



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. Brian Tate also conducted one interview in New South Wales.

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

The following people from the State of New South Wales tell their stories here.

Frank **Bonser**

Denis **Brown**

Ted **Byles**

Pat **Clifford**

Geoff **Fidden**

John **Garven**

Noel **Gogerly**

Tom **Goodlad**

Bob **Gordon**

Norm **Grant**

Joe **Greco**

Neville **Harris**

Alex **Heynatz**

Cecil **Heynatz**

George **McRae**

Barry **McRoberts**

Ernest **Motum**

Bruce **Paddon**

Evans **Paddon**

Tory **Puglisi**

Albie **Singleton**

Dulcie **Stace**

Ken **Tidswell**

Eric **Toyer**

Kevin **Warren**

Fred **Woods**

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Edited transcript of an interview with FRANK BONSER

INTRODUCTION

Frank Bonser has had a long and distinguished career in the Government administration of fishing in New South Wales. Prior to his retirement he was chief inspector of fisheries in that State and subsequently was awarded the Order of Australia medal for his services to the industry. During his service he saw many changes in fishing, changes in techniques and equipment, changes in technology and management, and changes in people both fishermen and fisheries officers. In this interview he discusses these changes and in addition expresses some of the concerns of the industry including the need for consultation between government and industry and the need for improved training for officers, particularly in view of their changing role from that of simply enforcement to a more advisory function.

The interview recounts some of the incidents Mr Bonser was involved in during his time in the Fisheries Division. These include the conflict between Eden and Ulladulla fishermen (happily, now resolved), the question of professional versus recreational fishermen's interests (including big game fishing), the High Court test case to determine Commonwealth/State jurisdiction and the seizure and prosecution of a Japanese long line fishing vessel (or more accurately, of her master). In retirement Frank Bonser has retained his links with the fishing industry and is the administrator of a now successfully functioning fishermen's co-operative. He is also the New South Wales Project Officer of this oral history of the Australian fishing industry which is being conducted by Murdoch University.

The interviewer is Jack Darcey. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 040 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Frank, would you record your full name, date of birth and place of birth please.

BONSER Francis Neville Bonser [spells it out]. I was born at Canterbury, New South Wales on the 4th June, 1925.

JD And you were brought up in New South Wales?

BONSER Brought up in New South Wales. I was a regular amateur fisherman with my father for a number of years and I went to school in New South Wales. I got my intermediate certificate and I joined the Sydney County Council and [stayed there] up until 1943 when I went into the Navy and served in the Royal Australian Navy for two years and nine months and went back to the Sydney County Council. In 1946 I got married and we were away on our honeymoon and my wife happened to meet one of her school pals who was married to a fisheries inspector. We spent holidays with them

and I became interested in the job and a position came up. It was advertised in 1951, I applied for it and I got the position as an inspector of fisheries. I was stationed in Sydney from 1951 until 1954 but I did a number of relieving jobs up and down the New South Wales coast. [In] 1954 I was transferred to Merimbula which included the Eden fishing port. I spent a fair bit of time involved in the trawl fisheries, going to sea with the fishermen and looking at problems. In 1955 the Commonwealth Fisheries Act was proclaimed and the first notice issued under the Commonwealth Act, Notice No 1, referred to the legal size of cod ends for Danish seine and otter trawl nets. That came in in round about January, 1955.

At that time there was a need for some provision for the escapement of under sized fish and that legislation was very effective. When I went to Eden in 1954 there were six trawlers working out of Eden and during the winter most of them used to go to Lakes Entrance to try to eke out a living. When I left the port of Eden in 1958 there was something like twelve, fourteen vessels [which] were working out of the port and none of them went to Lakes Entrance during the winter. They were able to maintain a living fishing out of Eden. During 1956 there was a conflict between the Ulladulla based and some Wollongong boats and the Eden fishing fleet on the fishing grounds east of Merimbula. It was alleged that the Ulladulla fleets were using undersized cod ends and there was a number of shots fired. I got instructions to do something about it and to stop the conflict. That evening the vessels pulled into Merimbula and anchored up. I was accompanied by the local policeman (I commandeered a vessel). We went out and we seized a number of cod ends off all the vessels as they were under size. I think there was about twelve vessels involved. They eventually appeared in court and were fined and in 1958 I was transferred to Wollongong.

Now after I'd been there a short while there was a number of problems with trawlers and enforcement. One of the Italian fishermen said to me, "You've come here to drive a knife through our heart to kill us." I said, "Well if anybody's going to kill somebody, you're going to kill yourselves the way you're fishing." So anyhow we sort of tried to educate them and there was a few problems still going on with cod ends. Some trawlers were swapping cod ends over when they went to sea. They had a legal one on when they came back in but they fished illegally or they put heavier bags in the nets and cut the mouth of the cod end off so they could just fish with a very long bag. It was decided that [on] recommendations to the Department, we increase the net fully to three and a quarter throughout which would stop this practise.

There's a fisherman in Wollongong who's an excellent net maker and fisherman, Rocco Musumeci senior. With Rocco I discussed the problem that the Eden fishermen were having with the fish meshing in the wings and the bags and there was all sorts of problems. So it was decided that the way to overcome it was to slightly increase the ply of the net and we did this and we came up with a successful net. I took the net to Eden and fished with the Eden fishermen and proved to them that the net was working very, very satisfactorily and got over their problems. From that day on the net size was maintained at three and a quarter inches and today they fish with much bigger mesh sizes in the wing; sometimes up to twelve to fourteen inches for less resistance. After I returned from Eden, and further discussing it with Rocco Musumeci, he said, "Now I will build you a net of three and a quarter to catch mosquitoes (small fish). So I said yes. So he built a net and we went out and he said, "Well try this", and we tried it and it certainly caught small fish. So it proves that it's critical that the cod end and its construction is important.

To give you some indication of defeating net regulations, fishermen have got the ability and the technology to do it, plus the experience. A case in point are prawn trawlers. They built cod ends 200 meshes round at the end and the resistance was so

great that they found that the prawns were kicking back up through the nets and going over. So they decided they had to reduce the size of the cod end but I think until such time as we work out a solution on taper and taper the cod end from the mouth down or only allow a certain number of meshes around the end of the cod end (the bottom end of the cod end) to eliminate the capture of small prawns. I think that the culling process has got to be allowed to go unhindered whilst the net is fishing.

JD During your time in the Department Frank, you would have seen many changes in the organisation of the Department, wouldn't you?

BONSER Oh yes, yes. Initially when I first started we were with the Chief Secretary's Department. We were the Fisheries Branch of the Chief Secretary's Department. Then we went to the Department of Services, then to National Parks & Wildlife and in about 1976/77 we were a Department in our own right with Don Francois [who] was the Director of Fisheries and responsible direct to the Minister. Prior to fisheries becoming a department in its own right, the Director of Fisheries was responsible to the permanent head who would either be the Under Secretary or the Director of National Parks and had no direct access to the Minister which made a very, very big difference to the fisheries of New South Wales with the Director having the ear of the Minister.

JD Subsequently however it's come back to being, or fisheries have come back to being a part of a larger Department of Agriculture?

BONSER Yes. In 1983 the New South Wales Fisheries was amalgamated with the Department of Agriculture and then again the process started again of the Director or the Chief of the Division going through the Director General of Agriculture to the Minister.

JD From within the Department, was your experience that it was best when you were on your own as a separate Department or didn't it make much difference?

BONSER I think as far as the industry point of view, as far as the Fisheries Department... When we were a separate Department we were able to get things through to the Minister and it was a great assistance to the industry. There was great strides made in that period of time with Francois as Director.

JD You'd have also seen very considerable changes in policies over the years?

BONSER Yes, yes. We've gone from a sort of an unmanaged fisheries to managed fisheries. The first managed fisheries in New South Wales was the abalone fisheries which was a change in policy. The Government, or the Director of Fisheries believed that it was the survival of the fittest and that everybody had the right to go broke as fishermen.... You'll find that in ports you've got your top fishermen and then you get your also [unclear] but the majority of the people that have stopped within the industry have made a real success of it.

JD You'd have seen lots of changes in fishing techniques and the type of people involved in the industry and the boats and gear and the marketing arrangements, I'm sure?

BONSER Oh it's enormous. In the early days it was all cotton and linen nets and manila ropes, natural fibres, but with the advent of the nylons.... We carried out tests with meshing nets and we found that the nylon net caught three to one; three times as much fish as the cotton and linen nets. They were finer. Fish couldn't see them and then with the trawl fisheries, with the Danish seiners taking over from the steam

trawlers, the steam trawlers were active in New South Wales up to about 1954. They went out through pure economics....

JD They were the vessels from the United Kingdom, were they?

BONSER They were vessels that were from the United Kingdom. They were bought by the New South Wales Government in 1916 but then the seine boats took over after the second World War when the seine trawlers took over. There was no echo sounders in those days. All the fishermen used to work off were land marks. Just prior to leaving Eden, sounders came on to the market and fishermen were able to work areas that they weren't able to fish before. The benefit, as far as the fishery was concerned in those days with the natural fibre gear, once you got fast on the bottom and your net broke, (naturally you avoided the fastings if possible) the trawl stopped and the fish were able to get out of the nets; but today with the heavy reinforced nylon nets and heavy steel wire (stainless steel wire or combination wires), they just trawl on. They trawl grounds, particularly coraly bottoms that they couldn't fish before. Today there's much more weight on the lead lines. They dig in much deeper and I think that's detrimental to the food chain on the bottom of the ocean. Also today they've got bobbins on the bottom on their lines (on the lead line) that they can fish over rocks and coraly bottoms and get access to fish that were never ever available before.

JD Do you feel that that sort of interferes with the food chain and ultimately is likely to decrease the catch?

BONSER When you look at the fisheries.... The tiger flathead is a classic example and I don't think that the increased technology and improvement in gear is a direct result. I think pollution has got to play a big part in the destruction of the inshore grounds and certainly there's been vast changes in gear etc which has increased the pressure on fishery.

JD Is it a question of declining catches?

BONSER I don't think there's any doubt that the unit effort has gone down considerably as far as the inshore ground is concerned. They wouldn't be catching one-tenth of what they caught ten years ago.

JD That's a very dramatic decline.

BONSER Yes.

JD And yet there's been all sorts of management techniques brought in to try and reduce effort.

BONSER Yes and there always seems to be ways of getting around it. I mean to say, they're trying to tailor it to everybody's needs and it's not possible. I think some real hard decisions have got to be made but I think those decisions have got to be made with industry. I think you've got to be able to sit down with industry and analyse the problems and then we forget all the factions and try to get a consensus amongst the industry that this is the best way to go.

JD Do you think the people in the industry, the actual fishermen, are listened to when they put forward their point of view?

BONSER I don't think so. I think it's unfortunate that they're unable to make the points they know where the problems are but they have trouble in getting the message over to some people who don't listen to them and I think that the Governments have got to listen to the producers and the suppliers and try to correct some of these faults. It's going to take time, might take years and years but I think there's got to be drastic decisions made.

JD Frank would you say there's a different breed of fishermen coming into the industry now from what pertained in the past?

BONSER Oh sure. You're getting the qualified people, I mean, say under the Uniform Shipping Code, they've got to be qualified. The fishermen are qualified by experience, a lot of the old skippers and they're excellent skippers. They have learned the technology of all the new apparatus that's available. They've managed it well but in lots of vessels, they just have fishing skippers on or just skippers to navigate the vessel from point to point. I think with the otter trawl gear on the bottom, (with Danish seining, the gear used to be on the bottom for about 90 minutes) today, providing that the ground is trawlable, they can trawl for hours; up to six and eight hours. I think that's got a bearing on it also. We haven't got a great depth of trawl grounds, although they've discovered the deep water grounds. Up to about 1964/65/66 we never fished much more than about 90 fathoms but today we're out into 460 and deeper.

JD The costs of operating a vessel must have increased enormously?

BONSER Oh astronomically. Everything you look at as far as the gear is concerned, the vessels, stainless steel, it costs a fortune.

JD Is that making it more difficult for a person to get started, an individual?

BONSER It's impossible for an individual unless he's got big money to buy into a vessel. With the management plans, they're closed off most of the fisheries and the only way that people can get into the industry is to buy somebody else out.

JD Does that mean that it's becoming more a matter of companies operating vessels?

BONSER That's for sure. More and more companies are buying up units. They're buying boats and just taking the units and stripping the vessel to the units and then keeping the units in reserve but I think some of them are going to get their fingers burnt.

JD Would you see that as a step in the wrong direction for the fisheries in the long term?

BONSER Yes. I think.... We were always of the belief that the family of fisherman should have access to it and it should pass from the father to the son as normal in most of the fishing villages, as most of the vessels have got a father and son relationship, and we felt that the sons should be encouraged to join the fisheries in their own right; but under the present arrangement in most management programmes, it's impossible.

JD Also during your career, there'd have been great changes in the marketing of fish?

BONSER Oh enormous, enormous. We went from double boxes, (wooden boxes) of 130 odd pounds to a box, (dirty boxes). They were steamed cleaned but by the time you got them back, they were impregnated with fish slime. The marking system in New South Wales, it's improved dramatically. The Chief Secretary's Department took over marketing in 1945 and in 1961 the Government brought in the New South Wales Fish Marketing Authority and the Government said to the fishermen, "When you can demonstrate to the Government that you're in a position to run your own industry, we will hand over control (producer control)", and that happened in 1961. From then on the New South Wales Fish Authority have purchased premises at Black Wattle Bay.

They've recently just upgraded that to one of the most modern markets in the world, spending something like \$27m. They're promoting educational facilities for children. School children can go into the markets and physically handle fish and fillet and watch the preparation and the cooking of it. They've got an excellent advisory management team down there and they are promoting fish. There's been a lot of promotion in New South Wales which wasn't on before.

JD Is it being effective, do you think?

BONSER It's very effective. I think as the heart scares come on, more and more people are eating fish. I've got a very old friend of mine from Lake Illawarra, Alf Byrnes, he is 84 years of age; 84 on the sixteenth of this month; plays golf four days a week; plays off a handicap of seventeen and eats mullet. He's eaten mullet all his life. He's had two heart attacks but he maintains that the fish oil, the oil out of the mullet, is keeping him alive.

JD There's a controversy in the community generally and in the industry as to the... Conflict's a bit too strong a word perhaps, but the difference in points of view between the professional fishermen and the recreational fishermen. Would you like to comment on that?

BONSER Yes. I think the CSIRO in 1954 did an extensive study into Lake Macquarie on the conflict between the amateur and the professional fisherman. I think it cost something like a quarter of a million pounds at the time and it was proved that the amateur fisherman killed more under sized fish than the commercial fisherman. In New South Wales when we were [the] Department of Fisheries, Don Francois encouraged the Fishermen's Union of Co-Operatives (as it was called at the time, and then later the Professional Fishermen's Association) to confer with the Amateur Advisory Committee which was set up by the Government to represent all amateur fishing bodies and we used to have an odd party with a couple of grogs around the table and we found that there was broad discussion between the two parties and they were getting closer together. I think the professional fishermen appreciated the amateurs' point of view and the amateurs appreciated the pro point of view.

What we did in New South Wales, in most of the estuary fisheries we introduced weekend closures which gave the amateur fishermen exclusive use of most of the waters with the exception of prawns in the prawn season. It gave them exclusive use from about 6.00 pm on the Friday to 6.00 pm on a Sunday. We felt that that cut down a lot of the conflict.

JD What about the big game fishermen off shore?

BONSER Yes well they were part of the Amateur Advisory Council and we introduced a tag and release programme which enabled them to participate. They took a great interest in this. They tagged marlin, king fish yellow fin tuna and sharks. It meant that

they could go out and fish and they were involved in a programme which kept them up-to-date with the capture and the data and the distribution of the various species. It was a good team and as a result of their representation, we prohibited the taking of marlin by professional fishermen. We also put limits on red morowong for instance and bass without any great deal of harm to the commercial fishery.

JD To come back to your own career Frank, you got up to where you were at Wollongong. What happened after that?

BONSER A funny story about Wollongong. When I first went there, there was a bit of opposition to fisheries and the fishermen approached the local member to have me transferred. They got wind of the fact that I was being transferred about three years later and they went to the local member and they requested that he try to stop the transfer [laughs]. I was talking to the Superintendent of Police one day and he said to me... the late Rex Connors was the MLA at the time), "I was talking to Rex the other day and he told me a story about the fishermen wanting to have you transferred, when you first arrived, and now that it appears that you're going to be transferred, they want you to stay." He said he was intrigued. He said he wanted to meet this bloke. I never got around to meeting Rex Connor but that was the sort of thing that happens to inspectors.

In 1965 I was transferred to Sydney after the reorganisation of the Department with the appointment of senior inspector. I was appointed senior inspector in charge of the metropolitan zone which went from Sydney to Tuggerah Lakes in the north. It was during this period of time that I was involved in a court case which ended up in the High Court with Bob Lamacchia which became the Bonser v. Lamacchia High Court Decision. It all happened when I was patrolling off Barrenjoey Head about six and a half miles off shore. Bob was using an under-sized cod end. The cod end was seized and consequently Bob was served with a summons. He rang me one day and said, "I've got to go to Court", and I said, "Well fair enough", but he said, "I don't want to go". I said, "Well you'd better go because there could be a fine involved of \$1,000. You know what went on. You know exactly what you said". I said "and it's down on the Brief." He said, "I'm guilty" and I said, "Well that's your decision, but mate if you want to have a look at the Brief, you can have a look at it." Anyhow the next thing I heard, we go to court and it's defended. They raise the fact that the Governor General didn't have the power under the Commonwealth Fisheries Act to proclaim a notice.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

BONSER So what happened was, we went to court. We found that it was defended, and as it was a Constitutional issue, it had to be lifted to the High Court. The officer from the Deputy Crown Solicitor's office said to me at the time, "What sort of money has this fellow got?" I said, "Well he hasn't got a great deal of money. The boat supports two families and he'd have a problem paying costs in the High Court." He said, "Well between you and I, we've decided that we will pay their costs in the High Court because they're contesting the validity of the Act". That was done and it's ironical that the Chief Justice at the time, Sir Garfield Barwick, was sitting in judgement on one of his own Acts because he was the Attorney General for the

Commonwealth Government when the Commonwealth Fisheries Act was brought down in 1951.

