion had various jobs to do. The job I ended up getting was to cover most of the island - or where possible - to look for any of our Australian allied soldiers that might have been killed and buried in the jungle somewhere - so that was a job that I more or less covered with others. Other chaps had different jobs such as.... I believe they had to dig up some graves and rebury them at Ambon, more closer to the city or whatever, or the town place of Ambon, because I believe quite a few were beheaded there, so I'm told. Fortunately for me I wasn't there when it happened. You know what I mean? But, as I say, everybody had various jobs to do and surrender terms, etc.

Another job I had - escorting Japanese officers when they were getting interrogated, things of that nature. And of course it didn't last a terrible long time, eventually servicemen with their points system. You know the points system? The more points you had the quicker you got home. So I was one of the lucky ones where I got home quite quickly I thought. So the next thing I know I'm getting a.... I got on a DC plane and they flew me back to Morotai and the next thing I know - I was very fortunate - I was one of about two hundred that got back on the **Kanimbla**. I think I arrived back in Sydney on New Year's Eve or Christmas Eve.... no, Christmas Eve, thereabouts. And I was in Sydney I suppose for about twelve days; I stopped with some people that I had known, you know, sort of corresponded, with and they let me stay with them until I left. And I left, what is it? Woolloomooloo, down there. And I came home on a ship which used to be very involved in Fremantle - pre-war days it used to be here a lot - a ship called the **Mooltan**. So I came home on her. And that's about it - as I say, I wasn't a here [laughs], just one of those blokes that served, like a lot of others, you know.

**JD** Fred, did you have any difficulty during the war because of your name?

**MARCHESE** Well, if I said to you.... if I said no, I'd be an impostor. But I'll say, even though it did happen, very, very minor. In fact, to tell you the honest truth, I was always very lucky. Not lucky that I didn't get pushed around, but people I knocked around with - you got the odd person. But I'll give you a tip now, when they did they got into hot water themselves because blokes I used to mix with.... Gee whizz, I remember one bloke from - I think his brother played for Claremont - and he said, "If I ever hear a word spoken against Fred", he said, "I'll break your bloody necks." And I thought well that's good, because I was always a person quite capable of looking after myself, but still it's always nice when you've got people like that, you know, go along....

**JD** Too right! Yes!

**MARCHESE** But I'd say the percentage was very small. If you used to turn around and say when I was a kid. Well that's a different kettle of fish. Because when you go back to say the mid-twenties, or a little bit before, you can understand what it would be like. Once again, I knocked around with English kids of Irish/Scottish descent, and by Christ, they were good friends. In fact I never forget the first fight I had at school. One of my mates turned around - somebody was pushing me - and said, "Go on, Fred, you can beat him." Well I ended up having a go and I did bloody beat him. [Laughs]. But as I say, I always had plenty of support but I was never a person to go around looking for trouble. In fact I think I had more fights for people that I knew than myself. Some of my, you know - kids of the same background as myself, some of them just wouldn't have a go; which you don't blame them, you can't change your nature. Many a time I'd go and put in for them, you know.

But no, as I say, you idiots, and the percentage is very, very small, because you'll find that people that are level headed, they don't take that. No, I've had a lot of friends and I'm not ashamed. I might go out on the street today or tomorrow and somebody say, "How you going you bloody ding?" but I know they're saying it for a joke. You know what I mean?

**JD** Sure!

**MARCHESE** You can always tell when a person says for serious.

**JD** Absolutely!

**MARCHESE** But no, no. In fact I always say to a lot of people, too, that my family - we seem to be more involved with Australian English speaking kids than our own, really, because we are mixers. And that's why I always take my hat off to my late father, he used to always say "This is your country!" And he used to always say, "You have to be good citizens." Well, I'm 71 years of age, going on for 72, I haven't been in jail yet (not that I'm against anybody going to jail) but, touch wood, I never had any record in the Army or in civilian life. I don't know if there's a chance yet, I don't know. [Laughter].

**JD** Oh, I don't think so. Fred, did you ever go back to Italy to look at your....?

**MARCHESE** No, I would have liked to have gone, Jack, to tell you the truth; but unfortunately it didn't occur. My sister that's a couple of years older than me, she's gone back; but her husband has got family over there and she's been over a couple of times. I believe she's been to France. Evidently we've got a [cousin] in fact I met him about twelve months ago, this person.... he's related to my mother by.... well, they're related. And he's a Frenchman and he's got a trawler in Marseilles. You know, it just goes to show you. We also have relations in South America - Buenos Aires; the uncle died many years ago, and his children would probably be in their.... if they're alive they'd be at least ninety. They are a bit older than what my brothers and sisters were, you know what I mean?

**JD** Were they involved in fishing in South America?

**MARCHESE** The only thing I did know - my late uncle over there used to be like a coxswain of a tug. Or captain of a tug. Used to be in the towing game over there.

**JD** Fred, earlier on you were telling me some very interesting stores about the early days of fishing and fishing boats, and the people involved. Do you remember the **Silvery Wave**, for instance?

**MARCHESE** Oh well, I'm glad you brought that up, Jack. At one time, I was only as I said, not even a.... about four and a half years of age, because my late brother Silv was born then, so I was not quite.... I'd be three and something years older than him and he was born then, so I'd only be four and a little bit. And I can remember my late father taking me by the hand down to the jetty, or wharf, in Geraldton and the first boat I can ever remember seeing was the boat he was fishing on called the **Silvery Wave**, and at the time the skipper was Mr Caligero Miragliotta. In fact I think he became Godfather to my eldest brother.

I don't know whether it's any importance but sometimes I go by.... well, I'm going by hearsay because Dad used to say a few things to us, but he was telling me about the

time his first lugger he fished on at Shark Bay was called either the **Scotchman** or the **Scotsman**. The reason why I say both names is of course that Dad was illiterate so it could only be one or the other - **Scotchman** or **Scotsman**. He also remarked about a time where he was on watch and he fell overboard through the night and anyhow eventually his screaming out (which is natural) and they chucked a dinghy over the side, and in the dark they're looking for him, see. And lo and behold, a young lad that was on the boat grabbed my father by the hair just as he was ready to go down. And the bloke lived in - he's dead and buried now - but he lived out at Beaconsfield, and his name was Vincenzo Loschiavo. He lived in Beaconsfield. And dad used to always remark about that.

**JD** Was he lost.... was your dad overboard on the **Silvery Wave**?

**MARCHESE** No, no.

**JD** Was this on a windjammer?

**MARCHESE** No, no, on another lugger. I can't remember.... I wouldn't say for sure which one it would be because I can't remember. But he did fall overboard he was telling me, and of course screaming and whatever, and eventually they chucked a dinghy over the side and this young lad who was fishing with them - he just happened to grab Dad as he was going down. And you wouldn't read about it! I believe the French lady that was living in Geraldton just before my father went out to sea that trip, says to him "You want to be careful." Isn't that marvellous!

**JD** Yes, yes. Was that boat lost later on? Was that the one that was lost at the Abrolhos?

**MARCHESE** Oh no, no no. That was a different boat. But the **Silvery Wave**, that got lost there, and the boy Miragliottas were on it as far as I remember, and fortunately the boat was lost but they saved themselves, and they're still.... Oh, quite a few of those brothers are still around. Yes, that's right.

**JD** You were telling me about how messages from the boats when they were at sea had to come by word of mouth.

**MARCHESE** Oh, well that is quite right because, as I say, a lot of the fishermen were illiterate for a start and there was no way along the coast of writing a letter and posting it or whatever, so everything mainly used to be word of mouth. Now the only thing that could happen, if there was somebody who could write, they'd write a letter for a person and, say, give it to my wife or my family. See? But mainly it was word of mouth.

Now one time there, my dad and his two mates on the boat, they seemed to be running late for coming home, and then rumour got around that the boat they were on was wrecked or something - they'd seen bits of boat floating around. And anyhow, eventually, the next thing we know there's a boat coming in around past Cottesloe way, and of course [it] didn't take long for word of mouth to say there was a boat like the **Rosella** coming in. The next thing we know, that it is them but, of course, only sail so they're not travelling too fast; and by the time they got to the market that day there were people along the rocks, I'd say from the Fremantle fish market almost to Gray Street - word had got around, and you should have seen them. There were people everywhere. You know, especially for that particular era. And I'll never forget Frank Iannello, my eldest brother and myself were there, and he picked us up with the dinghy and took us out to the **Rosella**. And that's when we found out that they were

unfortunate. They were anchored at Lancelin, there were heavy seas and they couldn't get through the passages, and that's why they were there for so long.

Yes, I was nearly going to mention about my late aunty and uncle who I am indebted to. They were very good to my family. My uncle was very good to me in as much that I worked for him; he used to give me ten shillings a week, which I always used to give to Mum; and he used to buy my clothes. And for that I used to go anywhere he asked me to go; I used to go to Perth, and I mentioned the hotels such as the Savoy, the Australia, the Metropole, Perth Club, WA Club, Forrest House, Tattersall's Club where I first took the first lot of seagulls. In those days they used to have seagulls on their front lawns and some fisherman from Rockingham gave me these young seagulls, so I took them to the Tattersall's Club through my uncle like - he must have worked things out - and I ended up getting a couple of bob a pair for these seagulls.

Forrest House is another place I used to go to, but it was all part of my education you know - going up to Perth. I think in those days they used to call them charabancs. And I used to love doing it. I hardly played at school, to tell you the truth, I was always on the move. I can even remember this teacher saying to me, "You got to go and pick any fish up for your uncle?" and she'd let me go a little bit earlier. But, no, they were good.

And what else was I going to refer to? A man's getting a bit above himself. But uncle was very good to me. He also used to buy fish for a dentist in Cottesloe, a bloke by the name of Mr Steele. He used to also send me to the Ocean Beach Hotel. I used to get off [at] the Highway and walk right up Eric Street to the beach, the Ocean Beach [Hotel]. Oh no, I don't regret - I used to love that.

Then there was another chap who he used to buy fish for - had the Castlemaine Brewery, and his name was Don Curtis; in fact I went to school with his grandson, Frank Curtis, and I've never seen him since he left school. I believe he's up north somewhere. But anyhow, Don Curtis, he always reminded me - this won't be defamation will it? He reminded me of a particular actor.

**JD** No, not at all. That's all right.

**MARCHESE** He used to remind me a bit of W C Fields, and I remember he used to come to my uncle's place in Suffolk Street and he used to be chauffeur driven. Oh yes. But gee, he was big-hearted. No matter how many kids used to be around my aunty and uncle's place, all the kids would get a shilling or sixpence each. Everyone of them. Wouldn't leave anybody out. And I always look at those people as marvellous people.

**JD** Yes, yes, too right!

**MARCHESE** And as I say uncle - he had a lot of friends. As I say, well he wasn't the best speaker because, let's face it, it's not an easy language English, I believe, for people; and especially the Italian women, God bless them. You know, like our mothers, the furthest they went was to the gate to see if there was any mail. That's as far as the poor so-and-sos ever went. And that's why sometimes I used to get annoyed when they used to say, [whispers] "Why don't they speak English?" Now the average Italian that went fishing, he fished with his own friends - Italians. The same in gardens, it was very similar. And as I say, the women - they were lucky if they got to the front gate. So they didn't get the chance to learn the language.

But oh no, I don't regret growing up that way. And as I said to you earlier, I grew up with another family in Norfolk Street. They were very, very patriotic, their name was

Coates; in fact after the war I worked with one of the brothers - his name was Jock, he came and worked down there with the dockies. And I believe he was in the Merchant Navy during the First World War, and I got an idea he could have even joined up in England. This is only hearsay, I can't say that I'm a hundred percent right, but there's only one of them living now, and I believe he's in South Australia. My late father used to tell me another brother lost his life during the First World War and he was in the Navy.

**JD** Your father's brother?

**MARCHESE** No no. One of the Coates, lost his life during the First World War, and I think how this came about. Dad always had a soft spot for Navy people.

**JD** Because he'd been in the Italian Navy himself, hadn't he?

**MARCHESE** Yes. Well, as I said, he served in China during the Boxer Rebellion, and there's another thing that I'm a bit disappointed, but I couldn't do much about it because we were born and bred here, and I believe Dad won some citation when he was in China and it was presented to him by King Victor Emmanuel. But unfortunately, evidently, his medallion was left in Italy because he came out here. They had a bit of a home near the sea, I believe, very close to the sea. I believe it would be very expensive there today. And, of course, there were other younger brothers in this Coates family - it was just like two families.

The youngest brother, he and I started school the same day. He got sunk the Atlantic I believe, well anyhow in the ocean somewhere away from here during the wartime. He was in the Merchant Navy and I believe he ended up in America and then he came home. And you wouldn't read about it; I was home on leave and I ran into him.

Then there was Andy Coates, he was in the Australian Navy. He, unfortunately, he was home on leave and got killed in Fremantle.

**JD** What, in a traffic accident?

**MARCHESE** A bus ran over him. My deceased brother, Silv, was on the bus that run over him. Oh dear! Then there was another one, Billy Coates - that was another brother. He was in the Navy. He was a Petty Officer but he had an accident and then I think they put him out of the Navy - probably for B-something, or whatever, and he eventually joined the AIF, he went through the Middle East and he only died a few years ago. But we were very close to that family. I know I was, because as a kid I hadn't started school and I'd always be at Mrs Coates' place.

And I'll never forget, they used to have a big stone hut at the back, or shed - whatever you want to call it; we used to call it the goanna. [Where they kept their canoe called **Scout**, we used to leave at the bottom of Norfolk Street, paddle around the fishmarket, down the harbour to North Fremantle traffic bridge; an elderly couple used to give us a glass of milk and cake, then visit our friends and later back home.] [Laughs]. Oh gee, they were good days, we used to have a lot of fun. Bloody oath, yes.

**JD** Well, we are nearly at the end of this tape. Anything else that you....?

**MARCHESE** I don't know if I can tell you any more. As I said to you earlier, there's a lot of people out there could give you probably a lot more information than myself

because they are fishermen. I only classify me as.... I did a stint of fishing, you know what I mean? But blokes like Carl Miragliotta that lives in Alma Street, near the.... opposite the hospital. He'd be one of the oldest, I'd say. There's Frank Iannello that lives in Howard Street - could give you a lot of information. Frank Del Rosso, he lives in Beaconsfield but I know there's some connection with the Council in Fremantle and he wouldn't be a hard person to get.

**JD** I'll get those names written down shortly.

**MARCHESE** Unless he's away! If you wish to get information something to do with.... well, it's to do with Rockingham Company, the people I advise you to see would be Jim Iannello, another bloke by the name of Pasquale Paparone. I'll tell you another bloke, but I can't remember exactly whether he was there or whether he just went fishing around the Fremantle area - you know, he might have gone further than that - and that's Louie (Luigi) Santaromita. Right?

Well, as I said, Vinci was another family, Merendino, Pensabene, Rotondella, Pittorini, Miragliotta, Camarda and Ionello. But as I say, there might be various others but that's all I can think of. [C.Glorioso]

**JD** Thanks very much Fred, that's been a very, very interesting interview. You've got a tremendous memory.

That is the end of this interview with Fred Marchese for the Australian Fishing Industry Project for Murdoch University. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey. This is the end of Tape 2 Side A.

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with **BILL NORTH**

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Bill North, President of the South Coast Professional Fishermen's Association and fourth generation fisherman in the Albany region.

Mr North is presently a beach and estuarine fisherman but he has a wide experience in other places and other types of fishing. His comments on tuna and shark fishing over the years are particularly interesting. In this interview he voices the concerns of many of his colleagues on the south coast.

Clearly, Bill North is dedicated to fishing as an occupation and a way of life, and in this he typifies many of the fishermen of his generation in this area. His account of his father's achievements is an inspiration.

There is one Tape of two sides. The interview commences at 026 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is an interview with Mr Bill North of Grassmere, near Albany. The interview was conducted in Mr North's home by Jack Darcey on the 15th December 1989.

Mr North, would you record your full name, please?

**NORTH** William Daniel North.

**JD** And your date and place of birth.

**NORTH** 30th January 1936 in Albany.

**JD** Were your parents born in Australia?

**NORTH** My father was born in Albany, my mother was born in Scotland.

**JD** And what about your grandparents?

**NORTH** My grandfather was born in Albany and his wife, Elizabeth Hayes, was also born in Albany.

**JD** Can you go back any further than that?



**NORTH** Yes, my great grandfather North and great grandfather Hayes came out in 1851 and 1852 respectively, to Albany and to Fremantle, in chains.

**JD** And they became ticket of leave, I presume?

**NORTH** Grandfather Hayes.... great grandfather Hayes was declared a free man, or whatever it was, when he got here. They just wanted to get rid of him, that was all. I think grandfather.... great grandfather North had a bit of time to still serve.

**JD** And when did they come down to this Albany area?

**NORTH** Well Daniel North came, he was transported to Albany in 1851 on the **William Jardine**; and great grandfather Hayes was transported to Fremantle in 1852 on the **Mindon**. I think it only came out once - the **Mindon** - to Australia, and I believe it was wrecked off Fremantle or something, that's one story I heard. Whether it's right or not I don't know.

**JD** Were they fishermen?

**NORTH** Grandfather Hayes started fishing soon afterwards in Oyster Harbour in Albany. He came down - I'm not quite sure when he came to Albany, but pretty soon after. From there on - possibly about the mid 1850's I suppose it would be - he was fishing in Oyster Harbour, he used to supply the mail ships that came in, (I think they were steam ships at that time) and a few other suppliers. As they came into Albany he would sail out of Oyster Harbour and sell them fish.

Prior to this, his daughter (who married Fred North, my grandfather) would, when they came into town, she would go up on to Mount Clarence and light a beacon fire so that he would see this when the ships came into Albany, and he would sail out and around and sell them the fish.

**JD** And your family, have they always fished in this Albany region?

**NORTH** Well we've fished State-wide pretty well. I, myself, have fished from the Fitzroy River to Esperance and all along the coast. Traditionally we used to move around quite a lot, but with restrictions you're sort of tied to one place now. You've got to sit where you are. But years ago we used to be able to fish where we wanted, how we wanted, and for everything we did want to fish for. For instance, a fishing licence - even as little as 15 or 20 years ago - used to cover everything, and I can show.... I've got dockets here now which will show where I've sold abalone, tuna, mulies, shark - and they've all been taken off me now. They are restricting you right down.

**JD** So you have a very wide experience in fishing, not only from a geographical point of view from the places that you've fished in, but also the type of fishing that you've been involved in.

**NORTH** Yes, I've fished virtually everything. I've even served a bit of time on whale chasers.

**JD** Have you?

**NORTH** Yes, I've done just about the lot, I think.

**JD** From here in Albany?

**NORTH** Yes, Albany whale chasers. Yes.

**JD** You would have seen many, many changes in all forms of fishing in that period?

**NORTH** Yes. In some sorts of fishing, yes. But in the one that I'm confined to now, which is virtually estuary fishing, there's very little change. Outboard motors have made a big change, of course, and faster boats; but apart from that...

Well, going back even not that long ago, we used to row a lot; then we had the old wooden boats with inboard motors and they were always leaking and, you know, a lot of repair work on them all the time. If they were left out in the sun they'd open up - you know, the planks would open up. There was a lot of maintenance with that type of boat all the time.

We're mainly into aluminium now, not much fibreglass, and with that and the advent of nylon nets I suppose it's a seven day a week job now instead of a four or five, where we used to work three or four, or five days and then dry the nets. Every week we used to have to dry the cotton nets or they'd rot. And then we used to have to tan them two or three times a year as well, to help preserve them; but now it's just a case of carrying on. You leave your nets in your boat; you go and set them; then you pick them up - unmesh as you pick up; and leave them there until you go and set again.

**JD** Did you join your father in his fishing enterprise?

**NORTH** Yeah. Well I left school at 13 and started fishing with him until I think I bought my first ute when I was 15, and I was sort of.... by the time I was 16 I was ready to leave home and fly myself. Well I had left home practically at 16, before I could even get a licence (a driver's licence) I was fishing myself.

**JD** You would have seen marked changes in the prices you got for your produce.

**NORTH** Yes, in a way there's been a lot of change in that area because the increasing population - in WA anyway - has brought about a bigger demand for fish, and especially with the Asian population. But I can relate back to say, 1948 or '9 when I was still sort of at school but fishing with my old man anyway - you know, I used to take a lot of time off school. And in those days you could get, say (of course everything was in pounds) - you'd get a hundred pound of yellow-eyed mullet and you'd get one-and-a-penny (1s.1d.) a pound for them - or one-and-tuppence (1s.2d.). [Deliberating] - Might have been one-and-tuppence, yeah, one-and-tuppence I think it was, and one-and-threepence for sea mullet; just in Albany here, at a place called Seafoods which was going at the time. And for that one hundred pound of yellow-eyed mullet which was relatively easy to get, that was about the equivalent of a week's wages. See five quid [five pounds] in those days was a week's wages and you'd need a bloody lot more than that now to get a week's wages, I can tell you. Yeah!

**JD** Any other major changes that you've noticed? Whaling has gone, of course.

**NORTH** Yes, this is right, the whaling has gone. There has been a big increase, of course, in off-shore fishing type of boats. We've got a lot of purse seining in King George Sound and other local areas now that was unheard of not so long ago. Even going twenty, thirty years ago there was virtually hardly any shark fishing, and that

was mainly carried out by an old deep hulled type vessel, probably 20/30 feet, close to shore. There could even be an old car engine in it with a.... it always had a sail.

There have been a lot of changes in that type of thing. That's got more mechanized; people are going out with echo sounders and radar, and faster boats, but they're not doing any better at it, I don't think. With estuary fishing, that is practically still the same as it ever was.

**JD** Yes. Do you do some beach fishing too?

**NORTH** Yes, with the salmon and herring fishing. Herring fishing, the way we are doing it now, is a more or less relatively new method of fishing whereby you set a trap net and herring accumulate in overnight. Little schools come along and eventually by morning, hopefully, there's quite a reasonable amount of herring in the net. Then, of course, the net is pulled in in the morning and loaded up and away it goes. This is off a cray boat, of course.

Salmon fishing is much the same as it started off. My old man, here again, in about the early Forties - in fact I can remember during the war selling salmon to the Yanks - they thought they were tuna at the time. They thought it was something the shape and the look of a tuna and they couldn't relate to them as being salmon. Nothing at all like their salmon. Of course, they are not a true salmon anyhow. And they thought of them as tuna and, of course, we'd virtually hardly ever heard of tuna. And we used to sell them to the boats - you know, the couple of Yankee boats down at the town jetty, or deepwater jetty, wherever they were - sell them around town for two bob each, and so on.

But then if we got a big lot, there was a place in Belmont, [a person by the] name of Gardiner had it - Ocean Canning Company was the name of the place - and we used to truck them up there, or put them on the train and send them up. Send some to the market - sometimes you'd get a bill back for your freight if you went to the market. But Gardiner at the time was paying, oh.... I don't know whether it was exactly at that time, but in the early Forties, say '44/'45, it was the mid Forties, he would be paying forty-four quid a ton for salmon in Belmont, delivered there. It probably only cost five quid for petrol to get them there anyway.

We'd fish, oh, any of these beaches along the south coast here, whichever was convenient, and cart them through to Gardiner. And then as the fish moved up the west coast we'd follow them up there. We'd fish maybe at Augusta for a little while; go to Hamelin Bay and fish for them at Hamelin Bay and cart from there up to Gardiner, which was a bit shorter distance.

I think it was in 1945, or '6, while we were at Hamelin Bay that a bloke by the name of Jimmy Rowden came down to see us in his little old Standard 8 at the time, and he came and talked and asked the old man if he'd sell fish to Hunt (a bloke by the name of Dean Hunt was going to open a cannery in Albany) and the old man said, "Oh well, we'll see how it goes. What price are you going to pay?" and so forth. And Hunt got established in '46 - I think 1947 was his first year he accepted fish. February or March '47. And his initial opening price was thirty quid a ton. Of course it all had to be hand cleaned and that, at that time, too.

**JD** You did the cleaning and so on and then delivered them?

**NORTH** Yeah, we used to gut them by hand on the beach and chuck 'em into tanks - 300 gallon tanks - which was virtually one sheet of iron high and probably 6 feet across, or whatever; and wash 'em and then chuck 'em into trucks.

**JD** Bill, could you tell us about the tuna fishing? You mentioned you were involved in it. What's happened to tuna fishing over the years?

**NORTH** Well initially, with the way tuna started here was the shark boats going out used to drag a jig behind to get a few of these things - mainly to cut up for shark bait. They were very good shark bait; plenty of oil in them, nice and fresh, a bit of smell. From there on, you know, some days we'd go out and getting very little shark but jigging tuna one after the other. So just even with the jigs they used to fetch them in to....

**JD** Can I just ask you, what IS a jig?

**NORTH** A jig is a lure, dragged behind a boat.

**JD** Right!

**NORTH** And usually they were just a basic lure with a couple of hooks on it. Then these Hunts started taking these, canning them, and see how they'd go - and they worked out reasonably well, I think. So it progressed from there; when shark was a bit short, to the blokes starting to pole them. They tried live bait - some of them, here, for a little while, but it didn't work as successfully as it has done in other areas. And so what they used to do was just take out a carton of frozen mulies, or whatever, and you had to tow a jig behind the boat. As a tuna got on the first thing they do is start to circle and pull thing in and chuck over a couple of mulies and chum up the tuna, and then start poling them until that school.... and then you'd go to another one.

But I think the main problem here with the tuna would be that it was a very young stock of fish that was exploited. Whereas even in South Australia - here they were getting ten pound fish - they were getting fifty pound fish in South Australia.

**JD** Was that the blue fin tuna?

**NORTH** Yeah, the southern blue fin. Yes. And of course the Japs were working further out and they were taking much bigger fish still. A lot of people like to blame a lot of other people for it and, to be fair, the West Australians were blaming the South Australians because they were taking a much bigger tonnage of fish, but when it all boils down I would say that the West Australians were taking a bloody big percentage of number of fish. And that's what it's all about, the number of fish; they are the ones that breed, not the weight of fish. Whereas we were getting them a fifth the size sort of thing, well we would have probably been catching as many fish as the South Australians.

Here again, the South Australians blamed the Japanese because they were catching a lot bigger tonnage again, but here again - it was probably only the same number of fish. So it's whether.... you know, the fish were too small to take. They've got to be [bigger]. This is what conservation is all about, and any true fisherman has to be a conservationist and you've got to see what you're doing. And in fact, a lot of the fishermen did see what they were doing and tried to get restrictions put on by the Australian Government a lot earlier than what were eventually handed out.

But a fellow.... I'm not quite sure of his name, it might have been Robins or something like that, did a bit of research into the tuna stocks and population and what his estimates were, etc, and they reckoned, oh, there was untold tuna, they are going to last forever. And it wasn't very long after that that they started finding out what was happening.

**JD** I believe there was something like seventy boats fishing for tuna in this area around Albany, now there's only about four.

**NORTH** Yeah, well this could be so. There was a lot of them doing a bit of tuna fishing and a lot of other. Like for instance, myself. I was shark fishing. I used to set 1,000 yards of net out of a 14 foot Clark boat and, you know, you'd pick up sometimes half a ton of fish in that, of shark. We might set the net and then while we were waiting around through the day we'd jig a few tuna - we were restricted in area, of course, in size - we'd jig a few tuna and have a little bit of mulies with us, frozen, chuck them over and pole them even into a 14 foot boat. And sometimes you'd pick up half a ton of tuna and fetch them into town.

**JD** The price of tuna has gone through the roof, they tell me.

**NORTH** Yeah, well of course it would have done. I'm not really aware of what the price is at this stage because it's such a rarity that I don't really know what's happening. But I wouldn't say that it would be all that high compared to the.... if you look at the price of tins of tuna on the supermarket shelf, they're not all that much higher than the price of salmon, and we are sort of giving that away, virtually. 55 cents a kilo. So I don't really know what the price structure is on tuna. But of course you can get it on the sushimi market - well that's another thing altogether.

**JD** That's to Japan, of course.

**NORTH** Yes. That's airfreighted to Japan. It's got to be treated right, you know, and the price on that - here again, I'm not quite sure of what it is, but I did here \$35 a kilo or something like this.

**JD** You talk about shark. Are the numbers holding up?

**NORTH** No, they've dropped considerably. There's a lot of shark that are virtually - well, very nearly been wiped out. The grey nurse would be the prime example. He was a coastal fish and used to live in an area, and they were very easily caught in net because of their hangback teeth, and you know nearly every time you caught a grey nurse he was caught by the teeth. They also had a.... they are the only shark with a swim-bladder, and they might even fall out of your net half way up or get out of your net half way up, because you're lifting up from the bottom, but their swim-bladder would expand and they'd come to the top anyway and float, they wouldn't survive. But there was not a lot of those around in any case, initially, they were very local - just along the beaches. I haven't seen a grey nurse for years now. We used to often get them in the shark nets with schools of salmon.

And the bronze whaler was another one we'd get in the shark nets, or they'd be around the beaches. [Correction] in the salmon nets, I mean. They'd be around the beaches as you were catching salmon, you'd have to - especially at night time - you know you'd be cleaning salmon. When you got a school of salmon you'd have to clean them, you'd have to work on them until they were finished. It doesn't matter what time of the day or night. Old tilley lamps hanging up on paddles, this sort of thing. Cleaning. Every once in a while you'd have to tip your tank out and, you know, refill it.

And of course you refill it with buckets - 4 gallon kerosene tins with handles on them, from the sea. And you'd have a few fish heads rolling into the sea, and a bit of guts and stuff, and quite often you'd be out there in the night with a couple of buckets, getting a bit of water for the tank again, and you'd find you were standing alongside a bloody big bronzie, or something. This often happened. Being such shallow water they were in, though, you'd quite often just grab them by the tail and run backwards quick, and you'd drag them out anyway. An extra few bob.

**JD** Did they ever attack?

**NORTH** No. No. Well, of course, grabbing them like that they couldn't.... a bronzie especially, a fairly rigid type of fish, he can't really reach around to his tail, and provided you put enough pressure on and kept the weight on, you were right, you could get him out.

**JD** Bill, would you recall your view on the management of the fishing industry in Western Australia?

**NORTH** Management is what we've tried to do ourselves as much as possible in all areas of the fishery, going back to what I said earlier on - the tuna. We tried to get boats restricted then, when we were first catching them. Even today we are still trying to get restrictions put on and unfortunately we have a Fisheries Department that have their own views on management which are not necessarily the right views - in my ideas anyway. When we ask for restrictions they don't give us restrictions, and then they restrict us in ways where we shouldn't be restricted.

Closed waters would be a prime example. We need some closed waters, and there are places that need to be open, and one of these is Nornalup Inlet which is open to the sea continuously. And there's no earthly reason why it should be closed to fishing, except a few people that live close there (mainly retired) and go there for this nice, pleasant little holiday sort of thing, and don't like to see fishermen. And there's a few who think that we will deplete the stocks of fish in the inlet. You can't get through to the people that we've been fishing Albany Harbour for 150 years and that is still producing plenty of fish, and there are no restrictions whatever there for fishing apart from a bit of closure recently through pollution.

The other thing, I suppose, with Nornalup is political. They think they'll lost votes over it. As a matter of fact I spoke to Gordon Hill, the Minister for Fisheries, yesterday about this particular inlet and, you know, they are reluctant to do it and I think they are afraid that people will be upset, so I mentioned to him how the Wine Tax Bill was going to be the end of the wine industry down here - the 10% tax they were going to put on that. And how the businessman's lunch was going to close all the cafes, and how the fringe tax benefits were going to be the end of all the new car dealers, and so forth. But none of this has eventuated and the same thing would apply for an area like Nornalup, which is teeming with fish.

We've got an ever increasing demand for it through population increase, and we're importing 80,000 tonne of fish per year into the country, and any little bit we can help to save that import would be a great help to us. And especially now, we need fish to bloody survive because the cheap imports are not doing us any good at all. They are unloading a lot of Chinese fish in the North West now. And cheap fillets; you can buy fillets of particular fish a lot cheaper than we would expect for the whole fish.

All in all it's been quite a bit of a blow to us this year, I'd say. Normally when fish is scarce there is a demand for it, the demand goes up as the supply goes down,

therefore your price goes up - and you can more or less maintain the same living standard. But not this year, because our prices have come down through the imports, and at the same time we've had a relatively lean year down this way. Through various factors, I suppose there's been.... earlier on in the year there was a fair bit of fish around and everybody was sort of going fairly well and it brought the price down, so there wasn't a lot of money involved there. Then the fish have sort of just gone lean the last six or eight months. It's been fairly poor. One fish that has held its price, I suppose, would be cobbler and one of the best areas for that here is in Oyster Harbour. Well, we had a seal in there and we couldn't work for that; it was giving us a lot of bother just taking the fish out of the net, ripping the net. It didn't eat all the fish it was taking, it just took them out of the net.

**JD** That's a protected species?

**NORTH** That's a protected species and we were talking about putting a bounty on it - the fishermen. We spoke to CALM about it - the Department of Conservation and Land Management - they didn't want to know anything. And when you stirred them up enough or got an article in the paper, they'd respond saying they were going to do this, or they were going to do that, but nothing eventuated. One of their plans was to paint it, I don't know what difference that was going to make unless they painted a bullseye in it - that would suit me.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**NORTH** With the seals, as I say, they caused a lot of damage in that time and I know if somebody approached me now and asked me how.... I'd be prepared to put in to a bounty. I'd put in a couple of hundred dollars at least, and I imagine it would be probably ten or twenty other fishermen who would be prepared to do the same, some might even pay more. There's certainly a price on the thing's head, I can tell you that now.

**JD** Bill, what do you see the future holding for fishing in this area?

**NORTH** Estuarine fishing will always hold out. There's a very good product in these estuaries, a good fish, good quality fish, and there's a big demand for it. That will always be there. We are trying at the moment to get a few restrictions put on the number of fishermen. There are too many at the moment licensed for this area. We've been negotiating for some time to get these chopped out. I think there's around about seventy licensed for this south coast estuarine fishery - we want to fetch it down to around forty if we can, which will maintain it can survive at that rate.

We'd also like to get some more waters open to relieve the pressure on some of the open ones that are being fished too heavily. Due to restrictions - as for instance, now we've got (because of the tourist season coming on) we are kicked out of places like Brook's Inlet (Broke Inlet they call it now - it's always been known as Brook's, I don't know where Broke came from); Herman's Inlet, Stokes Inlet (towards Esperance), all of these - which are good producers of fish but we've got to make way for the tourist. I can't see the sense in that one either, because the tourist will come whether we're fishing there or not. In fact the tourists come to watch the fishermen and get a good

feed of fish. But the tourist can still fish in any case, we're not stopping him, as is shown in Albany Harbour where they can still always get a good feed of fish.

But the industry will survive. I don't know how the.... because it has done for so long with the same method of fishing, and that is why it must survive. There's no new technology really coming into it. I can't see.... I wouldn't like to see any new technology if it was to eventuate. Just leave it as it is. And there's always a demand for it. In fact my son is just.... well, he'll be 18 in another - on Boxing Day, actually, another week or so - and he has just recently got his trainee fisherman's licence; and he will, I imagine, be taking over from me or I hope so, because it's a bloody good life. You are your own boss; you can do what you like; it's a relaxing sort of environment and you live with the environment. You can go to some of these rivers and lakes, you know, in various places. On a nice night you can reflect on things and it's really good, it's very quiet and no noise. And you've got a fire to sit around and might have a can of beer perhaps, but that doesn't happen a lot; but some nights you do. And it's a very relaxing type of a job and I wouldn't be without it.

**JD** Bill, just before we finish, is there anything else that you would like to have recorded?

**NORTH** Such as?

**JD** About people, or events, or the industry generally.

**NORTH** Oh, there's not a great lot I don't suppose. The people who are fishing, they seem to keep on going on fishing. They don't seem to stop. Just across the lake from here - in fact Newton Sharp, he must be.... well, he's getting on anyway, and he still goes and does a bit of fishing.

My old man, he started fishing - oh, well.... He only had one arm, actually, he shot his arm off when he was twelve, just shooting ducks down here. And from there he started fishing at an early age. Through the Depression he brought up.... there was eight of us kids and I think the first one was born about 1924 or something like that, and the last one about 1938 or '9. And we had two cars when everyone else had horses and carts. We had the first radio in the district - people used to come down from all around to listen to the wireless, as it was called then - an old Bateyphone wireless. I suppose when you work it out - my old man only had one arm, he never ever received any benefits of any description all his life; well it shows what fishing was like, in those days especially. And in fact the father was fishing until he drowned in this inlet here, at the age of 78. He was still fishing by himself. To that stage he had not received a penny in benefit of any description from the Government, be it old age, invalid, or any pension. Not a penny!

**JD** That shows a bit about what your father was like, too.

**NORTH** Yes, well that's right. He was too proud to. Possibly having one arm is what made him too proud to accept anything. He wanted to prove he was as good as the next one.

**JD** A tremendous achievement, yes! Bill, thanks for that, it's been a good interview.

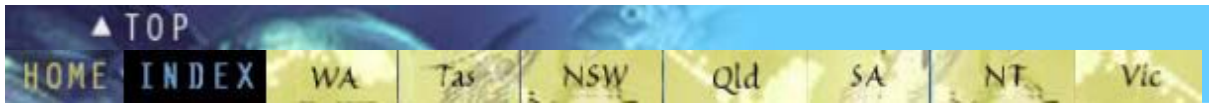
That is the end of this interview with Mr Bill North of Grassmere near Albany, conducted by Jack Darcey on the 15th December 1989.



END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with WILLIAM MILLER

### INTRODUCTION

Bill Miller owns and operates a seafood processing factory at Port Samson in Western Australia. He also is involved in fishing and prawning but does not now go to sea himself, employing a skipper to run his vessel instead. He came to Port Samson during the war years after some experience in beach fishing and rock lobster fishing near Perth.

While based in Port Samson he has had a very long and varied career. Although he does not mention it in the interview he was shipwrecked twice and lost a vessel in a cyclone. He was a pioneer in the Nickol Bay prawning industry and has also trawled in the Gulf of Carpentaria and Exmouth Gulf. He was much involved in charter work for off-shore oil exploration companies and iron ore companies, and he was a master pearler, taking shell in the wild.

In addition to outlining his own career, which is a saga of hardship and effort, prosperity and decline, that is quite remarkable, his story is a vivid portrayal of post-war development of the north west, a development in which he was so intimately involved.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Miller's home at Port Samson, Western Australia, on 7th of June, 1990. There are four sides on two tapes and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Bill, would you record first of all your full name, date and place of birth?

**MILLER** William Arthur Miller, that's my name. I was born in Dwellingup in the south west on 5th of November, 1927.

**JD** And were you brought up in Dwellingup?

**MILLER** I spent my.... I think I left Dwellingup when I was about probably four or five years old. It was just during the Depression.

**JD** Where did you go?

**MILLER** We went down to Perth, and I went to school in Perth, and I remained in Perth until I was about fourteen years old.

**JD** And what did you do after you left school?

**MILLER** Well, actually I enjoyed school. I was doing fairly well at school but we had domestic problems with our family, and at the age of fourteen I had to start paying the rent and the War had started and at that stage the best money I could earn in Perth at the time would probably be about twelve or fifteen bob a week. I ended up going down and working on farms for a couple of years where you could get two or three quid a week, because there was a shortage of farm labour at the time because most of the guys were at the War. I spent a couple of years on farms mainly because.... not that I wanted to be a farmer, but it was the only place I could earn enough money to pay the rent.

**JD** You had a number of brothers and sisters, didn't you?

**MILLER** Yes. My other brothers were in the Air Force and they were away, and I was the youngest of the family and there was only my sister and myself at home at the time. She'd only just started work and I think she was only earning about fifteen shillings a week and she couldn't contribute much to the domestic economy of the house. Our parents had split up and it was just one of those awkward situations.

**JD** So how long did you stay farming?

**MILLER** Oh off and on about two years. I went down and worked on a farm in a town called Dumbleyung for about twelve months. I went back to Perth after that period and that's when I first started to get my interest in fishing. I started.... I fished at Scarborough, and Triggs Island and Hillarys and Whitfords. I teamed up with a guy there and we were net fishing there for mullet and whiting and tailor and that sort of thing. When the winter months started we couldn't go fishing. It was always too rough in the winter. That's when I went back up and worked on the farms again for about another year. When I came back to Perth I teamed up with this fisherman again. His name was Bill Barrass and he talked me into coming up to Port Samson where he'd been up here before, and he knew there was a lot of fish. He was very impressed with the fish up here. He'd been up the coast (I don't know when) prior to that, but he talked me into coming up.

We bought a little freezing plant and it was a little ammonia plant and had the.... It was all in bits and pieces and had to be assembled and everything. We came up on the State ship **Koolinda** in 194.... it was late 1944, and we arrived at Port Samson with this freezer plant. The only reason I came up was we thought we were going to make a fair bit of money out of it, and that was my main interest because we had financial difficulties at home.

When we arrived at Port Samson we never ever got the freezer plant going and never ever shipped any fish down. There was plenty of fish up here, we could see that, but something that hadn't been calculated was the isolation of the place and when we arrived, at that stage there were two houses and two camps at Port Samson. The population was six and, of course, there was no water supply, no power supply. There was no shop, there was no service of any kind, and we arrived in this place and the ship sailed away, and we just camped on the beach. We'd previously been to the Lands Department before we came up, and asked about acquiring some land. They just said, "Look, it hasn't been surveyed, just go where you like."

So we selected a site down on the beach, a little bay at Port Samson, and we started the job of carrying all these ammonia coils and we had bags of cement and a little three horse power Ruston engine and all this equipment, to try and get this freezer plant together. But it was.... I think it was pretty late in the year. It was damned hot and we just about died of heat and exhaustion. We had no water. We went over and approached the people at the Harbour and Light Department who had rainwater tanks and they gave us a bucket of water a day, and that was very precious to us. We never actually got the plant going because at that stage there were no services in the town. There was no welding equipment. There was just absolutely no services, and there was only one vehicle in Port Samson, and we used to get a ride in that up to Roebourne where there was a shop. But half the time the shop had nothing in it. The State ship the **Koolinda** was about the only State ship operating at the time, because the **Koolama** had been sunk by the Japanese, and at this stage the War hadn't finished. Most of the women and a lot of people had evacuated from the local towns. There was only.... Well, I think the total population of Roebourne would have been about 100, 150. Probably Hedland wouldn't have been much better and Onslow probably a lot less, and the total population of the Pilbara would only be.... I doubt if there would have been 1000 whites in the Pilbara at that stage.

Of course, the shops would run out of.... you'd only have spuds and onions and those sort of things for two or three days, and you'd have to wait for the next ship to come which would be six weeks, and you virtually had to go and get a rifle and go and shoot something to eat. You know we'd shoot a 'roo or a turkey or something, and there was always plenty of fish to be caught, but our living conditions were pretty rugged and, because of the lack of services we weren't able to get this freezer plant together and get it operating.

This Bill Barrass, he ended up selling the freezer plant to an old prospector guy from Wittenoom and he went back down south on one of the ships, and I was broke so I stopped up here and oh I.... it's a pretty long story, but I eventually bought a truck and went kangaroo shooting for a couple of years and made fairly good money at that. I went prospecting and worked round the bush, you know, well-sinking, and operated a diamond-drilling rig for a while. Knocked round the bush for a few years and eventually got back down to Port Samson - I'm guessing - say around about '47, '48 and this prospector guy that had bought the little freezer plant, he managed to get it going. By this time the War had ended and the State shipping service had improved and people were starting to return to the north after the War, and there was a few services starting to improve, and he was able to get this little freezer going.

But he was an elderly guy, he was known as "Major Pianta". He used to be a fairly.... he was a cyclist you know. His name was in the **Miller's Guide**. He used to win all the wheel races and that sort of thing. But I ended up coming down from the bush to have a break by the sea, and I ended up teaming up with Major, because he was a bit old. I started getting the fishing going, you know. I worked with Major for about six months and started to get the place paying off reasonably well, but at about this time a man that I'd been diamond-drilling with wrote to me from Victoria, and he wanted me to go over there and operate a diamond-drilling rig on a hydro-electric scheme, drilling foundations at Mount Bogong at Wodonga, and I decided I'd take this job because I'd had experience on a diamond-drilling rig.

So I left Major and I went down to Perth and at that particular time my mother had been evicted from a house she was renting at Mount Hawthorn in Perth, and there was a critical housing situation in Perth at the time. Houses weren't available and building materials were in short supply because it was just after the War, and I ended up staying in Perth. I had to cancel my job in Victoria and I stayed in Perth for about two

years. I had a bit of money at the time and I built a small house for my mother out at Scarborough, and I also teamed up with a fellow named Bob Hugall in Perth. He was a cray fisherman and I worked with Bob while I was in Perth building this house. By the time I'd finished building the house I was nice and broke and I saw an ad in the paper where this small fishery at Port Samson was for sale. Only after I left there old Major hadn't gone too good and he couldn't get anybody to keep the fishing side going, and he decided to put it on the market. I wrote him a letter and told him I'd be prepared to buy the fishery off him. I never had any money but I said I'd buy it off him providing we could just pay it off as we go, and he agreed to this and my brother in the meantime had come out of the Air Force, and we both came up here in, I think it was about 1947 - '47, 48, it might have been '48. We both came up and started to work the fishery and buy it off Major.

Unfortunately we had only been operating for about six months and my brother got drowned up here, and not long after that another friend of mine named Jim Deagan, he came up and joined me with the fishery. It was also about that time I got married.

I married a city girl that came up from Perth. We lived under pretty hard conditions in those days. That was a bit hard for a girl from the city to come up here. She never had a.... there was still no electricity and no water supply. We used to have our own truck. We used to cart water from Roebourne in drums, and she never even had a stove. She used to have an old 44 gallon drum cut in half with jetty bolts over it and a camp oven. That was the way people cooked in those days. The only luxury we did have, of course, was refrigeration and it was virtually the first freezer plant ever built in the Roebourne district. We introduced refrigeration to the area, and we were able to get frozen foods up from Perth and I think we were one of the first ever to introduce Peters ice-cream in bricks, and all sorts of frozen foods and smallgoods to the area.

In those days all the services along the coast were made by State shipping service. The roads were in such poor conditions, there was no regular transport coming up by road until probably about 25 years ago. I can still recall the first trip that we ever did up by road in about 1945/46, when we went down to Perth and bought our truck when we first went kangaroo shooting, and it took us six weeks to get from Perth to Roebourne by road. The bitumen ended at Northampton, and I think it took us two or three days to get from Northampton to Carnarvon because the roads were all sandy and boggy, and from all the way up (from memory) the only bridge I can remember was Mindaroo Bridge over the Ashburton River. None of the other rivers had bridges and it was after the wet. We had to virtually.... every river you came to, you had to find a place, dig the bank down, and make a spinifex crossing, and we got bogged in one place for about two weeks. That was after a big flood out of Onslow.

People complain about roads today, they wouldn't know what it was like [laughs], the roads were virtually non-existent. The bush tracks weren't too bad but the fact that there were no bridges or crossings on the river was the main problem that held us up, and it was almost impossible to travel in the summer time because of the heat. People travelled in those days.... You couldn't travel in a car, you had to have a truck of some sort because of the standard procedure to carry a drum of water and a drum of petrol, and shovels and camp ovens and a rifle. That's the way you had to travel in those days.

At this stage, this friend of mine, Jim Deagan, and myself, we started to build the business up (the fishing side of the business) and our main markets in those days.... we didn't have a big freezing plant but our main markets.... we used to send fish inland to Wittenoom which was starting to boom as an asbestos mining town. It was quite a big concern for that era, and there was an airline company called Airlines WA

Ltd. They'd started an air service through the inland. They used to fly to Geraldton and then I think to Mount Magnet and Meekatharra and Wittenoom, and they used to terminate at Roebourne, and then fly back the next day.

Well, they were looking for business so we started to air-freight fish into the inland towns, and built up quite a business air-freighting fish inland, but it only lasted (that market) only lasted a couple of years because eventually Airlines WA Ltd merged with MacRobertson Miller (MMA) and they cut that run out. In the meantime the State shipping service had increased its fleet. They had about half a dozen boats and it became quite a regular service. There was a tremendous amount of cargo coming in at Port Samson. It was a very busy port, exporting asbestos and servicing the mining town of Wittenoom. The State ships themselves, plus a lot of overseas' ships, used to come in there and pick up their backload of asbestos and wool. They were boats from the Blue Funnel Line, the **Charon** and **Gorgon**. There were other boats from the China Navigation Company. Three or four of them used to come in there, plus American ships, Italian ships, and even Japanese ships started to come in. Well, one Japanese ship came in. They didn't get a very good welcome [laughs] by a lot of the ex-servicemen that were wharfies. I can remember that [laughs].

But it gave us a good market for our fish. We were supplying ships' stores with our fish which was very good. We also started to build up a very good business for about... well, we did it for quite a few years. We used to shuck local reef oysters. There was an abundance of local reef oysters on all the natural reefs around the area here. We used to... in season, it wasn't a thing you did all the year around because the oysters only used to be in good condition in the summer months. Once the oyster spawned they got into very poor condition and they weren't fit to pick. So in the summer months we used to shuck local oysters and freeze them in jars and we built up quite a good market for these. It turned into a lucrative business actually. We did it for nearly ten years, round about 1950 - 1960.

Over the years we also had our fair share of problems with cyclones which were a bit of a menace on the coast. They still are, but we weren't so prepared for them in those days. I can't recall.... I can remember every year we had cyclones but some were worse than others, but we had one particular bad one. I can't remember what year it was. It must have been about the mid '50s I guess. They never used to name them in those days. They never used to track them and you just had to use your own judgement and initiative. There were certain signs you know, that gave us warning that they were coming, but there was no radio or television services, no weather charts or anything, available to us in those days. We got wiped out with one cyclone that just completely wrecked the place we built, what we called the old fisheries, and I didn't quite know what to do. I was almost tempted to go back to Perth at that stage, but I was still young and foolish I guess, and I decided to build the place up again, but we wanted to build something a bit better.

So at that stage there was a politician up here named Rodereda and a pretty good guy in my book, and I spoke to Rod about it and he took us down to.... I went down to Perth and he took me around to the Department of Industrial Development and I negotiated a loan to build a new factory, or a new seafood processing factory and a new freezer plant. We borrowed what? I think from memory it was 6000 quid which was in those days, a lot of money. We ended up building the fishery we've got today, and it gave us much more comfort and we put in our own generators and we had electricity. There was no town supply. We used to always generate our own electricity.

When we built our new place we were a bit better equipped and we bought another.... upgraded our small boat. We'd lost the first boat we had up here. It was only a little

thirteen foot clinker built dinghy, and you didn't need anything much bigger than that because there was absolutely heaps of fish around, and catching fish wasn't the problem. I've never seen such an abundance of fish anywhere when I first came up here, and even off the local Port Samson jetty, people could go down there and catch half a ton of fish a day just on a handline off the jetty. Catching the fish wasn't the problem. It was a matter of being able to process them and being able to market them.

When we built this fishery we tried to encourage extra fishermen to come and work in the area. At this stage we operated the only fishing boat in the area because the area was still very isolated and there wasn't much population.

**JD** What species were you catching?

**MILLER** Oh the species we caught.... the fish they caught off the jetty was mostly trevally and mulloway cod. We also used to net fish in the creeks. We used to net barramundi and threadfin salmon. They were the main fish they caught at that stage. Once we got the bigger boat.... the second boat that we bought was a bigger boat. We used to go further afield and we started to find we could get very large catches of Spanish mackerel, but they were almost an unknown fish then. They used to smoke these mackerel in Geraldton years ago and call them albacore cutlets, but a lot of the locals up here at the time, a lot of the old-timers and locals, they reckoned they just called it "shit fish". They used to use it for bait, and I couldn't understand why, and we cooked some fish up ourselves and it tasted pretty good to us, and we thought we'd have to try and establish a market for it.

So I got in touch with a chap named Theo Kailis. He's a well known identity in the fishing world today. At that stage Theo was just starting off as well, and I asked him to try and establish a market for this fish. So we sent down a couple of lots on the State ships, and he started to promote.... marketing the mackerel and became very successful. So markets were established and for a couple of years we went fairly well fishing for this fish, and a couple of other small operators got into it. There were probably three or four mackerel boats working here at that time.

Towards the end of the late '50s, or it was 1960, Theo Kailis got in touch with us and told us there was a boat called the **Collier** available at.... or on the market very cheap. It was a processing vessel and he thought it was a good idea if we'd buy this boat and it would certainly give us a much better capacity to catch fish and process it at sea, and bring it back to the shore base rather than coming in and out every day. This particular boat the **Collier** and another boat called the **Will Succeed**, they'd fished up in the north here for a couple of years. They were boats with quite a bit of history. They were originally built as cargo lighters, oh way back in about 1906, I think they were launched. They had quite a romantic history on the coast as cargo lighters in the era when all the pastoral people used to have landings along the coast, and the wool was lighted out to the coastal steamers who had to anchor off shore because there were no port facilities available. Apparently the **Collier** had laid on the beach at Shark Bay for about ten years or something. It got washed up in a cyclone and it was just left there.

Now this company - I think it was called North West Enterprises (I just can't remember the people involved in it) of the name of Umanus from Geraldton, and a fisherman named Stan Stajanovich, were involved in it. They came up here turtle fishing with these two boats, and they caught plenty of turtles, that was no problem. They caught a lot of other fish. They also got a lot of mackerel. One of the best mackerel fisherman, a chap by the name of Fin Fosser, he was pretty well known at the time.

Unfortunately they didn't go very well with turtles because they didn't know how to process it properly and they'd never investigated their marketing, and the company got into financial difficulties and went into receivership. That's why we were able to buy one of the vessels, the **Collier**, and we refitted it out and brought it back up here to use as a boat for mackerel fishing.

Yes, we sailed the **Collier** up from Fremantle in about 1960, and there were at this stage about half a dozen small mackerel dories operating with the **Collier**, which we used as the mother ship. She was quite a good old ship. I really loved it, and we fished very successfully the first year. I think we got about 150 ton of Spanish mackerel and other fish. At this stage we were getting other fish - bottom fish, like spangled emperor, red emperor, cod and quite a variety of local reef fish which all had a good ready market. At this stage there was still no road transport from Perth. There were no freezer trucks coming up the coast, though you got as far as Carnarvon, but they never came further north.

At this stage we could hold around about fifteen or twenty ton of fish on the vessel, and we used to.... State ships ended up putting a radio frequency on their radio so we could make direct communications with the State ships, and we used to arrange schedules with the State ships and rendezvous with them at sea, at some given position. Because we used to move up and down the coast a bit, we used to have to arrange a rendezvous and unload our fish straight on to the State ships at sea.

**JD** This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**MILLER** The first year with the **Collier** was quite productive and we were reasonably happy, although we'd had a few problems. Round about this time (or towards the end of the season, or the next mackerel season) the buyers tried to force the price down a bit, and we weren't very happy about this. We were all ready to start the mackerel season and at this stage oil exploration (off-shore oil exploration) was just about to start off the north west coast, and we were approached by a company. They wanted to charter a boat off us to sail up the coast to just north of Darwin to set up some positioning stations, or get the co-ordinates of some positioning stations so they could start their seismic operations. We weren't very interested in the job and we told them to get a boat somewhere else, and two or three days later they approached us again, and they said, "Look, what sort of price would you want if we chartered your boat to do this?" They said they couldn't get a boat anywhere. They tried Darwin, they tried all over Australia, and they couldn't get anybody to bring a boat up to do this particular job they wanted to do. Anyhow we put a price on the job and said, "Look, if we did do it.... " we nominated a price and they said, "Well, we'll double it." Well, we just had to do it [laughs].

So we sailed away from Port Samson on the old **Collier** and headed up to Darwin, and we went just north of Darwin at Melville and Bathurst Island. We started... we had a surveyor on board and he had to do what they called a "ten star astro fix". The whole of the seismic operation had been held up for many months because the seismic boats couldn't position their shots because they never had any positioning gear. They're a bit different today with satellite navigators and decca navigators and all the rest of it. In those days the north west coast was very, very badly charted, particularly certain areas up round the Kimberley. You could go for a couple of hundred miles and there



were no soundings, and on the chart there was just a dotted line because none of it had been charted. They didn't have any co-ordinates to set up their positioning stations. At the particular time there was a firm called Off-Shore Navigation. They used to set up what they called radyst stations which enabled them to position the seismic shots for the seismic vessels.

We set off from Darwin and this guy had to do these ten star fixes. We went from Bathurst and Melville Island right down the Nor'west Cape, including round the Monte Bellos and Barrow Island and all that sort of thing and all those areas. It took us a few months to do this job and it turned out quite a lucrative job [laughs] and not only that, we caught a lot of fish as well [laughs] and every port we came into we had a freezer full of fish as well.

But that sort of started the ball rolling on this charter work. The company that we did the job for, they were very, very happy with the work that we'd done. I had a very good crew though, an excellent crew. I had a bit of a problem when we sailed out of Broome - or sailed into Broome. At that stage I never had a Skipper's Ticket. Nobody knew what a Skipper's Ticket was in those days, and one of the State ship's skippers said that they wanted to tie us up because we never had a ticket. I got in touch with the Marine and Harbours and told them that they'd have to tie up all the pearling boats in Broome and all the rest of the boats up north before they'd tie me up! So they started to scratch their heads on that one and when we got back down to Port Samson.... about that stage we were offered more charter work around Barrow Island. WAPET were getting ready to start their seismic work around Barrow and their drilling. We'd done a bit of work for WAPET there with this vessel, and we'd no sooner finished that and we were offered more work servicing some of these supply runs out to some of these positioning stations that had been set up.

In the meantime I'd had to do a bit of swotting and I eventually sat for my Skipper's Ticket with one of the State ship skippers. I think the first one I sat with was Skipper David Clarke, but I never passed. I never got my ticket then because I wasn't really aware of what I had to.... It's not like today where they all go to navigation schools and that sort of thing. I was completely ignorant of a lot of things, but they gave us some books and we took a course and a couple of months later we sat with another skipper and we got our sea credentials. I became a legal Captain at last! [laughs]

But we then got quite a good reputation for this charter work, and there was a French geophysical company got in touch with us then, and they chartered us. We went and picked them up in Derby and we did about a three months' survey for them. They had a new instrument at the time called a telurhometer which could accurately measure a distance of say up to about 30 miles within a fraction of an inch sort of thing, and they had a much more sophisticated positioning equipment than what the other vessels were using, and they had to have very, very accurate co-ordinates.

This particular job we started just north of Derby, and we started that we measured up all the islands and the country from Derby up to.... well I think we were just round about Vansittart Bay. We had a helicopter with us on this particular job. It was a little.... one of the first choppers ever to come to Australia I think. It was a little bell bubble type machine. It had no hydraulics. It had wire cables on it. The pilot that flew it, you had to virtually pull [laughs] it didn't manoeuvre very well I can assure you. We had a lot of trouble with it and pranged them nearly every other day. We broke every rule in the book because their radio was out. I think the radio broke down the first day and we never ever had radio communication with the chopper. We used to have about eleven guys on board, surveyors and a mechanic, and the chopper used to take off every morning to try and tie the other co-ordinates in with known trig points further

inland, but half the time the chopper would never ever get back, and you'd never know where it was.

It used to have.... to refuel it we had about 30 drums of aviation gas on board the boat, and we used to put a drum in a small eighteen foot runabout we had, and go and hand-pump it in to the chopper which had rubber pontoons on it. They gave us a lot of bicycle puncture kits which we used to repair the pontoons because every time it landed in the bush it used to get punctures. Only half the time he never got back because he used to run out of fuel. The pilot used to be screaming at us to pump the fuel in. We would pump the fuel up with the engine going which he was not supposed to do. He'd land in the water and then when he went to go to take off, he'd be half sunk. While we were refuelling he'd have to have his rotors going at a pretty high speed to stop him from sinking. When he went to take off, he couldn't take off because there was too much weight of water in his pontoons, and it used to take him a fair while and eventually he'd take off and there'd be water spraying out like a sprinkler system. Then if he'd further struck any headwinds and that sort of thing, by the time he'd finished his run he'd invariably run out of fuel and we'd find him on a beach somewhere round one of the islands.

One of the conditions of this charter was.... [laughs] I told them perfectly clear that I.... from a previous experience in the Kimberley area, that there are very ferocious tides and it's impossible to navigate accurately (because of the tides) with the type of navigation that I'd been taught, because in those days we never had a radar. Most guys won't even go through that country now unless they've got a radar on their boat, but all we had was a compass. We did have an echo sounder which was one of the first echo sounders ever fitted on a boat in the north west. That was our most valuable piece of sophisticated equipment we had. Eventually the chopper didn't return one day, and we couldn't find it, and I radio'd Darwin and they sent a air-search out and we eventually found it pranged in the middle of Mary Island in Vansittart Bay.

At this particular stage we didn't know what to do. The manager of Helicopter Utilities came up to Darwin. We got in touch with him on the radio and I said we'd salvage the helicopter if we could get another chopper across from Kununurra because at this stage, they'd just sent what they called a "G4" up to Kununurra which was a little bit bigger than the one we had, and they were just going to experiment with crop-spraying up there, for cotton or whatever it was they were growing at the time. Anyhow they reckoned that because of the distance it was beyond the point of no return. But I reminded them that I still had about 20 drums of aviation gas on board so a chopper ended up getting out there and we salvaged what was left of the other one. We picked it up in three or four pieces and dropped it on the deck, and eventually sailed in to Darwin with it.

We got another helicopter back and we went out and finished the job but at that stage we stopped out at sea for pretty close to three months without going to port. We used to get serviced by a landing barge come out from Darwin about once a month. It used to bring out fuel and provisions and we worked for this French company for about three months, and they were wonderful people. They were some of the greatest guys I'd ever worked with and we (myself and my crew) made very, very close friends and relations with these people. They were wonderful.

At this stage we got called back to Port Samson from Darwin. At this stage the iron ore industry was starting to.... well, the survey work was....it looked like the iron ore industry was about to emerge in the Pilbara, and there was a lot of need for survey work and charter work around our area, so we decided to come back and at that stage, we got involved in doing survey work. We took the first surveyors down to

Dampier before the town of Dampier was built. We surveyed round Cape Preston, Dampier, Cape Lambert, Depuch area, and Cape Keraudren and Port Hedland. We got involved in the lot.

Round about 1965 we.... unfortunately we lost the **Collier** in Cyclone Shirley, and what happened, we'd just been offered another charter round Barrow Island by a firm called Western Geophysical. They wanted to do seismic work on the Barrow shoals, and they chartered our boat off us and they wanted two of our smaller boats to actually.... shallow draught boats that could tow the geophones and the equipment over the shoal area round Barrow. I went down to Perth and I'd just virtually signed the contract with this company and two days later we'd lost three boats. We had a late cyclone come down on April 3rd, and Cyclone Shirley.... My crew had taken the **Collier** down but they couldn't get into Sams Creek where we normally used to moor because of the tides. There were neap tides and they couldn't get in so they took the boat down to Flying Foam Passage which was normally a good cyclone anchorage. Unfortunately they anchored in the wrong spot because most of the cyclones veer round to the north. This one didn't, it cut in and the winds came from the wrong direction, and the boat dragged anchor, and believe it or not there's a little bit of sandy beach and a big pinnacle rock on it. Instead of going on the sandy beach it dragged on to the pinnacle rock, and unfortunately we lost her.

After we lost the **Collier** plus two other small boats, it was a pretty depressing situation. We salvaged a lot of gear off the **Collier**. At low tide she was fully exposed but the vessel was beyond repair, or economically beyond repair. If there had been a slipway on the site it could have been repaired but because of the isolation of the area, we couldn't do anything about it. So we ended up buying it back off the insurance company and we salvaged the two GM motors and a fair bit of equipment, anchor winches and any equipment that was any good, but she was a wooden hull and that was not salvageable, and we didn't quite know what to do.

Actually I was very, very impressed with the assistance we got from the Government at that particular era because we had had a fairly good reputation with Industrial Development Department because they funded a lot of projects in the north, and from what I was told we were the only ones that paid them back. We had a clean financial sheet with them. Anyhow one of the chaps I'd met at.... or I knew at the Industrial Development Department, when he heard about it he rang up and wanted to know.... if we wanted to build a new boat, the money was available. I was quite happy about this, but at this stage there was also an interest in prawning in the north west and there had been prawns found in Carnarvon and Exmouth Gulf. One boat had been up this way searching for prawns but had never got any significant catch.

I think from memory the first boat ever to catch - or have an indication of banana prawn fishery - he was a boat called the **Vellalucca** skippered by a bloke called Tommy Doakes. Tommy Doakes came up here and he did catch a few banana prawns up here near Depuch Island, and it was only a very small boat that he had, and he brought them in and we cooked them and I froze them in our freezer. He was just doing a little bit of survey work because he'd been prawning over in Queensland. Tom sailed away and he never came back to this area again but the following year, Cec Pearce who was a very well respected fisherman, particularly on the research side of things.... Cec used to.... actually he was an old identity from the Cossack days. He used to skipper lighters and pearling boats and he also.... he worked for the Fisheries Department a fair while on research, and he was very knowledgeable on marine biology and on prawns and all the rest of it. Cec had been doing a bit of survey work in

the Exmouth area and he came this way, and he was really the first fisherman to find payable catches of banana prawns in Nickol Bay.

At that particular stage I had got in touch with the Industrial Development Department and we applied to have a limited entry fishery on Nickol Bay and Cec and myself tried.... we were going to form a partnership and we wanted to fish Nickol Bay with freezer processing vessels, and we asked the Fisheries Department and Industrial Development if it would be possible that we could arrange to have a limited entry licence on that area for about six to eight freezer vessels, for a two or three year period until we could determine what sort of.... the potential of the resource was. They were agreeable to this. They gave us the opinion that they were going to agree to this and on the grounds of this, I'd gone ahead and borrowed money through the Development Bank with the backing of the Industrial Development Department, and we had laid the keel and started to build our first steel prawn trawler/processing vessel, which was named the **Caroline M**. The **Caroline M** was launched in 1967 and it was quite a memorable launching. There were a lot of VIPs went to the launching, and a Fisheries Minister's wife, Mrs MacKinnon, she broke the champagne over it and christened the boat. At this stage it was the biggest and best and most modern prawn trawler ever built in Western Australia, but [laughs] it's been superceded now for sure.

**JD** It was built at Fremantle, Bill, was it?

**MILLER** Yes, she was built in Fremantle by Dillinghams Boatyard. At that stage there weren't any boatyards operating in the Fremantle fishermen's harbour. They were all built in the river.

We sailed **Caroline** up north in 1967 to fish in the Nickol Bay fishery, and at this particular stage many other firms were interested in fishing in the north and I know the Fremantle Fishermens Co-op, they tried to set up a base in Onslow, and the Geraldton Fishermens Co-op decided that they would set up a base in Sams Creek in opposition to us. I couldn't quite understand this because we were pretty well promised that there was going to be a limited entry fishery, and operated on the lines that we'd suggested. I read one of the headlines in the paper at the time. It read, "No more fishing restrictions. Geraldton Co-op to open up North West fishery." They always used to.... you had to bring tuna into it then. The tuna was the magic word in the fishing game in those days even though there was no market for it. There was nobody canning it and everything, but it was the magic name. If you built a prawn trawler in those days and wanted to get funding from the bank, you had to say that it could be converted to tuna fishing, otherwise they wouldn't give you any money, because that was the magic word. Nobody was interested in prawns.

But I was quite stunned about this headline and I rang up this friend I had in the Industrial Development Department and he was quite stunned about it too, but apparently the Fisheries had been influenced by the Geraldton Co-op. No more fishing restrictions, open fishing, and that's the way they wanted it. I later spoke to Sir Charles Court about this decision and he reckoned the only reason that decision was made was because the Geraldton Co-op had quite a reserve of surplus funds and they claimed that they were prepared to spend 200 thousand dollars on processing facilities etc in the area, which was much more money than what we could raise or were prepared to spend on processing facilities as we didn't think it was a wise investment. The Government sort of allowed the Geraldton Co-op to go in mainly because of the money they had available. We were trying to borrow money and they had the money. So they became our opposition, but they also seemed to have a strong influence over

the Fisheries Department. The fact that we'd been fishing up here for twenty years prior to them didn't seem to be of any interest to the Fisheries Department.

Eventually the co-op put up their factory and we didn't quite know what to do because our factory needed to be extended to process prawns. We weren't geared up with prawn processing equipment. So I got in touch with Theo Kailis and I asked Theo could he send up two or three freezer boats, which he did, and we caught a fair few prawns. It was before the co-op opened. We caught something about 500 thousand pound of prawns or something the first year, and when the co-op opened they influenced the Fisheries Department to ban freezer boats from Nickol Bay fishery, and this included mine. I'd just had a new freezer boat built and I wasn't allowed to fish in my own backyard.

At this stage the iron ore development was also starting to show signs of development in the area. New towns were being built and our existing business had to be upgraded and there was more of a need for management here. At this stage I put a skipper on the **Caroline** and decided to stop ashore myself, and we also had another small boat built which I skippered around the area, doing charter work and mackerel fishing. Because of the co-op opposition coming in we weren't allowed to fish our freezer boat here, so when.... she ended up going up to the Gulf of Carpentaria which was just opening as a banana fishery. Theo Kailis had a boat called the - a processing boat called the - **Yalata** which he'd just fitted out and sent up there.

So he went up there and fished up there in '68/69. I went up there two or three times. We slipped the boat at Thursday Island. I worked off and on up there but I had to keep coming back to my business because the magnitude of the business at Port Samson had increased tenfold, and needed more management than it did in the older days. This is mainly because of the influence of the growing mining towns in the area.

After this, the skipper I had, left the boat and I had more charter work offered to me, so I flew up to Darwin and picked up the boat and brought it back from Darwin myself. When we got back here we found that the Geraldton Co-op was operating freezer boats in Nickol Bay, and I got in touch with the Fisheries Department about this and I wanted to know how come we weren't allowed to operate freezer boats and they were. So they didn't quite know how to answer this but they more or less threw a hint that if I wanted an Exmouth Gulf licence I'd get one because they were going to release three more licences for Exmouth that year. So I ended up with an Exmouth licence. I just got the impression that they didn't want me fishing in my own back yard.

At that particular stage I was offered work for my trawler, the **Caroline M**. They'd just discovered this gas on the North West Shelf gasfield here, on which I'd worked previously. They'd had the boat chartered off me for six months on the off-shore exploration, and they offered me.... I had a good liaison with the Burmah Oil Company at the time. We got on very well and they offered me permanent work. So I took the **Caroline** down to Fremantle and we, at that stage, became very competitive businessmen. Lombardos were getting in on the act, and other charter operators, and all vessels at this stage had to have the union crews, and we had to have what they called "Commonwealth certificate of survey" which was a very, very high standard of survey. So I took the boat down and I think it cost about \$60000 to refit the boat up to the Commonwealth survey requirements so we could legally do this charter work.

In the meantime I'd arranged to build another trawler called the **Julie M** and she was a much more modern updated boat. I was going to put the **Julie M** in on fishing the Exmouth licence and put the **Caroline** on to permanent charter work because **Caroline** had twin screws, and the charter people insist on twin screws. They don't

like chartering boats - single screwed boats. Unfortunately when we.... at that stage Labour Government got in and the Minister for Energy at the time, his name was Connors, he forbid the export of gas from Australia, and Burmah Oil Company had just negotiated to sell gas to the Japanese market, and they had a plan to get the rig... to get the gasfield productive and because there was a restriction on export, they weren't able to go ahead with it. Connors at the time, he reckoned that all oil and gas reserves should be kept for local use, and they were going to put a pipe-line.... or he wanted to put a pipe-line across Australia and pipe the gas to Sydney and eastern states' markets, but it wasn't a viable arrangement which they found out quite a few years later. They had to rely on export because of the economy of things, but because of this I was not able to get that permanent charter job with the company, because Burmah Oil eventually got out of it, and Woodside took over.

It was also unfortunate that I'd borrowed a tremendous amount of money at that time to build a new prawn trawler plus the Commonwealth survey on my existing one, and unfortunately the next year.... the first year the **Julie M** operated at Exmouth, it was a very, very unproductive year, and it was the worst year on record. In those particular days the conditions of the Exmouth licence were that you weren't allowed to leave the area, you had to fish inside the limited area for three or four months.

*JD* This interview continues on side A of tape two.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

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## TAPE 2 SIDE A

*MILLER* Yes, at that stage the conditions of a limited entry licence at Exmouth, the vessels had to stay there for.... they weren't allowed to leave for about three or four months. Because the prawn catches were very, very low at that time a lot of the boats had just dropped anchor and they just.... I lost a fair bit of money that year and in fact, I never got the charter work as well. I couldn't keep my commitments and the next year I was pretty well pressured. I had to sell the **Julie M** and the licence to get out of my financial difficulties, and I decided to keep the **Caroline** even though she was an older boat, because she was twin screw and I still envisaged that I would have got a fair bit more charter work with the boat.

Just to rub salt in the wounds the next year was a bumper year at Exmouth and the **Julie M** caught about 200 thousand pounds of tiger prawns or something. If I could have got that the first year I would have been laughing. Well, that was the gamble I took and I lost.

When we came back to Port Samson (at this stage I was able to get the **Caroline**) they allowed freezer boats into the Nickol Bay fishery. They made it a limited entry fishery and as... (earlier I didn't explain) but what happened when I bought Theo Kailis.... I made a deal with Theo Kailis to put some money into the shore base because I never had the money to go in competition with the Geraldton Co-op. I made the arrangement whereas they put some money in to upgrade the plant and put in some extra refrigeration equipment, and some more sophisticated equipment for freezing banana prawns.

We put in the first brine emersion freezers ever built in Australia I think. We had three of these brine emersion freezers which were supposed to be the in-thing for IQFing banana prawns because there was quite a lucrative market for prawns in Japan, but the trouble with the banana prawns, they come in in such big quantities. They don't

run for a long period but you get huge tonnages when you do catch them and you need a tremendous amount of refrigeration equipment to process them.

The arrangement was Theo Kailis' company would market prawns. We would process them here. They'd do the marketing and we got a commission on the production that we put through on the prawns only. Then we still.... any other fish or any other activities we kept separate and it worked out quite well, but we made the agreement for ten years. After ten years everything would revert back to myself, and Theo's company would be right out of it. That system worked reasonably well, but over the next seven or eight years it turned into a bit of a slugging match between the Geraldton Co-op and ourselves. The prawn resource here couldn't really viably support two processing factories and neither factory were making good profits. We did make a profit but I know for a fact that the Co-op ran at a loss most of the time they were there. I think we worked a bit harder and we were a bit more efficient than what they were, because I know even though they got more publicity and media publicity about production and figures, in fact, over the seven or eight year period I'd say that we probably produced four times more prawns than they did, but the way the media had it you'd think it would be the other way around.

Anyhow as an incentive, our argument earlier in the piece was that I favoured freezer processing vessels because freezer processing vessels were versatile and they weren't restricted to one area, or one resource. The north west coast was a vast area and with a freezer processing vessel you could sail down the coast and you weren't limited so much. But the Government at the time which I can understand.... they were trying to establish industry in the north and they were looking at wanting to have processing factories, and creating employment and jobs. I argued that nobody would be prepared to invest in a shore base unless they had a guarantee back-up supply of product. On the basis of this, the companies were.... Geraldton Co-op and ourselves were allocated with a number of licences. What they did on the limited entry, they gave the Geraldton Co-op seven licences (why I don't know) and they gave us five licences, and one licence was for my own boat, the **Caroline**, and the other four licences, we just farmed them out. If there was any fishing boat that wanted to fish the area, trawl the area, they operated on our licence concession. This became a gazetted Act of Parliament called The Nickol Bay Act.

So this operated quite successfully. The boats used to come and fish for us every banana prawn season on our licences and we used to process and market the product and things went reasonably well. It didn't work out quite that way with the Geraldton Co-op. There was a lot of arguments with their vessels and when they used to.... if a skipper of a vessel had an argument with the company about something, they'd take the licence off that boat and give it to another boat, and because of this, they made a gazetted Act of Parliament to give the fishermen a certain amount of protection which I agreed with.

After about seven or eight years of the slugging match between the two factories, the Co-op eventually went on the market and I thought this would be a good opportunity to upgrade the economy of my own business - my own fishing business, so I bought the Geraldton Co-op out, and that should have given me a total of twelve licences. I thought with twelve licences it would give us a more reliable production and an opportunity to market direct.... to export direct to Japan, where at that time there was still a very lucrative market for prawns. I did a trip over to Tokyo and met some buyers over there. Theo Kailis had given me an introduction to a couple of buyers over there and we did export a couple of lots direct ourselves.

But not long after I'd bought the Co-op there were a couple of new fishermen to the area which had a bit of a gripe about things. They reckoned I'd contravened the Trade Practices Act and created a monopoly, and they wrote a letter to the Minister to that effect. The Minister without giving me any hearing at all, he wrote off the Nickol Bay Act. I appealed against it, and by writing off the Nickol Bay Act it meant that all the licences went back to the Fisheries who gave them all to the particular vessels and they gave them independent marketing on licences that were originally given to the factories as an incentive to go ahead with the investment. I wanted to take legal action against the Government. I was going to sue them for a million bucks and I went and saw a top solicitor and couldn't do a thing because the Minister had power to write off this Act, and the fact that we had never drawn up a proper legal agreement which say when the mining industry started here, all the mining companies and the Government made all sorts of negotiations, but they were smart enough to get their solicitors in, and if either party violates the agreement, they can take legal action and be compensated. But unfortunately our agreement was made in the days when a handshake was like a legal document and no doubt if the Minister - I think it was Alec Fraser was the Minister that agreed with this thing.

**JD** Director?

**MILLER** The Director of Fisheries. I think he would have honoured the commitment but in the meantime, he dies and some other Minister takes over the portfolio, and they don't [laughs] care much about the history. They just write it off to suit the times. They virtually sent my processing factory broke, or I could see it was going to go broke because already several of the.... Earlier in the piece all the boats (or most of the boats) were wet boats with brine tanks, and they had to come ashore every other day to get their product frozen and processed. Then as fuel became dearer and costs, overheads, became higher, a lot of the guys were replacing their vessels with freezer processing vessels, and I could see it was just a matter of time when the processing factory would have no use. I think it was 1983 when we lost the licences and I couldn't do a thing about it.

So I could see it was only a matter of time when there would be no use for the processing factory. We still had about five wet boats operating when they took the licences off us, so the factory died a slow death. It was like being slowly strangled. It was a matter of a couple of years it just got worse and worse, particularly as power costs and other costs and overheads got higher and higher. We had to keep cutting down on the plant until we virtually.... I was only running a very, very small part of our refrigeration plant because of the problems (the political problems) we had with the fishing industry and the lack of support by the Government. I was pretty upset considering the Government twenty years earlier had done everything possible to assist us, and we'd had marvellous assistance through the Industrial Development Department. I was quite concerned that the Government of that time weren't even concerned or interested because I think the north was booming so much in mining development. The iron ore was the big.... and off-shore oil exploration, were the big deals of the north. I think the Government just weren't interested in the fishing industry and they didn't seem to care.

Because of this attitude I decided to try and diversify my business into tourism, and we struck a lot of problems there. Another point that I should have brought in and I didn't, was during this.... about this time we did go pearling for a couple of years. I can't quite recall the exact date. It was probably in the early '80s. At this stage there was a bit of a revival in the market for pearl shell, and at this stage there were no licences being issued for cultured pearls. We'd never taken a great interest in cultured pearls I guess, but all of a sudden there was a good market for pearl shell. There was



a new fashion industry in Korea. They were making wooden furniture with inlaid pearl shell carvings and that sort of thing, and there was a very, very big lucrative market for it.

So we decided to convert a small boat we had called the **Beadon**. We got a couple of Maori divers up, and they were experienced divers. We had three divers actually and I think the first year we got about 30 odd ton of pearl shell from the Flying Foam area, and we worked as far as Monte Bellos, and between Onslow and the Dampier Archipelago. But the areas hadn't been worked for many years, and the pearl shell apparently had regenerated. The first year we did very well, quite a good tonnage of shell. The second year the catch dropped off a lot. We weren't getting the tonnage of shell. Also the market had started to drop off a bit too. They had a different method of grading the shell for this particular market.

But then it changed and the high prices only remained for the first grade shell and the lower grades the prices tended to drop a fair bit. So after the second year we gave it away because we weren't actually getting.... even though the market was there we weren't able to get the tonnages of shell that we did in the first year, and we put that boat back to mackerel fishing and barra fishing, which we're still doing today.

**JD** Just before you leave pearling for.... did you find any pearls?

**MILLER** Yes.

**JD** And they'd be readily marketable for sure?

**MILLER** Yes, I can mention that, yes. Well, we did get a few pearls. The Flying Foam area actually is quite.... it's got quite a history for being rich in pearls, but none of the pearls we got were very valuable. We never got any fortunes out of them. They've got to be.... I think we got about half a pickle jar of pearls but they were pretty odd shapes and flaws in them. Yes, they did have.... I forget what we got for them but it certainly wasn't anything to get excited about.

Also we did market the meat, the mother-of-pearl shell meat. The market for that was for sun-dried meat, and we found sun-drying was a problem. There was a fair bit of humidity about when we were operating, and we started to freeze the meat because we had a freezer on board this vessel. We started to develop a pretty good market locally for frozen meat, but then (which cooks up very well too) and we also.... our old allies, Kailis and France, they were after mother-of-pearl meat. We used to send it down to them frozen and they put it through an oven-drying process. I can't recall what we got for it. I think it was something like 50 or 60 dollars a kilo for the meat in those days. I believe today it's hundreds of dollars, two or three hundred dollars a kilo. It's supposed to be an aphrodisiac or something but it doesn't work, I tried it [laughter].

**JD** Do they export the meat from the cultured pearls, do you know?

**MILLER** I haven't had a lot to do with cultured pearls, but I should imagine if they've got to kill the shell they would have to do it. I'm sure they'd do it, yes.

At this stage I gave skippering boats away myself and I put a younger skipper on my prawn trawler. It's a young man's game as far as I'm concerned. Just a point I'd like to mention is, in the old days when we first started all that survey work in the old **Collier** and that sort of thing, they were great crews. They were a pretty wild bunch at times but they were a good loyal crew and a lot of the guys stayed with me for six or seven

years. There was one crewman, Bluey Barnett, I don't know how many times I sacked him, because we'd get into a place.... he'd be out to sea for a month or so and you'd go into Broome and in those days you had to sail on the tide, and I'd say, "We're sailing at midnight on the tide and anyone that's not on board is sacked," and invariably Bluey would never turn up and we'd have to sail without him because we couldn't wait because we were on charter. I'd be calling him all the names I could lay my tongue to and a week later we'd be perhaps steaming in to Port Hedland, and you'd go in to Port Hedland and you'd be throwing a heaving line ashore to tie up, and Bluey would be standing on the wharf, saying, "Have I got my job back, Chief?" And I had to give him his job back because he was the best seaman we ever had on board. But those guys used to stick to you through thick and thin, and if we were having a rough time, there was no job, no money, they'd still stick with you. But I always compensated them when we were doing well. I used to always throw them a few bonuses.

The only reason we ever got out of charter work was when Woodside first developed the Nor'west Shelf gasfield out there. The first charter job that was put up for tender, I applied for and I got it, but I couldn't do it because the unions at this stage were very strong and powerful in this particular area, which annoyed me. I personally had some strong words with one of the union guys and he reckons that we were big wealthy capitalists making fortunes out of this sort of thing, and I asked him well why the hell didn't they come up and do it twenty years earlier when there was nobody up here wanted to do it, and I had to sack my crews and put a union crew on my boat and I refused to do it. Well, I did do it a couple of times but I didn't want to get involved in that. When we were first told that we couldn't do this job because we never had union crews, I said to them, "Well okay, if that's the thing, I'll get my guys to join the union," and they refused. They would not allow any of our guys to join the union because they reckoned that the union had too many unemployed members. That way we virtually got pushed out of charter work. There's a lot more I could talk about that but it's [laughs].... There's a lot of corrupt and dishonest things happened with the unions round about that time.

So we decided to.... rather than be involved in it, we concentrated on fishing. We concentrated on prawning and we tried to upgrade our fishing techniques and gear. There was no work for the factory - the processing factory was almost a disaster. We fired up this year for a month. We put about 50 ton of banana prawn through for a month, but for the rest of the year we would be better off to shut it down. None of the fishermen support the factory. They only support it when it suits them. If their freezers break down they want us to give them service. If the catch rate exceeds their own processing capacity, they want us to freeze their prawns, and we can't operate economically on that arrangement.

By operating more efficiently.... I'm reasonably happy the way my boat fishes. I've got a good skipper on it. He works well and the boat's operating profitably, but the shore base is not. There's been.... since over the last three or four years our resource management has become a very important part of the industry. I advocated resource management should have been introduced years earlier. You know, years ago when we tried to get limited entry fishery in Nickol Bay it was rejected. They wanted open fishing and the same in the Gulf of Carpentaria. I remember when Murray France wrote a submission to try and introduce limited entry fishing in the Gulf, and he went down to Canberra with this submission, and the people in Canberra didn't even know where the Gulf of Carpentaria was, let alone know anything about the industry. There was a lot of ridiculous decisions made with that particular fishery as well as here. Now the fishermen have got to pay for that because they've got this licence buy back scheme and they expect the fishermen to pay for it. Well, it's not the fishermen's fault that the Government sold more and more licences and didn't put proper management

into the resource and I think it's wrong we should have to be penalised for political mistakes.

Another thing there's always been a lot of debate about foreign fishing off the north west coast here. I know for a fact that just after the War the first foreigners to fish this area were Japanese, and they made fishing history. They fished here for about six or seven years. I used to have all the records. I think they've all been destroyed since, but the tonnages of fish they pulled off this Nor'west Shelf area here, was almost unbelievable, but over a period of six or seven years it dropped off. Then the Taiwanese pair trawlers came in and I mean they've been working here for twenty years or more, and we used to see them all the time when we were on these charter jobs for the off-shore oil people. We were always dodging Taiwanese pair trawlers. They've been depleting fish stocks here for the last 20 or 30 years and I've noticed a decline in many fish stocks here over the years. Everybody blames the recreational fishermen from the mining companies and that sort of thing, but the tonnage of fish they catch, or the tonnage of fish the local fishermen catch is insignificant compared with what those boats took away from these areas, and while the Government is constantly putting resource management and limitations on local fishing boats, and allowing these other boats to come in and virtually rape the grounds.

**JD** Bill, is surveillance efficient?

**MILLER** No, there's not enough surveillance but even if.... I think it's a bit.... but most of these boats, it's not a matter of being illegal fishing here, these boats were legally permitted to come in to the country. They pay to come in. They pay the Government so many million dollars to take so many tons of fish out of the place. With the resource management here, I think it's a good thing where we need it, because our particular area here (the Nickol Bay fisheries) is not really overfished. We managed to get limited entry into here before the grounds were depleted. They've put in a management programme now to try and zone off nursery areas and all that sort of thing, and try and preserve the prawn stocks, which means that most of the average prawn trawlers here now can't operate on a twelve months of the year basis like they used to. Most of the boats used to fish for ten months then refit for a couple of months, then start again. Now you're not allowed to do that, they've closed you.... seasonal closures and most of the boats here can only fish for about six months, which means most of the fishermen have got a fairly big capital investment in their boats, and they can't afford just to drop at anchor for six months. They've got to try and develop some other resource.

This is another thing where the Fisheries Department need to give some serious thought. They tend to think that okay, you've got a prawn licence, you can fish prawns. Somebody else can get a trap licence and trap fish, and somebody else can get a trawl licence and trawl fish. But it won't work out that way because everyone will go broke, or the prawning boats will anyhow. They've got to have a second resource, a back-up resource.

What a lot of the guys here have done in the last couple of years.... well, my own boat has been trapping fish. He's gone fish-trapping, and been fairly successful. He does that as an off-season, or an alternative to prawning when it's not viable. The last couple of years a few of the boys have had a go at fish-trawling. It's been quite successful and actually, I'm quite surprised at the catches. The catch rate has been fairly good and the fish species and the quantities they're getting are quite good. The Taiwanese boats, of course, the last two or three years, they've been kicked out of this area and I think already, there are signs showing that the fish stocks could build up, and I think it's important that they don't allow too many boats in. I think it should be,

you know over the next ten years or so, they want to keep a close record to see if the fish stocks are building up. But there's certainly.... I know when I first came up here, you could just go half a mile off shore in a little lump there, and catch a ton of fish on a hand line, but you can't do that any more. Those days are history, but I think with management they should be able to do something about looking after the resource, or preserving it.

One of the major problems with the fish though, it's not so much catching the fish as marketing, because from my experience.... (particularly over the last two or three years) I know in my own freezer here I often used to have three or four hundred boxes of local fish fillets, which I never really had any major problems selling. There may have been a few seasonal problems but the magic word for marketing now is "fresh" and we find instead of processing fish, the fish are being brought in in an ice slurry and we pack them in ice bins and send them down to the fresh fish market. For this product we're getting very, very good prices. In other words if you fillet the fish and process the fish, you lose money. But the unfortunate thing is a similar thing that they're experiencing with the trawlers working up in the Gulf in the northern areas, and off-season now they're also fish-trawling, trapping etc. I can envisage there's going to be a seasonal problem of marketing fresh fish in Australia.

It already occurred last year just before the prawning season opened. It was very, very difficult to market fresh fish in Perth and the eastern states because the markets were saturated, and then as soon as you start freezing and processing that fish it becomes uneconomic because well.... high interest rates, people don't want to hold large stocks of frozen product, it just costs too much money.

**JD** This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

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## TAPE 2 SIDE B

**MILLER** One of the problems in trying to operate a processing factory today.... to be honest, I've been trying to get out of the fish processing side of it. I don't know why I bother to keep the plant going. High operating overheads, power costs are very, very high. You've got high licence fees, you know endorsement DPI licences, \$2000 and \$650 for a processor's licence and \$2000 water-rates. That's about another six or eight thousand dollars a year just for water. Power works out about \$50000, \$60000 a year, just to keep your refrigeration and all that sort of thing going. You've got another ten or twelve thousand dollars a year for maintenance and so on. It makes it very difficult to run a processing factory. In the old days when we used to process and market prawns, we were looking at margins up to a dollar, a dollar fifty a kilo, and now with the depressed markets for prawns (or depressed prices) the Japanese market has slumped dramatically, and prices are down probably 30 or 40 per cent on what they used to be, particularly with the higher inflation costs in Australia. High interest rates make it very difficult to hold large amounts of product in cold store. Everybody.... I try to keep my freezers empty now because you lose money by having stock, and we find....

The fishermen have also got problems. There were several wet fishermen working here now, we've only had one or two working most of the time, a couple more just starting which we hope to boost our economy with that a bit. We've got to work on.... we don't buy product any more, it's too dangerous, or too risky. We work on margins as low.... well, at the moment we're working on 30 cents over the top. We take a 30 cent

margin to pack and they use all our facilities. We pack the fish. We provide the bins and load the fish out, and provide labour and all sorts of things for 30 cents a kilo. Well, to give an example. We only had one boat working here. He was bringing in about a ton of fish a week. It gives us \$300 margin on his ton of fish, and you'd probably use \$100 of that in labour, and it costs you a \$1000 a week to run your plant. So unless we can get our production up to at least a couple of ton a fish a day, it's impossible for shore base to make a profit. I just can't see that happening because the Fisheries Department are already giving indications that they're not going to allow any more trap-boats in. They're not going to allow any more licences for the area. In fact they're talking about cutting down, so in my particular fishery, I need at least another six or seven wet boats here, otherwise I will have to close my factory down, because if we don't get the volume product we just can't keep going, and if we put our margins up we won't get any product. That's virtually it.

**JD** Well, let's hope it doesn't come to that. May I thank you for this interview. It's been wide ranging, it's been fascinating to hear you. You've given us an insight into many aspects of the development that's taken place in the north during your time up here. Thank you very much for it.

**MILLER** You're welcome. I just wish I'd had a bit more time or a better [laughs] environment to be able to.... your memory goes. It takes.... to tell a life story in half an hour is pretty hard [laughs].

**JD** Too right.

**MILLER** Okay.

**JD** Thank you very much.

END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 2 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with **BILL OVERTON**

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Bill Overton conducted by Jack Darcey in Mr Overton's home in Albany on the 14th December, 1989 for Murdoch University and the Australian Fisheries Research Council.

Mr Overton was captured on the island of Crete while serving in the Australian Army during World War Two and was a prisoner of war in Austria until his escape six months prior to the end of the War. He entered the fishing industry on his return to civilian life and has been involved in fishing at Hamelin Bay on the west coast and at Augusta, Albany and Windy Harbour on the south coast of Western Australia. He is experienced in many types of fishing. His comments on the depletion of fish stocks and the problem of pollution in Albany are of particular interest.

There is one tape. The interview starts at 025 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

This is an interview with Mr Bill Overton of Albany conducted at his home in Albany by Jack Darcey on the 14th December, 1989.

**JD** Mr Overton would you record your full name and date and place of birth please.

**OVERTON** Ivan William Overton; 9th January 1918; Unley Nursing Home, South Australia.

**JD** Were your parents both born in Australia?

**OVERTON** No, they were both English. My mother came from Birmingham and my father was a fisherman out of Grimbsy.

**JD** Was a fisherman? When did he come to Australia?

**OVERTON** In 1911.

**JD** And did he go fishing in South Australia?

**OVERTON** No, he joined the Army.

**JD** How did you come to get involved in the fishing industry?

**OVERTON** I suppose it was because I lived on the river at Augusta and it was more or less [we] had to fish to live with the parents. We had no money and times were hard then. Then after I joined the Army and went away and came back, it was the first thing I did.

**JD** Yes. That was after the War?

**OVERTON** Yes.

**JD** So you actually went into fishing after the War?

**OVERTON** 1945-46 whichever it was, yeah.

**JD** And what sort of fishing did you go into?

**OVERTON** I went into beach seining along the beach for herring and small fish. Then I went to Augusta on the Blackwood and did the same thing there and set netting. From there I bought a boat in 1950 and started hand lining out of Flinders Bay.

**JD** Right. What size boat did you [buy]?

**OVERTON** A 21 footer.

**JD** 21 foot; and you were hand lining for, what?

**OVERTON** Snapper, jewfish, shark; anything we could get.

**JD** Right. How did it go?

**OVERTON** Oh, we got a living out of it. I'd stopped the hand lining around about, oh ten years ago, seven years ago.

**JD** Were you in that Blackwood/Flinders Bay area all the time?

**OVERTON** No. I shifted over to Windy Harbour and fished from there from 1972 to right up to 1984, I suppose (about 83, 84).

**JD** Are you still fishing?

**OVERTON** Oh no. I do a little bit of estuary fishing now but nothing to speak of. Too old [laughter].

**JD** Bill during those years you'd have seen many changes I imagine in fishing?

**OVERTON** Yeah, that's true. Yes when I first started it was primitive. There was no doubt about that. We did a bit of set lining. Very primitive.

**JD** Can you remember what sort of prices you got for your catch?

**OVERTON** Yeah, the first prices I can remember, for the yellow eye mullet we got a shilling a pound. For jewfish we got one [shilling] and nine [pence] when I first started and mullet was a shilling, one [shilling] and six [pence], one [shilling] and three [pence]. Whiting was one [shilling] and six [pence], one [shilling] and nine [pence].

Shark was sixpence to a shilling. Snapper was one [shilling] and six [pence] for a long while and then it went up to two shilling.

**JD** How did you market your catch?

**OVERTON** We used to put it in tin trunks and send it to the markets in Perth for a long time.

**JD** On ice?

**OVERTON** And then we sent it to the Kailis Brothers in Newcastle Street.

**JD** Right. Was it packed in ice?

**OVERTON** Yes.

**JD** And you sent it up by train?

**OVERTON** Yes, all by train. From Augusta it went by train and from Windy Harbour it went by train from Pemberton.

**JD** Right. Did you lose much product on the way?

**OVERTON** Not from deterioration but from being stolen on the train, yes.

**JD** Did you?

**OVERTON** Yeah. Often lost a full box of fish which was equal to about ten, fifteen pounds in those days.

**JD** That'd be a serious loss?

**OVERTON** Yeah, it was, yes.

**JD** Later on, say when you stopped actively fishing, what sort of prices were you getting then?

**OVERTON** Oh the prices when I stopped catching snapper and jewfish, the price was about.... Jewfish was \$5.00 a pound [kilo], yeah \$5.00.

**JD** A pound or was it sold by the kilo?

**OVERTON** A kilo I think it was, yes. Snapper went up to about \$3.00 a kilogram; quite a considerable jump but at the same time [it] was actually no different to the prices we were getting in the early days because of the inflation.

**JD** Is that still the case today, do you know?

**OVERTON** Well jewfish today is fetching \$10.00, \$12.00 a kilo.

**JD** That's when landed?



**OVERTON** Yeah that's at the market and snapper between \$4.50 and \$7.00 today so when you stop to think about it, there's not that great amount of change. Well it's the same with the motor car. A thousand pounds bought a motorcar. Today its \$20,000.00 on the inflation. There's no difference. Matter of fact I think a motor car's cheaper today.

**JD** Could well be. Bill, what about methods of fishing? Have they changed?

**OVERTON** Oh yes, yes; entirely different. When we fished we did it hard. There was no doubt about that as any of the older fishermen along the coast will tell you. Today they have reels to pull their nets and they have reels to pull their.... [lines] they don't fish with a hand line any more. They call it hand lining but it's all reel fishing or winch.

No, it's different altogether. I didn't hand line all the time. I switched over to cray fishing for a while at Hamelin Bay. I was cray fishing there for several years.

**JD** They still catch crays at Hamelin Bay?

**OVERTON** Oh yes, yes. There's plenty of cray at Hamelin Bay, yes.

**JD** Were you engaged in any other type of fishing?

**OVERTON** Yes. In 1947, the Christmas of 1947 I went salmon fishing with George Dittmar, old Albert Christianson and an old Slav. called Bob Maegnitch. We caught the first salmon that was ever canned in Western Australia caught on the west coast.

**JD** Where was it caught?

**OVERTON** At Hamelin Bay. We got four pence halfpenny a pound for it and we had to head it and gut it and clean it and transport it to Perth. Gardner's Jam Factory was the first ones that took it.

**JD** They started down here didn't they, Gardners?

**OVERTON** Yes.

**JD** Out at Hopetoun was it?

**OVERTON** I don't know whether Hopetoun was actually working when we started salmoning or not but Hunt came over to Hamelin the following year because I lent him my boat to catch a school of salmon on the beach. I got into trouble for lending it; not lending another fisherman the boat [laughter].

**JD** Were there licences in those days?

**OVERTON** Not to catch salmon, no. It just came under the ordinary fishermen's licence. A matter of fact, in those days if I remember rightly, a farmer could go fishing; go catching salmon anywhere. Anywhere he thought he could catch salmon he could go. There was no restriction on it at all in those days. The salmon have changed. Well, they're just not there to be caught any more. People say they are, but they're not.

**JD** Not in the numbers [unclear].

**OVERTON** Not in the numbers that we used to see them.

**JD** Do you think that applies to other types of fish as well?

**OVERTON** Yes, definitely. When I first started catching snapper we used to go out of a morning and in four hours come back with 50, 60, 70 snapper. You can't do that any more today.

**JD** No. Why's that?

**OVERTON** Because the fish aren't there to be caught.

**JD** Why aren't they there?

**OVERTON** Well I think its like... [this]. The West Australian coast is peculiar. This is my own impression that if you concentrate on the one type of fish all the time, you eventually beat it.

**JD** You fish it out in other words?

**OVERTON** Yes. The only way I can explain it is, it's just like a farmer having 50 kangaroos coming feeding on his property, so he decides to shoot four or five a day. It doesn't take very long before he hasn't got a kangaroo left to shoot and that's how I can see the fishing is today. The coast doesn't seem to be able to carry the fish continually in large numbers. If you work on them you eventually beat them. I know it happened at Augusta when I first found snapper there. It was only a matter of three years and they dwindled. Now whether I caught the fish that were coming to that particular area every year, or whether they got used to being caught and decided to shift themselves, I don't know but it happened the same at Windy Harbour. They still catch snapper at Windy Harbour but not in the big quantities that we caught them in.

**JD** Bill does it mean there are too many people catching them or the catches are too big?

**OVERTON** That has a lot to do with it. It's like everything else. Somebody finds something and start[s] getting a quid out of it and ten others jump on the band wagon with the results, they cut each other's throats. I've only been in Albany for around about four to five years and I can see it with the mulie fishing. The mulie fishing this year is considerably down on what it was last year and the year before. I know this because I'm doing a research for the Fisheries Department. I have only been in it three or four months but the first three or four months I was in it I had no trouble getting the quota of boats. Now I can't get a boat during the daytime at all. They only go out at night because that's the only time they get a fish. This year (1990) the mulie fishermen are getting quite good catches again and the fish are quite a bit larger than last year.

**JD** Would you agree then that the industry need[s] to be carefully controlled?

**OVERTON** Definitely, definitely. Most decidedly. The number of boats should be cut down not increased. The number of boats that are in the fishing industry today should never be go[ing] any further than what it is because the West Australian and the south coast as I see it, I can't speak of anything further than Albany because I don't know it

but the west coast in particular from Perth downwards will not carry large quantities of boats.

**JD** So its the Fisheries Department that really would need to carry out the controlling and licensing and supervision?

**VERTON** That's right, yes.

**JD** Well what's the role of fishermen in the control of the industry?

**VERTON** Well actually the fishermen should be the ones that really do control it but they can't because they can't agree amongst themselves. Fishermen are the worst bunch of people you could ever wish to meet as far as agreeing about any one thing in particular. If a fisherman gets up and says, "I think we should do so and so", another one will jump up and say, "And what are you bloody gonna get out of it". That's how they look at it. They don't trust each other. They are the worst mob of people you could ever wish to deal with.

**JD** Is the Fisheries Department doing a good job in controlling the industry?

**VERTON** Well I think they are.

**JD** Managing I suppose ....

**VERTON** Oh, management wise, yes, yes, definitely but they haven't got nearly enough inspectors. No where nearly enough. While they're looking after one area the other area's being stripped clean.

**JD** Is the recreational fisherman a problem to the industry?

**VERTON** As far as net fishing's concerned, yes. I firmly maintain, not because I've been a professional fisherman all my life, that there should be no amateur fishing nets; none at all. I think the Fishery Department are on the right track now by not allowing any professional estuary fisherman to transfer his gear to someone else out of the fishery, but I do believe that they should allow a fisherman to transfer his nets to another fisherman if he wishes to but....

**JD** But not to someone outside the industry?

**VERTON** Not to someone new into the industry, no; but whether they ever will do that or not, I don't know.

**JD** What about some of the other problems facing the industry? What about pollution, Bill?

**VERTON** You've only got to go down [laughs].... go down to the harbour area in Albany and just stand on the shore and have a look at it - the meat works. That should never be allowed, never. Nor should the super works. They've got a major problem there in that they'll have to do something about it; otherwise they'll kill that harbour completely.

**JD** The effluent's going straight into the harbour is it?

**OVERTON** In the short time I've been here, I've been down to the harbour and stood there and it's almost pure blood that's running out for 50 yards round the outlet; almost pure blood.

**JD** Is that affecting the fish?

**OVERTON** Well, it's polluting the water. I've caught herring three-quarters of a mile from there and when you've taken the hook out the mouth they've regurgitated just pure blood. Now you don't fancy eating fish like that do you?

**JD** No, no.

**OVERTON** I don't. Course I'm a bit fussy with my fish. A lot of people maybe aren't. It's the same with the sewerage outlet going in. That shouldn't be allowed there.

**JD** Does raw sewerage go into the harbour?

**OVERTON** Only in in the summer time, yes when everything's.... [booked out]. You get a big influx of visitors here and that. It can't handle it.

**JD** There's a problem in Princess Royal Harbour, isn't there, with mercury in the water?

**OVERTON** Yes that's right. Well that comes from your super work[s]. Even when they unload in there, they hose all the wharf down and that but all the super that's spilt on the wharf and that all goes into the harbour. No, they've got a big problem there and they'll have to do something about it eventually.

**JD** Bill, is litter in the ocean, you know these plastic bands and that, is this a problem in the Albany area?

**OVERTON** Well there is a certain amount of litter comes ashore on Middleton Beach, such as cans and one thing or other like that, plastic bag[s] but not so much on the west coast where the cray fishermen are and they chuck the bags over the side. Those plastic bags and that are dangerous in the water in this respect for a boat because if a propeller picks one up it can bend or break a crankshaft; take a blade off. The big bags will stop a motor dead. I maintain that the bait outlets should have a stamp with each boat licence number on it for each boat. It should be compulsory and when you or I go in and buy ten cartons of bait or whatever it is, they should stamp the carton with that boat number on it so that when it's picked up out at sea they know who's thrown it overboard.

**JD** Yes.

**OVERTON** It might sound dictatorial at the moment but eventually it'll have to be done because otherwise.... I've seen the bags come floating ashore in here where they have been thrown overboard for the mulies [from the boats] and that and they're bad news with a boat in the water. The mulie boats have since stopped throwing bags over board.

**JD** Do you think the fishermen are getting the message that it doesn't make sense....

**OVERTON** Some of them, some of them are. Here in Albany we've got a lot of young chaps, some of them are only lads who've got their ticket, they've got a boat and

they've gone mulie fishing. Honestly, you'd think they were Jack Brabham driving a motor car and all they're in it for is a quid; a quid they can get out of it. Some of them are quite nice lads, quite good blokes but there again you've got the cowboys. Course you get them [in] everything.

**JD** Perhaps some of them have difficulty in meeting their financial commitments?

**OVERTON** Oh they've gone in too big. They've gone in far too big. They think nothing of going in for \$120,000.00 nowadays.

**JD** At current rates of interest, that's a pretty big debt.

**OVERTON** They've got no chance of meeting it and not at the present rate they're catching mulies, no way. They'd be battling to get a crust out of it.

**JD** Any other problems that you see in the industry?

**OVERTON** Oh I could think of plenty but....

**JD** What about marketing? Is that satisfactory?

**OVERTON** Well I've dealt with the Metropolitan Markets all my life, other than when I dealt privately with the Kailis Brothers and the Kailis Brothers own the Markets now. I've never had a problem, never but there again, I played the game with the Markets and they played it with me. I've heard some terrible stories about them.

Put it this way. You buy a boat, you go to the Markets and you say, "I want to buy a boat. I want \$50,000.00" and they say, "Right O, we'll buy the boat for you, but you must send all your fish to us". They do that for six months, then after six months they send some to you and some to somebody else. Well the other chappy knows what's going on. He knows where he got his money from so he tell's the Market, "I got a consignment of fish from so and so". The Markets say, "Right, down goes his price", straight away. They're gonna get their money one way or the other. The next thing you know the bloke says, "The bloody Markets, they're no good, scrub them". They bring it on themselves. I've seen it done so many times.

**JD** Bill how do you feel about the importation of fish from overseas - frozen fish?

**OVERTON** I think it's unnecessary. I think the amount of fishermen that we have on the coast, if they were geared up properly, they could supply our markets. I'm sure they could. Look at these mulies they're catching. They're going for cat food, tonnes and tonnes and tonnes of them. We shouldn't be importing sardines. They could be canned here. They could be canned here in Albany.

**JD** Is there a cannery here still?

**OVERTON** No, I don't think so. It's closed down.

**JD** That was Hunt's was it?

**OVERTON** Yes.

**JD** It does seem a bit strange doesn't it, that we....

**OVERTON** Well to me it is. Definitely strange. I don't think we've got a factory here that smokes fish even.

**JD** No. I don't know of any.

**OVERTON** We import no end of smoked fish but we don't do any ourselves.

**JD** Can you sort of look into a crystal ball and try and foresee what direction the industry will take in the immediate future?

**OVERTON** Oh it'll go into trawlers for sure. It'll have to and shark netting will eventually go out I think. I think it will. Well the shark fishermen themselves will tell you now. The sharks aren't there. They're definitely not there any more.

**JD** Fished out?

**OVERTON** Oh, well if they're here, they're out very deep. One time you could put 50 hooks in the water. I have done it myself and got 800 pound off 50 hooks. You put 50 hooks out today and you'd be lucky to get one for dinner [laughs]. That's how it is now.

**JD** So that means you've got to go further and further afield?

**OVERTON** Further afield all the time. This comes back to the same argument I put up a while ago. The coast will not carry the fish. They don't come back. They can't, we've caught them. When the salmon used to run years ago, I'd go so far as to say you wouldn't see one school in ten of salmon come along that didn't have four or five out riders of sharks with them all the time. I've seen as many as nineteen in a school of salmon. Mind you, it was a big school of salmon too. Now, if you get a big school of salmon, you might get two sharks, even one; sometimes none at all. The big sharks aren't there any more, not like they were.

**JD** And the salmon schools, are they as big as they were?

**OVERTON** Oh no, no. They might be from Albany east but they don't get on the west coast like they used to. I've seen a school of salmon go through Hamelin Bay from 8.00 o'clock in the morning till 2.00 o'clock in the afternoon with no end.

**JD** The one school?

**OVERTON** Just the one school; as wide as this room and black and they just kept going and going and going.

**JD** What about the herring? Are they decreasing in numbers?

**OVERTON** They are on the west coast, yes, definitely. They're not getting to the west coast because they're being cut off down here. They're taking some hundred and hundreds of tonnes out every year. They must eventually come to an end to them.

**JD** Bill were you ever involved in tuna fishing?

**OVERTON** No, no. Something I never ever took on other than trawl a line behind the boat, something like that, but no. I never ever went into it.

**JD** Could you cast your mind back to some of the sort of notable personalities you've known during your time in the industry?

**OVERTON** What, as just fishermen or good fishermen?

**JD** Well there's fishermen and processors, whatever.

**OVERTON** Well I suppose down Dan Hunt was one of the notable people in processing. [he] had to be because he was more or less the foundation part of it and Gardner, Gardner's Jam.

**JD** Hunt took over Gardner's canning?

**OVERTON** Eventually did, yes, but whether he had a factory in Hopetoun before that, I don't know. That I wouldn't know. Maybe Gardner's factory at Hopetoun, I wouldn't know because as I have said I was only involved in it at Hamelin Bay. I only did the first two years at Hamelin Bay and then I was out of it for a couple of years and then I went back into it with my own team for a while. That was with George Challis and Dan King and them went into it together there one year and Bill Hadley. Did you see Bill Hadley while you're here?

**JD** No, I missed him.

**OVERTON** Should've got him.

**JD** Yeah. Can't see everybody. You know there's just not the time Bill.

Bill, any notable events that you can recall? Have you been involved in any cyclones or ....

**OVERTON** No, I've never been at sea in a cyclone but I've been in one, yes. I saw the 1933 one at Busselton and of course Alby when it came down a few years back at Windy Harbour.

**JD** Did that do much harm to the fishing fraternity?

**OVERTON** Not at Windy Harbour, no. A few boats come up in Busselton in 1933, but no, not a lot.

**JD** Anything else that you'd like to mention?

**OVERTON** Just can't think of anything off hand.

**JD** Alright Bill. Thank you very much for this interview Bill.

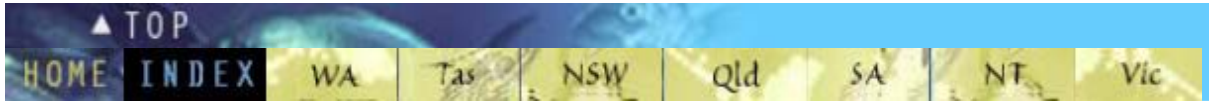
**OVERTON** Good.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Bill Overton of Albany, Western Australia.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer







## Verbatim transcript of an interview with MAURO PANSINI

### INTRODUCTION

Mr Mauro Pansini has been fleet master with North West Seafoods at Carnarvon in Western Australia for some twelve years, following a long career with the company as the skipper of a prawn trawler in the Shark Bay area. The company which is one of the Anglis Group has recently occupied a new complex in Carnarvon in which its large fleet now operates. A smaller fleet works Exmouth Gulf.

In this interview Mr Pansini tells of the duties of the fleet master, and describes the vessels in the fleet, and discusses the selection and training of crew, including women members. He also discusses the hazards of cyclones, accidents and collisions at sea and the measures taken to avoid them, or to minimise their severity.

Mr Pansini first went to sea with his fisherman father at age fourteen, and helped pioneer the rock lobster fisheries at Lancelin and Jurien Bay. At sixteen he first skippered a fishing vessel. Now nearing retirement, there can be few in the prawning industry with more experience.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Pansini's office in Carnarvon on 12th of June, 1990. There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Would you please record your full name, and date and place of birth?

**PANSINI** My full name is Mauro Pansini. I was born on 29th of December, 1933. My birthplace is Bunbury, Western Australia.

**JD** Were you brought up in Bunbury?

**PANSINI** No, I was brought up in Fremantle.

**JD** In Fremantle?

**PANSINI** Yes.

**JD** Your parents were Italian, were they?

**PANSINI** My father's Italian and my mother's of Italian parents.

*JD* When did your father come out?

*PANSINI* He was sixteen when he came out to Australia. He's 86 now, so 70 years ago, so work back on that [laughs].

*JD* And your mother's maiden name?

*PANSINI* Miragliotta.

*JD* Miragliotta.

*PANSINI* Miragliotta.

*JD* That's a well known Fremantle name, isn't it, too? Was your father a fisherman?

*PANSINI* Yes, all his life he's been a fisherman.

*JD* Out of Fremantle?

*PANSINI* Out of Fremantle, yes.

*JD* And you went to school in Fremantle?

*PANSINI* Yes, I went to Christian Brothers College in Fremantle.

*JD* And what did you do after you left school?

*PANSINI* Straight fishing.

*JD* Straight into fishing?

*PANSINI* Yes, fourteen. Left school and straight into the cray fishing.

*JD* With your father?

*PANSINI* With Dad, yes.

*JD* Were you fishing from Fremantle?

*PANSINI* No, we pioneered Lancelin, and we started off in Lancelin and worked there for about eight years. Then went on and did a bit of pioneering in Jurien Bay, also cray fishing, for a couple of years, and then back to Fremantle.

*JD* What vessel were you fishing in?

*PANSINI* Piave.

*JD* And you started then as a deckhand, I suppose?

*PANSINI* Oh yes, yes, as a deckhand. I was a deckhand for two years, and at sixteen I skippered our own vessel, the **Piave**, and Dad took over another vessel. The name of that vessel was the **Marigo**.... **Marigo** I'm sorry. The **Marigo**. It belonged to a Greek family. It was a bigger boat than ours. So for a couple of years we worked together,

and then this vessel, I think, was sold off from memory, and Dad came back on the **Piave**, and we worked together from there on.

**JD** This would have been in the days before the sudden boom in cray fishing?

**PANSINI** Oh yes, this was the actual start on the cray fishing days. We used to pull pots by hand you know. We had no mechanical means or nothing, just a boat, a very little engine, and the cray pots.

**JD** And how did you handle the catch? You landed them at Lancelin. There wouldn't have been a processing works there when you first went up?

**PANSINI** No, there were mother ships, three freezer boats. They were moored in Lancelin, and after we came in with our catch, we'd go along side them, and load to these three boats, and.... who were they? They were **Bluefin**, the **Eckero** and the **Kingfisher**. One of the freezer boats used to make weekly trips to Fremantle for stores. There was no way of getting to the city by road, so it was all done by boat, and take the catches (the frozen catches) back to Fremantle and load.... they would come back with the stores etc for boats.

**JD** Pretty rough living, was it?

**PANSINI** Very, very rough, yes.

**JD** When you went back to Fremantle, you were fishing out of Fremantle then, were you?

**PANSINI** Yes, yes.

**JD** Cray fishing?

**PANSINI** Cray fishing still.

**JD** What happened then in your career in fishing?

**PANSINI** Oh, we eventually sold our boat and Dad got out. He retired, and I worked as deckhand for a couple of years in various boats in Fremantle, and then Dad came up here with my brother with one of the Nor'west whaler boats in those days, to teach my brother prawning here in Carnarvon, and at the end of that year, they asked me to come up for two weeks - that was in 1967 - to give them a hand to take the boat back to Fremantle [laughs], and I've been here ever since.

**JD** Never left Carnarvon since?

**PANSINI** Oh I did, yes. All I did was come up here for two weeks, and it's been pretty good here.

**JD** So what happened when you got here?

**PANSINI** Oh I spent about a week and a half fishing out of Carnarvon, and then when it was time to take the vessels back to Fremantle - or the vessel back to Fremantle. So we sailed it back to Fremantle and the company - the fleet master, that would have been Vince Pensabene - offered me a boat cray fishing out of Fremantle that season if I would take one of their smaller boats, which was the **Nor 5**, which I did. I cray fished

out of Fremantle only for the white cray fish, as skipper, and then he asked if I would take it to Carnarvon - to Shark Bay - prawning. Which I did, and I came back up here. Dad didn't, he stayed home then, and I skippered a boat back, and my brother skippered a boat back.

Then the following year.... that year we finished prawning here, and then we went back to Fremantle and did a cray fish season - oh the white cray fish season - and then we came back up here. We only did it for two years, and had to surrender our cray fish licences. It was the law of the Fisheries Department, and we could either have one or the other, so we naturally stuck to prawning.

**JD** Is that the present Nor'West Seafoods?

**PANSINI** Yes, the present Nor'West Seafoods.

**JD** So you stayed then with the company ever since?

**PANSINI** Ever since, yes.

**JD** And you're ashore now, aren't you?

**PANSINI** Yes, I came ashore in.... I was skippering a boat right up till the time I came ashore. I came ashore in the first day of January, 1979, and that's twelve and a half years now.

**JD** And now you're the fleet master?

**PANSINI** Yes, now I'm the fleet master. I came ashore as the assistant fleet master, and our fleet master, Vince, has retired, and I've taken over his job.

**JD** It's a pretty responsible job, isn't it?

**PANSINI** Oh very, yes.

**JD** What does it actually entail?

**PANSINI** It entails quite a bit. My job is to make sure the boats are fishing. I hire all the skippers. We screen our skippers and make sure they are the right men for the jobs, and they in turn crew their own crew. We don't interfere with the crew, we just hire the skipper. The skipper hires his crew. But we help out. You know, a lot of people come to us looking for jobs and we put them on our list, ask their qualifications and check them out etc, and where required, the skipper is short of a deckhand, well then we've got him on our list.

I've got to make sure their gear is working properly. If they've got any problems with their gear, I supervise the making of the nets, keep the....

**JD** You make your own nets?

**PANSINI** Oh yes, we make our own nets. We have our net shed. We make and repair so we do those. Self-contained. We have everything here. We have our own

engineering shop, electronics, electrician, carpenter. Naturally we do our own processing in our factory. So we have everything at our finger-tips here.

**JD** Your industry and the factory is geared for prawns and scallops, is that right?

**PANSINI** Yes, well it's mainly prawns, and then the scallops sort of.... well, we have one scallop boat (licensed scallop boat) fish out of here, and yes, we process the scallops as well.

**JD** Is there a by-product at all from the prawning?

**PANSINI** There are various by-products. There's fish, to a lesser extent an occasional tuna, schnapper, squid, cuttlefish, coral prawns - they are classed as by-products.

**JD** And you process and market those as well?

**PANSINI** Yes, to a certain extent. The corals we cook - coral prawn - we cook. The fish, no, we sell those as is. We don't handle them in the factory.

**JD** You send them down to Perth?

**PANSINI** Send them down to Perth and sell them as is, which gives the boats a little bit of incentive, a bit more to catch. Now when our prawn stocks go down here.... We have a peak season and sometimes it goes for a month, two months, then the prawns start.... now they're starting to go down, so you know, anything the boys catch they keep, and it supplements their catches, or their pay when they unload. So anything else they sort of catch, we'd have it marketed for them.

**JD** The factory processes the catch from your own vessels?

**PANSINI** Yes, yes.

**JD** Do you have any other vessels that supply you?

**PANSINI** We had up till last year, two private vessels that supplied us. They were mainly bulky, but we did process quite a bit of their product as well.

**JD** How many company boats would you have operating here?

**PANSINI** As of this year, we'll have seventeen prawn boats (prawn trawlers) and one scallop trawler. Up to last year, we had 22 prawn trawlers and one.... I'm sorry, 21 prawn trawlers and one scallop boat. There was a buy back when we had to share and we got rid of four prawn trawlers, and the private sector got rid of four, so we got eight vessels less in the Bay now than what we had last year and the previous years. We've also got four trawlers in Exmouth - prawn trawlers.

**JD** Do they supply you here?

**PANSINI** Yes, oh yes. They unload in Exmouth and then they are trucked down here in freezer trucks.

**JD** And is this for the export market?

**PANSINI** Oh yes, mainly for the export market.

**JD** For Japan presumably?

**PANSINI** Oh mainly, yes.

**JD** There are other markets?

**PANSINI** Oh yes, there are other markets. We've got salesmen in Fremantle that do all the selling and buying etc, and stuff like that. They know where they all go and where they're coming.

**JD** What type of prawn are you dealing with?

**PANSINI** Mainly the king prawn. Then the most important one of the two, which is most expensive, is the tiger prawn. The king, tiger and to a less extent, endeavour prawns.

**JD** Do you get the bananas here at all?

**PANSINI** No, not in Carnarvon. They used to at Exmouth. They have the occasional one. I mean just an occasional one. At Exmouth there used to be a bit of a banana prawn fishery but it's just disappeared, but they picked a few up this year, but not to make it worthwhile.

**JD** Is the stock holding up would you say?

**PANSINI** No, it's the unfortunate part about it. It's fluctuating. That's why this buy back which they had eventually, in the hope that the eight boats less in this fishery, would bring the.... well, you've got less boats in the fishery which would make it more viable. We look to catch a certain amount of prawns this season to make those.... well our boats, viable, and so far it's proven reasonably good this year, for our first year, but it's not looking too bad. Not as good as we hoped but it's not bad.

**JD** Are prices holding up?

**PANSINI** Yes, they're holding, but once again, not as good as we like to see [laughs]. They do fluctuate quite a bit, depending on your market. If people are not buying, naturally the buyers are not buying so, you know, it revolves round people buying.

**JD** Are there restrictions on the size of prawns you can take?

**PANSINI** No, no. We put mainly.... we put our restrictions on them. If they're too small then they're no good for the market. But we like to stick around five inch, four and a half inch prawn. Anything smaller than that - that's the size - anything smaller than that's not viable.

**JD** Do you grade them then?

**PANSINI** Oh yes, we grade them into.... whatever the market requires, we grade the prawns into those grades. We've got all our vessels grading in all various sizes and so, we're always ready with whatever the market requires. We've got them graded, but we've also got the factory that grades as well. So at this stage we've got half our

vessels that do the complete grade of prawns, king and tiger, and the other half, mainly on the king, grading only the king.

**JD** And is it a night time operation or a day time?

**PANSINI** It's a night time operation, yes. One area, what we call Quobba, Cox Quobba area (the most northern end of the grounds) is fishable day and night. We don't any more. The regulations won't allow it, so we fish from five o'clock in the afternoon, we start fishing until eight o'clock the following morning.

**JD** And how long do the boats stay at sea?

**PANSINI** Our rosters vary from sixteen to eighteen days. They're all freezer boats. They've got enough fuel, water etc, stored up for that period of time.

**JD** Mauro, could you give us a bit of a thumbnail sketch of the boats? What size they are and motive power they have? That sort of thing.

**PANSINI** Our boats are.... we haven't got a boat over twenty metres. They're all between nineteen and twenty metres. Their engine marine consists of a Deutz motor. They're a new type motor we've just put in. Six cylinders, 360 horse power. They've got a Kort nozzle for more thrust in the water for power. The freezer is run by.... some boats have got a four cylinder and some have got a six cylinder Perkins. They've all got 240 volt alternators which is lit up.... electrically worked, mostly here on the boat. The freezer capacity is around.... they vary from seven ton to ten ton per freezer. The smaller boats are vessels that are just barely nineteen metres and vessels that are right on twenty metres, so the freezers' obviously a little bit different.

Accommodation: various boats.... some have got.... accommodate four in total, skipper and crew - some five and some six people. They've got a galley, they're pretty modern. Some of the boats have got gas stoves here and some are electric stoves. They've got fridges in the boats. Although they are small, we've got radar, we've got echo colour, echo sounder, automatic pilot, radio.

**JD** [unclear]

**PANSINI** No, we don't require [unclear] up here. But that's about all, you know. What actually is required in this Bay we've got. Some boats have up to four or five little radios on board, SSB's and what have you.

**JD** Are the boats built in Fremantle presumably?

**PANSINI** Oh yes, all our boats were built in Fremantle. We bought.... well, actually we've got three types of boats, the river class, and then we bought another company out. I can't remember how long ago that was. It was about fifteen years ago, the Tipperary Company. We brought those boats down to Fremantle, and we had another company in Cairns. Half of them went to Cairns, and three of them we've still got here. Then nine years ago - ten years ago - we bought Markwell Ross out. They've got nine boats which we've still got. So we're a bit of a mixture in types of boats.

**JD** Do you slip them here or.... ?

**PANSINI** Yes, we slip them.... we do all the maintenance from head to toe, the whole lot. Any big major job, we send to Fremantle, but 90 per cent of our work - 95 per cent of our work is done up here.

**JD** How many people would you employ in the servicing of the boats?

**PANSINI** In round figures in the refit period, in total, including contractors, we'd have something like about 60 people on the site.

**JD** It's a big operation.

**PANSINI** It's a big operation.

**JD** Could we come back to crews for a moment? Do you have any women in the crew members?

**PANSINI** Yes, quite a few actually. In fact I've got a woman skipper out there at present. I've had a woman skipper before but she didn't turn out. She was actually on deck as a mate and when she took full responsibility, unfortunately it didn't work out. Now, I've got another young lady out there. She's not a full time skipper, she's relieving, and so far, so good, but yes, we've got quite a few girls as deckies.

**JD** Do they go all right?

**PANSINI** Some of them do, some of them. The same as the guys who crew. Some of them are okay, some of them not. If they like the sea.... sea-sickness is the biggest part. If they don't get sea-sick a lot of them make a go at it, but if they get sea-sick.... you can't fight both, sea-sick and work, so.... Yes, they manage. They do a good.... yes.

**JD** How do you.... You said that you employ the skippers. How do you find them? Are they just by word of mouth or were they crew members or come up?

**PANSINI** A lot of them are crew members that have come up through our own ranks. They will have learned as deckies and eventually start sitting for their tickets. The majority, in fact, 80 per cent of them, 85 per cent of them, are guys who have come up through our ranks, which we find pretty good. I mean you've got to put in about five or six years as a deckie and eventually work up your tickets, because you've got to have a certain amount of sea time to be able to sit for your tickets, various tickets.

We had a programme going quite a few years ago with young kids from school. On a twelve month basis, we used to put them through.... I'd make them do two weeks in the engineering shop, two weeks in the cookhouse, and two weeks on the boats, and two weeks in the net shed, two weeks in the factory, and then you sort of keep turning them over. Then lecture them at the school in October for two weeks and go and do a sort of coxwain's exam. Unfortunately out of all these - we've done it for about three years - out of all these boys we only ended up with about three I think.

**JD** They all went to other companies?

**PANSINI** Other companies, and floated off, and out of all them also, it's very hard to keep young blokes. What we used to do was to put them out to sea first, to see if they liked the sea, to see if they could cope with the sea. I mean once you can cope with sea-sickness, you can cope with anything. I feel you can anyhow. So the ones that



were no good at coping with the sea, you know, and you could see that they had a flair for fishing, you had to use your own sort of bit of knowledge of them, we kept them and they did come out pretty good eventually.

**JD** Any of the young fellows go to maritime college in Tasmania at all?

**PANSINI** No, no.

**JD** Where do they get the special training then, other than on the job training, the sort of school work? Do they have that at Fremantle?

**PANSINI** Yes, we send them down to technical school in Fremantle, the tech at Fremantle, and we'd arrange that, and they used to do two weeks' course down there. A bit of schooling and then they used to put them through various tests, and then we get a final result, after the fortnight down there.

**JD** The crew and presumably the skippers too, are paid on a share basis or....?

**PANSINI** Yes, on a share basis, a percentage basis - a share basis, yes.

**JD** And it's left to the skippers to arrange the payment for their crew?

**PANSINI** Yes, they.... the company gives them a certain per cent, and from there they pay whatever they reckon. Well, we've got a guideline, we've still got to keep our hands on the payment to make sure that everybody gets paid properly, otherwise they can muck the whole show up. Yes, we've got a guideline on what we think the skipper is worth, the mate is worth, and experienced and an inexperienced deckie, whereas naturally the more experienced you are, the more you get. Then we screen all the pay, see, to make sure everybody's being paid the right way. If I ever come across something that I'm not happy with, I'll bring the skipper in and I'll want to know why. We pay virtually the same day as they unload. They're pretty well looked after, very well looked after in fact.

**JD** Do you find that the crew tend to stay with you now, or are they sort of drifting?

**PANSINI** No, we've been pretty lucky.... way back, twenty years back yes. We seem to have blokes that stay with us from year in and year out. This has been about the slackest year with guys - I think we had a bit of a poor season last year - and a lot of them panicked and a lot of them have taken off to look for greener pastures, which is fine, you know. No, we haven't had any great deal of trouble, but this year was a one year off, when we've been battling to find crews. Guys won't work. I think the dole helps them out a lot, and they get more on the dole, and they reckon, "Why work for an extra 50, 100 dollars a week?" whatever it is?

**JD** Is there competition among crew to get with the more successful skippers?

**PANSINI** I like to think all my skippers are pretty successful [laughs].

**JD** All are successful, I guess.

**PANSINI** But yes, no, you are right. You've got the more experienced skipper and, of course, the newest skippers going to learn from the older skippers. When I was fishing I used to always find the young skippers used to follow me around everywhere, and you know, we pass this on. I've got two assistants. I've got an assistant to me and a

fishing master as well, which I've put on boats to troubleshoot any problems any skippers are having. One of the other of my boys will go out and show them what's what.... well whatever they're doing right or wrong. If they're having trouble with their gear, if they taking the nets or their boards, and they're not spread properly, or their nets are not working properly, these boys go out and check them out. Yes, we run the whole.... well, we're here to help them naturally.

**JD** Do you allocate areas to the different skippers?

**PANSINI** No, no. What I do.... if I think a boat isn't catching up to scratch - and most of the boats are - then I'll suggest that he'd better go and have a look where the boats are. When you're talking about twenty cartons of prawns difference between one boat and another, it's quite a bit, but I think I've ever done that.... oh, about three times in the twelve years I've been here. And they go. They don't answer back really, they okay for you. I think they appreciate it a bit as well.

**JD** It's in their interests to....

**PANSINI** It's in their interests, that's right.

**JD** What about accidents at sea?

**PANSINI** Well, I think that's unavoidable really, accidents will always be there. We've done everything to make our boats as safe as humanly possible. We haven't spared any expense on safety. We're very safety conscious. Even when boats come in along side the wharf, my guys safety check. They go through the boats and make sure that everything's okay. But up to a couple of years ago, we had our fair share of accidents in general, but most of them were negligent on the part of the crewman being a bit too casual, and stuff like that. On the sea you can't be casual. You've always got to be on your toes, and now what we tell our skips to make sure that any new crew member they put on board, you know, "For God's sake, go through the ropes with him. Show him what's safe, what's not safe, what he should be doing." You know in the earlier days, we didn't have as many safety features on boats, but it certainly made us aware of things that went wrong, so we started putting extra safety equipment on the boats and stuff like that, because it was over-safe now, but it's best to be over-safe than.... and touch wood, we haven't had any bad accidents for a couple of years, so obviously you get the....

**JD** Do you have any near misses with shipping?

**PANSINI** Not so much with shipping, because there isn't a great deal of ship traffic in the Bay, but I can go back to my days when I've nearly been wiped over a couple of times [laughs]. They don't give way to you, and we're trawling and they're expected to respect your light, because your light indicates where you're travelling, fishing or whatever. I've had some very close shaves, but they're lucky now. We have a lot of close shaves with the boats themselves, mind you. There's some very, very near misses.

**JD** Trawler and trawler?

**PANSINI** Trawler and trawler, yes, and some hits as well [laughs].

**JD** Your own company's boats or....?

**PANSINI** Well, mixed, you know, with our own boats and private boats with our boats, and private boats amongst private boats. It's always there, but so far in the last couple of years it's been pretty good. Well, I've put all sorts of things on. We've got a stay-awake alarm on the boat. It's very easy to nod off. We've got this alarm. As soon as you switch your automatic pilot on this alarm takes over, and it goes off every eight minutes. It goes off with slight noises. There's about ten seconds and if you don't soon switch it off, it comes out with a very loud shrilly noise. We've put light indicators, so all the boys have got to do is look on their dashes of their boat and they can tell if their navigational lights are on. If there is one blown out it will indicate on this little board they've got there. You know, they've got everything which a lot of it now is entirely up to them. We can do so much but they're on the boats out there and they're the ones that have got to do the right thing.

**JD** Do the Marine and Harbours closely supervise the safety aspects of the boats?

**PANSINI** Oh yes, in fact I had them here yesterday which is quite good. I'm wrapt in it. I'll have to give them a rap. They are good, they do a very good job. We've got to have.... before we send them back to sea, they've got to have final survey and a Marine and Harbour Surveyor comes up and goes through the boat, all gear, flares, life-jackets and life-rafts and dinghies.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** Now you are in a cyclone belt here in Carnarvon. Are cyclones a problem to the fleet?

**PANSINI** For sure. We've got a lot of respect for cyclones. What.... well, originally with these cyclones, what we used to do, we used to anchor three miles out to sea, and ride them out there. Then that's pretty hairy out there, but we used to put our anchors down, and all our motors going ahead and ride them out there. We've never had any accidents or anything fortunately, but I went aground in one. I was anchored here in Teggs Channel and that was pretty hairy. There were two boats already aground behind me, and I thought I was going to drift on to them, but fortunately we kept away. And we came out of that one with no damage.

What we've done in the last seven years, we've laid 22 moorings in Teggs Channel for cyclones, bad weather and also putting boats on during the off season. We haven't tested these mooring in Teggs Channel in cyclones, but we've got a lot of respect. At least now we've got this new wharf here, and that will fit twelve boats on comfortably, and that only leaves me ten to worry about out in Teggs Channel.

**JD** You bring the fleet down from Exmouth?

**PANSINI** No, no. In Exmouth they've got an island they can go and get behind, and they get in the lee-way of the cyclone, but once the wind changes they go round the other side. We had one boat go aground in a cyclone last year. That was a bad experience. We couldn't get it off the beach. I ended up going up there and we finally got it off. It took us two days but we got it off, and once again fortunately, with no damage to the boat.

**JD** Towed it off with other trawlers, did you?

**PANSINI** Yes, we had two, three other trawlers up there at the time, and we just tied one aft, one up behind the other, and we virtually pulled it off dry land till it floated, and then we got it off.

**JD** Much damage?

**PANSINI** No, fortunately no damage at all. We had to do a lot of unloading of product with a small boat. The closest we could get to this boat was a mile, I might add, see. Imagine the length of tow rope I had to get to it, and I didn't think it was that far, they didn't tell me it was that far. But we eventually got it off after quite a bit of heavy work, and fortunately no damage.

We used to get a lot of damage here at Babbage Island in the old days, when we had none of these facilities, where boats were moored and the weather would come up, and drag their lines. Actually I've got some good photos of boats that have gone aground here, out the front. But since we've had this little jetty built round here, it's incredible, every time we've had any adverse weather over Babbage Island, we bring them around here. So in the last nine years - it's about eight or nine years since we've had this little jetty - fortunately I've not had a boat aground since, here in Shark Bay, it's been really good.

**JD** None of your family went into fishing, Mauro?

**PANSINI** Well, in my family there's my father, my brother - he's younger than me - he is in the fishing, and that's it. Oh my uncles, both sides of my father's side, and my mum's side, they were all fishermen. So we come from a way down the line, fishing family.

**JD** But your own youngsters, are not following suit?

**PANSINI** No, none of mine. They're schoolteachers, and one's a fitter and turner. The eldest boy, he's a schoolteacher, and my daughter, she's a schoolteacher, and the other son, he's a fitter and turner. They're pretty set [laughs].

**JD** Any regrets about coming into the fishing industry yourself?

**PANSINI** No, no, I can honestly say I thoroughly enjoyed my time in the fishing industry. If I had to do it again, I think I'd do it all over again without any problems.

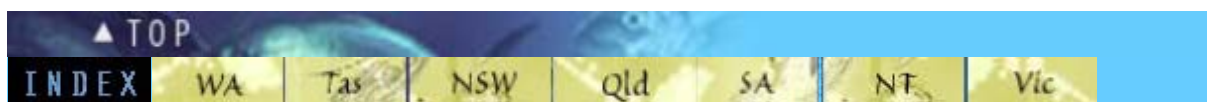
**JD** Well thank you very much for this interview, and all the best for the future with you.

**PANSINI** My pleasure.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Mauro Pansini of Carnarvon, WA.

END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW







## Verbatim transcript of an interview with PETER PARISH

### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is tape one, side A of an interview with Mr Peter Parish, General Manager of M.G. Kailis's processing plant at Dongara, WA.

Mr Parish could you record your full name and place and date of birth please.

**PARISH** My full name is Peter Raymond Parish. I was born at King Edward Memorial Hospital in Subiaco and resided in Warraloo until the age of six when my father transferred up to here. And I done all of my schooling at the Dongara School through until I was fourteen.

At the age of fourteen I decided to become a boat builder and with a firm called Ymmas, who consequently went broke within the first month.

I then decided to become a welder, as my father wanted me to do a trade, and that particular employment only lasted another six weeks. And the guy that was welding decided to go rock lobster fishing.

I then decided that I needed a job, so rather than look for another apprenticeship, I approached Mr M.G. Kailis who had taken over the Ymmas factory in Dongara and asked him for a job. I have since worked with Mr Kailis right through until today.

**JD** Thank you. Your father wasn't in the fishing industry, I understand.

**PARISH** No, my father worked for Hannifords who's a wheat grading firm and the reason for shifting to Dongara was to cover all the farmers in Dongara, because farming in Dongara was a much bigger industry than the fishing industry at that stage, in 1950.

**JD** 1950. And nevertheless you have brothers who are also in the fishing industry?

**PARISH** Yes. They've sort of split really. One is a wool buyer down in the Fremantle area and my other brother, my younger brother Terry is in rock lobster. Owns his own rock lobster vessel.

**JD** What year then did you become first involved with M.G. Kailis [unclear]?

**PARISH** Yes, I became involved with M.G. Kailis as I mentioned before, from the age of fourteen. So that would be 1960.

**JD** 1960?

**PARISH** Yes. Mid 1960.

**JD** And what's your current job with them? What does it entail?

**PARISH** My current job with the M.G. Kailis Group is sorry, is General Manager of seafood production. Which entails not only rock lobster but also prawning up in Exmouth Gulf. But the majority of my time is spent on lobsters because that is the harder of the two to do.

**JD** But you're responsible for this plant here in Dongara and also another plant in the North?

**PARISH** Yes, another.... The plant in Exmouth Gulf or in Learmonth as its called is for shrimp or for prawns as the [unclear].

**JD** And you look after that as well?

**PARISH** Yes, I do trips there and manage that as well.

**JD** How long have you been doing this job?

**PARISH** This particular job I've probably been doing.... Well I've been General Manager for the past six or seven years.

**JD** Since you came into the industry what would you say has been the major changes that you've seen?

**PARISH** Well from my point of view, certainly as with any industry the technology is, I think it's one of the industry's.... I think the reason for it to be so successful is that the technology has changed with times both in vessels and also in processing and I think that's why it is so successful today, because we have gone with the technology.

**JD** Is that technology devised here? Or is it something that you've seen in other places and introduced into Western Australia?

**PARISH** No I would say that, though in my capacity as General Manager I do do a reasonable amount of travelling and I would say that West Australia are the forerunners in rock lobster technology. I think the other States would be the followers. This is borne out by all the older vessels, our older rock lobster vessels are usually brought up by South Australia or Tasmania. When we build our new vessels they take the vessels that we've already been using say three years or four years previous to that.

**JD** Are the vessels built here in Western Australia?

**PARISH** Yes, there is two or three companies and that build rock lobster vessels. And over the last four years there has been one developed in, even in Geraldton, but there's no.... We've got extensions and stuff here to extend to boats, fibreglass boats and also aluminium boats, but we don't actually build here. But in the future I can see that happening because they're advanced as far as cutting them in half and adding to them, so there's no reason why those particular firms couldn't really go into building vessels here in Dongara.

**JD** In Dongara?

**PARISH** Yes, in Dongara, yes.

**JD** You obviously process a lot of rock lobster and you mentioned that you also process shrimps, that's in your....

**PARISH** Exmouth factory.

**JD** Exmouth operation. Do you process any other sort of fish here in Dongara?

**PARISH** Yes, we do do some [unclear] fish but it's mainly, it's mainly a by-product or off-shoot of rock lobster. But we do handle it because it's the same fishermen that catch rock lobster catch a few fish and we handle it for that reason. But we don't handle it as a profit-bearing situation, it's just an offshoot of rock lobster.

**JD** And that services a local market presumably?

**PARISH** Yes definitely a local market.

**JD** Whereas most of the rock lobsters would be for export, is that right?

**PARISH** Yes. 95% of the rock lobsters would be, leave for export.

**JD** What are your markets?

**PARISH** Yes, our major markets are in Japan and Taiwan and then America. I would say that 70% of our lobster goes to Japan and probably 20%, 20 to 25% goes to America and the remainder is sold on the local market, which is roughly only 5%.

**JD** Right, thank you. What sort of throughput would you have in regard to the rock lobsters?

**PARISH** Well here we... It depends it does vary, but I think the lowest, the lowest we've put through is about 900,000 kilos to 1.4 million kilos annually.

**JD** Thank you. It's a pretty big operation then?

**PARISH** Yes, it is a big operation but it does vary, it has its seasons from mainly what we call the white season. The reason its called the white season, because when the lobster come in and lose their shells and they moult and lose their shells and when the shells come back on they're a very light colour. And that happens from November 15th through to about the end of December. And then we have a fairly lull time then from the beginning of January through until 15th March. And from 15th March we have what we call an island season, which is closed off for the rest of the season and its only open from 15th March through to the end of June and that's what we call the red season.

**JD** That's the Abrolhos Islands, you're talking about?

**PARISH** Yes, that's the Abrolhos Islands, yes.



**JD** Yes. Would this plant be the biggest rock lobster processing plant on the west coast?

**PARISH** No, no. This would not be the biggest one. The biggest rock lobster processors would still be the Co-Ops. And the biggest one out of the two. There's two Co-Ops, one's a Geraldton Fishermens Co-Op and the other one is the Fremantle Fishermens Co-op which is situated in Fremantle. And they would be.... The Fremantle Co-Op would be the biggest producer of rock lobster holding about a third of the market.

**JD** Could you give us a very brief indication of how the plant operates from the time the catch is landed to when it leaves your plant for export or storage?

**PARISH** Right. When the lobsters arrive we actually sort them out into three different categories. One is for live lobster which is a very lively lobster, which is based mainly on how alive they are. The other lobsters which are alive but not top quality, but are still alive we actually cook all of those lobsters. And the remainder that are weak, weak lobsters we actually process into tails. And they are sorted out as soon as we've weighed in the fishermens catch and sent to the different categories.

First of all the ones that go around into the... We've got big live tanks which are operated, they're not an internal system. It's water that's pumped out of the sea, but have got very good quality water, it's no pollution because there's not industry in Dongara. So we pump the water out of the sea through these tanks which we've pumped a thousand gallons an hour, and then that water goes out to sea. Back out to sea again, which keeps the lobsters alive. We do this for two days to purge the lobsters out before packing. And they are packed in a medium of, we use wood shavings, pine wood shavings and an ice bottle, and they're packed in there very tightly and the ice bottle keeps the temperature in there to keep them cool. We then send them by truck down to Perth where they're put on aircraft and sent to either Japan or Taiwan. So that is the live section.

The cooked section is, we drown the crayfish in the first instance. This is done because they lose - if you throw them straight into boiling water, which is very cruel but more importantly we lose the legs off the lobster, so.... Which the Japanese would not then buy if they've got any legs whatsoever missing. So we drown the lobster and then we cook the lobster. They're all graded out into four or five different sizes and packed and frozen in snap freezers. We then hold them in a holding room here until such time as we've got eight hundred cartons and they are then loaded in the container, road transported down to Fremantle and loaded onto the shipping line which takes them either to Japan or Taiwan.

With the tails, that's the remainder of the lobsters that are left, we actually head them with a special killing knife. We remove the anal tract which the Americans do not want in the lobster. That is removed by a water jet. They are cleaned up, graded and packed into 22, oh sorry. They're packed into 25 pound boxes, because they still use their pounds over there. Or it's 11.34 kilos in Australian. They are then snap frozen, held in our holding room until we get approximately 1100 cartons. They are then packed into a container, road transported to Fremantle and sent by ship to America. That would be the only products that we would take out of rock lobster.

**JD** Thank you. How many, or the catch from how many boats would you use?

**PARISH** We would use 55 vessels actually fish to us. So there'd be 55 vessels. They are all different. They are all licenced for a different amount of pots. We usually work on the theory that it's a hundred pots per boat that actually fish to us.

**JD** Are these boats, or the fishermen contracted to you?

**PARISH** No, no, this - it is a free enterprise. All of the boats are usually owned, or the majority of the boats are owned by the owner/skippers. There are some owners which have got skippers on them, but they'd be very few. There'd probably only be 5% even if there was that amount. And so it is free enterprise. And some fishermen who are fishing for you this year may not fish for you next year and then you might win some of the thing. So it is very, very competitive.

**JD** Do you find the catch varies much, year to year?

**PARISH** Yes it does vary year to year, as it goes from 9.5 million kilos up 'til, up to I think last year was 13.1/2 million kilos for the total industry.

**JD** Is the general trend up, down or stationary would you say?

**PARISH** Well the trends been up and down. It's very interesting to look at a graph because the trend does go up and down. I think it is, well I don't think, I know I'm convinced that it is the best managed fishery in the world. Because the trend does go up and down and they can almost predict what's going to happen in four years hence to today. In other words I think we've got thirteen and a half million last year, they're predicting eleven and a half million for this season. And predicting nine and a half million for next season. And they're predictions at the Fisheries Department of Western Australia have done have usually been fairly close.

**JD** I understand that the M.G. Kailis Group of Companies are wholly Australian owned, but this is not now common in other companies involved in the fishing industry in Western Australia. Is that of concern to the industry generally that some of the ownership at least is passing to overseas interests?

**PARISH** Well it is a concern. A lot of the other ones that there are outside, their other outside interests are not particularly rock lobster. We did have an instance last year where there was a Japanese firm coming into buy out a couple of already established processing works. That was a big concern to the whole of industry, not just M.G. Kailis. It was the whole industry. Fortunately enough with a lot of work we actually stopped that. The thing I think that scares us the most there is not the fact that of foreign investment, because you're always going to get foreign investment. But to get foreign investment with someone who is an end user of rock lobster is the frightening side of it.

**JD** Right. Was it stopped with the aid of Government?

**PARISH** Yes it was stopped with the aid of Government after, after a lot of work done by Western Australians and more importantly the State Government of Western Australia.

**JD** Could you outline for us how prices to the fishermen are determined?

**PARISH** Yes, that is a bit of a worry to us because if prices were determined on what we received at the end, it is really becoming now quite a big gamble, because a lot of

lobsters sold on consignment so a lot of people predict that by the time it is sold we're going to get a much higher price for it. So they put the prices on the beach up higher hoping for this to happen, and sometimes it just doesn't happen. So the profit margin is being whittled away not to the detriment of the actual fishermen but to the detriment of the processors themselves is being whittled away. I feel, every year more and more. I don't know, I can't foresee how we're going to overcome the problem unless industry gets together and talks about the total concept of marketing and buying and selling of rock lobster. Or the other alternative would be to actually get fishermen totally into the total investment. So it's more or less like we've got a factory here and now that it's got fifty, it's got fifty or sixty boats fishing to us, that factory is probably worth in the vicinity of 3.5 million dollars. But each fisherman that's out there their boat is in the vicinity of one million dollars. So really in a lot of respects the fishermen have got a bigger investment in the industry than we have.

**JD** Could we have a look now at the situation on shore with employees. How many would you employ in the processing works here?

**PARISH** Yes well during the peaks of the white, white season here, what we call the white season, and the Abrolhos Island season which we call the red season, at the peak of that we would have sixty processors, casual processors working at our factory. That would in the lower times, would get back down to say fifteen. But on average I suppose it would be about 35.

**JD** The in addition, you would have maintenance people, office staff and so on?

**PARISH** Yes. The... We'd probably have back up to that processing staff, for back up we would probably have another thirty people.

**JD** Are they drawn from the local community?

**PARISH** As much as possible. Our first thing is for the local community as with any small town. We employ as many people as possible that actually live here in Dongara and then if we can't find staff then we use the people that are passing through. We don't advertise out of Dongara, but we do get enough people coming to the door asking. We take their names and if they are living here in Dongara, even though they might be only living here for a short amount of time, we still try to use those people. So as many as possible out of the town itself.

**JD** Do you tend to get the same people year after year? Or is there a big turnover?

**PARISH** Fortunately enough with the economy in Australia as it stands now, that is happening. Where back in the early '70s a lot of, a lot of the people didn't have to work. A lot of the wives didn't have to work in the local community here, because the '70s were the good years. But we've found now, in the, from the mid '80s onwards things have got tighter and tighter with the economy of the whole of Australia has got tighter and tighter, so most of those women now are coming back to actually work for here.

**JD** They're largely women are they?

**PARISH** Yes, largely women, yes. If we had sixty processors in the factory we would have probably fifteen men and the rest would be women.

**JD** Do they require any skills? I suppose they'd get some degree of on-the-job training? Is that the case?

**PARISH** Yes they're usually, we usually, anyone that's new, whose just come along, we do all the training ourselves and it is, it is, it has got quite a bit of skill behind it. But it's, it probably takes about a week of training. But while they're doing that training they're on a full wage.

**JD** And your permanent staff people, are they drawn from the local community also?

**PARISH** Yes certainly. That's probably more so than in casual. All of our permanents are, live and got their own housing in Dongara, yes.

**JD** And within the Kailis enterprise, is there a career structure for a young person starting off with the Company?

**PARISH** Only in our shipyards down in Gervais Bay in Western Australia. We have that. We have apprenticeships in our Exmouth factory. Here we're not really big enough. There's no such thing as an apprenticeship for a processor. It's just self trained. As a matter of fact even myself I've never ever done an apprenticeship though I've worked my way up to my position. But here we haven't got the facilities really. Well not the turnover in engineering and stuff to have a.... But if the time comes we would certainly agree to an apprenticeship system, yes.

**JD** Is the labour force unionised at all?

**PARISH** Yes, yes, all the processors are under a processing union and all of our truck drivers are with the TWU and so on.

**JD** What's the accident record in the factory?

**PARISH** Very, very minor, except from cuts which may cost people two or three days off the normal.... You can develop what we call rock lobster poisoning which comes off the spines of the rock lobster. That may stop them from working for two or three days, but our actual accident or major accidents to this date have been very, very minimal. I cannot remember a major accident.

**JD** The problem of maintenance and breakdowns is that a real worry in an industry like this? In a fairly isolated area?

**PARISH** If we're talking about vessel breakdowns, yes, it can be a major worry because you could lose up to four or five thousand dollars in one day if you're in the peak of the whites or the peak of the Abrolhos Islands. From our own point of view here, we've got enough back up equipment and also extra equipment too, if we lose a compressor or something breaks down we've usually got another compressor to take over. So we've never ever lost or claimed on insurance any fill up in the time that I've been here.

**JD** You mentioned that you are able to move around and see other similiar plants operating and this is a form of research into new technology, of course?

**PARISH** Yes.

**JD** Is there any other mode of research whereby you can discover what the current situation is, what the developments are in other places? Are there publications for instance.

**PARISH** Yes, the fishing industry do have quite a few different publications which are put out by the Fisheries Department. One magazine **The Professional Fisherman** is another magazine that we get it off. And then the **Manufacturers Weekly**, sorry the **Manufacturers Monthly** and stuff like that. It usually gives you a bit of insight into what's going on. But it's mainly done, it's mainly done by look and see.

**JD** You would have to keep in touch with the boats that are fishing for you I would imagine?

**PARISH** Yes.

**JD** That is the end of tape one, side A of this interview. Please turn the tape over for side B.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** This is tape one, side B of an interview with Mr Peter Parish.

Mr Parish we were about to talk about communicating with the vessels at sea, could you tell us what happens?

**PARISH** Yes, communication is a very vital link, as you can well imagine some of these vessels fish out to sixty kilometres out at sea and so it is very vital that we've got communications. We man our radio from early in the morning until late at night, or more importantly until such times as all of our vessels have reported in. This is a necessity to make sure that all the vessels do. We do have constant breakdowns and stuff like that and we co-ordinate our own vessels. When I say our own vessels I mean other fishermen's vessels to go out to sea and tow them in if necessary. But communication is a very vital link and without it it would be a very worrying consequence.

**JD** Thank you. Could we have a look at relationship with Government? Is there an export subsidy to the rock lobster industry?

**PARISH** Yes, I'm pretty certain there is, I don't do a lot of marketing out of here myself, but there is an export expansion grant which comes into for the more you export and what have you, you do get a grant for exporting.

**JD** The industry in Western Australia is quite regulated now, would you like to make comment about that from your perspective?

**PARISH** Well from my perspective in some respects it is highly regulated and in other respects in my time it has become unregulated. Mainly in the processing side of it where we had Department of Primary Industry inspectors full time on the whole time that we were processing, they are tending to go away from that approach as the economy downgrades, and we are now looking after a lot of our own processing within inspecting the finished product at the end before it is exported on a random based

checked. So for every three loads or three containers of product that you might load out you would probably get inspected once in three. That seems to be okay at the moment from my own perspective I think that it could become too unregulated, because as other countries now are up-grading their products, it could become to Australian product. I would like to see where we are maybe a little bit over-regulated but always have the top product of the world.

**JD** What about the Fisheries Department and their inspection of say size of rock lobsters? Is that done at the processing works here?

**PARISH** Yes, all on random checks the fishermens product is checked for undersized and on a regular basis, and that is all done here at the processing plant.

**JD** And if undersized are found who's held responsible, the fishermen or yourself?

**PARISH** All the bags that we receive in are actually labelled and if those rock lobsters come out of those bags that are labelled, the fisherman then would be held responsible. Should those bags be already emptied into what we call our killing trough or our sorting department they would then become our responsibility. However, we have not had that instance as yet.

**JD** What about health regulations? Are you checked from the point of view of the Health Department?

**PARISH** No the local Health or State Government local Health Authority stays right out of it. The surrounds of the factory are done by our local Health Inspector, but that all comes under the Department of Primary Industry. They have their inspectors and all the health of here, because it's an export product is under those, which is much stricter than the local Health Authority regulations.

**JD** Could we have a look at the problems that you see facing the industry at present?

**PARISH** Yes. I feel that the industry itself is over serviced to the fishermen. The processors are actually over servicing the fishermen to try and gain more fishermen by over servicing. Such as we, there's probably five processors in this area and we all have got our own vehicles which travel up to seventy, eighty kilometres away from the factory and sometimes even up to two hundred kilometres at certain times of the year and all of those vehicles go down and pick up only our own crayfish. And consequently you might have a five ton truck with only 500 kilos sitting on the back of it for us, and probably 500 kilos for someone. So I think the industry has become over serviced, but mainly only because to try and get a fair share of the product that's being distributed.

**JD** Anything else that you'd like recorded about your aspect of the industry, or the industry in general.

**PARISH** No I just think that the industry's got a bright future. They've got a rock lobster industry out there which is very well controlled. I would foresee that with the fishermens, while the industry's getting its act together and looking at it as a more broad based thing so that everyone is profiting from it. I feel that the profit of processors being whittled away very quickly and I think it's either industries got to get its act together or we involve the fishermen in there so that it all becomes one big industry. You know fishermen and processing combined.

**JD** Right well thank you very much, it's been a most interesting conversation with you. Thank you.

**PARISH** Thank you too.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Peter Parish, General Manager of the M.G. Kailis Company's processing plant in Dongara. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey on 6th November, 1989 at Dongara, Western Australia.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with TERRY PARISH

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr. Terry Parish, owner/skipper of a rock lobster fishing boat operating out of Port Dennison on the mid-West coast of Western Australia.

The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University and is part of the oral history segment of a History of the Australian Fishing Industry being prepared by the University for the Australian Fishing Industries Research Council.

The interview took place in Mr. Parish's home in Dongara on 7th November, 1989. Mr. Parish is an experienced and successful operator in the rock lobster fishery on this coast and his comments on his own career and on the procedures and problems in that industry are an important contribution to this project.

There is one tape. The interview starts 025 on the rev. counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is tape one, side A of an interview with Mr. Terry Parish, part owner/skipper of the rock lobster boat **Narranda**, fishing out of Port Dennison on the West Coast. The interview was conducted on 7th November, 1989.

Mr. Parish could I ask you to record your full name and date of birth and place of birth?

**PARISH** It's Terry George Parish, the 21st of the tenth 1950.

**JD** And where were you born?

**PARISH** In Perth.

**JD** Were your parents involved or was your father involved in the fishing industry at all?

**PARISH** No, my father wasn't involved in the fishing industry. It was only my brother and myself that have actually been involved in it.

**JD** I see. And when did you come to Dongara?

**PARISH** When I was about four years of age, I - the family shifted to Dongara and I think well my first association with the fishing industry was when I was about twelve years of age. And that was when Michael Kailis had started his operation here in '62,



and that was - I was still going to school at the time and we used to go down on weekends and some nights and make wooden boxes for.... Threepence a box we used to get.

And from there I actually left out - got out of the fishing industry and started in '64 with the, in the wool buying industry. And then by '65, '66 I came back into the industry working as a processor for M.G. Kailis. My brother had been with him right from the start and that was the connection there and I think I did one year in the processing side of it and worked my way up as foreman. For about six years I worked for Kailis, that was with the rock lobster and the prawning industry as well, all on the processing side of it.

Actually the foreman at the time when I first started down there was Margaret Best, whose still around now. So they talk about womens liberation, [laughs] it was going on then.

**JD** Yes.

**PARISH** Then from '77, was when I got out of it four years previous, so it would have been about '73 it would have been I worked down in Perth for the West Australian Newspapers for four years, so I got out of the processing side of it. And then in '77 I came back and started the season with George Bass.

**JD** Oh you started with George?

**PARISH** Yes.

**JD** Yes.

**PARISH** And that was.... He was getting his two new fibreglass boats built at the time. I was up here on holidays and he said - I said "When you get your two new boats built I'll come up and deckie for you," sort of half-heartedly. And he saw me the next day and said, "Well if you're serious," he says "you're on."

But the boats weren't ready at the beginning of the season and he had this other bondwood boat, this little boat called **Siesta Two**. And that was the first experience going out working on a crayboat. And it was a fairly dilapidated boat at the time. And the first few weeks were quite okay, I sort of managed it okay. I even managed to break to one of George's toes on an anchor that he kept telling me to move out of the way and I didn't! [Laughs.] And George had to keep going to Perth to sort of keep an eye on how his boats were getting - his new boats were getting built. And he put this other chap on as skipper at the time while he was away.

And that was an experience and a half. We'd moved all the gear out deep. When I say 'out deep' it was in about 26, 27 fathoms and this chap really didn't have much of an idea what he was doing I don't think, but I know there's one night there we never got in until about half past eight at night in a roaring southerly that would have been blowing at about 25, 30 knots I think [laughs]. And I started to wonder whether I'd made the right move coming into the fishing industry.

But from there on, after we got the new boat and that, my job was actually coiling the ropes on deck. Whereas that's not done now, they've got automatic coilers. And we'd gone straight into working deep water, so you're looking at about fifty fathoms of rope. And I think after about the first week of coiling the ropes my back was just about

ready to, it felt like it was going to break in half and I'd got to the stage where I had my wife rubbing dencorub into my back every night. And I started to say, "If it doesn't come any better in the next few days I think I'm going to have to give it in." [Laughs.] Toss it in. And anyway I think it was about three or four days after that everything sort of started falling into place and it became a lot easier then.

**JD** Where they tarred ropes that you were using?

**PARISH** No, no. It was the.... I was out of that era, sort of thing, when they had that sort of rope. It was the nylon rope.

**JD** Yes.

**PARISH** And even the floats for the.... polyurethane floats. And I did one season with George and then I swopped and worked with Norm Money on **Nebraska** for, I think it was about three seasons. And by this time I'd had enough time up to go for my engine drivers ticket. And I sat for that. I got that okay. And then I was sort of biding my time to go for my skippers ticket or coxswains ticket it used to be known as then. And I tried that by correspondence I found that very hard. I finished up doing a course up in Geraldton there.

**JD** What at the Technical School?

**PARISH** At the Technical School. And once I'd got my ticket I was still working on deck and just waiting for an opportunity to come along where I could skipper a boat.

And that came along eventually with a chap, Stue Chandler. And he'd come up from Denmark as a farmer and bought a boat and didn't have tickets at the time. And so I took over as a skipper for him. And, of course, the percentage rate - you know what you paid in that was a lot better than working on the decks so that was the advantage of doing that. And he finished up getting his tickets, and I did another season with him actually where we both had tickets and he used to work half the gear and I'd work half, just to keep our interest there. And it was a good experience because he was learning and I was learning still at the same time.

And then an opportunity came up where my brother was in a syndicate, the three people with the **Narranda**. And the other two partners wanted to sell out and they'd had several blokes working **Narranda** at the time previous and I was always at Peter saying, you know, "Why don't you give me a go? Why don't you give me a go?" And he kept saying, "Oh I don't think the others would approve." You know with two brothers, you know, with the relationship sort of thing. Anyway when they wanted to get out of it, he, Peter came around and saw me and said, "Oh, there's a chance to get into the boats." So we jumped at it. And went and organised a loan through the bank and whatnot.

**JD** Did you have any difficulty raising the loan?

**PARISH** Oh, not really, no, because we had a block of land out of town that we sold at the time and it didn't really.... They seemed quite willing to loan us the money as far as.... The industry was sort of looking quite good at that time.

**JD** About what era would this be?

**PARISH** That was.... When was it? '80, '84. February, '84 I actually took **Narranda** over. And from then on we just, you know, kept working it and did well. We had two, I think it's three, no two good seasons after we took the boat over. Then we had a couple of quiet seasons. But by this time we'd sort of established ourselves a bit better. And they bought in in that time, I think it was '80, '84. No. Yes, it was '84, '85 when they bought in the standard pot size, you know, to be a certain size. It couldn't be over that size and only one entrance and that sort of thing. So they'd bought everything into a uniformity, because previous to that they were - some of the pots were absolutely huge and I think where, where they were doing two day pulls and that sort of thing, you know, the catch rate and that was a lot higher. But then it was '86, '87 season when they bought in the pot reduction, the ten percent pot reduction. That's not so long ago.

**JD** Right.

**PARISH** And also the escape gaps which was a good move. That was one of the better - well since I've been in the industry, one of the better measures that's been taken like in a fishery. We're not handling the amount of small juvenile lobsters as we used to before.

And the ten percent reduction on the '86, '87 season that was very controversial, you know, amongst the fishermen. There was arguments left, right and centre and which was the fair way to go about it. And I think in the end everyone realised that the ten percent reduction overall, all the fleet was really the only way the reasonable way to go about doing it, and which they implemented.

**JD** Would you say that's been a successful move? Some people were saying that is hasn't really made any difference to the catch because people simply work longer hours and go out more often?

**PARISH** Well that's, that's true in a certain respect too, because there is - talking to other chaps who've been in the industry longer than me, you know, I've spoken to them and they say, "Oh we used to knock off in January." And this is when the season used to go through to the 14th August. And they used to knock in June, for the month of June sort of thing and then start again. And, just for the amount of time that I've been in the industry I'd say that everyone is putting a bigger effort into their catching. And because of the boats. You know the boats have changed now where there's not too many days you have to stop home because of bad weather and that sort of thing.

**JD** Yes.

**PARISH** And the electronic equipment that they've got on board now. You know where there's sounders, coloured sounders and that sort of thing. And even just recently, well now with this, they've got this GPS system coming in.

**JD** Yes.

**PARISH** It's.... That's that accurate that as far as you finding good ground when you're working deep water, you can pinpoint within five or ten yards, or metres I should say.

**JD** And then you can put it in the memory bank and go back to that very spot next year.

**PARISH** That's right. You just keep a log and whereas before I think, you know certain ground out there but you go by depth and distance or maybe an edge that you know out there and you know you're in the vicinity of that ground and you might have say a line of pots on board that you want to set onto that piece of ground and the chances of actually hitting that piece of ground with all the pots could be fairly remote, I'd say.

**JD** Yes, yes.

**PARISH** So it's a bit of a hit and miss. But with this GPS system coming in I'd say, you know, if you've got say 25 pots and you can pinpoint that piece of ground you're going to have every pot hitting that piece of ground.

The other side of it I've heard that (well I know from personal experiences) that some ground that you do well in one year doesn't necessarily fire up the next year.

**JD** Yes.

**PARISH** So there's still that side of it as well, you know? So maybe the GPS won't have that bigger dent in it.

**JD** What about the underwater camera?

**PARISH** Oh that.... We had a couple of chaps come up. When was it? Last, it might have been last year or the year before with the two models that they had and I don't know of anyone using one commercially at this stage. But when they operated it for us out.... Oh, we went about in about eight fathoms of water and because of the speed that you can, that you have to travel at to have it operate properly, and because you've got a cable hanging off your boat, and you can only see an area - you have to have it fairly close to the bottom depending on conditions, and the area that it actually shows up I couldn't really see it being a very big success as far as finding ground, you know, for setting your pots.

**JD** This electronic equipment, is it very expensive to equip a boat with the state of the art stuff?

**PARISH** Yes it is, because you're looking at, say a good coloured sounder you're up around say 5,000 dollars. Last year I installed a Satinav+ Plotter.

**JD** This is the satellite navigation idea?

**PARISH** Yes, yes. It's not the GPS it's the model before it. It's not as accurate as the GPS But that was, that was around, the cost of that was somewhere around twelve and a half thousand dollars. And of course I can say with your sounders that they're quite expensive stuff.

**JD** Sure. Do the suppliers offer an adequate back-up service?

**PARISH** Yes most of the.... Most of the, like the Geraldton suppliers that's their business, like electronics and that, so they do all the repairs. I think there's about three, three different places in Geraldton that handle electronics. So there's not really a problem there. I give them, like with your radios and that sort of thing, I've had

trouble with the radio and it's a matter of about a day and it's back on board, so that's pretty good really.

**JD** Yes, yes. Generally speaking people are quite happy with the availability of maintenance and service facilities in the area. Is that your experience too?

**PARISH** Yes, as far as like the motor on a boat, the back-up for those is.... The main motors I suppose would be Volvo, Caterpillar and then you've got the Mans and Mercedes to a certain, or lesser extent. But the major ones like, there's always good back-up with them. There's no problem there.

**JD** Terry there seems to be some concern in the industry at the moment of overseas investment that is coming into Australia in the fishing industry, is that of concern to you?

**PARISH** Oh it certainly is. I think it's a concern to most fishermen. It was only earlier on this year where there was a processing establishment wanting to sell to a Japanese buyer. As, oh it's been well seen in the last couple of years because of their, the strength of their economy, the Japanese economy that they're certainly getting into Australia and buying up real estate.

And the problem that arose with the fishing industry was that the Japanese company that wanted to buy this other processing company out was an end user. They've got a chain of restaurants scattered throughout the world and it could be seen that within several years that could really manipulate the market and the price of rock lobsters. Especially the live and the boiled rock lobster which we get a good price for at the moment over, by the Japanese and the Taiwan market.

At the time when it came to a head it was just before an election it was quite obvious that what the Japanese had done to the beef industry in Australia, and my way thinking, I was thinking at the time. I was thinking, you know, the Government seemed to be quite blind to the fact that they'd bugged up one industry and could quite easily do it to our industry. But as it turned out in the end, after a lot of meetings and whatnot, we got a good hearing.

There was a delegation went over to Canberra and they decided not to let the sale of this plant go through, so I think there was quite a few sighs of relief from throughout the industry over that. At the same time there was still a loophole there that the ownership and that of the processing plants, there wasn't any percentage situation, you know, where it should be owned or Australian owned for a certain percentage and foreign ownership to a lesser degree.

**JD** So control to stay in Australia?

**PARISH** Yes, control, yes.

**JD** Yes.

**PARISH** But since then there's been new legislation gone through to correct that, so at this stage I'd say, as far as foreign investment goes in the fishing industry it's been tightened right up. I can't see it sort of ever happening.

But it started really with the one, the one processing plant down in Perth was sold by the Government without any, anyone knowing anything about it. You know, it was

virtually, it was done overnight and the next thing people knew that there'd been a factory sold to overseas investment.

**JD** Is it one of the problems that people never hear about these until it's too late?

**PARISH** Well, yes certainly it's a problem I think, because with something of that importance I think with any industry the people that are in it and are operating within that industry should certainly be given a chance to air their views on such an important issue as that, which never occurred at that time. But I'd say now that what's come out of it that the State Government and the Federal Government be more aware in the future to make sure they do the right thing in that respect, I think.

**JD** Are the fishermen's organisations active and effective in this negotiating with Government?

**PARISH** Yes, I didn't up until last year, I didn't, I thought, you know, we were sort of a voice in the wilderness sometimes through the associations. And, of course, we've got our head like the WAFIC, the West Australian Fishing Industry Council which represents us on a State basis as well as Federal. And just for the different issues I thought, you know, do those big boys up there really listen to us, you know? But after this foreign investment situation when that cropped up and you could see the associations, all the fishing industries sort banding together and it certainly created a bit of wallop, I think. And sort of made me realise a bit more that if you get up, if you jump up and down hard enough someone's going to take notice.

**JD** Yes.

**PARISH** And that's virtually what happened, I think.

**JD** Right. What would be some of the other problems that you see facing the industry?

**PARISH** Oh there's one current issue going on now with the.... There was importers, importing fish from overseas, of not good quality and being able to put Australian brand names to it.

**JD** Is this scale fish we're talking about?

**PARISH** Yes.

**JD** Yes, right.

**PARISH** And being able to export it, you know.

**JD** As Australian....?

**PARISH** As Australian product.

**JD** Product?

**PARISH** And this is being looked into now, you know, to be stopped. And you can see how detrimental that would be to our marketing. We need somehow to really, even with our rock lobster to be more identifiable on the overseas market

**JD** In regard to markets, Terry, it seems that our outlets are for frozen tails, the West Coast of America, and for live lobsters and boiled lobsters, Japan and Taiwan, but not much else. That is a fairly narrow sort of market range, should we be trying to diversify into a wider range of markets?

**PARISH** Yes, I think it would be.... Like the broader market, of course, the better off we're going to be. But like the Taiwanese market is only a relatively new market, so that's one that's sort of. It's still growing at this stage.

**JD** Is the industry actively pursuing new markets in other parts of the world? Europe for example?

**PARISH** Not, when you say the industry, like the processing side of it, they're going out and trying to create new markets. But as far as from the fishermen's side of it it's not, there's very little promotion at all.

**JD** Yes. Well there's very little the individual fisherman could do. But what about the fishermen's organisations?

**PARISH** No at this stage there's nothing in that respect. It has been brought up at meetings that maybe the fishermen themselves should be more actively involved in that side of it. It's, I think, even having the medium to even let the fishermen know what goes on in the marketing side of it would be of great benefit, because there's quite often.... I mean there could be cases where fishing sort of looks at the going out, catching and bringing them in to the processors and then it's virtually forgotten from there.

**JD** Yes.

**PARISH** As long as the price is right.

**JD** There's no way the fishermen can know what's happening in the marketing, is that the case?

**PARISH** Yes, to a certain extent I think there could be more information, how it's done I don't really know, but more information fed back.

**JD** Yes, because it's quite vital to the industry isn't it?

**PARISH** The marketing side, it certainly is. There's a chap did a paper on the marketing side of it and that, last year, and I just can't think of his name right now. But that was quite interesting to see just how our product is received overseas. I know a lot of the Japanese are very critical of our handling techniques at the moment. The processing side of it as well as on the fishing vessels themselves. They can't, I think really relieve that we handle something that's worth so much money the way we do. But I'd say we're, in the processing side of it the techniques and that are trying to improve the whole time, you know, so we can only get better at it.