So the Decision came down and it clarified the constitutional powers of the States and the Commonwealth in regards to the three mile limit. The decision was that the Commonwealth jurisdiction, or the State jurisdiction finished at low water mark from the sea beaches. I think the Commonwealth might have been anxious to get their hands on the whole of the three mile limit but I think one of the factors that probably changed their minds was the fact that if they took over the three mile limit, they also inherited all the sewerage outfalls and today that would have saved [the] New South Wales Government billions of dollars. The Commonwealth handed back powers to the States to make laws in relation to fisheries providing they didn't conflict with the Commonwealth Fishing Laws.

JD That's within the three mile limit.

BONSER Within the three mile, yes. I remained as the senior inspector in Sydney (metropolitan) from 1965 to 1970. Then we took over our first offshore patrol boat and we were having difficulties finding a skipper for the vessel. We tried out a number of inspectors and they weren't interested so I volunteered for the job and I was the first skipper of the New South Wales patrol boat **Tracker One**. I was on the boat for about ten or eleven months and then I was promoted to supervising inspector in charge of training. I was responsible for the training programme for inspectors in New South Wales. I had training for about five or six years and decided I'd had enough and I asked for a change. I was appointed supervising inspector in charge of the Northern Division which took over the whole of the north coast.

During that time I got a call one evening at home in 1976, August of '76 (24th August actually at 10.00 pm). I'd worked all day, had been watching television, had a shower and the phone rang and the Chief Inspector said, "Confidentially, we've just seized the Japanese long liner off Coffs Harbour." He said, "The Director want's somebody to go up there." I said, "Like who?" He said, "Like you." I said, "Good God." I said I'd require a driver so I rang a young fellow, Max Withnall at Woy Woy and said to his wife (Max was in bed), "Throw a few rags in the bag for Maxey. I'll be there in two hours. We're going to Coffs Harbour to do a special job." I got to Woy Woy, said to Max, "You've got the wheel" and I went to sleep. We got to Coffs Harbour at 6.00 am. The vessel was in port but it was still undergoing Customs' inspection.

We got aboard the vessel about 9.00 o'clock. I interviewed the skipper of the vessel [rustle of papers]. It was the **Kompira Maru No 5** [spells it out]. It was found fishing nine miles east of Smokey Cape Light by a RAN patrol vessel. The Commonwealth Police were also there and they wanted to take charge of the vessel. The Commonwealth Police wanted to take the vessel to the Clarence River. I spoke to the captain of the **HMAS Bombard** who apprehended the vessel and he was a bit concerned. They wanted to get back to Sydney 'cause his son was being baptised on the Sunday at **HMAS Waterhen** and I said to him, "I don't think there's any problem with that. I think we'll be back in Sydney". I'd been in touch with my Department and I insisted that the vessel come back to Sydney because that's were all the facilities were. I also spoke to the Naval officer in charge in Sydney and he shared the same sentiments. As a result, the vessel was ordered to Sydney under escort from **HMAS Bombard**. I didn't accompany the vessel back but the two Commonwealth policemen were on board the vessel (the Japanese long liner). There were very heavy seas and I think they were sick all the way back. We had a comfortable ride back by car.

On arrival back in Sydney we again interrogated the skipper and the fishing master and as a result of that it was decided that we would lodge a prosecution against the skipper of the vessel. The necessary summonses were made out. I swore the information and I delivered the summons to their barrister and he said that if we didn't go for forfeiture of the vessel, they would plead guilty. I told him that I wasn't in a position to make that decision, it was a matter for the court. We went to court and the Deputy Crown Solicitor suggested to the Magistrate that he make a decision. The Magistrate said no, it wasn't his responsibility but he would listen to any case that was put to him for forfeiture. The matter was adjourned until we got in touch with the Department of Primary Industry. I think the Minister at the time was off sick and the case was adjourned until 2.00 o'clock. We re-convened at ten past two and I think it was up to the Prime Minister of the time to make the decision that we didn't want the vessel. So at ten to three the Prime Minister advised the Crown Solicitor that we weren't going for forfeiture of the vessel. I think it was a little bit embarrassing at the time because Australia was negotiating a new wool and beef agreement with Japan. Anyhow the matter went before the court. The skipper was found guilty, fined a thousand dollars with \$6.00 court costs and \$50 professional fees and that was about the end of that one.

JD Frank, before we continue with the rest of your career, can I just ask you this: During the time you served with the Fisheries Division (or Department), the role of the fisheries officer would have changed I imagine [unclear]?

BONSER Very much so. [With] a lot of the older fellows it was just straight law enforcement. It was just bang, bang, bang and that was it and there seemed to be a tendency for people to get as many prosecutions as they could and this stood them in fair standing with some of the senior officers of the Department. I think the role of the inspector has changed because there's a lot of liaison with industry. There's a lot of liaison with amateur bodies and I think it's changed vastly and people are becoming more and more educated in law and I think inspectors have got to become more and more educated in the field. They must have a good understanding of what they're about. I think training of inspectors is most important and the only way that we'd get training would be to transfer people around. It costs a lot of money, but you can't put cost on education when you've got various fisheries, such a big estuarine fishery and a large offshore fisheries, it's important that you transfer people around so that they can have this experience.

JD You were the training officer for some years, weren't you?

BONSER I was the training officer for about five or six years, yes and it was an ongoing thing. I kept an overview of the training when I became assistant chief inspector. I was assistant chief inspector up till 1979. The chief inspector had a heart problem and had a stroke and was on extended sick leave. I was acting chief until 1980 and from 1980 to 1985 I was chief inspector in the New South Wales fisheries and I went across to [the] Department of Agriculture as chief inspector. I got on very well with the Department of Agriculture. There was a need for people to know what fisheries was all about and it was my job to try and enlighten the top brass in agriculture what fisheries was about. I had a commitment. My troops had a commitment to fisheries, although we changed Departments. We never changed the rules, (we only changed the colour of the gurnsey) so we still had a team and it had to be a team effort.

JD And you retired in 1985?

BONSER I retired in July of 1985 and I was awarded the Order of Australia Medal. It was announced in the Queen's Birthday List of June of '86. I received the medal in September '86. I was invited to a function in December 1986 as a send off for the general manager of the Fish Marketing Authority and I was asked whether I would go down and have a look at the Lakellawarra Fishermen's Co-Operative to see whether it was viable. So I went down and spent three days there, had a talk to some of my old friends and I decided it was possible to get it back on the rails. In March of 1987 I was appointed the administrator and I've been the administrator ever since. It was in decline. They had lost a lot of money. They started in 1985 and never made a profit and kept borrowing money off the authority. We stemmed the flow of funds and started to make a profit. Last year we put in an ice making plant and paid cash for it. It's fairly buoyant at the moment.

JD Congratulations on the award and on the post-retirement job. I hope it continues to go well with you.

BONSER Thanks very much Jack.

JD Anything else that you'd like recorded before we finish Frank?

BONSER I think I've found a niche in fisheries and I enjoyed the work. I enjoyed the people and I can go to any port in New South Wales and meet up with fishermen and somebody knows me or I know somebody in the ports and its very good. Also the fact that I think there's been a big interchange with senior law enforcement officers within the Commonwealth. We used to meet every year (they still do) and I attended a number of those and I've made some very, very good friends amongst the senior inspectors or the chief inspectors of the various States. If we were having a problem, we would get on the phone and would discuss it. We found that we had similar problems and we'd be able to work back from there. I think it was the after hour sessions that were most beneficial.

JD Are you confident about the future of the fisheries in Australia?

BONSER No, not really. Personally myself, I don't know of one fishery that I'd like to put money into. I think we've got to re-think the whole thing. I think there's a great need for Governments and the right sort of fishermen to sit down and talk and I think there's got to be a coming together of all fishermen. There's a lot of jealousy amongst fishermen. I think they've got to forget that and think about their future in the industry and the industry as a whole.

JD And that's not really happening enough?

BONSER I don't think so. I think that there's meetings outside of meetings and I think this is wrong. I think that there's a lot of lobbying goes on and there's a lot of desire by Governments to get the right people on the Boards that are going to say yes and I think that's not the answer. I think you've got to try and bring as many of the factions into it and try to break those down.

JD Right. Well thank you very much for this interview, Frank.

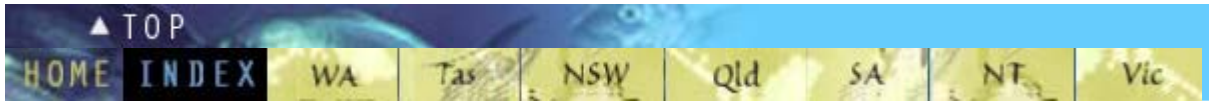
BONSER Thanks Jack. Thank you.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Frank Bonser, ex-Chief Inspector of Fisheries in New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with DENIS BROWN

INTRODUCTION

Denis Brown is a long line fisherman, fishing mainly for yellow fin tuna for the Japanese sushi market out of Wollongong, New South Wales. He is the chairman of the East Coast Long Line Fishermen's Association. Prior to entering the fishing industry he was a metallurgist working in the steel industry in Wollongong.

In this interview Mr Brown gives an excellent exposition of the long line fishing technique and also provides much information regarding the handling and marketing of tuna. He also discusses the concerns of the fishermen and the management plan being established in the fishery. On the question of pollution in the marine environment his scientific background makes his discourse a particularly valuable one. Indeed the entire interview is a significant contribution to this oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry.

The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University in Mr Brown's home in Mt Warrigal, New South Wales on the 24th March, 1990. There are three sides on two tapes and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Denis, would you record your full name please?

BROWN Denis Noel brown.

JD And what's your date of birth?

BROWN 8th of the third 1947.

JD And where were you born?

BROWN In Sydney.

JD Have you been brought up in Sydney and spent all your life in this area?

BROWN I spent all my youth in Sydney, finished my schooling in Sydney, did a year's university in Sydney and then transferred down to Wollongong University part time and gained employment in the steel works.

JD In the steel works?

BROWN It was BHP, yes.

JD Did you have a family background in fishing at all?

BROWN No, not in the commercial sense. My father was a keen recreational fisherman and I was a keen recreational fisherman from a very young age. I had become very involved in particularly the tuna fisheries from a recreational point of view and had done a reasonable amount of research into where they came from and what was known about the, particularly the yellow fin tuna. From about 1978, 1979 I'd been particularly interested in the sushimi marketing methods for tuna and had been sufficiently interested in that by 1982 to leave my employment as a metallurgist with BHP and purchased a vessel in partnership with another fellow and commenced fishing commercially.

JD For tuna?

BROWN For tuna with not the whole of my activity involved in just the tunas, but it was a significant part of the operation. It was about half of the operation involved long lining for tuna, specifically for the export sushimi market.

JD And that was the yellow fin?

BROWN Yellow fin tuna, yes.

JD Is that used for sushimi?

BROWN Yes. It's used very substantially for sushimi. The highest regard, or the highest rated fish quality wise is the blue fin tuna followed by the big eye tuna and then sort of third on the scale is the yellow fin tuna. It is the most abundant.

JD Is that the one they call a stripy?

BROWN No. The stripy's another tuna again, a relatively small tuna in our waters. The stripy is predominantly used for canning purposes. They use a lot of yellow fin for canning purposes too all the way round the world but it is the most abundant tuna that's utilised as sushimi, as the main species that is used as sushimi in Japan and in other countries that are consuming sushimi type products.

JD Are you still fishing for tuna?

BROWN Yes, yes, very much so.

JD Could you explain your operation, what you do with long line fishing?

BROWN Um, the technique involves finding a suitable location in terms of where fish have been abundant in the past or where you find environmental conditions such that you think there might be fish in that area and then several hundred hooks are baited up.

JD What with?

BROWN With pilchards, slimy mackerel (people in other states call them blue mackerel I believe), yellow tail (some other states refer to them as scad); they are the most common baits that we use.

JD Do you catch them for bait or do you buy bait?

BROWN Yes. I catch them for bait. Not all of the tuna fishermen, not all of the long line tuna fishermen catch them for bait themselves. It's a fairly complicated means of catching them and you've got quite a bit of money tied up in the equipment to catch them. A lot of people just buy them or club together with a few other fishermen to get them.

JD They'd be netted of course, wouldn't they?

BROWN Yes they're netted, yeah with small purse seine nets is the most common way of catching them because you go through quite a volume of them as bait. Well they're baited up. Usually each hook is baited up as it is being set. We then steam through the area that we're intending to fish and we pay[play?] out a large length of what we call main line which in my case is nylon. In the case of some other operators it is a rope type material, a polyester type rope material which is typical of the Japanese style operation. The monofilament is more typical of an American and an Australian type tuna long lining operation. So we pay out this mainline behind us and as it's going over the stern of the boat we attach a snood of, in my case about ten fathoms long with a baited hook on the end of it. The typical set-up is to put out about seven hooks approximately 50 yards apart and then attach a float, typically about ten inches in diameter or the equivalent flotation to a ten inch diameter spherical float and then pay out another seven hooks and put another float on.

JD So you use only one line?

BROWN Yes.

JD And what's the length of that line?

BROWN In my case it's between, depending on weather conditions, between twenty and 25 kilometres of main line. It has about a 30% slack in the line so it's actually shot over about fifteen kilometres across the surface of the water and it hangs between the floats in a catenary curve with the seven hooks sinking it down. In fact to promote the depth of that catenary we have a hydraulic long shooter on the back of the boat which is a hydraulically powered wheel which actually puts line into the water faster than the boat is steaming along and we can adjust how much of that line we put in the water. We vary the amount of slack we have in the line. If the fish are near the surface well we have very little slack. If we're finding the fish are deeper or we think the conditions are such that the fish might be deeper, then we put more slack into the line between each float.

JD You don't actually steam ahead once the line is set, or do you?

BROWN No well once we have put the line in the water we've got a length of line about fifteen kilometres long and then we just stay at one end and that then drifts naturally with the prevailing currents and we stay with it. Typically we'll leave the line soak for ten to twelve hours. Sometimes we'll leave it soak for as long as twenty to 24 hours. We periodically patrol the line and we simply look for a float which is sinking down in the water or may in fact be pulled completely under the water by a large fish

and we'll then pull that fish up and put another bait on, typically with using another snood and then we'll empty the line and we'll have a break at the other end for a couple of hours and the crew might have a sleep. Everybody takes it in turns sort of thing and we have a break for three or four hours and then come back down the line.

We work during the daytime and during the night time. Typically the line is short [at] one o'clock in the afternoon and it is retrieved from about eight or nine or ten o'clock at night. It will take us five or six hours to retrieve it if we have a few fish. Can take us up to twelve hours to retrieve a line if we have a large number. We're not a sort of operation that requires a large number of fish to be viable. We're the sort of operation that is quite viable catching three or four large fish which achieve very good prices and that's where the viability is in the operation. When you're lucky enough or good enough to find a large number of fish, a concentration of fish, well then the turnover for that method can be very, very significant. We can catch in excess of 100 fish coming from 350 or 400 hooks.

Then you've got the problem of looking after them for the appropriate quality level. Usually when large catches of fish are made the fishermen is in the position where you're unable to chill them satisfactorily. You don't have the storage space to keep them in absolutely pristine condition so you just normally pick the best of the fish as you're catching them and look after those to the highest level that you can and put the remaining fish aside and sell them in the local markets rather than attempt to keep everything and export everything because you usually come a cropper when you try and do that. Most of the boats typically in the industry on the east coast are around 40 feet in length so they do have limited storage facilities and limited ability to carry sufficient ice to handle very large catches. We're usually, as I said earlier, targeting on catching a half a dozen fish and we're very viable at that.

JD Whereabouts do you fish? Is it on the Continental Shelf or over the Shelf? How far off shore to you go?

BROWN The typical 40 foot type boat on the east coast is fishing from the near shelf area of about 70 fathoms out to 80 mile. Some vessels are working even wider than about 80 miles but weather conditions and safety considerations usually mean that a vessel of around the 40 foot mark is limited to about 80 miles. You're within reach of home when conditions deteriorate.

JD What port do you fish from Denis?

BROWN I fish from Wollongong and my vessel is a 40 foot Randal plaining hull type vessel.

JD Do you go north and south of Wollongong as well?

BROWN Yes. I have worked as far south as Montague Island which is well down towards the Victorian/New South Wales border and I work as far north as virtually the Queensland border. I've worked out of Yamba and worked from there, well north from there.

JD Are there many tuna boats fishing from Wollongong?

BROWN There's about four or five vessels. There's several vessels similar to mine and we have one of the trawlers in Wollongong [which] also utilises a long line from time to time.

JD How many crew would you carry then on a 40 foot vessel?