**JD** True.

**PARISH** And of course the difference there is that if we can stop the mortality rate, like with live lobster and that sort of thing, the premium, the monies going to increase as far as what you get per kilo for your lobster and everyone's going to benefit by it.

**JD** Yes.

**PARISH** But it's got to be an effort, well it is at the moment anyway, I'd say things have certainly changed over the last couple of years when live lobster came into it, how the fishermen handled their lobster on the boats. And I know that processing establishments have tried different techniques. And the whole time it's trying to improve their handling of the lobster.

**JD** Do you think there's sufficient research being done in Western Australia, say, into the lobster industry?

**PARISH** Well there has, over the years there's, you know, there's been quite a bit of research going on but I think because of the nature of the type of industry it is it's very slow to find out certain aspects of the fishery, and that's always been a problem, but we certainly can't afford to have the research side of it, the funding of it to be cut because it's, you know, you're looking what at a two million dollar industry annually.

**JD** Two hundred million.

**PARISH** Two hundred million, sorry, not two million [laughs]. And it's known to be one of the best managed fisheries in Australia and probably in the world, I'd say. And it's got that reputation, so it would be a shame to sort of see the research side of it collapse because of not having the funding there to do it.

**JD** Yes. Terry what other problems do you see confronting the industry? What about depletion of stock?

**PARISH** Yes well that's, over the last, oh since I've been in the fishing industry anyway that's been a concern. And like I mentioned before about the '86/'87 season where they bought that ten percent reduction in, that was partly because it was a low recruitment into the deeper water that year that they bought that in. And at the time my argument was that with this ten percent reduction they could work it like a flexible set up where if they want, if they reckon it's going to be low recruitment in that year in the whites that they say right they take twenty percent of your pots of the vessel until say the beginning of January, then you go back to your original number. And that way you get more crays going in, the recruitment of the whites going into the spawning areas, into the breeding areas, and also the whites as far as like on the overseas markets because of the colour, they're not accepted as well as what the reds are, so in one way you'd be looking after your market side of it as well because you'd be cutting down on the numbers there.

**JD** Yes.

**PARISH** And well by the time March came round after they'd remoulded or they've started to change to a darker colour they're going to be more value to you on your market, overseas market.

**JD** Yes, yes.

**PARISH** And you'd also be doing your conservation measure as far as allowing more of your crays to go through to your breeding grounds.

**JD** Yes. What other threats do you see, if any to the industry?



**PARISH** Only the technology side of it. I can't see a way around bring able to stop technology, I suppose. You know everyone becomes, or every fishermen is becoming more and more efficient because of the technology on the boat and like I mentioned before, like with this GPS system where you can pinpoint ground to very close accuracy, it's, all I can see them doing it either reducing, having a reduction in pots in the future because it's, they certainly aren't going to let the boats in the industry get more and more efficient and the catch rate become better per unit and not do something about, you know? They'd be foolish to let that happen.

**JD** Right. Another side to it perhaps is that as the technology increases so the skills required of the fishermen are need to be upgraded and does this imply a need for more sophisticated training?

**PARISH** Yes actually last night I went to a demonstration on plotters and navigators up in Geraldton and that's virtually what's happening. Like it's the people that are selling the equipment have now started to run like, if you like a small course on how this equipment operates or how you can get your best use out of it. It's certainly not much use having all this equipment on board if you don't know how to operate it properly.

**JD** Indeed.

**PARISH** This was the first of it's kind, I think, up in Geraldton and that's what happening. They're actually - the fishermen are buying the equipment and the people selling it are giving free lessons on how to operate it efficiently.

**JD** Yes, yes. Looking down the track new skippers will need to have their skills upgraded won't they? They'll need too.... Before they can operate a boat successfully they will have to have these skills in terms of the operation of the electronic equipment?

**PARISH** Yes, that's right, yes. I don't know at this stage whether like through TAFE and that whether they run.... I know like radar and that sort of thing they run courses before you can actually sit for your examination for a skippers ticket.

**JD** Yes.

**PARISH** But as far as the other, like sounders and that sort of thing, I don't know of any such course. Though whether the person that like, when he's a crew hand if he's willing enough to learn off his skipper then while he's a crew hand he can pick up quite a bit like that.

**JD** True.

**PARISH** That's about the only way that I know of at this stage.

**JD** Yes.

**PARISH** Anything else that you'd like to have recorded on this tape?

**JD** Only the... Yes I'd like to mention about the fisheries side of it. I know through our Association, the Dongara Fishermens Association, we've always been pushing for more field officers in the fishing, Fisheries Department. You're looking at the chap, the officer down at Port Dennison now, of the area he's got to cover, it's absolutely

ludicrous when you think about it, and there's no way he could patrol it efficiently. So he's sort of stuck there to do the best he can.

And there's also the amateur side of it, you know, he's got at holiday time, they've just got to look after that side of it as well.

And also the penalties, you know like to what the industry's worth now and the penalties that come into it for any lawbreakers they're quite ridiculous really at this day and age, and they certainly need to be looked at and revamped. They need to, you know, any rotten apples in the industries need to be really sorted out quite quickly, I think.

And one of my views is that if it's a fairly serious case that the person actually skippering the vessel should be banned, maybe for a certain amount of time or depending on how serious from him holding his skippers ticket again, and the licence stopped for a certain period. Instead of this going through a court and being fined a certain amount of money, to actually hold a vessel up so, take the concession away from him so he can't fish for a certain period would certainly do a lot more as far as keeping these sort of people in line.

**JD** Yes. So the infringements of the regulations you see as being quite a serious matter for the industry?

**PARISH** Yes I think so. More so because of the, like the price of the rock lobster now, you know? And I think that the people because of the set up, like in the courts and that, well what they get fined and that sort of thing it's, they'll take that risk because they know they can make big money by breaking the law in some cases....

**JD** Pay the fine and still be well in front.

**PARISH** Yes that's right. And that's the sort of what's happened in the case of.... In previous cases, you know. I think if the penalties were a lot harder that it would stop a lot of that sort of thing going on.

**JD** Terry, thank you very much, it's been a good interview. Thank you.

**PARISH** Good, thanks Jack.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr. Terry Parish of Dongara, Western Australia.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with SAVO [SAM] PAVLOVICH

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Sam Pavlovich of New Fishing Australia Pty Ltd, formerly Kailis & France, recorded by Jack Darcey at Mr Pavlovich's home in Perth on the 15th November 1989, for Murdoch University and the Australian Fishing Industries Research Council History of the Australian Fishing Industry project.

Mr Pavlovich has some thirty years of experience in the fishing industry, mainly in the northern prawning industry. He is Fleet Manager and part owner in a very large commercial fishing venture operating in many parts of Australia and overseas but based in Western Australia. In this interview he talks about many aspects of the prawning industry, an industry about which he knows a great deal. The over-view of the prawning industry he presents in this interview is a most welcome and instructive introduction to the northern prawning industry in Australia. As such, it is a very significant contribution to this history of the Australian fishing industry.

There is one Tape, Sides A and B. The interview commences at 021 on the rev counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

This is Tape 1 Side A of an interview with Mr Sam Pavlovich. Mr Pavlovich, could you detail your name, date of birth and place of origin?

**PAVLOVICH** Yes, my name is Savo Pavlovich, Sam for short. I was born in Leonora, Western Australia, on 18th May, 1939.

**JD** And did your family have a fishing background?

**PAVLOVICH** No, they vegetable farmers.

**JD** I see. Do you have other relatives in the industry?

**PAVLOVICH** Yes I have. My brother, Louis, he's the Fleet Master for our company.

**JD** And what company are you with?

**PAVLOVICH** New Fishing Australia.

**JD** New Fishing Australia!

**PAVLOVICH** New Fishing Australia, yes. It's what used to be called KfV Fisheries but for the last twelve months we've changed the name to New Fishing Australia.

**JD** And what's your role in that company?

**PAVLOVICH** Mine is Fleet Operations Manager.

**JD** Could you outline your career in the industry? When did you first come into it?

**PAVLOVICH** Thirty years ago. I was a motor mechanic, just come out of my time, all my friends had brand new cars and I decided I wanted to go fishing so I went down to the Fremantle fishermen's harbour and I spent the whole day there - 9 hours to be exact - asking for a job on a crayfishing boat. Anyhow, about 5 o'clock I forgot who I asked first so I went and asked him again, "Have you got a job?" and he said, "No!". I said, "I'm a motor mechanic", he said, "Thank God for that!" because they were waiting for a motor mechanic or an engineer to go fishing the next day. That's how I got into the fishing industry. That's thirty years ago.

**JD** Do you remember the employer's name?

**PAVLOVICH** Serge Zaza, skipper of the **Kingfisher**.

**JD** And what's happened to you in the industry since?

**PAVLOVICH** Well I was.... how can I put it? I was crayfishing for eight years but what I did - I was engineer for him for twelve months, then I was engineer for Sam Souza, who used to be the top cray fisherman in Australia I would say, even today, for three years. Then I decided, "I want to be a skipper," so I eventually got my first command of a boat called the **Jupiter** for Planet Fisheries, and I skippered that for about three years.

I then went and skippered a boat for Theo Kailis, the **Ross Empress**, and then the....[deliberating], the **Ross Empress**.... the **Ross Slavin**, and after that - about two years after that - that's when I bought my own, 50% of my own boat, called the **Dalmacia**. And about six months after that we purchased another boat called the **Empress**, the **Ross Empress** but the name was changed to **Empress**. I skippered those boats for two or three years, then we sold those two boats. Then I went into partnership with Mr Theo and Peter Kailis, we bought a boat called the **Eureka**, we bought that and I operated that for about twelve months. Then we sold that boat, that was in 1973, and then I went into partnership with Theo, Joe Rotondello and myself, we built the **Sarvo** which was the biggest at the time, the biggest prawn trawler in Australia, the 93 foot **Sarvo**. As a matter of fact I.... even that particular boat's name, the **Sarvo**, because my name was spelt S A V O and it sounded ridiculous, really, because people called me "Savvo", so I decided when I built the boat I would name the boat still after myself.... sorry! not after myself, after my son's name, Sarvo - S A R V O. I put a silent 'R' in there - well actually put a real 'R' in there - so it was spelt okay.

Anyhow, I skippered that for about six months then I handed over command to my brother Louis, who is now Fleet Master for New Fishing Australia, and we got into more boats. We got into 20% of this, and 20% of that, and we built up a fleet of boats in conjunction with Dick Verboon of Australian Shipbuilding Industries, until about eight

boats - I'll name a few of them. The **Kaijel**, the **Mutiara**, the **Chasseur**, **Sarvo**, **Kaijel**, and two or three more, and after a couple of years we sold those boats to Roy Annear, Marine Management.

Then we started again. We built the... what do you call it? The **Gove Aquarius** and **Gove Pisces**, in conjunction with Roy Annear, but about six months later, Roy sold out and we bought his shares and we just kept on going from that. That was 1978: we purchased a company called "Wright's Seafoods". What that entailed was a factory in Townsville, a base in Kurumba and also three boats. One was called the **Susan Wright** (used to be an ex landing barge in South Australia), that was a sort of mothership. We brought it back to Fremantle and spent a fortune on it. I'll get back to that in a minute. And we took over a vessel called the... [pause] **Jenny Wright**, and the **Angela Wright**.

The **Angela Wright** was ocean-going, you know, a going concern, but the **Jenny Wright**, there was a funny story behind it, because that was the one that sank in the 1974 Cyclone Tracy in Darwin. That was under water for three years. Wright's Seafood, you know, paid divers, etcetera, to raise that boat, and they raised the boat and they got it - they put another engine in it and fixed it up a little bit - and they got it mobile, and they took it across to - drove it across - to Singapore. When they got to Singapore, the bill to repair that boat in A1 condition was astronomical, so they decided to bring the boat back to Darwin, That is when actually we bought that company, Wright's Seafoods. We took that boat to Fremantle where, in them days, we spent \$550,000; because I know, I was in charge of overhaul. Also we bought the **Susan Wright** down to Fremantle, we spent \$500,000 converting that into a prawn trawler where it used to be a mothership before.

From then onwards we built another couple of boats and then in 1979 we started off... we started a new production line building eleven boats of the top catcher class. I can never forget that because the day we launched - the only triple launching in Australia to date - three prawn trawlers all together, it was the day after my wedding. I got married on a Friday and we had a launching on Saturday. We built ten of those boats. By this time the company was named KJV... (I should have said it earlier, but the company was KJV Fisheries). We built those ten boats and at the end of 1979 I went across to Townsville, actually, with Ken Somers and John Stratton, who was the new General Manager. I spent actually eight years across there and eventually I came back to Perth.

But we built up that fleet to 33 prawn, under the KJV umbrella, because the 'V' stood for Mr Dick Verboon, the Chairman of ASI (Australian Shipbuilding Industries). We built that company up to 33 trawlers and that amount remained for a few years and in the end we had a split-up with Mr Dick Verboon and the company - the boats - was reduced back to 27 trawlers. He took seven, I think six or seven, and we ended up with 27. About a year ago... I came back to Perth two and a half years ago, and about a year ago we built a new trawler called **Vulcan**. That was built for the New Fishing Australia executives, you know, all the Fleet Masters, and even the Accountant's in it. We bought that boat called the **Vulcan**, and just to give you an example of costs of that boat, that boat cost \$1.6 million; that was the contract price to EMS. It cost about \$100,000 to victual that boat, and also it cost close to \$600,000 for the licences for that boat. So in overall it cost over \$2.3 million for that particular boat.

**JD** Mr Pavlovich, could you explain the areas in which your company is involved in the prawning industry?

**PAVLOVICH** In the northern prawn fishery we fish between Cape York Peninsula, all the way across down to, I would say, Derby. And also, too, we have four licences in the Nor-West Shelf and also we've got one licence for western deepwater. I'll explain them as I go along.

In the northern prawn fishery we catch bananas, tigers, endeavours and kings. The season opens on the 15th April, that's for the bananas opening, and it goes through to the 22nd June. That's when we have six weeks off. And we restart again on 1st August until the 1st December, it's a theoretic.... it gives you six months' fishery and six months' closure. That's for the northern prawn fishery.

On the Nor-West.... sorry, I said it earlier. You get bananas, tigers, endeavours, kings up the northern prawn fishery. On the Nor-West shelf we catch two species over there; we catch scampi - between four to seven hundred metres - and also we catch four or five different species of deepwater prawn, one of them is the most important one, is the red carrid. We get those from about four hundred to one thousand metres depth. The problem with that type of prawn is the prawn comes up from the bottom at, say, +3 degrees Celsius. When it comes up to the top it's - maybe the water temp at that particular day - 28 degrees Celsius, and what happens! the prawn goes black in five minutes. We have spent something like a quarter of a million dollars per boat over four vessels to make special processing equipment on the boats and also to chill water set-up, where the prawns come out of +3 straight into, you know, the same temperature as down below. And that way there we take them out of that water as we need them to process, otherwise they go black on us. So there we catch, as I said earlier, the scampi and the deepwater prawns.

Also we've got (as I said earlier), we've got a licence for western deepwater. That's exploratory. We believe we'll get scampi. This is the first year we're going to actually do it this year. Scampi, and deepwater prawns, that's between say Port Hedland down to Cape Naturaliste. Port Hedland right down to Cape Naturaliste. Also we do catch scampi and some prawns on the Indonesian/Australian border. You don't need a licence there, it's outside the northern prawn fishery zone. So that is where we work at the present moment.

Our past experience, we've got a fair bit of experience, we spent two years in Saudi Arabia fishing for prawns over there - mainly tigers over there, a black tiger. We've fished in New Guinea for two years, mainly tigers, some endeavours and some bananas. We've fished in Indonesia for two years, that was mainly bananas; and at the present moment we've got two boats arriving.... another week and they'll be arriving in Burma, and if that proves fruitful we anticipate taking the ENTIRE fleet across there. The reason for that is to try and ease effort in the northern prawn fishery, because a prawn only lives for twelve to fifteen months, and if you keep going up and down, up and down, you'll eventually have nothing there. So what we've got to do is try and ease up on effort.

**JD** Mr Pavlovich, you have.... your company has some 28 boats operating in the industry and as you mentioned, they have - and still do - operate in remote areas as well as on the Australian coast. Could you describe the vessels? I understand they're built here in Western Australia.

**PAVLOVICH** The vessels, all of the vessels, are built in Western Australia; either they were built by Australian Shipbuilding Industries or, of late, our own shipbuilding yard called EMS Holdings. We purchased that company about twelve months ago. The vessels range from 23 to 30 metres; they are usually crewed between six and eight people, depending.... Banana fishing you have about eight people on board,

seven/eight. In tiger fishery you have between five and six people. The vessels can stay at sea, operating for 24 hours a day, up to 30 days. They are fully airconditioned, and they are full process vessels. Every vessel's capable of doing on-board 2 or 3 kilo packs.

With the catch, with the banana fishery, because you are getting volume it's very, very difficult to put that volume into 2 or 3 kilo packs regardless if you had fifty people on board. Well for a start, you wouldn't have the room to put those people. So what we do with the bananas - 90% of the bananas - when we get volume, we put them into 13 to 14 kilo cartons which are exported direct overseas and they're graded. And also they come out of a brine tank, we don't send them across, we put a big 'X' on that box and that goes to local market. The other 10% of the bananas, depends on the catch, if they catch only say 200 or 300 kilos, we ask the people please to put them into 2 or 3 kilo cartons and they're specially graded, and for those who can get another 2 or 3 kilo.... two or three dollars per kilo extra over bulk export. That's the one in 13/14 kilo cartons.

With the tigers, endeavours, king - we put 95% of those all into 2 or 3 kilo cartons. As I said earlier, we get sometimes up to \$4 or \$5 for the tigers extra, you know. The product is all export in frozen state. There are plans at later date to export live prawns to the Japanese market, but that could be another three or four years off. They've perfected that in the crayfish industry but with prawns it is a little bit more difficult.

**JD** And where are your markets?

**PAVLOVICH** The present moment our markets are Japan and Spain. With the Japanese market, we produce in Australia about 20,000 tonne of prawns. The Japanese import of Australian prawns equals i.e. about 2% of the imports. It's very hard to believe that. Our 20,000 tonnes equals 2% of the imports. Now the problem is, what's happened there is a couple of years ago we used to get, say, \$27 a kilo for our large tigers. Because the Emperor was going to die, not going to die, and eventually died, and that all the festivities in Japan ceased under the rules over there (whatever the rules are) and nobody was having festivities and the price plummeted down to up to \$10 and \$12 per kilo. Now we also export a hell of a lot of mainly white prawns, mainly the bananas and the endeavours, to Spain. We do those in 2 kilo packs, as I said earlier, frozen state. So they are, as I said, our main market is Spain and Japan. From time to time we send a consignment here to America, or to Italy, but 99% goes to one of those two countries.

**JD** And when they arrive in in Spain are they re-exported throughout Europe?

**PAVLOVICH** No. In Spain they consume what we send to them. In Japan, regardless what size pack you sent up there, you can send it in 50 kilos, or 1 kilo, they will go and re-thaw that carton out and re-do it again because over there you can purchase even five or six prawns - you know, a little frozen pack. They're just funny people.

While we were based in Townsville we used to have our own factory there, we used to process say 90.... not 90, say 60% of the product that came off the boat in a bulk form, we used to process into 2 or 3 - whatever the market wanted in weight packages. At the present moment, now that we're back in Perth, we have a very large factory in Perth but it's not New Fishing Australia, it belongs to Kailis, France & Fletcher; we put a lot of prawns through there. The biggest problem in Australia is the cost to process per kilo. It works out very close to \$2 a kilo to process anywhere in Australia. We last year - well actually this year - processed about 500 tonne in

Thailand and it cost 89 cents a kilo, so I think you'll find in the future we will be processing a lot of prawns overseas. Otherwise, you know, it's just too expensive here.

**JD** Could we turn now to looking at the role of government in your industry?

**PAVLOVICH** The role of government.... In this industry there is so many committees; you know, there must be at least twelve different committees, that's the private individual committees that, you know, meet from time to time, to discuss all the aspects of the industry, the problems, etcetera, etcetera. That eventually all goes back to a body called Normac and the outcome of a Normac decision must be unanimous. That goes across.... their recommendation goes across to the government and the government actually lay down the law. Really it is industry's input to the government which, in a unanimous capacity, allows the government to make the rules. So really the government are sitting on the sidelines. They're just waiting for the recommendations from Normac. They are the last body - or the closest one to the government - and that is how the rules are made. The government really doesn't put that much input in. They just sort of seal the law. That's what they do.

**JD** Is it Commonwealth Government or State Government or both?

**PAVLOVICH** Commonwealth. The northern prawn fishery is the Commonwealth Government.

**JD** Right. What about supervision of the regulations affecting the industry and the penalties involved?

**PAVLOVICH** The penalties can be very, very harsh. For instance, a very close friend of mine, Burt Pochetti, two years ago - on the 13th April, not last year but the year before - he was out, actually on the borderline of the northern prawn fishery borderline off Weipa, and he was spotted by an aerial surveillance plane, because that's the time they bring the planes out and make sure nobody's breaking the law catching some bananas outside the area before the season opens. And that boat was ordered into port and all the gear was ordered off the bloody boat. Bert spent, I think about eighteen months, in and out of court. He spent close to \$100,000 of his own bloody money, and I believe, speaking to Bert a week ago, he won the case in the Brisbane Supreme Court a couple of weeks ago, a week and a half ago, and he's still \$100,000 out of pocket. But the point is, they have the authority to confiscate that licence or confiscate.... not confiscate the boat, tie the boat up, for up to three years and also confiscate the licence for good. So the rules are very, very strict.

The rules actually in the crayfishing industry are more stricter, they don't much around there. But in the prawning industry they are getting stricter now, because they know if more boats break the rule, - you know we've got a problem now with stocks, you've got to be very, very careful of stocks - but the rules are very, very severe.

**JD** Thank you. What about the role of women in the industry?

**PAVLOVICH** Women? I think they do a very, very good job. For a start they keep the place clean, or I say 95% of them. Some are quite dirty [laughs]. But 95% of the woman are very, very clean; they keep the place clean, there's a feminine look about the place, and also when it's sorting prawns on a conveyor belt they do it three times as fast as any male. They are very good in the processing area. They do the cooking, and from time to time one of the smarter ones, after three or four years, they get a Mate's ticket, they act as the Mate on the boat and eventually, I would say in my 30 years in the fishing industry and the prawning industry, I think about 12 women have



actually got their Skipper's ticket. We used to have one woman that.... one woman skipper that worked for us, skippered a boat for three years, and did exceptionally well. So the women in the industry; I think it's a very, very good idea.

**JD** Thank you. Talking about the economics of the industry. You've mentioned things like the costs of boats and equipment and so on, and licences. Is there a reasonable return currently on the investment - the enormous investment in fact?

**PAVLOVICH** Yes. At the present moment it all depends how much money you owe. It depends on your debt/equity ratio. But if you were a private individual and you owed no money to the bank, and you skippered the boat, and you engineered the boat and repaired the boat yourself, you can still - even with today's economics - you can still make a reasonable living. With big companies it all depends how much money you owe. If the company owes nothing it's going to show a big profit. If the company owes a lot of money it's going to show a loss. It's like every other business here.

**JD** Yes. Your company, of course, would be doing its own maintenance and service I imagine?

**PAVLOVICH** We do all our own maintenance. We've got a very large staff of engineers and people in the field. We've got a base in Darwin, a base in Karumba, and also we've got a base in Townsville, so we do everything 'in house', but you know we do use a lot of contractors. But we do all the supervision, etcetera, etcetera, internally.

**JD** Comparing.... looking at the whole industry, the whole prawning industry, would you know off-hand about how many boats are involved all over Australia?

**PAVLOVICH** I know how many exactly to the northern prawn fishery, it's 225. I would say in total Australia it would run well over 2,000 - well over. Some of those boats are very, very small and some are quite reasonably sized. Over 2,000!

**JD** Could we have a look at crew? You mentioned, when you were talking about the role of women, that people can get their various tickets and become Mates or Skipper. Is there a recognised training arrangement?

**PAVLOVICH** There are training colleges throughout Australia - fisheries colleges in Fremantle, Hobart, Darwin, and another one in Brisbane, but that is for the young kids that leave school and don't know what they want to do and eventually somebody steers them towards that college. We get a lot of people from there and eventually, you know, like 50% of those - the survival rate would be about 50%, and of that 50% I would say 25% make the grade and make either a Mate job or a Skipper job eventually. That's on the Skipper's side, or the officer side. But on the engineering side, we have an 'in-house', our own New Fishing 'in house' training, etcetera, etcetera. Some of those people still go through that college but we put them on a boat with a good engineer. We've got our rules and regulations; you know, we've got manuals, etcetera, etcetera, and we put them out with a good engineer and they spend six months there to get their sea time. But usually the people we pick for the engineering, we don't pick people other than a trade - like an electrician, a fitter and turner, motor mechanic or electronics technician, because those people are trained for four or five years and they quickly adapt to the engineering on the boats. And also, too, at the present moment I would say we would have 80% of our engineers in our entire fleet originally from that trainee scheme.

**JD** And how long would a typical voyage be? Say from Fremantle back to Fremantle?

**PAVLOVICH** Well that's a.... Years ago, before the closures, it used to be twelve months. You'd leave here on the 1st February and you'd come back on the 1st December. It used to be a 12 months fishery. At the present moment it's a little bit more difficult because you've got a six month fishery broken up into two areas, like 15th April to the 22nd June, that's one working operation. Then you have a closure from the 22nd June to the 1st August; then you start fishing again from the 1st August to the 1st December. So theoretically the crews would work for six months of the year; but they work for two months, have six weeks off, then they work for four and a half months, or four months. So they are working six months of the year. Where before, I know of many, many people who used to leave Fremantle and arrive back in Fremantle twelve months later and never ever get off the boat. But at the present moment....

Years ago there were no motherships in the Gulf of Carpentaria, so if a boat went out his range was thirty days. While he'd go out for thirty days and come back to either port in the Gulf of Carpentaria to get fuel. But now, those boats never come into port. We have got our own mother ship - a 55 metre ex oil rig supply boat, that takes fuel, stores, everything out. So theoretically those boats go out for two months, come back to Darwin or Karumba or somewhere, and they go out again and they never come back for four months later. [Laughs]. So really it's a long time.

**JD** That is the end of Side A of Tape 1 of this interview. Please turn the tape over for Side B.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** This is Side B of Tape 1 of this interview with Mr Sam Pavlovich.

Sam, talking about crew and their leave; what's the situation when they go on leave? Where do they go?

**PAVLOVICH** Oh, it depends where they come from. We get people from all around Australia, you know. The boats on tie-up or end of year tie-up - which we call refit time - they come into three places: they go to Townsville, Karumba or Darwin. They come in there for two or three days. They square the boat away.... unload the boat for a start; they square away, clean away, wash it up and then we park it in the pens ready for refits, etcetera and that's when they go on their holidays. Some people decide from Darwin to go overseas to Bali or to Bangkok, etcetera. Some want to go home to Sydney. But actually they come from everywhere. There's people.... we've got people all around Australia. Sometime, occasionally, you might get a person who actually lives in New Zealand, so he'll fly from Darwin, or from Townsville, to New Zealand. So.... you know!

**JD** Are there any problems with industrial relationships between the crews and the management, say?

**PAVLOVICH** Not really. No, not really.

**JD** How are they paid? Is it a wage, or a share?

**PAVLOVICH** They are paid on a share of the catch. Usually it works out about between 20 and 22 per cent of the gross sale price of the prawns, or the fish, or

whatever it is. So they get paid.... how will I put it? If they catch nothing they get nothing. But nobody ever catches nothing, they all make reasonable money.

**JD** Yes. Are women readily accepted among the men on board?

**PAVLOVICH** Yes they are. One comment I'd like to say there, I'm always happy when I hear of a new girl recruit on a boat. If she's with a boyfriend, or she falls in love with somebody and she becomes a partner of somebody on the boat, because.... (how would I put it?).... it causes less friction. Instead of, let's say, five males or six males saying, "Gee, isn't she nice! I'd like to do so and so, and so and so"; I try and encourage girls to try and fall in love with somebody at least, you know. Everybody else accepts it better when they are in a paired relationship.

**JD** Right, well turning from that sort of happy occurrence, Sam, what about accidents?

**PAVLOVICH** You occasionally have a few accidents. We would be the only company in Australia who go to the extreme and the cost to put out proper brochures. We put out a what we call a New Fishing Australia 'Bible'. It's a manual, it's.... you know, the rules and regulations [are] in that. Also we try and explain to the people what to do, what not to do. For instance, we had a professional cartoonist last year [who] did all the drawings. You don't walk into a walk into a block and split your head open; you don't put your fingers through the trawl wires. But, you know, regardless of how much you try and encourage people to be careful, people still make funny mistakes; because you must realise that these people....

Years ago you fished 24 hours a day, but now because of the declining stocks we've got a thing called 'daylight saving'. You only work in the evening; you work in the evening from 6pm in the evening to 8 o'clock in the morning. That's on the second half. On the first half you can work 24 hours a day because the first half is the banana fishing. But getting back to the second half, the people work at night times so it's very easy if you have three hour trawls it might take 1 1/2 hours to clean up and pack and put everything into the freezer of that shot, and then you've got 1 1/2 hours spare. A lot of people just have a little doze and when they wake up ready for the next shot, if they're not fully awake, it's very easy to have an accident. But overall we are very lucky. We occasionally have a serious one like a finger - we've never had an arm or a leg or head come off, but we always had two or three fingers or a broken toe or something, you know. So it's not too bad really.

**JD** You mentioned the loss of one vessel in a cyclone.

**PAVLOVICH** Yes.

**JD** Have you lost other vessels?

**PAVLOVICH** No, we haven't. No. In 19.... oh Jesus! In 1982.... '82/'83, whilst we were in Townsville there was a cyclone. I think it was called 'Sandy' - Cyclone Sandy. One of those. It wasn't Tracy, that was in Darwin. About two weeks prior to the opening of 15th April, we had 20 boats... (I thought it was 22, I checked that), it was 20 boats anchored - not anchored, they were looking for prawns, round the Vanlin Island area. As the cyclone approached we decided to get all the boats to anchor up with double anchors, etc, in the Vanlin area. Believe it or not, that cyclone went straight through them. At that particular time I was looking after all insurance matters and that insurance bill came to \$4 1/2 million damages. In that cyclone we lost the **Lindeman**, one crew - I still believe it was the skipper, but the boys tell me, yes, it was one of the crew - got lost in that cyclone; and I think about 9 or 10 boats

grounded but we got most of them off. Two we had to bring a barge in with bulldozers to drag 'em off.

**JD** Do weather conditions interfere with your operations much?

**PAVLOVICH** Yes, it does. We can fish up to about 40 knots comfortably - not comfortably, a bit uncomfortably, [laughs], but we do. When I first started fishing say 30 years ago but prawning say 25 years ago.... no, it wasn't that! 27 years ago! In anything over 10 knots you'd go to anchor because those days you didn't have a radar, didn't have a GPS, didn't have anything, but nowadays the boats are bigger, they're made of steel, they don't leak, they've got all the navigation aids in the world and thick windows, and you can work comfortably up to 30 knots, uncomfortably up to 40, anything over 40 you try and.... you can't run for shelter because you might be 60 miles off the coast and you ride it out until the morning or when the weather calms down and you start fishing again. Also, it does upset the nets. The nets don't operate, don't fish the fish in rough conditions. They bounce on the bottom too much.

**JD** What about the depletion of stock?

**PAVLOVICH** Depletion of stocks is a fact and we are doing a lot about it. For instance, I'll give you an example. About 5 years ago there would have been 400 boats working in the Gulf of Carpentaria.... sorry! The Gulf of Carpentaria or, i.e., the northern prawn fishery - which I explained earlier - from Cape York down to say Derby. 400 boats! And we were getting concerned about declining stocks. As I said earlier, all those committees got together and got to Normac and we discussed it with government and it was decided - I think we were one of the main instigators of this, with John Stratton and Mr Murray Franncce.

In those days a boat was a boat and to operate a boat you had a little bit of paper. Things changed. We got what they called a units - the length of the boat, the depth of the boat, the breadth of the boat, the horsepower, etc, etc, all calculated through a computer.... not computer! a calculator, and i.e. it came out in units. So all of a sudden you didn't have a bit of paper.... one bit of paper, that this boat is sailable, etc; you had a bit of paper stating that your boat held 555 A Class units and 1 B Class unit.

So at that stage we knew we had a problem, so what we did, we got together and we said, "We have to reduce effort." So to reduce effort, okay that's very simple, go and sell half the boat, who's going to buy it? So we decided to create a thing called.... a body called 'buy back body', buy back system. But to fund that it was decided every A Class unit - you had 555 or whatever you had on your boat - you have to pay a levy. Now that levy, I think, is \$45 per year per unit. By the way, with New Fishing Australia with 28 vessels, we pay \$800,000 a year levies to the buy back system. What that does, it creates a bank account with the buy back system. It was decided also that the government would contribute one dollar for one dollar, so theoretically if the buy back system, as we say \$800,000, it doesn't take long to get three or four million dollars. If the buy back had three or four million dollars the government would pay three or four million dollars, and what that did, that enabled the buy back system to buy boats and.... not buying boats really, but buying effort, and that's the way to reduce effort. With reduced effort we believe we get increased stocks because a prawn only lives from 12 to 15 months.

Okay. Then it was decided a time factor - a time factor, a time span. It was decided that by 1993 there should be, or there will be, a 40% reduction. Speaking to Mr Graham Stewart, the Chairman of the body, a couple of weeks ago he showed me the

graph. We are under budget on that graph, on the projection; but theoretically it's not enough. So at the present moment all the major companies are trying to push through a new idea, or new law, of 50% reduction by the 15th March next year. I don't personally think it's going to happen. I think it will happen in a couple of years. But, you know, leaving the government idea - or our own idea - for the 40% reduction by 1993, it's a bit too slow. That has to be speeded up.

**JD** What about competition for markets from overseas people?

**PAVLOVICH** Yes, that's a bit of a problem. The problem is the prawn farming in South-East Asia is just, you know it's hope[less].... you can't believe it. For instance, I'll give you an example. China last year produced 120,000 tonne, Thailand produced 200,000 tonne, and before you know it there's going to be 1,000,000 tonnes produced overseas. What it really does, it causes us a few headaches because we catch our prawns in the wild. They produce them in farms. We used to get - as I said earlier - \$27 for our large tigers; at the present moment you'd be battling to get \$22, for those big ones. Because what really happens, in Japan (I mean everyone in Japan is not a multi-millionaire as we think they are) there are some poor people - poorer than we've got here. When the local housewife goes down the shop and she sees prawns, farm prawns for say, for example let's say \$15 a kilo, and she sees the wild prawns for 40 bucks a kilo, what does she buy? Automatically she buys the bloody \$15 a kilo stuff.

So we have got a real problem with the competition but I believe, and so do my other partners and most of the people you talk to, nature will take it's course. For instance in Taiwan last year they produced, say, I think it was 120,000 tonne.... no, sorry! the year before last. Last year they produced something like 10,000 tonnes. They had a problem. Whether that problem was diseases, I don't exactly know the extent of the problem, but all I know is one thing - because of their expensive labour they are now stopping prawn farming and going into eel farming because eel farming is more profitable. And I think you'll find these other problems involved here also. Like last year in Thailand everybody all of a sudden stopped growing rice, they got little prawn farms going. That's all okay 3 or 4 years ago, but at the present moment the price.... the food price, has gone up say, for example, from \$100 a tonne to say over \$1,000 a tonne, and the people just can't afford that.

OK. With the prawn farming, as I said earlier, that is our biggest problem. For instance, say two or three years ago, it used to take 6 kilos of prawn pellet or prawn feed per 1 kilo of prawns. They've got that down to 2 kilos of feed per 1 kilo of prawn because some of those people are turning out three crops a year of little prawns, but it takes a year to try and get a reasonable size. And also, by the way, in those pellets or the feed they feed those prawns, there's 28 different components that make up the feed. You know, it's not just chicken feed, it's a very sophisticated food and also they've got medicines, etc, etc in that product to look after the prawns.

**JD** Thank you. What about the question of research; is enough research being done and if not, who should be doing it?

**PAVLOVICH** I believe enough research is being done at the present moment because the best scientists and the best research people are actual fishermen, the company owners, etc., etc., and the bank managers - they know what's going on, so I don't think any more research is required. But everybody knows - as I said earlier - there's got to be a reduction in effort.

To give you an example on that. About 9 years ago the prawn grounds in Exmouth Gulf, and I happened to be one of the first original to go there, those days we used to

catch three or four thousand POUND [lb] in those days, and in about 9 years it got down to zero. The stocks were absolutely nothing. So what the government did.... (well, the fishermen didn't like it, they were going broke anyhow) they closed it for 18 months; and when they opened it up after 18 months it was one of the best seasons they've ever had. So that proves out point - if you reduce effort, but maybe a bit quicker, stocks will double or treble or go back where they used to be 20 years ago.

**JD** Thank you. Just before we finish, is there anything else you'd like to have recorded on this interview?

**PAVLOVICH** Yes. I was only thinking about it yesterday, and one thing I'd like to say. My funniest thing that ever happened to me in my life.... not my life, but in the fishing industry of 30 years. I was working for Sam Souza at the time. I know Vince Lombardo (deceased) is going to kill me over this; I know all the Lombardos and Mick Guard are going to kill me, but anyhow - here goes!

We were.... oh, 28/29 years ago, we'd just finished the crayfish season about the middle of May and we were the top crayfishing boat, was Sam Souza for 3 years while I was on that boat. One particular year we caught 3,333 cartons of prawns. A lot of money! I think I made 17,000 pounds that year, my own share.

**JD** Prawns or crayfish?

**PAVLOVICH** Crayfish. In the days of crayfish. Anyhow, we came back to Fremantle, we got the boat ready, went to.... we were going to Shark Bay. On the way to Shark Bay we had to pull in to Geraldton to fix up a refrigeration problem; those days you didn't call a local garage, you did it yourself. If you didn't like it, get off and get somebody else on the boat. And while we were in there there was a boat called **Carmella** tied up to the jetty, anyhow I knew everybody on board and later on when I did my job I went to the pub and met everybody. And old man Lombardo, who they always called.... his nickname was 'Bullshit' Lombardo, there's nothing wrong about that [laughs], a very, very dear old fellow, and he said, "Don't worry, boys, you can leave tomorrow but I'm going to catch more bloody schnapper than you."

Anyhow, next morning or that afternoon we took off. With Sam Souza, no joking, you worked and that was it. [We] went to Carnarvon, we filled up the boat - those days 50,000 pounds [lbs] or 25 tonne, it was a big boat. We came all the way back to Geraldton, unloaded the boat, spent about a day and a half there. Lombardo was still there; Mr Lombardo. He said, "Don't worry, still going to catch more than you people!" So next day, off we go again; went all the way to Carnarvon (this takes about 36 hours to get to Carnarvon). We filled up again, and we came all the way back to Geraldton and you wouldn't believe it! Mr Lombardo was just sailing out the heads. Anyhow we said, "Hello!" He said, "I'm still going to catch more than you people." [Laughs]. Jesus Christ! You couldn't stop laughing.

[We] unloaded the boat, we went straight back - this had given us more determination, you're not going to beat us. Went all the way back to Carnarvon, we filled up, we came all the way back to Fremantle, and Mr Lombardo came to Fremantle with half a load. So theoretically, instead of bullshitting around he should have been catching bloody crays.... [correction] catching schnapper. [Laughter]. Oh, it was funny!

**JD** Right. Well look thank you very much, it's been a most interesting interview with you, Sam.

**PAVLOVICH** I'm sure there could be a lot more but, you know I just sort of.... I was going to put all dates down. Would you like coffee now? How do you have it, anyhow?

**JD** Black, thanks.

**PAVLOVICH** Black!

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Sam Pavlovich, recorded by Jack Darcey on the 15th November 1989.

END OF RECORDING

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with ADELAIDE JANE RENFREY

### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**HS** This is an interview with Adelaide Jane Renfrey (nee McCaskie) for the Australian Fishing Industry Oral History project. The interview was conducted at her home in Mary Street, Mandurah, on the 8th December 1989.

Adelaide grew up in Fremantle and later when working at Cottesloe met Lionel Renfrey, a commercial fisher from Mandurah. Apart from the first few months she spent the whole of her married life in Mandurah. She has three children, one boy and two girls, and has been involved with her husband in various aspects of his fishing.

Adelaide, could you tell me your full name and when and where you were born?

**RENFREY** Well, my name is Adelaide Jane Renfrey, I was born in South Australia in a little town called Rosewater in Port Adelaide. My parents came.... he worked in Elder Smith's in South Australia. My grandfather on my mother's side, he was former Manager of Elder Smith's over there. Anyway, my dad came over here in early 1918 and my mother followed him with my brothers and sisters - there were seven of us then. I was the second youngest of the family at that time.

We came to Western Australia where we lived in Fremantle for a number of years, and more children came [laughs]. I have four brothers and seven sisters. There were seven of us born in South Australia and the rest have been born here. We grew up in Fremantle; went to school in Fremantle; and we went to the primary school in South Fremantle and secondary school there. And then we graduated from there and went to Princess May and Fremantle Boys' School. And then we gradually got old enough to go to work.

The boys all worked in Elder Smith's until the Depression. I don't remember much about the Depression, I was too young. They went up north shearing. My dad was foreman at Elder Smith's and he worked there for.... oh, until he retired (I can't think of the dates), he was 73 anyway when he retired and we went to live in Mosman Park.

We girls all worked in Fremantle and gradually I went to Cottesloe and worked. I was working there when I met Blue, and we got married and lived in Alexander Road in East Fremantle. Only there for about three or four months and we came to Mandurah. As I said, I didn't like Mandurah, I thought it was.... my expression was, "God made the world and Mandurah was the last place that he made." [Laughs]. But as you get old (because I was young), but as you get older you get acclimatized to a place and the people, and I think it's the people that makes a place. They welcome you and they were very kind to me, anyway.



I used to walk a lot because we didn't have a vehicle, and the beach wasn't too far away so I could walk to the beach. I used to go fishing - not commercially, just for the fun of it. I remember the first time I went I went with Blue and his brother Cyril out to the ocean, and just outside of the bar. They were going down towards Robert Point and I saw some fish, and they jumped out of the boat into the dinghy they fish out of, and left me sitting in this boat. I was petrified because of the seas that were coming. But anyway I got over that and I was quite interested in seeing the fishing done because I'd never seen net fishing done before. They were there for hours and they caught.... I think they were big sea mullet. I enjoyed it!

And then when we came home they went up the Estuary fishing so I choofed off with them and, lo and behold, I was seasick. [Laughs]. It was terrible! I'd never been seasick in my life and I don't think I wanted to go in the boat ever again. But I did, and enjoyed it. But I didn't like getting into the water because there were too many things in the river, like cobblers - I was petrified.

The children came and my eldest daughter - we used to take her everywhere with us. I used to cart the baby's pram and put it in the boat and go up fishing. And then we used to go prawning down at the bar. That was fabulous. I remember prawning one night and dipping the net and I lost the net - it just went choofing off. The tide had turned and it took the prawn net up towards the bridge; and I thought, oh dear, what am I going to do. When the tide turned in about an hour or two hour's time, lo and behold this net came fishing along and I picked it up out of the water. [Laughs]. All sorts of things happen when you're fishing. Well, to me it did.

Then my son was born and he loved fishing and from the time he was about two years old he said he was going to be a fisherman and he never changed his mind - he's been fishing ever since. He used to go with Blue and Cyrie, every opportunity he had he went with the boys fishing until he had to go to school. Of course he couldn't [go fishing] - only the weekends, in which they didn't fish in the weekends. Holidays and that they used to go off - they used to go out to sea with them, down as far as Bunbury and back again.

I used to stay home, but Blue had an accident - he hurt his back - and I had to look after the children, and he's one of these people he doesn't like to stay still and decided he'd still go fishing. Of course my son was too young to go, he had to go to school. So brave me, I decided I'd go and help him, and so he went night fishing. And I'd never been out night fishing before and I thought, oh, you'd just have to get on the boat, you know, and off you go. But I got up the Estuary and he said, "Well now, what you have to do is to get overboard and hold the end of the net." And he rowed the boat around. You have no idea the panic I was in. I didn't know what to do; I kept on thinking of the cobblers and what I'd do if a cobbler came and stung me. Anyway, I managed and I fished for him for about three months - only at night. I didn't go out in the day because I couldn't leave the children. And I've never been fishing again and I never want to.

But I have been prawning. We had a little creek down the back at the bottom here and the prawns were very good one year and I had a neighbour, an old Mr and Mrs Heath that used to live just up the corner, they used to go. She was a dear old thing, she must have been in her eighties when I knew her. But her and her friend used to go, and we used to go dragging the net in the pool and it was quite fun. But it's like everything else - everybody wants to be in it and by the time we finished prawning there must have been about 10 or 12 people dragging these nets. And you had to

go.... [indicating] round like that, there, turn around and come back, so that you were first out and you'd be last to come back again. But it was enjoyable.

And I've helped pack fish. Hours and hours of packing fish and things like that. What else did I do?

Oh, during the war Blue went away to the war and I had to stay here with the children and we used to have to walk to Mandurah for everything we wanted, and I only used to go once a week because it was too far to drag the children. We ran all sorts of things for Red Cross, and Auxiliary and Country Women. I remember once we had a.... what do you call it? We ran a....

**HS** Fete?

**RENFREY** Fete, yes a fete. And a baby competition, and there was only about three or four small babies then, and we all entered our babies into this competition. And we ran all sorts of things to raise money for the Red Cross. I remember running a bicycle race - had lots of help, and I don't think Mandurah has seen so many bicycles in the main road ever. But we tried to do our best for the Red Cross to help with the war effort.

There wasn't much going in Mandurah then, they had a couple of dance halls but they used to have a dance once a week and each society had a Friday night dance and they took it in turns in having it. At the dance they had tables of euchre and bridge. There was football to go to, cricket to go to, tennis to play; I think you find that in every small town you go to, they had their own way of doing things.

**HS** Just taking you back. The creek you mentioned earlier, what was the name of that creek?

**RENFREY** Well, it didn't have a name. We used to call it Renfrey's Creek because when we came.... when Blue bought this land, he wanted somewhere he could bring his boat to that was safe, and he cleared the creek out of dead trees and whatever so he could bring his boat in and anchor it. And my children called it the Renfrey's swimming pool because that was where they used to swim and where they learnt to swim. And we had friends from the country and they wouldn't take their children swimming in Mandurah - they used to bring them all over here to Renfrey's pool and all the children learnt to swim there.

**HS** So how far away is the creek to your house here in Mary Street?

**RENFREY** Well it's just.... oh, I don't know how long - not very far, just across the road and down towards the.... oh, down the road....

**HS** A few hundred metres?

**RENFREY** Yes, about that. Or it might be more, I don't know. But Blue used to bring his fishing boat in and he used to sell his catch sometimes there. He used to go out fishing and get snapper and things. But all the children loved it because it was free and easy. There was only the three of us living here then and we were the first one to build here in Mary Street, the the Heaths had a cottage up the corner. Then we had a dear old lady came and built two doors up from us and there she stayed. She was like a second mother and she looked after my children if I had to go out anywhere.

As I say, we had lots of fun. I remember once on a New Year's day.... New Year's night - New Year's eve night - we decided to have some friends over and Blue went over and picked them all up in the boat and brought them and we enjoyed ourselves. And then about three o'clock in the morning decided to take them home. After all these years that Blue Renfrey had been fishing in this place we got stuck on a sandbank [laughs] and everybody had to get overboard and push the boat off, but we enjoyed it and had lots of fun. The people that we ferried over, they thought it was hilarious. But you have to make your own fun in a country town otherwise you wouldn't have any.

I remember during the war when we had Red Cross and Blue had just come home on leave, and I had a picnic gathering up what we used to call the 'Old Chimneys'. And we had.... the fishermen got me some mullet and we dug trenches and we grilled the mullet in these trenches. [We] had sports for the children, had a wonderful time - the kids enjoyed it - I was there all day running races for them and things like that. They had swimming.

And then we had a Christmas tree for the children and we got Father Christmas to come in the boat, had lots of fun there. That's was the early parts when my children were very small. And then when the children went to school we had Parent and Citizens - had all sorts of fun for them, and Blue had just bought a truck and took Father Christmas on the back of the truck and he went around Mandurah and ended up at the school. Children enjoy those things, especially young children, they think it's wonderful. I don't know whether they do it still because I haven't had anything to do with the younger children around Mandurah, but when my children were little we had all sorts of things.

My son played football - he was a wonderful footballer - he played A Grade football when he was 12 years old. He won quite a lot of trophies and he (when he was a little bit older, about 14 or 15) won what they call the "Times Trophy", the **Sunday Times** trophy. A lot of them did, but we were thrilled about it and he loved sport of any description. I remember once when he was 5 years old - just turned 5 - he was at school and he was running in the athletics and the night before he ran around without shoes and he kicked his toe and took the top of his big toe off. But nothing you could do to stop him from running in that race, and with his toe all bandaged up he managed to come in first. [Laughs]. So I think he'd got used to injuries and so he never used to take any notice. [He] played when his ankle were bad. They played cricket.

**HS** What was his name?

**RENFREY** Alexander. We called him.... people called him Rusty; that's not his name. Blue named him that when he came home from war, he was only two.... [correction] three, and he called him Rusty. I don't know where he got Rusty from because he didn't have red hair or anything, he just had blonde hair, curls. And my eldest daughter.... three, [correction] five - going on for five, and he called her Smokey. Now where he got Smokey from I couldn't tell you, but there.... That's when he came home from the Islands.

**HS** And where did he get 'Blue' from?

**RENFREY** Well, he was ginger haired, wasn't he? [Laughs]. He's a redhead. And he's never been called anything else, though the older people in Mandurah always called him Lionel (or Lioney) but we knew him as Blue and it just stuck and everybody calls him Blue.

**HS** When you first met him was he Blue?

**RENFREY** Mmm mmm. Blue. To anybody, you know.... we knew him as Blue. But his family and his people, the old people in Mandurah, called him Lionel. They do to this day, though there's not many of them left.

**HS** Did you say you first met him in Cottesloe?

**RENFREY** No, I met him in Mandurah. I came down here when I was ill and I had to recuperate and I met him one day. Actually I think I was going home, or we were shopping or something, I forget quite. But I was sitting on the back of the truck and this chap came up - my brothers all knew him - and they had a big camp where.... oh, where is it? Where Lanes motor people are. It was a big reserve there and they had a great big tent up there. And that's how I met him. I don't know whether to say unfortunately or fortunately. [Laughter].

**HS** So did you go home, or did you stay?

**RENFREY** I stayed for another week and then I went home; because he knew my family and used to go to Perth and stayed with them, and well things went from there to this. [Laughs].

**HS** And what was your father's name?

**RENFREY** Thomas McCaskie.

**HS** McCaskie! And how did the Renfreys know the McCaskies?

**RENFREY** Well I think they used to.... the boys used to come down fishing - Easter time they used to come down; I think that's where they met him, and he used to take them fishing because Blue was a very kind and generous person; he used to take anybody that wanted to go fishing. And he'd take them up the estuary and take them fishing, show them how to net fish, which people from the city loved doing because they had never seen it before and never done it.

He has a lot of friends that he had made friends when they came down here. I couldn't tell you who they are because I never met them. And his father was a fisherman, he was a big.... He used to ride bicycles in Coolgardie, he was a champion rider. He had a sailing boat and I think his boat won the championships one year, but a good many years ago because it was before they had a sailing club down here. They all played tennis - did all sorts of things.

We used to run things, like go to dances. As I said, I didn't know anybody but I had to get used to everybody. I wasn't a very good social person - I didn't join in very much, I was always too shy (you wouldn't think so now!) but then I was. And then they had a RSL here, they formed a RSL, and Blue joined and I didn't join anything because I had young children and I didn't believe in going to meetings with young children because they distract people when they are having meetings.

But when my youngest daughter was eight I joined the Women's Auxilliary and we used to run dance evenings on a Friday night which was called the 'Over Forties' and nobody under forty was allowed to go. Of course I was younger and everybody else was over forty. And I remember we decided to go to the 'forties'; and I said, "Well, I can't go!" "Oh, yes you can, we can pretend you're forty." So we went, and went up to

the Ravenswood first and then we came back to Mandurah and all going in to the dance; and there was a dear old lady - a Mrs Fraser - and she's on the door, and I walked in with Blue and my friends and she said, "You can't go in." "Oh yes I can, I'm forty!" She said, "No, you're not. You can't tell me that", and she wouldn't let me in. So I had to stay outside in the foyer of the dance hall all night while everybody else was enjoying themselves and I didn't think it was right. But anyway later on I joined the company - the Over Forty Company - and I was STILL under forty. And I always used to bring this up to this dear old lady and she said, "You couldn't trick me because I knew how old you were." [Laughs]. I don't know how she knew, but there you are.

But we did have lots of fun at 'Over Forties'. They practised for four weeks and on the Friday night of the fourth week we had a concert - had an item, and a dance, and an item. It was the most wonderful thing. They did it for charity - all the monies that they earned went to different charities - the Guide Dogs for the Blind started up and we did that. RSL men's, we did that. Anybody that wanted a charity, did that. We helped the Auxiliary in Perth with donations. They ran - in conjunction with the RSL - they started up swimming carnivals and they donated trophies for the children; Pinjarra, Fairbridge, all competed, Waroona. They started a swim through Mandurah. All these things happened just after the war I should imagine, because our children were able to go into all these things so it must have been just after the war.

**HS** So how many children do you have?

**RENFREY** Three. Two girls and a boy.

**HS** Right. You've mentioned one boy and one girl; the other girl, what does she do?

**RENFREY** At the moment she's manageress of a boutique in Garden City. But they all went to school in Mandurah. Unfortunately when they came to the working age there wasn't much in the line of work in Mandurah, so my eldest daughter couldn't get ANY work here though she was a shorthand typist, she couldn't get anything here in Mandurah, so she had to go to town. Fortunately I had sisters up there which took her until she got independent and then she went off on her own. But she's quite competent, done lots of things.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**HS** Adelaide Renfrey Tape, Side 2.

**RENFREY** Now where was I up to?

**HS** We were talking about your youngest daughter.

**RENFREY** Well, [they] went to school in Mandurah. One of them went on to High School at Pinjarra; she was a basketball player and also hockey player. Did very well in both. She left school when she was sixteen because she didn't want to carry on any longer and she got a position in a small dress shop, what they call.... somebody from Bunbury, I forget the name. And then she went from there to Rondelle's - Shirley Anderson started up.... bought the other people out and started up her own boutique - and Jane stayed there until she married, and after she married her husband was transferred to Perth. He worked for the Commonwealth Bank - he's an accountant -

and got transferred to Perth. And then she worked for Irene Whyte, and now she's manageress of this boutique in Garden City. Some new people have taken over. .... I think it's Rothwells, I'm not sure, and she's manageress of that. She's enjoying her work.

She has two children, they go to.... both are in Willetton High School, Senior High School, at the moment. It's a wonderful complex there, all the schools from playgroup, pre-school, primary and then on to senior high school, it's all in the one complex. It's absolutely marvellous. They have all sorts of things and she has two children - two girls - and they're doing alright. They both play in the school band, one is a clarinet player and the other one's a flutist [sic - flautist].... if that's what they call it; and they're both enjoying it. They go horse riding and they play hockey - because their mother and father are both hockey players - not so much now they've got older but Graham played hockey in Perth, Fremantle, I forget. He played at Harvey, Jane played down here, but she hasn't got time to play hockey any more. But the girls have taken it on and they've done all sorts of things. They go riding, horse riding, and they play hockey. At the moment they are playing indoor hockey, I've never heard of it before but that's what they're doing, and enjoying it. Graham's a great.... or used to be a great squash player. He encourages his girls to get into sport, as much sport as they can, and they like it, and I think that's the main thing with children - as long as they like a thing they'll get going into it and excel themselves. I don't think there's much else I can say, is there?

**HS** Do any of your grandchildren.... or, have any of your grandchildren been involved in fishing, or do they like fishing?

**RENFREY** Yes, my son is a fisherman. He fishes with his father. From the time he was two years old he declared that he was going to be a fisherman and he's never changed his mind. People tried to get him to change his mind, but he hasn't. Had a friend that lived in Beaconsfield and they came down here when he was two and they said to him, "What are you going to do when you grow up?" and he said, "I'm going to be a fisherman"; and they were highly tickled because they'd known Blue all his life and they thought it was.... Well, when you are two years old you'll probably change your mind about four or five times by the time you get up to the working class, but he never did. He likes his fishing. But he's getting on in years too, so he'll probably have to retire before long [laughs]. But if he's like his father he'll never retire, he keeps on going and going.

His wife doesn't go fishing but she would if she had to, but she's a hairdresser, and he's got three children - two boys and a girl. Neither of the two boys are keen on fishing; I think it's because in fishing you have to be prepared to go out all weathers and fish all night if you have to, and I don't think they like going out in the cold in the winter when it's raining and things like that. The girl is still going to school, she's in her twelfth year, is it? Or ten year? I'm not quite used to these 'years'. It used to be 1, 2 and 3 years once, but now.... I think she's finished her.... she's going in to her twelfth year. I think she goes into twelve next year. She doesn't know what she's going to be or what she wants to be. She never tells anybody. She's one of these little girls that doesn't give any information; [laughs] - she just surprises you. She's not sport minded like her father, and the boys were - oh, one of the boys were, the youngest boy, he liked cricket and football but he's getting older and he doesn't.... it interferes with his social life too much [laughs] so he's given up. He'll come back to it, I'm sure he will. He was a good footballer - and a good cricketer.

Rus still plays cricket, and he's in the - I think they call it - the Veteran Football Association. They have a wow of a time, they go to Perth to play and they go down as

far as Busselton and play. I think it's good for them to be able to keep on playing sport of some description. Their mother doesn't play sport, she's a hairdresser and a very good one. She's still working.

**HS** [Do] any of the other grandchildren show interest in fishing?

**RENFREY** No. See we've only got five grandchildren - three girls and two boys. Well the three girls are still school age and, no, they don't go out fishing. They might like to go down and have a look at the fish when they come in, but they'd be too finicky to pick up fish. [Laughs]. They think they.... especially when they kick, you know, they get frightened. No, they haven't worried about it. Now and again when the boys were growing up they used to go out but they didn't like it. It was too long and too hard.

People think fishing is easy, but it's not. It's hard work and it's continual work. You start any time between 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning. You might be still going at 7 o'clock at night. You have to travel to where the fish are and you have to watch and see where they are before you have a haul. You have a haul, and then they have to come home, and then travel down from the estuary down here - it takes a couple of hours. Then have to come home and clear the nets and pick your fish out. Then they've got to be packed and then taken over to the people who take them. And they've got to be packed there again. Sometimes I've known them to be going at 9 or 10 at night. They must like it or they wouldn't do it, I'm blown if I would. [Laughs].

**HS** So your life is, or has been, organized around fishing?

**RENFREY** Fishing! Ever since I've been married. The wife of a fisherman - I know lots of them that go fishing but I have never wanted to go, only that one time I went. But a lot of them go, they have a boat of their own and they go, and I can't see any sense in it because it's terribly hard. Well, I think it is, put it that way. I might be wrong. But it's continuous work and it's hard work. You have to go out in all weathers - hot weather; cold, wet weather - you don't have a choice actually, you just have to go because that's what they want to do I expect. I don't know, I don't know why people take it on for a living because I think it's too hard.

And there for a while there, just after.... [correction] just before the war, and just after the war, fishing wasn't worth going [into] because they got nothing for their fish. The prices were down and really didn't have anything, it was a battle to keep going because you didn't have enough money to do anything, you just had to live on. .... I know when I - just after the war when Blue came out from the Army - we lived on fish because [we] couldn't afford to get anything else. And sometimes he'd send fish up to town and he wouldn't have enough to pay his freight bill. I mean, there's not many people who had to go through that but I think fishing - well, the world over - would have to do that. I don't know what the deep-sea fishermen do, you know those people in England in the North Sea and things like that; I don't know how they manage, I'd hate to be a wife and have to sit home and wait for them to come.

Because I know it was bad enough when men were fishing out to sea - they'd go away at 3 or 4 o'clock.... [correction] 3 o'clock in the morning, perhaps earlier, and they wouldn't get home until 6 and 7 o'clock at night, and they'd have no fish. And you'd have to just sit home and worry and see if they're alright. You don't know what the weather is going to be like or things like that. Blows come up and things like that.

**HS** So have there been times when either Lionel or yourself have had to do other work to supplement your income?

**RENFREY** No, I've never had to do any work. I've never since I've been married. When I first got married I vowed and declared I was never going to work again, but then that doesn't count housework and things like that. I'm one of these people who think that.... (what would I say?) woman's place is in the home, especially when she's got children. A lot of them go out to work and they put the children into nurseries and have somebody else to look after them. Well I'm not one of those! I felt that my place was there to look after the children, anyway I didn't want to work.

But I always helped Blue if he wanted a hand, I used to go down and help un.... take the fish out of the net and pack. Mostly packing. My daughter-in-law does that too, but she's a hairdresser and she works as a hairdresser. I didn't have a trade, but the girls do now. I stayed home. I did go out prawning, I used to go out in the boat prawning with Blue and enjoyed it, but not for a living - I wouldn't do it for a living. In fact I don't think I'd do anything for a living, even housework! [Laughs]. No, I've never ever wanted to go out to work.

**HS** So there were times when you hadn't sufficient income to pay the bills?

**RENFREY** That's right!

**HS** What did you do then?

**RENFREY** Well, we were very fortunate because Blue is a saving man and we always had a little we could fall back on. Not much, but we could fall back on. And he had an aunt and uncle who had a small store down here, and we could go to. We always got our things from there and we were always able to.... (what will I say?), go over there and get what we want and pay later sort of thing. But we never ever got into debt, we've never been in debt. EVER. Never bought a thing that we couldn't buy or pay for. Never borrowed. I think we perhaps might be the only two people in this world that's independent. [Laughs]. No! We made do. It never affected us, we were happy and our children.... we never let our children go without. They might say they did, but they didn't.

See, when my children were small they never had anybody else here - there were just three small children - until they were about, oh.... Jane was two, or three, and Mrs Heath's daughter came down from the North and she had three little boys, and that was the only six children that was here. But they had a wonderful time; they played together and did all sorts of things. They made their own fun. People don't understand that the fun you make yourself is the fun that you remember more. I don't know what else I can think of.

One time Blue was prawning and I always remember this time because he had his boat anchored at the bar, the mouth of the bar, and during the night a blow came up and, of course, he was on his own and we went down.... The boat was just about sunk down at the mouth of the bar and we had to go down and secure it. I've never been so frightened in my life. You'd see these great big breakers coming, you know, over the sandbanks and washing the boat out further and down into the water. Oh, it was terrible! But you forgot those sort of things. You ask Blue about that, he'll tell you. I can't think of anything else that really mattered much.

**HS** How did you rescue the boat?

**RENFREY** Oh, don't ask me! Well, Blue had a dinghy and he rowed out to the boat. We had to get on board the boat and it was on its side. I don't know whether you've seen the prawning boats when they are all rigged up to go prawning. And the weight



of the arms and fishing gear was pulling it over and the sea was coming into the boat and Blue had to dive over the side of the boat and take a hauling line on to the beach. He left me standing in the boat with all this water coming over, and on its side, and it would go back and forwards like that [indicating motion]. It was a frightening experience. We probably managed. Later on a friend of his came along and he helped him, but we were there about three, four hours trying to rescue this boat. It was full of sand; oh dear, it was terrible. The waves! Uggh! High as this house coming in.

**HS** When was this?

**RENFREY** Oh, this was.... oh, let me think. [Pause]. I think my daughter was about eight, eight then. The kids were all at school. What would that be?... '46, no! '52, '54 or something like that it would be. So we've had our ups and downs, rescues and things like that.

There is one thing that I was thinking about last night. Blue used to go around to Point Robert and they used to fish early evening for herring out there, and we used to (as a family), used to take the kids, they used to play on the beach and things like this. But this one time we went there and they had a haul of fish and got a great big load of fish, and so they decided to take a truck around - he had a big Bedford truck - and get the nets. We hauled the fish and got the load of fish, and they decided instead of taking them around in the boat they'd put the fish in a trailer and we pulled it across the sand on the beach. I can't tell you how far that was, it wasn't very far but it was pretty heavy. And when we got to the.... they had a little hill like that [indicating size] out onto the road, and we had Cyrie's boy and my three (because the little was only tiny, she never got.... we put the little girl into the front of the cab of the car); and the rest of us got around the trailer. Cyrie and I were at the front, hanging on to the bar, one on each side, and the three others (the three children) were at the back, pushing. And we were pulling and they were pushing and all of a sudden we slipped in the sand, and the next thing I knew was the breath leaving my body - the wheels of the trailer had gone over my chest, and Cyrie's leg was caught in the thing.

We were yelling and screaming and Blue just stopped the truck and of course the three kids were yelling and laughing and that, but by the time he stopped the trailer had gone over us. And I can remember the air coming out of my lungs. But I was alright, I only had a broken rib and things like that. But that's one of the things I can remember, and it stayed in my mind, you know. But nothing else happened - we just got up and pulled the trailer up and hooked it on to the back of the car and away we went. Nobody else got hurt but me. I'm the unlucky one of them. [Laughs].

But that's one of the few things that happened to people, you know. They are accidents, they are un-looked for, accidents, you don't expect them to happen. But still, it was alright; nothing happened, nothing really was damaged much, only the agony of a broken rib - that's all! And the funny thing about it was Blue had been attending the doctor's over there, Doctor Webster, and I was in so much agony I had to go and see what was wrong. I went there to see him and he told me I had a broken rib, but he couldn't do anything about it - just had to [do] deep breathing and things like that. Then I had to go back and see him again, and Blue took me over and he was standing outside the surgery and he said to me, "How are you?" and I started to open up; and he said, "I'm not interested in you; I want to know how Bluey is." I thought gee whizz, there's no doubt about him! [Laughs]. He was a wonderful person, but he said that they didn't tape ribs then, you just had to get over it as best you can and have deep breathing and things like that. And it was agony to breath. But that's only one of the things that ever happened to me.

**HS** There were many more, were there?

**RENFREY** Not really. Oh yes, there was one time when Blue hurt his back. I don't know whether you know Fairbridge Farm down there, the Fairbridge people had cottages there, and the way into the creek silts up and you had to push the boat over the bank of sand. It was in the wintertime, in May (May holidays), and Blue crawled home - he'd injured his back - and he crawled home on hands and knees until he got in. And he had to leave the boat there, you see, and my son was only five and he was quite capable of looking after a boat and doing things with it. But it was blowing a gale, as we used to have in May - the wind and that - and he said to his father, "I'll go down and bring the boat in" but it was too rough. And Blue said, "Well, you'd better go down and help him". So I walked down and got into the boat, and we were pushing, and I fell in the boat. I had four days in hospital in that one. But that's the only two things I can remember - you know - that happened. Lots of other things might have happened to the boys and the men, you know, that I don't know anything about. But those were the two things that I KNOW, because they happened to me. But nothing else.

We used to have carnivals here. The speedboats would come down and we used to go down to what we called Scott's Jetties and watch, and my five year old daughter (my eldest daughter was five years), she fell overboard; but she could swim and so we didn't have to worry about her. Little things, you know, you don't think about them.

There was another time we went out in the boat with Bluey in the summertime, the kids were at school. We went up the estuary and didn't get any fish but we anchored and had some lunch and these other fishermen came and had their lunch alongside of us. I'm not very good on a boat and I had to walk along the gunwhale of the boat to get down to where they were having lunch, and I fell overboard. And I had one of those great big floppy hats.... [laughs], and when I came up to the surface I was giggling like anything because I can remember that the hat, as I was going down, flapping like that. That was one of the funniest things. Everybody laughed, anyhow.

**HS** What, flapping up and down?

**RENFREY** Yeah. You know, the water seems to.... it was still on my head but it was flapping like this [indicating movement] - up and down, in the water. Oh, dear! But that's about all I can think of.

**HS** Did you sell fish from the house?

**RENFREY** Mmm, yes. We sold fish from the house. It was, what will I say, a thankless job because you don't have any time for yourself. It used to take me from about 5 o'clock in the morning until 6 or 7 o'clock at night to get my housework done and cook the food and look after the family, because you just get going and somebody would come for fish, and they always used to want to have a bit of a natter and things like that, and you never got any work done. Not that I'm a houseproud person but still I hate having to work after tea at night.

**HS** And how long did this continue, was it over many years?

**RENFREY** Oh yes, many years, until Blue went into the Army. I don't think we did it much after that. He does have fish, but if people want fish they have to let him know and he'll keep them for them. But he never keeps any fish in the house, you know, for

sale. Because we always have fish for ourselves, but not for sale. So that was one good thing the Army did, we didn't have to have any fish.

My parents used to come down for holidays and they used to love coming down. My dad used to LOVE it and he used to love going out to sea, and my brother-in-law. I think they used to come down just mainly to go fishing in the boat. Dad used to like line fishing but he never used to do much when they came down because they were out in the boat all the time.

**HS** So did you sell the fish for income or did you sell it for social....?

**RENFREY** No, income.

**HS** To supplement the fish that was packed for the Co-Op?

**RENFREY** Yes, yes. The earlier days in fishing they used to go fish for herring around Roberts Points, and that always got for Easter, and they used to get a boat load of herring and they'd take it in to what we used to call Scott's Jetty then, and they used to sell the fish from the boat to people who wanted it. Of course you could then, but you can't now - you're not allowed to sell fish from a boat, or you're not supposed to, put it that way. But it used to be interesting because of the different people that would come down. They sort of knew they'd get the fresh fish, and it was just out of the water and into the boat, and into their hands. Of course, the hotels used to stay open until about 11 or 12 o'clock didn't they, in those days! [Laughs]. And, of course, people at the hotels used to come over to where the fishing.

**HS** What type of fish were you selling from the house here?

**RENFREY** All sorts. When they were out at sea fishing they had skipjack, tailor, I can't always remember all the names of the fish. And we used to have herring, sometimes fish up the estuary, mullet - what they call yellow-eyed mullet - and mullet; and we call it pilcher and mullet.

**HS** Thank you, Adelaide. This interview was conducted by Howard Smith.

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

[Disclaimer](#)





## Edited transcript of an interview with LIONEL RENFREY

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Lionel 'Blue' Renfrey for the Australian Fishing Industry Oral History Project. The interview took place at Lionel's home in Mary Street, Mandurah, Western Australia on 15th November, 1989.

Lionel began fishing with his father and brothers as a child in Mandurah and at the age of eighty he is still fishing commercially. He started out on his own around 1924 and has fished both on the coast and in the estuary for many different types of fish, including prawns.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**HS** Just tell me your full name and the date of birth and where you were born?

**RENFREY** Yes. Lionel Renfrey, born in Greenbushes on 2nd July, 1909. Now that's all you want there, is it?

**HS** Yes and could you tell me the name of your wife and any children of that?

**RENFREY** Adelaide Jane Renfrey, was McCasky before she was born. Before she was married, and the oldest daughter, Maxine Jane Renfrey. The next one was Alexander Lionel Renfrey and Jane Adelaide Renfrey. That's the girls. Like two girls and a boy, I've got. The son fishes with me now.

**HS** Right. And how did you come to Mandurah?

**RENFREY** Well the mother was born here, and my grandfather came here with Peel. He was a rifleman for Peel. Tom Eacott born in England in 1803 and he was married to her, [Emily Edger] now. My mother was.... Oh they were, I just forget them. I'll get it in a minute. Oh, her people were Eacott's and her mother was. God, it's gone. They had two.... She had a mother, like my mother's mother, Eacott. And she had three brothers, four brothers went north. Two of them had cattle stations. One at Mount Hard Station, and the other had three stations at Broome. Edgars, yes. [Laughter]. God. But that was those.

Anyway Tom Eacott came here with Peel and he was like a rifle whatsername. They came out to shoot the blacks I think the main thing was and he hated the blacks they reckon. But they lived at.... When Peel came out he was supposed to get from South Fremantle, somewhere out there, Spearwood way, but when he got here I think the people who'd had it before him, Stirling or whoever it was running the State, he gave it to - I think they were named Bailey or something like that. But anyway Peel got from Peel Estate down to Mandurah. And they never stopped at Peel Estate, Peel House is up by Long Point but they took up down here somewhere. But he finished up in - Peel finished up just out of Mandurah down at, I think it's between Andrea Street

and some other street up this way that was built there. They used to have the stables and one thing and another there. And that's where that side of the family came from.

But my father was - his father was an engineer in the Victorian Railways and I think I've got the medal somewhere for the first steam engine built in Victoria, he was the engineer on it. But he got killed in a train accident when he was twenty-eight and his wife and the son and the daughter, they went to Coolgardie before the train was there I think. They went the last distance from Southern Cross on a camel team and then his mother started up a shop there I think it was. And they left there when the father was about eighteen. And he found a nugget, 53 ounces and it was the time that King George V was the Duke of York, he landed here. And they left there after and they came to Pinjarra and then he got a block in Mandurah in about 1899 I think it was. And that's where our part of the - my father like and mother, that's where we started from there.

And I left down there, the place is called **The Pine Trees** around there in Anstruther Road. Well the daughter and a brother and the son lives over there where the block was and the rest got sold. But that was about the start of us. And then I came in here in the thirties, over here, because it was the only sea fished, you see, and the anchorage and everything was good here and so we were really set up here.

This was beautiful country then. There was only us and then a couple more came, but there was ducks on the river, and there was crabs in the river, there was prawns and turkeys and kangaroos and things over there. You could live off the land.

Funny thing I had a brother-in-law come here, he was a Pommie. He came here and he married one of the wife's sisters and he was in the mines in Norseman and he came over here about, I think it was just when the war finished, World War II, and we had a garden at the back there and in the next block. There was no other boat people here, and we used to catch fish and prawns and crabs and shoot ducks on the pool down here, kangaroos at the back. He reckoned you didn't want anything, this was the place to be in. He reckoned it was really great. But he went back to Norseman again. I think he died there of a miners' complaint or something. But that's about all about the family I think.

**HS** When did you first begin fishing? What was your initial interest in fishing?

**RENFREY** Well the father went to Greenbushes. Were home here, you see. He went to Greenbushes when World War I started. I was born there in 1909, but he went working on the tin mines there for I think a Jack Cole first, had a mine. Well they call it South Bunbury, just out of Greenbushes. And from then he got an engineer - he was the engineer and foreman for Mosses out at Spring Gully. That's the other end of Greenbushes where the mine was. We stayed there....

We used to come to Mandurah because we had a sailing boat, we used to come for our holidays. They reckon we were millionaires. We used to at Christmas and Easter we always came to Mandurah. And then we used to come down from Pinjarra and from the train you had to come down in a sulky or something. Or one of the uncles would be there to pick us up and bring us down. But we used to sail around the estuary. And in those days - the holidays like Christmas and Easter, we had this sailing boat and the father would take us around.

And then if we'd seen half a dozen pelicans you know we'd have to go and see them because there wasn't many of them. Because up until 1916 they shot the shags and pelicans at 2/6d per head for pelicans and 6d a head for shags to keep them down,

you see. But through the war in 1916, through the war and the cost of World War I going, they'd cut it out. Now the place is overrun with birds and shags and pelicans.

Right what is the next question. [Laughter].

**HS** Well I'm interested to know how you got involved in commercial fishing?

**RENFREY** Oh yes. Oh well when World War I stopped, tin dropped from about 560 pound/tonne to about 90/tonne. So the whole lot of the mines there stopped 250 boys and about the same amount of girls in the school at Greenbushes, there was a lot of people there. Well I suppose it was about the second biggest place in the country. There was 29 big mines there, and something like 1,000 fossickers for tin. But when it dropped to 90/tonne well they couldn't do anything.

So the father had this boat and he had ideas, he liked fishing. He liked line fishing, he liked net fishing because he'd got this boat after, when he was younger before the War started and so always had the boat and the gear here. So we came back to Mandurah. And he went fishing and I used to go with him from the time - 1919 when we came back until after I left school about.... I forget when it was. I was about fourteen.

And then I went fishing too. And it was a really good life then. The fish was.... It was hard catching, you had to row boats around, and sailing boats and one thing and another like that. But you had to catch a coach to market. You had to catch the coach at Mandurah to take the fish to Pinjarra and then when the markets were then in Wellington Street, Perth they went there. So most of the time there was no freezer or anything like that. So you caught most of your fish at night and then you'd have to get to Mandurah. Then when we'd caught the fish we'd put them on stringers, put them out to cool them under shelters and that. And when they got cold, you'd pack them, you see, like you do meat. They had to be cool. Then you had to catch the coach. When I went there, there was only coaches, like horse coaches, and about seven o'clock in the morning they caught the train to Pinjarra at ten o'clock and then they'd get to Perth by twelve o'clock. And then the markets were at Wellington Street, just over from the Palace. No, Palace Hotel I think. No not the Palace, it's down the front. Royal, Hotel Royal it was just over there. And that's where the market was then. You couldn't go and fish in the middle of the day or anything like that. The fish had to be fresh.

But we mostly caught whiting. From about November to March on we caught whiting and you could catch those at night, you see, and clean them up and pack them and you'd get whatsername. It was quite good. Nothing like they make money now, but you could live. But when the Depression came in 1930, well I remember we got 4/2d to 6/2d a dozen. They used to sell them by the dozen then, not by the pound for whiting. And a few months after, well practically straightaway the market.... I think it was America, when the '29 crash came. Well then you could catch a boatload of fish and you'd perhaps wouldn't get anything for them. You'd send them up to market and it wouldn't pay the freight. And the freight was only about 1/9d a case for them. Most of the cases then was whisky cases or petrol cases. You know there used to be two tins of petrol in a case and we used to cut them on the angle and they'd be about four or five inches deep, and you'd pack the fish in them and they're nicely packed in them so they'd carry well. They wouldn't be squashed. But it cost you about 1/9d I think by train and coach to send them to town and half of the time you wouldn't get anything for a cheque.

I remember one time, it was in the winter, and I caught forty cases, the full case, the big mullet. And I reckoned well I'd get something for these, you see, and I sent them

up. Four days I went and I had the first four days in the week and I'd had it by then on my own catching them at night and pulling them out and have to catch the coach by seven o'clock in the morning. Anyway, when I got my cheque I went over to the bloke and I had 2/8d in my pocket and I gave him the cheque and the 2/8d for these forty cases of mullet to pay the freight on them. When I thought, this is a mint, and it was blowing a gale too. I thought I was going to get something. So that was that.

**HS** So was it just your father and yourself fishing, or did you have any....?

**RENFREY** Oh no, my father and myself. One of the other sons came. I've got a son, he doesn't fish now. Oh he used to fish with me on the beach. But when they closed the.... When they let the crayfishermen come ashore from the mile limit in, well it messed up our fishing, because we seined off the beach, you see. And the boats roaring down, and crayfish pots there, the fish never come ashore. We used to catch tailor and skipjack, kingfish - that's river kingfish and herring, silver bream and about four different sorts of fish. And the last year before they, two different days we caught seven thousand pounds of skipjack one day in two hauls. This is in the last year before they, the last season before they never came ashore. And just down past the Sounds Hotel there, nine thousand pound of tailor in one haul. A thirty hundredweight truck and two van loads of fish in one haul. And the next year you couldn't catch a fish. You know they're fairly powerful boats they have, the crayboats, and going up along the shore, the whitebait never came ashore, so the fish never came ashore to feed on them, you see, so there's none.

And the brother he went crayfishing and he went down that way, and there's a place down about twenty-five mile down, we call it the flat reef and it was about two hundred yards long, smooth on top and went down under like a cave underneath for about two hundred yards. And you could go past there anytime and see fish but you couldn't catch them; it was a rubblely bottom. We used to haul at them and try and dive down, perhaps we'd be two hours diving and about twelve or fourteen feet lifting it off the rubble. But then we'd come to the ledge and a lot of them go, but down again they'd go off the reef on the end and we'd get forty or fifty cases, something like that, and oh with no trouble. But as soon as those boats started to go up and set their pots, he came past there for two years and he never saw a fish under there. You see, most of the exhaust pipe on these new crayboats is underwater and the noise of that, put your head under the water you nearly bust your eardrums. So fish wouldn't come ashore.

So that was a good business, that was. We done that from about January, February, March down to sometimes up to June, but mostly in May I'd finish that up. But we caught thousands of boxes of fish there. So we had to come back on the estuary game then.

**HS** When were the crayboats first coming into Mandurah?

**RENFREY** Well they didn't.... About, oh now.... Fred Rodrigue bought a boat from South Africa - he was about the first one that came in here. That was a sixty-five foot boat **The Durban** and they bought it with three Portuguese from South Africa and they fished here about, oh it will be about thirty years ago. That would be the first ones that came in here. And then they got odd boats of their own like fishing four or five of them started to fish here. About four boats for a good while I think there was.

But I tried it in 1947. Two blokes came from Geraldton to set me up you see. Page and Burton, Bill Burton and so we made these slap pots, so they helped me set up and got them going and made about a dozen. And they said, "Take these out and try them."

So it was about two days before Christmas I took them out in the water. They said, "Give them a soak and see." So anyway I put, I think on Christmas Eve I put some bait in them out around the head here, so anyway [laughs] I thought I'd get some crayfish for Christmas, and when I went out there everybody had a pot bar me [laughs]. So that was that. And that I didn't worry about, because we'd done alright fishing then. Like the sea fishing and that, we done alright about it.

But anyway about 1953 I got a brainwave again that I'd take on the crayfish. And so I went to Fremantle and got about, me and my brother bought about sixty pots between us. And they were secondhand pots, but it was a try you see. So when the crayfishing season started about November, about a week before I took them out to soak. They soak them, you see, so they reckon air bubbles get in you see. So I took them out there, anyway the day before I put the bait in I got crook, so I finished up in Hollywood Hospital and I was there for about three weeks. Well they put me in Hollywood Hospital first and then I reckoned I had typhoid fever or something and they sent me to Perth. And when I came home they said, two boats came from Fremantle decked up the lot, so that's my crayfish history. [Laughter].

**HS** Not too successful! [Laughter].

**RENFREY** No. And I'm the only one that's not a millionaire now [laughs]. All the others.... Well to get a crayboat, well they sell them now for around that. And their pots are worth about 7,000 pound each.

**HS** So have you always lived in Mandurah, Lionel?

**RENFREY** Yes, yes.

**HS** I mean for fishing?

**RENFREY** For fishing, yes, yes, yes. We've fished here. I've had little trips away. In the 1920's I went roustabout and shearing and working on a station. And I finished up the last. I did shear in Murgoo Station when I was about eighteen I think. The end of the shed, somebody got hurt, so I sheared there. But the next year was the Depression and they all went on strikes and everything, I never went anymore. But I enjoyed that.

We used to go away about August and be about three months up on the Murchison. Beautiful country it was then. There was all the stations through the Murchison then. Oh they'd all have 30,000 to 40,000 sheep. And a funny thing, I went into the Army and there's a bloke in there Cresswell, I'll never forget him. Talking at night in the Army barracks and he said he came from Mount Narrier. I said, "Yes?" I said, "I was there in the 1920's at the shearing shed there, shearing." Well I didn't shear I was roustabout there. I said, "Oh, there are 30, I think 40,000 sheep there." And this was about, that was in 1924. 1939, no I think I was there 1927. 1939 or '40 we were in the Army together and he'd come off that station and there was two and a half thousand sheep there. They had seven years drought and all the stations, they'd all dropped like that. The whole of the Murchison. But when I was there it was beautiful country. When I went there about August it had flowers and dandelions, daisies, these everlasting and everything the whole country as far as you could see going up the sheep route, that used to go to Pindar out through around the stations and back down to Geraldton. You've never seen a country like it. And they had seven years practically and only got a drop of rain. And they got down to nothing. Of course, in places they cut the mulga down and they cut it wholly down. They should have only cut it half way



through and push it over to grow on the ground but some of the stations they messed up altogether. The mulga, the sheep feed off that.

**HS** And when did you come back to Mandurah?

**RENFREY** Oh we lived at Mandurah all the time only I used to go away for three months just for a break. But we fished all the time since then bar through the War. The three brothers, it was all the War II. But that was a break then. That was about 19.... Oh the youngest brother, I think he went into the Army just as it started I think, and he was, could have been, he didn't come out for six months after I think. I got out of it in '45. I came home. I had every disease in the world, so I got out in 1945. But that's the only time I've been away from here. I've been here all the time.

When I went to school here there was about twelve kids here, I think, in the school. That's in the like two or three years I did.

**HS** Is that Mandurah Primary?

**RENFREY** Yes. There's five schools here now, I think. Yes.

**HS** So your fishing really became your main interest....

**RENFREY** Oh yes.

**HS** And you didn't go onto secondary school?

**RENFREY** No, no, no. About fourteen I left school. Fourteen and a half, something like that.

**HS** So you would have been still fishing with your father?

**RENFREY** On yes, like I used to go out on the weekends with him and he used to fish then. It was only to get some money. Every weekend I'd go fishing with him from the time 1919 to the time I left school.

**HS** And when did you start fishing on your own?

**RENFREY** About 1924. Yes.

**HS** Did you set up a business or was it just working as....

**RENFREY** No, you just caught your fish for yourself and then you sent it to market.

**HS** Right.

**RENFREY** They used to go from.... But as I say it was hard work. Then you had to catch them, most of [unclear] fresh to catch them and then you'd send them up to market. Bring them down the road to Mandurah, or if the wind was right you could sail down. But you'd catch the market at seven o'clock in the morning it would go through to the market then. And you got your cheque for it on Saturday morning. It was fairly good then.

But before that they weren't too happy though, I think. There was a bloke from Victoria who came over. A bloke by the name of Langfords. They came from Victoria and got the market. From then they got their money for their catch. But I think the blokes before them, scared the small [unclear]. Some weeks the cheque would be alright, other weeks it would be [laughs]. Those running before Langford were not too trustworthy.

**HS** Could you explain how that market operated because I'm not quite clear on that?

**RENFREY** The market under A.J. Langford was trustworthy, but those before Langford was not up to scratch. Well you sent your fish up. Everybody sent his own fish up, you see? And sent it there. And they landed in the market and then they'd sort them out and they'd auction every one, one by one each fisherman's fish would be sold separate. And when that market was there, there was about 120 buyers and they'd buy perhaps two basketful of fish. And they'd a street edge, each buyer would do a street to sell his fish. They'd do all around Perth and they had a few big buyers that would buy for the shops but nearly always the shop, there's somebody that came there to buy it. Fish and chip shops and those that had bits of shops, mostly fish and chip and fish they'd sell, but all these here buyers they would have their couple of baskets there. And some of them would be going up the line. They'd have basket up Midland and get off the line and sell up that way. But the fish had nearly sold every day the whole lot of them. You understand? Like they'd be on the table. My fish would be there and yours would be there, somebody's would be down there and they'd sell that lot out. And they'd sell them by the dozens, bar big fish they'd sold them by the pound, dhufish and schnapper and stuff like that. But they sold them by the dozens or a lot. And they'd put the lot up and they'd auction my fish and they'd auction yours, or something like. And they were very good, the Langfords were. I didn't know about the other fellows. But the older fishermen used to complain about them, they never knew when they were going to get anything for their fish or not. The cheques would be crook or something or other.

But this would be.... Today I start mine, perhaps, and the next he was very good. The last bloke who sold the last days fish, they'd go first next day. Because a lot of the buyers would want to get a couple of baskets of fish and get out in the street first, you see. So the bloke that's had his fish first was better off. But then those that wanted fish a bit more they'd generally wait until last, and perhaps there'd be twenty boxes or something like that left over. And the bigger buyers would buy that.

**HS** What about export?

**RENFREY** Oh there was no export then. The only thing that was export, I'd seen exported in those times was ducks. They used to trap ducks. Oh, well actually I did shoot ducks myself at Lake Clifton and there used to be a rail line across. They started a mud works, a cement works at Lake Clifton. It broke down, I think Portland Cement bought them out and there was a railways line across there. And when I first left school I went up with one of the relations, one of the Moffatts and shot ducks and put them on the train there and sent them to Perth. Shot though. We'd shoot them and draw them, pull the gut out of them, salt it, so they'd last, you see. But we used to get about, grey ducks, about 5/6d a pair for them. And that was alright. But it only lasted a couple of months that sort.

But then I went like fishing after that. But that was good that market. But before it they didn't know where their fish was or anything like that. Some would be sold and some wouldn't be. Well that was with Skeen and Paul Page.

Funny thing this. Skeen I met him, a Scotsman. I met him on Coolberrin Station in between Naremben and Bruce Rock. It belonged to Hedges. I think he was a member of Parliament, of I think 28,000 acres. But he was the sheep man there, this Skeen was. He was a funny man. Anyway while I was on this place, we did the shearing there and then they had a, they used to cut hay for the Carrawang Line. Cut chaff rather. So they said would we stop there and work on the chaff cutters. And I met this Skeen, and he said, "Oh I used to run the fish market in Perth." Anyway, he was the sheep boss and they had about 10,000 to 12,000 sheep there, but they used to have a terrific amount of 3,000 acres a crop. And they used to.... They didn't strip it for wheat, they cut the lot, nearly all of it up for chaff for horse and carts to cart wood for the mines, for the Carrawang Line. Big stacks of it, this hay. But anyway, it was the first Fordson tractors, headers. Yes they had headers because the one paddock they had for wheat. That was right. The other was oats I think it was, and wheat for the cutting up the chaff for the Carrawang Line. Anyway, the father there, because he'd been on the steam engine in Greenbushes, you see, and with the steam engine, it was all steam engines there, no diesel engines, for the mines. And his father, I say, he got a medal for the first steam engine in whatsername, so he had a flair for steam engines. So anyway, they bought these Fordson tractors there, two of them to take off the crops, and they had the exhaust pipes underneath them like that. As soon as the father saw them, he said, "That's going to set fire to the crop." Because this head from bringing them here, the first harvester sold. Of course, he told that man he didn't know what he was talking about. And he said, "Well they ought to be up in the air, they're going to set fire to the crops." So anyway it only went a little while and it soon started to get hot, anyway you could see the fire going up and it set. I think 1200 acres it burnt the first day. And they weren't satisfied with that. Anyway, this Skeen's laughing like one thing, he said, "Let it burn, let it burn." He said, "My sheep will be right." You see the sheep it had burnt the grain on top [laughs]. I'll never forget him. He said, "Let it burn. Let it burn." Anyway it started off the next day again, burnt about 40 acres. So then they pulled the exhaust and put them up in the air after that. I think the insurance assessor came and it was that. So that's the bloke. That's where this Skeen finished up there.

There's all Scotsmen there too. The boss was a Scotsman. Powell, head of the machinery was a Scotsman and didn't they play, have high jinks there. When they'd have a beano; they'd drink bottles of scotch whisky like water. But it was a great place at.... They had a piggery there, a poultry farm there and they used to make about two tonnes of hams a year for the people that worked there, the men that worked there. It was like living at the Palace Hotel there, they had everything. Eggs and good cooks and it was home from home, nobody wanted to leave there.

**HS** What years were you talking about there?

**RENFREY** In about 1928.

**HS** So just before the Depression?

**RENFREY** Yes, just before the Depression. Just when wool was going up. You see wool wasn't worth nothing then, because in about the 1920's it started to go up, and gradually going up. And I know when I was on Toutra Station, that was another place out about from Moora, about twenty miles east of Moora. We sheared there about, I forget how many sheep was there. But all the time we were there we had steak for breakfast, dinner and tea. And so there was a bloke there, Phil Murfitt the shearer, and he said, "Well, we're going to have mutton today," he said, "I'll hamstring a sheep." So they took the sheep and [unclear] sack him and we still never got any mutton. Never got any sheep. That's why they wouldn't kill the sheep because they were getting a

good price for the wool. It started to get a good price. It was only about 2/4d a pound back then. The station had about 400 cattle and they were not worth much so sheep's wool was worth money, so the station would not kill sheep to eat.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**HS** Lionel, could you tell me about the fish cannery that was established in Mandurah?

**RENFREY** Yes, well there was three. There was one, Captain Charles Tuckey had the one about where the Little Theatre is now. And Hoskins had one on the other side of the road, just a bit further north between Smart Street and Mandurah Terrace. And there was another one at the Sticks by, Leightons I think run that. But their main cannery was on Mullet, but they did do gizzard shad or Perth herring and they partly smoked them. A little bit of smoke and they kippered them. And an American expert they tell me came there and they reckoned it was the best fish in the world. And it was a fish it's all fine hairs and the bones that are just like hair. But they did.... Now after they went out. They only lasted, well they started about I think the early part of the century. No last century, at the end of the last century and they went through there, and that was just before my time. Like but I know people that worked on them. But that was the main fish they done and they used to use a 3 inch mesh net. Fred Ward, he was the one that I learnt about it more than anyone else.

I remember when I first went fishing he cut my nets for me and he was talking about when he went fishing they made about a three and a half, a four inch mesh to catch the mullet with and it caught really big mullet. But when they got going they wanted a fish about three inch mesh. A three inch mesh, a six inch round. When you get a mesh you pull him out like that and that's the length from the two knots, you see? So a three inch mesh, six inch around it. And they found out that was a better class fish, it fitted in the tin better. Those round tins, pound tins, but rounded, like something like a little bit bigger than these here cool drink cans. And the three inch fish would fit in them. So Fred Ward said when he first went fishing that was in the last century he used three and half and four inch mesh. But later on they used the smaller size mesh to catch the better mullet for canning. But mullet was the main thing.

But there was another cannery started up, Lewis C.F. Dawe. He went to Pleasant Grove. He didn't start in Mandurah. But he started before World War I and he went through there until about oh, about half way through the war. And then he shifted from Pleasant Grove up to Allendale, that's up the Harvey Estuary, and they canned pilchard as well. That's the yellow eyed mullet and they were quite good when they were in good condition. But he used to can lots of different things, ducks and kangaroo and all sorts of things for themselves I think. But he went on for, when they were finished, he.... When they were at Pleasant Grove that's where they first started, I remember the father going there. They used to have to clean the fish and they got a pound a hundred tins for them. Well they did that in these factories. The fishermen went there when it suited them you see? But when they got a market in Perth and they got their money for them they more or less dropped the canneries, because they had to clean the fish, you see, and it was more work still. And they cleaned properly too, they had to really clean them. So that's where, I think where the.... As soon as they got money for their fish in Perth they gave the factories away. But bar Dawes they used, while he kept longer than the others, he went on 'til oh, into the '20s and they used to catch the fish in the afternoon and the day time, or in the morning or any time, you see, and they'd clean them and take them straight to them. Then when they

caught fish at night, or they could catch the market with their fish fresh, well they'd send them to market so the canneries went out.

But there was another cannery, it was a different idea. An ice works on the Murray River and they used to in hundred weight blocks put bream, mullet, I think whiting and kingfish, they used to put in the ice. Freeze them in the ice. And they used to put them in corn bags, like wheat bags, but they had hay all around them and they used to send those, all they did there they sent them to Kalgoorlie. That's when the Kalgoorlie line got right through to Kalgoorlie. You see for a long time it was to Southern Cross I think and they used to go from there in camel team. But soon as the line went through that's what they did. Well that was, that went for quite a while. Then they finished up, I don't know why it went under. But, of course, that was a good place, there was a lot of whiting around there at the Murray, in the mouth of Murray and the Serpentine. And they were close to Pinjarra so all the blokes, there was four or five Japs there, and there was the Strames and Tattams and three or four other families they used to catch their fish and you see they only had about four or five mile to go to catch their trains. And there was two trains a day, so nearly all of them went and caught their fish from there because they got at the market and they got there pretty fresh. So that went under the ice works. But I never sold to that one, I only know people that had worked there. But they reckon that was really good. The fish used to land in Kalgoorlie after going on two trains. They had to go to Perth and they'd a few trains. And I suppose they put them in the.... But anyway that's what they did with them, they put them in a block of ice with hay around it and in a corn bag, and had it wet and sewed it up tight. So....

**HS** The other canneries did they have an export market or was it all local?

**RENFREY** It was sold mostly to Boans and those places in Perth, I know. But when I said Murgoo Station and the shearing shed, I met a Hughie Nicholson, he's a Maori. He was shearing with the team and he said to me, as soon as he knew I came from Mandurah, he said, "We used to buy two dozen boxes of fish." he said, "there were cans of fish up at Cue, Mount Magnet" and he said, "they was beautiful." And he said, "We don't get any now." I said, "Well the canneries have all given up." And he reckoned they were beautiful, he said. As soon as they came in, the blokes that were working at the station, they'd all be in to get them, these here fish. And there were pilchard and mullet on the label. He said, "They had a pelican with a fish in their mouth on them." [Laughs]. So they came from Dawes's and they were the last cannery there. But that got up to about the '20s, they used to send them up there, early '20s.

**HS** So when was the last cannery in Mandurah?

**RENFREY** Well the one's at Mandurah they went before my time. But this one, Dawes's cannery, finished up about 1920. But the boy, Dawes' son, he did do canned fish used to - he even did them up to World War II, that's one of the sons. He came and lived in Mandurah, he used to do a few tins.

And then there was another one of the Tuckey's, Melville Tuckey, he used to fish and he used to up in Shoal Street. And he used to do them at the back of his shed. And he used to do quite.... This is the son of Charles Tuckey that added the street, but he used to have a shed out the back of his boarding house and he used to go fishing himself. His wife ran the boarding house and the girls and he used to do the herring, and he smoked them but if any time we got any herring we'd take them up to him and he'd give us some tins of gharfish or something like that, or these here.... He used to get the little gharfish about the length of the tin and can those, and they were just like

sardines. And his herring he used to just smoke them a bit and can them, and they were beautiful. And he used to do mullet and pilchard too. But he only done - not many. He used to sell them around the town. But he'd do fifty or sixty tins at a time. But that was right up 'til World War II, I think he died just through the war.

**HS** So they were mostly backyard operations?

**RENFREY** He was a backyard operator, yes. But Dawes, they made their own tins and everything up at Allendale. That's about ten mile up the Harvey Estuary. He was a really... But as soon as he died, they had bees, about a thousand hives of bees and they used to have a vegetable garden. They had seventy cows or something and they had the cannery going, but as soon as the father died the boys, everything fell to pieces. [Laughs] The shed blew over, and the vegies blew away and they went fishing themselves for the market.

**HS** Do you know how big the canneries were? Were they employing a large number of workers?

**RENFREY** There was four sons at home and they did the work. I wouldn't know, but Dawes had done it all themselves. But the fishermen, you see, he made the cans and the fishermen cleaned the fish, and they only had to be put in the cans and boiled. They boiled them for about eight hours. Not like the pressure cooking now that they don't take long to do it, but they were only just steamed. They put them in a big, about a two thousand gallon, four hundred gallon tank rather, and just put fire under them and boil them like that. Now it's pressure whatsernamed and they don't take so long.

**HS** So there wasn't a lot of processing involved?

**RENFREY** No, well as I said the blokes that caught the fish did most of the cleaning. But I think Austin's factory, they had somebody but that was before my time. I know they had one bloke for it. A cousin of mine lost all his fingers there. The stamp slipped. They used to push the tin under like that those that were cutting up the stamp and his finger went under it and only when they were half way up they came down and cut his fingers off there. And the next day another came down again on another bloke, so they wiped it off. But [unclear] fingers cut. Just took the lot around there like that where the stamp fell down. Like a round stamp.

**HS** That's off his right hand?

**RENFREY** It could have been his right hand because that hand would be put under. But I know he had a terrific, one arm was as half big again as this one, because he did everything with that arm. He used to fish though after it. He used to fish [unclear]. Take the fish out alright. He'd push them out because you'd push the fish, you'd push through and twist them as you pushed the fish through the mesh net. And he worked. He fished until he was sixty odd.

**HS** Did he get any compensation?

**RENFREY** Yes, nineteen pound.

**HS** Ninety pound?

**RENFREY** Nineteen.

**HS** Nineteen pounds?

**RENFREY** Yes. [Laughs] Hard times those. [Laughter]. Yes he's a cousin of mine, Eric Eacott [unclear].

**HS** So the working conditions wouldn't have been too good?

**RENFREY** Oh no, no. They'd just send them to work. They'd work twelve or fourteen hours a day and then if they didn't want them they wouldn't work at all. Oh yes, there was no conditions then at all.

**HS** And would that all be local labour?

**RENFREY** Yes, yes. Though I think those that came here with Austin's I think they'd come to the place, they weren't local you see. With Tuckey's, he was originally Tuckey's came here about 1840 or something I think. And about the same times just after Captain Charles Tuckey that's right. They've got a grandfather, then all about the same time they came here. And bar Dawes, Lou Dawes he was of German Descent that went to South Australia. You know there's a German area, he came from there. Well he wasn't German, he was born in Australia, but his parents were there. He was a good footballer too. And he's a good plumber and he can do anything. He built a house up there with twelve foot walls on the house, they'd built up the stone that thick up at Allendale. Still there. One son lives up there, Alan, his son. And he could do anything. Built boats or really anything he took, only first class. But then the boys [laughs]. He led the family with an iron hand and when they'd go.... The boys all played football in Mandurah and when they first went there they only used to come to Mandurah twice a year to get stores, or bring their supplies of canned fish. But when motor cars came and football started in Mandurah about, oh about 1930, and they got a team and so all the boys played football because their father played football too. And when they'd go home he'd line the boys up. This is Ron Harper; lived with them, a local fisherman tells me, he used to live up there too with them. And he'd ask one, he'd say to Ron, "What did Bert do?" And when he'd asked Bert, "What had Alan done?" And then he'd ask Alan "What did Reg do?" [Laughs] And he held the place with an iron hand but the day he died they were all on their own, nothing done. [Laughs]. They've never done anything. That place fell to pieces, the fish factory blew away. The jetty, the roof, I think they burnt the top off the jetty. But they're still good blokes. They worked and I think there's two of them.... Alan's the only one. No Alan and Ron. The youngest one of them died a couple of years ago.

**HS** So how did you convince your son to come into fishing with you?

**RENFREY** I didn't, he wouldn't do anything else.

**HS** Ah.

**RENFREY** I remember once, one flood, when he was here, he was going to school and he went up the Point Robert and when I came home he said, "You'd better come up Dad and pick up some cobblers for me." I was in the truck. I used to have a thirty hundred weight truck. I used to go into town. He had seven boxes of cobblers, seven crates of cobblers he speared up on the reef when they'd gone out on the reef and they were all in a heap up on the reef and he got his gidgee in and he's spearing them.

And he'd come home and get boxes and go back. And he had seven boxes when I got up there. He got a cheque. When he got it, it was 56 pounds for these here cobblers.

**HS** When would that have been?

**RENFREY** Well he's about 45 now, it would have been about 30 years ago. But they'd go out in the flow. Even this happened a few years after they went out like that. But in the big flood in 1945 when it finished, that was through the War and there was only a few fishermen there, but they used to get about. The fixed price then was four pence a pound for them in the bulk. They used to send them up in fruit cases, you know fruit dumps. About sixty odd pound a dump. They'd get about a pound a dump for them.

And this flood came in 1945, June, July and August got about 25 inches in each month. I'd just come back from the Army and they'd say "It's raining here." Of course in New Guinea it rained every night. And I said, "Oh it's not bad." [Laughs] And the flood came down, and this creek where the river runs here was a dead end here, where we're standing just out in the front of the boat, it was full of them. And I got a hundred cases there one night. And when it finished they'd all gone to sea. We never got any cobblers for five years. The whole lot of them sort of went out with the flood. And they used to go along the beach, and the sea (the cobblers just go along steady like that) and the big seas would lift them up and chuck them up on the beach. And they got up above the high water mark. And when the winter finished we went up the beach and they were from just down here to Long Point. That's around the whatsername is over ten mile. And they were scattered along the beach just like if you'd tipped them there. You couldn't imagine how many cobblers had come out of the estuary and with these floods. You see dirty water comes down and they go to sea and that's how he caught them up on the Point. But there was no cobblers until 1950. And then they came back, they must be great breeders.

My brother and I were set over Greenwood in 1950 and we had two and a half inch mesh and we just put the net out before dark and he said, "The mullets hitting it." You could see the net wiggling like that. He said, "I'll go and have a look," he said, "I can't see none splashing." So when they come to the top and they wiggle, you see, you can see them. So he goes down the bottom and it's full of cobblers, little cobblers, about nine inches long. Not big enough to market. And that big - there's a mass of them, there must have been a mile or so of them square. And they grow that quick in November they'd go and of course Carrabung Bird bank goes into the Harvey Estuary and we were catching them about a foot long....

**HS** What's that, about a foot or more?

**RENFREY** Oh over a foot they'd be about.... Yes a foot to 13 or 14 inches long. And they were good enough for market. And they'd catch in about a three inch mesh, they'd have to have about six inches around them.

In February they went up the Harvey Estuary you could see, they muddy up the water when they're going. They're all in it and their tails wagging and they're feeding, they'd grubber up the bottom. And on the back of the island, that's up where the Harvey River runs in. I was up there on [unclear] and they were about two pound weight. And I had a haul and I got about ten boxes of these and I was coming up and there's three or four blokes in the mouth of the river where I had to come out. In this part there's an island half way across the Estuary. It would be about three mile from the Harvey River and they called it the Cattle Crossing. But they used to camp on Poverty Point these blokes and they saw me coming out with these and in two days there was twenty boats up there catching them. And there was, I suppose, they never got scarce



for ten years. They were catching them all the time. There were about twenty-four boats worked on them for about ten years.

**HS** That's the 1950s?

**RENFREY** Yes. In front of our home right here.

**HS** The name of the creek you mentioned before, was that the inlet you were talking about Lionel, or....?

**RENFREY** This one down here?

**HS** Yes.

**RENFREY** The creek. Yes we call it the Creek because it....

**HS** You call it the Creek?

**RENFREY** Yes, it came down there. That was an end and the sea would turn like that and go down, it would gradually block up. This used to block up all the time. And that dead end was there. And then the bank would run right across to Peel Street over nearly a mile and then it could break through anywhere. Every blow would come, the bank would go about a hundred yards. The sand would go and it would go until it blocked it off. Then sometimes it might be low and it might break through there, while other times we had to dig it to break it through. But the last time it got wide they got a dredge here and dredged it through. And then after that they built the wall out there. Well they have to dredge it all the time to keep it open, because of instead of the sand going that way, it hits the groynes and the whole lots going up the river blocking up the river. Where there was twenty feet of water there in place now there's nine or ten feet of water. And they dredged it at about twelve foot deep along here two years ago, I think they spent a couple of million on it, now it's not six foot of water. This is out here.

**HS** Why do you think that is?

**RENFREY** Because they put the groyne out there and they shouldn't do it. Kempton said when they put that groyne out there, he said, "It couldn't last two years." But it didn't last one year the sand went around it.... The last load of stone they put out there was in May and it never moved, the sand didn't. But the blows came and the nor'westers came in, the nor'wester gales came in and the second week in July, and this whole lot here, 750,000 cubic feet of sand I worked that as, and it went around the end of the groyne. Four hundred yards out in the sea in three weeks. And you could walk around the end of it where it was ten foot of water.

**HS** How's that affected your fishing?

**RENFREY** Well for five years we never caught any prawns. You see it was just as it is out there like that and then there was none, the prawns and everything came up there, the King George Whiting got up there and never came in because the groyne was out there. This Murray Bight is one of the best nurseries in the country and they've allowed the trawlers to come in here so now we don't get any whiting. Very few King George Whiting. They trawl right along.... Even people were complaining along Golden Bay. They were dredging right into the shore catching little whiting that were six inches long. How they were marketing the things and all undersized. And we

don't get any now. Now in 1930, Smith, a fish inspector, used to go down along the beach where the anglers used to angle. Oh no, this was before, this is in the '20s to '30s. Yes, he was here through the War. And he went down there one year with a hanging scale and a sugar bag and the people that were along the beach, down along that side hand-lined for whiting, they average thirty hundred weight a day, that he got off those people down there. Just anglers were there in a line. Thirty hundred weight a day. Sand whiting. And now since they started to trawl there, well it's about four years since they've been trawling outside there.

We don't know how many boats. Some come from Safety Bay. Three or four go from here. But last year we never got any whiting. This time, this year we were getting, we've done I think four whiting this year, this summer. And we used to.... We worked for them King George Sound Whiting. We used to work about November 'til February. The main thing was whiting. But the bar and the trawling out in the sea there has done that. But the bar's the main thing, because it's in the wrong place, the groyne should be on Point Robert you see? The fish used to come around the shore like that, and go in from down that way, now the bar's out here and the point's out like that and they come and they must.... And there's all sand, where there's twenty-five foot of water now the seas breaking there. It's just filling up.

But what they're supposed to do by.... I'd better not make a noise like that. Because when C. Y. O'Connor came here and he told them what to do, build a groyne off the reef, Point Robert and I went to Willcock in 1930, he's the Premier, and I went there in 1930 to a meeting to see him, I was accompanied by Ross McLarty a local member, to do something about the bar. There was a President, I was a Secretary of the Fishermen's Association at the time. Anytime the other bloke was talking about fishing in the estuary I went there just to talk about the bar, because to get a groyne out there, so Willcocks said, "Well we've got no money now." this was in the 1930 Depression. He said, "When we get some money we'll give it to you." So right, 1937 we got the money to build a groyne off Halls Head and our local member, Tuckey, Hobart Tuckey MLC, he was eighteen years then and he never did nothing for Mandurah, I'm sure. I never heard of him doing anything. But when we were there this day, he was there and Stephen Young was the engineer, and Stephen Young said, "What are we...." This was over by the Hotel Peninsular we met. And on that with Ross McLarty there, because I was adviser to him, you see, he wanted me to be his adviser. So right, see what was going on. So Stephen Young said, "Well we have to go around the other side. That's where we have to put the groyne around there. It's no good putting it here." Anyway Tuckey had enough pull to get it put there, over his own land. The land where they put it, never lasted. The last three chain in the June, they put it across shallow water, back of the Peninsula somewhere across where the outside yacht club is now. Across there. There's no sign of any of it. But they went out like that, and they were going around like that with the stone and to finish up, the sand came down in the shallow water, and the blokes were carting out their stone (this was in June) and I was prawning alongside the groyne. They had prawn nets out. We have beam-trawl nets and I had them there. And these blokes were back and I said, "You don't want to come along here, there's twenty foot of water down along here where there was four feet of water the other day that's just cutting away." They said, "Oh no." I chucked over the anchor over the side with the rope and down she went. So anyway the next thing, stone started to fall. Anyway it blew that night and three chain of the groyne, it went. But that was that.

So anyway again in 1945 when I came out of the Army, I was invited up to a meeting up there about all the wheelers and dealers, you know fishermen, at the end of the war. That's the European war was over. And of course they lost all their trawlers and everything through the war, so they had no fish. And they were coming out here. There was a fixed price for fish, about a shilling a pound. No, we got tenpence a pound

for mullet and pilchard and things like that. Whiting was a shilling about. But they were allowed to charge 33.1/3% to sell it, you see. But anyway, they were getting fish from New Zealand for about seven or eight, filleted schnapper and whiting for about ten cents a pound. But they were selling the whole lot to these here boats that came out here for about ten or twelve shillings a pound because there was none in Europe. And of course they had a meeting about this to see how they could get more fish. So anyway I went there and I was invited there by the Fisheries Department, and when I got there, Alec Panton was the Minister of Fisheries at the time because he was a World War, what you call the, Gallipoli man. And I had a RSL badge up on this. He reckoned that was great. As soon as he saw me, he said, "That bloke from Albany." I said, "I'm not from Albany. I'm from Mandurah." I said, "and all I want is something done about that groyne in Mandurah." So he said, "Well I'm a politician. I know nothing about it but" he says, "I tell you," he said, "I'll send down an up and coming engineer," he said, "and see if he'll have a look at it."

About six weeks after, a bloke came to the door, he says, "I'm Ted Kempton." Just like you coming to me today, I wouldn't know the man from the man in the moon. "I'm the Minister for Fisheries, he'd get somebody to come down and do something down here." He said, "I'm the man to come down." But as soon as he said to have a look at the bar and that. I said, "Well I know a bit about it because I've lost boats out there. Been out there when there was an eighty-mile an hour gale, and had a boat out there in it," I said, "the sand would come over to five chain in one night. Well in four hours when it was blowing a gale." So he said, "I don't want to know anything further, I want to see for myself."

He was here a couple of winters and he said, "To build a groyne off Point Robert." I'll tell you after why it should be there. They said they never had any money, then, this was 1945, but they'd do something later on. And they sent him back again. They said they wouldn't do that, you see, and they couldn't do it they never had the money. So he came here five years and I think I've got the report. I found the report, thirty years after and if I didn't know a bloke named Gibson whose one of the top civil servants. He found it in the archives of the Museum. And in the fifty-sixth page of it was a little piece about three inches wide, anything built east of Halls Head couldn't last two years. And as I told you before, it lasted about May 'til August it was round the end of it. But they didn't get the blows until then.

But why this happens, you see.... Have you swam here or anything like or been to whatsername where there's rips and tides. And those tide rips are only sand, aren't they? So this groyne is something out of the box.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

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## TAPE 2 SIDE A

**RENFREY** Now when the seas strike Robert Point, it can't go to sea because the reef is underwater, so when the big seas hit that sand on that reef it stirs it up. Instead of going to sea again like a rip, it goes over the top of it. So the sand goes over nearly as much as water as sand. And when I was there in 1937 when I had boats anchored underneath there when a gale came up the bar was only about a half a chain wide and there was ten lines of breakers there so I couldn't come in. I would have turned sideways and I would have rolled over. So I anchored the boat under the Robert Point. While I was anchored there another bloke named Tonkins he came too and he said, "What are you stopping here for?" I said "Well you can't go in the bay or you'll turn over." So he anchored alongside me. Well it came to blow, that's why we anchored

there, at night it got really strong. It went to I think it was 80 knots or something like that, but anyway I anchored the boats there and I came home at twelve o'clock at night. I got tired. So at five o'clock in the morning I went back. By this time the boats were rolling around on the sand about two chain from the groyne. And when a big sea had come over it was nearly like sand and you could take another step forward in the sand. Because I cut my anchor line off and had another anchor there. I had two anchors in the ground. I cut those two off and put another anchor in the ground and I had to hang onto the rope it was blowing that hard. But when the sea would break it would roll over the sand, and you could take another step forward and there was about ten foot of water there. And that's how much sand moves.

So this is what happened. When it blows there, the sand breaks and instead of going to sea again it's low. And all it needs is to be built up then the sand would go to sea, but now it comes over the top and it goes as far as a hundred yards in a night when it blows a gale. The sand goes east. And that goes down and it cuts off the bar. And these two groynes instead of what they've got there now, instead of that stopping it that sand should be going east right down, turns around and goes up the estuary, so it's filling up the estuary all the time. And in two places that's here, it went five chain wide, five chain long. In 1953 the first year after they dredged this through when the bar was closed, it was I think three weeks after Channel 7 was in operation. Because when I was coming in the first day they'd dredged it, and the water came in I was coming in from sea, and I saw these blokes running over the hill with things on their shoulders, wondering what they were. And it was Channel 7 at about three weeks after it started. So that would be about 1953 or '59, one of the two, but I think it was '53.

Anyway, this particular time, one of the engineers, the local engineers, visited a football match at Pingelly. And the Mandurah Football Club played the Pingelly Association and I was up there with them and he said, "What do you think of this here....?" This Pletcher his name was, the local engineer. He said, "What do you think of the dredging there?" I said, "It's wonderful but" I said, "it won't do any good." I said, "as soon as we get a blow." And actually it was blowing this day, it was a holiday in June, and from the pub that we stopped at in Pingelly, those farmers' sheds were blown away. And the finish was I bet him ten pound to two shillings that the bar would shift a hundred yards when we got home. So anyway all the mob came around (there was about fifty footballers there, two teams of them) and they started to whatsername, and that's what it finished up. And you know, they all laughed at him, you see. In the morning I came home, we came home on the Monday night, you see, and Tuesday morning I walked over there, 167 yards it had went east. The bloke's coming around in his white ute and when he saw me out on this Point he turned around, and he pulled his time and he left Mandurah. So I never got me two shillings. So that's how much it travels. And this happens every time it blows hard.

And in 1915 I think, the first time I can remember. 1915, that's the first time I can remember. I was over there with a few of the old fishermen trying to dig it through. But that lasted until June. But through the '30s it was really bad, there was three or four times it was blocked up like this. And it doesn't take long to.... In two years it can go from here right down to Peel Street, right over the other side there.

**HS** Where is that? From here....?

**RENFREY** From Point Robert, the sand would work and it would come around the shore and it would work right across here, with the blows. It's just going that way all the time. But all this instead of going down and cutting it off now, it's going up the inlet. They've built fifteen or sixteen groynes here, up along there. And four of them, there's no sign of them they've washed away. And they've built these two out here

and half the stone on that Robert Point over the reef would have fixed it. Now the engineer, Ted Kempton, he said "It has to go out to six fathoms of water, the groyne that goes out, it has to be above water, and has to go out to six fathoms of water." Because six fathoms of water, the pressure stops the sand from moving and so all they have to do is put that on there and turn it out to get to six fathom and she's there forever. Because the sand won't move. But I've been there and I've called these there blokes everything. Even when they've had a seminar here. Their heads come down. And I've told them, that I've said "They've got a good job here and they don't want to lose here." They came down two or three times, sometimes you see them here for two or three days and they go away again. I said, "You don't want to be sent up North, you want to stay here." So that's why this bar's not fixed up.

**HS** What about the Fisheries Department?

**RENFREY** Well I've talked to them and they're the same. They say "Oh they know everything." I'm talking about Neil McLoughlin and Neil McLoughlin says, [Laughs] "They'll fix it up." They've spent twenty million here and they're worse than when they started.

There's a bloke over there with a drag line, and you'll see him over there and he's been there seventeen years, and he says "I haven't done any good" he says "as soon as I dig it out it's filling up again."

**HS** So what do you think are the real reasons behind....?

**RENFREY** They've got good jobs and they don't want to lose them. I've told them that, in public. [Laughs] And I'll tell them again. It's the only thing I've wanted done in my life this far is to get that groyne out there. Because I know it's right. C. Y. O'Connor said it was. And the Edgars, like I tried to think of that name before, the Edgars they were friends of theirs and the mother new him. And she'd seen him come down here and tell them what to do. Then Stephen Young, he was another good engineer, they built a whatsername of it. I think at one of the places out at Floreat Park or somewhere they had it. This was thirty years ago I think. They built a miniature groyne of it or something. But anyway Ted Kempton came here and he left the Government because he reckoned it was a waste of time working for them. He done this job and he finished up in Singapore, I think he was one of the top consultant engineers in that country. I think he's just retired and come back to Bassendean. And that's what he said. Well he said, "It couldn't last two years." And I'm certain when the wind started to blow it only lasted three weeks. And all this here, from here right out there's like....

And as I said, there's 37, I counted 37 big schnapper boats in this bay at one time in 19.. I think it was 1937. And they used to then, they used to have thirty foot boats and they used to put 12 x 3's underneath them like that to keep them steady. This is before they put engines in them. And I've seen them out here. That block there with the two storey house, I wouldn't buy that because the sea used to break on it. I bought this one.

**HS** Is that in Mary Street?

**RENFREY** Yes that's in Mary Street. That two storey house just down the road there, I wouldn't buy that block when I came here in the '30s, because the sea was breaking there.

**HS** So how far is it now from....?

**RENFREY** Well it's out as far as that, for four hundred yards there's sand down there now.

**HS** Four hundred yards.

**RENFREY** Yes. And just outside that house I've seen the biggest school of kingfish I've ever seen in my life when the bar was closed down there. I didn't see them first, the youngest brother saw them.

We went to anchor the boat there in the bay, because we couldn't get in the bar which was closed, and there was an acre of kingfish from the top of the water to the bottom. We put them into the seine net, there was that matter they took the lot. [Laughs] Now we've got to get it back to somewhere else.

**HS** Well there was one other thing, seeing as we've been talking about the groyne, the pollution of the estuary? That is an issue in Mandurah that seems to get everyone's attention.

**RENFREY** Yes.

**HS** How has that affected fishermen?

**RENFREY** They blame the piggeries. The hierarchy, but we don't. As I told them before that in 1916 they used to give us 2/6d a head for shooting pelicans and they used to get a sixpence a head for shooting the shags, plus even when they stopped that the old fishermen used to go to the nesting places for the shags and knock the eggs out. And on top of that they used to kill the young ones to stop the breeding of them.

And then pelicans up until 1930, pelicans went North every about Easter time, you'd see them fly up in the air like hawks, circle around and away they'd go. And they wouldn't come back, it would be about the second or the fourth of August we'd see them come back. Perhaps two would come back. And then the next day you'd see perhaps four or six or something like that. But now there's thousands and thousands of them. And they breed here. Even on New Sand Island, we saw fifty of their young ones come off it the other day. And on the other side of the estuary we've seen them breed twice a year. And they're worse than a pig. They pollute the estuary.

And the shags there's black heaps, where if you go over in the south east corner where the paperbark trees are early in the mornings, it's just like clouds going over. And there's a little black shag that he used to stir up the water, there'd be thirty or forty would get together at say ten years ago, and they'd stir up a part about as big as this room, and it brings up where they stir it up the little fish and the shrimps and things like that comes to the top, and they feed on it. Well now there's a million, I reckon, I don't know, I'd say millions, but I've seen a black heap about an acre, and they'd be flying. We call it Jones Island where they've done the Yunderup Canals, and they'd fly out that way and they'd be a big black patch, like an acre of them stirring it up. Where one time it was only half as big as this room. But you can see that when they really stir it up, and this particular day there was still a black heap where they'd come from and there was a string of them right across the estuary to where this, well about four miles away they were stirring the water up. And the shags and the pelicans

go there because the fish come to the top, when the water gets dirty, stirred underneath. And that is something.

But these pelicans, they're just like a drum. You can clean cobblers, chuck the heads over. We always clean the cobblers when we catch cobblers. And you get a boat load. That boat there I've had it full up, nearly sunk with cobblers and you clean the lot. Chuck the head in and the pelicans eat the lot. And when they do a dropping they squirt about a quart and you know it's really phosphorous. Well they used to cart goanna from the nor'west at one time for the garden. And we think that it's the shags and the pelicans polluting the estuary. There's that many of them. And that's what the fishermen reckon. But they actually say it's the piggeries. And when I told some of the pig farmers [laughs] up there, they reckon, "Well everywhere we go we can leave fifty or sixty pelicans."

**HS** So is there a lot of fishing that goes on in the estuary now?

**RENFREY** Oh yes, yes. Fishing goes on. Well the lad had six boxes of mullet just before you came, some of what you've got here. But the main thing with the pollution is birds are one thing, but up until.... You see they built the Harvey Dam in the '30s on the Harvey River, the Wellington Dam. Well that's cut a big lot of water. And then the Serpentine Dam. Well that's two rivers in the estuary. The Murray River is the only one that runs into the estuary without a dam on it. The other rivers have dams on them. Well every time we got a heavy winter, they flushed all the estuary out. And the water used to be fresh from say about the end of June until October, it used to be fresh the whole sea. But the fish and everything would get scoured out every winter when there was three dams with whatsername. Well just about every winter without, when there was a drought or something like that. But we never get droughts on the coast here.

Then when these here two rivers were cut off we don't get those floods down. And when they came out of the hills, with the first rains that came down it was all clay the sort of water and they used to drive the fish out. But it cleaned everything out. Well now you see there's only one river and it doesn't get the flushing like it used to and that makes a difference. And all these birds here - well at one time we used to use cotton nets and we used to have net sticks all around the estuary and we'd put these netsticks up on clear bank, and as soon as you put it there, the shag would sit on there. And in no time the weeds would go growing around there. And once you get weeds, the weeds go rotten, you know they grow just the same as everything else, they grow for two months, three months, or sometimes they'll grow when it's warm. Weeds grow in six foot of water when it's warm. And these, they got rotten, you see, like everything else and they don't get flushed out like they used to. So that's one of the real drawbacks on it. That if we had the good bar, when the bars wide and open and everything's clear and a good whatsername, we get the salt water back. It can be green up in the estuary with this here nodular, as they call it, it floats on top. Well it floats on top, the water underneath is alright, but it stops the oxygen getting down, you see? And you see the little fish come up and jump on top of the nodular. But the good fish like the mullet and pilchard and that they swim and they feed along the edge of it. It's not all over the estuary, you see?

But when that's there, say in Cox's Bay. That's the bay up here with the turn, the west of the inlet before it turns at the Harvey Estuary, well when the first.... At this time of the year is the lowest water, we get lower water in the sea from August until January and February it rises, but the lowest water in August. You can go up there in August, if it's calm weather you can see that reef sticking out perhaps that far. But we don't get high tides again, sometimes it's Christmas. And it has been as one year about February before it got high. But as soon as that high water comes again, in nine days

that bay is clear. You can go along there and you can't see that far in the water. In nine days after you can go and see seven foot of water, straight down the bottom. So as soon as the salt water comes back it's right. And we've been lucky this year. It's been a mild winter, we've had rains, well actually all of October was rains. And you can get fairly hot weather in October and November. Well now if they haven't been hot, they might say it's hot, but we've been getting showers of rain all the time. Well there's not much this year.

When Channel 7 was over there with their hurdy gurdy taking the photos, the water dropped and it was green and yellow weed the fish feeds on but the water dropped on Boggy Bay Bank and they're over there taking this, reckoned it was algae. And it was just weed the fish feed on. So it's birds and not enough water, if we had the flush of water. And there's this groyne here, when it's opened it's about nine days it will clean this estuary up, when the high water comes. And we're sure of that. That's happened every year. About nine days, that's all it takes.

But the fish will move away from it and they'll move into the other rivers and that and come back in this river. You'll see this river when it's on, it's full of pilchard. Not so mullet. The mullet go back towards the other rivers, in the Serpentine River and those. That's where the lads caught them this morning. They fished down by that way. The couple of days that the water went up last week, it was a bit of wind on and the tide was.... full moon the tide gets higher, and there's mullet all around there. I think we caught about fifty or sixty boxes last week. That's fifty pound boxes or twenty-three kilogram boxes. But the first couple of days there were none, but they're showing up again now.

But wherever you see the nodular is, it's just like a scum on top of the water and the pilchard and mullet, you'll find them around the edge of that. You don't have to go anywhere else. The edge of that, they feed on it. And you see the green stuff inside of them. You won't die if we eat these. I eat them all the time. The pelicans eat them they don't die. The shags eat them, they don't die. The crabs eat them, they don't die.

**HS** You mentioned earlier about your boat out there....

**RENFREY** Yes.

**HS** What size is that boat?

**RENFREY** That one? Twenty-one foot.

**HS** That's aluminium?

**RENFREY** No. That's a plastic.... That one's aluminium, that's sixteen foot long. And this one here is twenty foot long, that's a fibreglass boat.

**HS** And you use that for specific fishing, or for general fishing?

**RENFREY** Yes, general. We go there, and then we tow a little dinghy, or twelve foot dinghy with about eight hundred yards of net on it if we want to go in the shallower water. We go in the pretty shallow water without but we have to pull the engine up and it wants about a foot of water to go in, you can pull the prop after that. But we've got a dinghy that will go in about six inches of water. And when it gets warm, the warm weather they'll go right ashore. The mullet will go in with nearly their backs out



of the water. They like that warm water and they go into it. So we have a little dinghy to go along. Sometimes we only use that.

**HS** And what time of day do you go out fishing now?

**RENFREY** About five o'clock in the morning.

**HS** And how long do you fish for?

**RENFREY** Until you catch some. [Laughter] Sometimes you might go up there and be home at eight o'clock in the morning. You know where they go and you know where they are and if you get enough that shot, well you come home and clean the net out. Clean it out, get rid of them. A lot of blokes stay there all day, but that's you see them and they can't sell their fish here. But they'll go out and they'll catch fish and they'll catch fish, and then they'll come home and go around the town to get somebody to clear it.

Or they'll set their nets. Set net is the worst thing. It is real detrimental to the game. And when I first started fishing out we weren't allowed to set a net 'til dark. And there's no sense in that. If you set the net before it the fish goes away from it, they can see it. But now they want to come home and go to the pub before dark and they set their net.... They're allowed to set an hour and a half before sundown, and they set two or three hours before sundown. And then the shags and pelicans are along there all the time working on it. And then they [unclear] go along the net and in the morning it's the same. They go there too late in the day. And in the water your fish gets.... You're running out are you? [Laughs]

In the morning the fish, it's a funny thing, they can cook in the water if they die, they go white because the temperature, their sort of body temperature goes to the temperature of the water then. Before they die they don't. They're cold. But as soon as they die they go warm and they go white, and you can push your finger through them if they're in the water three or four hours. In the water like that if they're dead and they're no good then. And that's all they do know. There's only a half a dozen blokes haul nets. We go out and haul. See the fish. Go around until we can find them and then we put a net around them like that and then pull the net in from to when it brings it all back to nothing. The fish hit it. And then we take them as they're still alive when we pull them out of the net, so they're good then.

But these set nets, they're the ruination of everything as far as fish are concerned. The fish are no good. And the nets set in a long line like that, the fish will run along it in the day time, or even at night. You see fish, as soon as you put fish inside the net they run around the net, but when you set it in a long line, they'll go like that. And then perhaps another blokes' got another line like that and they finish up right across the estuary and the fish go back in the rivers. You see they won't stay in the estuary when they.... The river's all closed you're not allowed to fish there. Some do fish in it, but they get caught for it and it costs them money. But if you've got any brains you don't go in there. But these set nets the fish runs along and keeps running along and they finish up not in the estuary at all, they go to sea or they go up in the river.

**HS** You mentioned earlier about your larger boats and fishing outside of the estuary....

**RENFREY** Yes.

**HS** What types of boat were they?

**RENFREY** Oh the one that I had for sea fishing was twenty-five foot long and a nine foot beam, about five foot deep from top to bottom. It would only carry 9,000 pounds of fish. But it was a big boat. And a crew of four of us, you see and you'd shoot the nets along from the shore. You had about, oh forty fathoms of rope on each end of the net about two hundred yards long and oh, twenty-five, thirty foot deep. And you couldn't take the boats inside the breakers you have to shoot out, so somebody would swim in. A couple would go over the end with the edge of the net and swim ashore with it and others when they'd run out, you'd swing out from the sheets like that, go off of them. Then you'd anchor outside, the net was like that out in the water and you'd have a pocket there, the fish would go out in the pocket. You'd yank your boat outside there, and you'd have a rope, you'd tie that onto where the pocket is so when you pulled the net up on the beach, you swim back onto the boat again and pull it from the pocket out, and then you'd bail the fish out of the pocket. The fish was all in small mesh in the pocket.

**HS** Was it all coastal fishing that you did?

**RENFREY** Yes, yes, we never done any purse seining. We shot off the beach. Seining they call that.

**HS** Yes. And that, when did you finish your coastal fishing?

**RENFREY** Oh well we did a bit in amongst the rocks after, just round catching pilchard for bait or yellow eyed mullet. I did that up to a couple of years ago. But we did that with smaller boats.

In that boat there I caught 109 bags just over there in Golden Bay. 109 bags, 60 pound bags for bait for crayboats. Hauled about two o'clock in the afternoon and they were all in the Crayboats Association before sundown. You pull the pocket up. The fish all runs down the pocket like something like a trawl and you pull it up over the side, to undo the end, and you pull it out and you have like a net net. You know like you crab with. So big around and a small mesh, you'd just dip them out and tip on the boat like that. We'd lift out a couple of boxes, a hundred pound a time, a hundred and fifty pound at a time and just roll them in the boat and you'd see the boat going down. If you got four blokes in the boat, one bloke lowering the pocket out, or two blokes lowering the pocket over and another two would get one each side of it and you'd just pull in a hundred weight of fish. A hundred weight more a time. Quick fishing that, and the fish is good, they're not knocked about they just run down the pocket. That is fishing.

**HS** Just going back to the coastal fishing. You said you had three crew....?

**RENFREY** Four.

**HS** Yourself as Captain?

**RENFREY** No. No Captains.

**HS** No Captains? [Laughter]

**RENFREY** All workers.

**HS** Oh that's interesting.

**RENFREY** In that game you're all Indians, no chiefs.

**HS** Oh in crayfishing it's a bit different, isn't it?

**RENFREY** Oh yes. The bloke sits up in the front and he's King Farouk.

**HS** Right.

**RENFREY** Some of them, they're not allowed to talk to him.

**HS** Who were the others on the boat with you?

**RENFREY** Two brothers, and the brother's stepson.

**HS** Are you still fishing with your brothers?

**RENFREY** No, no. One brother, he's crook. He's had a by-pass. Was knocked about in World War II. He was there for about.... Or in Japan, finished up right at the end of the War picking up the Japs on an island. I think there was - Second Eight Commandos where there was an island where there was 671,000 Japs in the Solomons. Only the atomic bomb stopped them, they gave up the Japs then and the Japs reckoned well they'd give them that much trouble they were going to put the whole 670,000 on them. But anyway he finished up crook. He doesn't do anything now. He's had a by-pass.

But the other brother, he's younger, he's fifteen years younger than I am. But the other brother he's got a crayboat or he more or less is retired now. He just looks after the boat and the others take her to sea now. His stepson and a couple of his sons or something. But they're just crayfishing.

**HS** And what about your son, you're still....?

**RENFREY** He fishes with me. He just came in. He just brought that boat in, backs it in the yard. You can't leave anything outside. I left a boat down at the beach there one night and they know their job. They took the engine out and undid it off the leads and everything like. It was there at two o'clock in the morning, seven o'clock in the morning it was gone. Paddles and anything like that. If you don't bring them home and put them in the yard, there's nothing left of them.

**HS** So who do you think....?

**RENFREY** Oh well they're in the game. They're specialists, because they do it too good. Then a fortnight after they tried to take the boat, I had it chained up to a post and they tried to get it out, but they blew out. And you could see the footmarks where they tried to push it into the water, but they gave up I think. Or somebody came along, I suppose. But you can't leave anything in the boats.

Oh there was a boat there, a nice boat there, they left there a couple of weeks and going past there the other day and they just bashed the whole lot in, in the frame with a .... It was blocked off in the cabin. But a week before I think mine when the engine

was taken there was one taken down a bit further. Because it's big business now, thieving. And they have to be a specialist too.

**HS** Were your daughters ever interested in fishing?

**RENFREY** No.

**HS** No?

**RENFREY** No.

**HS** Not at all?

**RENFREY** No.

**HS** What about your wife?

**RENFREY** No. Oh she used to go out in the boat with me and they never wanted to do it. She just goes hand sometimes [unclear] but.... No the other daughter. Oh, the oldest one was the secretary to Paul Hasluck when he was Minister for Foreign Affairs, she was whatsername. But it was all night work working for him, so she gave it away and came back to Wesfarmers. She's just left Wesfarmers and she went to Denmark. Oh, she had twenty years in town or something like that. Well she's about fifty now or something. But anyway she's applying I think today or tomorrow for the Agricultural College, isn't it down at Denmark? Somewhere or other?

**HS** Yes.

**RENFREY** Yes. They told her to come in and have an interview. But see the last job she did she was working for Wesfeeds. Well she was at Murdoch University too.

**HS** Oh, that's where I come from.

**RENFREY** Yes. Yes, she was there about ten years ago. I think she was doing a, what do you call it? They have outside people send in things to be marked out.

**HS** Tutoring was she?

**RENFREY** No, all she was doing was marking the papers I think. But....

**HS** External Studies?

**RENFREY** Yes. But she left that and went back to Wesfarmers. She had a blue there. She went on six weeks holiday and came back and all the work was still there for her to do. So she said that was no good. And her boss said, "Well that woman's been here, and she's been in every department here and she never does anything. And she doesn't say she won't do it and they can't sack her." So she left there and went back to where she was started off before she went to Canberra. She went back to Wesfeeds. She was accountant there. Funny thing when she left, she reckoned there was more chiefs than Indians there....

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

This interview continues on [Tape 2 Side B](#).



## Edited transcript of an interview with LIONEL RENFREY

### TAPE 2 SIDE B

**RENFREY** Jane Adelaide Renfrey, the youngest daughter, she left school here and she went into the dress shop business and she finished up looking after the shop in the main street here. Then she got married and went to Perth. She's got a couple of daughters, one thirteen and one fifteen. And she's worked for different, I think Myers at times. Irene Whytes, she ran the shop for Irene Whyte. They sold out, I think, to Myers and she ran another shop for them. And now I don't know who they are they've had some other firm take over and she's running the shop at Booragoon. I rang her last night, she reckoned it's quite good. So that's what she does, selling the rags. But this one she reckons it's.... It's only just new, they bought the shops and the one at Booragoon she reckons a lot of the stuff they sell, they get a lot and they sell it at about a 10 or 15 percent margin that's all to get rid of it. You know, sell it at a quick turnover. Whereas before at some of the others it would be 100 percent, 150 percent on some of the dresses. But this one she reckons is really going good. They reckon the works a lot harder, there's no sitting around. Working all the time. She's got about four girls underneath her.

**HS** Are any of your grandchildren interested in fishing?

**RENFREY** No. Only Russ the youngest bloke, he's got two. One's at a mine somewhere working on the machinery in the mines. Then he finished up down the mines because there's more money. Clint the youngest one, he's about eighteen, he was building here. They were contract building with somebody, an aluminium firm I think it was, anyway half the time they couldn't get the gear and now he's gone away to shearing and he reckons he's going to learn shearing, roustabouting. But he's learning to shear and he kicks around with one of the shearers and he reckons he'll finish up shearing. That's Clinton. But Bradley's up in.... I don't know what the mine is, but he's up and he's down the mine now so he'll be mining, looking for gold. But anyway I'd rather a bloke that's shearing sheep. It's hard work though....

**HS** Is he your son's son?

**RENFREY** Yes.

**HS** Right.

**RENFREY** He didn't like fishing. He goes skin diving and everything like that, but anyway I think there's no future in fishing, not in inlet fishing. It's alright if you've got a crayboat or something like that because that's organised. It's so many in it

and you're allowed so many pots and things like that and they're trying to keep it, because of the export trade and they want to keep that going. But these inlets and things like that they, we can't get the market for our fish. Not like it used to be. People would get a fish and scale and clean them and the housewife wouldn't today, they want it in the packet now. So these fish here, these smaller class fish don't go very well with people to clean them.

And yet up until 1950 and all before that for all I can remember, pilchard or the yellow eyed mullet they were the main fish for the fried fish shops. Because they were white flesh, and mullet has got too oily and the oil spoils their dripping or whatever they use. And they used the pilchard. Well that went until 1950 from as far back as I can remember, that was the main thing sold from the fish shop. And the fish shops were mainly family shows, and the kids would come home from school and clean the fish and help to fillet and that's how it went. But about 1950 we got a lot of cobbler and they started to get on to cobbler for fried fish business. It was bigger and quicker. You'd get a big cobbler and you'd get a lot of fillets out of it. And then the South African hake and that started to come in and today you've got a job to sell fish, unlike the time when we sold through Perth market. It's all practically going to bait. Down South they send up bait. And the shark fishing and that, they're complaining that they're.... Net fishing for shark that's not too good because they set one net in the middle of the day and the fish get killed in it and they go rotten inside and it's not a good product, not like the fish that they catch on the lines, the shark fish, schnapper and the dhufish and that in it, they're not good in the set nets, sea nets. So it's hard if you haven't got a good product that you can pack and sell in the supermarkets you haven't got much chance.

**HS** Lionel, could you tell us about net fishing in Mandurah? You've just mentioned the nets.

**RENFREY** Yes well when it started off this Fred Ward, the first one, he talked to me about net fishing. When they started fishing then, this the latter end of the last century, they made their own net at about three and a half, four inch mesh and the most fish they caught was for the canneries, and they were fairly big fish. But they only had a short net and they'd join two nets together and shoot around the schools of fish each way. They didn't set much then for fish, then went and hauled for them all the time. But they did have a couple of smoke houses about twelve by twelve they were, made out of stone, and there was one in Cox's Bay and one up at, we call it Moffatts, but they call it Park Ridge now, and that was about twelve by twelve. And they used to smoke these good fish. And the sailing boats, then it was all sailing boats going to Fremantle, all the products practically was bought, bar on the train around the other way like and to Pinjarra and down. But they used to go through with wagons sometimes to Fremantle with the wagons. But they smoked fish and took them to Fremantle and sold those.

But getting back to the net fishing, they got into smaller nets and started to catch whiting from that time on and they marketed them through the market in Perth at Wellington Street, and this is about an inch and three quarter net they used to use. And they found this was much preferable and they had longer nets, a bit longer nets, not very long, they carry about five or six hundred yards. And the end of the net would be for whiting net and they'd have perhaps pilchard net alongside of it. But the main thing they were fishing for was whiting. When they got on towards the twenties they started to get more going for them, two and a quarter and two and a half inch mesh for mullet, not the big net, to market them you see through the markets. And it went on then, kept on going all the time and when they came to the

thirties they used a lot of net, mullet. They got lighter nets and better nets and they were better for catching fish.

**HS** What were they made of?

**RENFREY** All cotton and they had to be tanned, you see? And when they were tanned net they were no good for set nets, that's run them out and leave them at night time, but they were alright when they were new. Sometimes they'd tan them with wattle bark, and it was a softer tan. But the most were done with redgum and then the nets would go hard, so that's why there wasn't much set in those times. But that I'd say was the start of the really competitive fishing then. On the Murray and the Serpentine, they were fishing there and they were good there. They could catch a good lot of whiting, mullet and pilchard and they only had about four mile to go to Pinjarra to catch the train. But up the Harvey Estuary it was hard work there because you had a long way to travel. But they fished around the top of the river, what they called the Sticks and they caught a lot of whiting and mullet and that there. And that was pretty good because you only had to get them down the river to catch the coach to go to Pinjarra.

But when the thirties came there was a couple of trucks started to cart fish. They were going up the estuary picking the fish up and taking it straight through to the Perth market and the Fremantle market and some would be sold at Piennos in Fremantle and the fish market down there. So there was a good distribution of fish then and there was a lot more fish came in. In the thirties there was about ten fishermen come from the Swan River, they used to call them cacker catches. They used to catch undersized mullet and they left the Swan then. I don't know why. I think they used that much small net when the small fish came out in the early part of the summer they'd wipe them out pretty quick, so they'd finish up in Mandurah when the transport ran through. But when they were catching the whiting, I remember one time there 165 case of whiting caught from Mandurah. The fishermen from Mandurah sent 165 cases. We had thirty cases, the father and I. And nearly all the others had the same.

And I don't know how many went from the Murray, because the Murray and the Serpentine they seemed to be better from about May. Until the winter set in they were really good, the whiting was right around the rivers and all around there. Sand whiting, it must have been when the rivers came out. And there was four or five Australians from there and there was four or five Japs fish from the Murray with these here.... Yes, there was four lots of Japs I think. Okey says they're still there. But Cowra's I think they got interned through the war, World War II. And I think they were in that.... Now what is it? Cowra break out. And they've never seen them since, so I think they got knocked off there. But Okey's, there's still some of the grandsons fishing here and I think one of the sons. But three of them were in the Army, Australian Army. But of course, the old Okomoro, he came from Singapore. He wasn't a real Jap. Like he was a Singapore Jap, but he married a white woman you see, these ones. But they interned him for a couple of weeks but they let him out because he had one son in the Second Sixteenth Battalion.

Anyway getting back to the fish. I was saying there they really caught good fish for the market in there from the Murray and the Serp. That's before they had the ice works there.

**HS** What was the weight of each case?

**RENFREY** About forty pound.

**HS** And how much would you get for a pound of whiting?

**RENFREY** Well they sold them by the dozens. And you'd get, perhaps if there was a big glut in you might only get ninepence, but they'd go to 1/3d or something like that, the dozen. A shilling, 1/3d. But as I say the week before the Depression, or the Easter before the Depression they went to 4/2d to 6/2d a dozen. That was sort of ridiculous, it was, but then after the Depression started they went for nothing after the crash.

**HS** And on average how many would you have to a box?

**RENFREY** Fish?

**HS** Yes.

**RENFREY** They were small boxes. You'd get about eight dozen length mullet in it. You'd get ten dozen or eleven dozen whiting, or perhaps twelve dozen packed in very tight.

**HS** So that's the forty pound?

**RENFREY** No they wouldn't.... The mullet would go about forty pound, but the whiting wouldn't. The whiting would be about thirty-six pound. But they weren't pounds then, they were sold by the dozens. It wasn't until World War II before they started selling fish by the pound.

**HS** Right.

**RENFREY** But getting into the thirties when the extra fishermen came here from the Swan River, they started to catch small fish here too, selling these cackers under the lap. But that did no good to the industry. But then through the War it seemed to go out, like through the Depression. But the trouble is now with the net fishing we've got [unclear] and it's not like anybody can catch fish now. All you have to do is find out where somebody catches some and you'll set a mono-filament net there and they'll hit in the day time if it's a thin mesh. This is ruining the place, because they just run these nets out to the price of the fish and the quality of the fish. Because they're allowed to set it an hour and a half before dark and they don't have to pick it up until eight o'clock in the morning. So if there's any fish hit that net, well the birds are at them. And then they're going soft because they're in the net. And if they died, if they kill themselves, a fish his head won't go right through the mesh to over the gills, well he dies. He kills himself. His gills can't open and he kills himself because he can't breath. His gills can't open. But the fish is no good. And they're allowing it. That's what they're doing. And then they'll take them home and get somebody else to clean the net out and they don't wash them. And then they're complaining now in the local paper about they can't sell their fish. Well people aren't going to buy a fish if it's no good. So they're ruining themselves with these nets. And they'll allow them to do this.

**HS** When was the legislation changed to allow for that....?



**RENFREY** It's all the net. You mean the different sorts of net?

**HS** And also for the time.

**RENFREY** Oh it's in the last few years they're giving them longer all the time. And they've even tried to stop the hauling nets for cobblers. You see we use deep nets for cobblers. Fill up that boat out there, we filled it up in one haul and then let twice as many go as we put in the boat. Well that's when they're about. It only lasts for a while. But all the fish is good, they're not knocked about. But they want just a set net for them. Well they set the net and then the crabs and things are biting them. And when they bring them out of the boat, they've got a lump of wood (I'll show you because I've got a piece out there) just like a bat and they hit these cobblers and they bust the inside, and bust the blood and it goes through them, and the cobblers is not near as good as the ones that just butted up and rolled in the boat.

Haul nets for cobbler are small mesh nets and they lay in the net and haul them into the boat. With the set net at night the mesh is 3 inch to 4 inch and the cobbler mesh in the net is mostly alive. They bash them on the head to kill them with a piece of wood and that's where the cobbler get knocked about. And you clean them then, they're good.

But it's silly, And that's the game that I say that should be stopped, the set net, because it's detrimental to it. And now they say an hour and a half before the whatsername and the fish are dead in the net and they get soft. As soon as they die or get whatsernamed they sort of lose, they go soft and they're not alive and swimming, they're cooler, so when you haul the net you'll pull them in and you'll throw them and they're cooler fish. And this is going on. And that's all they do now, they just want to set.... This is a young, different generation you see. And that's the easy way just go over there, set the net, pick them up, next morning the fish come and hits it, go back and pick it up and take it home.

And when we first started to set nets, we had to stay with the net. We weren't allowed to set until dark, so if anybody wanted to haul nets around of it, they could see where to go and haul. A lot of fish was caught. You'd wait on sundown for the fish to come on the banks, in the shallower water. And you hauled them at night time, or just as it was getting dark, especially whiting, King George whiting, things like that coming in. But now today you can't find anywhere to run the net short of dark. They set nets everywhere. If it's not fishermen, it's amateurs' nets. And this is one of the biggest problems.

**HS** What proportion of fishers in Mandurah would be using the set nets?

**RENFREY** Well there's only three blokes out on the water all through the winter and that's me and my son and Ron Harper on two grounds. Three grounds rather. All the rest never had any orders for fish because they just don't look after them and just set the net and leave it there for birds to tamper at it and pull at the fish. And then they don't wash them in the salt water. They take them home, they're washed with fresh water. Well fresh water is the worst thing you can do with fish, is wash them in fresh water. Prawns and that will change their colours with fresh water. They go white.

**HS** That does mean that people who use set nets and they're not selling their fish they couldn't really be dependent on the fish for a living?

**RENFREY** Well it's a part of their living, but they set for prawns you see in the summer. Prawns can start about the end of January and they go through to about June. But they can make enough out of that to carry them over if a good prawn season.

**HS** So this is just an addition to the....?

**RENFREY** Then they just go fishing on the side. If they can sell them good oh. They try to sell them too. But anyway if they don't sell them they go on the dole if they can't. And some of them made enough money to last more than a year, but if you're not catching anything or can't sell them, you can go and get the dole. So it's a bad business.

**HS** So obviously you believe the future of net fishing in Mandurah....

**RENFREY** Has had it.

**HS** At stake?

**RENFREY** Yes, yes. And if they made them haul their nets. And now a thing about.... In the Tonkin Government the local health inspector and myself organised with the head health inspector, I think it was.... Sweetman I think it was.

**HS** That was in the early seventies?

**RENFREY** Yes, yes. Well we tried to get the health inspector to inspect the fish same as the meat inspector. We had it all set up to go and the Fisheries Department (I found this out). I was an adviser to the Minister of Fisheries in the Tonkin Government. And anyway we had this all set up and I found out that this went off, one of the fish inspectors in the department, McCormack I think his name was. Pretty well that's it.

When we were going up to Shark Bay once he said, "Oh" he said "they tried to get the fish in Mandurah inspected by a health inspector." He said, "I went to see them," (I think he was told to) "to wipe it off because they wanted it for bait for the crayfishing industry." You know for the crayfishing industry. So I didn't say anything, I thought "Well that's pretty good that is." But the point is if they'd been inspecting them all the time we'd have still been able to sell the fish because the fish had to be good. If they want good fish for crayboats the same as they do for people to eat, because if the fish is soft and no good in deep water it will fall to pieces in 70 fathoms of water and fall to pieces before it gets to the bottom. And it won't last. When the fish is stale and no good they put them in the craypots it's not worth a cracker. That's why they can't sell it. There's too many boxes. The bloke where we go he said, "If the imported fish comes into Australia it's mostly come out of a purse seine or something like that, and it's cold countries where it's come from, New Zealand or some of it's coming from Europe and it's all pulled in, it's all cold, so therefore the lot is good. The lots the same. But buy this local fish and one bloke will look after his fish and the other one won't. So the crayfisherman gets it and it falls to pieces in his pot, he doesn't want it again, so we all suffer for it. Now we were getting last year, \$16 a 23 kilo carton. This year we're getting \$10. That's a forty percent drop. Everybody's wanting thirty percent more, but we've got a drop. And some of them can't even sell their bait. And it's just through.... it's because it's no good and there's too many of them putting no good bait in.

They go out and they'll fill the boat right to the top on a hot day and then they'll come home and try to get somebody to help them clean them or something like that. And they just chuck them in the boxes, not washed or anything. If they're not washed in saltwater, there's a slime on fish, if it's not washed out, well it's no good.

In Shark Bay you'll get fish up there and if you don't wash them, the slime on them they're no good at all. And it's practically the same here. The fish that we clean down here in pool and wash them, and the other blokes that go home and just turn the hose on perhaps, there's no comparison the same fish. And this water's cool, that's in the sea water.

**HS** What about the restrictions on fishing along the southern coast?

**RENFREY** Oh different, coast. Oh yes, as I was saying before when you're licensed in the last few years. Well it got restricted when they started salmon fishing after World War II they gave them days each that they fish, but a license you bought it. It was fish in W.A. You could go anywhere. You could go from here to Perth, or go down the beach or anything. But they've restricted. The first thing the salmon fishing was restricted. Then the prawning got restricted and everything's getting restricted now. Three years ago I think my license said I could fish in the estuarine and the beaches. Well last year my license only just said I could fish in the inlet. There's no beaches on it. So it's getting down all the time. And now they're talking about....

I've seen a bit back, I rang the Minister of Fisheries up about a fortnight ago, where it was closing from to only special fishermen between Tims Thicket, about nine mile from here to Windy Harbour. They reckon there's enough fishermen fishing there now. You have to get a permit to fish there. And we've fished there since 1924. And we'll have to get a permit to go there now. And we fished up along here right up until last year, amongst the rocks here for pilchard and I never got that license this year of that. And we've done practically.... It will be a few years like in the 1920's where we used to go up the estuary and whatsername and then we'd come back and fish for the rest of the year.

And about three years when I played football in town I used to go the winter and play football in town and all the time that was fished. But we're not the only ones. Like they're not making it any different to others, it's going to everybody. And now you see they're culling out all the ones, fishermen in the Swan River. And they're used to be a hundred fish there I suppose before the Depression. And now they've got them down to, they're not processing the licences. Now they're buying licence's back here, but all the licence's they bought back, they give you \$5,000 to knock off.

But this Ron Harper he said, "They've given us \$5,000 just to knock off fish, but" he said "everybody else is getting, the politician is getting half a million" he says. And the other blokes worked for the government, they get a couple of hundred thousand when you knock off. They reckon that's not fair. Because we keep our boats and things like that. But if you sell your licence boat and net they're no good to you.

**HS** How much do you have to pay for a licence?

**RENFREY** Fisheries licence, it costs me about.... My licence and boat \$74-\$100 buy back licences. Marine and Harbours Licence \$150 I think last year. That's with the boat licence and mine. But on top of that you have to pay up, I think I paid about \$150 for a Harbour and Lights Licence and they tell you how many lights you have

to put on the boat. They don't do nothing for you. And then you have to pay \$100 into the buy back fund. To buy back fund or something like this. That's about \$100. Oh about \$250 I suppose. But that's not the thing, it's just going down the drain.

**HS** Do you belong to a co-operative?

**RENFREY** I've been in two, three rather, and I got thrown out of one and the other two went broke. [Laughs] Two Mandurah Co-ops, one in town going good, but you couldn't look after it in town there's that many crooks in the world as you know.

**HS** Why were you thrown out?

**RENFREY** Oh the one in Fremantle. Oh that was in.... I forget what the date of it was anyway. When Fremantle Co-op I was in that and it was run by the Onellos and those, you know, the Sicilians. And they were going well, two of them, Frank and his brother Con anyway, they practically did all the work. And they worked about twelve hours a day and got it going, but when they got it going and we went and borrowed 70,000 pounds from the Commercial Bank to put in freezers and build freezers up in Jurien Bay. And I was only a fisherman.

I remember "Big Matt", his first name was Matt, I forget his other name. A big bloke. Six foot six, twenty stone, a big Slav. Anyway I asked when we borrowed this 70,000 and everybody had to go 750 bond to the Commercial Bank. And I said, "Well they're building the freezers in Fremantle and a freezer up in Jurien Bay, now any freezers for us the fishermen.?" There was about twenty fishermen. Where were we going to put our fish. Well they said, "We're not interested in you," you see "You fishermen. This is for the crayfishermen." And we had to go bond for 750 pound. This big Slav he let them have it, there were dings going everywhere. But they had enough and Dr Marion was the manager of it, now he was a Slav. So anyway the Italians had, there was enough Italians to come into when they saw it was good to vote us all out. So I got my shares back from it. And this big Slav, I just forget his name, anyway he just about choked half of them. He really went berserk. But they took it over the Italians.

**HS** What year was that?

**RENFREY** I just forget the year. But it was when it was pounds, shilling and pence. It would be about thirty years ago. But anyway they got the whole set up. And these two Anelias they just sacked them as well as the whatsername and they'd worked twelve, fourteen hours a day to get it going, just getting ordinary wages. So that was bad.

But our two other Co-ops. We had one going good in Perth, but it went too big. We had too many blokes that weren't doing nothing and blokes walking away with dhufish in their pockets and one thing and another like that. Then we got one here, going here, and then they weren't satisfied being here and the head he got run out of the place. I think his father and whatsername were quite good people. Down at Blackwood River they put that island up or something, they've got that. But anyway they had more employed than there was fishermen and you couldn't do anything with them. So that went broke. About \$30,000 of it.

But Co-ops are the thing if you can work them. If you can get somebody good enough. You see in the one in Perth we had three managers in about a year. But the whole lot of them was just grabbing the money and selling anything.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE B

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## TAPE 3 SIDE A

**HS** Lionel, one thing I wanted to ask you about your own personal life, you look a very fit and healthy person for the number of years you've been in the game.

**RENFREY** Yes.

**HS** Are there any aspects of your fishing life where you've either been seriously injured, or your life was at risk, or you felt like getting out of it?

**RENFREY** No, I played football and cricket and tennis and swam and no, oh, I pugged once. I won the Cruise weight Champion of the South West in 1932, but that's the last fight I had, I never won after that. It was a dead loss. No, I drank a little bit when I was younger but I used to go through perhaps the whole football season or cricket season. At the finish of the season I'd have a drink whether you won or lost at the end of the season. Some seasons I wouldn't.

I was crook about when Darwin was blowing away. I had a prostate gland and I went to Pinjarra, a doctor here I'd been under him for a while, a Pommie doctor, a bloke name Hitchcock, good surgeon. Anyway I was there a month and I'm walking around with the bag on the side [laughs] and it didn't worry me. Every now and again they'd call me in to get another x-ray you see. He's a thorough man and when the first time I saw him, it's still on his books there. He's talking about fishing and going on, he writes a story on you every time you go there. Anyway getting back to him, I was three, four weeks before they operated.

Anyway the morning before he operated on me, or the evening, he said, "How much drugs do you take?" "Oh", I said, "I have a couple of beers now and again." He said, "Oh don't worry about that, that's not a drug" he said, "I'm talking about drugs." I said, "Oh I don't take, I might take an aspro when I have a cold or something like that," and I said, "no, I don't take any drugs." Well he said, "How much do you smoke?" I said, "I don't smoke at all." "Oh well" he said "I'll operate on you otherwise I wouldn't bother about you." So anyway I found out that.... After he operated on me he said, "I want to see you in three months." I said, "Right."

So I went back in three months and he had me x-rayed, so anyway he said "Come back again in six months." So I came back again at six months and he x-rayed me again. So he said, "How much are you drinking?" I said, "Nothing," I said "plenty of water." And I said, "Why?" And he said, "Well oh, I'll have a look up." I'd had this prostate gland and I'd had a growth in the bowels and a growth in my liver. And I've still never smoked or drank since but it's never affected me. And when I asked him this time he said, "You don't want to drink" he said "because alcohol will harden your liver" he said. But I reckon it's the stinking water and stuff I got in New Guinea when I was there, this trouble. But I've been right since.

The only thing I've got are a crook knee and a crook shoulder. I hurt that playing football when I was 26 in town. South Fremantle was playing on the wing and I came straight out and did last kick of the day and I ran into him and I came down stiff legged, I was up in the air and I came down stiff legged on that leg and the whole body on top of it. And it was just like in my leg, and I still have trouble with that. But even when I was in the Army it would just swell up when I was marching.

But then I fell backwards in the boat about nine feet on this shoulder. That's crook.

**HS** That's your right shoulder?

**RENFREY** But that's when I put it up there. I pull it down like that. And other than that I've had Dengue Fever and Malaria. And I think a doctor saved me there, an Air Force doctor. I had this cerebral malaria and there's no-one ever lived with that, they all die with cerebral malaria. It goes to the brain, you see, that's why I haven't got much brain. [Laughs].

But anyway I was talking to an old lady that lived down the road there one afternoon and I felt a bit dizzy and I rolled over just like I was in the surf of the sea. So I finished up in Hollywood Hospital and I was crook with that. As soon as they brought me out in the ward with about twenty in a ward, I'd start to dry retch and I couldn't stop. This Air Force doctor put me back in the ward, as soon as I got back in a room of my own, nobody there, I was right. So they took me out again, and I did the same. And I went crook at some of the nurses or something and they were going to court martial me or something, this officer he was, an Air Force doctor. But he'd been in New Guinea, and he said, "if anybody's going to get court martialed it's the Matron." And here she is the Matron, the sister. So they left me there then. But I got over that. But I was crook. Really crook with that.

Anyway when I was eighty I was run over by two girls and a bloke in a car. They were racing two others going around the turn that goes across Baldivis, the road across there. I was turning there. Of course, I had to stop and wait for the traffic to come past and there's three racing down the bloody road into the street and one of them hit me. They went to the police and nobody was hurt, but the patrol cops came along. And the bloke said, "Anybody hurt?" I said, "No." So wrecked their car, it finished up right over the other side of the road. And they said, "Well you have to go down to the police station and report it."

So I went to the police station to report it and the next morning I'm led to believe they said I did a right hand turn in the Bunbury Highway. So I then got a letter from the police in Welshpool, the police head whatsername to tell me that I wasn't a fit person to drive. Anyway something like that. Anyway they said I had to get a medical from the doctor, you see. So the doctor gave me one, and the doctor had to send it, I couldn't get it off him. So Doctor Hitchcock sent it to him, and he said to the girl there, "Will you get this away?" No, they sent it to the local licensing authority and they never sent it to me. And about six weeks after, I got a letter to say well I didn't go so I found out it was over there. So I went over there and they gave me a permit. Or they'd sent me a green thing for a permit, (the police did) to drive until I got my licence again.

So anyway when I got over there and got the licence, they gave me a licence for five years and what was it? Didn't charge me for it or something like that and I didn't go through a test. So anyway then something went wrong and they sent back to me to say I had to have another test or something like that. Anyway I went to the doctor

and I said to the doctor, "What's wrong with me?" He said, "There's nothing wrong with you" he said, "you're like a twenty year old" he said, "and as long as you keep eating those fish, you'll...." I eat a lot of fish and he knows that. And he said, "You'll never get anything wrong with you." So that was that.

But, no I've never had much trouble. But I eat a lot of grilled food and boiled food. I don't like stews and things like that. And I don't like this hash food. I very seldom eat it. I just like solid food, that's right, and plenty of fish. Plenty of water to drink and plenty of fresh air and keep on working. I remember a lot of the fishermen they used to say [unclear]. And when I went fishing they were nearly all old fishermen, like my father's age, you see. And they used all be talking about, oh, and some were older you see. Some about getting to pension time. "Oh it will be good when I get a pension." You know all these blokes that got a pension that worked hard all their life, they last no time, and when they got their pension and gave up fishing that was the end of them.

And the father died at sea, fishing, hooking.

**HS** Was it an accident?

**RENFREY** No, he just.... Oh he'd had an accident, had an accident years before. He was riding a horse and had run into a tree and he had to have operations on his.... It cut the nerves on his face. But anyway he used to take aspros or powders and of course, he'd come home and he'd get these headaches. He'd fall down and hold his head like that, before they cut these nerves. Anyway he started to have brandies because he drank brandy and took these tablets. But he had a stroke and it would only be through, by drinking and having this aspro. He had to drink something it was that bad. And he died thirty mile out to sea with a stroke.

**HS** Were you there at the time?

**RENFREY** No, no, he was with another bloke. No that's getting back to where I was.

**HS** You said that you had that accident when you were eighty? What year was that?

**RENFREY** Two years ago.

**HS** Two years ago.

**RENFREY** Yes. That's what he told me that I was right physically. I was good as a twenty year old bar the couple of injuries I've got. But he reckons keep on eating the fish and you'll be right. no, I never.... I feel just as good as I was when I was, you know, at any time. As long as I work, go fishing, work. If I stop for a week I wouldn't sleep and I wouldn't want to eat. But I go to work and I eat and I sleep. So if you can work, eat and sleep you're pretty right.

**HS** So obviously you won't be retiring?

**RENFREY** No, no, no, no. [Laughter] Oh I've got plenty of time yet to go. [Laughter] But these blokes I was talking about that got the pension. They'd go to the pub and they'd spend all the money in the first week and then they wouldn't have money left so they'd come down to the boat, get a feed of fish or something off you, something like this. But they lasted no time. So I said, "That's never going to

happen to me." And because you've got arms and legs that are made to use them. If you don't use them well something goes wrong. So that's my idea of the business.

**HS** Well perhaps that's a good point at which we could leave it for the time Lionel.

**RENFREY** Thank you.

**HS** Thank you very much.

**RENFREY** Good, you're welcome. I hope you get something out of it.

**HS** Oh, I'm sure we will. Thank you.

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**HS** This tape continues on 8th December, 1989 when I spoke to Lionel Renfrey for a second time at his home in Mandurah.

Lionel, could you tell me about the selling of fish from your house here in Mary Street?

**RENFREY** Yes well we didn't sell many from the house. We used to have the jetty down at the front, where the waterfront here which is only about 50 yards from the house, when the river runs through here. And when we were sea fishing we'd come in, in the afternoon with sea fished tailor, skipjack, kingfish, silver bream, herring, that was the main fish. But we'd come into the jetty. First of all we went to the jetty over at Mandurah. It was the jetty behind the Little Theatre now, it used to belong to Scott Brothers Transport, and we used to go in there especially about February, you'd see the country people, the whole jetty would be full by the time you'd come into the bar from the sea. And when you went there, they had fresh fish, they'd sell quite a lot of fish there. But that was only up 'til about Easter time, there'd be someone waiting there for you.

But to sell fish at home that was a different proposition you see. You fish, and you sell fish. Well people come in here, there was not time for them, they could come in anytime. So they'd wake you up at midnight, ten o'clock at night, or anything, they'd be off to the beach fishing and they'd want some bait. So that didn't work. So we closed the gate and got a dog and nobody got in. But it didn't work, you can't do both things, like go out, especially when you get up at four o'clock, half past three in the morning to get to the other side of the estuary. And slow boats we had then. And you had to get there by sunrise for the best time to catch fish in the summertime. So that ended more or less the fish selling.

But there was two or three dealers here who bought fish. I think next door to the Brighton Hotel they used to buy fish off us. They sold a lot of fish, they did. And another bloke, Jim Conway, he used to sell them out of a garage but that was about the only dealers that we had here. It would sort of mix you up, you can't do both and so we never bothered about selling fish. Or somebody comes to pick up some when the boat comes in here now, or down at where we clean the nets. We clean the nets down at the waterfront there. But we never made a business of it.

**HS** What years did you sell fish from the house here?



**RENFREY** Oh just about, just a bit before World War II and a little bit after it, but not much. It was a real waste of time.

**HS** And the fish was mostly for bait, was it?

**RENFREY** No, no, then they bought it, but they'd get bait to go around the sea to fish. But no the people would come to buy fish they were edible fish. Good fish, mostly skipjack, mullet, tailor and sometimes silver bream, kingfish. But that was about the lot of that.

**HS** Do you do any selling now?

**RENFREY** No, only the ones that come to the boat. You have to have a set up in your house to sell fish now. You may have to have freezers and proper cleaning places and everything like that. But we can sell our fish out of the boat anywhere. Like when we're on the water. I don't know whether if you brought the boat up in the backyard like some of these, whether you'd sell it, or how you'd go, but it's against the authorities you see. Of course, anything with freezers and cleaning places and they are two thousand or three thousand dollars to fix it up properly to satisfy the Health Authorities, so it's not worth it. So that was that.

**HS** Yes, you wanted to keep to fishing only.

**RENFREY** That's right, yes. Yes, that's enough for me.

**HS** You were saying it took a long while to get up the estuary?

**RENFREY** Then, yes. Well first of all when we first started fishing you rowed boats up there. We had a sailing boat. The father was I think, the first one to get a centre board boat that would tack against the wind and he used to run fish from the southern estuary and catch them winter time, any time. He had a fairly, oh it was only about a seventeen foot boat with about seven foot beam, I think, and all decked in. And he'd punch against anything at night. I don't know what time. He'd get down in the morning, he'd get there.

**HS** So how long did it take to get to the fishing grounds?

**RENFREY** Oh then, well if you rowed the boat, if it was calm it would say.... Or if it's up in the estuary before you'd take off it would take you an hour where the fishing ground started, but then you'd row around all day if weather permitting. And at times we rowed to the southern estuary and that would take about five hours to row. And then you'd fish and five hours back. It made a long day.

But then we got a sulky and a spring cart and took a horse up there and we'd tie the horse up in the bush, feed it, and when we caught our fish we'd bring it back at night time. But that was much better. But then when the roads got good enough we got buses. I think we had an old T Model Ford, we cut the body off it and ran that first. And you could come down in about 1.1/2 hours. Oh the road was bad to take to the top of the estuary, it's about twenty odd miles to that there island. It would take two and a half hours to get up there, the road was that rough. Just bush tracks, sand. So that was better than six or seven hours.

**HS** And how long does it take to get to those same grounds now?

**RENFREY** Well you can do the whole of the ground, the whole estuary twice a day in a 60 or 90hp motor boat if you want to. The whole lot in boats. You see the boat is a 60 horsepower boat now, eighteen, twenty foot boat, you'd go to the within two hours even looking, and do the lap around the estuary which would be about twenty-four, twenty miles, forty mile to do a lap all around it and back and forwards. There's quite a bit of difference. But we never go twice a day. The blokes up the estuary though do that, live on the waterfront where the open waters are and then perhaps at night for a look and then morning, and then the afternoon.

But we used to camp up there until about thirty years ago I suppose. We had camps up in the estuary there and we used to stay there at night, bring the fish down and go back at times. Or other times go back early in the morning that is where we are allowed to fish. But we were there more often fishing than we are now. You see we've got about four mile to go before we get into open waters. But of course, they don't take as long, about half an hour these boats or less than that. Then you have to look for them. You start to move around then, just around the estuary, backwards and forwards and run up the sleek patches to see any fish in the calmer water and things like that. But you generally put in about seven or eight hours a day plus the extra time you do coming home and going back and cleaning your fish up. Put in about a ten hour day most of the time. If you get no fishing done, well. But still when you're getting fish home later, when you're not getting fish you're home later because you keep on looking for them. But some mornings you'll go up and a bit later on you'd perhaps go up in the morning when the tide is up.

After Christmas and that, the tide goes up the estuary in the morning and you can go out at five o'clock in the morning and you can haul straight away and you're back home by seven or eight o'clock to clean your net.

When we get good fish we pull the net all in the boat in a hurry so the birds won't get them. But we clean out a fair bit of it pulling the fish out as we're going. But when they get really thick and pilchards are hard to take out, the yellow eyed mullet, we call them pilchards. But when you pull them out of the water they kick and jump and they're hard to catch hold of. But a mullet he's just vice versa, when you pull him out of the water he goes still and he's easy to take out. And whiting is different. Whiting are smaller fish and you use small meshes so it takes longer to get them out. And that they just generally come in the last part of your net. So then you get a heap in there you've got enough and well you come home. Clean them out as you're coming home. One fellow steers, the other fellow cleans them out.

But of them now they bring everything home, they don't clean their fish in the water at all. When they get some fish in their boat they take them home in a trailer and want somebody else to clean them for them. But it goes on like that. They're looking around half the time and letting the fish go rotten to get somebody to help them clean them.

**HS** Have you taken fishing parties up the estuary?

**RENFREY** Oh, I've never taken them like as a business. But somebody, like a friend that's up and we'll get in the boat and go up just to see what it's like. Some want to go back more than others.

**HS** Is that a popular thing here at Mandurah?

**RENFREY** No. Some of the blokes always take somebody up with them to help them do the work, but to me they're in your road. Odd ones are alright. They get in the boat and they won't get in your road. Some of them get in your boat and are like a parrot all the time. "What do you do this for? What do you do that for?" But when we're sea fishing, like on the coast between here and Bunbury, we had a fairly big boat a twenty-six foot boat, nine foot beam, it would carry five tonne of fish, and two or three would come, especially the cockies from up the north. Davies and Ashworth's and them, they'd come down from York and Butchers from up at Brookton they'd come for their Christmas holidays, you see. And that was the main time we did fishing. A couple of them in the boat didn't make any difference. And they soon knew how to get out of the road or where to be, so they were no trouble at all. They were just in the boat. They'd give you a hand sometimes, get overboard.

There we shot the seine nets out to sea with a rope on the end of them and then you had to turn before you just went around the fish from the shore. The boat wouldn't be on the shore, but you'd motor along and one would dive overboard with a rope on the end of the net, or perhaps two of them. You'd go around it like that and then you'd have to turn off the beach again like that and then you'd anchor the boat outside with the nets on the outside and tie a rope on the pocket of the net and let them pull the net up on the beach and then you'd tie the pocket up with the fish in it. There's a pocket like a prawn net pocket or mostly used cod ends like they do on trawlers, and you'd tie it back and pull it back in the boat. And then you'd have a scoop and shake them down the pocket under the end and scoop them out. Scoop out a tonne of fish well in twenty minutes. And they just bail them out and pull them over the side and tip them in the boat like that. Where a tonne of fish to unmesh out of gill nets you'd be, well, all day, two or three men would make just the difference.