BROWN Typically three. Quite a number of people do operate with only two crew and that's really geared to a catch of a half a dozen fish. If you're having a catch more than, say twenty fish, the work load is very great and you're recovery rate of your line, your retrieving rate on your line is very, very slow because with only two you have to stop your whole operation every time you catch a fish. With a crew of three it enables you to keep retrieving a line with two people while one person butchers the fish and refrigerates it as quickly as possible so you can keep retrieving. That's usually the limits of the operation.

JD In your operation is the fish shot in the water before it's brought in board?

BROWN On my vessel, yes, yes. In fact the majority of vessels do shoot the fish in the water. Our primary reason for shooting them of course being to not so much kill the fish in the water but stun the fish so that it is not violently bashing into the side of the boat and bruising itself as it's brought on board and butchered. As after shooting, the fish is stunned for about 30 seconds to a minute and with a skilled deckhand on the knife they can be butchered and cored and their brain removed so that they physically can't move within that 30 second period.

JD And then they're put on ice?

BROWN Yes. They're put in an ice slurry on my vessel. Typically within the industry they're either put into an ice slurry or they are packed into a fish room and ice is packed around the fish.

JD And then you bring them ashore and they go, where?

BROWN They come ashore in Wollongong and when I first started there were no facilities for handling the sushimi type fish. The co-operative here was not familiar with arrangements and the techniques required and when I first started back in '82, '83 shipping commercial quantities we were packing the whole operation ourselves. I was doing everything from catching the fish to packing them, taking them to a DPI approved packing premises. I was my own freight forwarder arranging all of the air freight out of Australia and into Japan with the assistance of my wife and it's only been in the last three years, three or four years that the people that I was dealing with in Japan had one of the export packers in Sydney start to send them some product. This made life a lot easier for me. We'd been utilising their services for the last couple of years and since that has been happening I've been putting all my product through the local fishermen's co-operative because all they then had to do was arrange a truck to go from Wollongong to the packing facility in Sydney and they looked after everything from there on in. There was no need for the local people to arrange air freight or anything like that.

JD Packing and air freighting and so on is a very expensive undertaking, isn't it?

BROWN It wasn't quite so expensive when I first started but it has become extremely expensive in recent years. The airlines have made a number of adjustments to their scale of charges for [the] fresh chilled product and in fact all of the product that they're handling but particularly so with fresh chilled product[s]. It has gone from a

stage where in 1983 say, it would cost you about three and a half to four dollars to pack your fish and land them in Japan, it's got to the stage where you're now looking at about nine dollars for the total operation. The commissions that we have to pay in Japan for customs clearance and transportation from the airport to the marketing site and the commissions you actually pay for your, what's effectively a wholesaler there, they haven't changed in recent years, since I started in fact but the cost[s] to the Australian end have really skyrocketed.

JD There are a lot of other costs too, aren't there, in insurance, fuel, wharfage I suppose, all sorts of costs?

BROWN Yes. The actual return, even though you might be catching a good sized yellow fin tuna of around 40 or 50 kilos and achieving a price of \$20 a kilo in the markets, your total costs out of that will amount to some \$13, \$14 and you've got.... That doesn't include any of your crewing expenses, just the expenses of lost equipment and batteries for all your electronic gear that you've got and radio beacons. They're all consumables. They don't last very long and your fuel as you mentioned is quite expensive. So it doesn't leave a lot but it certainly is quite viable at that sort of level of operation, around six fish a day.

JD Are the crew on a share basis? Are they paid on a share basis?

BROWN Yes they are on my vessel. As we discussed earlier, I've got two deckhands and one deckhand's been with me for about four years now and the other fellow who's the third slot in the crew as it is, is kind of a general type hand and you find those people move round in the industry a fair bit. He's been with me for about six or seven months now. The wages consume about a third of the return of the vessel.

JD Do the crew have ambitions to own their own vessel or have they given up thoughts of that, would you say?

BROWN In my case, no they don't have ambitions to particularly own a vessel and get involved at the level that I'm involved at. The top deckhand has been with me, as I said for about four years now and he's very happy doing the sort of job that he's doing. He doesn't really want the worries of getting the financial aspects of an operation together and he's quite happy to work for a commission, or work on a share basis and operate that way. He's happy with the sort of general turnover that the operation is providing him and he's very happy with what he's doing. He's more concerned about the worries of financial aspects than anything else.

JD Do many of them have ambitions to become skippers, get their tickets and become skippers of boats?

BROWN I think in the majority of cases, I think everybody aspires to do a bit better than what you're doing now but the reality ending up that there are only a limited number, shall we say, of people who end up acquiring the wherewithal to skipper a vessel either for someone else or come up with the wherewithal to obtain their own vessel and become the owner and skipper of it.

JD Most people I imagine would start off acquiring a share in a vessel, would they?

BROWN It does happen in the industry but in my experience on the east coast, it's a very difficult thing to maintain a partnership in an operation. When I first went into commercial fishing I went in with a partner. We had equal financial input into the operation but you can't have two skippers of a vessel. So one person becomes the

skipper and one person becomes the deckhand and as long as you are getting a good financial return in your total operation, that can be quite easy to handle for either party but when an operation goes through periods, and every operation.... The nitty gritty of the fishing operation is that it's got tremendous ups and downs and when you have those downs and you have a partnership there's always doubts that the other fellow is holding up his end, is making the right decision and consequently you simply see few partnerships in the fishing industry survive for any length of time. [It] just puts so much stress on the people involved because of the notorious ups and downs of the industry.

JD Denis would you like to comment on the management of the fishery from the point of view of departmental management?

BROWN Yes. I'm the chairman of the East Coast Long Line Tunamen's Association and up until about 1980, late 1984, middle of 1985 we had had no industry association representing the tuna fishery. It had been a very small, fairly fragmented activity, the long lining fishery. Then a lot of people got excited about the financial potential of the sushimi fishery and we saw a lot of entrants come into the fishery and [we] started to get a bit of conflict in the industry as far as people bumping into each other because we do take up quite a bit of ground with our gear. We started to get an association together and in fact in the middle of 1985 [we] held our first meeting of long line tuna fishermen down in Ulladulla and started to petition the Federal Government and the State Governments to do something about getting the long line fishery for yellow fin tuna under control before it got out of hand because we had the feeling that it was getting too many entrants too quickly and we could see a situation where we could very easily be grossly over capitalised. In late 1985 the then head of the Australian Fishery Service, Dr Robert Bain issued a warning on investment in the industry and we started to get a management plan for the fishery put together.

The management side of the long line fishery is rather unique in Australia in that it was the first commercial fishery that I'm aware of that had representation from recreational anglers on the management committee. This in fact stirred up quite a number of people in the industry. They were very concerned about the principle of having recreational anglers involved on a, what they saw as being, a commercial management committee. In hindsight it has been quite good for the industry to have the recreational people there because we're really not a commercial management committee. We are a management committee looking after a fishery and it has several aspects to it. We have a recreational aspect to it and we have a commercial aspect to it. The tuna fishery, more than any other, has probably the most significant input into that fishery from the recreational anglers.

JD This interview is continued on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

BROWN So this has meant that the management committee is therefore made up of representatives of the commercial industry, from South Australian industry, New South Wales industry, Queensland industry. It's made up from Government representatives from New South Wales and Queensland. It's made up of Federal Government representatives from the Australian Fisheries Service and a number of specialised

scientific members such as the CSIRO, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and State Department of Primary Industry type bodies.

Its activities have been very difficult for us to really get much headway in early years. I think the main problem was that nobody in Government circles knew who the hell we were, who the East Coast Long Line Tunamen's Association were, what we stood for, what our attitudes were and it's taken us a number of years to really impress the other members of the committee with the rational approach that we believe we've taken to the industry and to gain their respect in terms of what we're trying to do so that when we jump up and down about something, they're not thinking that we're trying to gain some advantage out of something in a commercial sense, whether the person who's speaking is in effect trying to feather his own nest by achieving a certain end result and it's taken us quite a number of years to really gain the respect of the other members on the committee and we're really starting to show a significant amount of headway in the last twelve months in particular that we have been able to really get more effect for the efforts that we've been putting in.

JD A management plan has been drawn up Denis, has it?

BROWN Yes. We're actually in the third year of a three year initial management plan and from June this year there's a twelve month review period as to the effectiveness of that management plan. In twelve months time basically a new management will be put in place. We've learned quite a bit in the intervening period since we first came under those auspices of a management plan and hopefully we'll be able to sort out some of the glitches which inevitably happen in initial plans where you think that things are going to work in a certain way but in fact that it doesn't work that way and we hope to have a more effective management plan.

It's really been a case where the rules which were brought in in terms of the fishing activity in delineating areas and what type of equipment could be used in certain areas has really had a defective slowing down, almost stopping dead the development of the tuna fishery on the east coast because we ended up being caught up with a combination of rules between the Commonwealth and the State Governments with two different sets of rules for two different reasons but nevertheless applicable to the tuna operators which has left us in a position where very few people had anywhere to go in terms of boat replacement so that we haven't been able to take advantage of what we've been learning about the tuna resources on the east coast. Hopefully we'll see that sorted out in the next twelve months and we'll have a comprehensive boat replacement policy that'll meet the requirements of both State and Commonwealth fisheries organisations that will enable us to get out there and catch a few more fish a bit more safely and a bit more reliably.

JD From what you say it would appear that the relationship then between the industry and the Government, either of Commonwealth or State, is reasonably satisfactory?

BROWN Yes, yes. We've had our differences and we didn't have, I don't believe, a particularly good working relationship for the first twelve or eighteen months in particular but in recent times we've gained that natural respect you have for working partners in that type of operation and we are achieving a very good working relationship, yes. We have our specific areas in which we disagree but that occurs naturally and you work towards achieving a compromise on agreement.

JD Denis, could you talk about some of the problems as you see them facing the industry? What about the question of the professional versus recreational fishermen's interests?

BROWN Well we were just talking earlier about the recreational people which are represented on the management committee on the east coast tuna fishery and their attitude towards the fishery as a whole is their aspirations are to achieve as high a strike rate as possible. The motivation for that is one not so much of killing fish but one of being able to market the tourism aspects of the fishing in Australia in competition with other areas in the world by being able to advertise that they have a higher strike rate. The interest in the paying customer is not even necessarily killing a fish but he gets a buzz out of having hooked one and lost it in the process and that keeps him coming back next time. Typically you have a ratio of the number of times or the number of fish that you hook up against how many you actually end up landing so they really want to achieve a high strike rate. So their aspirations are somewhat different to ours and their concern is that every fish that we're killing commercially is one less potential strike. So long as they are maintaining an adequate level of strikes as it were, they're happy and we're having to get down in the future to the nitty gritty of determining what is appropriate for each sector in the industry.

In the past few years there were moves by the recreational fishery to have all bill fish declared as recreational species. Their primary concern was for the black marlin off Cairns which does provide a very significant input in terms of tourist dollars to the Australian economy and it is quite a unique fishery. They were not of any significant commercial value in Australia. It's not generally known that they are quite valuable in pre-spawning condition as a product in Japan. The main commercial interest is in the striped marlin and in the broad billed sword fish. The viability of any long term tunaing operation is going to be affected by any potential reduction in the ability to keep striped marlin and broad billed sword fish.

We've had our disagreements with the recreational people about what is appropriate to be regarded as a recreational species and what is not. We currently have a compromise where the black and blue marlin are regarded as recreational species and we have had voluntary release practices in the commercial fishery around Australia with respect to those two species. We have the ability to retain the striped marlin and the broad billed sword fish but there is a quite strong depth of feeling amongst the recreational fishermen about the striped marlin and I'm sure that we will still be trying to achieve a long term arrangement about that species in particular. I think we'll still be arguing as it were in ten years' time about that particular species but we have come quite some distance in terms of talking about the situation and we'll have conflict with the recreational people and we'll have more conflict with them as they venture further and further off shore with their recreational activities.

We have some of the game boats ranging quite widely off the shoreline and it's typical that the people who are sort of the pioneers in going to other areas in the recreational side of things are using the commercial activities as a primary guide as to where to go. In fact you have a good relationship with that type of fellow, the pioneer but along behind him comes another fellow who's simply going there because Joe Bloggs has been there and caught some fish last year or last week or whatever and is not aware of the working relationships as it were and goes out there and then stumbles into a tuna long line and says, "Well I'm not gonna catch anything now. Look these buggers are already here". The reality is that the fish are being caught around the equipment and we've got a lot of education ahead of us.

Another problem that we have is the pollution problem. It's a simple fact that we as mankind are putting too much into the ocean. We've had a poor attitude towards what we can put in the ocean. We've regarded it as the biggest garbage bin, most convenient garbage bin in the world and it simply can't be treated that way. It has the ability to accommodate a certain amount of rubbish but it is not able to accommodate the amount of rubbish that we as mankind in Australia are putting into our area. We are a relatively sparsely populated country so the situation I imagine is a lot worse than other countries than what we have but nevertheless we have to put our thinking caps on and approach problems with regard to, predominantly our attitude (I see it as an attitudinal problem) to what we can put in the ocean and what we can't.

Wollongong as an example used to be a very good area for pelagic species. We used to catch.... It was one of the earliest areas [which] developed purse seining for mackerel, to develop purse seining for pilchards. These activities were brought into the area by the Italian fishermen when they first commenced fishing operations here 35 and 40 years ago and it was very well regarded. Now the schools of fish that we see on the coast now, they just don't come to the Wollongong area. We have a fairly dense population close to the coastline. All our sewerage goes into the ocean. We have a number of major Australian industries here: BHP with a large steel works, Lysaghts with a steel works, BRNS with a refinery. We have copper wastes. We have sulfurous wastes. In the past a vast many of those wastes, or the run off from them, found their way into the ocean and we now find that migrating schools of fish just skip past Wollongong now.

Even the beach fishermen in our region.... The schools of mullet which come up they coast, they only come up the coast right behind the backs of the beaches as it were. They are not a species which travels long distances or far away out to sea. They travel up against the coast. Now they're not caught in the Wollongong region because they get near to Wollongong and they must turn their noses up and say, "To hell with this place" and they kick the motor up another gear or two and go through very quickly and very deep and they've changed their swimming approach and the local beach fishermen just cannot catch them but they'll catch them further north than Wollongong and they'll catch them a bit further south.

So over the years, from an anecdotal point of view, it's pointing that we do have a serious problem here. We have had a number of fish kills in the local area of the Port Kembla Harbour as a result of pollutants. We've had one particular product in Wollongong which has been dumped at sea up until quite recently, was the waste acid from the pickling process in the steel works and at Lysaghts. This produced a tremendously dense brown stain on the ocean. It wasn't toxic in its own right but it was such a finally distributed precipitate that came out of the acid when it hit the salt water that it actually clogged up the gills of the fish and killed them. I know it's been very pleasing to see that in the last few months, and in fact as of February this year, the New South Wales Government has withdrawn the licence to allow the companies, the two companies involved, to dump that product at sea and they're finding alternative means of handling them. They do have alternative technology as it were to neutralise the acids and get the iron content down and they're using it in water treatment and in sewerage treatment around the country now so it's very pleasing to see that we have those sorts of effects but the future holds a few very nasty problems for us in Wollongong.

Some of our major industries are running out of places to put their waste products. The slags that are generated as part of the iron and steel making processes in any steel making plant anywhere in the world, they're running out of things to do with them. The BHP has been trying to get rid of a number of its wastes. We're collecting

dusts out of the air and what do we do with them then [and the] sort of approach that most people have is, "Oh well, stick them in the ocean somewhere". They have odours and chemical effects that we don't understand and you worry that those sorts of wastes can affect other species in a similar way that we talked about the mullet and the pilchards earlier.

We also had a prawn fishery here in Wollongong. A very substantial prawn fishery up until fifteen years ago and it just doesn't exist any more now because all we can find is muck from the steelworks on the bottom in the area where that was. The steelworks was developed over the lagoon which was [laughs] seen as the primary spawning site and primary habitat for the juveniles and that fishery just simply does not exist. The prawns don't exist in any significant quantity so the future holds a few worries in the Wollongong region for a number of the trawl species because the areas that the steel works is looking towards dumping their wastes is out on the Continental Shelf and that causes concern that flavours or smells or tastes or simply the terbitity of some of the things that they're going to dump or proposing to dump will affect the migration patterns of things like gemfish and mirradori and tunas and other pelagic and semi-pelagic species and dimersal species that migrate up and down the coast.

We could be doing things to our fishery that we simply don't understand and we've been trying to get the State Government in particular to take more interest in what potentials there are there. If we change the migration patterns of some of these species, we may in fact destroy their biological viability. We certainly will probably destroy the fishing activities and the viability of the fishing operation in the Wollongong region and it is of some considerable concern.

JD Is there enough research do you think being done into these problems?

BROWN No, not with respect to things like the wastes that we're putting into the oceans at all. People seem to regard it as being quite adequately diluted and it's going to be of no affect because it's so dilute but things that have been done.... Just one thing that comes to mind is the level at which I've heard it quoted that sharks can detect things like human urine. It's level of concentration is absolutely miniscule and yet they can detect it. We've done no homework at all with respect to at what level and what concern it may be for some of the fish species. They've got very commercial in our region and in fact up and down the whole east coast of Australia and the situation is probably not different in other states where they have heavy industries that are doing these sorts of practises. We've done no homework at all to determine whether the species are sensitive to some of the elements which are contained in the things that we're dumping in the ocean. We've done absolutely nothing about it whatsoever.