We'd left here once. The father and a young chap and myself went up the North Beach here and it was about two o'clock and we went up the North Beach to haul at a bunch of sea herring, 120 flat cases, 120 flat cases and we were back at where the depot was by the Little Theatre there in two hours. But you see you'd just bail them out, they go in the pocket and the herrings keep to the top of the water in the pocket of the net, that's sea herring, and just scoop them out and tip them in the boat like that. A basketful like that. We did that in two hours. 120 flat boxes of fish. Well if you've got 120 boxes of fish a mesh net, six men would be all day taking those out. Just the difference.

It's a beautiful game that sea fishing, but they've allowed.... 19, what was it '64 I think they allowed the crayfishermen. The crayfishermen had to keep a mile off the beach and it was illegal for them to come in, and when they left '64 they allowed these boats to drop their pots into the shore to come right on the shore and that was the end of the fishing for skipjack and tailor and that. They never came back to the shore again.

You see the boats would be anchoring, some of them up to 600 horsepower, two stroke engine, the propellers, the exhausts underwater it would break your ear drums to put your head underwater when it was going past. But it frightened the fish off too.

So that was just one year it went dead. The year before it was. I say that year in one haul we got 7,000 pound of skipjack and 9,000 pound of tailor only just down the beach down here. And just finished like bang like that, that was the end of it.

Because the boats all set their pots in amongst off shore. And they asked for that. And when they got they're, they were sorry they had done it, but of course they can't get it back now because of the amateurs in the game. There's more amateurs than there is professional fisherman and that suited them. But then there wasn't many amateurs went out because they had to go a mile out to sea. So anyway quite a lot of the blokes, even I've spoken to blokes at Jurien Bay, they've said "It's just a waste to go along the shore now with the amount of amateurs that set their pots down along the coast." Something like a couple of thousand in the season, it might be more now.

**HS** We talked a bit about your father and his fishing in the first interview. Can you tell me a little bit more about how your father got involved in the fishing industry?

**RENFREY** Well it's hard to say, it was before my time.

**HS** Did he tell you?

**RENFREY** No he just took me with him. That's all. And I remember one of the first times when I went I can remember I was about twelve years old when we left Greenbushes to come here and that's in the tin mines at Greenbushes. But he had a boat from the time he left Coolgardie about I think it was 1898 or '99 or something. But he got a block over in Anstruther Road or two blocks or something, two acres of land, and he got a fishing boat straight away. And he fished here until World War I and then they got him to go back into the mining industry, in the tin mines there. And that's where I was born. But we used to come to Mandurah at Christmas and Easter. But when it finished he came back here to Mandurah to fish. Like soon as World War II finished, tin dropped from about 560 pound a tonne to 90 pound a tonne because tin goes into the hardening of steel or something like that, you see. So when World War II finished they didn't want no more. Anyway he left there then because he reckoned it was no good. He worked for Moss's.

**HS** World War I?

**RENFREY** World War I, yes. Anyway, so we came back to Mandurah in 1919. But when I used to come down here when I was a kid when I used to get interested in fishing, I used to kylie fish with a kylie, like the natives do. Of course from the time I could run around the water I remember we used to look for fish. So I went fishing you see and I used to catch a lot of whiting here. He was a specialist at whiting fishing. And you'd go around the shores or on the edge of the shore, like on the drop of the bank to see the whiting running. They don't come to the surface like mullet or pilchard, like they'd jump out or tailor. They're a bottom fish and they stay on the bottom. And when they feed they make a little round hole. And you could go along and when they first fed there, they make a little hole and they spin there, sort of spin in it, and it's really round like that and it's blue at the bottom. It's a blue hole you can see when it's fresh. And they get worms out of the ground, so that's what they feed on you see, mostly. They do catch shrimps, things like that or little whitebait. And anyway he told me about these.

But I used to stand up on the deck of the boat when I was a kid of about ten I suppose or twelve or something like that and look for the fish and other fishermen would reckon he was mad. But I could see better than they could, because a lot of them were old men then and they smoked black tobacco those times, and they were half found before they knew they were. But father never spoke. But anyway I used to stand up on the deck of the boat. I remember the first lot at a place called

Unlucky Bay about sixteen mile up and we'd sailed up duck shooting somewhere or other, and then we went ashore to fish. And we're going along and I'm standing up and I'm yelling. They're waiting there you see, and I got over the end of the net to hold it and drag it along the shore like that. Well let's say that's the shoreline and I'd get along and pull it along the shore and then he'd row out around like that and pull the nets in together like that. I think we got thirty whisky boxes in this shot, in this first time. And why it was in this particular place, Unlucky, the sand was like the beach. And I was catching them underneath my feet walking on them, there was that many. There was just a mass of them.

Anyway getting back to this place again. In about '60. Oh between 1950 and '60 that place was bogged up to the ankles after weeds had started to grow here. The clear hard sand, it was like beach sand, and you could bog in it. I say that was 1919 by between '50 and '60 you'd bog in it, in the same places with this weed and pollution coming down. And, of course, it used to flush out...

END OF TAPE 3 SIDE A

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### TAPE 3 SIDE B

**RENFREY** About 1924 when I went professional fishing with my father, the main thing we did from about November to about March was fish west of the sticks, no west of the sticks at Mandurah in the north of Peel Inlet. Night fishing, we'd go there and perhaps three or four hauls along the sandy bottom it was then. Just like beach sand, we call it Wannurup. It's mostly east of Cox's Rocks. Anyway, we'd scratch we call that, that sort of fishing. Well we did haul for fish but we called it scratching because we were going along and had three or four hauls one after the other. Just a term we had for hauling. But things as fishing goes it was a pretty good game then compared to other things. The basic wage then was somewhere about four pound a week or something like that and you could make that and a bit more with your fishing.

But anyway getting back to this clear ground and the whiting. There was an inspector named Smith. He had been a fisherman at Denmark and he gave it up. Him and his brother got a job in the Fisheries Department, but when we used to catch these whiting it was a few years later, but we still worked the fishing like that. And this Jim Smith he went down along the entrance to the bar, that's in Peel Inlet where it goes out into the sea and he used to weigh the catch of the anglers, the whiting they caught in their bag. He used to have a pair of hanging scales and a sugar bag and he'd go along all the people with the fish. There used to be perhaps a hundred would be fishing along the bridge there every day in the summer time, mostly visitors to the place. And he used to get all their catch and put it in the bag, it didn't matter what size they were and not interfering with them fishing or anything else, but he just weighed these, and he put it all down in a book. And for the summer the average for the anglers fishing along the beach there was thirty hundred weight of fish a day. While he was down there he'd just weigh them and give them back to the anglers. You'd go down there and catch four or five or six dozen whiting on a line without any trouble.

And I'd have an uncle and people next door to him Truants, they used to catch shrimps for bait for them and they'd have their little packets of shrimps and half the time they couldn't catch enough shrimps for them. And they'd be sorting them out and giving them so much for their packet of shrimp. And that's how the fishermen, I

say these are your grounds up there at this Wannanup where we used to do this scratching as we called it for the whiting. It was hard just like beach sand.

Today it's boggy up over your ankles when you walk over the same ground. And this similar to where I was talking where the first haul I had with the father up the Southern Estuary, the difference between it and in the 1950's from the 1919's to the 1950's how the bog got in the place. But as the cousin said, "You should blow up the Wellington Dam and the Serpentine Dam to let the water out." So I don't know how they'd get a drink in Perth now if they did that! [Laughs] So that's that.

**HS** Do you know whether your grandfather was involved in fishing?

**RENFREY** No, no. One of my grandfathers was a blacksmith engineer and built the first railway engine out of.... Had a medal for building the first railway steam engine in Victoria. And the other one came out here with Peel, that's the mother's father, came out here with Peel in about 1830 from England or something. Came out with Peel. I wasn't told, but I'm pretty sure he was brought out here to shoot the blacks. That's the grandfather, Tom Eacott. But when he left Peel he was like a farmer. He used to work on Suttons Farm over here, he used to do all the ploughing and that. And he'd plough right across that paddock with double farrow plough and you could shoot a rifle down the lines, they were that straight. That's when he was an old man then. When I knew him because I wasn't born until 1909 and he was pretty old then. He was around the hundred or something at the finish when he died. But I can just remember him. But no, none of the grandfathers did any fishing.

**HS** Was your mother involved in the fishing industry?

**RENFREY** Oh well the father was but she never did any fishing.

**HS** She didn't go out?

**RENFREY** No, no. She very seldom went out on the boats.

**HS** Did she do any packing or selling?

**RENFREY** Oh very seldom. No, we generally did the packing on the estuary there. The only thing I remember about her [Laughs] she said, "Well I'll smoke you some fish." She was going to smoke the fish. So the father bought home two boxes of fish and cleaned all these fish down and cut the spits to put them in the smoke house and the mother had a [Laughs] smoke house made out of hessian, you see, it lets the smoke out good. Anyway I was home at the time and she's got the smoke house going and they were really good and she said, "Well we'll give them about another hour in the smoke or something like that and we'll come out and we'll take them down." And we came out before the hour was out and there was a flame there and all the sticks had burnt off and here they were stuck in the ground with all the fish. So that was the end of her smoking fish, that was the end of it. [Laughter].

**HS** You're fishing at the moment with your son, is he going to continue in the business?

**RENFREY** Well he's the one in it now, I just go with him just for the sake of going.

**HS** Right.

**RENFREY** But it's not good. When we fished the sea, we shark fished and seining and prawning fishermen are still alright. But the estuary is getting worse and they don't treat us as fishing. Like they set too many set nets and the fish is no good, so in the winter time none of them can get a licence for bait fish even. You see they don't look after it, so it's going down hill all the time. And they get the faster boats and roaring around is not doing any good at all.

And now they're allowed to use I think it's about five hundred yards of inch and seven eighth mesh and that's to catch whiting. And a certain time of the year you want it for the small pilchard. But you only have to leave them a couple of times and leave them for a couple of months longer and you'll catch them in two inch mesh and they're nearly as heavy again. So they get away with too many things. The small mesh netters ruin the place.

So you catch a fish and he's a nine inch fish well he's hardly any weight. That's a pilchard. And if you let him come so instead of catching him at an inch and seven eighths net you only use two inch he'd be nearly as heavy again with that little bit of extra bigger mesh. And not only that if they use five hundred yards of inch and seven eighths and they shoot the net and they put it around little mullet and the mullet will hit and it will catch mullet five or six inches long. Well that's the end of them. If you take those out there's that many pelicans there, the pelicans eat them before they swim away. The only thing if you're right in the middle of the estuary and they just drop down straight away it's alright. So that's a small mesh net and setting the nets out in the.... When they set nets they go home. When I first started fishing you had to stay with your net. And if there was any small fish you'd take them out and throw them away back in the water alive. Lift up that and put the bigger net in. And now they just set the net and go home. And they set for whiting and things like that. And it can't last, not professionally, with sixty fishermen in it.

**HS** So does he have any other plans in mind?

**RENFREY** No, none at all because he's fished all his life from when he was a kid. And see now they're restricting.... I got a letter from the Fisheries. I've fished in my beach since 1924 with boats and that, now they are cutting out all the fish and so they want to stop the fishing between here, or limit it, between here and Windy Harbour. Or just about nine miles south of here, what they call Tims Thicket. And I got a letter from them the other day wanting to know something about it. They've closed it from there or limited from whose there. So there's nowhere else to go. Only prawning and they set the prawn nets in the river, you see. But that will come to an end because....

And talking about these whiting, you see, we hardly get any now. We've caught about ten or twelve whiting this summer. Not dozen, ten or twelve in the last two months. But they trawl in this bay and that's the nursery of the fish here. That's where the whiting used to come and you'd see them coming in, in the summer swimming along the edge. Well there's trawlers out there and they catch (you know the small mesh trawlers) they catch everything, small fish and whiting, crabs and things like that and stir the prawns up. Knock the bottom about. So the nursery, that's for King George Whiting, Sound Whiting and there's pilchard get out there, but the mullet mostly whatsername in the river, but they do get out there and pilchards go out to sea to sort of clean themselves up, then they come back in the river into the inlet. But with the trawlers there well that's the end of them especially the

whiting and King George Whiting, that's their nursery out there and they still allow them to go on trawlers.

We'd tried to get it stopped but it was a waste of time.

**HS** Why does the Fisheries Department allow the trawlers in?

**RENFREY** Oh well they just got there and they just let them go. They allow them there, you see? And I said to Peter Rodgers - he was at the meeting when we tried to get it stopped you see, and he said, "Well there's plenty everywhere else. Up along the beach there's plenty of prawns up there." And I said, "There are not nurseries up there. Why don't they leave the nursery here for the fish?" And anyway nothing happened about it. They still come back and trawl.

**HS** Peter Rodgers, is he an Inspector is he?

**RENFREY** He was talking about prawns north of Perth, we are 60 miles south. No, he's in the office in Perth. He's about 2IC. I think he's just under, I think under, you spoke of him the other day.

**HS** Bernard Down?

**RENFREY** No, no he's the boss.

**HS** Neil McLoughlin?

**RENFREY** Neil McLoughlin, yes. And Peter Rodgers he has a lot to say. But things like that, the industry can't stand those sort of things. They've proved that all over where they've trawled for prawns right to the beach. Up North and everywhere they get worse all the time. Still you can't do much about it, can you? But the small mesh here in this estuary is the thing that's the problem. Too small catching too smaller fish. And pilchard net and the whiting net catch too many little mullet. Little mullet, you see. It doesn't matter how much you try you put your net out to catch whiting but when you're allowed to use five hundred yards of inch and seven eighths and I think a hundred yards of whiting net on top of that inch and three quarter, well you put your net out and the little mullet they just hit like steam and they grow to a good weight. Not like little things, when they grow up over length they're good fish.

So what's next?

**HS** Lionel, you're commonly known as 'Blue' I believe. When did you first pick up that nickname?

**RENFREY** Well I don't know whether when I was a kid working the timber mill (I think it was in Mandurah) Bolton and Sons had a mill to cut felloes for wheels before actually about 1922 I think it was. It started before that but they made the Bolton and Sons cart. I remember I was counting out some 22,000 of them I think. The last lot from ten by fives rim wheels, and some I just forget. And some of the other felloes were sulky singles. But there was 22 or 26,000 of them in one lot. This was about the last big lot, just as Ford trucks started to come in, getting built up and then they started to cut the [unclear] for the bodies of Ford cars there. But that was about the last lot of felloes wheels I think that went to South Australia. But they



used to cut them, they were made out of tuarts. We call them white gum, but their real name is tuart.

This is where I think I'm sure I got the name of the mill that I got called after, when I was a kid I went roustabouting up in the Murchison in the shearing teams, they still call me Blue. But these felloes that they cut in this mill, I think in the cottage down on the road here, Halls Cottage the uncle had one made. It must have been sixty years ago and six weeks after it was made it was brought back to Mandurah and I think it's still there. In the '20s it was made, a dray, and it's marvellous timber and it's still there. I'm sure it's still over at Hall Cottage with other farming junk they've got there. But anyway that's how my name came about. Because I had red hair then, really red and it's gradually gone different colours. Gone down, nearly white now.

**HS** Did some people still know you as Lionel in Mandurah?

**RENFREY** Oh yes, the ones I went to school with. I went to school here for a little while and they do. There's not many left that I went to school with, only about half a dozen I suppose. All went by the board.

**HS** Earlier on you mentioned that you did some fishing with a kylie, can you just explain what a kylie is?

**RENFREY** It's a piece of iron about an inch galvanised iron, you get it for beading sort of things, that's not its name. But you just turn it over and you get a piece about eighteen inches long and you turn it over a corner like that, make it that way. Then you get one end and throw it and throw it at the fish and it cuts them. It will cut them in half if it's hit them fair. But that's the kylie. And the natives have them too. They did have them when I was a kid because where the waterway is over there, in the summertime, there would be four hundred natives live over there. All the summer. As soon as the rain came they went back to the hills. Pinjarra and further around.

**HS** Which waterway?

**RENFREY** The waterways over here where they let the boats out. Oh it's just south of the first bridge, the old bridge. They called it Niggers Trees. There was all beautiful casuarina trees and the natives used to live under there, camp under there. And there used to be these casuarina trees used to be all up the river on the side. Actually there was one not far from where we used to camp. We had a camp on Channel Island. We camped there for twenty years or something like that and after the war the brother, youngest brother, pulled it down because all the rat bags of the world was getting there.

But these casuarina trees, they were beautiful trees and there was one just down from where the camp was about three or four hundred yards and I remember the younger brother, Cyril, he's sleeping you see. We used to camp there at night. This was when we did this scratching along the shore for whiting and we stayed there until it was time to take the fish down in the morning, and people would come up and would want to know where Sam Renfrey's tree was to fish alongside. And my brother had just fell asleep and the bloke came and woke him up and asked him where the tree was and he said, "I'll cut that bloody tree down," he said. [Laughs].

Anyway, but these trees I was talking about, these casuarina trees when the shags got really bad here the whole lot of them along the river, they were all dead with the shags nesting on them, polluted the lot, killed them. And right around the estuary it killed the lot, the shags in the trees. They even got back at times into the white gum trees and killed some of them. But all the seeds, just like old beards there, the trees, been dead for years now. They killed them in no time. They camped in them. They'd only have to camp in them for a couple of years and they'd be dead.

**HS** And the Aboriginal people that you mentioned earlier, did they fish along the waterways?

**RENFREY** They fished at the Monger first, they used to go to the Monger before Christmas and they had a monger on the Serpentine River, poles as straight as masts. They cut them, they brought them from the hills, they must have been thirty foot long and drove them so they were nearly touching together and then they put some wire weed they got out at Gulls, which is a place along the top of Serpentine River and they made their nets there and there's a break in it about six foot wide and all the rest was pinned off, these posts alongside of one another so the fish couldn't go through it. And then about November they'd set these out. They were before my time but I remember it there, the weir. But the natives never came back to it then. But the mother knew about it. The fish went in this wire grass sort of stuff, they made it to go in there in the gap in the poles, and they'd put the lot ashore. And the mother reckoned they went there with bullock wagons to get them. They had a hole down near the industrial area it used to be where they lived, and they used to have a big hole like a dam and they pulled in everything. They used to catch sharks and stingrays and they'd go over and get these mullet from what was left over, the natives left over and put it in the hole. And the natives they wouldn't let one go, they said if they let one go they wouldn't come back again they'd tell their mates and they wouldn't come back. So they had to kill the lot, catch the lot. And when they were finished they'd lift up the net and let it go.

But there would be about four or five hundred would come there and they used to come to Mandurah after that. And that was just by where the Serpentine Bridge is now. Just on that side of it on a point where the monger, they called it a monger. And they were just poles that would stick up alongside of them. They were that straight these here poles where you'd reckon they were like masts of a ship. And then somebody went there when I was a kid and blew them off with gelignite so they wouldn't get stuck in the boats which were going along there.

**HS** Well thank you Lionel once again.

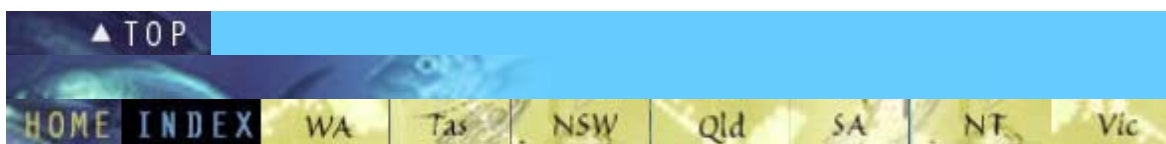
**RENFREY** Good, right. See you one day I suppose again.

**HS** Yes, yes. I hope so. Thanks very much.

This interview was conducted by Howard Smith.

END OF TAPE 3 SIDE B

[Disclaimer](#)







## Verbatim transcript of an interview with GREG ROACH

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Greg Roach, District Officer of the Fisheries Department at Dongara, Western Australia. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey from Murdoch University, as part of the Oral History segment of the History of the Australian Fishing Industry being produced by the University for the Australian Fishing Industry Research Council. The interview was conducted at Dongara on the 6th November 1989.

Mr Roach the sole District Officer responsible for a large segment of the rock lobster industry Zone A on the mid-west coast of Western Australia. He is an experienced and knowledgeable officer whose efforts on behalf of the industry are well regarded by the majority of fishermen in his area. He has a balanced and sensible approach to his duties; and while his role requires him to enforce the regulations, he is also active in other forms of service to the industry and community. His willing co-operation in his own free time and in his own home made this interview possible. That cooperation is very much appreciated. His contribution to this project has been a significant one.

There is one Tape, Sides A and B. The interview starts at 023 on the rev counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

This is an interview recorded in Dongara with District Officer Greg Roach.

Mr Roach, could you record your full name and place and date of birth?

**ROACH** Yes. Well my full name is Gregory Robert Roach, I was born 5.9.1949 in Newcastle, New South Wales.

**JD** Thank you. How long have you been in Western Australia, then?

**ROACH** I've been in Western Australia since about 1976.

**JD** I see! You were educated then in New South Wales?

**ROACH** I was educated initially in New South Wales and final education was through the Navy in Western Australia.

**JD** I see! You have a naval background?

**ROACH** I have a naval background, yes.

**JD** And when did you join the Navy?

**ROACH** I joined the Navy at 15 1/2 in 1965.

**JD** As a boy entrant?

**ROACH** As a Junior Recruit, yes.

**JD** A Junior Recruit! In New South Wales?

**ROACH** I enlisted in New South Wales and was trained at HMAS Leeuwin in Fremantle.

**JD** Oh, and that's how you came to come to the West?

**ROACH** That's how I got to the West, eventually.

**JD** Right! And how long did you serve in the Navy?

**ROACH** I did twelve years.

**JD** Twelve years! Oh, I see, so you've got quite a connection - and a long connection - with the sea.

**ROACH** I would say, "Yes." From 15 1/2 anyway.

**JD** And you are currently with the Fisheries Department of Western Australia?

**ROACH** That is correct.

**JD** And what is your official title?

**ROACH** My official title is District Fisheries Officer, Dongara.

**JD** How long have you been with the Fisheries Department in Western Australia?

**ROACH** I've been with the Department since 1977, which is something like twelve years now.

**JD** And could you give us a run-down on your career with the Department so far? Where you've served, what sort of things you've been doing.

**ROACH** Yes. Initially training was undertaken at our Victoria Park offices in Perth in September/October 1977 and I was placed on board the patrol vessel **Abel Tasman** based out of Fremantle, commencing the first rock lobster season of that year which was around about late October, ready for the season. I stayed with the vessel for twelve months, prior to coming ashore and proceeding to Albany for 3 1/2 years.

After Albany, I came back to Perth metropolitan area where I was second in charge of a mobile patrol unit. We covered the State from - well in our particular case - Exmouth back down to Albany again. From there I was placed in a Relieving Officer's item, still based in Perth, and carried out duties some months as the second in charge of Perth

District Office, and in 1985 (December 1985) I took the opportunity of the transfer as the District Officer in Dongara.

**JD** So you've been here now about four years?

**ROACH** Roughly four years, I think I'm going into the fourth or fifth season now.

**JD** Right, thank you. What's the way forward for you as a District Officer?

**ROACH** From Dongara I've got a chance of possibly going to a senior district such as Bunbury or Albany - or hopefully even Broome - as the Senior District Fisheries Officer. I have no great desire to go much further than that, really. I have about 15 years left to retirement as I wish to go, and I think that a position such as Senior District Fisheries Officer would be my final desire. However, if the opportunity came to go a bit higher up into the system I would take it, but I wouldn't go out of my way to.

**JD** You've no desire to go back to the city?

**ROACH** I have no desire to go back to the city whatsoever.

**JD** Do you work on your own here or do you have a staff of other officers?

**ROACH** I work completely on my own. Some years, if staff permits and the number of trainees brought in - which we have not had many of in the past few years. In fact only one year that I've been here a trainee officer was placed with me for six months to assist and to obtain some training.

**JD** So you are fairly isolated then?

**ROACH** I'm only isolated in so far as the radio will get me out to. I am responsible to the Senior District Fisheries Officer in Dongara and I can call upon help from there.

**JD** In Geraldton?

**ROACH** Sorry, in Geraldton. I can call upon assistance from them if it requires, and during my periods of off duty a relief officer comes down from Geraldton to watch the district.

**JD** Do you see much of your fellow officers?

**ROACH** I see them probably on a basis on once a month. I often go up to take paperwork up and have a general discussion with the Senior District Officer, and I see them as they pass through when sometimes mobile patrols drop in. There as a courtesy to let me know they're in the area and working. But the majority of the time, no; I'm completely isolated apart from the radio and telephones.

**JD** You would occasionally have conferences and such, I would imagine?

**ROACH** Well we have a yearly conference in Perth where all staff come down. Apart from that there's not much in the way.... unless there's some sort of special meeting that requires to be called in the area and I'm required to attend it.

**JD** Yes. In this sort of country service do you find your family is disadvantaged, or not?

**ROACH** I really think it's hard to answer that. Educational-wise they could be possibly, but I can't.... the only way that would be happening, of course, is that we only have a Junior High [school]. My eldest son would be coming on very soon - I think next year or the year after - going through to Senior High, but really there would be no problem because there is a bus service available which is 45 minutes to Geraldton, and back - 45 minutes back. So at the cost of an hour and a half of his time he still could attend to finish his high schooling.

**JD** Are there opportunities for in-service training within the Department?

**ROACH** Up until recently there was very little opportunity. The Department is going through a restructuring. They have just recently.... well, a year or so ago I was sent down to a two week course to just brush up on the elements of law and the Fisheries Act, which was good because we'd never had any formal training when I joined. We never did have those sort of things; although for the last few years the trainees are getting very good training in Perth, they have a very intensive in-service course.

There will be, as we understand it from the last conference (last week), further programmes are being arranged in difference in-service studies. For instance, all officers will be given - they hope to be given - a course in elements of shipboard safety, because we're always involved with boats and mucking around in small craft and patrol vessels. I don't know, I think there will be some sort of computing instruction coming through, they've been talking about that because we now have computerised licencing and records in the office. I should imagine there will be further development programmes - as the years go by and money is available - will be made available to us. The only problem I feel and see is that we do not get any time for private study (off, that is, special leave). For instance, I've just done, or am undergoing, a Master Class 5 course at the present time and the majority of that course was done during my annual general leave, and all the costs are going to be incurred by me.

**JD** And what would be the benefit to you of that course if you succeed in it?

**ROACH** Well the benefit would be, of course, if I so desired I would be qualified to take over a patrol vessel. Some people may not agree with that, but I probably would be. But I wouldn't desire that. Really, I've since found out, it probably really is not going to be of much benefit to me in the Department. Since the Marine and Harbours (Department) now have brought down that vessels under 7 metres now no longer require to be surveyed, and the next size of patrol vessel that I could expect to operate is a 6.5 metre setter console. So really I've got a ticket I might be able to walk away with, if I get it; but within the Department I don't think it would have much sway towards any future development or promotion.

**JD** On the other hand it could be a step along the way to an even more advanced ticket, I presume?

**ROACH** It could be, yes. I could carry on if I so desired to Master Class 4, but I couldn't see any point in doing that because I would be getting out of the realm of requirements for this job.

**JD** True! Could we come to the job, then. What area do you serve?

**ROACH** Well the Dongara district is from Flat Rocks which is north of Dongara and proceeds down to the 30th parallel, just south of Leeman, between Leeman and Green Head; so it's roughly 118 kilometres of coastline with something like 16 anchorages.

**JD** That's a considerable area, isn't it?

**ROACH** It is, yes. Although since the coast road has now become sealed and it only has about 10 kilometres to go, it makes it a bit easier to get down there and a lot quicker now. Although there is still a lot of area to try and work out your priorities for patrol and to look into problems - areas that you may think could become a problem.

**JD** Do you try and visit every anchorage over a period of time?

**ROACH** Oh yes, I'm constantly out through the week, at least twice to three times a week, travelling through the district; either on specific work or snooping around so to speak.

**JD** And do you also man an office in Dongara?

**ROACH** Yes, I have an office here which has to be manned and I'm required to do licencing and so forth if I'm there. A lot of people complain about that, of course. Unfortunately some of them bring it on themselves because during the off-season, when the season finishes on 30th June, I'm usually in the office for great lengths of time before... when I'm not taking leave. These people get their renewal notices at that time in July and put it away until the rush one week before the commencement of the season. Which has started.

There's people starting to howl now because I've been away on leave doing a course, and over the last couple of days or so I'll be doing examinations. I have a task from the management branch... sorry! Yes, from the management branch, to inspect an algae farm. So I mean it's going to be pretty hectic, particularly with the run-up to the season. We do anchorage lists, we check the licences of all the crews and the vessels, and the limited entry licences, so I'm constantly on the run in the next few weeks and it does cause a bit of a headache as far as office work is concerned.

**JD** Do you work hours, that is do you put in an eight hour day, or do you just work until the job is done!

**ROACH** Work until the job's done, in the main. The minimum requirement is 37 1/2 hours a week but I have worked well over that. I've done 68... the record, I think, is 68 or 69 hours in a week. It's mainly you go until the job is finished, particularly if there's something going on. If there's nothing going on, well I usually start early in the mornings and I have the option of knocking off after 7 1/2 hours if I so desire.

**JD** And what kind or types of fishing take place in this area?

**ROACH** Well predominantly it's the western rock lobster, and that is the end all of fishing in this area. There are a small number, only one - one in Dongara and two in Leeman - wet fish boats, who go out and target West Australian jewfish, schnapper, shark and the like. They've got net drums for shark fishing. They do drop lining, hand lining. Apart from that, no, there's no other fishery involved in the area.



**JD** Could you outline to us how you keep the industry under surveillance; say for the rock lobster industry? What do you look for?

**ROACH** Well, that's very hard to explain this, I suppose. [Pause]. Oh, how can I explain it? You've got to keep your ear to the ground virtually; listen to what's happening around the place, and you'll find that a lot of these fishermen are very responsible and care very much for their industry. For instance, if something's happening they're not quite happy with the word usually gets back to you in general terms of what might be going on. They don't.... won't come to the point, but at least you've got to try and work it out for yourself where the problem lies. But generally it's just carrying out on-shore surveillance through telescopes, and factory inspections - checking the catches as they are processed, to make sure that the rock lobsters submitted are not undersized or don't carry spawn.

**JD** And do you check gear as to....?

**ROACH** Yes. When the boats are loading their pots prior to the season I go around and I check for escape gaps, to make sure the pots correspond to the dimensions allowed. I'm restricted in checking pots, rock lobster pots, at sea because I don't have a proper maritime capability at this stage.

**JD** Yes. How many boats would you be required to supervise in this area that you work in?

**ROACH** Well at the moment I've got the figures here in front of me for the last season, which is a general indicator of every season. The commencement of the season I started with 193 rock lobster boats and they were only.... I didn't even count Flat Rocks and that. I just went 7 mile down to Leeman at that stage. Then another 15 vessels came in at various times of the season to fish the area, so I was up to 208 boats; that was an increase of 90 over the previous season. I think that in turn included the fact that of that total 75 vessels commenced here in comparison to the previous season - 75 extras, and they used 15 anchorages. It works out that I had something like 29.21% of the fleet of 712 vessels registered in the rock lobster fishery. There was 57.45% total of the 362 Zone A registered vessels.

**JD** And what is Zone A?

**ROACH** Zone A is the Abrolhos Islands. Their season commences on the 15th March [probably means 15th November] each year and they fish the coast from the 15th November to the 1st March. So that was, as I said, 54.... sorry! 57.45% of the 362 Zone A vessels. During the season there were 14 of those vessels actually live over there, they fished on a daily basis from Dongara.

**JD** Good, thank you. Also, within your area, you have how many processing plants?

**ROACH** There's one processing plant, it's here in Dongara, it's M G Kallis (1962), although there are a number of receival depots who pick up rock lobsters in this area and they are transported to Geraldton, Jurien Bay or Cervantes, where there are other processing factories, or even to Perth in the case of one. Receival depots.... I think, let me see, I've got six receival depots here in Dongara and then there's another.... Some of these companies have other receival depots spread down to Leeman, Freshwater Point, so there's a fair number.

**JD** And you are required to check the catch?

**ROACH** I try and avoid the receival depots because they really haven't got the facilities for checking rock lobsters without treading water all over their toes and causing all sorts of mayhem. I tend to concentrate on the main processing factory because that is where the majority of crays in this area go to. But I do, if I'm alerted to a possibility of something being wrong, I will go to a receival depot and check rock lobsters, but I very rarely do that if I can help it. Those rock lobsters would normally be expected to be checked at their processing points for the inspectors in Jurien, Perth and Cervantes.

**JD** What would be the most common infringements that you come across?

**ROACH** Well the most common infringement, of course, is the possession of undersized rock lobsters. It is the most common.

**JD** Is it at all common now?

**ROACH** A lot of people now are using their sense a little bit as regards conservation. There are still a few rogue fishermen about who have a go. I average getting at least two to three rock lobster fishermen that need to have a breach report placed in on them for submitting undersized through the factory for sale. And the amateur population, unfortunately, are the worst offenders; they have the tendency to take more chance at bringing along an undersize, and I think they do it knowing full well that I'm pretty overstretched and it might be a ninety to one chance that they're going to get hit.

**JD** When you say two or three of the commercial people, does that mean a month, or season?

**ROACH** Over the season, yes.

**JD** Only two to three?

**ROACH** That's been the average since I've been here, anyway. As far as breach reports for professional fishermen.

**JD** I believe years ago it was quite common.

**ROACH** Oh yes, in the 'good old days' as they call it. In fact, they used to call the rock lobster here, on the undersized rock lobster in Dongara, the Dongara cray - that was the nickname they gave it. There wasn't a western rock lobster, it was its own species, but we full well knew that it was the western rock lobster undersized.

**JD** And how are the offenders dealt with?

**ROACH** Well, I approach them at the point of the offence and ask questions to establish that an offence has been committed; to get evidence for prosecution if it warrants it. I get their names and addresses and all the details required for the report. I then write up a report to the Chief Inspector stating the facts as they happened, what I saw, what I asked them, what they told me, what I found in the boat or in the container, whatever; and then make a recommendation for a letter of warning or prosecution, whichever I may see fit.

In most cases where a severe problem has occurred, I will recommend prosecution. In the minor ones, and depending on the person's attitude and if I can see that they obviously didn't know what they were doing and it was only a minor thing I'll often, just to keep them on their toes, have them get a letter of warning - or ask that they get a letter of warning. And in some very minor instances I just slap them on the wrist on the spot and tell them if I catch them at it again they're in trouble. The brief report goes to Perth, it's entered by the Chief Fisheries Officer (or the Assistant Chief Fisheries Officer at this stage - although it will be changing soon, we are going to have managers); and it goes to the Crown Law Department, who again check it to make sure that everything is correct, and then they approach the Courts for a hearing date and eleven to twelve months later we get to the Court system.

**JD** Yes. And are you required to appear in Court?

**ROACH** Yes, I am required to appear in Court. A number of circumstances may arise. If they plead guilty by endorsement on their summons, well there's no requirement for me to go. If there's no indication from the offender in any manner whatsoever, he hasn't told anybody what's happening and he has a date set, I have to attend the Court and usually we do what we call 'expartae' where I will get up and give evidence as asked by the Crown Law representative and the Magistrate will make a decision in the absence of the offender. Then, of course, if the persons are going to defend the case, well you've got to be there to give their people the chance to question you and try and get their person off the hook, so to speak.

**JD** And what kind of penalty is imposed?

**ROACH** It depends mainly on the Magistrate. Rock lobster is considered the most serious or the most senior, I suppose, in the range of penalties. The actual taking of the undersized.... it depends. There are three scales; there is first offence, second, or third or subsequent offence. So it could go between \$50 to around about \$500 odd dollars; depending again on the Magistrate, I mean he makes the decision. Plus an additional penalty of between \$5 and \$25 for every spawner or undersized rock lobster involved. But again, as I say, it's up to the Magistrate, we can't control. He's got a range of penalties that he can use and it's up to him how he wants to put it out.

**JD** What about repeated offences?

**ROACH** Well, I've never had much problem in regard to repeated offenders. Repeated offenders, as I said, will go up the scale because it's their second or third offence. In the case of the rock lobster boats in the industry here, a third offence on your boat can lose you your licence. They have what they call the 'black mark' and if you have three offences within ten years your licence is gone - you can forget it.

**JD** That's a very, very severe penalty nowadays.

**ROACH** Well, it has to be to protect the industry. You never get to that stage very often, I think it's very rare that it happens because after the first ones then they wake up to themselves and think, oooh it could be a bit dangerous if I carry on in this way. And they also lose something in the resale because if somebody buys that boat from them within that ten year period, the black mark goes with the boat, it doesn't go with the person. So it can knock their values down, too. It's a deterrent.

**JD** A very severe one I would think.

**ROACH** Well, it could be if it was pushed to the limit. Yes.

**JD** Right. You would be, of necessity, involved with other authorities, wouldn't you? The police, for example.

**ROACH** Well I have a good rapport with the police. And the marine inspector - well we work in the same office complex as far as the marine inspector is concerned. He goes down the coast a bit and if he sees something he lets me know; and vice versa if I see something of interest to him, I'll let him now.

The police.... we get along quite well and I sort of keep a lookout for them too, for certain things, as they would do for me if the requirement be. I usually let them know, actually, if I'm going down the coast and where I'm going to be just in case anything was to happen. That was the request of the previous officer in charge, he wasn't too happy about the fact that I was running around what they used to call the drug capital of Western Australia, I think, many years ago - Leeman/Green Head; and he thought that it was probably a little bit dangerous that I was running around in those sort of areas. And so he sort of instigated this.... got me into the habit of letting him know if I was going to be anywhere. But, of course, if you had a dishonest policeman I suppose that could be a disadvantage, if he wanted to know where you were so he could go play up. But that, of course, doesn't happen now.

I also assist in sea rescue work, searching for bodies from marine mishaps. I've done that on two occasions. So we liaise, yes. I even at one stage before they got their 4 wheel drive unit, if they needed to get into some country that they wanted to check something out in, I usually volunteered the services and took one of them into the area.

**JD** The Marine and.... or Harbours and Marine officer, it's his responsibility to survey the boats and keep an eye on them is that right? And your function is to catch?

**ROACH** Well yes. My function is the policeing of the fish - the fisheries - of the area. His function is to police the safety aspect for smallcraft and for registered fishing vessels. He's also the port.... the harbour master here, so he's responsible for the running of the harbour and keeping it so as it doesn't get out of hand, which it could do if the fishermen had their way. But he keeps a stern hand on them and keeps them in control. He doesn't let them block the jetty up or do anything that would be detrimental to other users.

**JD** Who determines where people put their moorings down?

**ROACH** Well at the moment the moorings.... I'm not too sure of the history really on how the moorings came to be, and how that their layout came to be. There's no real set pattern of moorings in the harbour. The Marine and Harbours control all the moorings. At this present stage no new moorings are allowed in the harbour at any rate. And now they've brought in a fee now for mooring fees, and fishermen who.... (as I understand it) fishermen who don't or refuse to pay those fees will have their moorings removed anyway and at their cost, by the Marine and Harbours Department. That's a bone of contention in this area at the moment - the harbour and costs that are going to be levied on the fishermen.

**JD** And that comes under the jurisdiction of the Harbour and Marine?

**ROACH** Yes, that's all their problem. I have nothing whatsoever to do with that.

**JD** That is the end of Side A of Tape 1. Just turn the Tape over for Side B.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** This is Tape 1 Side B of an interview with District Officer Greg Roach of Dongara, Western Australia.

Greg, in your years in the service of the Fisheries Department you would have seen considerable changes in the rock lobster industry in this State. Could you outline some of the major changes that you've seen.

**ROACH** Yes. Well when I joined the job the limited entry regime was well and truly in place, I think it was the first fishery in the State to go under that regime. When I joined, the boats were probably not as flash, so to speak. They were not as well equipped as they are today, we've now got the onset of the GPS satellite navigator, we've got the colour radar, we've got the colour.... echo sounders have now come in and most boats now carry that sort of equipment. As I say, the boats have become bigger and faster.

The other changes are that the fishermen's attitudes have changed. They were a lot of scallywags back when I first started but.... I can only really speak for the Dongara area, I suppose, but I find these fishermen, in the main, to be a very responsible and very interested in the state of the fishery and they wish to ensure that it's going to be there for their children.

We have seen some changes recently that caused some furore but it seems to have settled down. It was when we decided to reduce the pot numbers by 10% in the industry.

**JD** Was that to conserve stock?

**ROACH** That was to conserve the stock, yes. We thought that there was too much pressure on the fishery. There were some worries, for instance underwater cameras that had just come in to being might cause some sort of a problem and make the fishermen more efficient, but I think that's died in the wool because this equipment was good if you stopped your vessel and had a hunt around, but it wouldn't do any better - it would just show you the ground was there, it wouldn't show whether the crays were there. So, I mean, that fell by the way.

There was some concern about GPs navigator systems, but really that comes into sea safety and there's no way that that can be tampered with, so that's fallen by the wayside as well. There are no problems there. But, as I say, the major changes I've found is the attitude of the fishermen and the upgrading of the equipment they now use.

**JD** Yes. Has the development along the lines of faster boats and better communication between boats made your job more difficult?

**ROACH** It can only make it difficult if the people want to do it for me and make it difficult. I suppose so. I know, for instance.... well, take the amateur community down at Leeman; there is a code that goes over the private radio, you know, their 27 megahertz sets and so forth. When they're out at sea and it's known I'm down on the beach that the people are told that your mother-in-law is waiting for you. I know that code is there. That's a standard one.

Yes, if the fishermen wish to, they've got equipment now. You can get equipment that you can eavesdrop on other people's radio frequencies, I mean it's a well known fact. If they wanted to go to that extreme they could do it. I know of fishermen who have got a scrambler system, so if they want to talk about ground and don't want other boats to hear it for instance, or us for instance, as well, they scramble it - the message.

Yes, communications could be used against me if they so desired. With my radio communications I can tune in to their frequencies but out of necessity, I'm mainly on the departmental frequency so I'm not listening in. There's so many boats chattering and you can hear them from all over the State, so it doesn't really do me any good by eavesdropping. I'm not going to find anything out and you'd have to be there right on the time that somebody was saying something that you'd be interested in. But I think that.... well, the only thing I can say is, "Yes, it could be used to disadvantage."

**JD** Sure. Greg, your function is not only enforcement and surveillance, you also have an educating role I presume?

**ROACH** I have. It hasn't happened that often but I have been asked to go to the school to give talks to the students of different classes on a couple of occasions to explain to them the reasons for the fisheries laws and why we have size limits and bag limits. Just, you know, a bit of a history of the Department and its function. I have to liaise with the industry - with the fishermen.... I don't have to, but I'm invited to and do attend all Association meetings. I'm often asked to get up and answer questions of a matter related to something they're talking about. And I usually give them a rundown on any new measures to be taken, and I also place across messages such as what I'd like to see them do in regard to certain things to keep the peace.

**JD** Could I ask you what the attitude of the commercial fishermen, or professional fishermen, is to the amateur who, say, takes undersized crayfish?

**ROACH** Well I think that some of the professionals get a little bit carried away in their worries over the amateurs. I think it works out that the amateur population takes something like 3% of the catch, so although they may be the worst offenders as far as.... you know their breach report is usually 90/10 in regard to the amateur versus professional. They don't tend to like them, the fishermen seem to think that the grounds and the fish resource is all theirs, but they begrudgingly understand that it is a common resource. But, yes, at times some of them get pretty nasty about the amateurs. Not to the stage where they'd do anything to them although some I've known would do - they'll see an amateur pot and out comes the knife and goodbye! But generally their attitude towards them in the main is one of distrust, I suppose. But most tolerate them, it's only a minor vocal few that will really get stuck into the amateur fisherman.

**JD** With such a large number of boats in such a large area to keep under surveillance, you would need a fair bit of back-up in terms of equipment and facilities. Is it adequate?

**ROACH** I would say no. The bosses would say I've got plenty. I suppose I've got to.... I remember when I first got here I kept pressing (as my predecessor did) for a decent off-shore patrol boat - a trailerized one, but something that could be used off the coast - out say 5 miles - quite comfortably, and had equipment for hauling and winching and checking pots. It was explained to me that that was not going to happen because they don't like having inspectors running around on their own at sea, and I've come to regard their part - I could see the safety reasons. I'm probably one of those people that thinks nothing's going to happen to me, but it could. I've given up on that at this stage, of fighting for a larger craft.

The vehicle is quite adequate. I would have liked a long wheel based vehicle, something I could camp in down the coast, because we don't have any motel facilities in this district apart from here and Dongara. And I'm restricted in some degree because I can't really get out and stay in the area for any length of time. It's a bit hard sleeping on the front seat of a short wheel based Nissan. However, I have asked for a four wheel motor bike which - I think through budgetary constraints - is not coming. Although the chances would be there to get one because they have bought one for the Lancelin area and it has proved to be quite successful for getting into the rough and real tough areas, or even sneaking up on people more readily than what they can in a known patrol vehicle. And I must say my vehicle is known to the scallywags; although it's not registered with government plates and has private plates on it, those who want to know it, know it.

Really, radio equipment - well I think we'll be upgrading that over the years. It's probably a little bit archaic at the moment but it does the job. We've since recently, and it was about time, we've got into the RFDS [Royal Flying Doctor Service] frequencies now, so in case we do have any problems we can call for help. The radios are now about to be.... some have, and mine's about to be fitted with an automatic alarm for the RFDS, so that if I'm on a weekend or evening and I have an accident, or something, or a midget [unclear], I can hit the alarm button and it will start the alarm bells ringing in Kalgoorlie and they'll get organised to get on the radio and try and contact me or to get hold of people so that they can start looking for me.

**JD** The problem of litter in the ocean. I believe it was mentioned in the Director's report recently to Parliament. Is it a problem in this area?

**ROACH** Yes, it seems to be in the harbour here in particular. There are a lot of fishermen who do dump bait bands and plastic bags and bait boxes, cardboard boxes, over into the sea instead of bringing it back. They seem to think that because they've got outside the harbour entrance it is safe, but a lot of it seems to find its way through the entrance and back into the harbour and has caused some upset amongst locals. There are a number of people who make notice of it in the local rag and ask fishermen to get their act together.

I have seen fishermen dump their equipment. It is annoying. We have a section under the Fisheries Act under dilatorius matter, but it's very rarely used, I think it was mainly designed for big industry. I think I'm going to see the need where Fisheries officers will have to have the power and the ability to take action against persons they see littering. It's education programme more than anything - you've got to get these people to understand that that uncut bait band is going to possibly catch up a shark or a dolphin and injure it; that that plastic bag could get sucked up into a water cooling intake of a vessel, or wrap itself around; or the rope that's let go and maybe gets into somebody's propeller and cause strife. I think.... there is that problem.

The majority of fishermen here - you'll see them come in and we've got bins provided at most of the anchorages and they'll bring their rubbish back with them. But there are those few who still couldn't give a hoot as to where it goes. I, myself, have only had one opportunity to chat, and it was a local amateur who should have known better and didn't realise I was on his port quarter in my little craft that I do have. So he just happened to throw it over right in my view and I hit the roof and promptly plucked it out of the water and threw it back at him and said that if I saw him do it again I'd go to see the marine inspector, who could take action.

**JD** What about the pumping out of oily bilges?

**ROACH** That's pretty much under control. I've not seen any evidence of major spillage to be quite honest. I think what happens here in the harbour, I've noticed most fishermen if they're going to pump the bilges and there's oil in it, they'll give it very liberal doses of detergent with the water in there as well to disperse it. There have been a couple of accidents with oil, but nothing that was long lasting. I've not come across any oil pollution problem at this stage in the area.

**JD** Is there any evidence of any other pollution, say from passing ships?

**ROACH** No, I've not seen any. As regard to pollution probably - I don't know if it's pollution, probably more into rubbish in the sea, but a lot of pot floats and so forth get washed onto the beaches because they get cut off or broken up. You see a lot of that litter. But then again, yes, I'd have to say there would be evidence because you see cartons and stuff 'Made in Japan' and what have you, drifting up if you go down the beaches. You often find some stuff that has obviously come off a merchant ship. But I think that that's an Australia-wide problem, it's not just localized.

**JD** No, no. It's not a major proportion?

**ROACH** Well, it depends how you look upon it, I suppose. If you go along a beach and all you can see is bait bands and floats every two yards, and possibly plastic bottles and stuff, if you added it all up it could be a lot of tonnage there.

**JD** Right. What other problems do you see confronting the rock lobster industry?

**ROACH** I think at this stage that the only problem.... well, it's very hard to see if they've got any problems really at this stage. I think we've got to keep a check on the resource and make sure we keep the laws applicable to the time and that we're ready to change if something drastically needs to be done. Providing the industry continue as they are and take a responsible attitude, I feel that there should be no problem.

Although there was talk at one stage of Chunagon, a Japanese company who took over a controlling interest in a processing factory; they were starting - or at one part of the season tried - to offer fishermen ridiculous money for the A size, or the just size animals, which would have put a lot of pressure on the inshore fishery and could have caused some strife. I've only heard this on the grapevine. The Chunagon fishermen, I believe, down in their area, down south, further down in the fishery, a lot of their fishermen actually left them because of that. They said they were being silly and it was going to be a destructive force as far as they were concerned.



But generally I think that providing, as I say, the fishermen carry on and keep the attitudes, in the main, that they've got, they should have no real long term problems. Not foreseeing any major disaster that could overtake us that we're not prepared for.

**JD** Yes. There seems to be considerable inflow of capital into the industry from overseas. Is that thought to be a problem?

**ROACH** I'm not fully aware on how that is going. When Chunagon took into the INF there was a large concern because the Japanese waylaid... they're very hard businessmen and there was a threat to see that they could start slowly but surely eating their way and controlling the industry completely, by buying up boats for instance, licences, and eventually sort of taking over. Although Planet Fisheries for some years was owned by an English company and there's been no problems. But it is something that will have to be watched and the Minister has just recently published some guidelines on foreign investment in the West Australian fishing industry and I think that, through Parliament, it's going to make it very hard for any would-be, greedy type, overseas company to come in and take advantage.

**JD** Yes. Right. Well thank you for that. Just before we finish, would you like to record the names of some of the more prominent people in the industry in this area?

**ROACH** Well yes. There's John Cole, John Fitzharding. There's some characters who go back - Dick Carr (although he's not actively engaged, he owns three boats). I suppose you could call him prominent, he's a bit of an eccentric but you can take Dick, or leave him.

Alf Woodcock at Seven Mile Beach - in his seventies and still going strong, loves fishing, and a good fisherman too. I mean, he's been the subject on occasion of people thinking that he's been over-potting or what have you, (using excess pots) but it's just that he's a good fisherman. He knows where to put his pots and he knows how to catch rock lobsters; and when they come in with one bag and he comes in with three, they start thinking he's up to no good. Well, all it is he can fish well.

There are other people down the coast that are predominant. Clem Hill at Sandy Bay, he's had a history with whaling in the North-West and has been a Cray fisherman for many years and is obviously doing well out of it because not many people can build a brand new house and own a new aeroplane. I would say that they would be possibly the most predominant in the industry.

There are some other characters who are not connected with that industry. Charles Arris, an ex-Naval commander, in Leeman, who recently was very much active in the sea search and rescue, but has now decided it's time for him to have some quality time. Robby Leeuwin, a wet fisherman, who comes from South Africa, a quite interesting man to talk to. I think that would about sum up those people that are of interest.

**JD** Good. Well thank you very much and thank you for the interview, it's been very, very interesting to talk to you. Thank you.

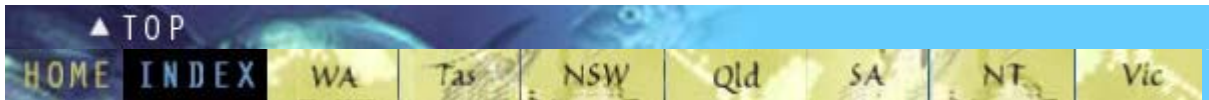
**ROACH** I'll have a coffee now, then.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with District Officer Greg Roach of Dongara, Western Australia. The interview was recorded on the 6th November 1989, at Dongara by Jack Darcey.

END OF RECORDING

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with CHRIS RUSSELL

### INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Chris Russell, owner and sometimes skipper of fishing vessels currently working out of Geraldton, was conducted by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University and is part of the Oral History segment of the History of the Australian Fishing Industry being produced for the Australian Fishing Industries Research Council.

The interview was conducted at Mr Russell's home in Geraldton on the 8th November 1989. Mr Russell has a very extensive experience in fishing in many areas from Fremantle to Shark Bay and in several different fisheries, but most particularly in the western lobster industry.

He is a Director on the Board of the Geraldton Fishermen's Co-operative and has been such for some fifteen years. He has an intimate knowledge of the industry past and present and has made a special study of the marketing of Western Australian rock lobster overseas, notably in Japan.

Now in semi-retirement, Mr Russell is an outstanding source of information on both the history of the industry and on the present situation therein. He is a prominent and highly respected personality in the Western Australian fishing industry. His contribution to this oral history has been invaluable.

There is one Tape, Side A and B. The interview starts at 025 of the rev counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is Side A of Tape 1 of an interview with Mr Chris Russell. Mr Russell, could you record your full name and date of birth, please?

**RUSSELL** Yes. Christopher Frederick Thomas Russell, and I was born on the 7.10.32.

**JD** Were you born in Western Australia?

**RUSSELL** Yes, in Perth.

**JD** And what is your current function in the fishing industry? You are an owner/skipper partly retired, I understand, but you have other roles as well.

**RUSSELL** Yes, I've dropped out a little bit over the last few years and more or less handed it over to the boys, and they just call me when they need me now. Sometimes I might skipper the boat for a month, or maybe half the season or something if they need me. And I'm also a Director on the Board of the Geraldton Fishermen's Co-operative and a few other little odds and ends, and it's good to keep an interest and

keep up with it all the time because if you retire right out of it you seem to lose track altogether.

**JD** Was your father a fisherman?

**RUSSELL** No.

**JD** Did you have any fishing background in your family?

**RUSSELL** No, not really. I was the first one.

**JD** You were the first one! And how did it come about that you got into fishing in the first place?

**RUSSELL** Well I used to live at a place called Triggs, it's a suburb of Perth about 8 or 9 miles from Perth out on the coast, and I was a ceillite fixer by trade. I was only about 19 or 20 or something at the time and I used to catch a few crayfish just for pleasure - just down in the waters close by where we lived - and it suddenly dawned on me that the amount I was catching, if I caught enough of them it would be a lot better than working in the trade I was in and it would only require a few more pots than I was working anyway to make my wages. So I bought a few pots, secondhand pots, off the Italian fishermen down there and used to pull them by hand out of my dinghy and I was making far better wages than I was in the trade, so that's how I got started.

**JD** What size dinghy were you using?

**RUSSELL** It was a 14 footer clinker dinghy, and in those days it was quite a good dinghy. And just an old Seagull outboard, an old 31/2 Seagull outboard, and I used to go up to about 4 or 5 miles, I suppose, from the beach. And I used to set lines for sharks as well; that was pretty good money as well, and the sharks. So gradually..... I spent about a year - two years - I suppose there, doing that, and then suddenly I started to want more and more money so I thought I'd buy a bigger boat and go a bit further. Which I did, and I went up to Lancelin, and fished out of Lancelin, which is about 60 miles north of Perth.

**JD** About when did you move to Lancelin?

**RUSSELL** Oooh....

**JD** Would it be about the mid-fifties?

**RUSSELL** Yes, possibly around.... yes, the mid-fifties. Yes, just somewhere around then.

**JD** This would be in the era when crayfishing was just taking off, am I right?

**RUSSELL** Yes. The markets in America were picking up - they had picked up a few years before that. Slowly. And really the money was just starting to get into the game then. Not much of the coast had been fished then, not a lot, probably for about 30 or 40 miles north of Fremantle had been fished for a good few years by the Italian fishermen down there. But Lancelin had been fished for just a few years then, and further north hadn't been touched much except at Geraldton, which was about 300

miles north (that's by road); that had been fished for quite a few years but only in the locality of Geraldton.

**JD** So all that country from just north of Lancelin to a little south of Geraldton was virtually virgin country from the crayfishing industry's point of view?

**RUSSELL** Yeah, almost. There had been a little bit of fishing going there but not very much, so you could virtually say most of it was virgin country.

**JD** Can you recall the approximate price of crayfish in, say, the mid fifties?

**RUSSELL** Well when I started it was one [shilling] and ninepence a pound and that was pretty good money in those days. Before that they had been.... oh, they were selling them for up to I think it was about tenpence a dozen or something, you know, back a few years before that but, of course, there were plenty of crays then and wages were very low. But it was only a hand to mouth game in those days. Mostly the Italian fishermen were doing it.

But this was just when a bit of money started to get in to it, so you could earn oh.... well, just taking my own catch, possibly in a week you could probably earn about up to a hundred pounds a week or something like that if you really fished.

**JD** You'd gross that much?

**RUSSELL** Yes, you could gross that much. Yes. Which was pretty good money.

**JD** Too right!

**RUSSELL** .... because wages at that time, I think, were only about six pounds - a tradesman's wages were only about six pound a week. So if you worked hard you could gross up to that. And the opportunity was there - it was an industry just starting to....

**JD** You came in at the right time really, didn't you?

**RUSSELL** That's right.

**JD** Just hit it right.

**RUSSELL** Yes, and I was at the right age and I was very keen on the ocean, and a young family, so the pressure was always on to make a bit more money to build a house and buy a motor car.

**JD** Did you live in Lancelin?

**RUSSELL** Yes. We used to go up for the season and we would stay there from November through until about the end of May, and then the weather more or less closed the season. The actual season went through in those days until the middle of August, but the weather would close it. It was a bit hard in there in the rough winter weather and you didn't make much money out of it.

**JD** Chris, could you continue on and tell us the rest of your career in the industry in brief? Where did you go after you had your first bigger boat at Lancelin, for example?

**RUSSELL** Yes, well I fished at Lancelin for about three years and distant fields looked greener, and there was an opportunity came up to jump up to a place called Fisherman Islands, just north of Jurien Bay - about 10 miles north of Jurien Bay. I used to work for a firm called Tropical Traders at the time and they had a boat - I think they had bought it from.... oh, up in Singapore or China; they tell me it used to be a gun-runner or something in the old days. But it was called the **Nardimar**, and they turned it into a freezer boat and a mother boat, and they based this at Fisherman Islands and several of us went up with our boats and we fished to the mother boat, because we only had.... at that time I only had a 24 foot boat. So we pitched a tent on the island and lived on the island for about three months and supplied all our catch to the mother boat and got our stores off the mother boat and so forth, and our water.

We fished for one year there and then I went to Green Head, which was about 4 miles further north but I could land base myself there, and there were tracks - they were only two-wheel bush tracks in those days. I fished there for a season and then jumped back to Jurien Bay for a couple of years and by that time the kids were starting to get a little bit older and I had to find a place where I could put them to school. So Geraldton was the next best bet, where there were reasonable schools and there was still plenty of scope in the fishing game.

So I left Jurien and went and bought a block of land in Geraldton but while my house was being built I worked out of Dongara for twelve months. That's Port Denison, actually. Dongara is the main town and Port Denison is just about a mile away on the coast. I fished out of there and when my house was finished I moved to Geraldton and lived in the house. Still fished down the coast - we used to travel up and down by vehicle each day, probably up to 60 miles south. And you'd anchor your boat wherever the closest point to where you were catching your crays and you'd go down by vehicle each day, and then go out in the boat from there and bring your catch home in your vehicle with you to Geraldton.

**JD** Alive?

**RUSSELL** Alive, yes.

**JD** Chris, are there many anchorages south of Geraldton that are suitable for this sort of thing?

**RUSSELL** Yes, there's lots of anchorages. Once you get down to Dongara.... from Geraldton to Dongara is about roughly 40 miles and it's pretty open coast there. There's one little place they call Seven Mile - there's a few boats. That's 7 miles north of Dongara. There's a few boats anchor there and fish out of there, but there's no fuel there - you have to cart it in drums. In the days of bigger boats and faster boats, of course, they all work out of the main ports now. [It is] much easier.

But south of Dongara you've got protecting reefs running all the way down; and most of the coast there you can anchor just about anywhere along the coast that you like there, and I suppose there would be an anchorage every few miles.

**JD** It's still in the public view fairly remote sort of country, isn't it, along the coast?

**RUSSELL** Yes, they are just opening it up now. For years it has just been tracks into the various spots but now they are putting better roads through and there are a lot of

squatters down there - squatters' camps and things. Mostly fishermen, but now a lot of the farmers are coming out and squatting there. When we first went to Green Head there was a little place just north of Green Head they called Little Bay, and that had quite a few farmers' camps even in those days there. They'd come for holidays and used to come out and live on the coast in the hot weather in the summertime....

**JD** Sounds great!

**RUSSELL** .... and after harvest, and do a bit of fishing. Yes.

**JD** So how many years have you been fishing out of Geraldton then?

**RUSSELL** Gee, when did I come to Geraldton? It would have been about.... oh, I think it would have been about '59 or something like that when I came up to Dongara that first year. Yes, probably about 1960 or '61, yes - I've been fishing since then out of Geraldton.

**JD** Do you fish north of Geraldton at all?

**RUSSELL** Yes, we go up to the Murchison River - Kalbarri; and also up to South Passage, that's at Shark Bay. Kalbarri is about roughly 100 miles north of here and Shark Bay is about 200 miles north of here.

**JD** So that 's a lot of territory, isn't it?

**RUSSELL** Yes.

**JD** From Shark Bay to south of Dongara! Do you still go down south as well?

**RUSSELL** Yes, on the whites - what we call the white crayfish. That starts in November and usually runs through to Christmas; they are the crays that have just moulted and they come out a very pale colour, and they must be very hungry after changing their shell because they hibernate while they change their shell. Then they must get very hungry because you can catch big catches of white crayfish at various times, especially when the weather is just right for them. If you get a bit of swell or so forth, something that suits them, they will fill your pots up and you can catch up to.... oh, in the early days 20 or 30 bags was fairly common in those days. And a bag is a wheat bag, about 100 pounds [lbs] approximately of crayfish in a bag.

**JD** What would a bag be worth on the current scene? Of course it varies, doesn't it?

**RUSSELL** It varies, but a bag is approximately about \$700, a bag of crayfish nowadays.

**JD** It's gone up, hasn't it?

**RUSSELL** Oh, it's gone up all right! [Laughter].

**JD** Chris, do you also fish the Abrolhos Islands?

**RUSSELL** Yes, we fish the Abrolhos. It starts on the 15th March and goes through until the 30th June. It did go through to the middle of August but they cut it back by six weeks to try and preserve the crayfish and the last bit of the island season wasn't really good anyway. Not for money in your pocket; it was.... you probably covered

expenses and made a few bob but it was better to cut that part off and catch the crayfish. Leave them, and save them for more economical times of the year so you could catch them with a better rate of pay for them.

**JD** Sure! How many boats do you and the boys operate?

**RUSSELL** Well I had two boats - two cray boats - most of the time and we also have.... one of the bigger cray boats we turned into a trawler, a scallop trawler, and also prawns. I sold one of the boats just recently because with the price of pots nowadays running up to - it did run up to \$9,000 a pot - and for what you could sell them for (sell your licence for), it was far better to sell it and invest it in something else because the return just wasn't there out of crayfish at that sort of money.

**JD** Yes, right! That's an interesting observation, isn't it?

**RUSSELL** Yes, well see, you probably on a boat that's worth about a million and a quarter dollars - that's the boat and licence - a million and a quarter dollars; you'd probably gross \$300,000 for the year out of that. You may nett out of that about \$100,000 to \$150,000 but you have to pay tax on that, so you finish up with about a taxable income of \$100,000/\$150,000 - you've got to work all year for that as well, and you've got an investment of a million and a quarter or a million and a half dollars.

**JD** It doesn't make sense, does it?

**RUSSELL** It's something like about 7 or 8 per cent return when the banks now you can just invest it somewhere and get back 18 per cent or something like that without even working.

**JD** Right! Yes, incredible!

**RUSSELL** Yes, it has certainly changed from the early days, but I suppose that's progress. [Laughter].

**JD** What other changes have you seen that are major changes in the industry in the time you've been in it?

**RUSSELL** Well, the major changes were processing works being built at various places along the coast where you didn't have to travel as far. The mother boats, they all phased out because the land based processing works phased them out. Freezer boats.... there used to be freezer boats, they were possibly boats of around 60 foot long and bigger, that could process their own catch on board and freeze, and they'd be out for about a month at a time and then come back and offload their catch.

But they all got phased out as time went on. Probably the last of them have only just been phased out in the last couple of years, but for about ten years there's only been probably two or three of them that have fished. Before that I think the freezer boat scene would have been possibly.... oh, 30 or 40 or 50 freezer boats on the coast. But, of course, when they were catching their own.... [correction] processing their own catch, they could fiddle a little bit [Laughter], and they used to process crays actually undersized by the head, but the tail weight might have been size, because they used to go on - I think it was 5 1/4 ounces per tail, and that was the only way the Fisheries [Department] could keep track of it.



**JD** Of course they didn't have the head, did they?

**RUSSELL** That's right! With the land based, the Fisheries could check the head measurement, but on a freezer boat that was gone because they only packed the tails. But what they used to do, they used to get a small crayfish and they would cut slivers of crayfish and poke it into the flesh of the other crayfish, of the tail they were going to keep and pack in the boxes. If it was slightly underweight when they screwed the head off, all the end of the tail is just bare meat and they could just poke these slivers of meat down to make up the tail weight, and it was very hard to check. You couldn't tell the difference and as long as the tail weighed the 5 1/4 ounces the Fisheries couldn't do much about it.

**JD** One of the things I notice is that taking undersized crayfish seems to have gone out of fashion in the industry now. Is that the case?

**RUSSELL** Yes, I think the fellows are more responsible nowadays. In the early days there were that many crayfish around that if you sold a few cackers it didn't matter, there were that many more there in the ocean it didn't seem.... well, we didn't think it mattered. I used to bring a few in for a feed; I don't think I ever sold any - if I did it might just have been a very few. Some blokes used to more or less make a living out of just dealing in the undersized crays, and in the Dongara area they virtually called them Dongara crays. They were known all throughout the State as Dongara crays, but really they were undersized crays.

And in the Dongara area it was a breeding ground there apparently, and there were millions and millions of undersized crays, or small crays (also size crays as well), close into shore where people could catch them quite easily with just small outfits - a little dinghy or a small boat. And of course it was a bit of a hobby for these fellows, and they used to catch these crays. They might go and catch 4 or 5 bags; they'd have their cookers hidden away just around in their backyard somewhere, or in the paddock next door behind a bush, and they'd cook them up. And they had various people coming through [who] would buy them off these fellows at a fairly cheap rate and take them through to Perth with them, and sell them and make a profit out of them down there.

But really I don't think anyone realised the consequences of it in the long run because, you know, it had to deplete the stocks and so forth if enough of it went on. Nowadays, of course, there's very little of it goes on and everybody really looks after the crays now.

**JD** Well I suppose the investment in terms of boats and gear is so high that you don't put the industry at risk. If the industry goes you go with it, don't you?

**RUSSELL** Yes, that's right. Well, see, like I was mentioning the major changes in the industry, also the efficiency of the boats and the type of boats we've got nowadays, it's jumped every year actually since I've been in the game - there have been better and better boats every year. But in the last ten years it has been dramatic, the change in boats. The fibreglass boat has got much, much better; then the aluminum boats came into it and with the aluminum boats you can build them so easily because you don't have to have a mould to make them. They are just made up of frames - you can make any size or shape quite easily. The boatbuilders can. And with the electronics and all that sort of gear that's come into the game now, we've got....

It started off with echo sounders. You used to just do it by lead line once, it was like trying to see in the dark. Echo sounders came in and we thought, oh hell, that's great, you know - we can't get much better than this. But then we've got radars, and colour

sounders, and we've got 'sat navs', and plotters - they've even got plotters on their 'sat navs' now where you can plot your course, it leaves a mark (it's like a TV screen), and you can plot your course on it and it leaves a line - a track - where you've been, exactly where you've been. If you get to a point and you want to go back, exactly on that track again you can just turn around and follow it back on the plotter. You can go back yard by yard if you want to, exactly where you've been.

**JD** And I believe there are automatic pilots, or the equivalent.

**RUSSELL** Yes. Well they came out some time back, the automatic pilots. Quite a few years back now. But, yes, they're great! And, of course, now they can integrate them with their 'sat navs' and virtually you can set a course that you want to go on and set your pilot and your 'sat nav' and the boat can automatically turn itself when it gets to a way point. It will turn and go onto a new course, and really you don't even have to guide your boat any more. You don't have to steer it if you didn't want to.

**JD** Chris, all this increase in technology (and the increase in investment too), is that requiring the fishermen to have higher skills than was once required?

**RUSSELL** Yes, yes. Years ago, when I first came into the game - I was only in it about a year or so and then they brought in tickets, you had to have a skipper's ticket. There was a small exam for it, fairly easy, but some of the old Italians couldn't read English and although they could go up and down the coast with their boats.... practical; they could do the practical side of things but they couldn't do the theory because they weren't educated. Some of them could hardly read or write. But they gave these fellows tickets because they could do it in practice anyway, but from that day on - then you had to sit for tickets.

Gradually over the years it's got harder and harder, and now it's quite hard to get a ticket now. You've got to have the seatime up, a certain amount of seatime, and then you've got to go to a school virtually, and you study at the school for a few weeks - it might run into six weeks if it's only a day or two a week or something like that - to get the knowledge to sit for your ticket. They are not easy to get now.

**JD** And I suppose there are various grades of ticket, are there?

**RUSSELL** Yes, they've changed them now. First off they used to be a Coxswain's ticket took you to about a 15 tonne vessel, and then a Grade 2 ticket took you to about 50 tonnes, and then a Grade 1 was from 50 to 300 tonnes.

**JD** That is the end of Tape 1 Side A. Please turn the tape over for side B.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## **TAPE 1 SIDE B**

**JD** This is Side B of Tape 1 with an interview with Mr Chris Russell. Chris, talking about tickets, you were about to explain the new style of ticket that is available to people in the industry.

**RUSSELL** Yes, they've changed them now and they've gone to what they call the Master Class 5, which takes over from the Coxswain's and the Grade 2 ticket. It's virtually one now, but it is a lot harder exam to get it. And the Master Class 4 is a

higher ticket again, I think it takes you more than 300 tonnes, I think it takes you up to about a 500 tonne vessel now. But there's a lot more in it nowadays because of the equipment you've got to use - the electronic gear and all that sort of thing. And where in the old days it was just done by the seat of your pants, now it is a bit different story.

**JD** Do the young blokes go for all these tickets or don't they bother?

**RUSSELL** Oh yes, they go for them all right. They go to the school and I think they do quite well because they probably know a lot more than I do nowadays in the mathematics and all that sort of thing, and probably if I sat for the ticket now I'd really have to go to school and swot to pass my ticket, because all the stuff I learnt I've probably forgotten. And all the school work sort of stuff, you know. But I'd have to virtually go back to school again if I wanted to sit for one of these tickets today.

**JD** Where are these schools conducted? Are they technical schools, or are they private colleges, or what?

**RUSSELL** Yes. There's a technical school up here, it's TAFE College, and you sit for your ticket there; and there's a couple of ex-sea captains that teach navigation and teach you everything you need to know for your ticket. Because they've got the questions and answers in front of them so they know exactly what to teach you and so forth. But they give everybody a good general knowledge of what they should know of the sea so that when they take a vessel out they are quite capable of doing it.

**JD** And generally the courses are considered to be satisfactory in terms of the material, the stuff they cover?

**RUSSELL** Oh yes. When you sit for your exam the local Harbour Master down there, he takes you for your exam and he's got everything set out in front of him - his questions, and the whole works. You've got to do a written exam and an oral exam and so forth. Most of them pass. Some have got to go back to school and do a bit more swotting and so forth and then sit again. But the young blokes nowadays are fairly brainy, actually.

**JD** You've been very much involved in the management side of the industry, mainly I think through the Fishermen's Co-op here in Geraldton, have you not?

**RUSSELL** Yes, that's right. I've been a Director on the Board there at the Geraldton Fishermen's Co-op for about.... oh, I think about 13 or 14 years now. We do a few trips away, usually when our Manager and our Marketing Manager go overseas to Japan, or Taiwan, or Hong Kong, America. Two directors go with them - not just to keep an eye on them but to further our knowledge as well, because you want to know.... If you've got to make decisions down there on the Board you've got to know as much as you possibly can about the markets, and the other countries. And when we are over in those places we go to the restaurants and we order crayfish and lobsters (as they are now called) and so forth, and get an idea of just how they are marketed; how the end user gets them over there; and the price. And so we try out the lobsters or crayfish from other countries as well to try and get a comparison of how much better ours is than.... Well, the cold water lobster is much better than the warm water lobster. So we go and order a feed of warm water lobsters just to get a comparison and see where we stand in the market.

**JD** How do we stand? How does our product compare with products from other countries?

**RUSSELL** Oh, very good. Our product, I would say, would be tops in the market because all our crays come from cold waters and they are much better crayfish. Not only that, in Japan our crayfish is almost identical to crayfish that they catch in Japan and the Japanese people, of course, go for stuff that looks like their own. But their crays, I've seen them there, they've got no size limit on them and they are VERY small. Very small! You can put them on the palm of your hand and acrossways they wouldn't overlap your hand, where our cray - our minimum cray - would be.... he's roughly almost a pound weight. He's probably just under a pound, the minimum sized cray, where these little blokes would be not much more than a few ounces.

**JD** Goodness!

**RUSSELL** But they get big prices for those. I don't know why we can't get the same price because the crayfish looks identical. It's just one of those things, I suppose. We are top of the market and the Brolos brand, which is the brand of the Geraldton Fishermen's Co-op, is now tops over there. They don't need a sample if they order Brolos brand crays; they just say, "Right, we want Brolos brand" and that's it.

**JD** So our presentation and marketing techniques are well and truly up with the world's best?

**RUSSELL** Oh yes. Presentation in Japan is very important. They are very particular, and some of the stuff you see in the supermarkets - and the presentation of it - is magnificent. I don't know whether.... I suppose we could match them, I mean we can match anybody I suppose, but it would be very hard to match the presentation that they've got for any sort of fish at all. Their fish nowadays, they go for iced fish - the fresher the better. Frozen fish now is almost a thing of the past in wet fish, in scale fish.

The fish.... they have them on little polystyrene plates and they have a clear plastic cover over the top and the fish inside (because they have them in these big trays of ice and stuff around) and he looks like he's just come out of the water. He looks as fresh as a daisy.

**JD** Do they still have the practice of having a tank of live fish and you pick the one you want and they despatch it and serve it?

**RUSSELL** Yes. This is something that's only common in the last few years here is live cray export to Japan. We keep them in circulating tanks on boats and then they go into circulating tanks at the factory, and then from there they are put into these polystyrene boxes which are probably an inch thick, and they are little insulated boxes. They are put into very cold water first, and it sort of stuns the crayfish and calms him right down; then they pack them into these boxes with a bit of sawdust and they are quickly taken to the airport, which is all pre-arranged, and flown to Japan - which takes about 24 hours approximately.

**JD** What, from landing here to the table (or the restaurant) in Japan?

**RUSSELL** Well no, from when they get taken out of the circulating tank for the last time at the factory.

**JD** Yes, yes.

**RUSSELL** From when they get taken out to when they are actually put into live tanks over in Japan. About 24 hours, approximate. And then they are kept in the live tanks in Japan, and of course the people over there they like the fish as fresh as they can get it, so if they can buy live fish that's a bigger price again. So we're getting bigger prices for the live crays.

And the people can actually.... there are tanks all over in the restaurants, they've all got tanks and things, and you can go and pick out what fish you want and within a few minutes it's on your plate in front of you. They eat a lot of raw fish over there, and first off I'd ever eaten much raw fish in my life (or very little), and I tried it and with the sauces and stuff that they use, it's quite good. The only part that I don't like is when they bring the fish to you on a plate and it's still quivering, and it's mouth is still going, and they've filleted one side of it and chopped it up, and here's the fish lying in front of you, with it's mouth still going and it's eyes looking at you, and you are picking out the raw flesh off the side of the fish, [Laughter]. And you're dipping it into the sauces and eating it while the poor old fish is still.... well he's dead, but his mouth is still moving anyway.

**JD** I think most of us would lose our appetite, wouldn't we?

**RUSSELL** [Laughter]. Yes. They've also got what they call 'drunken prawns', and they are live prawns and they get a little bowl of brandy and they put these prawns in the bowl and they are just flipped around a little bit, moving, and then tip a bit of brandy in it - probably half a cup or something - and put a lid on it. And, of course, these prawns go mad - the brandy and the fumes must be getting into their gills, breathing it in, and they jump all over the place and of course they call them drunken prawns. And then they take it away and they sort of break the head and they bring them back to you, and they're still alive and they're still moving, and that's the way you eat them.

**JD** Ugh! [Laughter].

**RUSSELL** It doesn't mean much to the Japanese because they've done it all their lives.

**JD** Yes, that's right.

**RUSSELL** Some people get a big upset by it.

**JD** Oh well, everybody to their own taste. [Laughter].

**RUSSELL** Yes, that's right.

**JD** You mentioned earlier on that you did a bit of shark fishing in your early days and that you, even now, are still involved in scallops and prawning a bit.

**RUSSELL** Yes.

**JD** There's a scallop fishery up here, is there?

**RUSSELL** Yes. At the Abrolhos Islands there have been scallops there for years, probably hundred of years maybe. A few years back, oh say maybe 20 years ago, they

caught a lot of scallops over there and brought them in the shell - whole scallops, live - and they would bring them in and they were processed on shore. But you didn't get very much for them and it wasn't very lucrative. So then they had a couple of bad years where there didn't seem to be many scallops appear over there so the boats gave it away. They were still making plenty of money out of crayfishing, of course. So they gave that away as a sideline.

Then in about 1981, '82, suddenly there was a market - an export market - for scallops and the price skyrocketed, so the boats went back again. But they were processing them on board and things had advanced a little since the early days, and so they were processed on board and just the meat of the scallop brought in. It's quite lucrative, actually, while there are enough scallops there to be caught.

You have ups and downs with the scallop seasons. One year they'll be good and another year they can be just a disaster - for no reason. And there were probably too many boats got into it in the three or four good years and that helped to deplete the stocks. Now they've closed it off and it's a limited entry fishing now. Some of the boats have fallen out because it's survival of the fittest in any game and they just can't make enough out of it, so they've fallen by the wayside and there are getting less and less boats so it's a little bit better fishery for the boats that are in it now.

**JD** Yes. These are trawlers are they?

**RUSSELL** Yes, these are trawlers. A lot were cray boats - ex cray boats - that were turned into trawlers, and not really suitable as trawlers but quite suitable just for catching the scallops over there in the calm waters and so forth.

**JD** And do these scallops trawlers double as prawn trawlers?

**RUSSELL** Yes, yes. Everything is limited entry now. With the prawns, that's limited entry and so forth. There are a couple of areas that aren't limited entry areas - this is where they've doubled up and they've got prawn concession there. Those areas since have been closed, so anyone who had a scallop concession and got in on the prawns and got a prawn concession - he's all right. Nobody now can get into those unless they buy their way into them - by buying out another boat.

**JD** Yes, sure. Are they expensive licenses to buy as well?

**RUSSELL** The Abrolhos fishery limited entry licence probably.... probably for a single net, I suppose - oh, it's hard to say, there's not a figure on them. I would say it could be anywhere between about \$40,000 and \$80,000, somewhere in there. [It would] depend on the season. If it was a good season and there was a good return, licences would probably go up to \$80,000 and maybe even more. But a lot of the boats go from here to Shark Bay for the scallops, and that's a limited entry fishery as well now. But the licences up there are worth much more because the catches are much bigger up there, and some of the licences there are selling now for \$1,000,000 to \$1 1/2 million - that's for a boat of about 50 or 60 feet. The boat and licence - the boat is probably worth another \$200,000 or \$300,000 on top of that, or maybe even more.

Although this year they had a disaster up there with the scallop season. It's one of those things. They've had four or five brilliant years up there - boats catching as much as 45/50 tonnes, and this year those same boats were battling to get 4 or 5 tonnes. Didn't even cover costs. So that's the way it goes.

**JD** With that sort of investment that would be pretty hard to take, wouldn't it?

**RUSSELL** That's right. Yes.

**JD** To come back to crayfish, or rock lobster. Are we able to find markets for all our catch, or should we be attempting to find new markets to absorb more of the catch?

**RUSSELL** Well, I think we've got to keep trying to find new markets all the time to get a better return. It's not much good finding new markets at a cheap price because that's not what we are in the game for. But we can't rely just on one or two markets - we've got to keep looking all the time and spreading our eggs out a bit, and not all in one basket.

In the early days it used to be just the American market and that was a tail market - tails only - and probably 80 or 90 percent of our crayfish went to America. That's virtually where the change in the name came, from crayfish to lobsters. The Americans catch lobsters over there and their crayfish are freshwater crayfish, and they don't taste anywhere as good. And our crays - as we call them crayfish here - were seawater and we suddenly came to the conclusion that if we called them lobsters we would get a better price than calling them crayfish because their lobster over there comes from the sea and they are a much better product. And that's actually how the name changed. And the price went up a bit but whether it was because of that I don't know. But the cost of living goes up, so I suppose prices have to go up.

Yes, these markets.... see we changed. Over the last few years in Japan we went into live lobsters and now we've got the whole boiled lobster - where he's boiled up here, packed into boxes, but he's a frozen product. You freeze them and then send them across. And we've got that market. We've expanded to Taiwan, into Hong Kong; we are looking at Korea; we've got some into Singapore, a small market there. Some go to Europe; there's just some small consignments but we are looking more and more at Europe now. It's very hard to get into some of these countries but I think the markets are there if you've got the quality. And that's a point we've got to have nowadays, is the quality. If you haven't got the quality you are really battling.

**JD** Have you heard rumours of other countries selling their rock lobster labelled "Product of Australia"?

**RUSSELL** Yes. This has come about. It's actually possibly.... I don't know whether the other countries actually sold them called "Product of Australia". The ones that I know of mainly were Australian fellows importing these crayfish into Australia, repacking them into boxes and then calling them "Product of Australia" and selling them as Australian crays. And actually the quality wasn't there because they are warm water crayfish. Although they are making a quick dollar it's ruining our industry by doing that.

**JD** Sure!

**RUSSELL** People get those boxes of crays and they are not as good a quality and they say, "Ooh, these Australian crays are not too good, we won't worry about them again!" But really they are not Australian crays at all.

**JD** Is that illegal to do that?

**RUSSELL** Yes. It is illegal to call them "Product of Australia", yes - on the boxes - as far as I know, if they're not a product of Australia. And there's been moves made now to stop all this and I'm sure that if anybody tries to do it now, I'm sure the authorities will.... there will be a severe reprimand for it.

**JD** Yes. Good! Our cray or rock lobster fishery is reputed to be as well managed as any in the world. Would you agree with the assessment?

**RUSSELL** Yes, I've had a look at a lot of the other industries around the world - the fishing industries and so forth - and the West Australian rock lobster industry would be one of the best, if not THE best, managed fishery in the world. And a lot of this came about by the fishermen themselves. Through our Fishermen's Association we put things up to the Fisheries Department and said, "Look, this is what we want done; can you do it?" and the Fisheries Department had a look at it. And of course it lets them off the hook a bit, too. They don't have to bring in rules and regulations that don't suit the fishermen. So a lot of these things were done by the fishermen, which is good because they are looking after their own industry then. In this day and age that's the only way the industry will survive, is by people actually really looking after their own industry.

**JD** It's becoming self-regulating to some degree?

**RUSSELL** Yes.

**JD** To a considerable degree from what you say!

**RUSSELL** Yes, that's right. We liaise fairly good with the Fisheries Department. There's still a few blokes get caught for a few undersize in their catch. Some might have a bit of a go, and of course being the price they are they see a quick buck there if they can slip a couple of undersize in. But it doesn't happen all that much.

**JD** I noticed it's rather frowned upon by the other fishermen nowadays?

**RUSSELL** Yes. A lot of the fishermen will bring home a feed of crays for themselves so naturally they might pick out a few that are just undersize, but of course if they get caught there's a hefty fine for it. But anybody actually dealing in undersized crayfish is frowned on.

**JD** Mm, sure. Chris, is there anything else you'd like to record about the industry or your own role in it or whatever?

**RUSSELL** Well yes. Going back to the boats, the speed of the boats nowadays is out of all proportion to what it used to be in the early days. In the early days when I came into the game they were all round-bilge boats and plank boats, old luggers and all that sort of boat and the top speed would have been 10 knots - and that's real top speed; the lowest would have been around 7 or 8 knots, and they had an engine to suit. They used to work - in the early days - just straight around, or straight after.... oh, about 1945, straight after the war - they used to work on about 1 horsepower per foot of boat and that used to drive it at about its hull speed.

Then suddenly as things went on, they put a bigger engine but they got very little more speed for their bigger engines, and so they started to go to the chine type boat - which is a flatter bottomed boat. And they also went into plywood boats which were



lighter and faster; bigger engines; and once they got them up planeing, of course, the bigger engine you put in, virtually the faster you went.

Nowadays, of course, they've gone to aluminum and fibreglass and boats nowadays.... a boat about 45 or 50 foot boat now, where in the old days he'd probably work on about a 50 or 60 horsepower engine, now they're working on 500 or 600 horsepower, but they're doing 25 and 30 knots. A 50 foot boat! And it's a much bigger boat, actually, in bulk than the old plank boat, because on the old plank boat - say a 50 footer you could probably put 100 pots on comfortably, they are a much more roomier boat.

**JD** Has this extended the sort of area of operations?

**RUSSELL** Oh yes. Nowadays there's hardly a bit of ground that we know of that hasn't worked. A day boat in the old days, if he travelled 20 miles to sea and 20 miles back and worked his gear, that was a big day. Now the boat can travel 60 or 70 miles out in a day, and the same back, and they're back in the same time.

**JD** And they can go out in weather that earlier boats wouldn't have looked at, I believe?

**RUSSELL** In the early days you would probably have averaged a day off a week I suppose, from bad weather. Now, virtually you could go through the whole season and maybe - if you wanted to - only have a couple of days off.

**JD** Do they?

**RUSSELL** They'll anchor in 50 fathoms of water; and boats of, say, 45 foot and upwards - mainly 50 foot and upwards - they anchor out and they'll stay out for 4 or 5 days with their circulating tank and keep the crays alive. This has given them more scope up the coast. Instead of.... once you get north of Geraldton you've only got Port Gregory and Murchison River, the only two anchorages that you could call anchorages. You've got probably from Murchison River North, you've got 100 miles of country there that is very hard to get to, only the freezer boats could get to it in the early days. But now all the day boats can get to it with the speed of the boats. And the machinery they've got on board - they pull the pots much quicker and all that sort of thing.

**JD** We don't hear of the accidents with cray boats now - the loss of boats - that we used to. Is that the case? There are not so many accidents with boats?

**RUSSELL** They are a much bigger and better boat now. In the early days we all had small boats and we all probably tried to do too much with a small boat, and that's where a lot of the accidents happened. Also fellows working on their own. In the early days they would just work on their own in a small boat and you only had to get a rope around your leg, or something like that happened and you'd fall overboard and the boat steamed on, and of course you would drown. Very few blokes would get ashore. But as it gets harder and harder to catch the crayfish, especially at the Abrolhos Islands, there's a lot of reef country there and fairly dangerous country. But there's a lot of crayfish in that country and the blokes will stick their necks out more and more, of course. But with the bigger and better boats that's helped. If you did the same things today with the boats you had 15 or 20 years ago there would be a lot of accidents. With the boats now they have quick acceleration; they are much bigger beamier boats - they can stand up to the breakers and so forth - and they get away with it.

**JD** Chris, it has been a great interview. Thank you very much, you've put me in the picture on many things. Thank you.

**RUSSELL** All right. That's all right, Jack, no problems at all.

**JD** That was an interview with Mr Chris Russell, owner and skipper of vessels engaged in the rock lobster fishing industry out of Geraldton, Western Australia. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey at Mr Russell's home in Geraldton on the 8th November 1989. There is one Tape, Sides A and B.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with EMANUEL SOULOS

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Emanuel Soulos of Bunbury. The interview was conducted in Mr Soulos' home in Bunbury, Western Australia for Murdoch University and the Australian Fishing Research Council.

Mr Soulos has spent a long working life in the fishing industry in this area and is still actively engaged in the industry. He is President of the South West Professional Fishermen's Association and is a highly respected member of a very well known fishing family on this south west coast. His long and close involvement with the industry and the people in it make his comments as recorded herein of particular value.

A subsequent interview with Emanuel's son, Nicholas, who is mentioned on this tape and who represents fishermen of a younger generation enables a comparison of the views and concerns of a wider spectrum of fishermen in the area.

The contribution of Mr Soulos to this project is appreciated.

There is one tape. The interview starts at 025 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

This is an interview with Mr Emanuel Soulos of Bunbury. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey on the 11th December, 1989.

*JD* Mr Soulos, would you record your full name and place of birth please.

*SOULOS* Emanuel Nicholas Soulos; born 6 August, 1926 in Bunbury.

*JD* Where were your parents born?

*SOULOS* They were both born in Greece. They were Island people in Greece; up in the Islands, [unclear].

*JD* When did they come to this country?

*SOULOS* Oh I think it was just after the first War finished.

*JD* Was your father a fisherman?

*SOULOS* Dad, no. When he came here he was fourteen years of age.

**JD** Oh yes, yes; and then he went fishing when he came here?

**SOULOS** Yeah, well see there was already a few Greeks here so they took him into their homes and they were fishermen and he just took over, you know, automatically.

**JD** And it was here in this Bunbury area?

**SOULOS** In this Bunbury area, yes.

**JD** Did he have any other brothers that were involved in the fishing industry?

**SOULOS** Not here he didn't; not here in Australia. He had brothers in Greece. They had different jobs you know over there, vineyards and olive plantations. He would have been the only fisherman.

**JD** You had a brother, a fisherman did you?

**SOULOS** Yeah, well I've got six brothers.

**JD** Not all fishermen?

**SOULOS** Well, most of them were except one, the youngest.

**JD** And now you've got a son fishing?

**SOULOS** Yeah, Nicholas.

**JD** How did you come to get into the fishing industry?

**SOULOS** Well in them days things were pretty hard. Dad used to take me fishing, and my other brothers. When we left school we just carried on.

**JD** And at what stage did you start on your own?

**SOULOS** Oh when I got married, about 38 years ago.

**JD** Mr Soulos could tell us about the sorts of fishing you are involved in now.

**SOULOS** Well I'm involved in estuarine fishing, beach sein fishing, white bait and we do a bit of shark fishing, little bit of mullett fishing. It is seasonal.

**JD** Is that the same kind of fishing that you've always been involved in?

**SOULOS** Pretty well. Yes; and salmon fishing. I do salmon fishing in the season. See everything's seasonal. You just take it from season to season. We do a lot of crabbing too but we used to make a living out of crabs but we've shifted over to our whitebait. Whitebait's come on. See in the early years, we never used to catch whitebait, but see there's a demand for it now; angling bait.

**JD** You'd have seen quite a lot of changes in the industry I would imagine?

**SOULOS** Oh yes, yeah. A hell of a lot.

**JD** What would be some of the main changes?

**SOULOS** Fish, fish habits have changed. I think it's a big environmental change. We don't get the weather we used to get twenty years ago. I think that's had an affect and I think the Leeuwin current's had a big affect, specially the last couple of years.

**JD** Is it altering the kind of fish you get, is it?

**SOULOS** Well we are catching northern fish down in this area; Spanish mackerel and other different species; some of the fishermen are catching them. Heard of Spanish mackerel as far as the Leeuwin That's a fair way south and that's a northern fish. See you had tailor disappear; there's skippys disappeared off the beaches. You used to get schools of mulloway but I think all that type of fish is coming back again. There's just been an environmental change.

Same thing happens with the sharks. Some years you don't get them as thick and other years they are plentiful. See last year there's that much shark around they were all battling to sell them. Even now there's quite a bit of shark around and see we've got a management plan and limited entry. A lot of our fisheries are starting to get managed now and see I think that's for the better. It should improve things, fish wise and I think the least fishermen that's in, the better chance you've got of selling them, you know.

**JD** Are there more fishermen in the industry now than there were?

**SOULOS** No. I think there's less. There was a lot of fishermen. A lot have gone out. A lot have been [in] the Government buy-back scheme but the imports are the ones that're killing us. See we got fish coming in from all over the world through our Australian markets.

**JD** That's the frozen fish you see so much of in the shops?

**SOULOS** Yes, yes.

**JD** Are there enough outlets for your product?

**SOULOS** I think there is enough outlets or the problem is, the private sector, see we used to see half a dozen boats in the old days. Now you see up to 200 boats in one day on the inlet and that's only the inlet. Then outside here, you used to see three or four, half a dozen outside.

**JD** That's the recreational fishermen?

**SOULOS** Recreational. Now they're, you know, there's hundreds of them. See you get a bit of conflict. They reckon we shouldn't be there and you, know... Good public relations I think, that counts a lot too.

**JD** You're involved with the Fishermen's Association, aren't you?

**SOULOS** Oh yes, yes.

**JD** What's your role there?

**SOULOS** I'm President of the Sou-West Fishermen's Association. This is the Bunbury area.

**JD** Yes. Is it an active body?

**SOULOS** Oh yeah, very active; been very active too. Yes. Very active and well respected by the Government and the Fisheries Department.

**JD** You co-operate closely with the Fisheries Department?

**SOULOS** Oh, very, very, very. You got to, you've got to. We got a problem, we go to the Fisheries or the Government. If they want something done they consult us. You know, it's good. And then we've got AFIC (Australian Fishing Council). That's part of us. If we've got a problem we go to AFIC. Terry's in AFIC and they'll carry the problem to the Department or from the Department to us.

**JD** What about on the local level. Is there a good relationship between the Fisheries officers and the fishermen?

**SOULOS** There is, there is. Good public relations between them. They try to help us as much as they can. We try to help them as much as we can. No, it's good. It's different than the old days. The old days, they were hard. They were hard people but now it's different.

**JD** Are there enough inspectors?

**SOULOS** Well I think they've got their hands full, put it that way. They're crying for more inspectors but, see we've only got two here and one in Busselton. They have, they've got their hands full. Well look at all the boats; hundreds of them. Who [are] they gonna put to police [them]. You take 200 boats on that inlet, who they gonna [get to] police [them]? No, they work the clock I think. Then they've got the marron. That's another thing. Haven't only got this area, they've got to do all the marron too. There's only.... well there is a few of them there.

They've got a few mobile patrols but I think they do a good job too. See they circulate a lot of pamphlets. This is the best thing too, what they've done, pamphlets, you know. I'll show you after before you go, what I mean.

**JD** Information?

**SOULOS** Oh yeah, yeah yeah. Specially our District Inspector, he's John Breedan, he's.... There's one of them. That's a part of one. See, lot of these [are] a lot of his ideas and since he's been on the scene, you know, he's made a big difference.

**JD** I'd like to have a look at that shortly.

**SOULOS** I'll show you down there; what I mean.

**JD** What other changes have you seen? It's always been hard work, fishing, hasn't it?

**SOULOS** All the plastic pollution change, that's for sure. Yeah we've got that. Then we've got the chemicals coming down the rivers. They don't help; but fish wise we're

still getting our fish. You know, the crabs still come in. In fact I think we get more whiting than we ever got. You know, the whiting come here.

**JD** Catching techniques, have they improved or are they the same as they always were?

**SOULOS** No, no. The only thing that [laughs].... We can use an outboard now instead of rowing.

**JD** Yes. Make it a bit easier?

**SOULOS** I've only had an outboard for the last, about 25 odd years. I was rowing up till about 25 years ago.

**JD** And where did you row to?

**SOULOS** From here right up to the head of the inlet; catch my fish and row all the way back. Before they put the inner harbour in we used to row right up there. I can remember my father in the early days, he had a little sail, two men on the front paddle and one at the back and they used to go from Bunbury to Mandurah and from Mandurah back to Bunbury; but them days was all ice. No freezers. The freezers came later.

**JD** What size boat would they be operating?

**SOULOS** Well they were rowing the twenty footer. Yeah, twenty odd foot.

**JD** Was it with those big sweeps that they used to use?

**SOULOS** That's right, yes. Two on the front, one each and then one bloke at the back and then when the wind used to [blow] they used to put [up] their little sail and go.

**JD** What about marketing in earlier times?

**SOULOS** Yeah well [it] was A.J. Langford first. A.J. Langford and then they had another one in Fremantle, another market. Then old George Kailis took over. He done a lot for the fisherman. Hell of a lot. He helped them a lot. Then Michael took over and now I think his boys have taken over. So they've done a lot too. They've gone out of their way to help fishermen, even though a lot of fishermen don't send their fish to him, you know; they [send it] here and there but they always fall back on the market. They've done a lot for this Western Australian, the Kailis family.

**JD** They've very highly regarded.

**SOULOS** Oh they are, yeah. Theo, cousin Michael, there's two Michael Kailises. We've got the Exmouth Michael and we've got the boys that've got the Markets. Oh yeah, very highly regarded and very well respected. From this area they area, yeah. Oh well I think they're respected right through. Oh for sure.

**JD** Yeah; all over Australia in fact.

**SOULOS** Yeah, big family, because without them I don't think we would have survived either. You know, it's alright us selling our fish now to different outlets and that but in

them days everything went to the Market. They've tried to get the best return they could.

**JD** In the very early days, wasn't it the case that some people used to sort of take their fish in a basket around....

**SOULOS** Yes. In the early days I can remember my grandmother, even my mother, used to get a basket of fish and go out to the farms, come back with a pound or two of butter, a dozen eggs. There was eight children in the family but see the grandparents used to help a lot. That's how we survived, but even today we all help one another.

**JD** The whole family?

**SOULOS** Oh yeah. We get a load of fish. Each family takes its load of fish home and each one helps one another do them and any problems, the families are there.

**JD** And everybody's involved?

**SOULOS** Of course they are and that's how it should be I think.

**JD** What are some of the other problems then that you can see in the industry, in your part of the industry? There's the rising costs [which] is a factor, isn't it?

**SOULOS** Yeah well rising costs and the price is still the same as they were years ago. If anything I think they've gone down. Yes, they've gone down. Electricity's gone up. See we work for 40 bucks a day some days. You know, all day but there again you've got to take it. You've got to do it, you know and somewhere along the line you do get your run and when you get your run it seems to make up. Well put it this way, our income, even though we might have to work a bit harder, from one year to the next year the income seems to be stable. Doesn't seem to change.

See last year I went on the salmon. The year before we had 200 and something tonne of salmon. Last year we ended up with 50 but there again we had a good herring season you see and that brought us back up.

**JD** You're probably lucky that you're not dependent on just one species.

**SOULOS** No there is a lot of fishermen that do depend on one species but see a lot of these things was handed down to us from the grandpeople. This [unclear] at sea, if I hadn't done it and had me licenses.... We done a bit of sharking. I got, you know, few months on sharking. This beach sein thing; our salmon concession. That's me father's salmon concession. I got that. When he passed away I got it from the Department and that's how it goes.

**JD** Any other major problems that you see in the industry?

**SOULOS** Only imported; import and pollution. Pollution's a big thing.

**JD** Pollution's a big thing?

**SOULOS** Oh that's for sure but there again we're lucky. I think on this west coast they're now doing something. Didn't let it go too far like the eastern states. See I've seen it on TV, you know, how bad it is there. We haven't got to that stage, you know where fish are dying. We did have a bit of a mishap in Wonneurup there with a boat;



out in the estuary[unclear], closed up and the fish died but now they're keeping that mouth open now. It's open. Twelve months of the year they keep it open and make sure nothing happens again.

**JD** How do you get on for crew members?

**SOULOS** Oh, it's pretty hard to hold a crewie.

**JD** Is it?

**SOULOS** Yeah, it's understandable too.

**JD** Are they on a wage or a share or....?

**SOULOS** No, no. They get a percentage of the gross. It's the only way you can hold them. It's the only way you can get them to work too I think. They get a lot of fish and they get their fair share. If we don't get any fish, well....

**JD** They're mostly young chaps I imagine?

**SOULOS** Oh yes, yes. They are youngins. Actually the fishing industry seems to be a stepping stone. See I had one lad here, I had him, oh for about eight or nine years and then he went from fishing, he went to something else and he's pretty right now. He's got a good job. I've had other lads come from school and then they've gone; they've got better jobs. I would have had eight or nine lads I think in my time, working for me. All got good jobs and believe it or not, you know, they do come around and have a beer with us now and then. Very thankful boys, a lot of them.

**JD** Well I suppose you gave them a start, didn't you?

**SOULOS** Gave them a start, and I'll tell you what, the lads want to be wanted. The youngins want to be wanted. You know, they don't mind bogging in. Doesn't matter whether it's rough or what. You tell them, you know a lot of lads.... Well most of the lads I've had have been good kids.

**JD** Your boy, Nick, has done very well, hasn't he?

**SOULOS** Yeah well he's a chip off the old block, you know. He's respected too in the community. He's in quite a few things, in the fishing things, you know, on a few committees and that and a few working groups. Good skipper. Went to school to study. Actually the younger ones are very lucky because they went to school and studied. I didn't have that opportunity. We didn't have that. I think if I'd have studied, I might have been a.... I'm happy the way we are, but it might have been that much more better, but there again.

**JD** Who can tell?

**SOULOS** Well that's right. You never know.

**JD** What direction do you see the industry taking in the future?

**SOULOS** I think once its managed, which it is being managed now, it's starting. I think we've got another couple of years, three years I think before it's under control. I think it'll level out. Should level out. I think there's a future. I don't know if we've got

a future for outside but, you know like the Russians and the Taiwanese and that. I don't know if we can get our boys to go.... Some of the boys do go on the prawns and that but I don't know if they go into the fishing part of it. See we've got a lot of fish coming in from all them countries. They're that far ahead of us it's not funny you know. They've got factory ships, they've got....

**JD** It's a tremendously expensive undertaking though isn't it to build seagoing ships.

**SOULOS** Oh yeah, I know what it cost me. Even this little operation I've got. I know what it cost me. See I need \$6,000.00/\$7,000.00 worth of fuel annually.

**JD** A year?

**SOULOS** This is mine and then I've got me electricity on top and then got me cartons and every three years I've gotta have a truck. That gets rusted out and the Government won't recognise this for our trucks. They reckon.... Well we are classed as primary producers and we're not. Every three years I've gotta get a new truck and there's no way in the world we got sales tax relief. We've been trying to get it and for some unknown reason, I don't know, they just won't have a bar of it. I don't think they realise what type of work we do. Don't realise it.

**JD** You've made representations through the....?

**SOULOS** Oh yeah, yeah. We've had Jeff Prosser. He's a liberal member and AFIC's been trying. They reckon we'll get it but gawd knows when.

**JD** Is there any other support that you feel the industry needs from Government?

**SOULOS** Well I think they should do something about the imports but the trouble is, we gotta export too. I think that's where our problem is. We'd be shot without that export too.

**JD** In crays and that sort of thing?

**SOULOS** Oh yes, snapper, yeah. See it's the rock lobster fishery that keeps a lot of us people going because we supply them with, you know, rock lobster bait and, you know, it's just a big circle.

**JD** Yes. Would you care to mention some of the prominent people that you've known in the industry or who have been in the industry?

**SOULOS** Well you've had the Kailis families and the.... Here in Bunbury here we've had the McKailises, the Margies; they were all fish buyers. Directors: A.J. Fraser, we've got Bernard Boan now. A very good director; very clever man, you know. He's [a] very knowledgeable man and he's done a lot for the industry too. He has, he's helped the fisherman. Had some good ministers.

**JD** What about.... Can you recall any outstanding events that have happened?

**SOULOS** Only when the cyclone, two cyclones I can remember where people got lost out here. Cause in them days, I don't know whether it was in 1935 or 36, there was a big cyclone and half the fleet went down from out of here. They were mainly Norwegians and Swedes, you know. They drowned. Never come back.

**JD** There seems to be fewer accidents now?

**SOULOS** Yeah I think we're.... Marine & Harbours (Harbour and Marine, you know).... Harbour and Lights. We get our boats inspected every.... and I think that that helps a lot too. They don't take the risk we used to take either. You know in them early days we used to take a lot of risks.

**JD** What, they'd fish in the same places or....?

**SOULOS** Yeah. They're fishing the same, if not further now but in them days we used to go from here to Cape Naturalist. They're all five horsepower simplex in a 27 foot boat and thousand pound ice box and 600 volts[?] [laughs]. I don't know how we went there, but Jesus, some of them squalls and gales, specially in August and September. They were only little boats you know. Three men in it. It's a wonder we never went under. There again, it's you know, what we knew.

**JD** It's always been a pretty tough industry?

**SOULOS** Oh it has, it has.

**JD** And has been all around the world?

**SOULOS** Well I think the fishing industry is a tough game; very tough.

**JD** Would you go into it again if you had the opportunity?

**SOULOS** Course I would [laughs]. Yes. I'm happy. I'm happy when I'm on the water but the women pay for it a lot too, you know. They stay home and....

**JD** Have you ever employed any girls?

**SOULOS** Not really, no. Sometimes they help but only the family girls, you know. They'll hop in and help us but they do, they make good skippers. I think they've got a few up in the north. There's a couple of girl skippers down south here. They're good workers. I know my mother was a good worker. She used to help [with] the nets, mend the nets, you know and she was a woman; but there again you're battling to get a woman now to mend a net. You're battling to get a man to mend the net. [unclear] I'd rather go and buy.... There's a thing now, my boy, he mends it. He learnt. He makes his own nets, mends them. It's a big saviour.

**JD** Anything else you'd like to mention before we finish?

**SOULOS** Only hope to Christ the price of fish goes up [laughs].

**JD** Right. Well look thanks very much. It's been a very, very interesting interview.

**SOULOS** Thank you.

**JD** Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Emanuel Soulos of Bunbury.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with NICK SOULOS

### INTRODUCTION

[This is an interview with] Mr Nick Soulos of Bunbury. Mr Soulos is a younger member of the Soulos family of Bunbury. The family is well known and widely respected in the fishing industry here.

Born in Bunbury and educated there, and at the West Australian Institute of Technology (Now Curtin University), Mr Soulos has wide practical experience in many forms of fishing in this area. He has both a theoretical and practical background in the business aspects of the industry and has served on a number of committees associated with it. His comments are wide ranging and intelligent, and a valuable contribution to this history of the Australian fishing industry.

The history is being produced for the Australian Fishing Industry Research Council by Murdoch University.

There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 040 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is an interview with Mr Nick Soulos, recorded in Bunbury on the 11th December 1989 by Jack Darcey.

Mr Soulos, would you record your full name, date and place of birth, please?

**SOULOS** Yes. Nicholas Emmanuel Soulos, born 9.7.55 in Bunbury, WA.

**JD** Thank you. Were your parents born in Western Australia?

**SOULOS** Yes, both my parents were born in Western Australia.

**JD** Yes, and your grandparents?

**SOULOS** My grandparents on both sides of the family came from Greece.

**JD** Greece, yes! And your father, I understand, is a fisherman?

**SOULOS** Yes, that's correct. My father's a fisherman. My grandfather was also a fisherman, so I am what would be known in Australia as a third generation fisherman.

**JD** And you wouldn't yet have sons old enough to go into the industry?

**SOULOS** No, no. Although my eldest son is ten years old and he thoroughly enjoys fishing and where we live here, where our backyard backs onto the estuary. He spends all his spare time catching crabs and fishing off the jetty.

**JD** It looks as though he might be the fourth generation.

**SOULOS** You never know.

**JD** You never know, right. You were educated here in Bunbury?

**SOULOS** Yes. I did most of my education in Bunbury.

**JD** And where else?

**SOULOS** And at the Western Australian Institute of Technology.

**JD** Oh yes. And what did you do there?

**SOULOS** I did a Business Management course there.

**JD** How long ago was that?

**SOULOS** Oh.... it would have been when I was about nineteen, twenty.

**JD** Did you then come straight into the fishing industry?

**SOULOS** No, no. I came back from there and I worked up at Shay Gap - you know, an iron ore mine - for about six months. It was when I came back from there that I started to get involved in the fishing industry.

**JD** Did you go in with your dad?

**SOULOS** Yes. Originally I did, for the first three years I fished with my father. Then we still sort of fished as a team, but separately. You know, in separate boats. And then over the years we just sort of gradually drifted apart, although we still help each other and utilised a lot of the same gear.

**JD** Any other members of the family involved in fishing?

**SOULOS** Not sort of as in my immediate family. A lot of my uncles and cousins are.

**JD** In this area?

**SOULOS** In this area, yes. You know my father was one of five sons and three of them are still fishing.

**JD** And do you all sort of work in together?

**SOULOS** Yes. In different types of fisheries where you need, you know, the manpower and the knowledge combined to sort of capitalise more and in different fisheries - like

the salmon fishery, or the beach zone fishery. They'll often team up together and catch the fish and split the fish up and work that way.

**JD** What fisheries are you, yourself, involved in?

**SOULOS** Well I originally started fishing in the estuary, in Leschenault Estuary, as an estuarine fisherman - and that was with my father for the first three years. And then after that I sort of branched out on my own, got my own boats and fished Leschenault Inlet as just purely an estuarine fisherman. Then we went into beach zone fishing, which I did with my uncles in the early years when I was twelve to about sixteen. But they used the older method of beach zone fishing, whereby they have a little boat - mainly old American whaler type boats with small putt putt engines in them, and sails, and used to sort of motor along the beach at around about 5 knots and a bloke would go up the mast and spot the schools - you know, the shoals of fish - and beach zone them.

That method was alright for that day and age, but when I went into beach zone fishing it was the more modern method of using a 4-wheel drive vehicle, you know, equipped with sand tyres and used a small dinghy to shoot the net out of. It gave us more mobility, we could cover three or four hundred miles of beach quite easily in a day, and once we'd caught the fish it was only an hour/an hour-and-a-half before we could actually get the fish back to refrigeration.

**JD** Did you say three or four hundred MILES?

**SOULOS** Yes, yes. It's quite possible in one day to cover say between Hamelin Bay and Mandurah quite comfortably. We've got some remarkable coastline here where you can drive 50 and 60 miles along the beach before you have to actually pull out off the beach, go on the road to come back onto the beach, you know. It gives us a good scope for a beach zone fishery.

**JD** And you carry a dinghy on the back of the vehicle?

**SOULOS** Yes. You either carry one on the back of the vehicle.... oh, around about the 7 to 8 foot mark; or tow one around the 10 to 14 foot mark on a trailer behind the vehicle. You know, depending on the type of fishery. If it was whitebait fishing, which is where I first started beach zone fishing with the vehicles, you only require a small net and a small dinghy. But if it's herring or salmon fishing you need a bigger net and a bigger dinghy.

**JD** Any other fisheries that you are involved in?

**SOULOS** Yes, well from that I diverted into shark fishing. In the early years of the beach zone fishery, using the modern method of vehicles, there was only ever two or three teams and that made it reasonably profitable. But as all these things happen in any fishery, it was a good money spinner and it is a goer - more people came into it. Unfortunately at that stage of the game there was very little fisheries management so everyone was able to do that. And it got to the stage where we had the same amount of fish that had to be shared among seven or eight different teams, and so each team's portion was getting less. There were more teams coming in every year.

So that's when I decided that it was time to diversify yet again and into the shark fishery, as that was still in its infant stages of modernization. Now shark fishing is an age-long fishery along this part of the coast, but using methods which I refer to as the arm strong method - where it was all brawn and muscle and no machinery. There

again, when I ventured into the shark fishery for the first two years it was still brawn and muscle, but then with modern day equipment we soon changed that and, you know, that enabled us to use larger amounts of net and stay at sea for long times, and handle larger quantities of fish and make it a lot more viable fishery.

**JD** Its' a net?

**SOULOS** Yes. Well there's two ways you can actually target on shark - one's with a long line and the other is with gill net. I chose gill net mainly.... well, for a couple of reasons. One, I've had very little to do with long lines. Secondly, nets, in my opinion, are more efficient and they required less man hours on the actual water. More man hours on the land, but less man hours on the water to actually work. And the catch per unit effort of the nets, in my opinion, was far greater than the hooks, and that's what made us go that way.

**JD** There would be a lot of repair work on nets, I imagine.

**SOULOS** Yeah, yes there is. Before, when the shark you were netting.... my needle skills are far as mending nets were quite pathetic, but after a few years in that game, you know, I'm probably as good as any.

**JD** You do your own repairs?

**SOULOS** Yes we do as much of it as we can. Sometimes with the metreage and a net that we're using these days, sometimes you've got to employ extra hands to help you.

**JD** Do you employ many people?

**SOULOS** Well I always employ two people twelve months of the year and seasonally, when I require them, I employ another one or even two. So at times there's between two and four of us. But definitely for twelve months of the year I've always got two people employed.

**JD** Is it difficult to get good people?

**SOULOS** It can be. It's much the same as any other game, the game being that it is as much a way of life as a way of earning money. So if a person doesn't like that way of life it can be difficult for them to fit into it. Once you find a person that can fit into it - and I'd put it down to a ratio of almost one in ten, that will - once you find a person that does like the life style, is prepared to put in the odd hours (not necessarily long, but definitely odd hours), you know they normally stick to it. That normally ends up being their career as well.

**JD** They are paid on a share basis, aren't they?

**SOULOS** Yes. Well that's the main way in the fishing industry of remunerating people, is on a share basis. It's got its advantages, I feel, over a wages system, whereby the more fish that you catch the more - well, hopefully - the more money you turn over, and therefore the more money that they are going to get paid, which encourages them to work. It sort of.... we don't have problems like strikes, or people walking off the job because it's only detrimental to themselves. In a way it's very much like piece work you know. It is definitely a good way, a good system of running any industry.



**JD** Do they make a reasonable living wage out of it?

**SOULOS** Yes! But that really depends on the operator or the skipper as to how hard he wants to work or how much thought he puts into his work, how he organises himself. It would be like if you work for someone else in an engineering shop and if you were getting paid a percentage of the gross turnover. And if you had a very unskilled boss and one that wasn't very well motivated and he didn't turn over much work, well your pay would be very low, you know. If you had one that put a lot of thought into what he did and had a bit more expertise and turned over the work and therefore turned over the money, you were well paid. Yeah!

Definitely in our type of set-up now the wages that the crew receive are well and truly higher than the basic wage. They are very comparable to a... well, to a secondary school teacher. If you look at the time put in by each, yes, I'd say no problems there.

**JD** What about, from your point of view, the question of prices you are getting for the product and the costs of operating your operation, are you getting a fair return on your investment?

**SOULOS** Well, yes; I have to say I'm getting a reasonable return. Not a fair but a reasonable one, because if I wasn't getting a reasonable return... well I wouldn't still be doing it, because to me - although it's a way of life and I enjoy fishing - I also, at my age and in my position, have to look at the business side of it. If it's not making ends meet then it's time to get out.

So yes, you get reasonable return for your effort you put into it, not a fair [return]. We are forced now to sort of compete on the world market with our fish. The government offers us no assistance at all as far as, you know, embargoes or tariffs, as are offered in many other industries - especially in the manufacturing industry in Australia. We don't receive any of that. The government doesn't totally recognise the fishing industry as a full primary producer as can be seen in the amount of goods that we can get sales tax off, as compared to other primary industries.

We are in no means protected, you know, in any way. Because whilst there's a free flow of imports coming into Australia and our fish has to compete with that on the open market, the government will turn around and say to us that we have to process our fish in hygienic conditions, and if we're going to export we've got to go to the EPI standards, whereas the fish that's coming in to Australia doesn't have to be processed. You know, there's no rule or law in the Australian government that say that fish coming in from Taiwan, China, or any of those third world countries has to be processed to the same hygienic conditions as ours, or has to meet the EPI standards. And they are all cost factors that add on to us but not on to theirs.

And then to make matters worse, our government also sees fit to allow foreign countries to enter our own waters to catch fish within the Australian fishing zone, and land their fish in Australia for consumption within Australia. And that's even more difficult because the fish doesn't have to get transported here, so it cuts out the transportation cost, or the freight cost, and the fish is getting landed here - smack bang in Australia. And the labour cost comes into it, where we wouldn't be able to find a person to work for \$40 a day whereas they can crew their boats with crew for \$40 a month. And that's what we are asked to compete against.

We are asked to pay import duties on radars, on machinery, on nets and all the gear we use, whereas these boats... As an example, the Chinese trawlers working out of Broome can come over here. They don't pay any duty whatsoever on any of their

fishing equipment, they fish in our Australian waters and we are asked to compete against it. You know it's a very stiff market concept.

Now if the government put more thought into it, if the government wanted to protect its own industry, and if the government would pull its head out of the sand and say, "Well, okay, we realise you blokes aren't as big as operators as what some of these foreign countries are, but we'll help you to get that big," instead of saying, "Okay, you blokes can't do it," and sort of bringing someone else in to do it.

Yes Australian fishermen are very skilled fishermen. You know Australian fishermen would have to be the most highly skilled trawl fishermen in the world. Other countries come to Australia to look at our trawl methods. Other countries come to Australia to look at our potting methods. For the resource we've got, we've got really good, skilled fishermen, it's just for our government won't give us the chance. Our government won't put 200 and 300 foot boats on the water for us, they won't make capital available to us to borrow at low interest rates or no interest rate, or grants for us to go into that sort of work. They won't subsidise us for fuel to go out and do experimental fishing in our own fishing zone. Other governments do all that.

**JD** There's a considerable concern in some quarters of the fishing industry about the inflow of overseas capital, particularly into processing. Do you see that as a matter of.... is that a concern for you?

**SOULOS** No that's not a real concern for me. [Coughs - pardon me!]. With the bigger companies using foreign capital to expand their processing plant within Australia, no that's not a real concern in my opinion. What IS a real concern is when they are using foreign capital to set up processing plants in third world countries, and then taking the Australian expertise over there to run those processing plants. That's a far greater problem in my opinion. Because what's happening is they are getting the advantage of cheap capital, cheap labour and one of the world's best processing knowledge from Australia - and it's the bigger companies that are doing this. And then that fish inevitably ends up on our markets and we've got to compete against it. That DOES make it hard.

**JD** Yes! What other problems do you see facing the industry?

**SOULOS** I think besides the competition on fish marketing, our next biggest problem facing the fishing industry is going to be.... well it's twofold, and they are both connected. One is the recreating fishing pressure, and the one that sits right alongside is the government of the day bowing to their pressure, purely because of political votes, not saying we've got an industry here to protect. There is a resource out there that has to be shared amongst commercial and recreational fishermen. The government of the day tends to say, "There's a resource out there - it should be shared, but we're going to gain more votes if we cut out 100 commercial fishermen and let in 10,000 recreational fishermen." And unfortunately that's the way the government of the day is acting.

And you know, not just the particular government that's in power now, any government has acted the same way. We've seen unnecessary closures brought in on purely political grounds for recreational fishing pressure, which by no means take into consideration the resource itself - whether the stock can handle recreational or commercial fishing, or whether it can't. The research side of it, and the data and statistics they collect, don't seem to have any bearing on it. It's purely votes, you know. And there's some really astounding examples of it right throughout the coast,

and I daresay right throughout Australia. And that, I feel, is a pity, because in my opinion the resource is big enough to share.

You know, it's no good the recreational and the commercial fishermen fighting against each other, they should be working with each other. It can be proven equally on both sides. If you leave a commercial fisherman to his own ends he'll deplete a fish resource to such an extent that it won't recover, and then the same argument can be used for the recreational fishermen, where marron in Western Australia is a prime example. It is a non commercial fishery, it was left largely to the recreational fishermen as to how they managed that fishery and how they reaped the harvest out of the fishery, and those stocks got depleted to dangerous levels too, you know. It happens on both sides of the fence. Yes I think from both sides, I suppose, there's a certain amount of greed that pushes you to do it. I mean the commercial fisherman for money, the recreational fisherman for food and pleasure. But it all comes back to the greed factor.

But definitely if they can work more together, sort things out; you know, management, as far as preserving fish resources is a magnificent tool but it has got to work for both sides. It is no use managing the commercial section and not managing the recreation, and vice versa. It's got to work for both sides. There is enough of a resource there for everyone. Until the government, and the fishermen, and the recreational fisherman wake up to that I have to say that they are our two next biggest enemies - the recreational fishermen and the government. Definitely!

**JD** Is there evidence of depletion of stock in other fisheries besides marron?

**SOULOS** [Pause]. I don't....

**JD** Jewfish are getting in very, very short supply nowadays. Is that a fact?

**SOULOS** Well no, I don't think the jewfish are in short supply. I've got records going back twelve years that show that our annual catches of jewfish haven't really changed a lot. I think what you'll find is that the recreational catches of jewfish may have changed a bit, but what they've got to remember is in the last ten years the amount of recreational boats targeting on that species has increased a hundredfold. So what people fail to realise is that just because the catching power increases the resource stays the same. The more people there are targeting on any species of fish, the more times it has got to be shared. So if you've got a thousand fish there and you've got a hundred people catching that fish, the chances are they'll get ten fish each. Now, if you've got a thousand fishermen catching that thousand fish, the chances are they'll only get one fish each. And this seems to be a very hard concept for recreational fishermen to swallow.

And the other thing that they find it a bit hard to swallow is the seasonal change of things. You know, certain months are better fishing than other months. Commercial fishermen have to accept that because it is part of their livelihood, as does a farmer when he plants his wheat. He doesn't go planting it at the wrong time of the year, he plants it at a certain time of the year. Whereas a recreational fisherman, for some unknown reason, expects that if he caught a jewfish in a certain spot in April, that he can go back there in November and catch similar quantities in that same spot, and then go back there in January. And it doesn't work that way - it doesn't work for us, and we've learnt to accept it; but the recreational fishermen, for some unknown reason, haven't. You know, I'm saying the larger portion - not all. There are some that

take as keen an interest in the seasons as what we do. But the larger portion, which is where the votes are, seem to adopt that attitude.

**JD** Do you see a problem in pollution?

**SOULOS** Yes, I think pollution is.... it could probably, and more than likely account for the depletion of fish stocks as much as fishing from recreational and commercial fisheries. The only reason why it hasn't been highlighted is that there has not been enough research done into it. We've seen changes up and down our coastline and in the water over the years; and we've seen different fish resources come and go and, not through fishing effort, have disappeared. Then you look at what happened in and about that time and after, and you can only draw the conclusion that some types of pollution have definitely harmed it.

There are a lot of different types of pollution and when I talk about pollution I don't just talk about effluent being poured into the water, you know. There's noise pollution, which is a very great factor especially with pelagic fish which migrate.

**JD** Is that the case? what is the source of noise?

**SOULOS** Motor vehicles, heavy machinery, outboard motors, or any sort of motor. We often quote numerous examples, you know, where we've beached say, salmon, on the south coast, or the south-west coast. We'd go into what used to be uninhabited, hard to get to beaches, and the fish would be very quiet, docile fish - just doing their normal migratory run. After ten or fifteen years later, when they've put roads in and there's heavy machinery running up and down them, you know the fish become very timid - swim out wider, don't go in their normal path. That all changes the habits and lifestyles of fish. Definitely, you know.

**JD** You feel there should be a lot more research then, into what's happening?

**SOULOS** I think there should be a lot more research done into it so that people are more aware. But I also think that it would be a pity, too, if it were to get right off on it - as with the ozone layer type business, where we all know that the problem is there. We all know now with the ozone layer what causes the problem, but you can't take all the causes away otherwise we all stop living. By the same token, you can't take all the pollutions away from the ocean otherwise we'll all have to drastically change our lifestyles and we'd be living in what we could call an undesirable environment. It is the compromises we've got to look at.

Okay, we've got to have road transport. We've got to have heavy machinery. Maybe the road should be built back a bit further from the ocean, not right on the ocean. And we've got to have outboards for the recreational fishermen in particular, running around in the ocean. We've got to have diesel powered boats for the commercial fishermen. But then maybe they should have higher standards of exhaust emissions, or maybe the exhaust emissions shouldn't be pumped into the water but toned down somehow, you know. It's those sort of compromises. You are never going to get it cleaned up altogether.

Phosphorus in the water is another big problem from the farmers and the amount of fertilization on their [properties].... you know that gets washed down the rivers. You can't stop it altogether, but there must be a compromise somewhere where the farmers can still fertilize but yet, at the bottom end of the scale, not as much fertilization gets washed into the ocean.

**JD** That implies government control, doesn't it?

**SOULOS** Oh, definitely! Well, no! No, I take that back. Not so much government control. The government making an effort to research it enough, and then make the people aware of what the problem is, and I think most people act responsibly. If they know that they are creating a problem, and if the government can research it enough and show people ways around compromising that problem, most people are responsible enough to adopt it. I don't think it requires a Gestapo type government to....

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

You know, I don't think it requires a Gestapo type government to bring in the heavy hand and enforce those sort of things. I think there's definitely more time, more money, needed from the government in the way of research for people to be aware of it.

**JD** From an outsider looking in to the industry as I am, it seems to me that the people in the industry have a pretty satisfactory working relationship with the Fisheries Department. Is that your view?

**SOULOS** Yes. I'd say the majority of the fishermen have a good working relationship with the Fisheries Department. They are one of our main sort of contacts to the government - we've also got a West Austral.... [correction] or an Australian Fishing Industry Council which is really suppose to be there to liaise between the industry and the government. But we use that a lot of the time when we feel the Fisheries Department isn't quite looking after the best interests of the commercial fishery.

Now the Western Australian Fishing Industry Council is there to represent the commercial fishermen only, whereas the Fisheries Department is there to represent the interests of recreational and commercial fishermen. Yes the Fisheries Department is the main cause of most of our fisheries management, in Western Australia anyway. They are doing the best job they can and I totally endorse their attempts at managing the fish stocks, because without management we would eventually deplete stocks. Not just the commercial fishermen, the recreational and commercial fishermen would definitely deplete all stocks.

So on those terms, it's hard. I've spent a lot of time with the Fisheries Department in formulating some management plans, I've even been on advisory committees, and it's hard sometimes to accept these changes. But provided you know that in the long term future of them they are going to be for the benefit of the industry, and then if the industry is going to benefit, eventually the fishermen will benefit. If you can see far enough down the track and you can see a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel, the fisherman doesn't need a lot of light to keep battling along - as long as he can see a little bit of light at the end of the tunnel - yes, it's alright.

Unfortunately, no one's got a crystal ball good enough to gaze too far down the track, and sometimes some of the management policies the Department are bringing in are too harsh and crucify the fishermen as well as the industry, and some of them are too lenient. So whilst it can be said the majority of fishermen have got a good working

relationship with the Fisheries Department, I think you will also find a fair percentage that think that their relationship with the Fisheries Department isn't so good.

**JD** Yes there's bound to be a variety of opinions. Have a look into your crystal ball and how do you see the future for the fishing industry in the part of the industry you are involved in?

**SOULOS** I don't think the future for the part of the industry I'm involved in is greatly different from any other part of the fishing industry. I think there is a good future in it. We are going to have to change a lot, and the way that we handle our fish is going to have to change. We are going to have to look upon other countries that have handled fish a lot longer than us, to learn from them how to handle their fish. We're going to have to really push hard on the value added product for our fish to survive. We are not going to survive by catching increased quantities of fish, that should be evident to all fishermen by now. That's definitely not the way the industry is going to survive; the industry is going to survive by handling a reasonable quantity of fish, looking after the fish in the best possible way, and then getting the most money for that small amount of fish - even if it does mean evaluating and putting in that extra work.

And so there definitely is a future there. Australians, although they are not large consumers of fish, they are learning to eat fish. We import an enormous amount of fish. So once all the world prices on fish stabilise, other countries can't keep producing fish indefinitely at a cheap price you know, their costs are going to catch up. You know, I think it's only ten or fifteen years away before their prices do catch up. Our prices have stabilised, if anything fallen back. Their prices are going to increase. Ours might stabilise for another five years before we see any significant increase. Sooner or later we are going to be able to compete more fairly. And when the competition price gets to be fair, what sells the fish is quality, and that's where we've got to learn from other countries.

**JD** Presentation, yes. Do you see a future for aquaculture or microculture?

**SOULOS** Yes, yes. There's a tremendous future for it. You know, as a food to feed people, there's definitely a tremendous future for aquaculture. Not on all types of fish.... [unclear]. But that still, in my opinion, is not going to take away a hell of a lot from the fisherman who goes out into the ocean and catches his fish, provided we can keep our oceans and our rivers clean enough. We are still going to have that added advantage of being able to say, "Well this fish was grown by nature in unpolluted waters, without any chemicals." And it gets back to being able to buy eggs that were pumped out at a thousand a day, or ones that were fed on all the.... you know, chickens that were fed on all the greens and the eggs hatched. There's always going to be that bit there for the fisherman who goes fishing. But by the same token, in my opinion, the fish.... the market that aquaculture is going to break into isn't going to clash altogether with the fisherman.

For sure there's going to be conflicts, there's going to be times where the fisherman thinks that he's going to definitely lose his industry because of aquaculture. In some fisheries that is going to happen. But I mean, the prawn fishery for one is struggling now, and the main reason why they are struggling is because of aquaculture. But then they have got good selling points to sell the ocean-caught prawns. Aquaculture can produce prawns a lot cheaper than trawl fish prawns, you know. But then it gets down to taste. There's definitely no comparison in taste. It's going to be harder in Australia, maybe, than other countries because Australians unfortunately buy their food by their

pocket and not by their taste, and it's unfortunate that in Australia. In Japan they buy by taste. But Australians, with any sort of food, tend to buy more by the pocket.

**JD** Nick, anything else you'd like to add before we finish?

**SOULOS** No, I don't think so. The questions you've asked me... no, I don't really think so. You know, it's a tremendous industry - fishing! I think from my generation it's still an open frontier, it's just that we've got to go with the times and we've got to treat it less like a way of life and more a business. And, unfortunately, I tend to think that the ones that treat it like a way of life and not like a business aren't going to be here in the future. They'll plod along but only on the subsistence type level, they won't go ahead.

**JD** Thank you very much.

**SOULOS** That's okay. Thank you.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Nick Soulos. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey in Bunbury on the 11th December 1989.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with PETER SPURR

### INTRODUCTION

This interview with Mr Peter Spurr was conducted by Jack Darcey at Mr Spurr's home in Bremer Bay, Western Australia on the 9th January, 1990. The interview is part of the oral history project on the Australian Fishing Industry being produced by Murdoch University for the Australian Fisheries Research Council.

Mr Spurr was one of the original tuna fishermen in the Bremer Bay area and having seen the industry prosper with some 80 vessels operating on this coast, he is now one of the last two fishermen catching tuna from Bremer Bay. He also line fishes for scale fish in order to supplement his income but reports a considerable reduction of catches in these species also.

Mr Spurr represents the fishermen along the south coast of Western Australia who have had their income greatly diminished through the reduction in catches imposed as a result of the Australian Government's international agreements with New Zealand and Japan. Unlike most of his fellow tuna fishermen in Western Australia, Mr Spurr has continued in the industry but he displays little confidence in its future.

The interview starts at 023.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

*JD* Mr Spurr, would you record your full name and date and place of birth please.

*SPURR* Peter Edward John Spurr born on 1st May, 1935 at Kondinin.

*JD* Were your parents born in Western Australia?

*SPURR* Yes, Yes.

*JD* Both of them?

*SPURR* Both in Narrogin.

*JD* Has the family been in Australia for long?

*SPURR* Yeah, all their lives. All dad's life as well.

*JD* And what about his father?



**SPURR** Yes. He was too.

**JD** Can you go back any further than that?

**SPURR** No, no [laughs].

**JD** Did you have any background in fishing before you came into the game?

**SPURR** No, no. Only weekend fishing. I've been here fifteen years now.

**JD** You were farming before that?

**SPURR** Yes, yes.

**JD** Whereabouts?

**SPURR** In Karlgarin.

**JD** What's that, wheat and sheep?

**SPURR** Wheat and sheep. Between Karlgarin and Kondinin actually.

**JD** Well how did you come to come into fishing?

**SPURR** Oh, I had two daughters and got sick of farming and decided to have a go at fishing [laughs].

**JD** Did you sell up the farm?

**SPURR** Yes, yeah.

**JD** And made a complete break?

**SPURR** Yes, yeah right out of it.

**JD** What sort of fishing did you come into originally?

**SPURR** Oh, scale fishing for a start; then we accidentally stumbled on tuna and we've been at those ever since.

**JD** Did you buy a boat when you came into fishing?

**SPURR** Yes, yes

**JD** What sort of boat was it?

**SPURR** A Bondwood - 30 foot.

**JD** When you say scale fishing, is that for all sorts of scale fish?

**SPURR** Yes, yeah; oh nannygai kingies and occasional jewies and stuff like that [which] we mainly get down here anyway.

**JD** That was line fishing?

**SPURR** Yes, yes.

**JD** You said you got into tuna. Could you tell us about that.

**SPURR** Oh we went out the shelf hooking one day. We were just hooking away and all of a sudden this school of tuna came up round the boat. We poled a few with a couple of gaffs and a few other things. From then on we sort of started to get into those then [laughs].

**JD** Were they good sized tuna?

**SPURR** Yeah, about twelve, thirteen pounds.

**JD** Southern blue fin?

**SPURR** Southern blue fin, yeah.

**JD** In those early days of tuna fishing, where did you sell the catch?

**SPURR** To Hunt's Cannery it was then in Albany. It used to be canned in Albany in those days.

**JD** Yes. Where does it go now?

**SPURR** To Perth - Osborne Park; Kailis and family.

**JD** Oh yes. Is that a canning process?

**SPURR** All canning, yeah.

**JD** Is it sent here on freezer trucks, or from here?

**SPURR** We cart to Albany on an ordinary truck and they freeze it and send it to Perth in an insulated van; I believe, I couldn't be sure on that.

**JD** To look a bit more deeply at the tuna fishery, it's been very severely limited now by the Commonwealth Government I believe.

**SPURR** Yes, yes.

**JD** Could you make comment on that?

**SPURR** Well we used to average about 40 tonne a year and our best year was '86 with our little boats. Up until last year we had 51 tonne and last year they cut us down to 22 1/2 and this year we're back to.... I'm not sure yet. I've got eleven and a half of my own left and we might be able to lease another eight.

**JD** That's a dramatic drop isn't it?

**SPURR** It is, yeah.

**JD** Does that leave you with a viable occupation?

**SPURR** If they don't cut it any more we can still make a living out of it with what scale fish we hook and with the bit of tuna we got left.

**JD** But it would be a big reduction in your income from what it used to be?

**SPURR** Oh yes, yeah; to less than half probably.

**JD** Do you belong to any of the fishermen's organisations?

**SPURR** Oh we're members of the Australian Tuna Boat Owners' Association. That's about as far as it goes really.

**JD** Are there headquarters in this part of the world or....?

**SPURR** No, South Australia.

**JD** Whereabouts in South Australia, do you know?

**SPURR** Port Lincoln I think Jack, yes.

**JD** Peter, having been in the industry for fifteen years you'd have seen quite a lot of changes wouldn't you?

**SPURR** Yes, over the tuna Jack, yes. They've only got scarce, oh a couple of years ago. They seemed to get a bit thinner but last year they turned up in more or less droves out there in July after we'd filled our quota and weren't allowed to catch them which was fairly embarrassing [laughs].

**JD** Can you recall how many boats fished from this area during the peak of the tuna industry?

**SPURR** Yeah. We got up to 24 boats there for, oh roughly two years from the Albany fleet.

**JD** And how many fish from here now?

**SPURR** Two.

**JD** Only two?

**SPURR** Two, yes.

**JD** Going further east, where would be the next port that tuna boats operate from?

**SPURR** Esperance and Albany west, yeah.

**JD** There not many in Albany are there?

**SPURR** No. Counting Terry and I there's only about, I think there's eight left with quota at all.

**JD** That's a dramatic drop in the number of boats and people in that fishery.

**SPURR** It's put a lot of people out of employment you know. We did have a truck carting our tuna at more or less permanent for three or four years. 'Cause he's left and we'd nearly cart most of our own now.

**JD** Has it had an effect on the price you get for your product?

**SPURR** Yes. It went down \$200.00 a tonne last year when we got cut.

**JD** Down?

**SPURR** Down \$200.00. We were getting [ \$14[00.00] for three years, a tonne. Last year Kailis cut it back to \$1200.00. Then we weren't allowed to.... only had 22 tonne.

**JD** That's different from what one would expect, is it not? You'd think there'd be a shortage of the....

**SPURR** That's what we thought; we'd end up getting about [ \$1800[.00] a tonne over the shortage but he reckoned it wasn't viable to keep all his avenues open just for a small lot of tuna so he dropped the price.

**JD** Do you do any beach fishing at all for salmon?

**SPURR** No, no.

**JD** Do people catch salmon from the beach here?

**SPURR** Yes. There's four beaches here for salmon and herring.

**JD** Being involved in the industry, you would be aware of many of the problems facing it. What's your assessment of those problems? What are they?

**SPURR** Well I think it's all out in one really. Our Government's the biggest stirrer of any Australian fisherman. They don't seem to care about us and let Taiwanese and everybody else catch them. The importing of fish is dropping the price of our scale fish. This has dropped about a third in Perth this year through importing fillets and stuff like that.

**JD** Frozen fish?

**SPURR** Frozen fish.

**JD** Where do those imports come from mainly?

**SPURR** Taiwanese and China I think. Kailis wrote us a letter only a few weeks ago and wanted us to protest against it but I don't know what good that would do, cause he sent a pamphlet down with the price of filleted cobbler [which] was \$3.50 a kilo and

another one was snapper just in the whole before. Therefore we can't compete against it so....

**JD** That's a further reduction in the income for the fisherman?

**SPURR** For us, yeah.

**JD** Do you see any problem in the litter in the ocean in these waters?

**SPURR** Not here Jack because there's.... We do often out the Shelf. You get a current of hot water. It brings a lot of timber and plastic and stuff like that you'll run into it. It's come from somewhere else but our.... We don't get boxes of mulies with baitbands on which they should really not have them on. We have caught sharks with bands around them; chase us when we're catching tuna.

**JD** You don't fish commercially for shark?

**SPURR** No, no.

**JD** Have you noticed any depletion of stock Peter? You mentioned that you.... Tuna seemed to have.... There's lots of tuna around. What about other fish?

**SPURR** Oh very.... Our scale fishing, we don't fish in shore at all. We fish the Shelf all the time because it's been netted out in here and caught out in the inshore reefs. We fish the Shelf and there's been a couple of trawlers working there and it's definitely dropped out in what we call the Bremer Bay canyon. It's probably dropped too. Well there's not many there at all really. We don't fish there any more. We going about 40 mile west now.

**JD** How far off shore is the Shelf here?

**SPURR** Twenty mile from here. The little canyon where we're going now, its about 27.

**JD** What about the role of the Western Australian Fisheries Department? I know tuna is really controlled from Canberra isn't it?

**SPURR** Yes, yes.

**JD** What about the other fisheries that are controlled from Perth? What's your relationship with the Department there?

**SPURR** We get on quite well with the Fisheries Department ourselves you know. Actually they do help us a bit sometimes, quite a bit; like last year when Canberra wouldn't let our lease tuna out and there's tuna our here everywhere and we had to wait, for they reckon might be a month, to get the lease through, seeing they were shifting house from Canberra to the new Parliament House. They were just gonna make us wait for a month and by that time the tuna might have been gone but our own Fisheries got it through that they could give us the OK and which they did within a week which was a real big help to us.

**JD** [unclear]

**SPURR** On the tuna we lease, if we didn't catch them within the given time we wouldn't get the chance to lease them the next year. The Government made that rule

yet they wouldn't let us go and catch them. They knew how many we were allowed to catch and we knew how many we were allowed to catch. We weren't allowed to do it until somebody put their stamp on a bit of paper from Canberra which is very ridiculous really.

**JD** That's right. But do you find the Western Australian Fisheries Department a bit more understanding and co-operative?

**SPURR** They are in Albany Jack, yes.

**JD** Is that do you think because of the personnel in Albany who know the fishermen here?

**SPURR** They all know us well. Yes; know us by sight and know us in Albany and everywhere else [laughs].

**JD** Do you see a problem in this area from competition with recreational fishermen?

**SPURR** Oh well, like I said, the inshore reefs are fairly well cleaned out and they get enough to eat. That's about all nowadays. Well we don't worry because that's all we get if we fish inshore so.... But they do come out on the Shelf with us occasionally; not with us they just come out in a drove of five or six little boats. They could end up in trouble one day.

**JD** Are there many accidents along this coast Peter?

**SPURR** No there's been only two drowned I think since I've been here. They capsized a little boat in the bay and were both drowned; or the boat didn't capsize, I think one fell out and the other one jumped in to save him.

**JD** Were they professional fishermen?

**SPURR** No, amateurs. One jumped in and they had an anchor with only 60 foot of rope on it. They threw that out but it didn't hit the bottom. There was a wind much like this, about 25 knots and I think what happened, they couldn't catch up to the boat again, or the bloke that could swim couldn't and they both got drowned.

**JD** There wouldn't be much assistance available on this coast, would there, if you got into trouble?

**SPURR** Pretty good now. They've got their own sea rescue radio and that in at the shop. They all carry radios and they also supplied us with a CB sea rescue so we can go and rescue them as well but I've over ever towed one fellow home yet.

**JD** You get some pretty rough weather in these waters I believe?

**SPURR** Very rough Jack, yes [laughs]. It's one of the worst places in Australia I think.... amongst them anyway.

**JD** Does it stop you going out very often?

**SPURR** Yes, yes.

**JD** What, about one day in two or....

**SPURR** Oh, this year so far, we're lucky if we get it one day in a week. It's been really bad. It doesn't stop.

**JD** Worst in the winter, presumably?

**SPURR** No. About from March, April, May, June even July is quite good sometimes. They're our best months of the year. We got a lot of easterlies in the summer which is unusual to get a sou-west like this now anyway.

**JD** Any other problems that you noticed developing in the industry?

**SPURR** Oh, not really.

**JD** Marketing is an obvious one isn't it?

**SPURR** Marketing is a bad one yes. The whole thing with the tuna, they let too many boats in for a start. That's caused that to go down hill of course. Same thing's happening with the mulies down Albany. They've been gone for four months in there without catching a mulie hardly and they've just turned up again which.... There's only four mulie boats operating here but they've been doing quite well.

**JD** Thinking about the industry, you'd have met a lot of remarkable people - fisherman or administrators or processors. Do any of them spring to mind as being especially remarkable?

**SPURR** One probably, Fred Swarbrick from Albany. I don't know whether you know him or not. He's been fishing for years and he's still fishing. I think he's 76 this year. He's a real remarkable old fellow. He knows every reef out here as well as every one in Albany and they're all in his head. It's quite amazing really.

**JD** Anyone else?

**SPURR** He's about the only one I think. Old Frank Bentley, a salmon fisherman out there, he's been there ever since the War. He's still out there too. I think he's 65 yesterday I think but he gets a lot of salmon of course; about 200 tonne a year in the last few years.

**JD** During your time in the industry Peter, has there been any events that have sort of stuck in your memory as being particularly unusual?

**SPURR** Probably not really Jack, only probably trying to learn how to catch tuna because as I said I've been at it about twelve years now and I still don't know what they're gonna do [laughs]. Nor does anybody else. That's one thing Fred Swarbrick said to me. He said, "I've fished for tuna ever since I've been young" and he said, "If I live to be 100" he said, "I still wouldn't know what they're gonna do" and I believe him now [laughs].

**JD** Would you come into the industry now if you had your opportunity again?

**SPURR** No not with the money and the price of boats to get back into it, no. If they left the tuna the same, yes. It's still a good living.

**JD** Peter, is there anything else that you'd like to mention on this tape about the industry?

**SPURR** Probably only on nets Jack. I think they should stop shark nets and if shark fishermen want to catch shark, make them set hooks like they do over in New South Wales. I think there's no nets allowed there; and stop trawlers running along the shelf. They don't catch very much but they frighten them for all us guys that try and hook them.

**JD** The trawlers take all sorts of fish do they?

**SPURR** They mainly chase nannygai but they don't seem to get a lot. They trawl outside the Shelf, just outside and they don't seem to catch them but they seem to frighten them somewhere. They do get a lot of leather jackets as well but that's their main thing they catch.

**JD** Has there been any movement of overseas capital or influence into the fisheries along the south coast?

**SPURR** No. Drew's Herring Factory, they built that out there. They've got two or three farms up the road here. They built all that themselves. I don't really know what it cost them but just at a guess I'd say about \$350,000.00. They say it's working quite good at the [moment]. The factory's making a fair bit of money out of it.

**JD** Alright. Thanks very much for this interview Peter.

**SPURR** No problem Jack.

**JD** Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Peter Spurr conducted by Jack Darcey at Bremer Bay, Western Australia on the 9th January 1990.

END OF TAPE

[Disclaimer](#)







## Verbatim transcript of an interview with CHESLYN STUBBS

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Cheslyn Stubbs, ex Whale Chaser Captain and Gunner for the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company in Western Australia.

After service in the Australian Army in Borneo during World War 2, Mr Stubbs entered the fishing industry on the south coast. When the Albany Whaling Company started operations he joined the organization and later transferred to the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company, where he became Senior Chaser Captain and Gunner.

He lost a leg in a harpoon gun accident and in an epic piece of aviation history was transported to hospital by the company's spotter plane pilot, John Bell. Mr Stubbs returned to whaling and continued in the industry for ten years until his retirement.

Since retiring he has become a self taught artist of very considerable talent. Indeed, this interview was conducted in the Albany Town Hall where an exhibition of his work was in progress. He has also written a book on whaling.

There are two sides of one Tape. The interview begins at 020 on the rev counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is an interview recorded with Mr Cheslyn Stubbs of Albany. The interview was recorded at Albany by Jack Darcey on the 15th December 1989.

Mr Stubbs, would you record your full name please.

**STUBBS** Cheslyn Edgar Stubbs.

**JD** Thank you. And what was your date of birth?

**STUBBS** The 15th February 1916.

**JD** And where were you born?

**STUBBS** Albany.

**JD** Were your parents Australian?

**STUBBS** Mum was an Australian; Dad came from New Zealand. His father migrated to New Zealand in, I think, around about the middle of last century.

**JD** From England?

**STUBBS** From England, yes.

**JD** And when did he come over to Australia?

**STUBBS** At the beginning of the century. He was - the grandfather - he was boring for water up around Menindie [South Australia] for quite a while. He was a chemist. He ended up in Southern Cross as a JP, and land and estate agent, and a chemist.

**JD** And that was at the early part of this century?

**STUBBS** Mmm.

**JD** When did he come to Albany, then?

**STUBBS** Dad? He came to Albany in '15 - 1915 - and from there he went to Narrogin. He was working in the Railways in the Chief Civil Engineer's office, and from Narrogin he went to Perth and we lived in Mosman Park - when it was called Buckland Hill. That was a long while back.

**JD** And you were educated in Perth, I suppose?

**STUBBS** Yes. I went to Buckland Hill school, Mosmans Park now it is; Claremont Central, and then a school in Newcastle Street in Perth - Junior Technical School.

**JD** And when did you enter the fishing industry?

**STUBBS** Well, I was always interested in fishing. I used to go down to Mosman Park Jetty, all night I'd sit there after those kingies. But after the war, that was when I got into it properly. When I was discharged from the Army.

**JD** You served in the Army?

**STUBBS** Mmm.

**JD** Overseas?

**STUBBS** Yeah, in Borneo I went.

**JD** And what part of fishing did you go into?

**STUBBS** Well, first up there was estuarine - estuarine fishing. That's the word isn't it, 'ine'? And then I was catching....

**JD** Was that in Albany?

**STUBBS** Yeah, in Albany. Then we were catching salmon - in '76, I think, when they first started catching them. '77 I joined the Albany Whaling Company then.

**JD** And what was your role in the Albany Whaling Company?

**STUBBS** I was the gunner on the old **Wadjemup**.

**JD** That's a chaser?

**STUBBS** Mmm. She was the target towing craft during the war off Leighton. She did 45 knots. Two big Thorneycroft engines in it.

**JD** And how did you become... were you in the artillery during the war?

**STUBBS** No, I was a foot slogger.

**JD** Well, how did you get the job as gunner?

**STUBBS** Well, dashed if I know. When they brought the boat down to Albany and I joined it down here, and they just put me on the gun and that was it.

**JD** Was it an interesting job?

**STUBBS** Well, there was lots of thrills and spills. Yes, it was interesting.

**JD** Did you fish far off shore?

**STUBBS** No in the **Wadjemup**. Prior to the **Wadjemup** - [correction]. No, no, after the **Wadjemup**, I was with a fishing company, they had a seafoods factory down here, they used to call themselves. And we used to fish from Esperance around to Bunbury in a 64 foot boat.

**JD** What were you fishing for then?

**STUBBS** We were trying out a Danish seam trawl. It had a mile of rope on each end of this dashed silly thing, and if we ever picked the net up without a hitch, without it getting around a reef or anything like that, we were lucky.

**JD** It was not a very successful operation?

**STUBBS** No, no, no. It wasn't any good at all. In the end we just went hooking in this 64 foot boat.

**JD** What, for shark?

**STUBBS** Mmm. Shark, and jewies.

**JD** Were you in the tuna fishing at all?

**STUBBS** No, no, never in the tuna.

**JD** To come back to whaling, where were you operating from exactly?

**STUBBS** From Frenchman's Bay, with the Albany Whaling Company. They had three years whaling down here, we caught six whales.

**JD** In three YEARS?

**STUBBS** Mmm, in three years. Well, the first year the gun wouldn't go off. It was made in Perth by the manager of the company, he was a bit of an inventor kind of bloke. It went off in the Swan River really good, but down here it never even fired. So they took it back and we got a 50 millimetre gun from Norway; that gun was built in Norway to catch 25 foot whales but we had to catch them 35 foot minimum length. It was a bit small, hence the six whales in two years kind of business.

**JD** Yes! What would be the range of one of those guns?

**STUBBS** Oh, the accurate range is 70 yards - that's the projectory kind of business. But if you pointed the barrel in the air it would go.... oh, probably three quarters of a mile.

**JD** Would it? Gee! How many crew would you have on board a chaser?

**STUBBS** When the Albany Whaling Company folded up then I joined the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company as an AB.

**JD** That's an Able Bodied Seaman?

**STUBBS** Yeah. And from there I got up to a Mate, and then Skipper. We had seventeen was the crew when we were fishing for Sperm whales, but three of those would be on holiday - having their two days a week kind of business.

**JD** You lived on board, did you?

**STUBBS** We could live on board, yes, but we mainly when we came in of a night we used to go home. We only went out for the day; although we went 20 miles off shore and 60 miles east, and probably 50 miles west, we always came home of a night. More economical.

**JD** Could you sort of describe the operation of a chaser?

**STUBBS** Oh yeah! We had.... they were steam chasers built for the job. There was a skipper, mate, 2nd mate, Sonar Operator, five deck crew, one cook and one deckboy on deck. And there was the chief engineer, 2nd and 3rd engineer, and a donkeyman below - and two firemen. When we first started catching Sperm whales we used to leave Albany jetty at 3 o'clock in the morning and get out on the Shelf [Continental Shelf] by daylight. In the finish we had three chasers, they used to steam east along parallel with the Shelf at about 5 miles apart. That was just a nice range to see any blows.

Then we had the spotter plane, he used to do.... well, when he first went out in the morning he used to go west, just in case anything passed during the night. They always came from the east to the west, these Sperm. And the Humpbacks, too! When a whale was sighted we'd put the... the speed would be increased to chasing speed, which was about.... we could do 15 knots, but about 13 knots, until we caught up with the whale.

I'd go down on the gun deck and harpoon the whale. If it wasn't dead on the first shot - about 70 percent of the whales we killed were killed with the first shot. Well, instantly. And then we'd get it alongside after it was killed - get it alongside the chaser

and if there were more whales to catch we'd drop that whale, put air in it, and there would be a radio buoy on it so that we could pick it up with a radio direction finder. And a light - just in case it was dark when we came back. And then we'd chase the others. And it was kill and drop, kill and drop, until the station said that they couldn't take any more; or they were all gone, or probably it was too dark to chase.

**JD** Ches, you said you went with three chasers in line. If one was into the whales what did the others do?

**STUBBS** Well it all depends how many whales there were. If there were say more than two, well there would be two chasers out there; if there were only two, well one chaser could fix that lot up, and the other two would keep steaming on and looking for more. But then if there were quite a lot, well the three chasers would go in and kill and drop, as I said before.

**JD** The whales were the Sperm and the Humpback?

**STUBBS** Yes, we chased Humpback before they got.... well, they stopped us from catching them because there were not many, and it was uneconomical too. Gee, I think the last season we were on Humpbacks we only got thirteen, I think, in about 6 weeks.

**JD** Do these Sperm whales, say, do they move about in schools?

**STUBBS** Oh yes, big pods. I've seen Sperm out there on the Shelf and south of the Shelf from horizon to horizon, as far as you could see, and from the bridge of the chaser to the horizon was 6 miles. And they were all in small pods up to fifty, with one big bull in amongst them. He had a fair time looking after his harem that old fellow. And generally, a big pod of herd bulls followed up, just in case any of the little.... the cows, came adrift from the herd. Yes!

**JD** When whaling finished - you mentioned that the Humpbacks were depleted in number - what about the Sperm whales, were they reduced in number as well?

**STUBBS** No, I don't think so. We were trying to farm them. It was hard! It was hard, I think, to farm anything that you never got an exact count of. But the first day we started Sperm whaling, or the first year we started Sperm whaling, and the last year we started - there were just as many Sperms seen out there on the last year as the first year.

**JD** After you'd finished the day's killing you went back and collected the whales?

**STUBBS** Yes, we used to pick them up and tow them in. It all depends on where we were, sometimes we'd used to come in the next morning, you know, still towing. I've towed twelve whales in one shift. I think the most, or the heaviest tow I've had, was ten 50 foot bulls. Gee, they were big ones!

**JD** They'd slow you down a bit?

**STUBBS** Yes, they do. But you put them alongside, one behind the other kind of business, tow them that way. You don't put a wire rope around their tail and tow them in the water, you lift the tail out of the water and the first whale kind of sucks the next

one along, and so it goes on. If we didn't have that you would have been out there for a week.

**JD** So you then would tow them into the station at Cheynes Beach, was it?

**STUBBS** No, no. At Frenchman's Bay.

**JD** Frenchman's Bay, yes.

**STUBBS** There's a museum out there now, that's where the station was. We used to tow them in, put them on the buoy or give them to the tow boat. They had a little 30 foot tow boat there that used to take two at a time, and he'd put them on inshore buoys if there were a lot of them. And we'd come in, into the town jetty, and fill up with harpoons again and any incidentals that we should have - like food and water - and away again the next morning. But the last twelve months or two years that they whaled down here, they never left the jetty until 6 o'clock.

I left them in '75, three years before they finished. I'd had enough.

**JD** It was pretty rugged work, wasn't it?

**STUBBS** Boring at times. There was more sleeping done out there, I think, than whaling. Well, sometimes you'd go out there and you wouldn't see a whale for a week. I remember once the management sent me down east to see if there were any Russians down there stopping the whales from coming through. We did see a few Russians out there now and again, the Russian fleet - we used to chase with them. The first time we ever saw them we chased with them. They were too good for us, they had sonar and everything.

Eventually we got sonar, and once you spotted a whale and the sonar operator got his.... started getting his thing, the whale was gone - he was out! Yeah!

**JD** What sort of size of whales were you looking at, Ches?

**STUBBS** The Humpbacks - they were 36 foot minimum length.

**JD** That was the legal minimal?

**STUBBS** Yes. That was the.... you couldn't catch anything under that. Sometimes we did - there was always that occasion when, not very often, when you did bring in a small. But we never used to dump them out there, which you could have done - cut 'em adrift and let the sharks get them. But we always used to bring them in. If we did get an undersized one we'd have to write out an excuse as to why we got it - but of course there was a lot of bloody lies then. You'd have to make it good. I think I only got knocked back once and told to write another excuse.

But as the Sperms, they were 35 feet when we first started and then somebody (I don't know who it was) said that there were more cows than bulls, and they brought the minimum length down to 30 feet. Well 30 feet! A cow never grew much over 35 [feet], and bringing it down to 30 feet, it really ripped into them. But in that pod of cows there would be cult bulls. They'd be up around between the 30 and the 35 mark, well you'd get them instead of the dashed cows. And then somebody says, well there's a lot of bulls being caught with the little cult bulls as we used to call them, and we had to bring the size of the bulls down to 45 feet in the breeding season. Well, I don't

know, the blokes that sit behind the desk instead of coming out and having a look around! But the herd bulls, if we caught one of those, but were generally 50 footers. They were the ones we were after. The herd bull, there was always one to take his place. Always one!

**JD** The cult bull was the immature one?

**STUBBS** That's right.

**JD** Hanging around behind the herd?

**STUBBS** Yeah. He might have been.... his mother might have still been in the herd, in that pod. But after a while they drift apart and the cult bulls will be in one big heap. And there might be, oh gee, anything up to two or three hundred in 'em - these little ones. You can, after a while, know whether it's a bull or a cow by the shape of the head. But in rough water I don't think you could. No! But we always used to bring in any undersized whales that we caught.

**JD** When the carcass was floating and you'd gone off chasing other, were the carcasses attacked by sharks?

**STUBBS** Oh yeah, yeah. It used to be \$1 a bite once, but it went up to \$5. In the finish, the year I left them in '75, to fire a shot was worth about \$70 - to fire a harpoon. That's with the head going off and all the powder and what have you.

**JD** You wouldn't want to miss too often, would you?

**STUBBS** No.

**JD** About how many successful hits would you have. How many were....

**STUBBS** Out of ten. Say out of ten. You'd hit eight; eight out of ten. But the barrel of those guns, they get elongated, the barrel does, and when you put the harpoon in it's either drooping down or drooping up kind of business; and it will go under a whale or over a whale. So we generally change.... get another gun or something.

**JD** Was that wear on the barrel?

**STUBBS** Mmm. You see if you went under a whale you might get the next one to him, underneath him. He might be undersize. But we never went after undersized whales, never ever.

**JD** You met with a serious accident on board.

**STUBBS** Oh yeah. Well, it was my fault. It was a little bit choppy out there one day and I'd had a couple of misses and got a bit frustrated. I don't know why I was missing these dashed whales, but we do have our off days when you're a gunner. I went down on the gun deck, and prior to that the boat had the bow under the water and the forerunner which is coiled under the gun, right up forward, a part of it was washed down on the gun deck. I didn't see it. If I had trodden on it or seen it, I would have never put my foot in it and fired the gun. It was a bite.... what seamen call bites of rope, you know. When I fired the gun it just kind of sawed the top of my.... well, my leg off - about 8 inches above the ankle.

We had a bit of a panic there and John Bell, the spotter, we had a little 172 Cessna, I think, with floats on it. He came down. I didn't ever think he'd ever get off. But I was in the plane too. We had three goes to get off, he did it in the third time. From the time I'd had my left sawn off I was fifty-five minutes before they got me into hospital. That was pretty good; three hours if I'd have come in the boat

**JD** And he landed on the open sea?

**STUBBS** Yeah! And there's.... well, I reckon there would have been 8 foot waves out there in this damned, silly little thing.

**JD** Did he land along the waves, along the ridge?

**STUBBS** I don't know, I didn't see him land. But he tried to, when he was taking off, he took off in the wind the first time and the starboard float dug into a wave and slewed the plane around. I was sitting in.... there's only four seats in this plane and I was sitting on the starboard side, on the back seat, and the water came right up over the window. And I could only see.... well, looking down, into the water which was blue - yeah, light blue. The second time he took off he took off parallel with the waves, but he only went about 20 yards and said that wasn't any good.

The chief engineer was in the plane with me to hold me up or something - I don't know what he came in for - but he couldn't swim, this chief engineer. John Bell, the pilot, said, "Well, you'll have to get out". So he took him back as far as he could to this little life raft we had, and he dived in and came up underneath the damned thing. He was alright! The bloke in the life raft got him in. [Laughs].

And then John Bell wirelessly to two chasers to pump their bilges, steam up wind, pump their bilges and throw oil over the side and it calmed it down a bit. But those floats were still banging on those waves. I think the last one was a fairly big wave that tossed us into the air and away we went.

**JD** Would you have been in a lot of pain?

**STUBBS** No, no. I had four.... we used to carry morphine pills and I had two of those when it was done, and then when I knew that they were going to put me in that bloody plane, well I took another two.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** Ches, when you finally got airborne, where did John Bell put down?

**STUBBS** Just outside the channel to the Oyster Harbour and Dr Fitzpatrick and the ambulance were waiting there for me. He went up the channel a little bit in the calm water and drove these damned.... this little float plane right up on the bank. We still had to get out in the damned water.

**JD** But you wouldn't have been able to walk ashore! Obviously you would have had to have been carried.



**STUBBS** Oh, I got out of the plane myself. As soon as old Doc.... (well, young Doc) Fitzpatrick then, saw me he off with his boots and came and gave me a hand. Yeah! Oh, it was a bit of a shermozzle. [Laughs].

**JD** And they took you to Albany hospital?

**STUBBS** I was in there for two months, and then in January the **Cheyne III** had to go to Perth and I took her up then. Up to the slipway up in Fremantle. Well, I think if I hadn't gone on that trip I wouldn't have gone back to that boat.

**JD** And did you continue whaling?

**STUBBS** Yeah, another 10 years. Oh, I liked it, it was alright. With whaling if you didn't like it you wouldn't stick it. There was good money in it, but you still wouldn't stick it like we did, for the money. There was a lot of blood and gore and things like that. You get used to that. You get used to it. It was after three or four months when you first start whaling and you've caught probably ten or twenty whales, you haven't got any more feeling for them. They are just like a rabbit or anything else. A pity, but that's the way it is.

**JD** Ches, regarding the way you were paid whilst you were whaling. Were you on a wage and share, or a share, or just wages, or how were you paid?

**STUBBS** We were paid a week's wage to keep the family ashore, and then a bonus on oil production. Any other stuff that they got out of the whale, well we weren't paid any bonus on that. Only the oil.

**JD** Was that the traditional way of paying whalers?

**STUBBS** That's a law. I believe that's a law that the Australian government have brought out from away back, but I wouldn't be certain about it. But that's what I've been told. The first time I joined the Cheynes Beach Whaling Company we only had one ship, and then when we got two the bonus was paid on each ship. If one ship got more whales than the other one they'd get more pay kind of business. More bonus. But then when we got the three ships the pay was on overall production. The bonus.

**JD** Shared three ways?

**STUBBS** The bonus, mmmm.

**JD** As the skipper and gunner, you'd be under a fair bit of pressure then, from the crew, not to miss, wouldn't you?

**STUBBS** Oh yeah, yes. Oh, there was a lot of competition out there. Even when we were paid on the whole production there was still a lot of competition - we should have got that whale kind of business.

One day.... for quite a while I remember, I couldn't hit a dashed bullock in the arse. I was the skipper out there that had to tell the other ones what to do - if there's only two whales, well you go and get them, see. But because I couldn't hit a dashed whale I gave the mate a go; well he was a dashed sight worse. I towed most of the whales and, gee, was there a blue! [Laughs]. Yeah, a lot of talk about that. There was a lot of jealousy. I was about 50 whales behind the other two, but it was just as well because

they could go on and catch whales and I'd follow them up and pick them up afterwards.

**JD** What, the crew were not very amused?

**STUBBS** Oh, they weren't very happy - with the competition, you know.

In '66 I was made senior skipper out there and I could tell the other skippers what to do. But you can't tell them because they've had more sea time than me, and I used to ask their advice kind of business and say, "Well, you'd better do it." [Laughs].

And '67 they sent me over to Durban, to another whaling company over there, to see how the other half live. Out of that trip came the sonar, and that boosted our catch up. I think the most whales we caught one year was 1,100 odd, I think. Yeah!

**JD** Ches, were there some Norwegian crew?

**STUBBS** Oh, we had a cosmopolitan crew. Yes, we had Norwegians, Danes (one of the skippers was a Dane), another skipper was a Scotchman.

**JD** Oh, was that Gordon Cruickshank?

**STUBBS** Gordon Cruickshank, yes. He was my mate. The company always, if they wanted somebody to try out on the gun, I had to train him - give him a go, let him have some killer shots. But Gordon was one of those chaps, yes. That was the Scotchman. There were two Danes - one of them just died about a month ago, here in Albany. Another one died up in Perth, I think. Fin; oh yes, you name the beasts. Yanks! We've had them. Yeah!

One of the times.... when would it be? That time that one bloke, he was a bit of a firebug, and he used to make bombs. The charge in the head is 650 grams of black powder, and he used to stuff four of these in his shirt and come up to the pub, especially in the winter time when all the fires were going, you know, in the grates - and he'd chuck one in. [Laughs]. It wouldn't blow anything up, you know, it would just go - pppshhhht, and a big cloud of creamy looking smoke would come off it and everybody would have to go out of the bar. [Laughs]. Oh that time that lasted, oh, for quite a while until they found a heap of these bags of powder in the collision tank when they took the old **Cheyne**s up to Fremantle. He was a big bloke.

**JD** Ches, is there anything else you'd like to say about the whaling?

**STUBBS** No, no. I could go on for a long while but you really want somebody here to prompt you all the time. Two whaling blokes, you know - half stoned! [Laughter].

Last year we had a reunion; we had about 120 whalersmen came down from all over the place. Some from Queensland! Gee, what a night that was! A beauty!

**JD** Alright. Are you sure there's nothing else you want to say?

**STUBBS** No, I don't think so.

**JD** Well, thank you very much Ches.

**STUBBS** It's a pleasure.

**JD** You've become something of an artist, is that right?

**STUBBS** Oh yeah. Well, when I retired out of the whaling company.... when you're whaling like this, you're out at 3 o'clock or 6 o'clock, whatever it is, and you don't come home until late at night - sometime the next morning, or probably the next night - the wives have got a heck of a thing. A lot of work to do, you know, bringing up the kids. So when I was 60, when I got to 60, I said, "Well that's the finish! Dot and I are going to get the caravan and away." Well we travelled around for four or five years, around Australia. Had a good time.

When I came back I had nothing to do, so I bought some teeth and started scrimshaw. And then my eyes got a little bit worse for wear so I started painting, and now I've sold six paintings in this dashed thing here - this little bit of an exhibition we've got in the Town Hall now. I won one of the categories in the Albany whaling.... [correction] Albany Arts Competition this year. I've only been painting for two years.

**JD** Did you have any formal instruction?

**STUBBS** No, no. My sister, she paints. And she came down one time - I didn't know anything about it - came into town and bought the basic paints and a few brushes, and a board, and away we went. So there you are! Now you're going to paint with me, and that's it.

**JD** I heard, also, that someone wrote a poem about you.

**STUBBS** Jack Davies, yes. Have you seen old Jack?

**JD** No.

**STUBBS** He's a funny fellow. He jumped ship. He's a Welshman. Jumped his ship over there - over the Eastern States somewhere. He's been in the West most of the time. And last year he got naturalized.

**JD** After how many years?

**STUBBS** Fifty-six, I think. [Laughter]. Yeah, he reckons he's an Australian now. But he writes a good poem, old Jack Davies. He's an awful old bastard you know. He's only got one eye. A good bushman. And.... I didn't tell you about the book I wrote.

**JD** No.

**STUBBS** Yeah, I wrote a little book. I've got another revised edition coming out now.

**JD** About you own life story?

**STUBBS** No. Albany - whaling. How long will you be in Albany?

**JD** Until tomorrow morning, early.

**STUBBS** No, they're still getting printed. They should be down before Christmas. I'll send you one.

**JD** Would you! I'd be grateful. In the meantime, thank you very much for this interview.

**STUBBS** It's a pleasure.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Cheslyn Stubbs, ex whale chaser captain and gunner, artist and author.

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

[Disclaimer](#)





## Edited transcript of an interview with FRED SWARBRICK

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Fred Swarbrick of Emu Point, Albany. Mr Swarbrick has fished in the Albany area of Western Australia for some 65 years. He is widely experienced in many types of fishing at sea, on the beaches and in the harbour and estuaries. He fished with his father in these waters and with his two brothers. His son now fishes in the same area.

Mr Swarbrick is a thoughtful and concerned fisherman who has seen many changes in the fisheries in this Albany region. At 78 years of age he still assists his son in fishing operations.

The interview was conducted in Mr Swarbrick's home at Emu Point in Albany during a violent electrical and rain storm. The interview forms part of the Australia Fishing Industry Project being undertaken by Murdoch University for the Australian Fishing Industry Research and Development Committee.

The interview commences at 025 on the revolution counter. There is one tape of two sides.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

This is an interview with Mr Fred Swarbrick of Albany conducted in his home in Albany by Jack Darcey on the 15th December 1989.

**JD** Mr Swarbrick would you record your full name please.

**SWARBRICK** Frederick Hodge Swarbrick.

**JD** And your date of birth.

**SWARBRICK** 27th September 1911.

**JD** Where were you born?

**SWARBRICK** At Emu Point; across the channel at Emu Point on the east side of the channel.

**JD** Were your parents Australian?

**SWARBRI CK** Yes. The father was born in Dalby in Queensland and my mother was also born across the Emu Point channel.

**JD** When did your father come and mother come over here, or your father come to Western Australia?

**SWARBRI CK** He came over, I wouldn't be sure of the year at all. When they (the family) left Dalby they came down to Quorn in South Australia and they came over from Quorn and he began fishing. I can't tell you too much about his earlier life but he began fishing in 1906.

**JD** How would they have got across the Nullarbour in those days?

**SWARBRI CK** Well he came over by ship.

**JD** Oh, he came by ship. And he came to Albany?

**SWARBRI CK** Albany, yes. Well they went to Fremantle and my grandfather was looking for work. Anyhow he got the job of painting the scenes on the screen in the Albany town hall and he had to walk to Albany to do that.

**JD** From Perth?

**SWARBRI CK** Yes.

**JD** How did you come to enter the fishing industry?

**SWARBRI CK** Well my father was fishing before me and I used to go on the boat with him when I was about five years of age. I used to be in the boat every chance I got. Every school holiday my brother and I were always in the boat fishing with him.

**JD** This was down here in Albany?

**SWARBRI CK** Down here, yes.

**JD** Were you educated in Albany?

**SWARBRI CK** Yes, educated in the State school and the Albany High School.

**JD** And when you left school you just continued....

**SWARBRI CK** Straight in the fishing game. Every holiday we had from school I was fishing.

**JD** And you've stayed in fishing ever since?

**SWARBRI CK** Ever since, yes. I've never made another shilling outside of fishing.

**JD** Goodness. What sort of fishing are you involved in Fred?

**SWARBRI CK** Well, when I first started in the game we were working the seine net. The brother and I were mad on set nets, so we rigged about 1500 yards of set net and we began working that. We proved that if we'd have stuck to set netting we'd have

ruined the harbour because I think set nets should be banned. That's my opinion, but if I was to say that at a meeting, I would be thrown out, as 95% of fishermen are set or mesh netters.

**JD** Why are you so against it?

**SWARBRIK** Well because it ruins the fishing. I've proved it myself, I say we had this harbour that way, you couldn't get a feed out of it, and we cut the set nets out and the fishing came back good. You see by law you're not supposed to set your nets until sundown but they don't today. They set them all hours of the day and they get away with it. They have been clamping down on them a bit the last couple of years but lots of times I go down the harbour with the son and you'll see the nets shot at 2.00 or 3.00 o'clock in the afternoon.

Well when the brother and I used to poke back along the nets, what I mean by poke the boat, was to put your oar on the (harbour floor) bottom and shove the boat along the nets, especially towards dusk and you'd see perhaps three or four fish hit the nets and you'd see three or four dozen jump in the air and run away from the nets. You'd see that in three or four other places along the nets and fish are not mad. They know what's going on. They know when they hit that net, they know there's trouble. It's the same with the netting outside in the deep water for sharks, mainly sharks, that's set netting. They also catch groper and jewfish and they lose a terrific amount of fish when they're lifting these nets, with the boat rolling, and falling with the big swell, the fish roll down the net and fall out (that is sharks and fish).