One of the other things that we haven't done much about, and we as an industry really deserve a kick in the backside because we haven't done enough about it either, is things like mercury. We find here in New South Wales that in the last twelve months there's been a hell of a kerfuffle about the Water Board entering into contracts with ICI and other various chemical companies to dispose of some of their wastes through the drainage system, through the ocean outfalls. We find that some of those things that they've been dumping are high in cadmium and high in fennels and high in mercuries and it's very much the wrong attitude towards what we're doing.

On the one hand we have one Government body which is getting rid of wastes and on the other hand we have other Government bodies like the Health Department which is telling a fisherman that he can't sell his product because it has too much mercury in it, but nobody's paying him any compensation. Now we don't know what the background

levels are. We don't know what the sources are but for some of those heavy metals which the health community has a great deal of concern about, we really (I don't think) can be thinking of it in any other way even that we shouldn't be putting any more in the ocean. If we feel that we can't afford to consume it as a human being then we shouldn't be adding to the load of that heavy metal in the ocean. It's of concern, particularly with respect to mercury that we as an industry and the health authorities haven't done sufficient to really understand what the problems are with that particular heavy metal.

It is the heavy metal which is the most regulated throughout the world. It affects all of the products that we generate in the fishing industry out of Australia. It affects the markets into which we can put some products and there's very strong potential that we have in fact looked at that problem as a world health problem from the wrong way. The example I give is things like potatoes where as when we looked ten years ago as a community as to what potatoes were to us as a human being.... If you wanted to lose weight you were told not to eat potatoes. Now in the last twelve months or a little bit more than that, the attitude has changed completely. In fact they don't just look at the total load of carbohydrates in potatoes and say, "Well carbohydrates are bad for you". There's complex carbohydrates and there are refined carbohydrates and now they're telling you that potatoes are high in fibre and they are full of complex carbohydrates so that in fact potatoes won't cause you to put on weight. They are in fact very good for you as food. They're a very good source of dietary fibre and that all you should be doing is not putting the butter on them and not frying them.

Now our attitude towards mercury has been one where we had a problem with mercury poisoning which really came to the world's attention in Japan in Minamata. It was caused by localised chemical pollutants. Now we had a problem with poisoning and very serious side effects as far as mankind was concerned in over exposure and high levels of it. We've really gone a little bit overboard. We've looked at the problem just from the point of view of mercury. We haven't looked at it from the point of view of legislating it with respect to either solely its organic mercury content or its inorganic mercury content. We also haven't done our homework to look at what other interactions are involved. We know that there's a high, well not a high level but a easily detectable background level of mercury in the oceans' waters. That's naturally occurring. There's nothing that we as mankind can do about that and we also find that recent scientific work is indicating that there is a relationship between selenium, another metal one, and mercury where a significant part of the scientists working in the health field are indicating that there's a relationship there that they don't understand the mechanics of it but they believe clear proof that the selenium actually is blocking the pick up of mercury in the human body from the mercury in, say fish products or any product that you're ingesting.

So that whilst you potentially have a certain level of selenium and a certain level of mercury, you're not going to get this mercury pick up but that is in the long term poisonous to us and we really need to be looking at that afresh. We've seen fisheries in Australia destroyed because of their mercury content. We've seen the southern shark fishery very heavily affected in years gone by. Now we've had what's reported to be an over-fishing situation since then but we reacted to the mercury content. We reacted to the mercury content in New South Wales in broad billed swordfish and they're almost unmarketable in New South Wales. They were quite a high priced product from around \$10 to \$20 plus a kilo. It was very viable to actually go out there trying to catch them. It's not a viable product any more. So it really behoves us as a fishing community, all of us, to put much more pressure on the Government to relieve the regulations that we have, particularly with mercury and do a lot more homework

on what the real effects are; otherwise we're staring down a very dangerous road with mercury as the community becomes more and more concerned about heavy metals.

JD This interview continues on side A of tape 2.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

TAPE 2 SIDE A

JD Denis in a number of the fisheries and in your particular fishery in the tuna, it would seem that we're very dependent on the Japanese market. Is there any threat from competition from other countries in that market with tuna?

BROWN Yes, very, very much so. The development of the sushi type marketing operation in Australia, it really got a significant toe hold on the east coast with the yellow fin tuna and then there's been more development of southern blue fin marketing as sushi rather than canning that species but the development of the yellow fin resource has been very much atuned to a niche in the Japanese market that at the time of year which is predominately winter and early spring here in Australia that we could catch significant quantities of medium grade yellow fin tuna that there was a shortfall in product in the Japanese markets from their own domestic fisheries. We're talking fresh chilled product here, not frozen.

So there was a shortage of product then and we were able to fill that vacuum as it were and other fishing nations in the world, and some nations who were noted as fishing nations, such as a number of the central Pacific states, they have seen the marketing opportunities here and had the tuna species available and have developed up sushi based operations and they are able to compete with Australians with a significant commercial advantage because they have much shorter flight times, their fish are getting there fresher and at a significantly lower cost. We talked earlier about how expensive it is to package and send product[s] air freight fresh chilled from Australia and we're just not able to compete with the central Pacific island states that are developing up in the last couple of years and we're actually losing our market penetration in this area.

There was a time where just a couple of years ago that you went and you caught fish in the middle of winter and early spring and the price would look after itself. We had the experience where boats that have just gone and caught what fish they can catch and shipped them across to Japan have actually gone backwards. Over a season it's cost them money to operate because there was that much competition the price was down. We still hold a very unique position in the world market as far as Japan is concerned with respect to the fish which come from the far south coast of New South Wales in autumn and early winter but there is no doubt that the big eye tuna and the yellow fin tuna that we catch in southern New South Wales at that time of the year is THE BEST that the Japanese market can obtain from anywhere in the world at that time of the year as a fresh chilled product. The product is held in such wide regard that there would need to be the development of another very substantial fishery for those species somewhere else in the world which is not terribly likely now to even challenge the position of that market. Now we don't catch those fish in any great volume, the really high grade product but you don't need to when you can achieve a hundred dollars per kilo for your big eye tuna and depending on market situation, the world record price for yellow fin tuna just recently went up to \$250 a kilo. That compares with an Australian record price of round the hundred dollars a kilo.

JD What size fish would that be?

BROWN Round the hundred kilo mark. The really high priced fish ranged from about 70 kilos up to 150 kilos.

JD So one fish could be worth something of the order of two and a half thousand dollars, is that right?

BROWN Um, no one fish can be worth in the order of fifteen to twenty thousand dollars if it's large enough. We had the experience here on the east coast where a fellow down at Ulladulla who was initially an abalone diver, fellow by the name of David Dunn, David had built up a 48 foot Randal in his own back yard as it were and took that boat out and the first fish that David caught when he got his boat functioning was worth \$10,000 - one fish, one yellow fin tuna. We've had occasions where some fishermen have for one day's work caught \$60,000 worth of fish but unfortunately a lot of the people outside the industry don't recognise that there are peak catches. They're only available over a short duration and they're really the top of your aspirations as a fisherman to be able to achieve catching and marketing a few of these fish. A lot of people see that as what the industry is worth all the way round.

It's not unique in the fishing industry. It's not unique in other industries that people just don't understand the economics of an overall operation but certainly catches like that are achievable and they will become more outstanding catches like that in the future as the price of fish and the price of everything in general goes up. The resources in the world are under stress and there are very few of them which are not under stress and we as fishermen, when we can identify our resource [laughs] we go and try and make some dollars from it. That's our function in life as it were and so things can only get worse, one would see. We have a relatively young long line fishery in Australia. It hasn't been highly exploited in the past and one hopes that the catch rates that we've seen in the last few years are sustainable. There's some indications that they're not, not because we have a long history of decline in abundance but simply that the catch per unit effort that we have in the industry by some yard sticks is claimed to be declining and this is a fair indication of what's happening in the short term. One hopes that that's not occurring in the long term.

The tuna fisheries in particular are very difficult to predict because they have such wild fluctuations in abundance, so it's very hard to translate short term indications into long term projections 'cause it's so easy to come to grief and it makes managing those fisheries very difficult. One really has to be conservative in your approach. So with the decline in overall availability of tunas, the Japanese have been through their major expansion of fishing activity with their far seas fishing fleet and their fleet is actually declining in numbers because they can't maintain the return on the investment that they've had in the industry in the past ten years or so. We can expect to see increases in prices, particularly for the very high quality fresh chilled product.

In New South Wales in general you have to maintain a very high level of diversity in your fishing activities in most cases because we're really situated in a, what I understand is termed an oceanographic transition zone where we're in between, in our case the Coral Sea and the Tasman Sea and depending upon seasonal conditions and climatic changes from year to year, and through the year, we are either influenced predominantly by Coral Sea water or predominantly by Tasman Sea water and we have a fairly significant change-over of species dependent upon which oceanographic conditions we're under at the time. This means in general the successful fisherman in New South Wales is quite highly diversified and you have people who are involved in as such activities as fish trapping, prawn trawling, fish trawling [and] beach hauling all

mixed up in one operation which they spread throughout the whole year. The mix of activities varies as you come down the coast in New South Wales because the northern areas of New South Wales are more affected by Coral Sea conditions for most of the year and the southern end of New South Wales is much more effected by Tasman conditions and contains typical Tasman sea type species. So the mix of activities changes quite markedly.

In my case, a significant part of my operation is tuna long lining, predominately through the winter and spring. I trap crayfish. I trap fish. I purse seine fish. I haul net fish. I drop line fish and I long line fish and this means that my activities change through various times of the year, dependent upon what the prevalent species is. Now I at any point in time have a choice as to whether I'm going to stay at home, or if the species which I'm geared up for, not at home, then if you're going to make dollars you have to go and travel.

Some species I chase, they're economic to chase, particularly the tuna and other species it simply isn't economic to chase, that the added costs of living away from home are not justified by the return you can get from some species. This does mean though that typically in New South Wales, a fisherman in New South Wales has a lot more money tied up in the fishing industry than in other industries, other parts of the fishing industry because he has a lot of capital tied up in equipment that he's not using all of the time. So he has to have a full set of gear for the different activities that you're involved in and very few of the activities involve a low capital cost. Most of them are quite substantial.

This has the disadvantage in being highly diversified in that the current trend in fisheries management is one towards endorsements on licences, limited entry and gear restrictions and that all involves cost to the fishermen and their current idea of user pays. This means that the more types of activity that you're involved in, the higher your total licensing package cost is and you worry that in the future we may in fact be affecting the viability of the New South Wales industry as a whole by bringing in substantial management costs which may mean that a fisherman has the choice of maintaining diversity at a cost, or bailing out of a particular fishery that he might have only been involved in for two or three months of the year. That is a serious worry for the future.

JD Would it also mean that if a fisherman has to relinquish some of his licences, or the endorsements on his licence, that he therefore would have to get bigger and bigger in the remaining fishery that's open to him?

BROWN Yes, absolutely because the reason we've had such diversity in the fishery has been because there hasn't been income coming in. You haven't been able to sit back and live off the fat that you've developed from other parts of the year. So it's simply going to mean you're going to have to do something which means that you're going to have to develop up or take more involvement in some part of your activity. If the cost continue to keep getting higher and higher you may in fact get to the stage where you have to pick a fishery. For New South Wales it worries me that that would be very sad if we get anywhere near that sort of approach because we haven't got fisheries in New South Wales, in the large extent, which we can survive on a particular fishery or a particular type of operation. That's why we've developed up over the history of the industry in New South Wales, such diversity because we haven't been able to do it. Really it's a worry that our management thrust may in fact be pushing us in a direction that we in New South Wales, as fishermen, can't afford to travel as far as maintaining our diversity.

JD Denis, thank you very much for this interview. It's been a most interesting one. Thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Denis Brown, tuna fisherman of Wollongong of New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





Verbatim transcript of an interview with TED BYLES

INTRODUCTION

Ted Byles started fishing in Tuggerah Lakes as soon as he left school at age fourteen years and has spent 52 years in the industry. Both his father and his grandfather were also fishermen, as was his brother. As well as his own fishing, Ted has been very active in fostering the industry as a fishermen's representative, and as the Chairman of Directors of a successful fishermen's co-operative, a contribution, it is pleasing to note, that has been recognised by the industry.

In this interview Mr Byles gives an excellent insight into fishing in Tuggerah Lakes. He speaks of the boats and gear and methods used both currently and in earlier times. He also tells of the habits of the fish and the effects of population growth around the lakes with the consequent pollution and he discusses markets, changes in dietary habits of people and relationships with recreational fishermen, among other things. He is very knowledgeable in these matters and presents his view in a balanced and well reasoned manner.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry. It was recorded in Mr Byles' home in Tacoma, New South Wales by Jack Darcey on the 31st March, 1990. There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Ted, would you record your full name please.

BYLES Edward Mervyn Byles.

JD And where were you born?

BYLES I was born at Wyong in 1923.

JD That's within just a few miles of here, isn't it?

BYLES Two miles of here.

JD Two miles?

BYLES Yes.

JD Have you lived in this area all your life?

BYLES All my life, yes; went to school here; married here; everything. Never been away from here, only holidays and so forth. Lived here forever. Always went with dad in the boat on holidays fishing. He used to take us at night with a pillow in the boat when we were only little fellows, my brother and I. As we went through school.... My dad wanted me to go on to high school. I had enough education to go to high and so did mum and I didn't want to be anything else but a fisherman. I left school on a Friday afternoon and dad had a boat for me to go to work Sunday night, which I did. That was at fourteen years of age. I worked with my dad and my brother for.... Well I've been fishing now for 52 years I think it is. We fished together till dad got too old to fish and then my brother and I, and he's since retired. I'm the only one of the three of us left at this point of time.

We used to, those days, camp round the lake and things are so different to what they are now where you could go shooting rabbits, where now there's guest houses and so forth. It's altered in that respect. It's altered a lot, of course, but it's brought progress. I suppose is the best thing you could say about that, that's progress, but the fishing has been.... Well my grandfather was also a fisherman, I forgot to mention earlier.

JD On these lakes?

BYLES Yes. On these lakes and then my dad and my brother and I.

JD Ted, just before we go off any further, would you know about when your grandfather started fishing on the lakes?

BYLES Not off hand but dad died at 77 or 78 and he finished at about 72 (years of age this is) but he had a spell in Sydney as a butcher, but I recall that he was fishing here in the Depression.

JD So it would have been perhaps the last century that your grandfather....

BYLES Yes, he would have been, in addition to the Cloutons and the Dennis'. Some of those people are now fifth generation in just Tacoma alone, or they've been born and lived at Tacoma all their lives and went to school here and they're all members of the school across the river; all went there. The school has since closed up of course but in those days you started school at seven and finished at fourteen. There was no such thing as shoes to go to school in or whatever in those days, as you'd well realise.

JD How did you get across the river?

BYLES By boat. We had a boat to go across the river and so forth. There used to be half way down where the village is, there used to be a school boat. The old lady that used to carry the fish, a Mrs Sphere, she used to put the children back and forth to school of a day. That was part of her job. She....

JD Rowed the boat across the river.

BYLES Rowed the boat back and forward and she in turn, her and her sons were the fish carriers by horse and cart.

JD Where did they carry the fish to?

BYLES To Wyong railway station. We packed down in the very old fish shed provided by one of the very old shires. I don't know what.... It would be [unclear] shire I

suppose. It was the very first shire here and the fish were packed there. Of course there was no ice in the early days. When [Before?] we got up to having ice, we kept [the fish] in saw dust on the bank and to now where we have ice crushers and the ice is readily available and so forth. She did it very hard too with her sons. Six pence a box was the carrying fee for fish in those days. She did it hard. No, all those fishermen that were the original fishermen, their families now have become.... and they seem to be the fishermen. There's fishermen come and there's fishermen go but the basic names are still the basic fishermen on this lake. They've gone into administration of the co-op and grown up and become very good in their own fields.

JD Ted, to come back to your own early involvement in fishing, you came in with your father and your brother. Could you describe the sort of operation that you were involved in: the boats and gear, the nets you used, the type of fish you caught?

BYLES Yes. The boats, the style of the boats are basically the same boat as they were when I first started. Naturally enough the motors have improved because of time. The net is basically the same net. The method I use is basically the same. My dad told me that, he said I would find a mullet in a nor' easter. On certain nights I would find that mullet where it was and in a light southerly I would find it somewhere else. He was dead right. He was dead right.

JD Is he still right?

BYLES YES. He's still right. He's still right. I still retain that knowledge in my head that in such a such a breeze those mullet will be or ought to be where they.... If they're not there, well they won't be far away type of thing. You'll find some there, if not what you're after. The basic hauling net, it was done by hand winches when I first started and that was pretty hard work. We got up to power winches run off our motors and it made it a lot easier. We didn't seem to catch any more fish. The fish were the same but it made work easier to do and of course we've come up [with] a synthetic net, where once you used to have these nets.... You used to have to have to what we call pull off and that's pull off the boat onto poles or racks to dry on Thursday and you'd put it back on the boat Sunday to go to work. Every three weeks that same net had to be tanned[?] because it was cotton and the old sisal ropes and so forth. It would rot and of course the old proper cork as we called it.

Now it's a synthetic cork we use but basically my method hasn't altered.... My method of catching fish or going about.... We don't have any aids, any mechanical aids such as sounders or things like that. The fish are still caught by eye and ear and knowledge. By ear I mean to hear a fish jump and that's something you don't seem to be able to teach a person coming into the game. That appears to me to have to be born with you. That's something that dad passed on to me....

JD Can you tell what fish it is that's jumping?