The brothers and I, we worked the shark nets. We rigged them and worked them only about three times and we could see what was happening so we cut it out. We never worked them after. They're still in the shed at home.

**JD** These set nets, they're gill nets are they?

**SWARBRIK** Yes, that's right.

**JD** Yes, and they would catch any sort of fish that happened to run into them?

**SWARBRIK** Well, not so much in the harbour, in the bays and inlets. They generally use the size net that will gill or catch just round the nose and, as I say I'm very much against it.

**JD** Yes. Now what's the alternative to set nets.

**SWARBRIK** Seine netting.

**JD** That's where you put the net around....

**SWARBRIK** That's right yes, and we haul the net with hand winches. You see, with set nets they put them in the water at 2.00 or 3.00 or 4.00 o'clock and they don't lift them until daylight the next morning. Those nets are in the water twelve and fourteen hours, where the seine net, it's set and hauled immediately; it's gone in four hours. The fish have got a free run in four hours. It's out of the water and finished.

**JD** What kind of fish are you catching at present?

**SWARBRIK** Well at the present time they're (the son) catching a lot of whiting, skippy, herring, leather jackets in the winter time; oh quite an assortment. So far this year there's been no mullet at all. You only get them with the set nets. We see the school and ring the school and unmesh them right away. The mullet have been running well the last three weeks. It's really amazing how fish of all sorts appear and disappear as the years go on.

**JD** Do you do salmon netting too?

**SWARBRIK** Yes, yes. Well I don't now, the son does. I started salmon fishing... Well we started first in 1923. We bought a salmon net in 1923. We didn't get a lot of salmon. We'd only want them for Easter because that's the only time you could sell them (over the Easter period). We'd perhaps sell fifteen or twenty dozen. We used to pen them up just on the bank down there where the swimming pool is. You can see the swimming pool out of the window down there. I've got photographs here where we used to have them penned up, perhaps twenty or 30 dozen and we'd wait until we got an order of six or eight or a dozen. We had a hook on a long mallee stick and as they swam over, just jag it under the breast bone and get them out that way. That's how we sold them; gut them and sell them to the people on the beach. But the cannery, we started into it in a bigger way when the cannery opened in 1946.

**JD** Are they on the.... did you fish on the ocean beaches?

**SWARBRIK** Oh yes, yes. We had to for salmon.

**JD** You'd have seen a lot of changes in the industry, wouldn't you?

**SWARBRIK** Oh yes, quite a few, quite a few.

**JD** In methods of catching fish?

**SWARBRIK** Well we've always stuck to the seine net because we reckoned it's the best net but the biggest alteration has been in the selling of the fish. You see, when I started off they had a depot in Albany where all our fish used to go and they used to pack a lot of fish, all iced those days. There was no refrigeration and a man by the name of Cooper was the first man we dealt with. Dealt with him for many, many years. They sent fish as far as Kalgoorlie all packed in ice. Perth was the main market but [a] terrific amount of fish used to go to Winterbrandt in Kalgoorlie.

**JD** By train?

**SWARBRIK** By train, umm.

**JD** What about prices in those days?

**SWARBRIK** [laughs] Well the prices, we used to get threepence a pound up till we got 500 pound and then used to drop down to twopence. When we began to supply the cannery the price was \$60 (30 pounds) per ton (now of course tonne).

**JD** This was for salmon?

**SWARBRIK** No, no, no. That was for mixed fish, what we call, like mullet, herring, yellow-eyed mullet, skipjack, pike, trout and garfish. Whiting we used to get five pence a pound; leatherjackets sevenpence; jewfish we used to get oh I think about



eightpence or ninepence then; snapper about the same; kingfish we used to get about fivepence; but oh, big difference today. The son would make more now in one day than I used to make in a year. That's money wise. My first year's pay, and I considered it fairly good money, my first year's pay was 264 pounds.

**JD** For the year?

**SWARBRIK** Yes. See that's better than five pound a week and the basic wage those times was only four pound something; four pound four shillings, I think it was.

**JD** Well, you know, I suppose inflation has made a big difference.

**SWARBRIK** Oh yes, that's the thing. The price of fish really started to go up when your Americans were here during the War. That's when we first noticed the price going.

**JD** What were some of the problems that faced you in those days? You wouldn't have had for instance the roads, road access to beaches and [unclear] ?

**SWARBRIK** Oh no, no. Well when I first started fishing on the coast, in 1927. It would be about 1927 that we started working on the coast. It was all just bush tracks, bog and slush all the time, you know. We did quite alright at that game. You see we started hooking about 1926 from Emu Point. As we got more advanced and better equipment, we were going further away and getting a lot of fish, off here, along the coast but today, they're not the same. Every weekend there are dozens, (in fact) hundreds of amateur fishermen putting to sea all along the coast and their catch amounts to a lot of fish.

**JD** When you say hooking, what do you mean by hooking?

**SWARBRIK** Hand lining We used two hooks on our line. If we got on to a run of big kingeys, we used to take one hook off; only use the one hook because we used to lose quite a few with the two hooks. They sometimes break the line between the two hooks. Those days there were only cotton fishing lines but it's different today with nylon which is very strong.

**JD** And did you try line fishing for shark?

**SWARBRIK** Long lining. Yes we did quite a lot of long lining. Yes, [unclear] a lot. Our best day I can remember was about, oh 2,990 pound, something like that.

**JD** Were you ever involved in the tuna fishery?

**SWARBRIK** Yes, yes. We had a go at tuna fishing when the cannery decided to take tuna. We did quite a lot of fishing along the coast and on the Shelf. We got a lot of fish off the Shelf.

**JD** What sort of a boat were you fishing from?

**SWARBRIK** Well, when we were hooking in the early times we had a "V" shape boat. Then we were doing better we built a 36 foot boat, deep drafted boat, for drifting so she'd drift slow, but when we got onto the tuna fishing, with that type of boat, all the blood used to run into the boat, so we were very much against that because it would only rot the corking and that sort of thing; so we built a flushed deck boat. We had an

ex-carpenter, who became a fisherman, he did all the cutting and fitting and we did the fastening.

**JD** When you say you built it, did you build it yourself?

**SWARBRIK** It was built here in the shed, a 36 footer. Well the shed's gone now, it was where you've got your car parked. Of course with that type of boat, all the blood runs overboard. We made an error. We built it of bond wood which I think's a failure because they go rotten. We've had to replace both sides of the boat in twenty years. Lasted no time.

**JD** How was it powered?

**SWARBRIK** It had a 95 horse power AEC diesel. Then, when I was about ready to get out of the fishing, the son had a big year and I said, "Look, you'd better spend some money on a new engine" so he bought a Detroit diesel GM. That's about 260 horse power I think.

**JD** And put it in the same boat?

**SWARBRIK** The same boat, yes.

**JD** That's not the boat he's still using?

**SWARBRIK** That's the boat he's using still, yes. We put it in [laughs] and in a couple of years later the Government clamped down on the tuna fishing. Of course, they gave him a quota of fourteen tonne which wasn't worth considering.

**JD** What was the reasoning behind that clamp down on the tuna fishing?

**SWARBRIK** Well, it makes me wonder. It makes me wonder because the Japanese and all other countries, eastern states, mainly South Australia, bought a lot of our fishermen's quotas. Western Australia are out of tuna fishing.

**JD** I understand that there was something like 70 boats fishing for tuna at one time in Albany?

**SWARBRIK** Well, no. I wouldn't say in Albany. There'd be twenty odd I'd say, but in Western Australia there could have been 70 odd. I wouldn't be certain of that figure but I'd say in Albany there would be twenty odd.

**JD** And now there are very, very few?

**SWARBRIK** Oh, none you might say. Just the odd boat now and again goes out and catches a few; might be four or five boats in the game but their quota's are too small. I believe they can hire a quota but what it costs them I don't know cause it doesn't concern me. I don't stick me nose into it.

**JD** Fred, what's your view about the management of fishing in this State?

**SWARBRIK** Well, that I can't really talk of because there's quite a lot of outlets, but [laughs] with a lot of the outlets they don't come up with the dough. The son had one just recently. He was letting a chap buy quite a lot of fish and he just disappeared over

night and you've got to watch that. Oh, we've had perhaps three or four do that to us since I've been in the fishing game.

**JD** People who undertake to buy the catch and don't pay?

**SWARBRICK** Don't pay up. They just disappear [laughs]. We've had that happen three or four times.

**JD** Do you sell to canneries now?

**SWARBRICK** No. No. The son deals with Kailis at the Metropolitan Markets. His salmon and herring go to a receival depot in Albany (Eric Colley), Albany Bait Producers. They distribute the fish. I think Heinz of eastern states has dealings with him. It's also sold as cray bait.

**JD** Oh yes, yes. The Metropolitan Markets. Fred, what are the main problems facing the industry?

**SWARBRICK** Well I think one of the main problems is the amateur fishermen, the part time fishermen. You see, they sell a terrific amount of fish. There's very few people fish for pleasure today.

**JD** It's illegal isn't it, to sell....

**SWARBRICK** It's supposed to be illegal but they get away with it by the tonnes. Now I saw an article published in the Fisheries Newsletter of October, 1980 and it just gave us one figure. Concerning Queensland and the professional fisherman, the professional reef fishermen of Queensland caught and sold 900 tonnes of fish. The amateurs, ("shamatuers") they called it, caught and sold 1500 tonnes and it's happening here. (More so in the eastern states where the departments don't allow amateurs to have any nets at all).

Now only Wednesday a chap called in to see me and he's got a son. I don't know where he works and his father did a job for him and the father said, "You can pay me with some squid, I'll get some squid off you". When he come home he told his father he got fourteen squid. He said, "Where's mine?" "Oh" he said, "I've sold them"; and that's going on all the time. The amateurs sell squid by the hundreds every weekend.

Now I'll point out another thing. A fish inspector here, (this would be couple of years ago) said to me, "Fred, how much fish have you sold to Marty's Fish Shop lately"? I said, "Very, very little". He said, "I don't want that answer, I want to know how much". Well I've kept diaries all me life. I still enter the diary every day. The son, he keeps his diary and I keep mine here. Anyhow I went through my diary and we'd sold him 68 pound of shark. "Oh" he said, "That's dam rot". I said "I'm dinkum". "Well" he said, "your name's in that book an awful lot". See the amateurs put them in our name. Also another fish inspector came to me.... He went down checking on the Esplanade Hotel, (I shouldn't be mentioning these names perhaps); but the people who had the hotel, they've gone long ago. He said to me "The Esplanade tell me they buy all the fish off you". I said "They've bought one snapper. A 22 pound snapper, that's the only fish I've ever sold them". Well, the weekenders are supplying them. It's happening all the time. It never stops. A fisheries inspector said the amateur fishery is a fairly expensive game and it helps pay his way. I said, "Rae just bought a new car. Would they tolerate me using it as a taxi cab"?

A couple of years ago I was playing a bit of bowls and we were supposed to go to Denmark to play in pennants and we got a phone call to say that they couldn't field a team, and I made some enquiries. They'd bought a boat between them and went fishing. They said they get no money out of bowls but make good money out of fishing. Many a time I've had two or three chaps come here and want to sell me three or four hundred pound of fish. People in all walks of life fish along the coast with shark nets and hooking. Quite a few trucks are fitted with freezers. When they get a fair load they travel through country towns and sell them, mainly to hotels and taverns.

**JD** Sell you the fish?

**SWARBRICK** Wanting to sell me the fish and I said, "No, I don't want them. I've got to get rid of them. I don't want the darn things". One chap in particular, he went to Queensland and he fancied a boat over there and he bought it. It cost him \$68,000. He was a millionaire farmer and he came over to me one day, and he said, "Fred, if I get any surplus fish, will you buy them off me"? I said, "No, I will not". I'm very much against that.

Take for instance the amateur fishermen. When it comes to amateur fishing with nets, if their nets were put end to end, they would reach from Albany to Kalbarri. Don't tell me there's any pleasure in catching fish with a net. When it comes to sportsmanship, there's no sportsmanship in catching a dead fish.

**JD** Fred, what about the importation of frozen fish from overseas?

**SWARBRICK** Well that's got a big effect on the industry. It's coming in all the time. A terrific amount of the shops, you take all your big stores, they import a lot of it. I believe our Australian salmon are sent to Taiwan, canned there, and sent back here for sale in all our big stores.

**JD** How is it that it can be sold so cheaply as compared with our own fresh fish?

**SWARBRICK** Well its, I s'pose because our cost of living's too high. We've got to get a good price otherwise you go down the drain. You've got New Zealand, they put in a lot of fish into Australia. Japan, they put a lot of fish in also. The Japs are fishing on our coast and sell it back to us. I believe they send it to Japan, can it or treat it and send it back here. The South Africans send a lot of fish here. Kingclip, that's one fish they sell here and that's one of the biggest imports into Australia. Now the Chinese catch fish in our waters (a lot of it under size, so I am told) and it's put on the Perth markets.

**JD** It seems strange that we import so much canned fish and smoked fish and we don't seem to be able to can it and smoke it ourselves?

**SWARBRICK** No because our wages are so high, we price ourselves out of world markets. Another thing, other countries don't get long service leave, which all has to go into price of articles sold. No, we don't, that's a fact. You see Hunts were going well but when we used to catch our fish years ago and had to clean them on the job and sell them, the product was a good product, but once they started taking the salmon whole, guts and all, I think that was, personally, the downfall of the industry.

**JD** Why's that?

**SWARBRICK** Well, half the fish were rotten. You see when the fish are not gutted and the fishermen have to truck them up and down the coast a couple of hundred miles,

half those fish go bad. At one stage they were even carting tuna from Esperance 400 kilometres. If you ice fish, if you put a lot of fish on a truck, ice them heavy, the ice water doesn't go down, it runs round them. It doesn't go into the middle of the fish. I know a lot of the fish, I saw them myself, to pick them up, the tail and backbone would pull off them. I've done that quite a few times; not with our fish as all our fish were caught locally. Those fish are rotten. They tell me [laughs] if you can fish when they're rotten it doesn't hurt you at all. After the can has been opened and it's left out of the fridge and goes bad, that's when trouble begins.

**JD** Do you see any other major problems facing the industry for the future?

**SWARBRIK** Well, no, not exactly. There's a lot of fish here. People say there's a big scarcity of fish but the fish have been very good, especially the whiting. I've never known the whiting thicker in my life than they've been this last three years. This year they're terrific; that's the King George whiting.

**JD** What about the muelies?

**SWARBRIK** Well, there's a lot of boats working on muelies. There's about 40 odd boats working here on muelies, that's out of Albany. I suppose it must make a difference to them but they've had not a good year this year but of course it could be a bad season. You see they're not good seasons every year. See right through my life, some years the fish are really good, other years very scarce.

**JD** Fred would you say there's too much pressure on the stocks, perhaps too many fishermen chasing too few fish perhaps?

**SWARBRIK** Well I wouldn't say that. The muelies, there's acres of muelies. When we used to work the Shelf, sometimes when we're coming home (I always used to steer the boat, the son used to tend to the fish) and on the way home I've passed through acres and acres, miles and miles of muelies. It would take them a long time to fish them out. Even the last day the son went out, he saw three or four very big schools of muelies off in the deep water.

I think a lot of the trouble is here, on this coast, is pollution.

**JD** Is it?

**SWARBRIK** Oh, a big problem. You take in Albany alone.... Now I'd go back now, say 30 years when we used to catch a lot of trout off Middleton Beach. We used to sell, say one or two schools of trout a week. We used to go looking for them with the strong nor-west days. That's a wind that you get very little of now, no nor-westers at all. We used to walk the beach and we'd find a school of trout. You could see them, say three or four hundred yards off. There might only be three or four hundred pound; there might be a thousand pound but today you couldn't see them if they jumped out the water because the water's that dirty.

**JD** What's it dirty from?

**SWARBRIK** Well I think a big problem is the sewerage. That's coming up from the Sound and they have put it further out into King George Sound. I don't give it a dam where it goes, it's still going into the water. In the Albany Harbour you've got the super works which is a bad thing. It was also extended out into the harbour and its's

spilling off the wharf when being unloaded and you've also got Borthwicks. All that stuff going into the harbour there.

I remember one time, we were catching mulies for Hunts Cannery off the wharf and the eldest son got down under the jetty and he noticed a lot of oysters, so he got some. Thank God I didn't eat any. The son and brothers ate them [laughs]. They nearly died before we got home. They were vomiting and doubled up with cramp. You see it's a bad thing. That's all pollution. It shows you on the News sometimes, this stuff going out from Borthwicks, well it must all tell on the fishing game.

Mind you, the blood coming from Borthwicks is not as bad as the super because a lot of fish come to the blood.

**JD** So that's the three main forms of pollution?

**SWARBRIK** That's right. Then you've got super coming from the farms down the rivers. You see another thing I'll mention is the weed. They said all the weed's dying. Well the weed did die. All the weed died in this harbour. I'd be going back now 40 years. Well its' coming back now better and healthier than ever. Now [the] EPA crowd, they've been on to me to.... Well, I'm telling a lie. One chap rang me from Perth and said, "When I come down I want you to take me round the harbour", but he never ever came. They've been to other chaps in this area and they tell them to come and see me. They said I've forgotten more about this harbour than they're ever likely to know, "Go and see Fred Swarbrick". They've never come near me.

The weed in this harbour, look it's really beautiful, healthy, beautiful. Where there was none at all, it's now beautiful. Whether the super killed it or not, I don't know. A few years ago, the farmers got super under a big subsidy and they put so much on and that's the cause of the trouble. Heavy rains brought it off the farmers' paddocks into the harbour. There are a lot of farms in the area these days. There are farms all around the harbours and the Kalgan River runs right up as far as Kendenup. There's hundreds of farms and the river drains the lot into Oyster Harbour.

**JD** This interview continues on side B.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

This is side B of tape 1 of an interview with Mr Fred Swarbrick of Albany, Western Australia.

**SWARBRIK** [first words not recorded] .... At the latter part of the Depression I used to run passengers up to Kalgan with the launch. I used to take quite a few up bream fishing and picnicing. Today you can't get up there. There's that much mud coming down I can't get the launch beyond Killaney. That's about halfway up to where we used to go. It's only mud coming down from the farms. The river was one time deep all the way, but today its shallow with a lot of the areas, perhaps two feet deep. Some of the corners in the river have completely filled with mud. With low tide it's high and dry.

**JD** Was the Kalgan fresh water in those days?

**SWARBRICK** Only with heavy winter rains. Summertime it's salt all the way up the river. When we had very wet winters and had a flood, one could drink the water (really clean), whereas today it's just mud. It kills all species of fish and shellfish.

**JD** Is it.....

**SWARBRICK** In the northern end of Oyster Harbour it was deep water, eighteen to twenty feet deep. On the floor of the Harbour it was quite hard, grit and cockle shells all over, whereas today, especially the north east side, has got very shallow. A lot of the Harbour is only five to six feet deep, all mud from up the rivers (from farmer's paddocks).

When I was a lad a boat, the **Silver Star**, 100 to 120 feet long ferried tourists up the Kalgan River. Today it (the ferry) wouldn't get within three-quarters of a mile of the river mouth.

**JD** Any other problems that you foresee for the fishing industry in this area?

**SWARBRICK** Oh....

**JD** Or for the fishing industry generally?

**SWARBRICK** No, I wouldn't say that. Well I tell you another big problem. You see, a lot of the people that angle from the bank and other dinghys down the harbour.... When I was a young man we would catch a terrific amount of whiting in these channels, but not today, because with all these boats, the muelie boats, running in and out, there's 44 boats travelling in and out of here twice a day. Well there is that much noise, and noise is the biggest problem. Fish won't tolerate noise. They clear out and I think myself, that's why the son's doing so well. They go straight up into the harbour. They go straight up into the harbour. There are also dozens of outboard motors and their exhausts are under the water.

I'll tell you another instance. I'd be going back now, oh what, in the early 30s. We would get days and days of strong nor-west winds. We would go round the corner onto Middleton Beach after dark (about 8.00 pm). We'd often get two or three, four hundred pound, perhaps up to a thousand pound of herring and skippies and trout. An old chap and his wife bought a block of land right on the water front. He installed a Delco lighting plant, and from then on the fish cleared out. We'd go around there and get nothing. They won't tolerate the noise of those engines. It's also I suppose they can feel it through the ground. Anyhow, in the early 40s, the old chap passed away and his wife sold the place, and they took the Delco plant back up to the farm. The fish came back good again. Oh no, cars driving around on the beaches swinging their lights and the noise of engines, the fish don't like it, no way.

**JD** Fred, you'd have known a lot of people in the fishing industry over all these years. Who are some of the outstanding personalities that you can recall?

**SWARBRICK** Well, in what way?

**JD** Well, they might have been great fishermen; they might have been processors; they might have made a big contribution in the management of the industry.

**SWARBRICK** No, I couldn't recall many at all, not that way. In my life I've fished with some mighty funny men. See I practically took on all the hooking in later years. The

two brothers, Alf and Norm, used to get very seasick and it never ever worried me at all. I used to take some funny people out. I had, oh about four or five different people over the years. I would only take one person at a time. We caught a lot of fish.

There'd be a lot of work, hard work, because we had to start so early in the morning. We used to get away at 4.00 o'clock in the morning, so we'd be at Eclipse Island off Albany by sunrise and we'd fish until dark that night and I'd gut the fish on the way home. Of course they would just come out with me for the pleasure. All they did was steer the boat while I did the gutting.

**JD** If you had your time again would you go fishing?

**SWARBRIK** Yes. I loved every minute of it. Yes, even now I still go out as often as I can with the son. You see he's got a deckie working with him now. Nothing upsets me more than getting fish in the net and losing them at the last when you're bunting up.

**JD** What's bunting up?

**SWARBRIK** That's forming the pocket under your fish. You see with the seine netting you use a very small mesh, very small mesh so that the fish don't stick in it. When you bunt up you've got the fish in a pocket. We pick out the good sized fish and you just let your corkline go and pull up on the net and it just tips the small fish out; they just swim away as though nothing's happened. It gives me pleasure going out there too.

A funny thing happened a couple of years ago. My son-in-law was here and he said he'd never seen the net work. I said, "I'll take you down". I said, "Be here at 7.00 am in the morning and I'll run you down to Mervyn". We went down, I helped Mervyn bunt up. We got a nice lot of squid and whiting. That's one of the main fish today, squid. I should've mentioned that earlier. We get a lot of squid in the winter time. Often get a couple of hundred pound in a haul and they bring a big price too. Anyhow I took this chap (my son-in-law) down and we were back home a few minutes and the wife called to me, "Fred there's someone outside wanting to see you". She said, "It looks like an officer".

When I went out it was a Fisheries officer. He said to me, "Where'd you come from when you come up the harbour"? I said, "I've been down giving my son a hand to bunt up". He said, "Who'd you have with you"? I said, "My son-in-law". He said, "Did he pull on the net at all"? I said, "Yes, he pulled about ten or fifteen, twenty yards perhaps". "Well" he said, "he had no right to". "Oh" I said, "don't be mad". He said, "He's not allowed to pull on a net if it's for gain". Well it upset me a bit. He said "Is your boat licensed?" I said, "Course it's licensed. I've had a licensed boat all my life". Anyhow I had to take him down and show him the boat. He said, "Well don't take anyone again because you're not allowed to take anyone in the boat if you're hauling for gain". Well I said, "Look, the best thing you can do is get off your backside and get down the coast when they're salmon fishing, right the full coast", I said, "Often there's 30 and 40 people, visitors, pulling on the net". I said, "If you're going to stop me, I want to see you stop all visitors as well". Anyhow it all fell through but it's stupid.

**JD** Do you get much of that heavy handed sort of behaviour from the [unclear] ?

**SWARBRIK** Oh, not a lot, no. We get it now and again, not a lot. No the fisheries inspectors are pretty good that way, pretty good.



**JD** Fred, anything else that you'd like to say about the fishing?

**SWARBRIK** You know, when you talk of the fish being scarce, on this bank, just in front of my house, are cockles. (They're putting a limit on the cockles.) I think it's a bucket of cockles are all you're allowed to take, a two gallon bucket. Well all my life I've seen people taking cockles off this bank and I'll often go to my window and look down there and you'll see a dozen or fifteen, perhaps twenty people gathering cockles and they take them away in bucket fulls. They've been doing that for the last 40 years and the cockles are still there. So it just tells you how they must breed to be like that. Well fish must be the same.

Oh yes, in all life, bird life, everything, they're gone to what they used to be here. You see when I was a young man, the gannet, they used to be here in thousands. When I used to come up the Sound (King George's Sound) of a night, the gannets would be passing us by the dozens from outside the headlands (off the ocean after their day's fishing) and they would settle down for the night off Cheyne Head. We would often steam through a couple of acres of birds. Today you never see one. Well, you never see one resting on the water. You see a few flying in the Sound and outside in the ocean but where there were thousands, today you might see a dozen. They're all gone. I have heard that the crayfishermen kill a lot to use as cray bait; whether that's true or false, I don't know.

The mutton bird, he's still as thick as ever. They were a curse when we were tuna fishing because [laughs] when the son and I were tuna fishing, he always used the plug and I used live bait. No I'm telling you a lie. We used live bait for a while but only for a while. We found that we'd catch the tuna just as good with a dead bait. So I'd be using the bait and he'd be using the plug. Lots of time you'd let that bait go and before it hit the water, a mutton bird would grab it off. Oh they were corkers. We had to kill quite a few but still it made no difference.

**JD** What about the silver gull? Have they increased [unclear] ?

**SWARBRIK** Oh, millions. They're here in millions. When I was a young man you would bunt your fish up and put them in your boat. We always kept the net in a separate boat and we would just anchor the boat, say a few yards away, and lift the net and you'd never see a gull go near the fish. Today, if you don't lash the two boats side by side, there's not a fish left with its eye in. Eyes are the gulls' main diet. I personally think something should be done to eradicate them. They are fouling all the swamps and lakes in the area.

**JD** Fred, anything else?

**SWARBRIK** On Green Island, that's the little island out in the front of the house, when I was a boy we used to put cows and calves there for the different dairies around Albany. We would swim them over behind a rowing boat and vice versa to bring them back home. We used to go out and cut the grass from there to bring it down for the stock. Well today there's no grass. It's just all scrub; dandelions, harem lilies, nasturtiums and all the rubbish grass you can name. There's all the mongrel grass [laughs] in the world there and there is also a colony of pelicans. Could be over 100 to 150 pelicans nesting on the Island and the smell when passing the island (by boat) is really on the nose.

The other day I was down fishing with the son. We counted 77 around the boat at once.

**JD** Pelicans?

**SWARBRIK** Yes. They do a lot of damage, you see when we're fishing on weed you get these pelicans sometimes diving into the water to get at the fish. Well the fish go into the weeds and the net comes over them. At times there could be a dozen or fifteen on the water inside the net and when they (the pelicans) decide to take off, the splash of their feet and flapping of wings also scares the fish. I can remember (as a boy) the pelicans turned up here, middle or late September, with the first of the low tides, but were always gone again by mid-February.

In our life we've also had a lot of problems with the black cormorant. One year, I'm going back now, what 40 years ago, 50 years ago, we had to get to work on them with cyanide. They were that bad. You could hardly get any fish at all because they were putting the fish into the weeds. The weed was that long in this harbour. Well it's coming back the same today. Beautiful weed.

**JD** Do the seals do much harm to your nets?

**SWARBRIK** Well, not to us no. When you work the seine net, it's in so quick but with the set nets they're there all night. It's an invitation to the seals. They get that way after a while, (they're not fools) [laughs]. They go round looking for these set nets and when they find them they just help themselves to the fish, but on the coast, or when we're salmon fishing, we had to shoot a few; not a lot, half a dozen perhaps, because they used to get into the salmon net, when we had the salmon penned. There were times when the cannery had a break down or perhaps a glut of salmon, that we had to pen them. When I say pen them, we would run a small net around the school and anchor the net off the beach. If they get in the herring net they'd chase the herring around. The herring would go out the net because the net was set as a trap. You see when the herring are coming along the coast they're coming in dribs and drabs all the time and of course with the net set as a trap, they're building up in it.

**JD** Do the herring move from the east to the west?

**SWARBRIK** That's right, east to west yes. The salmon the same. In the early days the fishermen thought they followed the coast but they don't. They come onto the coast.... When the run starts they come straight from the ocean onto the coast because you can get them at Bremer Bay or you can get them at Peaceful Bay on the same day which is 180 miles apart. When they make up their mind to run they come straight onto the coast and they might go a few miles and go away to sea again. I don't know that they've ever had any real proof that they follow the full coast. A team can be fishing on a beach and get several schools of salmon and the beaches east of them have never seen any fish at all.

**JD** There's probably a need for a lot more research into the fishing industry.

**SWARBRIK** Well yes, for more tagging. I think it would prove a lot. Mind you they're doing a pretty good job now with the tagging but they could do a lot more I think as far as the migratory runs of fish. You see you can't see a fish but you can see a bird. You take the mutton birds off here. They're just about driving you insane when you're tuna fishing (this is going back a few years of course). All of a sudden they're gone, none, you don't see one. When they leave here they go across to the eastern states, right up the east coast round the Aleution Islands, down the American coast and back here again in about two or three months. It'd be interesting to know the movements of

a fish. In the Albany or south coastal area I understand the movement of fish quite well but it's in my interest to keep it to myself for my family's sake.

**JD** Yes. There is work being done though [unclear].

**SWARBRIK** So I believe.

**JD** Fred, thank you very much for all of that.

**SWARBRIK** Well I could talk a lot more on the fishing game but I feel I've talked enough [laughs].

**JD** It's been interesting to talk to you. Thank you.

**SWARBRIK** Good, very good.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Fred Swarbrick. The interview was conducted by Jack Darcey at Mr Swarbrick's home in Emu Point, Albany, Western Australia, on the 15th December, 1989.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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## Verbatim transcript of an interview with ANTHONY TOMLINSON

### INTRODUCTION

Anthony Tomlinson came to Australia from England as a young man. After a variety of employments he started in fishing as a deckhand on a series of rock lobster boats. In 1966 he came to Exmouth Gulf and now skippers one of M G Kailis's prawn trawlers, working out of Learmonth.

In this interview Mr Tomlinson gives an insight into trawling operations in Exmouth Gulf and tells of the management practices adopted, and some of the problems facing the fleet, particularly from cyclones and lack of a breakwater and harbour facilities, but also in the retention of markets in view of the threat of overseas' aquaculture. He was much involved in the establishment of a fish-trawling operation which seems now to have a viable future.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Learmonth, on 9th of June, 1990. There are two sides on one tape and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Would you first of all record your full name, date and place of birth, please?

**TOMLINSON** Anthony Gerwood Tomlinson, born in Cairo, Egypt, on the 16th of April, 1942.

**JD** How did you come to be born in Cairo?

**TOMLINSON** My father was over there with MI5 during the War. My mother went over there as a nurse. They met and got married over there and I was born over there.

**JD** And were you brought up in that part of the world or did you come to Australia?

**TOMLINSON** On and off until I was ten. We used to go back to England occasionally and back out to Cairo. Then when the Suez thing started, and when King Farouk got kicked out, there was a lot of anti-British feeling and we scarpered as quick as we could to England, and I was brought up the rest of the time in England. I went to school there, went to Durham University for a year, failed [laughs].

**JD** What were you studying?

**TOMLINSON** Zoology. Zoology, botany and geology. At that time there was this immigration scheme, you could go to Australia for two years for ten pounds as long as you stayed the two years, and I decided England wasn't big enough for myself and my disappointed parents, so I came to Australia - originally only for two years. By the time the two years was up I had no intentions of ever going back to England so I stayed here.

**JD** When you came out, how old were you?

**TOMLINSON** Twenty-two.

**JD** And what sort of employment did you go in to?

**TOMLINSON** Oh, a bit of everything. I met a few blokes on the ship coming over and the money was so good over here compared to back in England that we'd just get a job as a builder's labourer or something for a couple of weeks, save some money and travel on somewhere else. We went all over the eastern states and across the bottom. I think I had eighteen different jobs in the first eighteen months. I came over to Perth and up to Dongara, then up as far as Darwin.

While in Dongara I got a job on a crayboat as a deckhand for a while and I enjoyed it so much I sort of decided that I'd come back and do it for the next cray season, and I've been fishing ever since. When we first got to Dongara there weren't many jobs going but I ended getting up on a boat with Dicky Carr, but it was right towards the end of the season and we only fished for a few weeks and he had his licence taken off him after that for having too many pots in the water.

In the meantime we (myself and my mate) had lined up a job for the next season with Theo Rose on the **Helen II**. We went up to Darwin through the off-season and flew back from there to Perth and decided to work with Theo on his boat in the Swan River getting it ready for the next cray season. Did that out of Dongara and at the end of the cray... well, at the end of the whites, Theo at that time used to throw on a bit of extra rigging and a prawn winch and go up to Exmouth Gulf prawn trawling.

So I went with him (my friend didn't) and I found prawning was far more interesting than crayfishing, especially after having studied zoology for a while. All the weird creatures that came up in the net I found quite fascinating and decided that I enjoyed it more than I did crayfishing.

Well, at that time a lot of boats used to do the whites and then come up prawning. They used to do both. So I did the rest of the prawn season at Exmouth Gulf and went back down to Dongara. I left Theo and worked with Vic Ferris for a while, and Jim Bailey, but I always came back up to Exmouth Gulf for the prawns.

Then the Fisheries decided that you could either go crayfishing or prawning but not both - that's a boatowner, fisherman. So Michael Kailis sort of (as far as I know) convinced most of the fishermen who owned their own boats at the time, that they'd be better off staying in the crayfishing side of things, and he would acquire their prawning licences for Exmouth Gulf. I don't know the details but this is what happened and from then on, there were just specialised prawn trawlers which didn't go crayfishing anymore, and the seasons got longer and things changed.

The company acquired licences and started building their own trawlers and putting on their own skippers and crews. That way they had more control over the amount of prawns that came in to the factory, because when all the boats were privately owned,

the fishermen tended to make so much money in a certain time, they'd sort of slack off after that for the second half of the season. Otherwise they'd have to pay too much tax probably or they all had reasons for it, and there was no hold over them. The company couldn't make them go to work because they owned their own boats and their own licences. But this way once the company acquired the licences and its own boats, they had the power to send you to work regardless, which was much better for the factory, which could continue processing on a continual basis, rather than work a few days and then have to have a few days off because nobody went to work. And that's how the prawning fleet started in Exmouth Gulf.

That was in 1966 when I first came up here and 1967 I worked for Vic Ferris on the **Water Witch** which is a tiny little 38 foot lugger type boat with a little wheelhouse down the stern and towing one net, which most of the boats did at that time, and that was an unbelievable season for prawns. If we'd had the boats then that we have now, there would have been half a million pounds per boat easily caught that year.

A lot of our knowledge at that time was that.... West Australians didn't know a great deal about prawning and there were quite a few Queenslanders over here. Now most of our knowledge about nets and trawling was gained from them.

I changed boats at the end of 1967 season and worked on the **Tiruna** in the next year for Ken Leach, and part way through that I left and got a job on the **Challenger** which was Kailis's first twin-rigged prawn trawler. At that time there had been one or two double-rigged trawlers operating in the Gulf but they were still a bit of a novelty, and it was amazing the difference they made to the catch. Towing two nets instead of one, they almost doubled the catch (although the combined size of the two nets wasn't much bigger than the size of the one net) and we've been towing two nets ever since.

In 1969 I got married, and also acquired my Grade Two Skipper's Ticket, and did a year as second skipper on the **Challenger** under Nigel Fergusson who has since started his own company, Tiger Fishers, and he left at the end of that year, and I took over the **Challenger** which I skippered until 1972.

At the end of 1972 I was looking at possibly acquiring my own trawler, and Theo Rose meanwhile sold the boat he used to have as a crayboat and built a trawler called the **Helen Suzanne**. He was at that time working it himself and paying it off, but he was getting a bit old for the game and he offered me the job as skipper of it with a prospect of eventually buying into it. So I skippered the **Helen Suzanne** the next year but we worked for what was at that time, I think, Ross International. It might have been Queensland United Foods. They used to change the name quite often. But buying the **Helen Suzanne** sort of fell through. I couldn't raise the money at the end of the season and it was eventually acquired by the Kailis Company. I did two more years for Queensland United Foods and came back to Kailis's in 1976.

In the time I'd been with the other company, Kailis had left his original processing site, the reason being it was situated right off the end of the runway at the airport, and all the seabirds would gather round the offal pipe where the prawn heads from the factory went in to the sea, and were a hazard to low-flying aircraft. He was offered quite a substantial sum to move and by the time I came back in 1976, the new site at which we're still situated was almost completed.

I did a year's relieving skipper because there were no boats immediately available, and built a house right on the sea-front with assistance from Kailis. Originally I was hoping to own it. Three houses were built there and we were all under the impression that it would be our house but reading the fine print, because they were built on an industrial

property, we couldn't actually own it because we couldn't own the land. So we were reimbursed by the company with the amount of money we'd paid out ourselves, and from then on we rented these houses at a fairly reduced rate.

I got back into the boats for a few years and became.... I spent a year as a Fleet Master but I didn't enjoy that very much. I went back to the boats in 1980 and have been skippering a boat called the **Point Cloates** ever since. That's where we are now.

**JD** Tommo, could I ask you, it must be difficult living in these remote areas for a family man, in terms of the family. Do you have children?

**TOMLINSON** Mmm.

**JD** And how about their schooling and that sort of thing?

**TOMLINSON** Well, that was no problem. The hard part was working nights because you don't get much family life when you're working at night, but Exmouth Gulf is about the best you can expect if you're in the prawning industry (on this coast anyway) because it's such a small area. You're never away from home for more than two nights at a time. Quite often you're only out overnight and you come home every morning and, of course, my wife, once the children had grown up, she would work in the processing factory during the day and I'd be at sea during the night, and things were a bit hard. We hardly ever saw each other because we were working different times and a lot of families couldn't handle that. There were a lot of marriages that didn't work, or left because they weren't working because of these hours. But we became acclimatised to it, we became accustomed to it.

Kailis subsidised a school bus to come out to Learmonth to pick up the children to take them into Exmouth High School, so education was really no problem there. But at that time.... well there was no schooling after you left at fifteen. You couldn't go on to any higher education at Exmouth. We experimented. We sent our oldest daughter (I had three daughters, the second two were twins) we sent the oldest one down to Kobelia in Katanning, but she was so homesick we pulled her out after a term and shortly after that the school closed down anyway.

But then Exmouth school became.... well, you could go on to - I don't know what the years are but you could do your education right through until you were eighteen, so the twins were all right that way. We took them out and sent them all to.... is it Perth Modern School?

**JD** Yes.

**TOMLINSON** Perth Modern for a year, but they didn't settle in all that well down there either. They were very excited at going to Perth and getting out of Learmonth which they found terribly boring being teenagers, but after a while in Perth they couldn't wait to get back here.

In fact, if you can get over the uncomfortable hours you have to work, it's a terrific place for bringing up children. We've got beautiful weather and there are all kinds of sports facilities in Exmouth. My children were involved in swimming and pony riding and it was just a great place for bringing up kids. Expensive maybe. The cost of living was fairly expensive because Exmouth was right up the end of the road. There was no through road to anywhere else, and everything that gets freighted in to Exmouth, well the trucks only have to go back out the same way they came in. It's not en route to

anywhere, so the cost of living has been fairly expensive, but supplemented with a bit of seafood we managed to get by all right.

**JD** The question of cyclones. Is that a worry in Learmonth?

**TOMLINSON** Definitely cyclones are a worry, yes. At one stage Michael wanted.... he visualised this as being a year round fishery and, in fact, I have worked year round on a prawn trawler, but it was also a gamble with the cyclones because quite often your crew didn't want to stay on over summer anyway. They'd had enough and quite a lot of the skippers the same. They wanted to go away for a holiday and you could not leave a vessel unattended up here in summer because of the danger of cyclones. So in the end, only those who actually lived here and were prepared to work right through the summer kept their vessels up here and the others went down to Fremantle for their refit. I usually kept mine up here.

But our worst cyclone seem to have been when most of the vessels had come back [laughs] and the first one I ever went through was also one of the worst cyclones - Beverley in 1975, which was only a few months after Darwin was wiped out by Tracey. Most of us had never been through one before and it was quite horrendous. In fact one boat, the **Katchula**, ended up two miles inland on the other side of the Gulf in a mangrove creek. It didn't go up the creek, it went over the top of the mangroves! It took nearly two months to get it out. Two other trawlers were washed high and dry on the beach on the other side and they had quite a problem because there were no roads around there. You can't get bulldozers or anything in there, and they all had to be towed off by other trawlers and they were so far up the beach it wasn't easy. It took quite a while, but there was nobody injured and in the end, no losses.

But they're such unpredictable things. Since then I've been through quite a few and we've realised every time you go through one you learn. We originally went to Tent Point for shelter. We now very rarely go there. The worst ones we get usually start blowing in the east and swing around to the north east which is all very well. You can go over the other side and get shelter, but when the winds swing round to the north, there's really nowhere to go in the Gulf and it's very uncomfortable to put it mildly.

But we sort of worked out a system now where we can get reasonable shelter from most directions and it's just a matter we have to take the boats out (you can't leave them on the moorings) and ride them out. Because the Gulf is fairly shallow the seas don't get huge but the waves get pretty big and all the shoals in the Gulf break and it can be quite scary. We've had plenty of boats go aground through other reasons but I think if I remember rightly, those three and that first one were the only ones that have actually.... the only ones of ours that have actually gone up in a cyclone. There was one (I think it was **Pacific Pride**) there was one boat that went aground too. It didn't belong to us and that was high and dry for several months before they got it off.

Cyclone damage ashore, well, everything built here, of course, is supposedly cyclone-proof, and we have never so far suffered much damage, although this last summer we had quite a few trees blown down. They're definitely a worry and it's sort of at the back of your mind all through the summer when you're living up here. It's not much fun when you've got a boat out there to worry about, which is another reason why they all go down to Fremantle now, most of them.

**JD** There are quite a few boats out of this port, aren't there, who fish out of this port?

**TOMLINSON** Well, Kailis has eleven boats now. He used to have fourteen. See, about 1980, the tiger prawn catch especially started to drop to such an extent that nobody



was making any money at all, and the Department of Fisheries was more or less ordered by the State Government to bring Exmouth Gulf back to the way it was - a viable fishing industry. They went about this in several ways, closing off parts of the Gulf classified as nursery areas, other parts which they classified as spawning areas, at different times of the year. They limited the maximum trawl board size and net size, even the size of the chain you allowed to use on the bottom of your nets. One of the other weapons they used in this fight against over fishing was to get rid of a few licences. There were at one stage 23 trawlers in the Gulf. Now they're down to sixteen. This is one of the ways they're trying to stop over exploitation of the stock.

Kailis has gone from fourteen down to eleven which he has at the moment. Nor-West Seafoods have gone down from five to four, and there is one privately owned vessel in the Gulf now, a total of sixteen trawlers.

**JD** Has that policy proved successful? Are the stocks holding up?

**TOMLINSON** Well, it's definitely saved the industry. It's too early to tell whether taking these three trawlers they've already taken out this year has had any effect, but it's had to have an effect. I mean, you know, three trawlers is quite a high percentage of the fleet, but it's a bit early to tell yet. The basic idea (although we've had a lot of argument with the Fisheries Department) seems to be working even though I don't think even the Fisheries Department understands quite how some of it does work, because they forecast a pretty bad season for this year, and it's turned out to be an exceptionally good one. But definitely they have saved the industry at Exmouth Gulf, but they're still monitoring it very closely to make sure that it never gets back to the bad situation that it was at the beginning of the '80s.

**JD** Does this fleet fish in the Gulf of Carpentaria as well?

**TOMLINSON** No, no, not this fleet. At one time.... well, Kailis still has a complex at Groote Eylandt, and at one time he had quite a big fleet up at Carpentaria, and some of our vessels here were sent up there. They were given 240 power and had some sort of a freezer put in, and at one time, I think three of them were up there. But the bottom fell out of things up there. He closed down his operation to quite a large extent. I think he's only got two or three trawlers up there now, and the three from here that went up there are now back here, and that's where they'll stay. But some of the skippers we get here have been up there, but virtually this fleet is purely Exmouth Gulf and doesn't fish anywhere else.

**JD** Tommo, you mentioned tiger prawns, do you also get bananas here?

**TOMLINSON** We used to get quite a lot of bananas when I first came here back in '66 and '67, not so much big schools of them as they get in Nickol Bay and Carpentaria, but steady - steady fishing. You'd pick up a few hundred pounds in the night and occasionally you would find a small school. I believe one boat got ten thousand pounds in a couple of days over the other side the year before I came here. But I remember a fisherman called Clem Hill (who's still operating I believe) did some sort of survey for the Fisheries Department in, I think it was 1967, on banana prawns up towards the Ashburton River and so on, and the Fisheries decided more or less that it was not a suitable area for banana prawns. Their theory is that what banana prawns get in the Gulf, have filtered down from Nickol Bay and points up north, maybe the Ashburton River and, of course, now there's a big fishery at Nickol Bay, most of them are caught before they get a chance to get out and get down this way, and you can virtually write

bananas off as a species, although there are a few round this year. But they're certainly not one of our main catches now.

The tiger prawn, of course, is the most valuable. It's the one we export to Japan and the king prawn and endeavour prawn are the other two commercial species we get the most of. Apparently the king prawn, he was a fairly tricky customer. He sort of regulates his own catches. He doesn't come out and feed unless conditions are suitable and quite often you can trawl over ground and get very few although they're still there in the mud. But they have a built-in protection device which the others do not have. Sort of one up all up with them. They're quite an easy prawn to fish out.

Nobody worries too much about endeavours just yet, because they're not terribly valuable, but the tiger, king and endeavour are the main species, plus quite a few coral prawns which more or less come under the heading of by-products with our company. The kings and endeavours and corals are mostly sold in Australia. There's not many go for export.

**JD** The ones that you do export are exported direct from here, are they, to Japan?

**TOMLINSON** Ah yes, I think they are. This is the only prawn processing establishment we have. They do send some (if we have a lot) they send some down to Dongara after the cray season's finished down there I think, to create employment in Dongara, or on-going employment in Dongara. But this is the main processing establishment. We used to get prawns coming down from Groote Eylandt or from Carpentaria, to be processed here at one stage, and we still get prawns from Nickol Bay if they have a bumper year like they did this year. We get banana prawns sent down here to be processed and as far as I know, we put out the finished product here (the finished export product) which goes to Japan.

**JD** Is there any other fishery based in Learmonth?

**TOMLINSON** There's a minor fishery - net fishing off the beach. There's always been a few fishermen that come up every year with a four-wheel drive and a dinghy and a few nets, and catch mullet and whiting. Mullet mostly go for cray bait and the whiting well... few go for human consumption, of course. Mostly they're not full time. They're cray fishermen perhaps who've done the cray season down south and come up here more as a working holiday than anything else, and they like it and some of them... the Wongs down in [unclear] for instance, have quite a big camp, and they catch their own cray bait for the next season, and they catch a lot of fish. We have two that sell to Kailis Fisheries, one of them lives in the Kailis camp more or less permanently, the other one has a camp down in Gales Bay on Lefroy's property, Exmouth Station property. They sell most of their product to Kailis's, but compared to the prawning it's a fairly minor sideline to us.

We have been experimenting in the very bad seasons round about 1980/'81. I got permission to go outside the Gulf to look for prawns out there because there were so few in Exmouth Gulf, and on the first survey I did, we got quite a number of edible fish. So I got permission to do another survey up that way, concentrating more on edible fish than prawns, and the last day of that survey, myself and the other boat hit a patch of fish which was an incredible amount to us for the short time, and we actually got a subsidy from the Fisheries Department to investigate the fish trawling that off-season. It was about 1980/'81 I think.

So my boat the **Point Cloates** and the **Challenger**, the oldest one in the fleet, at the end of the prawn season when the others went south, went up towards Barrow Island.

We had two nets, the same as we did prawning. That's all we knew, we just made them a slightly bigger mesh, and we did quite well. We got a lot of fish, a lot of it was cray bait but there was enough to make it worth investigating further.

**JD** This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**TOMLINSON** In 1981 or '2, I forget which, the prawn catches dropped so low in May and June that myself and another skipper got permission to go fish-trawling out towards Barrow Island, and in the seven weeks that I did we actually made more money than the crews that stayed on the prawn trawlers, and we averaged about a ton a day of edible fish, which to us was quite good. All through the years, we've always been looking for something to do in the summer rather than have the fleet just tied up for several months, lying idle, and this looked to be possibly the solution to the problem. For several off-seasons I've been fish-trawling. Now the Pilbara In-shore Fishery has decided that it is a good thing and they're starting to get a trawling fleet. The area where we found these fish just outside Exmouth Gulf is very small, but it looks like it is going to be a licensed area, so in order to make sure we've got at least one licence, we had to put in an effort whether we caught anything or not.

When this came about two or three years ago, I decided it wasn't worth doing it the way we had been which was virtually prawn trawling with bigger mesh nets. We had to do it with the proper fish-trawling gear. So we got a net made up by a bloke from New Zealand who knew all about it and we got the proper boards. The only problem was sort of re-arranging the prawn-trawling rig without any major alterations, to handle the fish trawling. We only tailed the one net which was about 50 fathoms behind the board. We sort of got over this but it was always very cumbersome. We had some absolutely brilliant results, you know, a ton and a half to two tons of fish for an hour and twenty minutes trawling, and fish trawling's definitely taken off.

One of the boats that we pulled out of the Gulf in the Fisheries effort to reduce the fishing effort, is now (or is in the process of) being converted into a full time stern trawler for fish, which will be operating out of here and possibly further up. So I was instrumental in a way in starting a fairly new industry.

Going back to the prawning fleet, some of the boats now.... the **Challenger** I think was built in 1968, so they're pretty solid boats. They've been going for a long time. They're mostly about 60 to 65 feet long. The one I've got in fact, is 74 feet long. It's quite a big one. Mostly they're just catcher boats. I have a brine tank and they just bring the prawns in every day, or every second day at the most. We have a couple that have got freezers on board although they don't often use them. The engineering is done by shore staff. We have a morning "sched" about seven thirty every morning when the Fleet Master calls up each boat in turn, and finds out how much they're bringing in, what time and any mechanical problems, and those are fixed during the day by the engineers while.... you see all we have to do is unload and go to bed or whatever.

Fuelling's a problem because we only have one little jetty and down towards the port which has been there for about 100 years, there is no shelter from any direction except the prevailing wind one, the south west round to the south. So normally it's all right, but it can only be used about three hours each side of high water. In fact at low

tide, you can just about walk around the end of the jetty, and if you get any sort of a wind from the east to north east, there's no shelter at all, and it makes it very hard to take on fuel and water.

The boats can go about two weeks in between fuelling them and my boat can go for a month. They're mostly about 250 to 350 horse power. We each trawl two nets, the maximum size we're allowed to use now is seven and a half fathom head rope, 45 foot head rope. The board's seven foot six by three inches maximum size, and no heavier than ten millimetre chain, and only one tickler chain. Well, all the boats tow the same size nets now. We're gradually upgrading the fleets. The older boats are getting more powerful engines and in fact, it's working out to be a pretty good system. There's very rarely a night when there's a boat tied up on the moorings through breakdown. There's very few down nights now through breakdowns and mechanical problems.

With the advent of radar and colour sounders and things there are very few rip-outs. We used to destroy a lot of nets in the early days before we had radar. Now it's very rare that you destroy a net. We have a full time net-maker in Perth who makes all the company's nets at the start of a season, and reconditions them when you send them down when they need it. Each boat is supplied with six nets a year free of charge and well, the whole thing is a pretty good system.

Over the years we've had a lot of crew problems mainly well, drink I suppose. A lot of them were.... well, they liked the beer, put it that way, and occasionally liked it too much and wouldn't be fit to go to work. At one time we had a cadet course and we had about twelve young blokes who were interested in doing fishing, making fishing their career, and each one was allotted to a trawler. They were given accommodation ashore by the company. [unclear] They did their work for about four nights a week on the trawler, one day in the factory and one day in the net shed learning how to mend nets. Then they had a day off. The company paid them so much a week and the skipper paid them a little bit plus their keep on the boat, and the course was supposed to last twelve weeks at which time they took a fairly simple exam and became a full time deckhand. But eventually we abandoned this scheme because we never ever seemed to get any of those cadets back as crews or skippers later on. They all left [laughs] and went all over Australia. Very few of them ever came back to Exmouth Gulf and it just seemed to be a wasted effort on the company's part training these guys who never did anything for the company after they'd been trained. So that was scrapped.

But over the years the class of deckhand and skippers gradually improved, whereas now we very rarely have any trouble. The deckhands today seem to prefer to go surfing rather than get stuck in the bar and drink. The Fisheries has decreed that the seasons are pretty short now. We get about four or five months off over summer, and the whole fleet ties up for three nights over each full moon. The night of the actual full moon and one night either side of it, which gives everybody a break once a month. We also have one or two relief skippers and three or four relief deckhands on standby, so if for any reason you want a night off in between the moons, it's no problem to get it. So the days where you had to work every night for months and months and months with no break, are long gone, and it's a much happier place for that.

**JD** Are there any accidents on board or at sea?

**TOMLINSON** We have had quite a few accidents (I say quite a few, we've had A few). Surprisingly not as many as you think because it can be quite dangerous out there. We've had one deckhand caught up in the winch. He survived, he just lost a.... I think he was scalped and lost an ear, but they sewed that back on [laughs] and lost a few

fingers and apart from the fingers you wouldn't know it had happened. There's been a few close escapes and one or two crews have been stung by stonefish. In fact, a couple of skippers have too, and they have spent.... some of them have spent time on the critical list over that, because you do trawl up a lot of poisonous fish out there and it's not uncommon to get stung. Luckily stonefish aren't terribly common but when you do get stung by one it's bad news.

Because of the situation of the Kailis complex, just about half way up the west side of the Gulf, we have to unload by dinghy. There's no jetty facility to unload unless you go and fuel up, and usually that's no problem, but we do get a considerable amount of easterly to north easterly winds over winter, and it can actually be very dangerous. We've had quite a few dinghies overturn and all the catch has been lost, and we actually had one drowning a few years ago. A young Irish kid on his last night on the boat jumped into the dinghy to pull the anchor up when the boat came in in the morning, and the dinghy went under a big wave and he went with it, never to be seen again, although part of his left leg was found inside a tiger shark's stomach about a week later. That's the only fatality we've ever had up here directly concerned with the prawn industry, although one of the privately owned boats, **Miss Odette**, disappeared completely on its way to Fremantle at the end of one season. No trace of it was ever discovered and the three crew went with it, and it's still a mystery. I actually had to fly up the coast - the company had its own aircraft at one time - and I had to fly up the coast looking for traces of it and there was just nothing.

**JD** Turning to other things, Tommo. The question of recreational versus professional fishing and the conflict sometimes between the two. Is that apparent here in Exmouth?

**TOMLINSON** In Exmouth possibly. It's not really because Exmouth Gulf is mainly a nursery area. We do a fair bit of line fishing out on the different lumps, but the tourists mainly go outside the Gulf in the ocean and around the islands at the top end of the Gulf and course down the Ningaloo Reef on the other side and, in fact, the commercial fishery and the amateur fishery don't clash very much at all here. We get a lot of tourists which are quite happy to fish off the beach where we unload out the front of Kailis's and on the jetty, catching their bream and whiting, and we have conflict with them occasionally. They get in the way of the tractor towing the dinghies up or down, and we have some pretty good times sometimes, arguing about things.

But basically there is not much conflict between us and the amateur angler, except over questions of a marina which we've been trying to get for many, many years and some sort of breakwater at least to break up these easterly winds which make unloading so difficult. We thought we were almost there at one stage but then the Chamber of Commerce in Exmouth decided that they wanted one up there instead. All we wanted was a fairly simple breakwater but it cost quite a lot, but that's all we wanted. But we lost out and the town is now getting a marina at some incredible cost and we're still unloading under the old system with no shelter half the time. The marina won't be much good to us, I don't think, when it's built, although we will use it, but not full time. It's still easier for us to unload in dinghies.

That was the only conflict and it's not really with the tourists, it's actually with the business people of Exmouth. Well, it's sort of water under the bridge now. The only other.... We have a few attacks from Greenies about trawling anyway, you know, the damage that's done to the seabed and so on. At one time the townies reckoned that the trawlers had killed Bundeggie Reef. It was a dead reef and had just been covered by silt stirred up by the prawn trawlers. But, in fact, there's a glass-bottomed boat that takes tourist parties out to Bundeggie Reef now, and it's some of the most beautiful coral you can find anywhere. In fact, some tourists have spoken and they

reckon it's better than the Barrier Reef, so they certainly haven't damaged that, and we're still getting exactly the same species and almost the same amount of different species of fish and by-products as we ever got when I first came here in 1966.

So really it seems that here anyway, we don't conflict much with the pleasure industry - tourist industry.

**JD** Just to finish off, are you confident about the long term prospects of the prawning industry in these parts?

**TOMLINSON** As far as the stock goes, I think it's being strictly policed now by the Fisheries Department. It won't ever be allowed to drop back to what it was in the early '80s, and there will always be a viable industry here. The only problem, of course, is the marketing and the competition from aquaculture - farm prawns in south east Asia. They're taking a gradually bigger and bigger slice of the market. At the moment we can compete with them only with our large tiger prawns. They can grow small ones in their ponds for a fraction of the cost it costs us to catch them. We still get good money for the bigger prawns. They can't grow them as big in ponds as they grow in the wild. I suppose eventually there will come a time when they will be able to grow them as big in ponds, and that's the only danger I can see to the prawning industry here at the moment, being cut out of the market because the way we do it cannot compete for expense with farm prawns.

I don't see any other danger. I think prawns will be here for more or less indefinitely where they are policed.

**JD** Well, thank you very much for that and thanks for this interview. It's given us an excellent insight into prawning in Exmouth. Thank you very much.

**TOMLINSON** Oh my pleasure.

**JD** That is the end of this interview with Mr Anthony Tomlinson of Learmonth WA.

END OF RECORDING ON TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with VIC WANN

### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** This is side A of tape one of an interview with Mr Vic Wann.

Vic, could you record your full name and date of birth and place of birth please?

**WANN** Yes. Victor Roy Wann and I was born in Pingelly on 13th June, 1920.

**JD** And you have a long history in the fishing industry, I know, was your family in the fishing world before you came into?

**WANN** No, actually it worked out that my father took me to the beach from Dumbleyung to Point Anne five times for a fortnight at a time in one year when I was a kid.

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** So that sort of started the fishing game off. And then we just carried on from there in 1938. I was fishing '38, '39, I was fishing the Bremer River. Knocked off to go to the war for four or five years, five years, and come back and went back into the salmon fishing at Hopetoun.

**JD** How old would you have been when you first started commercial fishing?

**WANN** Oh about seventeen. It was all I did, I've never had a job in my life apart from fishing.

**JD** Oh, yes right.

**WANN** Yes, yes. Yes, just fishing all the time. The Gardiner River and the Bremer River, Hopetoun then we went.... We were shark.... Well we were salmon fishing for the most of the year and then we swing onto shark fishing. We were the first on the shark fishing there with shark nets and worked as far as Starvation Harbour and further round. And then when we were dropping about.... We were.... Our top catch was 450 tonne of clean salmon a year. And then we started rock lobster by a hundred tonne a year, we've got down to about 250 tonne, so we pulled out and came up to Geraldton.

**JD** From....?

**WANN** From Hopetoun, yes.

**JD** Hopetoun.

**WANN** We did work Doubtful Bay and Bremer Bay and all the beaches there while we were on the salmon. We worked them there, but then we came up to Geraldton and got onto the.... The rest of the team went onto Exmouth and started the factories up there for Danny Hunt. Three cyclones in two years finished them up. And the wife was expecting the first kiddy, that's why we stayed here, and just walked straight into the crayfishing.

**JD** Yes. About when would that have been?

**WANN** Well, about '52 I think, '51, '52 we came up here, yes.

**JD** That was about the time the crayfishing was really taking off. Is that right?

**WANN** Well it was taking off, yes, but it was worth about twice the basic wage and in those days that's about all the money that was in crayfishing in those days. And gear was - well the ropes and everything was.... We were all pulling by hand, there was no such thing as winches, you just pulled everything by hand. You'd pull about 45 pots a day I suppose. But it was, it was good, you know what I mean? There was no.... But it improved over the years after that.

**JD** Vic, what sort of boats did you use?

**WANN** Well I had a twenty-eight footer I bought from.... Well after the war I went to Perth to buy a boat and you could buy a .... We wanted something a bit smaller, but you could buy a fifty footer cheaper than you could buy a thirty footer. And, so but we finished up with about a thirty footer and we took that to Hopetoun, and we brought overland up to Geraldton. But it was old, an old car engine in it and when the car engine was worn out you put it in your boat and away you went. And if you had a twenty-four foot boat in those days, you had quite a big boat. You know what I mean? They were....

**JD** Yes, Yes. What sort of construction was it?

**WANN** She was carvel built. Type plank, carvel. Carvel, yes.

**JD** Yes, decked?

**WANN** Foredeck yes. Rowers, tiller aft, you stood aft and steered and if you wanted to get to the engine you had to walk for'ard and there was no such thing as a wheel or anything, it was all, all, all by tiller. Stand out in the rain, in the weather and the sea. You held a bag up if the water came over the top because oilskins were no good. You just.... There was no wheelhouses or anything. All pretty rough but it was a way of life.

**JD** Whereabouts from Geraldton did you fish?

**WANN** We went to the islands.

**JD** That's the Abrohlos Islands?

**WANN** The Abrohlos Islands. Pigeon Island, yes. And fished there for, oh for many years after that. And when the seasons closed over there we used to go north, or go



south to Leeman. We opened up the ground down at Leeman. There was supposed to be no crayfish south of Dongara. It took a long time about three years, three, four years before they started to crawl. You had to sort of teach them to crawl. They were like anything else. We could catch a lot of dhufish there and that kept the thing going 'til the crayfish come. The crayfish you would possibly get half a bag a day, but you might get forty dhufish and that's the reason why we stayed there. And as we stayed there over the three to four years the crayfish started to improve dramatically.

**JD** Yes, Yes.

**WANN** But....

**JD** What speed would your boat travel at approximately, would you say?

**WANN** In those days?

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** We used leave here.... It used to take us twelve hours to get to the Islands. If you had.... We went back to the Simplex engines and the single cylinder Simplex. There were sixteen foot boats heading for the Island. The four or five of us would go together. We'd leave here at - oh it used to be two o'clock in the morning or.... And, well we have left like six o'clock in the morning. It used to take twelve hours to get there and when we got back later boats and I did it in eight hours, eight and a half hours that was terrific. Then you got back to six hours, then all of a sudden it's back to three hours. But in those days it was twelve hours, a twelve hour trip. And....

**JD** What do they do it in now? Three hours?

**WANN** Oh yes, around about that, or less. Oh yes, they'd just be about half way back again now. Yes, but it was all.... It was.... Well, sixteen foot boats were doing it no trouble at all and they're pretty small.

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** Yes. Mostly they were twenty-four foot boats.

**JD** How many pots would you work on a boat that size?

**WANN** Oh about forty-five. There was no limit to what you.... You just worked what you wanted. There was no shortage of crayfish. You could get.... If you couldn't get a bag to four, well you would shift, that wasn't good enough. You know what I mean? You could.... And there was no season. You could before the season started, you know, we were two or three weeks early you could have thirty or forty bags crated up ready to come in. The carrier boats couldn't carry them at the time, but when you'd more or less had enough the carrier boat would stop carting, you'd go home. But you'd still catch all you wanted without.... There was no.... Well there wasn't the press of boats there either, I suppose.

**JD** Yes. You'd live ashore of course, wouldn't you?

**WANN** We lived ashore. Pretty rough too, but it was very, very interesting. We had one of the first outboard motors there and all the islands and they were very interesting. You could get around....

**JD** Sorry. About how many boats would have been fishing from the islands at that time?

**WANN** Well there was nine, nine boats on Big Pigeon. Nine boats at Pigeon and another boat came in. Tommy Taylor came over to make the tenth boat and Eric Gudminson was there, and Eric said "Oh God, Tom" he said, "we're pretty crowded now. We've got nine boats here, why don't you go to North Island?" There was no-one at North Island. So Tom went to North Island. He was the first boat up there.

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** Now there's seventy boats or something, well it would be something like that. But that's.... That's how it went. But....

**JD** And did you have to have your ticket to skipper a boat in those days?

**WANN** No, no nothing like that. No, no we.... Oh we had a lot of problems too with some of the boats. There was no radio in those days and you.... We had problems alright. We lost quite a lot of boats one way and another. But they.... Well things weren't easy.

**JD** No.

**WANN** Not that way.

**JD** Is it the case that you were not allowed to have radio?

**WANN** No, no, we just.... They were unheard of. I think I got the second radio in at the islands. But.... It was expensive, the money wasn't in the game that much, you know what I mean? And....

**JD** What sort of prices would you have been looking at in the.... When you first started in crayfishing?

**WANN** Well I think it was 1/2d a pound or something. But when crayfish at ten pound a bag, we were made. We started to make money. We were making big money then. But our costs seemed to be down a lot too. I mean fuel and everything was a lot lighter, but 1/2d a pound we were getting. But....

**JD** And that was for crayfish that would have been tailed and frozen and packed and sent to America?

**WANN** No, no, just whole, whole crayfish. We'd send them.... We'd bag them and send them in. The carrier boats bring them in.

**JD** But the processing works would market them in the USA?

**WANN** Oh yes, yes. Oh no, there was a lot of fish there too, but you couldn't, you couldn't sell fish. West Australia was not a fish eating country. And there was no shortage of fish you used to cut it up for bait if you caught fish. We never sort of

bought bait. We just.... We would catch fish for bait and you couldn't sell fish. I mean they just didn't eat fish in Western Australia.

**JD** Would it have been difficult to transport from the Abrohlos say to where the market was in Perth?

**WANN** No. We all worked on ice over there. The boats, we all had big ice boxes and they carted ice in bags of straw. That's how a few doublegees and that got to the islands. There was plenty of ice, there was no shortage of that. It was just there was no money in fish. Well by the time you paid freight you might have got a penny a pound for it, do you know what I mean?

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** It was no good. And then again, say you pulled in.... Groper was one of the nicest eating fish you could get but it took twenty years before you could get, or more, before you could get a market, before anyone would eat it. It was just - it was just that way.

**JD** Yes. Did you fish the coast as well as the islands?

**WANN** Yes, we used to fish Leeman. I have fished the.... Yes, fished the coast on the white crays. But we fished Leeman round Beagles. I used to have a camp on Beagle Island and I lived on there. I used to go down, take the wife and family for holidays and work from Beagle Island into shore. And they worked.... Mind you that's the only places I've worked crayfish. I've worked north too, but not much. There was better ground down south for crayfishing. But I've worked.... When I sold the crayboat, and well the son took over the crayboat and I just went wetfishing then. I'd retired more or less and I did, well I suppose the next fifteen years just wandering up and down the coast from just this side of Esperance. Just the wife and myself to up as far as the Montebellos. Just the two of us on board....

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** Throwing a line over every now and then and just paying our way.

**JD** What sort of vessel did you use?

**WANN** Oh I got a new thirty eight footer, fibreglass. It had everything fitted into it, well just.... And we just fished our way around. We used to go to Carnarvon and fish and we'd go up to Shark Bay and fish. And we went up as far as Coral Bay fishing and the Montebellos. It was too far to handle fish up there, we were only looking up there. Then we.... Oh before I knocked off crayfishing we swung into the scallops. We tried - we got scallops and....

**JD** That's at the islands?

**WANN** At the islands, yes, got that going. I got the first dredge designed through the Department of Primary Industry on the Tasmanian dredge, oh many years ago. When I caught scallops no-one knew what a scallop was, you couldn't do anything with them. So that would be, oh, very early in the piece. So we used to get a few every now and again for our own, just consumption, and all of a sudden twenty years after they started to wake up to what scallops were.

**JD** Yes. They don't dredge them now do they?

**WANN** Not allowed to use a dredge at the islands now, they stopped me from using a dredge, yes. Which is fair enough too.

**JD** Yes. So what, they trawl for them?

**WANN** They trawl for them now, yes with a net, yes. But you don't get crayfish where the scallops are. That's barren ground. That's entirely different ground. You can set craypots right through the scallop ground and you might even get.... There's no sign of it. And they don't bring up - unless they're lost or something - they don't bring up crayfish in the scallop dredges either.

**JD** Are the scallops that are caught here the same kind of scallop as the Tasmanian one?

**WANN** No, no, we got the saucer scallop. We get the fluted scallop, although it's a Tasmanian one too. Five years ago, we caught them out here by the tonnes. You'd fill a net up with them, and since then we haven't found any. They've just.... We don't know where they've gone, but you'd get a tonne or two tonne at a time in a net, and you'd have to tip them out, you can't handle it, we didn't handle that type of scallop. And they haven't found any since and we don't know why. It's just one of those strange things.

**JD** Yes. It's surprising how little is known about some of the creatures of the sea isn't it?

**WANN** Yes, they know nothing much. You've got to find out for yourself.

**JD** Well crayfish for instance nobody seems to know all its breeding cycle for instance.

**WANN** No, that's.... You've got to find it out yourself through trial and error a lot. You don't really know what goes on with them.

**JD** Yes. Vic you were instrumental in getting some people started in the industry who have since become very prominent?

**WANN** Oh yes, well we give Micky Kailis a hand. Really what happened was a friend of mine was up on the, in Exmouth Gulf on the 'John Jim', one of the trawlers and they got, oh something like five hundred cartons of prawns in a fortnight. And I told Mick about it and he said, "Oh well we'll have a bit of a look at this."

And then 'Lacanookie' was a big processing boat and the owner of that, he had an aircrash and he died, and it was up for sale. And we wanted to raise twenty thousand pounds to buy it, and we couldn't get ten fishermen.... It was going to be ten fishermen putting a thousand pound each and Mick was going to put the rest in. And we couldn't get ten fishermen, so Mick said oh well he'd go alone.

So Mick started off in Exmouth that way. He went up there. You've got to admire him. He had to start from scratch. We went up with him several times and we helped him a lot, because the factory that was put down - that he used up there was put down by my brothers when we left Hopetoun. I stayed here, they went up to Exmouth and they put the factory down for Danny Hunt. Then the cyclone blew everything away. Cleaned

everything but the cement floor and everything like that. So Mick moved right onto all that. That was all ready for him. And he built all that up.

And then when they were blown away with the cyclones. They unloaded.... They used all the barges, did all the shipwork for the oil rigs when they come in, for WAPIT. And, of course, they started to drill water wells. Well Mick had all the water laid on around the place because all the wells from the oil rigs. And he was pretty well set that way, but he did alright. He's done alright.

**JD** Yes, yes.

**WANN** But we still fish up there now. We go up there every year and we catch bony herring for bait.

**JD** Oh right.

**WANN** And in the off season we load up our freezers, we just go up there and load up our freezers and you don't have to buy bait.

**JD** For the crayfish?

**WANN** For the crayfishing, yes. Yes.

**JD** What else can you tell me about your career in the industry, Vic?

**WANN** Oh well not really much, I don't think. We started off shark fishing down there. Well in those days we used camouflage net for a while.

**JD** This was.... How did you catch the shark?

**WANN** With nets. We used nets. We used lines too, but the sharks were big down there. We used to get the big white pointers and they were.... We had to use the lines to catch them out every now and again. They would just tear everything to pieces. And then we used to hand make all our own nets. We used to use camouflage net for a start. And then we used to hand make all our nets. We used seven and a quarter inch mesh.

**JD** Was there a market for shark other than gummy?

**WANN** Yes, yes any shark that has a round tail at the butt of his tail is round is alright. Anything that got that, like the Tiger Shark or the Maco or the.... They've got the squarish tail and they're no good to eat, so.... And if you kept a.... If you got a reef shark they'd keep it in the freezer for six months and then sell it. Get rid of the ammonia out of it. You had to handle it right and bleed it properly when you got it and everything like that.

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** But it was.... They had a lot of sharks down there. It was.... Well we were the first in the game down there, but the prices weren't that good they were just.... You know what I mean? Just a sideline.

**JD** Yes, yes. There's still a lot of crayfishermen that go wet fishing as a sort of a sideline?

**WANN** Well they try it just as a sideline, but they don't make any money out of it.

**JD** No.

**WANN** No, there's.... They'll do one trip and then they'll pull in because it's just not an economic proposition unless you sit it out. But I mean, they've got a boat that's very heavy on fuel for a specialised job, and they can get one load of fish, but when they've got to go back and get another load this week and another load next week, they're starting to scratch their head a bit.

**JD** Right.

**WANN** And it's getting very hard for a wet fisherman now, very, very hard.

**JD** Vic in your day you wouldn't have had the sort of sophisticated gear that they've got now, of course?

**WANN** No.

**JD** What sort of pots did you use?

**WANN** We used batten pots all the time.

**JD** Did you?

**WANN** Well it's, it's a funny thing if.... Where those crayfish were taught to crawl into, which sort of pots they were taught to crawl into was the one that would catch the crayfish. Now we used to go down to - as I say it took us three years down at Beagles to teach them to crawl - and we used batten pots all the time. And if you'd come in with any other pot we would get up to ten bags a day, and they wouldn't get half a bag. Just, that's the way it worked out there. And Southern Group, where a lot of the Italian fishermen at Southern Group used to use stick pots, you had to use a stick pot Southern Group to catch crayfish.

**JD** Yes, Yes.

**WANN** And it seems a bit strange, but that's the way it worked out.

**JD** Because the crays were used to that....?

**WANN** Used to.... When the little one, they're crawling in and out for a feed, and they're used to that pot, and that's how it worked out. It's a strange one, but that is so.

**JD** What do you think about the gear they have now on a modern crayboat?

**WANN** Well as long as they've got a seat behind the wheelhouse for the deckie to sit down it's lovely! [Laughter.] Well in the early days you'd see them on the Batavia Road, all they'd have would be a pair of black shorts on and about three men and they were running. There was no.... Well there'd be water coming straight over and there

was no such thing as walking and they were all running all the time. But when - now to get - there's no way now, it's got to be a little bit comfortable now.

**JD** Yes. Automatic pilots and....

**WANN** Oh.

**JD** Aircraft seats.

**WANN** Yes, it will bring you back into the harbour if you.... [laughs]. No, they're vastly different now.

**JD** Yes, sure. Mind you, prices are vastly different too. But so are costs.

**WANN** Costs have gone up, yes. Oh as I say when crayfish at ten pound a bag we made money.

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** And taxation, everything was right, seem to be right then. Everything just, that's the time you started to make money.

**JD** Well the.... Go on.

**WANN** No, carry on, yes.

**JD** I was just going to say the current cost of getting into industry if you haven't a million dollars or can't get a million dollars you're not in the race to start.

**WANN** And that's right. Unless too, unless you get a skipper that knows how to catch crayfish you've just got no chance either.

**JD** Yes. And if you have a large debt you just can't keep up with the interest.

**WANN** You can't, no, no, no. They might have this and that, but.... A lot of fishermen have got a lot of money and a lot of assets, but if you asked them to write a cheque for a thousand dollars they don't know where to get it from.

**JD** Right.

**WANN** They're.... You know what I mean? They're.... They'd have a lot of money when they sell out, but it's not easy.

**JD** No indeed. You'd have seen a lot of changes in the management of the industry, wouldn't you?

**WANN** Yes, yes.

**JD** You've mentioned some of them already. What do you think about those changes? Are they necessary or desirable?

**WANN** Yes, the.... I think our fishery is one of the best managed fisheries there is really. They make some decisions at times that seem, everyone's seems a little bit

hard. But we also have the world's leading fishing fleet. I mean you've got to look at those boats down there, there'd be nowhere else in the world would come near what's in Geraldton, oh, in the crayfishing fleet.

**JD** Yes. It was a fantastic sight down there today, when they were all getting ready for the season.

**WANN** Yes, that's fantastic. The boats are fitted out now like luxury units, you know what I mean? There are no.... Even got pot plants in the darn.... In the wheelhouses, everything like that. Airconditioned, bloody, they've got everything on them.

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** But, I don't know the times have changed. Things were fairly.... Well if it.... We could handle a lot of crayfish that weren't sized. I mean if it was near enough it used to go in, and then in the early days you were allowed to bring it home. If you wanted to bring a couple of dozen cackers home, or small ones there was no problem. You said to the Fishery Inspector "I'm going to have a party I want a couple of dozen crays." "Yes that's right, go for your life." But you could bring in two dozen every day until he woke up what was going on, but a lot of chaps handled crays, small crays. We didn't there was no.... We kept right out of that.

**JD** It's a pretty rare thing they tell me now among the professionals.

**WANN** Oh very rare, yes, yes. No, no they don't do it now. It policed itself, you know what I mean. The fishermen themselves policed the game. They, they policed it very well.

**JD** That's an interesting observation. The industry does appear to be self-regulating to a considerable degree.

**WANN** It is yes.

**JD** Obviously there's a pretty good liaison between the department and the fishermen?

**WANN** Yes, there is too, yes.

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** Yes.

**JD** And presumably that's through the fishermen's organisations?

**WANN** Yes they've been fairly good. Well, it's not.... The organisation is likely anything that.... Everyone's mostly doing well so there's not much interest in their organisation. But the fisheries ask advice, you know what I mean? They get it from the fishermen and everything like that and it works out very well.

**JD** Yes I've been surprised at the sort of good relationship between the fisheries officials and the fishermen.

**WANN** Yes, that's right.



**JD** It was unexpected to me.

**WANN** Yes. They can predict your catch two or three years ahead now, and things like that and it works out alright.

**JD** Vic, out of your experience, what would you say are the main problems facing the industry in this day?

**WANN** Well, it's only that if anyone wants to get into the industry now, the main problem is it's got to be a father and son arrangement because you otherwise can't get the money to get in. It's extremely, extremely dear to get into. But I can't see another way out of it. It's just.... it's just impossible really. But there is.... Otherwise there's very.... I can't think of any other problems really. They're handling their crayfish right. They're handling the catches going back into the water. They've got their tanks on their boats and everything is working out very efficiently. They had an expert from South Australia or somewhere or Tasmania to tell us how to catch crayfish here a while back. Well that's a bit funny, I reckon they've got it here. You know what I mean? But.... No the - everything works well.

**JD** Yes, good. Would you say for those few fishermen who infringe the regulations, that the penalties are severe enough?

**WANN** Oh they're very severe here.

**JD** Are they?

**WANN** Oh very severe, yes. You see even after making.... That stops it. The penalties are that severe that there is no chance of anyone stepping out of line really.

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** They probably sneak one home now and again to eat, but mostly if you want to eat a small crayfish now you've got to eat it out to sea. That's the way it is now. They are very severe.

**JD** Yes. And what do you feel about the apparent threat to prawning from aquaculture in Asia?

**WANN** Well, it's.... My son's a prawner so he just got into pearls, going into pearls because he can see the writing on the wall. I don't think we can do much about it. It's got to find its own level there. I think aquaculture is taking over. I mean we can't do it in Australia because it costs us too much money.

I mean the fisheries had a study on it a while back and you get about a twelve percent return on your money in Australia, so the costs of getting bait and feeding and labour and everything like that is just out of the question in Australia. And anyone tries in Australia will go under, but I didn't think that the prawns that they were growing in the ponds, I wasn't over worried. I thought they would not be allowed to export them, but evidently they are exporting them alright. It's going to get worse.

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** There's a lot of boats mixed up in it. And they had a bad running.... There were a lot of prawns in the Gulf of Carpentaria this year and someone was selling for

three dollars a kilo just to pay their crew and keep going, which has bugged the market a bit.

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** But I can't see it improving very much.

**JD** Yes. Anything else you'd like to say about the industry as it is now as compared with your day?

**WANN** Oh I don't know really, I just can't think of much. Well I think it was a lot more fun in our day than it is now. [Laughs].

**JD** It's very much a business now isn't it?

**WANN** Yes, it's very much a business now, yes.

**JD** A lot of financial worry and so on to a lot of people.

**WANN** Oh yes. I had a crewman once, he worked with me for the whole island season and he didn't collect any money. He never collected any money until he came in and I gave him enough money to buy a boat. And there was a boat for sale, and he said, "Will I or won't I?" And he said, "No I'll go to Perth for a week first." And he came back and he had no money left. [Laughter.] But out in those days he could have bought, and he had nothing, just in one.... Three or four months work at the island he had enough to buy a crayboat and get started, complete. And that's how easy in those days really. But we couldn't foresee the future though, who can?

**JD** Who can?

**WANN** Yes.

**JD** Would you like to mention some of the personalities that you can recall from your earlier days of fishing? You've mentioned a few of them.

**WANN** Well there's old Bert Strom he used to go to the islands. I left here at midnight with old Bert Strom to go to the island, just the two of us. He had a twenty-four foot boat and he'd sail up and we left at midnight. And I had a compass, he had a compass I think. And that man and he - we took off for the island, the moon was up and he looked at his compass about every hour, he worked on the moon and in the morning, well it's half past eight and I was not going to worry at all. I'm sitting back on the seat in my boat and he's.... And half past eight in the morning he gets up and he has a look around and there's the islands dead in front of us. That man.... He'd used that torch about every half hour, or an hour I suppose, and just have a look around. And he sailed, he used that moon all night to hit those islands. That was 52 nautical miles out. He was good.

**JD** Yes.

**WANN** Then we had Jack.... There was only ten of us on Pigeon Island at the time....

**JD** That is the end of side A, tape one, please turn the tape over for side B.

## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** This is tape one, side B of an interview with Mr Vic Wann.

Vic, you were talking about the old time fishermen and their inability, many of them, to do anything else other or rather than crayfishing. Would you like to continue on that vein?

**WANN** Oh yes. I don't know. Mostly they.... Well there was mostly more.... Crayfishing was really only a sideline in those days, in the earlier days, there was no, no money much in them at all. You'd get very little for them for a start, but....

**JD** You were a family man, Vic, was it difficult with the wife and family on the islands?

**WANN** No my wife insisted on coming over the island, which made it very easy. The kids were on correspondence. But the thing was over there you had to be very, very careful because there's no beach it's just a sudden drop into the water. You had to be very careful with your kiddies. Mostly everyone went in, well the kids went in, you had to be very severe and you had to watch them all the time. There was no, no easing up. And they.... Even when they used to be able, before they could walk more or less they were out in the dinghies and using dinghies at.... It was a lot of worry at times, but you sort of.... It was just second nature you were watching all the time. But they.... Until they got enough and then they went to boarding school for a few months while we were there.

But then it got, the set up on the island got quite good, everything seemed to be in. But we could get.... Well one time we went seventeen days without a carrier boat and he turned up and then we had another seventeen days, and I tell you things were getting fairly grim then. I mean that was a long time without stores. You had to get all your water and everything carted unless it rained and the boats, the carrier boats, weren't.... Well I don't know what was wrong with the skippers. We used to reckon they.... Well one in particular he reckoned he was good but I think he wasn't, he wasn't up to it or something or other.

But after that we had fairly good skippers, they were Charlie Longbower on the 'Linda' and that they, extremely good skipper, very.... He'd work with a bottle of rum in his hand, you know what I mean, he was that way. He'd never, never been in the engine room in his life, he used to have a look down it and send one of the crew to start the engines. He'd never seen the engine. He was a sailing man. But they were good, we had quite good skippers in the finish.

It was hard, I mean you could get over there - there was a vast difference in the wind speed. You can get calm in here and it will be hitting 35, 40 knots out there. Just about getting dark and they've got a load of crays on and they've got to bash their way in. I tell you it's not easy, it's extremely.... They wash them overboard and everything like that. But the boats are a lot better now but it was very hard in those days. And there was no way, they had to go, and they just whatever the weather was they'd go. But it straightened them up a bit. [Laughs.]

**JD** Yes, sure. I think that you mentioned that quite a few boats were lost on the islands?

**WANN** Yes, we used to lose them. They were mainly small boats and we used to, some of them we used to tow, have to tow them in and if you hit a black south-Easter well we'd lose them they'd sink you. And we were pretty lucky with men, we only lost one or two or three or four, you know what I mean? But, well we lost a few. But a lot of boats used, you'd use them, you'd sink them, they'd break up. You couldn't.... You couldn't make much of a mistake over there, there was much reef and breakers and stuff. And you were sort of making. You were making the roads, let's put it that way. There was no-one knew, you had to find out yourself where you could go and where you couldn't go. But they, they went off and generally wash ashore on one of the islands or somewhere.

One in particular, he came in. He was missing, I'd just got a radio in at that time and I, he saw me, I saw him off West Wallaby, he said, "What's the weather going to be?" I said, "It's going to be a black North-Wester, it's going to rain." He said, "I think I'll go to town." And he took off and he didn't have enough fuel or something and he broke down outside of Geraldton or he run out outside of Geraldton or something. He said he broke a fuel line or something. And two days after I sort of got, I got on the radio and asked if he'd been in, and he hadn't been in. Then the next day they got the planes looking for him and the planes up, the Air Force it is, and a coastal steamer. Then the steamer said "Oh we found him." He gave his position and everything like that where he was, he was well off out off the Murchison River. And the chap in the Air Force plane said, "Oh," he said, "that position puts us ten miles inland." And the wireless operator on the ship said, "Ah the skipper said just hang on a minute while he goes has a look over the side." [Laughter.] Well that sort of straightened everything up. [Laughter.] Then they corrected themselves.

But, no we were very lucky. Well you see you didn't know. A boat would take off and you didn't know for three or four days whether he got there or not and we had quite a lot of hair raising ones. But we got out of it alright.

**JD** Vic, did cyclones come down that far?

**WANN** Yes, they did. On Pigeon Island, there was only one camp left on Pigeon Island at one stage, it blew the lot away. And there was only one camp left and that - on the little Pigeon that was a stone camp. That was, everyone was in that, and they'd ropes over the rafters, the roof, hanging onto the roof. But that just cleared everything, it shifted, blew the lot away. And all our.... Over there now are mostly we've built cyclone-proof. They haven't had one for so long that there could be a little bit of a shock when they get one. You've got no foundations, you're sitting on flat rock.

We had it bad there with rats. We had a rat plague there one year. Absolutely, oh, thousands of rats.