BYLES Yes, a mullet. I can hear a mullet jump. I can hear a blackfish hit the net. I know it's a blackfish that hits the net by the sound of the way it hits it. I can hear a garfish. You can tell what it is. You can tell what it is in the water; tell if it's a tailor shot.

JD This is at night presumably?

BYLES Yes, at night; at night, yes. Most of our work is done at night other than the hauling. The hauling is a day work or a day job, and the day prawning, of course. It was just a [unclear] day, a way of catching things. We used to prawn ashore. The net

was 150 used. We used to say what we call prawn ashore and that meant that, from the shore out and the clear bottoms before pollution. We just hauled it round by hand. You got in the water on the outer end of it and pulled. You had no waders or boots. It was just an old flannel and an old pair of trousers and that.

JD What, in chest high water?

BYLES Yes, chest high water and you cooked them ashore over there in the old wood fires and so forth.

JD Would you have one person at the other end of the net on the beach?

BYLES Yes, yes; two to a crew.

JD And one on the beach and one out on the water, and you walked along....

BYLES Yes, dragged it along by purely and simply manpower; purely and simply. We seemed to catch as many prawns then as we catch now, though I don't think the thing has deteriorated, or my figures say that it hasn't deteriorated but it seems to me that the person that has the struggle is the person that wasn't born at it. It's rare that a person that isn't born at it makes the same degree of success as what the fellow that was born into the thing.

JD Do the professional fishermen still catch prawns with that method on the edge?

BYLES No, no. That's gone now, Part of the reason for that is the weed grew and this.... If I may touch on pollution, the weed grew in the shallow water. In the days when it started to grow in the shallow water, was the advent of the septic system and the septic system's being what they are, overflow into the lake area all the way round and not only did they overflow, they were deliberately overflowed into the water. This in turn encouraged over-fertilisation of the shallow water. The over-fertilisation made an abundance of weed growth in the shallow water so therefore we couldn't work where we used to work before to catch the prawn. In turn the prawn won't travel over that dry weed so we then learnt to work a method of running it, as it's called, in the deep water, or over steps into say eight, ten feet of water, fourteen feet of water in some places. We catch as many prawns now as we did.

JD So a type of trawling, was it?

BYLES No it isn't. It used to be a hand haul net, the one before. This one the net is just shot out. Sometimes some particular place it's picked up and other places it's pegged and they just shake the prawns into their boat. The prawns have got to swim to [unclear - heal?]. Course you're dry. You don't have to get into the water at it. It's a gentleman's game to what it used to be in that respect but I think it hasn't hurt the production. It's only altered the method.

Of course the amateur, it's spoilt the amateur side of the thing, the pollution growing in the weed because the amateur people.... Amateur people are local people that like a feed of prawns, and why not? Why shouldn't they catch a feed? It's theirs for the taking as well. Well they can't, without a twenty foot net or a scoop net. Well there was a great thing for someone with their family, wife and children, go Saturday night, Friday night, feed of prawns and now [with] the weed ashore, they can't do that. They can't catch that feed of prawns and this is something that I guess pollution has done. Where it hasn't seemed to have hurt us yet (the fish population) but it's upset the

method of catching and it's hurt the amateur fishermen more so than the pro. The pros learn to cope with the different methods. Of course the amateur can't get out over his head in the water and work where we're working. That's the poor thing about the amateur fraternity.

JD Also of course the development in terms of the number of people living around the lakes has increased dramatically. There are many, many more people here now than there were when you started.

BYLES Oh just in Tacoma alone, you knew everyone that went to school. You knew every person that lived here. Now I don't even know the people down Tacoma. I don't even know my neighbours two doors away. Everyone knew one another and the only identification I have now, if I go up the river to Wyong, is my fishing boat. I'm identified as a fisherman. That's the only reason you're known. Otherwise you're not known.

JD So that effluent would be much more in evidence now than it was in years gone by?

BYLES Yes. Very much, yes. Just now I think that here (Tacoma) is the last of the sewerage being applied but that's not going to rectify the situation. It could take ten, twenty maybe 30 years for the lake to right itself naturally. Well that's what biologists say and I'd go along with that because I think that's the case. It's not going to right itself over night. I believe because of the population and the run off and what have you, which we've got to have anyhow, I believe it's the reason for the Entrance itself being silted up more so than what it used to be. There used to be no bridge there. All that adds up to a pretty rough time for the water and doesn't do too badly to stand, the pressure that's on it.

JD I noticed there's quite a big dredging operation down near the Entrance. What's that in aid of?

BYLES Well this present Government has instigated an eleven million dollar grant to upgrade the condition of these lakes. That dredging is part of that and they intend to dredge this silt or weed I spoke of earlier, to some three inches to about ten inches in the shallow water to get rid of that sediment and over-fertilisation. That's their intention to take that off the top, reclaim about 30 yards or 30 metres around the edge of the water or wherever they're doing it. Hopefully they will speed up the process of the lake recovering to what the foreshores were, anyhow. The foreshores on the eastern shore used to be one little strip of golden beaches. They're not there any more and I don't know what's the answer there.

JD Ted, are the fishermen happy about this dredging?

BYLES Yes. Wyong Council has an environmental officer who consults with us fishermen, a deputation of us fishermen. Basically it's our agreement or our say so as to the amount of stuff they're taking away from the foreshores here. We worked out between ourselves, or come into agreeance with ourselves and this environmental officer as to how far we ought to come out and what depths we should go. It's generally agreed that yes we've got to.... When you see algae, just dry algae with birds running around on top of it, no fish can get in it. If they were, we can't get in it to catch them. It's got to be removed and the whole thing is, over-fertilisation. This is what council are trying to do with their dredging; whether it's a success....

One year when the channel was closed, and I mean closed prior to the travelling season or spawning season, it cost our co-op \$800,000 on the previous year's prawn prices. We had no prawns. The prawns had to come in by spawn, I'll touch on that later, but they've got to come back by spawn and there's a sand bar across the Entrance where there's land and nothing could get back. So this is what council are doing in regard.... and we're generally agreed [with] what council are doing. You always get the odd ball that disagrees but generally the fishermen agree that something has to be done and we think that council is going the right way about it.

JD Perhaps this might be an appropriate time to talk about the spawning habits of the prawns in the lake.

BYLES Right. Well it's essential that this channel be open or kept open. The prawn reaches semi-maturity between six and nine months old and that's when it starts to migrate to sea and it starts to migrate here in about November and right through till end of March, April. It's very essential, this autumn rain, autumn floods. That's what gives a big entrance which in turn gives like a flush back of the prawn and they migrate north. I believe at about twelve months they're mature and they have a life span of something like eighteen months, the school prawn. That's to the best of my knowledge, about eighteen months.

In that short time.... We're talking now April, beginning of April, most of our next year's prawn spawn is already back in the lake and then away it goes. The mature prawn or semi-mature prawn matures at sea and I suppose the Hawkesbury prawns and wherever, they all congregate somewhere or drop their spawn as they go and the prawn spawn is known (or the King prawn spawn anyhow) to come back so far as the tip of Tasmania. I don't know how far back the school comes, but he's caught well down the coast. I don't know how far down, but they're caught well down but it's very, VERY essential here that we have a good entrance. All our fish comes back.... They say a suitable tide (flood tide) at night will bring that spawn back. That's supposedly the best time for it to come, at night where it spreads out over that shallow water in the Entrance itself, in the Entrance flat which is closed waters for us for fishing. I believe that the area's correct.

JD There's no limit on the size of prawn that can be taken, is there?

BYLES No, no.

JD Is there a mesh size?

BYLES Yes, yes. There's a mesh size that we're allowed to have. The mesh size is, from memory I think it's 32 mils and we're allowed.... It's 30, I'm sorry. It's 30 in our day prawning net, where we're allowed two millimetres, forgive me on the metric system, but we're allowed a tolerance. That's to allow for mesh size as being not regular and the net we use of a night is 25 and we're allowed a little tolerance on that too. All nets have to have a tolerance. They have to have a regulation size. The prawn was once three or three and a half inches, I'm not sure which. It's just silly. You can't measure prawns. You can't measure prawns. We've tried it and you can't do it. They took the size off them and regulated the mesh size....

JD So that the immature prawn escapes. That's the theory, isn't it?

BYLES [Yes]. In our case the immature prawn, it does go. It gets away. You know what we catch, you know. You see them go to sea. You see them go and so, yes they go to sea alright. They don't have any problems getting out. Because of our

inefficiency at catching prawns with our old fashioned methods [laughs], I don't think we'll ever harm them. I just can't see us harming the.... Our production figures say over the years that we haven't harmed our product.

JD They're holding up quite well?

BYLES Yes, yes. It's holding up, basically, pretty well. I don't know, we probably put a bit more effort into it than what we used to but then again it's standing up with.... There'd be basically the same amount of fisherman I suppose as.... Depends on how big the families are, the fishing fraternity becomes.

JD Just talking about that, are there many young fellows coming into the fishing industry?

BYLES Yes. In this area there's young men.... There's young men in their twenties, eighteen. The family starts off the fishermen. As they leave school they generally....

JD Do they take over the father's licence and gear or....

BYLES No. In my own case, we worked with dad. My brother and I worked with dad as a team or crew, whichever you like. Dad used to be the skipper sort of thing when we were at school, naturally. As we grew older and dad grew older, of course, he sort of sat back a little bit and let my brother and I do whatever was needed to do. Course it was just one of those things but of course the boats wore out and the nets wore out and the old boats that used to be there when dad was alive are not there any more either. So we've had to get [a] move on in that respect.

JD Are the licences saleable?

BYLES No. My licence is not transferable. My boat licence is transferable but not my fishing licence. This is where we've had great arguments with Fisheries. The abalone is a saleable thing and Fisheries didn't want our boats to be a saleable item. They thought when you died out that that licence should go.

JD The licence for your boat?

BYLES [Yes]. We went to great lengths anyhow. We felt that, well say in my own case or whoever, that you've got some sort of superannuation there with your licensed boat, to be able to sell [to] your wife, your family, or whoever. Fishery didn't see it that way but we since came to terms on the thing and now it is.... It always was a saleable item and it still is, for that matter. Unfortunately I think it's abused, the saleable part of it.

JD To buy into the industry, do you have to buy a licence from an existing boat owner?

BYLES Yes, now you do. You have to buy a boat licence off an [existing boat owner].

JD What's the going price?

BYLES For a six metre boat in an estuary it's about \$1,500.

JD For each boat?

BYLES [Yes].

JD And would a fisherman need more than one boat? He would, wouldn't he?

BYLES Yes. I have two. Most need two. Some of them have four, five, depending. In the advent now of the fibreglass boat, they can build their own in a few days. Well some of them have four, five and registrations and things going up in price. So they can become a liability.

JD So you've got that cost, the cost of the licence, the cost of the boat and motor, of course. Nets and gear would also be fairly costly I presume?

BYLES Yes they've gone up but then again they last longer. A net lasts. There's no maintenance on the thing insofar as handling preserves.

JD [unclear]

BYLES No. You don't have to do any of that now. The net on my boat is something like, oh about \$10 a metre, it costs.

JD How many metres of net would you have?

BYLES 725 and I'm allowed multiples of that. In the net I use I'm allowed one, two, three multiples of that if I wish. Not joined as a one, but in separate nets.

JD So you use different nets for different purposes?

BYLES Yes. Different species of fish you use.... For instance, if you're catching a bream, you use a 100 mil. Say you're catching a mullet, you use an 80. If you're catching a garfish, you use a 30.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Ted, I notice in the Fishermen's Journal of March '88 a photograph of yourself receiving an award from the Prime Minister. What was that all about?

BYLES Well I'd rather you hadn't asked me this but it was because of my involvement and my effort in the fishing industry as a whole. The fishing industry decided to honour a certain amount of fishermen, as it were, along the New South Wales coast in conjunction with the Bicentenary celebrations and I was lucky enough to be one of these men.

JD I don't doubt you deserve to be one of them. What form has your contribution taken, Ted?

BYLES In administration. I'm a member (or we are, our co-op is a member) of..... I represent the fishermen of Tuggerah lakes as fishermen. This in turn, I represent them on a central region basis which takes us in.... In the past it takes us from here to Coffs Harbour. I've been a delegate there for many years. I've been chairman of that organisation for some years (I don't know how many). This is what that award was all

about, over years of talking to the Fisheries Department and representing and so forth, marketing and so forth. For me it's been an education for me, just an education. It's been lovely to be able to meet people and talk to people.

JD A lot of time and effort in it, though, isn't there?

BYLES There is but if you like what you're doing it's not too bad; it's not too bad.

JD Ted, you've also been very prominent in the co-op here?

BYLES Yes. I joined the co-op in, I think it was 1947, the year the co-op started. I became a director, I don't know how long ago. It would have to be twenty years, I suppose now, since I've been a director of the place. I became chairman about eleven or twelve years ago. I mentioned earlier the old lady that carried the school children across, well from that shed where she carted the fish from, we went from that shed to our co-op where it is now. We have three depots, three retail outlets in those three places. We have some, oh about 65 (I think it is) shareholders, not all full-time but about 65 shareholders out of the top of my head.

JD That'd be the majority of the fishermen [unclear]?

BYLES That'd be the majority of the fishermen on the lake. The co-op has gone from a little tin shed or a little pokey shed to a fairly good organisation. Now we have all sorts of modern things, that we consider modern: Ice machines, we didn't have one time, with the saw dust in the bag and the old wooden box and so forth. It's all health wise. We have our own prawn cooking facilities where we didn't have before. Everything's at our finger tips now.

JD What's your role in the co-op?

BYLES Now?

JD Yes.

BYLES I'm Chairman of Directors. I have been for some ten or twelve years I suppose.

JD Still going well?

BYLES Am I or the co-op?

JD [laughs] The co-op.

BYLES Good, yeah, both of us are [laughter].

JD And you too?

BYLES Yes, both of us are really. No, it's still going well. Things are getting harder because of cost but I think that's a generalisation anyhow. Wages go up. With wages goes insurance and the public still want cheaper stuff over the counter and it can't always be done but the idea of it is, people expect when they come to a co-op outlet that they should be getting it....

JD A bit cheaper than normal retail.

BYLES A bit cheaper as well as being a bit better. They expect fresh and they expect it a little bit cheaper. We don't put our prices up during holiday times for the tourists. We stay the same price year in, year out for that reason. We don't believe in fleecing the tourist because, after all, the tourist is where we get our money from. When they're here we get a flux so we don't believe in doing this like that.

JD Your outlets then are the shops that the co-op runs and you also send fish to the Sydney market?

BYLES Yes. We send fish to [the] Sydney market at least three days a week, every day if necessary, if we've got the product to send. We do deliveries in Gosford, Woy Woy, right round this area. We'll deliver as far as Newcastle.

JD Direct to shops?

BYLES Yes. To wholesales or retailers, whoever. We do daily deliveries in our own area and we have our own filleting facilities, skinning facilities, vacuum packing, that sort of thing, a brine freezer for prawns.

JD You don't export?

BYLES No. We don't have the facilities to export. Export means the Department of Primary Industry. You've got very stringent regulations to do that. We just don't have that. We don't have the quantity of stuff to do it either. You're only looking at 100,000 kilos of prawns a year here, 120 [thousand] is a good year. I think we dispose [of] something like 60% overall of our stuff, we dispose of it locally, which we think's good.

JD You'd have been in the industry when the new method of auctioning was brought in at the Sydney markets?

BYLES This is the Dutch auctioning system? Yes, yes.

JD Has that been an advantage to the fishermen, do you think?

BYLES I think it's too early yet to say. I've been at various conferences at the build up of this market coming up and it's generally agreed that they will have teething problems. I believe that you've got to bear with them. If they've got the problem, well you must bear with them. Stamping on their toes doesn't solve the problem. I think they should be more [unclear]. Let's give it a year, a couple of years to see. I think it will be a great tourist attraction in the city. If you haven't already seen the thing, it will be, I think. I believe they have already guided tours there now. No, I think it will be alright. I think it will be alright.

JD It is a very pleasant place to visit, Ted.

BYLES Very, very.

JD Very interesting.

BYLES [Yes], very.

JD Wonderful to see the way the product is present in the retail outlets associated with the markets. Never seen it done better anywhere in the world. Very well done.

BYLES No, I agree, the parts of the world I've been. Yes, I would agree. Overseas it is nothing like the production or presentation, I should say, as to go into those retail outlets in the markets.

JD Would you say that apart from those Sydney markets which are very special, that the product is presented well to the consumer by and large (I know there's big variations)?

BYLES I think there's room for a lot of improvement but by and large the retailer has lifted his game some 90%. There's still the odd one but by and large the retailer has really lifted his game.

JD Is there any evidence from your point of view whereby there seems to be a change in the dietary habits of people in Australia? For example, do you think young people are eating as much fish as young people used to eat a generation ago?

BYLES Yes I do. While they might not be eating the basic fish that we know, like the bream, the flathead, the whatever, they're more into what the ethnic people[s] methods like the octopus, the calamari. Now that's the in thing to eat and it's nice to eat too. One you didn't eat that it just was a throw away thing. Now shark whatever, it's all eaten and I put it all down to the ethnic population that made this. That's the only difference I see, is the basic fish, yet our fish down here in our co-op outlets, we've got three different... even in our own outlets.... We've got one at the Entrance which was an ocean fish outlet but people there want the snapper, they want the sand whiting, lobsters and so forth. That's what they want there. We go to our other one at Korican and they want the snapper and the mullet and the blackfish. Tacoma is based on Wyong, like the rural side of the lake [They] basically eat the mullet and the blackfish and the flathead, the fish that they've known all their lives, they've been handed down in families. That's the one they seem to eat. Terrigal's another place; is snapper, lobsters, sand whiting, different....

JD There's a noticeable difference from place to place.

BYLES Yes, yes. Just in our three there's a noticeable difference. You can hardly sell any quantities of bream at Tacoma, yet you can sell bream at the Entrance. There's just the different people. I think it might be the influx of city people that brings this about but I've seen no difference.... The people, they've drifted away from buying the fish and cleaning it themselves. They don't want to do that any more. They'd rather [buy] the fillet and take it home and it's ready to go. Where once we used to sell, say 60/40 round fish as against fillet, now it's 90/10 the other way. You hardly sell a round fish, in mullet, the blackfish or flat[head]. In fact, you hardly sell a flathead whole. People just want the fillets.

JD Ted, is the imported fish a threat to the local fresh fish market?

BYLES I don't know that it's a threat so much as what it is a necessity to the retailer. There's the clientele that wants that fish now. There's times here when, for instance just our own co-op. When all our fishermen, or basically all our fishermen go prawning, well there's no fish supplied. We have to look outside to get fish to maintain our own supplies. So when the summer comes and these people (the coast, that is)

haven't got the supply of fish, there's no alternative but to have it in. The fish shop has to have a supply to cook. Yes, I think there's a place for the imported fish.

JD Ted, this area that you fish in and live in is a very popular place for holiday makers obviously, and understandably so too. Is there tension between the professional fishermen and the recreational fishermen?

BYLES Insofar as the professional's concerned, none whatsoever, not at all. Anything we ask for with Fisheries we preface that we don't wish to come in conflict with the amateur. In [that] way we seem to have very good relations with the fishing bodies around the place. If there's any conflict, it's certainly not on our side. We like to see them catching prawns. We like to see them catching fish. We'll tell them where they're biting. No, none whatsoever. We've [got] very good relations. The local politicians at times when we have to go and see them, this is both parties, have [volunteered] this information. They say, "We're great friends with the amateur fishing bodies here and we don't have a complaint about you professional fishermen." We don't have a complaint anyhow so I'm glad that the politicians don't have a complaint. So it seems to me like that we do have good relations, perfect as far as we're concerned.

JD Good, good. Let's hope it stays that way.

BYLES Yes. I hope so too. We'll do our best to keep it that way.

JD Ted, how do you see the prospects for the fishery in the lake generally?

BYLES I see it as being alright. I think there's got to be and will be more regulation of the industry. I'm certain that's going to be [in?] management and so forth and possibly in the long run it will be to the benefit of the industry but I see the industry being alright estuary wise. I think it'll be alright. I can't see anything wrong. I see no reason why. I've worked all my life at it and so it sort of hasn't altered that much. It's [been] very kind to me. No. I don't see any problems provided it's pollution and things like that. Like this place to me has never been over fished because the same amount of men like myself die out and the younger man comes in and replaces. No. I don't see any great problems.

JD If a young man were to come to you and ask your advice as to whether he should go into fishing or not, would you advise him to do so?

BYLES If he comes off the street, I say no. The young man [who] was bred here doesn't come to me for advice, he goes straight into it, but the person that comes to me.... Say a man [with] a couple of children coming out of a good job and he gets ideas. They see us packing prawns and they think, oh there's money so and so and so and so, they'll come to me for advice and I almost always advise them against it because I say, "Well you're earning such and such [amount] of money" and [they say] "Yes, about that, yes". "Well you're not going to earn that now. You might see a good pro here with, you know, a good day's pay. Well he's got that good day's pay. Yours is only going to be a fraction, and when he gets back to that fraction, yours is none so your going to finish up in a dreadful state of affairs." That's my advice if.... Very few men make it that come in off the grass. Some do, but very few, especially in these estuaries. Like I said earlier, you can't teach a man how to hear a fish jump.

JD Yes, right. It is a way of life still, isn't it?

BYLES Very much so. Yes, very much so. It's a seven day a week job, or seven nights, whichever you like to take. If you like it the days don't seem to matter. Doesn't seem to matter.

JD Would you ever go again if you were starting up?

BYLES Yes, yes I wouldn't think otherwise. I don't reckon anyone's been treated better than me all my life in the fishing industry. Met a lot of people and almost all of them good.

JD Good Ted, well thank you very much for all of that and this interview. It's been very, very pleasant to talk to you.

BYLES Thank you very much.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Ted Byles of Tacoma, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with PAT CLIFFORD

INTRODUCTION

Pat Clifford's father was a fisherman, as was his grandfather. He is now 77 years of age and has spent a long working lifetime in the industry. He still has a close connection with it through his retail fish shop and is still a professional fisherman.

Most of his career has been spent on the Tuggerah Lakes estuary, fishing for the many species of fish and prawns that inhabit the lakes.

In this interview he gives an account of the working week of the lakes fishermen; the gear and methods they used; the ballot system in use; and their relationships with Fisheries inspectors and amateur fishermen. He also comments on fishermen's organizations and the Fishermen's Co-operative, of which he was an active foundation member. Other matters he discusses are the effects of weather and floods on the stock; the paucity of the rewards for the hardship of the fisherman's life; the lack of new entrants into the industry. He concludes his discourse with a heartfelt tribute to fishermen's wives.

The interview was part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded in Mr Clifford's home at The Entrance, New South Wales, on 30th March 1990. The interviewer is Jack Darcey.

There are two sides of one tape; the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Pat, would you record your full name please?

CLIFFORD Patrick Clifford.

JD And what was your date of birth?

CLIFFORD 5th March 1913.

JD And where were you born?

CLIFFORD Tacoma.

JD And Tacoma is on this lake, is it?

CLIFFORD Yes.

JD Have you ever lived away from the lake?

CLIFFORD When I was about 2 years of age my parents went to the Clarence River at Maclean to fish and that was my earliest experience of fishing. My father used to have his net poles right on the edge of the river and that was the first time that I'd ever started to catch fish. My sister and I used to have a chaff bag dragging along the river bank at Maclean catching prawns. That's my first experience of fishing.

JD Catching prawns in a chaff bag?

CLIFFORD In a chaff bag.

JD Using it as a net?

CLIFFORD Yes.

JD Did you do any good?

CLIFFORD Oh yes, we caught them all right. They were there; they were very thick there when you are going back to 1920.... 1918.

JD Your father was a fisherman then, what about your grandfather?

CLIFFORD My great grandfather and grandfather (and my grandfather's brother) came from Lake Illawarra, I believe, around the 1880's, or '89, before there was any railway. And they used to send their fish, I believe, by boat from a place called Bungaree - which is Norah Head. They used to send their fish down by boat to the Sydney fish markets. I believe it was to fish markets at a place called Redfern in the city. I know nothing much about that, the only fish markets I have known in Sydney is the Tea Tree and Black Wattle Bay.

JD And that is the present....

CLIFFORD That's the present market now. That's the early part of it. They came here from Illawarra in small sailing boats and I believe there was a big storm came up and they were bar bound in Botany Bay for about a month or six weeks before they knew that they were still alive. They thought they might have been caught in the storm, in this nimbus gale. I don't know whether it is only folklore or whether it is the truth.

I think they used to use all types of fish nets here at that time, but they were mainly hauling nets. They were mainly fishing for bream and whiting, because they were more valuable.

JD Pat, when you say a hauling net - what is a hauling net?

CLIFFORD Well hauling nets in the days that I'm going to talk about, the lake was full of blubber. Now we had to make a net so that this blubber would not.... so that we could eliminate a lot of this blubber. And fishing for bream and whiting, which is what we call ground fish, we used to make the nets so that they would be a couple of feet (or three feet) under the surface so that the blubber would go over the top of the net. If we didn't, if the net was the full depth of the water, it would fill with blubber and we

wouldn't be able to haul them; and we had to make the net so that it would let [out] this blubber (or jellyfish as they are called).

In those times, as I said to you, we might be three or four hours winching the hauling net in with rope, and we would put the net out mainly about 4 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon and we would be finished about 9 or 10 o'clock, and we'd get the net, then we would get the end of the net and we'd go to the camp and we'd have our tea and go to bed until just before daylight. We'd get out of bed and then we'd finish hauling the net the following day, and we'd finish up about 10 or 11 o'clock.

And then when we'd finished hauling we always used to call the fish boat. Well there would be two of the crew take the haul away to Tacoma and then it would be packed to go to Sydney fish markets. And the chap that was left behind would put the net on and have it ready for when we came back from packing the fish to go to the next haul. And it would be over the same procedure.

We'd leave home on Sunday after lunch and then we'd go and put the net out (weather permitting) on the Sunday afternoon. Then the fish boat would go home for supplies on Tuesday, and then we'd come back.... We'd finish on Thursday and then we'd most likely take the nets and have to dry them, because they were cotton. And then they would have to be tanned and mended.

JD Every week?

CLIFFORD Every week or fortnight. Practically every week. See, if the blubber was that bad it would burn your nets. And then we'd spend.... if we got home early on Friday the net would come off, and then we'd most likely mend until about dinner time Saturday. Then we'd mend again on Sunday morning and put the net on, so that we would be on our way again to start work on the Sunday evening.

JD You operated from two boats did you?

CLIFFORD No, we'd have anything up to four or five boats sometimes, it all depends on the fish and what quantity of fish. And some of the fish at times we'd have a net to back the first net up because bream will bury themselves in the sand (so will whiting) and sometimes we'd get more fish in the following net than sometimes in the first net. If the bottom is holey, or weed, sometimes we'd get more fish that way.

JD What length of net were you using?

CLIFFORD Not going to school, we always considered.... we'd always call it a strip, and we used to hang the net on what we called a half. The net was 50 yards when we buy it, and when we fix it up to work it is generally 25 yards - we lose half it when we rig it. And sometimes, it all depends how we want it, sometimes we hang it on what we call thirds and sometimes on halves.

JD And what size mesh?

CLIFFORD Well, when a hauling net we weren't very fussy, it would be generally about three and a half. But of course when you tan your nets with wattle bark, and sometimes we tarred.... if we were going to haul them we tarred them, and that shrinks the meshes. So that could bring it down a little over three and a quarter, three and a half.

JD They weren't actually a gill mesh?

CLIFFORD No. See we don't want fish to mesh in the net when we are hauling because it holds us up too much. It slows us down with our work because we have the fish coming in to a big pocket, and then we sort the small fish (like the marketable fish from the undersized fish), so we can't be bothered with fish getting gilled.

JD That sort of net is sometimes called the seine net, is it?

CLIFFORD Yes.

JD Is that the same as the Danish seine net?

CLIFFORD No, a Danish seine net I believe are very short nets. The main force here is with rope - rope and speed. You see, we haven't got to worry about speed, time doesn't count really. Not the same as a Danish seiner. But you must realise that I've had no experience with Danish seine.

JD Those jellyfish you call blubber, are they still prevalent in the lake?

CLIFFORD For some unknown reason there hasn't been any in this lake for about ten or fifteen years, at least ten years. There's been none. And I don't know what is the cause of that. Our lake has been free of all vermin, we've had no vermin to interfere with our fishing in any way; only the winds and the current.

The power station was put here at the lake a few years ago and I don't know whether it has created false currents, and that is the only thing that we've got to contend with. The currents that are created in the lake at the present time.

JD Do the fish come into the lake from the sea?

CLIFFORD Originally the fish leave your estuaries and they go.... your bream, your whiting, your blackfish and your mullet leave the estuaries to spawn along the coast. Then they come back in minute size that is practically invisible to the eye, and they come back into your estuaries, and that's the life cycle in the lake. It is the same with your prawns. See we've got a prawn in the lake called the greasy back. Well it will spawn in the lake, the lake closes; but your school prawns and king prawns have to go to sea.

JD So they spend part of their life in the ocean?

CLIFFORD Only like your Canadian salmon. They come back. Whether that fish comes back to the original estuary or not I don't know. There's been not, to my knowledge, any study for that.

JD Do you get the Australian salmon here at all?

CLIFFORD We did, they were here.... going back to the 1940's they were very, very thick off our coast here, but it is 20 or 30 years since I've seen any quantity come on the coast here.

JD What about barracouta, do you get them?

CLIFFORD They would be very rare. You see, you've got that king barracouta (which they call a gemfish), they get that off.... they get that into the deep waters off Sydney Harbour. But of course all this is something I know nothing about.

JD You are more....

CLIFFORD I'm only an estuary fisherman. Practically all my fishing has been in Tuggerah Lakes. I have fished outside after snapper and jackets, and lobsters, but it was only just a fill in. My knowledge of all that is very little.

JD So what sort of fish do you get in the lake?

CLIFFORD Well you've got mainly your black fish.

JD Is that ludrick?

CLIFFORD Ludrick! Black fish, mullet, and your whiting and your bream; and your garfish. That would be the main ones that we would be getting. There are others, but they would be your main.

JD And you also get prawns?

CLIFFORD And prawns, yes.

JD And do you fish for all of those species?

CLIFFORD Well I have in the past. What you've got to realise is that sometimes these fish move in what you call cycles. One year the fish, one species of fish, might be more plentiful than the other. So naturally you are going to fish for the one that has the biggest quantity, returning you the biggest amount of money, so that is what you fish for.

JD So when you get a licence to fish the lakes, it's a licence to take all of those varieties?

CLIFFORD Any fish that you want that comes in those nets.

JD There is no closed season?

CLIFFORD Closed season for garfish; and there are certain places in the lake that you can't fish. Not many.

JD Nursery places, are they?

CLIFFORD Well mainly the one is so that it doesn't interfere with the fish going in and out of the sea. If they want to go in and out well there is nothing there, no way to stop them if they want to come or go.

JD So you can't put a net across the bar for instance?

CLIFFORD Yes.

JD You can?

CLIFFORD Yes. At a certain time we switch off the fish and we go back to prawning. Now in my early days I mainly followed prawning in the summer and fishing in the winter, in the slacker part of the year. You see when we were prawning we used to have something similar to another seine net, but there used to be two of us who would haul that net. One would be on the shore and the other fellow would be out up to his shoulders in water, and that's how we used to catch the prawns.

JD You had to walk in the water?

CLIFFORD We walked, yes.

JD Didn't use a boat at all?

CLIFFORD Yes, to put out the nets. We had 150 yards of net; we'd put the net out - one chap would be on one end and you would put your net out and then you'd haul it back to the shore. And that's how we used to do that prawning in the early days. Then that place where I was telling you where we had the bar, well we can have a ballot to go down there and prawn there with the prawns going out on the outgoing tides. They can generally work that in what they call the darks. And any surplus prawns that weren't caught in the lake, naturally have got to go there; well, we used to catch them there.

JD And you'd have the ballot between the fishermen?

CLIFFORD Yes, the ballot. The Fisheries inspectors have a ballot and you get your allotted night that you can go there and put your net in.

JD How many fishermen would fish the lakes now?

CLIFFORD Well there's roughly.... I don't know whether there would be.... You see, in the early days we used to consider there were about seventy or eighty full time fishermen, and I think there are roughly around about fifty or sixty here now.

JD That idea of balloting is a bit unusual; I've never come across that before, Pat. Are there any other ballots held?

CLIFFORD They do ballot at Lake Illawarra, and we have another one here on our lake - up in the Munmoora power station. With the current that is coming through there they also have a ballot there to be able to put their nets in the inlet that runs through the Munmoora power station, which generally is about our first top grade prawns that come from that particular area. We, the fishermen, refer to it as the top lake - seeing we've got three lakes here. That is the second place where we ballot.

JD And the fishermen who don't get the ballot, who don't win the ballot, they respect the rights of those who do?

CLIFFORD They do. You see they ballot for each night, so you might be in tonight or there might be two - it is at the discretion of the inspector whether there's one or four men can go in that particular night. The number one has the first choice, or whatever people are allowed to go in that ballot on that particular night.

JD Does everybody ultimately get a turn?

CLIFFORD Well, if there are thirteen crews there might be four or five nights that are of no use to you. But say you've had the bad luck not to draw a night that was any good, you just take that for granted.

JD Would that be because of the moon?

CLIFFORD No, that's just that the weather might not be [right]. The prawns do not always travel on certain winds - the winds and the current have [bearing] on whether the prawns are going to travel or not.

JD And the fishermen would know this?

CLIFFORD They have got a pretty fair idea. See if you get hard nor'-easters it is not of much use going down to the entrance here. But if you get a real strong southerly today and then it eases the next night and the current starts to come back down the lake, they are generally ideal nights to go prawning in the entrance. That's on an average, it doesn't always run that way. But taking it if you've got a draw you are always happy with the second night of a southerly; and that happens nearly wherever there are draws.

Now I said to you there was one at Illawarra, there is also one up at the Tea Gardens in the Myall Lakes.

JD A similar type of prawning?

CLIFFORD A similar type of prawning. See they do no other prawning in the Myall Lakes, only by these proper nets, to my knowledge.

JD Turning to some other things. You have mentioned the inspectors and the balloting and that sort of thing. Is the relationship between the inspectors and the fishermen a good one, or are they opposed to each other?

CLIFFORD On an average, yes. Well with any body of men there always seems to be one that just doesn't seem to get on, but taken on an average the fishermen are on pretty friendly terms with the inspectors. But, of course, it is like this - the fisherman is a loner and he likes to be left alone, and he doesn't like the Fisheries inspectors poking around where he's doing his work because what he just wants to do is work, and that's all there is to it. And, of course, what we've always got to realise is that it is not in the Australian nature - fishermen are on one side of the fence and the inspectors are on the other. That has been my experience.