**JD** Where would they come from?

**WANN** Well they must have come over on the boats because you were carting bags of ice and straw and when we went back there was just thousands and thousands of rats. They even filled up, half filled the water tanks. They started to get water. They'd get in the downpipes and we had to roll the tanks, some of the tanks into the sea to get rid of them. Now you can still see over there, I don't know whether it's still carried on, but there's no outlets on the tanks at all. Every tank is more or less sealed. But there's been nothing like it since. But the Fisheries, we asked the Fisheries and as, when we

left the island they moved in with bags of bait and they cleaned them right out again. Yes, they were unoccupied and cleaned them right out. But that was just one of the.... No it's good there, really over there.

**JD** Did you - if you had your chance again would you go fishing?

**WANN** Oh yes, I've still got a licence [Laughs]. Oh yes, I still fish. I've been fishing up in Exmouth again this year. But the north country interests me more now than further south. I've just been up to Walcott Inlet and then up, further up, Prince Regent River way and further up again and just on the.... Well I'm more or less waiting to go again. But that's terrific country up there, but you're a long way from anywhere.

**JD** Yes. What are you fishing for up in those parts?

**WANN** Well I went up with a son, and....

**JD** They're prawn up there?

**WANN** Yes, we went to.... Just looking, just trying out just seeing what was the potential further up. But when you've got to get, well there's no radio communication. You've just got to.... You can get no radio at all, it's just all blank. One of those blank spots when you get well up. And you've got, you got.... There's no fuel you've got to get into Koolan Island to get fuel, and then that's top price. And it's just.... It's just out of the question.

**JD** A long way from markets.

**WANN** A long way from market, a long way from everything, yes. And wet fish now, you can't sell wet fish, you just, if you get a dollar a kilo you're lucky. That's the way it is up that way now. They can import cheaper or something than you can even produce it.

**JD** Yes, well it's frozen stuff they import?

**WANN** Well, it is, yes. Oh no, we've fished at, we've put in Coral Bay, we've put on in the schnapper. We were shore based up there for several years, five or six, seven years. When the crayfishing season finished we used to shoot straight up there and I haven't seen a, I've seen one winter in about 36 years. I've had, every winter has been north. And it's, it's good.

I don't think there's much else. I got all those names of those boats there if you want them.

**JD** Would you like to just read through at least one year of them, so we've got a record of them on tape?

**WANN** Oh gee, wait until I find one.

In 1960, there's 250 boats of all groups, that's all groups together. There's 250. And on Big Pigeon there would be 21, and on Little Pigeon there would be 13. This at the Wallaby Group. And Pelican Point or West Wallaby, there would be 12. And there was a couple in Turtle Bay, but we don't count them. And there would be, on Beacon Island had four, four boats. And there was Dickie Carles on Sandy Island, that's another little island. And the carrier boat was the 'Linda', with Johnny Roberts as skipper. And the

'Valour' with Charlie Longbower as skipper. And on Big Pigeon, there was Freddie Bell had 'Em Latisse', Billy Spencer had 'Meteor', Billy Long had 'Merlin', Johnny Gledden had 'Judy Anne', no Johnny Gadero had 'Judy Anne'. Eric Gudworth had the 'Cygnet'. Alec Wann had the 'Adela'. I had the - oh I don't know what mine was. Alf France had the 'Robin'. Jack Malley, I don't know, Jack had a name on his. Mike Rigby had the 'Shirley'. Then Red Thompson I haven't got his name. And Sammy Minnasales had the 'Felly', Bob Sweet had the 'Francisco'. Laurie Fascini had the 'Tuna'. And then there was Gerry Bursall, Pat Purchase, Ron Burnett. Arthur Saxon had the 'Agnes'. There was Jackie Uert and Johnnie Gliddon. That was all on the Big Pigeon.

There was Bob Richie on Little Pigeon. He had 'Long Sam'. Cliff Hands had 'Sandrina'. Wes Galloway I don't know what his was. Andy Robson had 'Sandduel'. Curly Evans had 'Chekita'. Brian Twist had, oh I can't read my own writing, 'Juvini', that's right. Don Allen had 'Gary Ann'. Eddie Day had 'Lucky Bay', Brian Chance had 'Maxine' and Tommy Taylor and Tommy Taylor was the areas another boat, and Billy Burton and 'Pollyanna' was one of Micky Kailis's boats I think that was there. It sunk later on. And that's about it in those.

**JD** Yes. Thanks a lot Vic.

**WANN** I can't.... I'm not over much bloody help. I - there might be an odd thing or two in here that might interest you later on. I don't know, some of them are just. It's only just a more or less a catch, you know what I mean? Catch ratio of things.

**JD** Thank you Vic for a most interesting conversation.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Vic Wann.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with LEE WARNER

### INTRODUCTION

This is an interview with Mr Lee Warner who is presently an abalone fisherman at Esperance in Western Australia. The interview was conducted at Esperance by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University and the Australian Fisheries Research Council on the 11th January, 1990.

Mr Warner was a State champion skindiver and left his job as a primary school teacher at Melville, a suburb of Perth, to become a professional diver working on oil rigs in various parts of the world. His account of this work, as well as being a fascinating insight into the work of a construction diver, explains something of his entry into diving for abalone. In addition to his diving activities Mr Warner conducts a processing plant in Esperance at which the catch of four other fishermen in addition to his are prepared for export to Hong Kong and ultimately to China and Japan. Mr Warner makes light of the hazards of his occupation. For the layman however his is a story not soon forgotten. He deserves his success.

There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 024 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE ONE SIDE A

*JD* Mr Warner, would you record your full name please.

*WARNER* Leeland Richard Warner.

*JD* And your date of birth.

*WARNER* 16/7/43.

*JD* And where were you born?

*WARNER* Wiluna.

*JD* Were your parents born in Western Australia?

*WARNER* My mother was. My father is English.

*JD* And when did he come out here?

**WARNER** When he was sixteen and he died last year at 81.

**JD** Where did you spend your boyhood?

**WARNER** We moved down to Pemberton when I was two years old and then we moved up to South Fremantle and we lived in a tent when I was about five.

**JD** A tent?

**WARNER** A tent?

**JD** In South Fremantle?

**WARNER** Yes.

**JD** Whereabouts?

**WARNER** Where the tram used to stop there used to be a reserve about half a mile passed there down near the foreshore. We were living in there.

**JD** Where did you go to school?

**WARNER** South Terrace Primary School and then John Curtin High School.

**JD** When did you leave school?

**WARNER** Oh, well I finished fifth year high school and then went to Claremont Teacher's College. The dates I don't have.

**JD** And you did, what, two years training?

**WARNER** Two years, yes.

**JD** And then you went teaching?

**WARNER** At Melville Primary.

**JD** Well how did you come to get into fishing?

**WARNER** I got into diving and not fishing. I was the State's [unclear] champion and I left teaching to go sailing. I sailed around to Melbourne and then I got onto a hydrographic survey boat and sailed back to Fremantle. It was rather unfortunate but I had an altercation with one of the crew members who was my boss and I knocked him down a hole and he got a black eye. The party manager happened to see the black eye and he finally got the story. I think the guy didn't want to dob me in and I got run off at Fremantle. So that as my home port. I didn't mind that but I went up north diving for crayfish out of Warawar Station. I used to dive up there in the winter time and then come down to Augusta in the summer time and dive.

One winter I blew up some motors and the guy that I had working for me, he got a job with a diving company and I ended up working for the same diving company. Eventually I went overseas and spent, oh some ten years diving off shore. Then I came back and I was working in Indonesia and living in Perth and I thought it would



be a wise idea to buy an abalone licence. So I got a friend and approached him. I needed help raising the finance. So between the two of us we had enough collateral to buy our licence. We bought a licence eight years ago.

**JD** Lee, could I ask you.... when you say diving, what form of diving? Is it helmet diving or....

**WARNER** Mmm, well, you can do hard hat diving these days and you have hard hat equipment on some of the offshore platforms but not very often. Most of it is fibreglass type helmets: Kirby Morgans, Aquadines, these are the brand names of the hats. They're commercial diving hats; but basically it's mostly deep air work or helium work; a lot of bell work; bit of saturation; bit of air sat.

**JD** Lee, you've used a number of terms that I don't understand. Could you explain them in more detail? What do you mean, for example, by bell work?

**WARNER** Well the bell is a diving bell and basically it's just a means of transporting someone to a place of work. In this case it's from the surface to the sea bed. You enter the bell and the bell has an external door and an internal door. So when you're going into the water, you close the external door and then this is sealed by the actual water pressure against the bell and you travel down to the sea floor, or where ever you're doing the work at ambient pressure. At that normal air pressure. You get down to the work site and then you get prepared to go under pressure. The internal door during this stage is open and normally you're just sitting into the base of the bell and you don all the diving gear and then the bell is normally pressured up with a mixture of helium, oxygen and nitrogen; a tri-mix. When the bell reaches the same pressure as the surrounding sea water, the bottom door just drops open and you drop out, go and do your work, return to the bell and you return to the surface. On the ascent you close the inside door and then they raise the bell and the internal pressure will seal the internal door. The bell is then lifted up and it will be at a set pressure. Let's say for instance we're working in, say, 400 feet. The bell will remain at 400 feet until you lift it on the surface, place it on a what they call a TUP, a transfer under pressure chamber, and you transfer out of the bell into the chamber. Then you go into a decompression chamber. So you actually do all the decompression inside a chamber on the deck and you can have, we on really good systems, you can have your meals and showers and sleep while you're decompressing. So basically a bell is just a diving bell and it's just a means of getting to and from the work either under pressure coming up or at ambient pressure going down.

**JD** What about some of the other techniques that you use?

**WARNER** Well we had air sat. Saturation diving is normally carried out using helium. Now with bell diving, basically that's used for short dives; very quick hurried work. If you have something involved and you have to stay down eight, ten, twelve hours to do it, you go under what they call saturation diving. Now saturation diving basically means you live at pressure. If you were carrying on work at say, 600 feet, you would probably [be] living around about 350 to 400 feet in a saturation chamber which is just a big diving, or a big decompression chamber. It has locks that people can pass food in and medicine and towels and things like that. You take your wet clothes out and you put dry clothes on. Basically you just live under pressure.

Air saturation is exactly the same. Instead of using helium, you're breathing a nitrox mix which is oxygen nitrogen at low concentrations of oxygen and usually this is done

at much shallower [depths] than what you would dive at helium. It's just an economic method of diving. Helium is very expensive.

Kirby Morgan masks are a diving mask that's manufactured by a company in California. They were basically the forerunners of the lightweight diving masks that are in common use today.

**JD** That's sort of.... free diving, is it?

**WARNER** No. They call the.... When you're working with Kirby Morgan masks, basically you're diving from the surface, right, without a bell. Now they use the Kirby Morgans inside the bell but when I was in the industry in Australia before I moved overseas, we used to be able to work down to depths of two or three hundred feet. Now they've got legislation in place to prevent this because it's a lot safer to use a bell. So that's basically surface orientated diving. We just go down with a mask and a towel.

**JD** What sort of work would you be doing under water?

**WARNER** Oh, if you're on an oil rig where they're drilling for oil, the work is very simple. You're just changing out wires onto the BOP.

**JD** What's the BPO?

**WARNER** When they're drilling for oil, they have to put mechanisms in place on the sea bed so they don't have blowouts from gas. If they drill through into a pocket of gas, the gas can come up through the pipeline they're drilling through and as it leaves the sea bed and rises to the surface, it has a big expansion and it can actually sink ships because aerated water has no flotation qualities. So they put on the sea bed what they call a BOP and all it stands for is blowout preventer. Now a blowout preventer is a huge hydraulically activated device that has many mechanisms but they have very strong hydraulic rams on the outside and they have blind rams which will.... if there's no pipe in the hole, they have a blunt face goes together with a seal on it and it seals the gas coming off. They have pipe rams which will go.... They have a circular face that both sides of the ram will close around the pipe and then they have sheer rams. If all else fail they have a guillotine like action where they can actually shear the pipe in half and then seal it like that. Then they have a mechanism where they can pump cement beneath the rams itself and actually cement the hole in. Basically it is just a method of shutting down the hole so that no gas can escape.

**JD** Most of your work was with oil rigs, was it?

**WARNER** No. I basically got into construction diving fairly quickly. It's much more interesting. It's better paid and it's just a better line of work.

**JD** What's that, in constructing piers, harbours....

**WARNER** No, no. It's offshore in the oil fields setting platforms. When the platforms are set you have to set pipe. You go on pipe laying barges. You inspect the pipe as it's being laid. When you come alongside a platform they lay the pipe down. You go down and measure it and then they put what they call rises. So you have to go down and measure up the pipe so they can cut it and then you put a tube turn on. A tube turn is

just an angle, a right angle, so that it comes up the platform and then you clamp it into the platform as it comes up.

**JD** Did you work as a team or on your own?

**WARNER** Diving is always on your own.

**JD** Your team mates would be up on the surface?

**WARNER** Yes. Diving is basically, it's just one man by himself all alone and he has to solve his own problems.

**JD** It's pretty risky isn't it?

**WARNER** No. You took more risk driving down from Perth [laughs].

**JD** Oh yeah [laughs]. It must take a lot of getting used to though?

**WARNER** Oh, some people just can't get used to it. You either can do it or you can't.

**JD** What about your health? Is that in hazard?

**WARNER** Well I'm 46 years old. They call me "grandpa" but I can still way out score quite a few of the younger guys in abalone catches.

**JD** Have you ever suffered from the bends?

**WARNER** Yes. Once. Many years ago we were on experimental tables. They're called Boyce Table 5. We didn't know they were experimental. In those days there weren't very many regulations and they wanted a table where they can decompress the divers quicker. Now in the old days they only had five people on board the rig and sometimes four for bell operation. So if someone was in the chamber, they couldn't do the next dive. So they brought these tables out where we were breathing fairly high concentrations of oxygen on the sea bed. We breathed fairly high concentrations of oxygen on the way up and now I'm only quoting from memory here, I think at 100 feet we changed to 40% oxygen on the ascent which is extremely high concentrations of oxygen for that depth. Then we went to pure oxygen at 60 feet. Most normal tables you go onto pure oxygen at 40 feet. Therapeutic tables you breathe oxygen at 60 feet but that's different from a working dive and we were doing these 450 foot dives.

From memory, if we did a 30 foot exposure, we would be out of the chamber in about seven or eight hours which was fairly quick but we got too many bends. We had MANY, many bends. Sometimes both of us would get bent. You have a diver that goes outside the bell and you have a tender inside the bell to tend the hose. Sometimes both people would be bent. Well I got bent on one of those dives, these experimental dives. They later modified the tables so we only dived to 400 feet and then nobody got bent at 400 feet so they limited that table to 400.

**JD** Having given up the commercial diving, you went into abalone fishing. Is that the way it happened?

**WARNER** Yes, yes. I talked a friend o mine into investing in a licence just as an investment.

**JD** Yeah. That was in this area, Esperance?

**WARNER** Yes, yes. I tried to get into Zone 2. There was no licence available and we managed to purchase a licence here and this is a much better zone but I didn't realise that at the time.

**JD** What type of abalone do you catch down here?

**WARNER** We've got three species that are commercially collected. We've got the greenlip which is leather garter and then we've got brownlip which is connicaporer and then we have the small roweye with is roweye.

**JD** Are they all in the Esperance area?

**WARNER** Yes.

**JD** And you fish for each of these?

**WARNER** All species, yes.

**JD** I imagine you'd get one species in one spot and a different species in another, or are they all mixed up?

**WARNER** Basically they're all mixed up. There are some areas where you won't get connicaporer. Connicaporer lives in caves and ledges, narrow ledges, and so does roweye. So if you were fishing open country where there were no ledges, it would be possible that you would only get the greenlip; BUT there are areas, especially in the shallow waters where you've got ledges alongside crevices and cracks, that you'll get all three species together. Now often when we're in shallow water chasing roweye, we might be catching a roweye that's on an average length it might be eight centimetres long, and all of a sudden we come across roweye that's twelve, you know fifteen, centimetres long sometimes; you know you're in an area where there's brownlip. Where the brownlip are up in the shallow water with the roweye, for some reason, the roweye when they live with the brownlip, grow much better; but they do live together.

Now we also get crosses. When the abalone breed they blow their eggs and their sperm into the water and they intermingle. Now, I often see crosses between the greenlip and roweye. That's very common. Not so common is a cross between the brownlip and the roweye and the rarest cross of all is between the greenlip and the brownlip but they do cross breed. Now in South Australia they get another species of abalone. As well as the greenlip they get a blacklip which is called ruba. Now over there the ruba and the brownlip cross breed. Now I think that there must be the original stock of ruba, maybe the same as connicaporer because I think the cross breeds over there breed as well. Now, that's normally physically impossible unless they're the same species but they have too many of these cross breeds in South Australia. I'm fairly sure that they actually breed. I've been across there and had a look at their animals and we went across for a conference on aquaculture and they had these shells turning upside down. I looked at them, [and thought] "Oh, brownlip"; turned the shell over and it was in a ruba shell. The animal was identical but the ruba animal is nothing like our brownlip. To physically look at, these were connicapora in a ruba shell. So they're a strange animal.

**JD** Yeah. Be an interesting biological study wouldn't it?

**WARNER** Yeah. I've just been sending up species for testing but it's hard to get them up there because they have to be frozen and they want them very cold because they do.... I'm not sure whether they're testing enzymes or how they do it, but the animal deteriorates if it's not kept cold enough so they have to get something that's still alive when it's frozen then transported up there and tested fairly quickly.

**JD** That's to CSIRO is it?

**WARNER** No. It's to the Fisheries at Waterman; Fisheries Research. They're having a look at the cross breeds.

**JD** Lee, could you describe the operation. What do you actually do; the sort of depths of water you fish in?

**WARNER** Well abalone diving is all carried out on using hooker gear which is surface supplied air through a long hose, usually 400-500 feet long with a simple, a fairly rudimentary demand valve; normal face mask; thick wet suits and flippers and gloves and away you go. We operate in depths from oh two or three feet. Maximum around here, sometimes you get abalone at 100 feet but it's fairly rare. Most of the abalone are in the shallower waters. They like being close to turbulent water. I get my best catches in less than 30 feet of water so we try and spend, in summertime, four to five hours, sometimes six; rarely eight but you can.... you know on a good day you'll do up to eight hours. You only do two or three of those days a year but in summertime you'd probably average five and a half hours; wintertime you'd spend about four hours.

**JD** That's because of the coldness of the water?

**WARNER** Yes. Everybody usually works harder in summertime so they don't have to work so hard in the wintertime.

**JD** Is it a seasonal fishery?

**WARNER** Um, well it's seasonal in the sense that you fish hardest when it's economically advantageous. Like for instance now we've been working very hard to take advantage of the Chinese New Year because abalone is usually in very strong demand and we get higher prices. As far as the season goes, no we fish the full year round. We could finish our quota, our meat quota, probably in oh.... If it took 100 days you'd get going slow. So we could probably finish it in 80 to 90 days with working hard but we usually spread it over twelve months; take roweye, we take other shells that we sell.

**JD** Does the weather stop you fishing often?

**WARNER** Um, strong winds will stop us but bit swells stop us also. That's like being in a washing machine.

**JD** Yeah, in shallow water particularly I suppose.

**WARNER** Well the swell's up now and I headed out into the deep water today.

**JD** What sort of boat do you fish with?

**WARNER** I'm probably the wrong person to ask this because I've got the largest abalone boat in Australia. I think it is. I've got a 32 foot powercat now. Most people fish in vessels around the 20 foot size, 20, 23.

**JD** In addition to yourself, and you're doing the diving, you'd have a crewman on board, presumably?

**WARNER** Yes. The abalone diving uses a method which we call live boating. The boat follows the diver around all day; never anchors. He drives up the hose and then drifts back; drives up the hose and drifts back. While he's doing that, in Western Australia at least, we're allowed to shuck the abalone. So he's shucks it.

**JD** Shuck it?

**WARNER** Shuck it is taking the meat out of the shell, takes the stomach off, discards that. The shell is kept, that's commercially viable. The animal is washed, separated into greens and browns and counted. We have to count our animals to help control the poaching that goes on. Basically its a control so that they can monitor what the processors are buying. So basically when I come in at night time I've got a docket there saying that I've caught 47 brownlip and 359 greenlip. So this docket has to go wherever the abalone goes, when it's transported, unless it's transported under DPI regulations which is Department of Primary Industry.

**JD** They have a different arrangement?

**WARNER** Well basically when we consign product for transport that's being exported, we have to fill out DPI paperwork and it has to go from one DPI establishment to the next DPI establishment where it's exported. For instance, we always send our product to P&O Coldstores which is a DPI registered refrigeration service. Then DPI comes out and inspects the abalone and gives it a health certificate to say that we can export it.

**JD** Where is it exported to?

**WARNER** All our product goes to Hong Kong. Now traditionally the Chinese eat greenlip abalone. They eat a little bit of brownlip and a little bit of blacklip and then the Japanese eat mainly blacklip and a little bit of greenlip. There hasn't been a great intermingling of the two different types of product. The Japanese like their product unbled. In other words you have to shuck it and put it in a freezer and the Chinese like theirs fully bled. You've got to catch it and shuck and let it bleed for the day so there's absolutely no blood left in it at all.

At the moment there's a shortage of abalone and the Japanese can't get enough stocks for their own market. They're coming into the market and they're starting to purchase some greenlip.

**JD** You mentioned poachers. Are they recreational fishermen?

**WARNER** Well, yes they're the imitation recreational fishermen. We've had quite a few successful prosecutions down here and they pose quite a threat to the abalone industry. It's an industry that can be very easily put under threat. In Western Australia the abalone industry has been limited entry for many years which basically restricts the amount of people that can take it. The only way you can enter the industry is by purchasing a licence that already exists. We've got six divers in zone 1, eight divers in zone 2 and one the west coast there's twelve roweye divers. Now, Australia wide, all

the abalone States are following West Australia's example and they have all become limited entry. It's only recently in states like New South Wales, Victoria and even South Australia; they've been able to transfer their licence, probably for about six or seven years but New South Wales is only just recent and Victoria it's only recent. You know, the least three or four years.

**JD** These poachers there, they're people who come in and take abalone and market it, is it?

**WARNER** Yes. They sell it to processors and the processors obviously export it. In Western Australia we don't have a very big domestic market for abalone so it gets exported by scrupulous processors. We've got mechanisms in place that we like to think might curb their activities, but I'm sure they don't. All our abalone has to be counted and accounted for and the Fisheries can go into a processor and say, "Where did this abalone come from? Show me the paperwork" right.

Just recently, just before Christmas, they had a meeting in Melbourne and they're now talking about issuing export credits to the divers. Now we can take 6,000 kilos of abalone meat in West Australia so we'd probably assume something along the lines that I would be given 6,000 export credits and as my abalone is exported, these exports credits would be moving along with the abalone till they're exported. Now some of the poached product we know goes through stevedores and they put them on boats, presumably for the crew to eat and they're exported elsewhere. So you're looking at a.... The landed price in Hong Kong is over \$60.00 a kilo and it's not unusual in WA to go out and take 100 kilos of meat in a day. So if people can go out and catch \$6,000.00 worth of product a day, you can understand their interest in taking it.

**JD** This interview continues on side B.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** Lee, what else can you tell us about the operation of abalone fishing?

**WARNER** Well, the catching's the best part. When we land ashore we've got some work to do. We've got our own factory and when we come ashore we take the round to the factory and we put the abs. on a weak saline solution and put them in a chiller overnight. The chiller brings the product probably down to around -2 degrees, -1 degrees centigrade. We do this because if we freeze them straight away after catching we get significant weight losses, probably to the tune of three or four percent. We soak them overnight in a weak saline solution. Now we have to have salt in the water so that the abalone retains its colour. If an abalone when it's sold still has the colour, the buyer knows that it's been processed while it's still fresh. If you leave it in fresh water it gains more weight but the colour deteriorates. The colour just washes off very easily so we put a salt solution in the chiller and put the abalone in that. Then next morning the abalone are graded.

Now grading and weighing.... We have three different sizes that we sell and they go back a long way into the time when we were still in pounds, the old Lavoyjapoy[?] System. The grades are: the larger sizes are the ones to twos, the mid-grade is twos to threes and the small grade is three to fives. Now what these numbers signify is the

number of animals per pound. For instance, if you are in the ones to twos, you will have one or two animals that will go to one pound, right, and so forth. Now, they're put on trays, stainless steel trays, in the morning and then they're snap frozen. We have what we call IQF, individually quick frozen, so that they're separate on the tray, they may just touch the other one but only just, so that when you bang the tray after they're frozen they separate into individually frozen pieces.

OK, they're left in the freezer overnight and the following morning we have a little bit of further processing going on. Now they're already graded into a size. They're then weighed out into ten kilo boxes and you always include one and a half percent. When you're exporting a product, where it says ten kilos net it has to be ten kilos after it's thawed out. Now during the period from when the abalone is taken out of the water and put on the tray, [it] always has a little bit of water there. So you add one and a half percent - 150 grams to the ten kilos and that accounts for any ice that you're going to accumulate.

After you've weighed out ten kilos plus one and a half percent, the abalone are glazed. Now this is just a quick dip into chilled water so that the abalone gets a coating of ice around it. Now if the abalone's stored any period of time, the coating of ice around the meat prevents the weight loss in the product. You get a leaching out of water in meat that's frozen for any period of time. Then it's put into a waxed cardboard box. It has a plastic liner inside, like a big plastic bag, and then it's sealed and strapped and then placed in the freezer. Has to be kept colder than -18 degrees for DPI regulations at all times. We have to keep a temperature check on the freezers.

When it's transported up on truck we send it to another freezing establishment that's registered with DPI and then DPI come around and inspect the product. They inspect the grading; they inspect the hygiene of the product and most importantly they check the temperature. They usually drill a hole into certain animals and stick a temperature probe in it and make sure it's cold enough. If everything's up to scratch they issue a health certificate and we can export it.

**JD** And it all goes to Hong Kong for re-export, I presume?

**WARNER** Well Hong Kong is probably the largest consumer of our product. They on-forward about 45% into mainland China and this on-forwarding has come to a standstill since they shot the students in Tienamin Square.

**JD** Has it? Has that had repercussions here with your industry?

**WARNER** Yes. We sold a container 1.3 tonne in May. We flew on the aeroplane up to Hong Kong with it and met our buyers and then we never sold another container until October. We were sitting.... I do the marketing for four divers and we were sitting on six and a half tonne of meat in Perth and we sold it all in October. That was just in the expectation of the Chinese New Year coming up. Of that six and a half tonne, it didn't all go to China, Hong Kong. We'd been getting into the Japanese market and we sold a few odd sales into the Japanese market.

**JD** Lee, are prices fairly stable or do they fluctuate?

**WARNER** They fluctuate up. They always go up in price. Australia's the largest supplier of abalone. As the Asian countries become more wealthy we cannot supply enough product. Every State is reducing their catch rates. They're all introducing quotas and with each announcement of a quota, usually the price rises. Whenever we



have a price drop, its normally you can attribute to the fluctuation of the Australian dollar but it's just basically going up all the time.

**JD** Is it a Commonwealth managed fishery or a State?

**WARNER** No, it's a State managed fishery. The Commonwealth are just stepping in now and at their instigation they look like improving the regulations to prevent [the] poached product being exported.

**JD** And there's a sort of a State quota that's split up between the licensed fishermen. Is that right?

**WARNER** Well you'll find that the abalone fishery is different to all other fisheries in the way it's being regulated. Now you'll find that when they brought in regulations into all other fisheries, everybody had different quotas, right. In all States of Australia, when the quotas were introduced everybody got an equal quota. Now some people in the old days, they might have only caught two or three tonne a year. In our zone, we had two people like this - only every caught two or three tonnes and they were given a.... We started off at eight tonnes, they were given an eight tonne quota which they never ever caught. All other States have done the same. So in this State now, we started off at eight tonne five years ago and we've now reduced it down to six tonne and we hope that we will be able to maintain the six tonne level. Our top diver five years ago was catching fifteen tonne. I was catching twelve tonne so we're catching a lot less than what we used to catch in the old days but the stocks haven't improved to a marked extent. We haven't noticed any dramatic improvements which we thought.

Now we've had some drastic storms and we feel that the stock has been damaged more by some of the severe storms we've had than what we've had. Now six years ago we had a storm that they regarded as the worst in 50 years. We were looking at granite boulders the size of this room that had moved six feet sideways. During the storm, you know, there must have been immense amounts of abalone destroyed. So this may have had an effect. We're hoping we can stay at six tonne.

Now, West Australia was the first in Australia to introduce quotas and we introduced quotas in conjunction with Tasmania. We both introduced quotas at the same time. The difference being that in Western Australia the quotas were at the instigation of the divers in this zone; in zone 1. We asked Fisheries to introduce a quota system. They were reluctant at first and we suggested how we'd like it done and they made a few suggestions. The following year we got quotas introduced. I always feel it's to our credit that the rest of Australia has now followed suit.

**JD** You clearly feel it's a pretty well managed industry?

**WARNER** It's well managed in this State because we've got an extremely efficient fishery service. I don't mean from the head office side, we butt heads there, but I'm talking about the people that live amongst us. In our zone here they've had a very good success rate at apprehending poachers and I've got nothing but praise for one inspector in particular, Jimmy Sutton. He does a marvellous job and he's so dedicated that he's outspoken in the way the Fisheries should be run and he doesn't do his career prospects any good at all. He's destined for the scrap heap I'd say because he always takes the side of the fishermen. He's a bloody good officer.

**JD** A very capable young man?

**WARNER** Oh, that head office up there, they've got some fools, FOOLS. Hope you're listening Bernie [laughter].

**JD** He's not one of them? [laughter]

**JD** Lee, to return to the fishing operation, could you tell us some more about the cage that you work in? What's its purpose and how's it operate?

**WARNER** Well basically a cage is a hydraulically driven apparatus that carries the diver around while he's under water. It has buoyancy tanks on it; it has a big net underneath where we put the abalone in. It has doors that swing up in a gull like form like the old Mercedes 300SL. [the] Theory is that if a shark comes around you can just pull the doors down and you're safely ensconced. It's been pointed out that it has a psychological deterrent to a shark in basically he's looking at a fairly large object that's got a tail 300 feet long which is the hydraulic and air umbilical. It goes back to the boat.

These days I think they're used more for convenience of transport than anything else and there's been a move to sort of remove the cage and just have the hydraulic motor and propeller and that drags the diver around and on top of that apparatus he has a parachute which is like a plastic bag filled with air and underneath he has a bag that hangs down and he puts the abalone in.

I've still got the full cage and I find that very convenient. You can stay down longer in deeper water. Normally when you're free swimming and carrying a bag around, as soon as you get a few Abalone in, you're actually on the bottom - crawling along more than swimming; that's swimming and crawling. Now with a case, as soon as you clean out an area that you're in, if you're in 60 feet of water, you jump in the cage, hit the ballast tank and you can pop up to 40 feet. You bleed some of the air out so it's natural buoyancy then you're motoring along at 40 feet, so you're not accumulating nitrogen at the same rate as you are when you're crawling along at 60 feet.

Now it has the added advantage in that because the shark cage has a buoyancy tank which you also breathe out of, if something goes wrong with the air compressor, or if anything goes wrong at all, you've always got a supply of air available on the cage. There's always enough air there to blow the cage at the top. Now when you work deep, you work hard. You're swimming hard because you've only got a limited time you can spend there. For instance the free time at 60 feet is only 60 minutes. At 100 feet it's only 25 minutes. So if you're working deep you always work much harder and you're always out of breath, right. If something goes wrong and you're at 90 feet of water and your air supply cuts out, you've got 90 feet to get to the surface. Now any abalone diver will make it but it's always reassuring to know that when you're in a cage and something goes wrong, you just crank a valve open and you just rise to the surface, no matter how many abalone you're carrying in the cage and you can breathe all the way up. So it sort of has a reassuring feel that way.

I've had a shark cage for probably four years and I've never seen a shark.

**JD** Never one?

**WARNER** No, no. So maybe the psychological deterrent does work but still, look, you could spend many years in this industry and not seek a shark. It's mainly because you've got your head down and your butt up and you're looking into the sea or even

around rocks and things so there's obviously, you know, there's sharks there that we don't see.

**JD** Is the abalone attached to the reef? Do you have to prise it off?

**WARNER** Yes, yes. It lives in a restricted area. It usually clears an area where it can get maximum suction. It stays on there. Now the abalone will move off and grab a piece of seaweed and come back to its spot but it stays on that particular piece of seaweed and come back to its spot but it stays on that particular sport. Once they're disturbed they can be hard to get off and you have to break the shell just to get the abalone knife under them. Often, if you come in from the wrong angle, the shell brakes which is a shame because the shell's expensive.

**JD** What's the shell used for?

**WARNER** The Koreans import it and they use it for inlaid furniture, motor-of-pearl. Now the Chinese do a little bit of it. The Japanese do a little bit and the Indians do a little bit of it but the Koreans are past masters. They make the best gear. They basically buy it all world wide these days.

**JD** Is the abalone liable to diseases?

**WARNER** Well they must be because Fisheries have told us that we cannot import tuba into this State. We wanted to import tuba into this State. We wanted to import tuba in here and breed it and see if it would live in some of the areas where the greenlip won't inhabit. I know in South Australia that they have an area over there where they have a disease where a, it's like a black spot grows on the foot and the abalone dies and they believe that's spreading. They think it's caused by pollution and there's areas over there where the actual seaweeds, the seagrasses are actually dying and putting the resource under threat in one of the areas they have over in South Australia.

**JD** But that's not in our....

**WARNER** No, no, we don't have any problems here.

**JD** ....up to date. Any other comments that you'd like to make about the abalone industry?

**WARNER** No. Only that it's an enjoyable way to earn a living. I'm glad I brought a licence from a financial point of view. I can only see it getting better. When the Labour Government took power and they floated the dollar, we doubled our income in a year. When they ease these interest rates, I'd say that the dollar will be down around the 65 cents mark again and we'll have another substantial price increase.

**JD** Is there research into aquaculture or murray[?] culture of abalone?

**WARNER** There's a lot of aquaculture of abalone around the world. Californians are into it fairly strong on a commercial basis. They've gone very quiet so I'd say they're not making any money. The Koreans have been doing it for years and the Japanese have been doing it for years but it's all Government backed. Now nobody has ever been able to raise abalone and grow it to maturity and make a profit. They're very slow growing; takes five years to assume 300 grams; has to be fed on seaweed which

is very hard to harvest. This area here, the seaweed they live on is very small. For instance you can't go along and harvest it, you'd probably kill the plant.

Other areas, I know in Tasmania where they have the bull kelp that grows out 100 feet of water and grows to the surface. This stuff grows one metre a day and they can feed abalone on that. Now if you have access to food like that you may be able to do it commercially but this is what the Californians are doing. They have the same bull kelp and I feel that they aren't making any money growing there so I don't hold high hopes for it.

**JD** Well before we finish, anything else?

**WARNER** [pause]. No, only the fact that we'd like to experiment getting the ruba over here. I feel that the ruba will live amongst the kelp beds that we have where the greens won't live. Now between Esperance and Albany we've got a lot of coastline where no abalone will live amongst that.... in that seaweed and if we can get the ruba over here and raise it in captivity and then make sure that it's pure stock with no diseases, this animal might do really well here. If the ruba doesn't do it well there may be other abalone in other parts of the world that would live on this week and if we can get the ruba here and it's unsuccessful, I think we should try other stocks.

**JD** Right, well look it's been a fascinating interview. Thank you very much.

**WARNER** You're welcome.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Lee Warner, abalone fisherman of Esperance, Western Australia. The interview was conducted at Esperance by Jack Darcey on the 11th January, 1990.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with TOM WEAR

### INTRODUCTION

Tom Wear known in Denham as Captain Wear, is 77 years old. He retired from full time fishing two years ago, but still has his boat and still maintains his commercial oystering licence, selling his product mainly through the retail shop his son conducts.

There are now three Tom Wears involved in fishing in Denham. Tom senior, who provided this interview, has a son also named Tom, who was a fisherman but had to leave the catching side of the industry due to ill health, and now his grandson, another Tom, is learning the job as a deckhand.

Tom senior started in pearling in Shark Bay, but later went fishing for some years with his wife, Nora, as crew. He acquired a freezer and fish-processing and transporting business, which he carried on in conjunction with his fishing for many years. Much has changed in Shark Bay during Tom Wear's lifetime. He records some of those changes here.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded in Mr Wear's home in Denham, by Jack Darcey on 14th of June, 1990. There are two sides on one tape and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

*JD* Would you record your full name, and date and place of birth?

*WEAR* Thomas Wear. Date of birth here in Denham, date of birth 26th of November, 1913.

*JD* Were you brought up in Denham?

*WEAR* Yes, yes.

*JD* Did you spend your whole life here?

*WEAR* My life apart from four years. That was Gwalia.

*JD* You went to Gwalia?

*WEAR* Yes, Gwalia, something to do with the mines there. I was four years up there. Otherwise I've been here all my life.

**JD** Were you at school or were you working up there?

**WEAR** I went to school up there.

**JD** Your father was in this area?

**WEAR** Yes, he was in this area. Quite a while at different things, but I don't remember him that much, you know, I was only a lad then.

**JD** What brought him to Denham?

**WEAR** He was on these barques, whatever you call them, you know, these sailing ships. Yes, to Fremantle and back up here. [Father came out here from England on the barque **Manfred**. He joined it in Sunderland on the 19th of April, 1878, and left on the 27th of April, 1878, and arrived at the Lacedpede Islands on the 25th of October, 1879. He went on board the barque **Clodian** for Shark Bay, 26th of November, 1879, and arrived at Shark Bay on the 3rd of December. He left for Fremantle on the 20th of September, 1881, and arrived on the 26th of September. He came back to Shark Bay on the schooner **Argo** on the 4th of April, 1882.] They got sandalwood, pearl shell and that. They used to cart down at different whatsiname.

**JD** He was a seafarer?

**WEAR** Yes. Then he got in different jobs here like sail-making and a bit of a shipwright carpenter he was. A bit of a jack of all trades.

**JD** And finally settled in Denham?

**WEAR** Yes, he settled here and married my mother and that's it. The family and myself.... well, there was a sister first, the eldest sister, and two brothers. One was two years older than me, and the other one was two years younger. That was it. But the sister, she married after the First World War, a chap named Sorensen. Ed Sorensen and they finished up at Gwalia mines. He was a turner and fitter there. When my father died, his mother had to look after us then, so she got me up there, took me up there and I stayed there and went to school there.

**JD** Your father died when you were very young?

**WEAR** Yes, I was still about eight years old, I suppose. You know, that's not to say I don't remember that much, a bit, but just for that short period when we were on land, that's all. That's according to Geordie. It wasn't Geordie [laughs]. But Mother, well she had to go to work then. She was part Aboriginal like, from her mother. Her maiden name was McQuade. Born around Northampton somewhere, from that area. I wouldn't have a clue where, you know, we never took much interest in things those days. She lived quite a while.

**JD** She brought you all up on her own then?

**WEAR** Yes, she brought us up after Father died, she brought us up. Cooking up there at Dirk Hartog Island, you know the station owners over there, Chenery and McIntyre. It was just like a home it was, for all of us.

**JD** You were living on a station?

**WEAR** At Dirk Hartog, yes. She was cooking over there and McIntyre and Chenery (that was a few years back) they were very good and then they left the place and that, and she went then. She got a bit old, and had a bit of a stroke, and finished up in Geraldton. Mother's daughter was down there, and Mother had taken her in years ago, you know, when she was a young girl. She just.... didn't adopt her really, but she had the name of Ellen Oakley. She had a place in Geraldton. She married a chap, Norton, and she had a place in Geraldton, and she took her down there, and the doctor all the time, and that's it. She lived quite a few years. She finished up in a wheelchair but she eventually died down there. She was about 87 or something around that area.

I came back here from Gwalia and I went on the station for a bit then. It was a Peron station, working for a chap named Talbots. They owned it then, and I don't know if I was eighteen months there or so, that I finished up going to.... Well, I must have been about fourteen when I went on the station here I suppose. Then I finished up going over to the island, Dirk Hartog Island, where Keith McIntyre was. I stayed there for about five years, working on the mustering. I wanted a bit of a change so I had a job offered to me with Fred Adams, pearling.... he was a pearling magnate you might as well say. You know, there's a lot of pearl shell banks and that and he did well in the business. Left our buses down there in Fremantle, a big industry that. He was a big shareholder in Metro Buses.

I went pearling then, working the boats, and dredging shell. In the winter time I could dredge the shell, and there were three of us in the boat, and summer time you'd go out when the tides were low, you'd go out and pick up shell on the banks. The banks used to go dry.

**JD** And you'd walk on the banks?

**WEAR** Yes, you could walk on the banks. They would all go dry and you'd just pick the shell up, and when the tide came in, well, you'd go back to the boat then, and put the shell in, and stop out until the tides were over. At the end of the moon you'd then come home then and you'd open the shell and wait for the next moon, and you'd go out again.

I was with Fred for fourteen years, but that wasn't pearling all that time, and after a while they started this canning over at Herald Bight, and I wasn't included in that. I carried on the pearling on one of his boats. I'd sooner have done that, yes, pearling like, going out dredging and pick up shell in the summer time and that, for a couple of years, I suppose.

**JD** Did you get any really good pearls?

**WEAR** Yes. It's marvellous the pearls you used to get, and they used to have a pearl bloke come down and buy the pearls off them and that. He had quite a lot of good banks and banks to look after, pearling banks. He was very strict that way. He wouldn't let you bring the young shell in or, you know, he kept the industry going. You had to keep your banks going then. It was quite good for him.

**JD** Did each boat have its own area?

**WEAR** Yes, there was all.... just like leases you know, the blocks. They had to have the banks all numbered off. You had to just work them. If you got caught in another site, well, you were up for poaching. There's a sort of poacher everywhere, you know, and all numbered off, that was your banks.

**JD** Is it on a rocky ground, or mud, or....?

**WEAR** No, mostly sea-weed and shell, that's all. It's all on the sea-weed, the banks. Some were rocky rough [unclear] on the shores, but all the rest were all sea-weed, and gravel bottom, that's all.

**JD** Was the oyster itself edible? Could you eat it?

**WEAR** Pearl shell? Oh yes, yes, those are edible. We used to often eat quite a bit of it for a change. No [unclear] them days. Rations were all tinned stuff mostly, you know tinned meat and fish, plenty of fish and that.

**JD** Do people still take pearl shell here?

**WEAR** No, not now, not that way. They're cultured. They're culturing pearl shell here with Macinow and the Broome pearls got a batch over there, and someone else has got another lot, and they're culturing them.

**JD** Using the same pearls, or the same oyster?

**WEAR** The same oyster like, and they take them [unclear] now and they do it, and they make themselves a [unclear] they do it. But lately they get the younger ones and plant them. Do something to them and put them somewhere and they cultivate them. I think they're all right too, I think. Then they're starting to do the pearls and all. I never went into it much myself because I don't know much about it, but they say the pearls are sort of doing all right with the culturing. So it could come to a pretty big thing I suppose.

And all these banks that are sort of left here since the War (the Second World War) well, a lot of them moved out, the pearl owners and all that, you know. They shifted to Perth to live.

**JD** [unclear]

**WEAR** Yes, the price of shell went down and the banks just deteriorated. You see, when you leave them like that, you get two clusters that are not worked, with the dredges and that, and the shell is sort of clustered together and they don't grow big. You've got to work at that and spread the shell, and that makes the shell much better. But none of those pearlers are up there.

**JD** What did you do then?

**WEAR** Well, after that, when that was finished, I finished up fishing for him. He had this big - **Theo Christi** - a big lugger it was. It had a big freezer on it, and they used to fish with the smaller boats, and put in the freezer, and they'd cart their fish round here and bag it up, and it was already to go on the State ships, sent to Perth.

**JD** Was this from netting off the beaches?

**WEAR** Yes, netting off the beaches, yes. The same crowd owned the Metro Fisheries here and they bought this boat to cart the fish, instead of taking it by truck for a while, they carted it out to the ships, which was convenient. Then they started this cannery at Herald Bight. Well, I wasn't interested in that. I still kept that.... I was pearling like.



**JD** Could you establish about when was that? Was it before the War?

**WEAR** That would be.... yes, just before the War it was. It was '39.... the War started '39 wasn't it?

**JD** Yes.

**WEAR** Yes, just before the War I think it was. Round about '38 I suppose. It was during the War because they used to supply some of the stores, Bairds and Boans.

**JD** The services?

**WEAR** Yes. Like Bairds used to buy a lot of the canned stuff, they did in different whatsinames down there, and eventually that folded up. They couldn't get enough supplies and that. See, they never had the fast boats then. While the fish was at Herald Bight - that's over the other side here where Monkey Mia - well, down that area. Herald Bight wasn't.... had the canning factory there, and they had all the refrigeration and everything. But when they couldn't carry on, they just turned that into a refrigeration to freeze fish.

**JD** What were they canning? What fish?

**WEAR** Mullet.

**JD** Mullet.

**WEAR** Tailer, whiting, bream, and it was very good, too, very good, and after that, well they just broke up as partners. Some of them went to Perth, and that was it. They never came on with it. They used to can it there and put it in cases and brand it, and then it would come over here and go on the State ships, and sent to Perth, Fremantle.

**JD** The State ships called in here, did they?

**WEAR** They used to call in regularly, yes. It was the only service we had, State ships. Yes, it would be pretty often they used to come in. That's how they used to get all their stores and that and everything unloaded into these two lighters. Someone before them too, I think, had the whatsiname.... had the land then. Then they'd unload the stuff. They'd come in about oh three miles out there, I suppose. They'd unload the stuff into these big lighters and bring them ashore, and then they'd unload it in these punts, these big punts, towed with a motor boat, and bring it along, and they used to unload all along the foreshore. In those days they had pearling sheds along there, and the pits and that, and it was all shell road, [unclear] Street, that's all that was there then. They used to just dump it by your front there, and you carted in the stuff. That was.... Where was I now?

**JD** You were talking about just when the cannery opened and later on it closed.

**WEAR** They closed, yes. They couldn't carry on, but they still carried on with the fishing with the boat, and I finished up running Herald Bight then.

**JD** That was the freezer boat, was it?

**WEAR** Yes, the freezer, not the rest. I just carried on. I fished there, chaps with me like. We'd freeze the fish there, and bag it up and all that. It used to go in bags them

days, and when the **Theo Christi**, their crew on there fishing, when they came round to pick up the fish from there, they put it in their hold, and carted it to either the ship here or it finished up, they used to take it to Gladstone. They had a truck carting from there. It was over the other side like where the jetty was. They only had to take it a few miles into the road and you can get out of there any time like, and they would take it down.

**JD** Take it to Perth, yes.

**WEAR** Yes, right to Perth.

**JD** Were they freezer trucks in those days?

**WEAR** No they weren't freezer trucks. It was frozen hard when you took it on, and if you didn't get down.... if you were caught on the road, well, you knew the fish was gone.

**JD** What was the market when you got it to Perth?

**WEAR** Oh I wouldn't know much about the market. It wasn't much.... we weren't getting much for the fish here. You see, I was still working on wages when that.... just for that chap. Even with the fishing. We weren't getting paid for the fish. We were just employed for the wage. Four pound a week I think it was then [laughs]. It wasn't easy work, you know, [laughs] it was hard work. No motor dinghies. There'd be a launch there and that with a dinghy behind doing the poking most of the time, which was all right too. It didn't frighten the fish, anything. That's why a lot of fish was around, I suppose. You'd just poke along and you'd get the fish.

**JD** Poking, that's poling?

**WEAR** Poling, yes. Yes, just poling the boat along. But we had other auxiliaries to take us, you know, we had the launch and that, the mother boat. It wasn't very big but that used to take you to different places. The matter is.... '42 I think. No, it wouldn't be '42. That's fourteen years, that would be.... I started there in '32, and that's....

**JD** Just after the War, shortly after the War.

**WEAR** Yes, shortly after the War. Then I was [unclear] and worked in the freezer.... back in the fishing and that, take it in turns like in different ships, in the freezer boat. Two of us were there. He'd take the day shift and we'd take it in turns. I did the night shift. I went to the freezer and that for about four years I suppose, and I decided to go fishing myself then.

As I say we met a couple of.... Fletcher it was, old Tas Fletcher, with a boat called **Enis**, so I took that over on a share basis, and the wife and I, Nora, we went fishing in that.

**JD** Your wife as crew?

**WEAR** Yes, she was my crew [laughs]. We had a few years, quite a few years, in that boat. When old Tas died then, and his son, Freddie, took the boat over. We still worked in it for a while, and then I got a boat myself then. One we had the **Meteor**, I bought off Dick Hoult, this young Dick Hoult, and she was an old pearling boat they'd had in their family for years, and I bought that off him, and went fishing in that. That

was [unclear] and I had that for.... I carried on with that all the time. When the boys got big enough to work, my son, well I use to take him out then, and Nora stopped home to look after the house [laughs].

When he got old enough - that's when he left school like - you know, he left school and came straight on the boat with me. Then he went in to the.... finished with me for a while, and he went on to the station then, Peron Station. He worked there for a few years.

**JD** Did you have a crew? Did Nora come back?

**WEAR** Nora came back with me in the boat then, and after that he got married and then he decided to go on his own, you know, break away for a while and went up to a place called Quobba, Keith Baston's station up north. They were there for quite a few years, and when he came back again - I just don't know what date it was - but when he came back, he came back in the boat with me, and we fished then and carried on from there. After a while he got a boat of his own. Before that though, we fished in my boat, and we were fishing for the Golden Gleam in Geraldton, getting bait for the crays. We fished for them for quite a few years, and then we started a freezer of our own then, that's through the Golden Gleam in Geraldton. They put the freezer there for us, and we used to fish and pack the fish there ourselves and cart them down. We got a truck on the road. When they finished they used to come and pick it up from us. Then we got a truck of our own on the road, and we'd process - well not process - just pack the crates and freeze them. We had a freezer truck on the road and just put them on the truck and cart down there for quite a few years it was.

**JD** That was whole fish?

**WEAR** Whole fish, yes. No filleting. We had girls working here for us, just packing the fish - whiting, any fish at all - they packed them in crates.

**JD** Did you handle the catch for any other boats?

**WEAR** After a while we did, yes. They had a bit of problem with their factories here, and people used to come and start a work business off, and they'd finish up going broke. So we had a couple of boats fishing for us at the time, that is for the Gleam like, and we were employing them. Fishing myself at the same time, and then they got some of the blokes at the factory they were fishing, four went broke, and the next thing we had to take them on then. We took some on. That was my son's idea. It wasn't mine though [laughs]. He didn't get any thanks for it, only from one chap in the place, that's all [laughs]. I suppose we got him out of a bit of a.... whilst Damen took the fish in for him, and.... worried all for nothing, till someone else came in to town then, and had great ideas of running things you know, with these factories. They started in a big way and finished up going broke again.

Planet Fisheries came in then and just exactly I don't know what day it was.... '55, something around that way. We were fishing for them in '58, so it might have been '56, '57. Yes, we carried on ourselves for a while, when they got rushed, we fished for them then. One a chap by the name of Powell, George Powell.

**JD** That's Planet.

**WEAR** Yes, Planet Fisheries, which is very good, and they handled the fish all right, and they had good facilities there. They were processing and a lot of girls working on it, and they were very efficient too. They did everything right. They had a good man in

there controlling the fish and that. That went on for a few years, but when they couldn't get the quantity of fish they wanted, like all the time, they shifted to Carnarvon.

**JD** Did they pay a good price for the fish?

**WEAR** Yes, well it was a good price, the best that was paid around the place, Planet Fisheries, within reason. They did raise the price up. They were the only ones that ever paid a good price, and they couldn't get enough fish. They worked the two of us and I suppose they wanted to handle them and keep in front, but when they couldn't get that fish, they sold out then, and they had the Nor-West Whaling in Carnarvon.

**JD** They were Nor-West Whaling.

**WEAR** Yes, they were Nor-West Whaling too. That's Angus and Powell and Pansini and all that crowd was all in it, I think. It was a big concern. That's when they took on Nor-West Whaling for the prawns and that.

**JD** Now they're Nor-West Seafoods?

**WEAR** Seafoods yes. They did a good job the Planet Fisheries, but as I say, when they couldn't get that quantity of fish, they sold up and a chap by the name of Rosecape bought them out. Of course, he was going to do big things. They would do it in a big way, you know. They demolished most of the plant up there which is still a good plant, just bulldozed it all down, and started off afresh, building a big factory and that and [unclear]. Beyond their [unclear] paying a fair price too but that couldn't last.

I think after Planets went, well we carried on with our own business again, with the fish and buying fish, and a couple of boats we had here with us. When Rosecape came in and they were one of these arrogant crowds they were [laughs]. They came along and didn't want us to cart the fish. They thought they were going to dictate to fishermen, you know, the fish had to go to them. Two of them came in to the fishermen here, had a meeting with them and a yarn and talk to them. No, they weren't worried about the fishermen, they were going to do this in a big way themselves, and the fishermen had to go to them. But they found that it was a bit different. We still had a truck on the road, and still carting fish and we had a bloke driving for us, and he said, "We'll have you off the road in a month." [Laughs] Our bloke, this Davy, he said, "Oh I'll have a little bet with you, a gallon of beer. We'll be still going when you go broke. I'll give you six months," and he was right too. They finished up going broke. I think they owed a bit of money around too, I think, and that was that.

They, you know, came in and bulldozed them.... you know, don't go rushing round like that. They don't go anywhere, especially the crowd that is fishing here. They pull pretty well together. You don't get dictated by blokes coming in like that, and you know what is going to happen. Anyway that was it. And after they went off.... we did fish for them for a while - Rosecape - but when there was another crowd in there, and when they finished up there was still one chap there, a chap by the name of Bremen, Murray Bremen, he was in the company, and he sort of carried on and we used to fish for him for a little while, you know, to try in a small way like, to try and help him out and that, which we did in a way. Oh I don't how long he was.... it wasn't that long. It was the same plant as Rosecape had, but he was one of the partners. Anyhow it finished up we were on the wrong end of it then. We got done in for a few thousand [laughs]. It was interesting.

Eventually anyhow, I don't think we ever got our money from him. We didn't worry about it that much. It had gone and that's all about it. This chap though (the same chap) we struck him a few times, or rather my son has, but every time he sees him, he sort of dodges him, you know. But he was doing the accounts for the Shire here for a long time. He still does it I think. He was an accountant he was. He knew what he was doing I suppose [laughs].

**JD** This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE ONE SIDE A

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## TAPE ONE SIDE B

**WEAR** Well then, we still had our own plant going and we carried on from there again, fishing for ourselves, carting down for Gleam. I don't know how long we stayed with them, and it must [mutter, mutter]. Oh the Geraldton fish market started up I think. Yes, that's right, yes. We still carried on ourselves here, that's right. Someone else worked up the factory then. They opened up again but we weren't fishing for them, I don't think. I think Tom put a couple of loads in there for them. A chap by the name of Bennett (Aub Bennett) he took over the factory, and had some other partners with him, but Tom put a couple of loads in there I think. I didn't.... wasn't catching that many then myself. So I just carried on and he just kept what we had here like, and if they wanted some fish he put them up there, but we still had our own factory going here, for ourselves, and still carted them down to Geraldton.

After that, well that crowd, most of the boys they were still fishing for them, but we weren't part of them that much, and they got.... some of them got caught with them after. They went broke too. This chap, Bennett, he had control of the thing and I think he sold out after. But then, I don't think anyone else started after that. Eventually we finished up fishing for the Geraldton fish market, run down to Geraldton. They had the fish market there.

Then in the meantime, they put a factory up here at Purser - Purser Fisheries. I used to - whatever fish I got I used to drop in there. Tom fished for them too then. We just carried on from there. I did that a year and they had to get out of it, and Geraldton fish market took over then.

**JD** You closed your own factory?

**WEAR** Yes, we closed our one. It wasn't worth while you know. If you had a factory going here in Perth, and they started us pretty good, and so we just closed our own, and just carried on and let them handle the fish, which is a good thing, because you know, things were a bit expensive then. Your cartons and all that.... you had to get cartons, proper cartons, for carting them, and trays and all them sort of things, and your freezer, a big overhead it was, the electricity and that.

It was all right but you were working a bit hard. You had to go out and you catch your fish and you come home, and you'd have to be packing them and that, and when you'd finish that, freeze them, and you'd have to go out again. Well, the work was too much, so if you can just sell to one place it was all right, save all that work and expense and that, so that's what happened, and we fished for Purser Fisheries and then when they had to sell out, of course, Geraldton fish market took over then.

**JD** Is that the co-operative, the Fishermen's Co-operative at Geraldton?

**WEAR** No, no, that's a different whatsiname, yes. This is a.... Geraldton fish markets it is. The Geraldton Fishermen's Association, that's still going down there, the co-operative. But we never ever fished for them. Anyhow still with the fish, Geraldton fish market now.... when Purser sold out, well they took over the factory and my son went into partnership with the Geraldton fish market, a chap name of Lodge - Steve Lodge - and he had this little retail shop here, because he had to give up the fishing on account of ill health. So he had to give it up and take something on a bit lighter. So he's running that now and selling, that's not hard work to do.

**JD** Did he maintain his licence?

**WEAR** Yes, he's still got his fishing licence.

**JD** And that....

**WEAR** Eventually I think that will be handed down to his son, young Tom.

**JD** And young Tom is fishing now.

**WEAR** Yes, but he's a deckie now. Young Tom, my son Tom's son, Thomas, he's a deckie with Dennis Hoult for a while till he gets his ticket, and he probably will sit this year for a ticket, and if he gets that, he's got his own boat, he'll take over then. That's young Tom, that's my son's son. My grandson.

But as I was saying about Tom, my son, he had to give it up on account of ill health, and he's got this little retail shop here, and does all right with it, I think. You know, it's not as much hard yakka to do, but it's an hour or so, you've got the hours to do, but still he seems to be doing all right, and his health seems to be holding all right, as much as can be expected.

**JD** You, yourself, have retired now. You handed in your licence.

**WEAR** Yes. Myself I've retired. I've handed in my licence, my fishing licence, but instead I've retained my oyster licence. I've still got my boat which is not a licensed fishing boat. It's getting a bit old and they wouldn't survey that any more, so I just made it a private boat to go out in that, and I still carry on getting oysters. You have to get an oyster licence. When I got that it's just something for me to do. When I feel like going out I just slip out and get a few oysters and home again.

**JD** It's a rock oyster is it?

**WEAR** Yes, rock oyster, yes. You know they're all on rocks over on Dirk Hartog Island.

**JD** Do you walk over the rocks and prise them off? Is that....?

**WEAR** Yes, when the tide's low like, you just go along the rocks and you prise them off. You take the fish out of the shells like. You shuck them off the rocks and put them in containers and just put them on ice then, and come home. I pack them in cartons, of about four dozen in a container, and come home and just freeze them then. They sell them in the freezer or sometimes I just sell them locally - I don't make much out of them - but just something you can earn because we're on a pension like, my wife

and I, and you're allowed to earn so much, so that's it. We just keep them.... it's something for me to do, that's all.

**JD** Do you enjoy it?

**WEAR** Yes, of course, I enjoy it. That's my life and the sea [laughs]. I really enjoy going out there because as I say, it's a thing that you've been on that long, it's hard to give up the sea. I like it, yes, that's why I.... I still stop home and as I say, when I feel like going out, you know, I'll just go out. I couldn't just sit about, you know, I could find plenty to do around here, but I know [unclear] feeling when he's tied than when he's out in a boat. Of course, it's different out there. You just work so many hours and that's it.

**JD** You finished fishing last year. You'd have been about 75 then?

**WEAR** Yes, yes, that's when I gave it up, last year the fishing licence handed in.

**JD** And are you still quite fit?

**WEAR** Oh yes, I'm still fit [laughs]. That's the trouble. I said if a man wasn't fit well he wouldn't be doing these things, would he? But still, as I say, I'm probably one of the lucky ones I suppose. Still fit, that's why a lot of them can't get over me, you know. I've known them for years and they say, "You haven't altered much at all. Friends I know I see in Geraldton there a lot of years, well since I turned 50 or 55, I looked after myself a bit then. When you get round that mark or round the 60's well you've got to look after yourself a bit. Well, I admit myself, I used to play pretty hard in the young days, drink a bit hard, and worked hard, and played hard, but that was it. It didn't affect me that much.

**JD** Fishing's been good to you really, hasn't it?

**WEAR** Yes, yes. It's been pretty good.

**JD** Can you see it continuing to be good for people?

**WEAR** Oh I think so. Now it's controlled pretty well now, the fishing industry, as far as seine netting goes. I think it will be all right, but as I say myself, there's not the quantity of fish around that used to be, but that doesn't mean a thing. It doesn't mean that the fish are not there. I would put it down it goes in a cycle and you might have a bad season with them, and the next year you might have a good season. It might go for a couple of years, have a crook season. Then it might come good then, especially your whiting will come in. They haven't had a very good start this year as far as the fishing goes, I don't think, on the whiting, but now then pretty well, there it is. It just shows they're still there to come in.

But as I say, I'm not interested that much myself now, but it's for the younger ones that like my grandson, he wants a go, and a lot of the younger lads round here, well it's their future. But I don't think.... the fish might have depleted a bit but as I say, I think the same, I don't comment on that because they've all got their different views. I'm not fishing now but they are but there's a lot of the boys were saying, "Well, I'm going to let go," but I think they cover a lot of the country now, because they've got all these jets now and that. The fish mightn't be there that used to be there, well they're not, not in my opinion, because as I say, this could be depleted or getting

depleted, but it mightn't be. But now they've got bigger size fish and bigger nets they use so it could be right in a matter of time. But I don't....

**JD** Do you think this World Heritage listing will affect the fishing industry in Shark Bay?

**WEAR** Yes, well it probably will. They seem to think that it won't, but I think that it will affect it if they take over and they get restricted from fishing here or there. It's all right now, but once they get into power, that crowd, well they just take over and tell you what to do, and you mightn't be able to put a net down so many kilometres off the beach or metres or whatever it is. That's where the fishing is, all along the coast. A lot of areas you don't get much fish, but a lot of areas where they want to preserve for dugongs and different things, which is a bit ridiculous, and there's still just as many dugong around in there as before. If they take over in power, in my opinion anyhow, they could make it a real awkward if they wanted to, but they said it's not going to affect the fishing industry. I hope it's not.

Not that it makes any difference as far as I'm concerned in my time, but it's for the younger ones. It's their future and they, I suppose they think it will be all right. It could be all right too. They might just, you know, make it a Heritage but don't interfere with your livelihood. So it's hard to say.

**JD** Tom, is there anything else that you'd like to record on this tape?

**WEAR** No, I better not. I could say something but I better not.

**JD** Tom, you've lived in Denham for a long, long time now. You've seen a lot of changes.

**WEAR** Yes.

**JD** What do you think about those changes?

**WEAR** Oh, I've not got much comment on the changes. It's all right in a way I suppose. It's really changing very quick, you know, progress and quickness which is all right in some ways I suppose, but it's not the same place it used to be. The atmosphere and that has changed in the place. That's my opinion of the thing. But still them sort of things like progress has got to go on. I've nothing against it and that, and it's certainly changed a lot and developed a lot in my time. The latter years it's really gone ahead. It's really on the mounting there. I think it's through Monkey Mia dolphins, you know, that made a big difference to that place. They come from everywhere to see them I think. But as for the town itself, it (in my opinion) has changed. It's not for the younger ones though. They see a new town, you know, but with mine, I've been here a lot of years and it's certainly changed all right. The people in it are all right like the crowds that's still in are all right, but there's a lot of newcomers. Still they're all all right.

**JD** Still a good place to live.

**WEAR** Still a good place to live in, yes. Well, one part there I was thinking of leaving the place you know, selling out and going to Geraldton to live [laughs]. Things got a bit bad down there and I thought I'd just as well live up here [laughs]. But I did at one time, too you know, I was going to sell out. With me it's not.... if I went well Tom would have gone, my son. He wasn't too good and I asked what was he going to do



and that, and I thought it's too hot for me, well Tom and that and Nora my wife, her other family's here you see, a lot of [unclear]. That would have suited me but it wouldn't have suited her. She reckoned it wouldn't make any difference but to my way of thinking it would have made a difference. You know she has her family and you can't have everything your own way, you've got to share it with her. Both of us have been together a long while and we've got to share our troubles and hardship together. You don't just... just because it don't suit you you say, "We're packing up and off, sell out!" You've got to consider your partner too. So we're still here. But the town's all right. It's good the way they've progressed. In the last few years it's a credit to them I reckon, you know, with a good bowling green and the oval there and everything. They said in the latter years it's just happened and they've done it in a quick time which is a credit I reckon. They've got everything there. They've got a good industrial area and everything.

It's surprising you know. That's progress I suppose, but it's the same everywhere isn't it? Take Geraldton there and that. I go down to Geraldton pretty often and every time I go down there's change you know. Well, even the people that live in Geraldton they said it's not the same there either. It's progressed. [unclear] because them days you could do things you can't do today isn't it, anything at all [laughs]. No-one wanted [laughs]. Still that's it, that's progress. And as I say, it doesn't affect me, it's a credit to the people that do it in this town.

There's a lot of things you don't agree with but it doesn't concern me that much because as I say, as long as it's kept like it is eventually it will be a city. It mightn't be in my time but eventually it will be I reckon, the Bay itself. It's going to be real tourist spot I reckon, which is a good spot. They all enjoyed it, but you've got to have that for the town to benefit you know. It's bringing money into the town. They go through and that's it. It's good.

**JD** Right, Tom, well thank you very much for this talk. It's been very, very interesting to talk to you.

**WEAR** It was good to talk to you because you're a couple that I can talk to [laughs]. Some of them I don't cotton to [laughs].

**JD** That's the end of this interview with Mr Tom Wear of Denham, Western Australia.

END OF TAPE ONE SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





## Verbatim transcript of an interview with Joe (Jack) Weir

### INTRODUCTION

Mr Jack Weir, commonly known as Joe Weir, came to the north as a crocodile shooter after working in the blue asbestos mining industry and in the iron ore industry.

After various business enterprises in Wyndham he became a barramundi fisherman and now, together with his son, Jim, operates two vessels in the rivers and off the beaches in the Wyndham area.

Joe offers interesting insights into, not only barramundi fishing but also into the town of Wyndham and the crocodiles of the area. Concerning fishing he comments on the conflict of interest between professional fishermen and the illegal net fishermen on the one hand and tourism on the other. He also talks about the importation of aqua cultured barramundi and the incursions of foreign fishing vessels.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Weir's home in Wyndham in Western Australia on the 28th May, 1990.

There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 02 on the revolution counter.

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### TAPE 1 SIDE A

**JD** Joe could you record your full name please?

**WEIR** Jack Alexander Weir.

**JD** And your date of birth?

**WEIR** I beg your pardon?

**JD** Your date of birth?

**WEIR** The 29th February, 1929.... I'm sorry, 16th February, 1929.

**JD** And where were you born?

**WEIR** I was born in Albany, Western Australia.

**JD** Are you known as Jack or Joe?

**WEIR** Jack.

**JD** Jack?

**WEIR** I'm called Joe.

**JD** But Joe's a nickname is it?

**WEIR** Yes.

**JD** Oh right. How do you prefer to be called?

**WEIR** Well Joe. I'm known as Joe so I'll suppose that's....

**JD** Stick with Joe?

**WEIR** [unclear]

**JD** Were you brought up in Albany?

**WEIR** I was in Albany until I was fourteen years old.

**JD** And then where did you go?

**WEIR** Well then I took off! Worked here, there, everywhere.

**JD** You left home?

**WEIR** Yes.

**JD** And how did you come to get up here in Wyndham?

**WEIR** I took a job at Wittenoon Gorge in the mine and got burnt out there, so I took off from there with the shorts I stood up in and I got to Derby. Took a job on Cockatoo Island: got a job on the boat there - Yampi boats - travelling between Derby and Cockatoo Island.

**JD** [unclear]

**WEIR** .... Got a little bit tired of that and went to Darwin as a rigger on the.... they used to call it the timber jetty in Darwin. This is in about 1949. A few boats in Darwin and crocodile shooting was sort of taking on then so I took on crocodile shooting in Darwin. Ended up in Wyndham for the wet season and I've been sort of in Wyndham ever since.

**JD** That was 30 or 40 years ago?

**WEIR** Yes, 40 years ago. After we came to Wyndham I took a job with Main Roads, bulldozer driving. That was for the wet season. Went back crocodile shooting for the next dry season and back to Wyndham again for the wet season. Took my old job back with the Main Roads and a bit after Christmas bought a [unclear] in Wyndham and

from there I bought a little shop in the [unclear] of Wyndham and the school shifted out to the Three Mile in Wyndham and we built a store which [unclear - excessive noise]. After running the store for a few years I got a bit sick of it and sold it out and went fishing and I've been fishing ever since.

**JD** Just before we get on to the fishing, about how many crocodiles would you take in a season, Joe?

**WEIR** Oh, it really depended on the market what we took and salt water crocodiles we could take as many as we liked. [unclear] the availability of them which wasn't too good. There was less crocodiles around then than there is today in the salt water and [unclear] fresh water crocodiles they were very thick. We could shoot as many of them as we could process in a day which was about 50. So you could knock over 50 at night and process them the next day, but salt water ones we would spend all night shooting and you might get three or four. About six, I think, was our best night.

**JD** You shot from a dinghy or boat?

**WEIR** Started with a dugout canoe - made it ourselves. [laughs] We graduated from there to a plywood dinghy and oars - no outboards or nothing like they've got today.

**JD** And a bright light was it?

**WEIR** The light was a pushbike headlight (good quality one) hooked up to a six volt battery. That was quite good and used to last for months until you got the old battery charged. Usually you had a spare battery and you'd hook it up to your vehicle and charge it that way.

**JD** Did you have any trouble with the crocs?

**WEIR** No. The crocs were pretty scared of human beings in those days. It was hard to sneak on to them - not like today. They sneak on to you today [laughs]. It's the other way around.

**JD** And where did you sell your skins?

**WEIR** Well the first lot of skins we sold them through an agent in Wyndham - Hector Fuller was his name. He was a skin agent for Elders Smiths, but we got a very poor price for.... I think we got a shilling an inch and they were paying about five shillings in Darwin for the [unclear] so we looked for other buyers after that. But we had to take what we could get that time because we'd run out of money and needed food to eat and restock up.

When I finished crocodile shooting the price was thirty shillings an inch I think so they were going up pretty high, but even at thirty shillings an inch it was hard earned money[?]. It wasn't easy money.

**JD** That was an inch in length was it?

**WEIR** That was an inch measured across the girth and the average was about 24 inches I think (of the salt water ones), probably about six or eight inches on fresh water ones.

**JD** What did you do then after you left crocodile shooting?

**WEIR** I bought a taxi. To start with I was working on the main road during the wet season. The second wet season I decided I'd have a go at something else and bought a taxi in Wyndham. Built that up to three taxis, and built the store and decided I'd enough of the taxis so I sold them out and stuck with the store for probably about ten years I suppose, off and on. Did lease it a couple of times while I owned it and then I sold it.

**JD** Was Wyndham a bigger place then?

**WEIR** No, Wyndham was a very small place when I first came here. There was about three vehicles in Wyndham plus a taxi. It grew. It was a very go ahead place up until about four years ago and now it's in the doldrums....

**JD** Why is that?

**WEIR** Well we had a government meatworks here. I don't know when it was started off - around about 1924 I think. Well it went on until (I don't quite know when) but probably the government operated it until about ten years ago and then a private firm bought it out and they operated it for a few years until the price of labour got too high to keep it operating with strikes and things like and they closed it down and walked out. Eventually they sold it by auction - bit by bit. And since then Wyndham's sort of gone backwards.

One operation that started up is mineral from a mine just out of Fitzroy and they ship the ore out from Wyndham - that sort of helped it along a bit. But apart from that we've got no industry at all. As far as I know we have a lot a empty houses and that around Wyndham: lot of people are selling out and going away and that's about all I can say about Wyndham I think.

**JD** Joe, your own health wasn't affected by the mining that you used to do at Wittenoon?

**WEIR** By the what?

**JD** Mining?

**WEIR** Oh I don't think so. I never was all that robust in the chest and I think I'm just as good now as I was as a child in that respect. Unless something drastic happens to me I can't see that it interfered with me at all healthwise. You hear it on the radio and the TV about all this asbestos dust and that, but I think the conditions when I was there would have been a lot worse than a lot of these people who are getting big compensations today, for asbestos dust. I don't believe it myself.

**JD** Joe, how did it come about that you got into fishing?

**WEIR** Well, as I said before there was government meatworks operated here and I had a taxi at the time. The meatworkers liked recreation on the weekend and the butchers from the slaughter floor hired me to take them fishing at the weekend and we used to pull the fish and sell to the meatworks on Monday. We used to make a fair bit of money actually [laughs] and have a good time.

**JD** Was this from a dinghy?

**WEIR** Pardon?

**JD** Was this from your bondwood dinghy?

**WEIR** No. The method of fishing then was lines. We used to have about six lines each and a throw net to get live bait and we'd all throw these lines out and mainly catch barramundi and [unclear]. We used to get free ice from the meatworks and we iced them down and bring them home Sunday afternoon.

**JD** So you were fishing from the shore or the river were you?

**WEIR** Fishing from the shore. We did have dinghies but that was only to row across the river or something like that - not to fish out of. It was pretty lucrative.

**JD** And you decided to go fishing full time did you?

**WEIR** Well from that I decided that I wanted to carry on fishing after all the meatworks finished their season and went back to Perth, so probably the following year or a couple of years later, I decided to try net fishing. Used to make a net by hand - that was a very labour intensive operation but it was rewarding too. We were told that you'd never catch fish in a net in this area in the tidal rivers. Said there's too much against it - there's rubbish floating up and down in the rivers and fast tides would wash our nets away, but we found means and everything to overcome all the problems so we decided that [unclear] to go fishing full time.

**JD** That's what you've been doing ever since?

**WEIR** Yes.

**JD** What waters do you fish?

**WEIR** Well in the early stages it was just the Ord River. The upper tidal reaches of the Ord River where the fish used to congregate and there was no shortage of fish. Maybe it's not so there today, but I don't think that's any fault of the fish population. I think that's the difference in the Ord River since the damming of the Ord. The fish can't travel right up the Ord. I think it's upset their habitat - that's what it's done.

**JD** What other rivers do you fish, Joe?

**WEIR** I fish all the rivers around Wyndham. But not very much close to Wyndham simply because all the fish have been, in my opinion, caught out around Wyndham or their food supply has been caught. I remember that every little [unclear] or stream or creek adjacent to Wyndham had large quantities of mullet and it was pretty rare if you ever see one mullet around Wyndham now - within ten miles of Wyndham. So there's not much here for barramundi to feed on. We've only got to go 40 miles from Wyndham and the fish are the same as they ever were.

**JD** Do you fish the ocean beaches as well?

**WEIR** Yes. We fish the sand bars and beaches along the coastline, any rivers [unclear]. Of course barramundi is an in-shore fish (it doesn't venture out to sea) so you don't fish the deep water for barramundi and I think if a high price fish or fairly

high price, but I don't think, with our operation, we could make a go of fishing low priced fish. I think it's a bit that way with all wet fishermen today. I think the costs are putting them out of business. Well that's the attitude of them down in the fishing boat harbour in Fremantle.

**JD** Are there many fishermen fishing for barramundi in these parts?

**WEIR** Pardon?

**JD** Are there many fishermen who go for barramundi in Wyndham?

**WEIR** Last year there was, I think, four or there was four the year before, there was three last year and there's two this year I think. You could say there's three fishing units this year. We've got two (my son and myself have one each) and [unclear] got one. Leo Wills has one as far as I know, but his health doesn't allow him to fish today and I don't think he can sell his licence. I think it becomes redundant now.

**JD** What other species do you catch beside barramundi, Joe?

**WEIR** Well, we catch flat fin salmon which the market is very respected today. We catch a lot of sharks but that is unsaleable in this area although I do read that shark has [unclear] nine dollars a kilogram in Perth, but I don't think I could sell them. I get them too far away from the market. No one seems interested.

**JD** Where is your market then, Joe? Is it local or do you send it to Perth?

**WEIR** Well I think our main market is Kunnunurra. Like the Overland Motor Inn, the Kunnunurra Hotel, some of the clubs out there used to buy it. I think that the Motor Inns in Derby and Broome used to buy it also through the Motor Inn and Kunnurra. We have sent a lot to Perth at different times, mainly to the Festival Fish Supply in Roe Street, but a lot of Taiwanese imported barramundi came into Western Australia and that's cut out all the Perth buyers. They don't buy.... The Kunnurra motels and hotels tried it: some still use it, some have scrubbed it altogether. They reckon it's no good and they've come back to us and buy their fish off us. The restaurant in Wyndham tried it and said it's no good and they buy their fish off us. The price of Taiwanese barramundi I think, is seven dollars a kilogram they pay, or nine dollars a kilogram and the price of ours is twelve dollars a kilogram. It's been twelve dollars for three years - hasn't gone up in the last three years. This year up to date, we've found it pretty difficult to sell it, but we haven't been working too hard this year, sort of [unclear - laughs] just about, but it's coming good now. They're all starting to buy again now. Probably by the end of the year we won't be able to keep the supply up.

**JD** Do you sell direct to these outlets?

**WEIR** Yes.

**JD** How about transporting it? Is it frozen when you send it away?

**WEIR** Yes. Hard frozen in fifteen kilogram cartons.

**JD** You do that yourself?

**WEIR** Yes. Of course it depends on the buyer although [unclear] want to take whole fish and that's pretty easy to do too. That's [unclear] carried out in Bayleys. You don't have to carton it, wrap it or anything. They're pretty good trucking company.....

**JD** Joe, what sort of boats and gear do you use?

**WEIR** Well, as I said, me and my son we've got one unit each which is a licensed fishing boat each. One's a dual licence, but it's a barge - it's a 38 foot barge. It's a coast trading barge and a fishing barge on one certificate. That's ideal for barramundi fishing: there's a lot of room on it and you can put your freezer on deck with a crane and take it off with a crane when you get back to port again. The other one's a normal aluminium boat like they use for crayfishing: flush deck and we just put a freezer on the back the same as the barge. Lift it on with a crane, but it stays on there - we unload the fish piecemeal by hand. Both diesel powered boats.

**JD** You don't actually work together - you and Jim?

**WEIR** Oh.... sometimes we do. If we're short of crew we might go out on one boat and leave one boat at home.

**JD** Do you have much trouble getting suitable crew?

**WEIR** Yes, you'd have trouble getting suitable crews. You don't have much trouble getting a crew that's not much good. The difficult part today is the high cost of wages. What they expect out of it. They expect more than you can afford to pay so you're really better off forgetting about a crew and just potter along and do your own thing and make a bit of profit.

**JD** Are they paid wages or do they get a share?

**WEIR** No, they get a share and the share depends on how good we feel they are and we make an offer to them of what they can get and they accept it or they don't accept it. It's a pretty hard life, fishing for barramundi. It's night work and [unclear] to put up with mosquitos, sandflies, sometimes rough water and a lot of the crews are frightened of crocodiles and usually one trip they've had enough - don't want to go out again. So I've just about decided I'll forget about employing crews. They're just about more trouble than they're worth.

**JD** Are they local people the crew you employ when you do?

**WEIR** Oh, we've employed local; we've employed those travelling; we've employed those that have supposedly come off fishing boats in other States and very few of them are much good and those that are good can make better money on-shore. If they're good fishermen they're pretty good at something else and they can always get a good job on shore. So we're left with the dregs in the labour market which is not very good.

**JD** Are the crocodiles a real problem?

**WEIR** Yes, the crocodiles are a problem and getting worse all the time. We're not allowed to shoot them; we're not allowed to harm them in any way. I've been told by the Fisheries Department even if they attack us we're not allowed to hit them [laughs].



I think that was a bit far-fetched, but that's what they told me, but I don't think they meant it.

As soon as you put up in an area and set your nets, the crocodiles eye the nets off and they swim up to the nets and wait for a fish to get caught and then they try and grab that fish out of the net and that's not an isolated case. That's every day that happens. It's my opinion that the crocodiles are thicker than they've ever been. Not big crocodiles - up to ten feet - never see a big one. Not like in the days of crocodile shooting: we used to shoot sixteen footers, one after the other.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

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## TAPE 1 SIDE B

**JD** Joe, do the crocodiles damage your nets much?

**WEIR** No, crocodiles don't damage your net very much. Sometimes they get a back leg in and scratch and tear the net, but that's pretty rare too. If the crocodile's got any size about him and he gets tangled in a net he's very hard to get out. If you don't have any lifting gear to lift them with then you've got to manhandle the lot. If it's too big to manhandle into a dinghy you sort of got to lean over the side and untangle him. The first thing [unclear] when he gets caught in the net is wrap himself up like a Christmas parcel then he drowns and and you're left with the long job of untangling him.

**JD** Are the recreational fishermen a problem for you professionals?

**WEIR** When you say recreational fishermen, I take it you mean fishermen that use a fishing line, not a net? I would say they're no problem whatsoever to professional fishermen. They've got to be a pretty good line fisherman to catch too many fish in relation to make the fish supply scarce - that's in my opinion. But if you're talking about recreational fishermen that use nets, yes, they're a big problem. They take all the juvenile fish. They take anything that swims in the water. If they don't want it, it dies anyway: they just clean the whole area out. I don't think that's good for anybody.

**JD** Is there a conflict between the recreational people and the professionals?

**WEIR** No, I don't think there's any conflict between the line fishermen and the professional fishermen. I do believe that it's a conflict between the illegal net fishermen and the professional fishermen and there's also a bit of a conflict between the tourist operators that depend on fish for a tourist attraction. I think it's unfounded (their complaints) but there is a bit of a conflict [unclear]. From the attitude when some of them talk to you.

**JD** They think you're fishing the.... or you're taking too many fish, not leaving enough for the tourists?

**WEIR** Well a few months ago I was up the Ord (went up there to catch fish). I'd only just got there (a few hours) and the tourist operator came down the Ord in a dinghy from Kunnurra with some, I suppose they were local tourists - I don't think they were travelling tourists - they got their rods and reels and the operator asked me where all the big fish were. They wanted to catch one to win a trophy and I said there just wasn't any there at the time, they were too early. The fish hadn't gone up the Ord: the

wet season was all wrong, but they'd probably be there in a month or two and they didn't believe that - I'm pretty sure of that. They reckoned that the fish were just scarce and getting scarcer and scarcer, but I don't think he was a person of long standing in the area and doesn't understand that the fish don't stay in one area all the time. As I say, as I know, they just go up the Ord to feed when there's a lot of food available which is when the floods are [unclear] and are receding. This year there was no floods and there was no bait fish - there was nothing up the Ord. It could be put down to the birds on the Ord now that it's dammed and all the flats [unclear - excessive noise] to the Ord there's probably millions of acres are probably covered with bird life and all those are fish eating birds or water birds. I think they could deplete the food stocks so the bigger fish (I'm only guessing on this)... I think that's probably it.

**JD** Joe, some parts of Australia, restaurants and fish shops serve people fish that they call barramundi which is really not barramundi. In other words they substitute a cheap fish, is that a problem for you?

**WEIR** Well, I don't know about what you say "substitutes", this could be a fish altogether different from barramundi, or could be a fish altogether different from barramundi or it could be, what they call, Taiwanese barramundi. I believe it's a real barramundi that's bred under aqua culture conditions and this fish (I haven't seen it myself) I've been told by people that have seen it, but it's not barramundi and yet all the suppliers of it say it's barramundi, but it doesn't look anything like the barramundi fillets that we supply [unclear] perfectly white flesh, whereas ours is pinkish with a brown outer layer of flesh on it. It doesn't resemble it and that all the users of it admit that it's no good, but that it's cheaper than what we supply and therefore they use it.

**JD** What about the Nile perch under the name of Kenyan or African barramundi?

**WEIR** Yes, I wasn't aware that they imported Nile perch. I knew they did import a couple to Queensland for experimental purposes to try and rear them, but apart from that I didn't know that they imported it in fillets to eat or anything. It's news to me. The only thing I know about a Nile perch, I've seen a photo of it and it looks like a barramundi to me.

**JD** Do you think the fishery is being well managed?

**WEIR** No. I don't know who's managing it or I've got no faith really in the fisheries management plans. They seem to be all wrong somewhere along the line. It mightn't be the fisheries. It seems pretty odd to me that foreign boats can come into our water and catch and take millions of tons of fish out and our own fishermen can't sell their product. They find it very hard to make a living. I mean [in] a few years we're not going to have any wet fishermen in Australia. We're going to buy all our fish from Japan or China and Korea. I don't think we'll have a fisherman in the country.

I'm not an economist and I don't know much about running a country but to my small mind, I see that the amount of fishing vessels, especially the Japanese ones, are allowed because we sell them iron ore. I think we'd be better off leaving the iron ore in the ground for our own use at a later date than selling it all. The best [unclear] Australia's going to have in the whole iron ore [unclear] the lot. They'll have a big stockpile of it there. We won't have any fish; we won't have any iron ore - I don't know what we'll do then. I think that goes for everything that's in the ground - things you can't replace. I think it should be left in the ground for our own use and use it when we want it. Not sell it away so that eventually we haven't got anything.

I don't think I've got much more to say on that angle. I think the best way to run a country is the survival of the fittest. That way you get the right person for the right job because it's the best man for the job - he's a survivor. All the weak ones for the job are left by the wayside - they can take up some other occupation more suitable to them. But when you start detection rackets you end up with a fishermen doing a job that he knows nothing about and bricklayer out there fishing or something and a fisherman laying bricks. Everything gets in a hell of a muddle and no one knows what they're doing. I'm a firm believer in survival of the fittest. I think that's the way the country should operate.

I don't think I can say much more.

**JD** Do you plan to stay in Wyndham, Joe?

**WEIR** Well, I think I would like to finish my days in a little bit better climate. Not a cold climate but a little bit cooler climate, say close to the edge of the desert where it's much cooler. When I say the edge of the desert - a desert that goes right to the coastline. I'd like to be by the water because where you've got a desert close to the coast you've got a good climate and I think that's where I'd like to finish up, but right now I'm still pretty fit and I feel pretty active. I've only to take a day off and I start walking around in circles wanting something to do [laughs]. I can't see myself stopping for a while yet. That's it I think.

**JD** Okay. Right, well look thanks very much and all the best for the future with you. Thank you very much Joe.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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