JD What about the recreational fishermen, Pat; is there tension between the recreational and the professional fishermen?

CLIFFORD Well it's really hard there because the biggest majority of people you can talk to them. But there is that odd person that will seem to aggravate people. For some reason or other you wouldn't know, but there is just that odd one. And there seems to be this hard core (how much a fishermen's association) that seems to be adverse to the fishermen all the time. But why it is, we wouldn't know; because it has been proved (oh, I believe, up on Fraser Island) the amateur fishermen take more fish than the professional. I'm talking about tailer now. I think they've had to ease up on

the fishing because the amateurs are the ones that are catching the most fish. But you just get that odd....

Like we strike a bit of trouble here, but if some of the amateur people, or people in pleasure boats going around, and someone happened to run your net down - they are very sympathetic. But then you get the other one that uses all the foul language and what should be done to you; but luckily I think they are in the minority. You can generally go and speak to people.

JD There would be a professional fishermen's organization?

CLIFFORD Yes.

JD Is it an effective body?

CLIFFORD No.

JD Does it make representations to government?

CLIFFORD It is suppose to, but they seem to be.... the fishermen seem to be (I'm talking about estuary fishermen).... to me they seem to be disorganized in a lot of ways. They don't seem to have much fighting spirit.

JD There is a fishermen's co-operative here?

CLIFFORD Yes.

JD You were a founding member of that?

CLIFFORD I was a foundation member of it and I was the instigator of getting the one here on the north entrance. I also went to Tacoma one day and I noticed a waterfront block of ground for sale and I went back to Mr Ellis, the manager, and told him about it and he went up to Wyong and we finished up buying that waterfront block of ground. The main Co-Op is there now. And then there is another one at Gorokan, and I took Mr Ellis (he didn't have a car at this time), and I took him up to East Maitland twice to get that position at Gorokan.

JD And you got that as well?

CLIFFORD Yes, but I can tell you what!

JD The Co-Op has been pretty successful over the years, is it still going?

CLIFFORD Yes, the Co-Op is still going but the last year or so it hasn't been quite as successful. Last year, I believe, they didn't have quite as good a prawn season as previously because they have had more or less record catches of prawns previously.... like the last six or seven years. Last year, not so good; and this year the same. They've had big floods in February and whether that has affected.... well, they are not catching the quantity of prawns now. But of course prawns leave generally in February/March, April is the latest nearly at any time. And the floods have affected the fish according to the fishermen that I speak to.

I was only talking to one fisherman the day before yesterday and he told me that in his opinion this is the worst. He's been here fishing for thirty years and the lake at the present time is the worst he's had for thirty years.

JD For prawns?

CLIFFORD For prawns and the fish.

JD And fish!

CLIFFORD Yes. The flood has taken the fish; that's his [opinion]. He's a chap called Jobson, a pretty regular fisherman, and he said that he hasn't been able to find the quantities of fish as what we have caught in the past. As I say, I was only talking to him the day before yesterday, and he prawns and does all sorts of fishing, and it looks like we might be coming into our slack periods. We've had a phenomenal run of fish in the lake for the last 10 or 15 years and it looks like as if our drought is coming around. Seven good years, seven lean years. That's what the good book tells us, I believe.

JD Has that been the pattern in the lake over the years?

CLIFFORD Well I think so. You've got your good years and your bad. It only stands to [reason], nature can't give you everything all the time. You've got to prepare yourself for your bad times; and we've had, as I say, a phenomenal run. So we don't know whether the wheel is going to turn slightly now for us and give us a year or two of slack times.

JD Is there any evidence of pollution in the lake?

CLIFFORD Well, they are screaming about pollution. But if there is pollution, and pollution in my book.... the first thing that is going to suffer is shellfish. If I've learnt properly, shellfish are the first things that are going to suffer if you've got pollution. Well the shellfish are not being killed in Tuggerah, so I consider there is no pollution. Only they are calling it pollution with the weeds around the edge of the lake in which small, minute fish are feeding on, and your wild ducks are feeding on it. So if that is pollution well it's not affecting the fish; but people are saying that is your pollution. But I can't.... what chance have I got of arguing against the scientist. They say that it IS polluted. And my argument is that the shellfish would be gone, they would be the first to suffer if there was pollution.

JD Is there a marketable shellfish in the lake?

CLIFFORD No. All we get is drift oysters. But we do have out in the lake.... the bed of our lake is smothered in certain parts with a small shellfish that we call bream pippies. They are like your thumb, and you can go out with a little bit of a net and you can fill that up. Sometimes when we are looking for bream you can see where these bream are feeding and crunch on these berries, or shells, and they will thicken the water up. And sometimes we can find these schools of fish by them thickening the water.

JD Are they the same pippies that are sold down in the Sydney markets?

CLIFFORD No. I can show you some after, I think. I don't know whether there would be a couple lying down in the boat. They are out in the middle of the lake, they are out

in the deep water. See the bream can crush them and that's what makes the lake a very good lake for bream, on account of these pippies.

JD It would be part of the food chain.

CLIFFORD Yes.

JD The licencing arrangements that have been imposed in pretty well all fisheries now in every State, are they working satisfactorily do you think?

CLIFFORD I wouldn't know. As I said to you, I haven't been able to follow closely with this because.... well, I don't know, I suppose you get a bit old and sour and you just.... I've got a cousin that fishes with me and he attends to all our book work, and as a matter of fact he's got records of all our fishing that we've done since the two of us have been together. He's got a record of that fishing if you would like to see it.

JD Are the licences transferable?

CLIFFORD No, no! Even our boat licences. There was one time they brought in here within the last five or six years, they were going to limit the amount of boat licences you could have but you could sell that. You could sell your boat. But I think they have stopped that, I wouldn't be sure about that. The young fellow down at the club could tell me that.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Pat, we've talked a bit about the types of fish that you net. What other species are in the lake?

CLIFFORD You've got what we call a beakie buller, that's only to catch garfish. Well then you've got what you call a net to catch flathead, which is a sunken net with only very shallow net that goes down at sundown. It's got to be taken back up at sunrise. The garfish net has a certain closure.

JD That's the beakie buller?

CLIFFORD That's the beakie buller; at certain times of the year. Then you have your gill net for your mullet, which can be used at any time of the year with no restrictions - only with your three hours. There's a three hour limit that you are supposed to leave that net in the water. Then you have nets that you mesh bream, which means that there is a far larger mesh of net than your mullet net. Then you have the same net you use for catching ludrick. So that is some of the nets.

JD So you use quite a number of different nets?

CLIFFORD Yes, different rights. Then you can have.... this is some of the problems that we are having; trouble at the present time with some of these new restrictions they want to place on us. So that if we are going to have a mesh net we can only have

a mesh net that is of three and an eighth, or three and a half, but we can't have three or four different types of net to catch mullet.

Myself, fishing for mullet, I have a net of 33 meshes - that is for around the shallow waters. Then if I want to go out into the deeper water I will have a 50 mesh net.

JD That's 50 to a metre, is it?

CLIFFORD No. It's 50. You see, meshes are like that [demonstrating]. Some of them are 33....

JD Oh, in depth!

CLIFFORD In depth! Then the next one could be 50 meshes. Then if you are going out and the fish are starting to school in the daytime, you go up to a 66 mesh that will fish top and bottom. So when you go out with the shallower nets into the lake and you see a school of fish, well if you sink the 33 mesh it sinks, and the mullet swim over the top. If you don't sink it, it floats on the top and they go underneath it. So this is where you've got to have all these different sized nets.

As I say, I've got a 33, 50, 66 - there's three nets there, and the Fisheries Department say that you must only have one. See, how can you tell which net you are going to use? It all depends where you are. If the fish are not going to come into the shore, well you've got to go out to them.

JD This lake is quite shallow, is it?

CLIFFORD Yes, about.... I think the deepest would be about 8 or 9 feet, but I'd say it might average about 7 [feet]. See a lot of the part down towards Long Jetty is only a little over 6, but the deepest lakes are the further north you go the deeper the lakes become. But the big lake here, there are only one or two spots where it is fairly shallow.

JD So it seems as though you are having a bit of trouble, the fishermen are having a bit of trouble, communicating with the Department?

CLIFFORD Yes, I think so. And, of course, the trouble is fishermen for some reason or other (with the form of practically all fishermen) are not people that mix a great lot because they are only used to mixing with their own type of people. And then you get these Fisheries inspectors - a lot of them are engineers, or bricklayers, or what, and then they go and take a course of a couple of years and then they are the people that are making our laws for us. There are very few of them that have ever been fishermen that become Fisheries inspectors. They can't think the same as us, and of course they come along and see some little thing that they might make a mountain out of, and say "Oh, this is the wrong way." And it doesn't seem right that they should be telling us people how to make nets. What's the sense of us.... well, we're not going to make nets that are going to be adverse to us with our work. I wouldn't think you would, because you'd only be doing work for nothing.

Like in my early days, which is wrong, you'd make the net to catch the fish. It wasn't rules you were worried about, you are not living by a book. And this seems to be the problem today. The inspector comes to you and says that it is in the book - and you're gone!

JD Pat, are there many young people coming into the fishing?

CLIFFORD Only no-hopers.

JD Why do you think that is?

CLIFFORD Oh, there is no incentive for them to be there. The price.... they are not getting the prices for their fish. Then the conditions you've got to live under. Now, can you imagine.... See to be a successful fisherman you've really got to be on the lake at least six days, or at least seven days. Well, can you imagine young people wanting to be stuck out in all weathers? I don't know what percentage of small, young fishermen would be on the lake, but I think it would be pretty poor. I think they are just gradually dying out.

JD There's still a living in it, isn't there?

CLIFFORD Yes, with a bit of work. You can't take just at the present time here, what we've got here, we've really got a slump here now. But if anyone wants to work, they've been doing all right.

JD Pat, you are the son of a fisherman. Your father was the son of a fisherman. And you had five sons, none of whom followed in your footsteps as a fisherman.

CLIFFORD Well I don't think the life.... the life was too hard and the rewards weren't there; and the incentive was not there because you are at the whim of the politicians. You do some little thing wrong - the inspectors are taking.... There's just not any incentive there; the working conditions are not good enough. So I never encouraged any of my boys to fish, as much as.... well, in my early days I could think of nothing else than being anything but a fisherman. But I certainly discouraged them. And I wouldn't encourage ANY young person.

I had a grandson, he wanted to come and go fishing, and I did everything I could to make sure that he didn't fish, because the lifestyle is not there for them.

JD It is hard work and long hours, isn't it?

CLIFFORD Well, it has got to be. And what I can see of it, when you are fishing you are not fishing for money you are just fishing because that is the only lifestyle you know.

And what has always surprised me is how the fishermen's wives could always put good meals on your table - and plenty of times you haven't even earned the price of the meal. It has always been a wonder to me how these fishing wives used to do this for us.

JD Yes, they are a particular breed of people, aren't they?

CLIFFORD And a funny thing about them is the biggest majority of these women that marry fishermen don't come from a fishing family. So it is surprising how they can do it. And, of course, talking about my early days - as I told you, money didn't seem to be much because you never saw it. And you'd go and get a girl and drag her up from the city, that's had regular money, and you bring her to the house and she mightn't

see a penny for three months. Yet she still sticks with you, still goes along. So it often makes me wonder!

So there! You've got to admire those wives more than the fisherman because he's quite happy to stop and have a yarn at any time.

JD Right! Is there anything else, Pat, that you would like to record?

CLIFFORD I just can't think of anything.

JD All right. Well then thanks very much for this interview.

CLIFFORD I wish I could have done a little bit better for you, but I....

JD You did it well.

CLIFFORD Well, I don't know about that.

JD Yes you did. Thank you.

This is the end of this interview with Mr Pat Clifford, lakes fisherman and fish shop proprietor of The Entrance, New South Wales.

END OF INTERVIEW

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

Disclaimer





Verbatim transcript of an interview with GEOFF FIDDEN

INTRODUCTION

Mr Geoff Fidden has fished the Myall Lakes and Port Stephens since leaving school. His own sons now follow the same calling. Geoff is the Chairman of Directors of the Newcastle Fishermen's Co-operative, and also he's the estuary fishermen's representative on the New South Wales Ministry's Advisory Council.

In this interview he records a great deal of information of the nets and boats and efforts used in this industry and the changes he has seen in those directions. He also comments on the absence of pollution in the estuary and the evident increase in fish stocks.

In the later part of the interview he discusses the operation of the co-operative system and its benefits to fishermen. In addition to marketing, the auction system and to the advertising and the presentation of the fish. Finally he gives an outline of the fishermen's organisations, the establishment of organisation and functions of the Fishing Industry Advisory Council.

Mr Fidden has a moral and prominent involvement in the estuary fishery at Port Stephens and its associated waterways. His interview makes a very significant contribution to this Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry, which is being conducted by Murdoch University in Western Australia. The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Fidden's home in Pindimar, New South Wales, on the 1st of April, 1990.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Where were you born, Geoff?

FIDDEN Newcastle.

JD And when?

FIDDEN 18th of December, 1931.

JD And have you lived in this general area all your life?

FIDDEN Well, I was actually born at Newcastle. My parents lived here at Pindimar, and I came back - as soon as I left hospital [laughs] - came back to here. Lived here until I was about four, just after the Depression. Dad was fishing here then, and when things just started to get a little bit brighter after the Depression years, he moved to Newcastle. The school here was burnt down so there was no schooling. My sisters

went to school here but there was no school here so we went and did our school years in Newcastle.

JD Was your dad fishing in Newcastle?

FIDDEN He was fishing here. No, when he left here he went and worked at the steelworks. Things were just starting to brighten up after the Depression years. I came back here when I was seventeen. I finished school and came back and kicked off fishing here then. Worked with all the older fellows around about the place.

JD This is yourself now, doing this?

FIDDEN Myself, yes. Worked with all the older fellows. Dad used to help me with my gear, helped me hang gear and do my gear, because I had to be taught all those sorts of things, and learnt from a lot of the older fellows, too.

JD When you say your gear, that's the nets that you're using?

FIDDEN The nets. They were all cotton net then. You had to tan it.

JD How did you tan it?

FIDDEN With ironbark. You went and cut your ironbark, boiled your ironbark up.

JD What's that, the bark....?

FIDDEN The bark of the ironbark tree. That was to preserve the net. You had to at least tan your nets, pull them up and dry them once a week.

JD You actually boiled them in this....?

FIDDEN You boiled the bark, extracted the sap from the bark, lifted your bark out of your pot then.... and all copper pots. If you put them in an iron pot, it would kill your tan. It would make them go black, so that would be your copper pots, or you would lift the hot tan out into wooden bowls, and then put your net in them, and that preserved the cotton nets.

JD You soaked the nets?

FIDDEN Soaked the nets in them. Pulled them out and dried them, and they were ready to go to work again, and then they were beautiful to go to work again with. Out of your cotton net, I suppose the lifetime, most times, would be about eighteen months for a cotton net.

JD Were they expensive?

FIDDEN Oh, in those times I suppose, yes, you'd have to say it was. The old cotton net used to cost us then around about three to four pound a bundle of net. Now a bundle of net is 50 yards long, a 100 meshes deep, three to four pound a bundle. In comparison to a box of fish we'll say, your fish was in those times, around about tenpence a pound, and that was your mullet and blackfish and things like that.... about

tenpence a pound. So you're talking two pound ten a box, so you're talking what, a box and a half of fish to buy a bundle of net, or thereabouts.

JD And what length or how many bundles would you use?

FIDDEN Well, we used to use - a legal net is 30 lengths long, which is enough when we're pegging round here or stalling round here; 33 meshes deep, which gives you ten bundles of net that would make you a net to work in those times.

JD You only used the one net, did you?

FIDDEN Oh well, it was for setting or meshing or pegging, you used the one net, then you had your beaky nets, and you had your haulers and your divers and things like that, which are all different types of nets for catching different species of fish. Jew net for catching jewfish.

JD And handled in a different way?

FIDDEN Handled in a different way, yes. Worked in a different way, and in those times we used to work them differently. Well, pegging, we don't do any pegging today.

JD What's pegging?

FIDDEN Well, you used to stall the flats off or shoot from the bank out, along to your low watermark, back to your bank, let your net go dry (it's illegal, of course) then walk along your net, pick your fish up on the low water, wait until the tide came back in again to pick your net up. A good way of catching fish but with the modern gear today, you don't need to do it.

JD Was there a limitation on the mesh size?

FIDDEN Minimum legal net then was three and an eighth....

JD Inches?

FIDDEN Inches.... in mesh, of a mesh net, all set up - three and an eighth. It's still the same today.

JD Was it intended to be gill nets or....?

FIDDEN Well, really yes, they were actually mesh nets, but your cotton net was so thick that fish meshed in it, and it's a funny thing that your mesh fishing net.... Now the next net that came on to the scene was linen thread. Now for some reason or other, when linen thread first came in, that was the ultimate in catching fish, and yet you meshed more fish in linen thread for a short period of time. The same thing happened when linen went and we got to nylon, ordinary nylon. Fish for a short period of time, meshed like hell in it, and then they get used to that type of net and you progress now to your multi-mono net which I've shied off for years and years. The boys have had it and reckon it's great. I've just got some and by God, all your nylon's obsolete now. This multi-mono has.... it's the answer. Just because it doesn't hold water, it doesn't pull the water aboard the boat. Fish seem to, not really wrap up in it, but they feel.... just catch in it to hold them in the net.

JD Is it difficult to see in the water?

FIDDEN Yes, it would be, it would be, but it's sort of.... You'll probably find in 20 years' time that they'll come up with a new species of net that will catch the fish better again, and it will only catch them better for a short period of time, and they become used to it then.

JD Almost as if they learn.

FIDDEN They do learn. People don't realise but you can go and shoot a patch of fish in on the beach there, we'll say ten lengths of net which is approximately 25 yards in a length, ten lengths, you might shoot a thousand boxes of fish in, in that small circle. Right, and approximately ten boxes (or fifteen boxes) will mesh in that net out of the thousand. The rest will just swim around that net there, and stop there until such times you will haul them ashore. Now why doesn't every single one of those fish put their nose in to that net and mesh? There must be some form of communication or they get frightened or they know it's there. They just don't go near it. The same thing in the lake, when you mesh in the lake. You'll shoot a thousand box of fish in, but you'll get twenty boxes will mesh out of that, and the others will just swim around inside, no matter what you do and won't mesh.

JD What species do you fish for, Geoff?

FIDDEN When we were pegging we used to catch a good few bream, flathead, mullet and blackfish. They were predominantly the fish you caught there when you were pegging years ago. Now that you're meshing, you're not catching a great deal of the bream, you still get your mullet and your blackfish, they're the predominant fish that you're catching when you're meshing.

JD Is the blackfish, is that the ludrick?

FIDDEN Ludrick, yes. Those fish are more or less the bread and butter of the fishermen in this port in this area. Your common fish, you get your money, like your everyday money for, and your bream and your flathead and that, the boys are always looking for that sort of stuff (and myself) you're looking for that sort of stuff to get the little bit of cream from.

JD What about prawns?

FIDDEN Prawns, yes. Go back into the '40s, four shillings a pound, prawns, and we had good years and bad years. This year - and this is with your conservation and people thinking that stocks are getting less of prawns and everything else, you'll see prawns that will go well, I suppose, ten years we've had a bad season of prawns. This year there were more prawns showed in October and November than has ever been seen before in the lake there. Regular catches. Now I maintain that if stocks are going to be declining, they never should reach a peak. They should never be greater than they were ever in the past, and beautiful prawns, Myall prawns, recognised as the best prawn in the State.

In those times you had your cotton net, rigged virtually the same. You set pocket prawn nets virtually the same today as it was 40 years ago, other than the make of the net. It was cotton then, it's nylon now.

JD And that's the only difference.

FIDDEN The only difference in the set pocket prawn netting on this river here.

JD Geoff, can I ask you, this is actually an estuary, is it? It's called a lake, is it....?

FIDDEN Well, it's a port. It's Port Stephens this, and you've got a huge waterway system here. You've got the port, you've got fourteen miles of Myall River which joins up with your Myall Lakes system, which runs for about another fourteen or fifteen miles (the lakes are long) going up towards Bungwall, and then you've got a Bulahdelah River which runs another twelve miles up the one side going another way, and at the far end of the port here you've got Karuah River which runs up for another ten or twelve miles.

JD And all of them are fishable?

FIDDEN And all of them are fishable.

JD Is there an outlet to the sea?

FIDDEN Yes, through your headland, North and South Head goes out. That's about a mile and a quarter wide, the entrance to the port.

JD There'd be a bar, of course.

FIDDEN Oh yes, there's a little bank there, but it's got two deep channels in to it, and as a matter of fact I think somewhere in there I see there's a bit of study that was done in 1932, by the **Fantome** which was a government survey vessel there, that gives you the dimensions of the port, and says that there's a greater volume of water even than Sydney Harbour, and more depth.

JD Could you estimate the number of fishermen that fish these waters?

FIDDEN In Port Stephens, well I'd say in the port, this is counting both inside and outside boats, and blokes, you'd have to have probably 150 men that worked the port, and off the port. It's in that vicinity.

JD And some of them would be fishermen that fished outside the Heads?

FIDDEN Yes, you've got your port fishermen, your estuary fishermen and your outside fellows there.

JD What do they fish for outside?

FIDDEN Well, prawns - king prawns, royal reds....

JD Trawl for them?

FIDDEN Trawl, and all your trawl species of fish. They've gone and fished over the shelf now and got all these blue-eyes and stuff like that which you would never ever see a few years ago.... your gemfish. Well down south they catch them as orange

ruffie now, which governs the market a lot. You know there's huge quantities now that are getting caught.

JD They're fishing out of Port Stephens?

FIDDEN No, they're south where they're catching the orange ruffie, but they do tell me that there are supposed to be stocks off here that one of these days they'll find and exploit.

JD And tuna? Yellowfin tuna?

FIDDEN Tuna, yes. There's blokes catching tuna and exporting to Japan. All those markets have opened up.

JD Does fish-trapping.... Is there a fish-trapping industry?

FIDDEN Yes, there's a few blokes trap fish, not in the port but off the port, not a real predominant port for trapping fish. Further north they trap a lot of stuff, but off this port they don't. Our fish here are mainly caught in the port itself by meshing, setting, hauling. They're the three main species of work that you do in the port here, and well, there's.... I suppose there's less fishermen actually in this part of the port, than there was 40 years ago. I suppose at Tea Gardens there, going back in those times, we'd have 50 fishermen at Tea Gardens, and now the Tea Gardens' area is down to about fifteen? Twenty? Whereas other parts of Port Nelsons Bay, about 100 the population there, so there's more fishermen there. There's a lot more there today than what there was 40 years ago.

JD It's more that they've moved their location?

FIDDEN Moved their location, yes.

JD There's no indication that stocks have declined?

FIDDEN No. Fish in my opinion everywhere (well, I don't say everywhere) but in this port and a lot of other ports too, have increased really in numbers. I know we've got better gear and in those times, you had well, probably more dedicated older fishermen that lived on the water all their time. When I was a boy I'd spend four or five days away at a time, living on this little boat, on the water all the time. You saw what went on, you saw the movement of fish. Things have changed today. Young blokes, they leave home, they go to work, they're back in an hour in these fast boats, and naturally when you're walking you see more than what you do when you're driving the motor-cars, so they steam past a lot of fish today.

I've always kept a diary and I can go through that, and my boys go through that at different times and look there, and some of their catches of fish today in quantity wise are far in excess of what I caught 40 years ago, and not only me.... that was caught in the port, like our records of fish. Go back in those times and our travelling season when fish travelled, which starts generally about March and goes through till June, there was mostly in that crew working on the beach there, round about fifteen men. That was about the average crew. We've got seventeen now. There was about fifteen in those times. Your average catch of fish used to be round about one thousand five hundred boxes of mullet, and they were 60 pound boxes.

JD Is that all at once, a week....?

FIDDEN No, that was for the three months' travelling season which on mullet lasts generally round about three weeks, four weeks. About one thousand five hundred of mullet, say about six or seven hundred boxes of bream, and about seven or eight hundred boxes of blackfish, was about the average for the season. Now, and going back to our last five or six years (probably more than that) our average has been round about four and a half to five thousand boxes of mullet, two thousand and better of bream, and from one thousand five hundred to two thousand boxes of blackfish.

JD Is that do you think because the technology and the methods have been improved?

FIDDEN Methods have improved slightly but the methods we're using today to catch those fish, haven't changed in the last 30 years. Previously we hauled our fish most of the time. Today hand-hauling, hand-hauls.... the mullet was still caught hand-hauled, our bream and blackfish are caught in what we call a "figure six" net, that we've done for the last 36 years, but previously to that, we used to hand-haul them, similar to what we did with our mullet. But the figure six net now, you gather those small lots up and that method hasn't changed in the last 30 years, but the quantity has increased. It hasn't altered one bit.

JD It sounds as though pollution is not a problem in these waters?

FIDDEN In this port it's not, because we've got a dead clean port with no industry and virtually no agriculture in the port. In other places where you've got industry, I think it's a definite problem. You've probably got places like Newcastle, and we'll say Port Kembla and those places where you've got high industrial areas, the fish stocks have probably declined, and through the.... I suppose the quality of the water in those places, and while everyone's getting aware of this pollution thing now and I think our future kids are probably going to benefit by this.

JD And at the moment you'd feel that it's a fairly localised problem?

FIDDEN Oh, I think so, I think so. It doesn't seem to affect other than your ocean outfalls, or your sewerage outfalls and that. Immediately round those areas you seem to have problems, but once you're a few miles away from them, there doesn't seem to be any problem.

JD Geoff, just before we go off the fishing side of the interview, could you tell us a bit about the boats you use and the changes that have taken place during your time in the industry?

FIDDEN Yes, when I first started off, I had a little wooden boat. The first one I had was a fourteen foot long clinker boat. You had tar to keep them afloat then. A lot of the fishermen this is what they used to do to keep them tight, and watertight. You didn't have any money much to go buying or building boats in those times, and if you got an old boat that used to leak a bit, you'd fix him up with tar, so that he was waterproof, and then as you progressed, we got better boats, carvel-built boats out of wood. White beech was always the pick of the timber for a fishing boat, because it didn't shrink and swell like other timbers, like your cedar and in the latter years, morante.

JD Is that a local timber?

FIDDEN Yes, white beech comes locally. Well I'll say locally, it's as far back as Gloucester, like 50 miles away you can get white beech, or in the Barrington area there. You can still get good white beech in those areas, and so we built our boats out of white beech wherever possible, and then in about the late '70s, my boys started fishing, and they got the idea of building fibre-glass boats. So one of the good-shaped boats that I had here, they took a mould off it, and made these fibre-glass boats. That put fibre-glass boats everywhere, and put boats everywhere. It put fishermen into better boats, whereas the fisherman had one dinghy he worked in and looked after, now nearly every fisherman, well, I'd say 90 per cent of the fishermen in this port, have got at least two, three or four boats, of these fibre-glass boats. The reason they have the boats (or the multiples of boats) is to save them from changing gear over. It's a multi purpose fishery in this port.

I mean a multi purpose fishing by, you've got beaky net, a mesh net, a hauler net, possibly a jew net, and a whiting net and they'll crab trap, so instead of pulling that gear off one boat, and putting other gear back on all the time, they've got the boats with the different types of nets on them. They just moored up on the banks, and they can grab that boat and go to work on the different species that they want to. It's made life a lot easier. You don't have to paint the damn things. You don't have to maintain them. If they do get a hole in them, half an hour at the most and they're repaired. It's given fishermen more free time to go and do other things, and it's really made the industry.

JD It's probably cheaper to produce in the first place, too.

FIDDEN Well, a wooden boat to build, you've got three weeks' work for two men that would cost today - with copper nails and your timber - at least \$5000. The fibre-glass boats, you can pop him out in two days, and at a cost of materials of about \$1000.

JD A big difference.

FIDDEN A big difference.

JD Are they using aluminium boats at all?

FIDDEN Not very much. Aluminium boats are all right for young fellows to run from point A to point B, but to fish out of, no, they're too noisy.

JD Noise is the problem, is it?

FIDDEN Oh yes, it is a hell of a problem. Noise and rough to ride in, you know, you get a little slop and he's bang, bang.

JD Does it affect the fishing, noise?

FIDDEN Oh definitely, definitely, yes. But look, well, you've got different species of fish that are very, very frightened, jewies for one. The jewie guts down like crazy. You've only got to stamp the ground hard and he's gone. If you're going to a quiet river anywhere to mesh a jew and you just bump the boat, you might as well leave your net in the boat. He's not there. He's gone. I used to work with an old fellow years ago and he was a good old mate, but he was a cranky old beggar and I used to be on the paddles and he'd be paying the net over the stern, and on a dark night we'd back up into the bank on some of these real quiet rivers, and if I happened to let that boat

touch the bank at all, I'd get a blast. Yes, he wouldn't like it, because if you let your boat touch the bank, you were gone.

JD What's the motive power of the boats these days?

FIDDEN Well, most of them are outboards. The boys still (and myself) I still row around a lot. I think that you're far better off if you want to go and catch fish at different times, to row, because it's surprising what you notice with fish. We've seen fish jump and we'll say half a mile, three quarters of a mile away, and you steam up with a little outboard motor and get within two or three hundred yards of those fish, and they'll stop jumping, and you can stop your motor and lay, and I bet you it's at least quarter of an hour to twenty minutes before those fish will start jumping again. So they must be able to either sense the noise or the vibrations of your propellor in the water there, and go deeper, and go quiet, and then you've got to lay, as I say, for at least a quarter of an hour, twenty minutes, before they will come to the top and start jumping again.

JD Yet they're not worried by the sound of the oars?

FIDDEN No, no, you just sneak along. You're so quiet with paddles, you know they're just in and out the water so quiet that you could sneak right up on fish with paddles and they never ever worry. The same thing as when you're shooting fish in when they're travelling on the beach there. As soon as you've kicked that motor over, they seem to sense that motor straight away.

JD The selling of the fish. You're very much involved in the co-op, aren't you?
Newcastle Co-op.

FIDDEN Yes.

JD You're the Chairman of the Board?

FIDDEN Chairman of the Directors, yes, of Newcastle there.

JD Are most of the fishermen in the port members of the co-op?

FIDDEN Yes, there's 99 per cent of fishermen on the whole area. Our co-op area goes from Swansea to Bungwall - it's a big area. When I started fishing, the co-op had just opened at Tea Gardens here, and somewhere upstairs I've got it, I think.... I just can't remember the bloke's name, the Minister that was in power then, that started the co-op system going.

JD It started from Government did it?

FIDDEN Yes.

JD Not the fishermen themselves?

FIDDEN Government orientated. No, government orientated to start the marketing. Rather than agents and that you had before, they implemented the co-op system, and our co-op here opened in Tea Gardens, I think, it was 1947 or '48 there, and it made things so easy that now fishermen can go to the co-op, put their product in there and

forget about it. It's iced, put in a cool room. They can go home and go to sleep and at the end of the week they get their money.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Geoff, in New South Wales, every port seems to have its co-op, and they seem to be thriving. Other States, in many instances anyway, they've gone out of existence. Why the difference?

FIDDEN Well, I believe that one of the reasons is your legislation in New South Wales. It makes fishermen ship at the nearest recognised market, and that's your co-op. We'll go back to when the co-ops kicked off and some of the co-ops now in little ports, through different rules and regulations, or changes of legislation with the boats, and endorsement on boats and everything, are sort of scratching at present in New South Wales. But that's not because of the actual co-op system, that's because of the viability of some of the boats in those ports. They said, "Okay, you've got to ship your fish through a co-op," and that's good, because it controls the marketing of fish. Fish get to the market in a better condition. They're supervised and inspectors can inspect the product at those places, and we'll go to other States, and their marketing seems to be in a turmoil because there doesn't seem to be any enforcement of rules and regulations in those places, whereas in this State, your inspectors check up on black market, you've got a squad that runs around, and until this last three years, fishermen used to look over their shoulder if they were selling a few fish on the side. The last three years it's been relaxed. I don't know why, but it's becoming more predominant, the black-marketing of fish in the State.

Now to me, this is really detrimental to not only your marketing system, but your individual fishermen, because if fishermen can do this, or if in the future, they're allowed to do this, they're going to take slightly less prices, getting cash in the hand, and that'll lower the price, because a buyer once he buys them for a dollar a kilo in that system, he won't go and pay a dollar thirty through a legal marketing system.

JD Am I to understand that the black-market is operated by the professional fishermen?

FIDDEN Well, yes, both professional and amateur, both professional and amateur. But I suppose they do it for one reason [laughs] that's only tax reason, they do it, and it's not all fishermen. 90 per cent of the product would go through legal markets, probably 99 per cent. But your co-ops, I feel, are the only way to market product in New South Wales. If you went now to your old system of either agents, or controlled market where individuals run the market there, you'd have manipulation of fishermen that he'd have to take the money that was offered, and in glut times when someone catches 1000 boxes of mullet there, and there's no demand for them, he'd be.... well, in the hands of the Philistines, he'd be. They wouldn't be worth two bob to him.

JD The outlets for your co-op are the.... you run some retail shops in association with the co-op, I believe. Then you can sell to other retailers, presumably in a close handy

area, and the rest of the product that comes through you goes to the Sydney market. Is that the scene?

FIDDEN Yes, yes. Newcastle, they've got a retail outlet. They've got an auction on the market floor every morning, every weekday morning. So what happens is, there's four receiving depots for Newcastle market. You've got Bungwall, Swansea, Nelsons Bay and Tea Gardens.

JD Run by your co-op or is that the Marketing Authority?

FIDDEN No, it's run by the Newcastle District Fishermen's Co-op, that is, so the product all goes down to the central market in Newcastle there. Every morning at half past seven there's an auction. Your shops come in from everywhere about the Newcastle area, and Coalfields area and everywhere else.

JD Is it a Dutch auction?

FIDDEN No, no, it's a normal auction system. A Dutch auction system is a shocking system in my opinion, and just recently we've had, you know, incidences here of prices - dramatic alteration in prices. Well, I just saw a return here last week for seabreakies. They started off at \$2.60 something there. There were fifteen or twenty boxes of seabreakies. The top price was \$2.60 and for those few boxes of fish, there was say, one box sold at \$2.60 and a few boxes sold at \$2 and the bulk of them went right down to 70 cents. Now that's a hell of a variation for a small quantity of fish on your Dutch auction system.

JD That was in Sydney?

FIDDEN In Sydney market. But in Newcastle, over the years your common fish (which we class common fish as mullet, blackfish) you'll get a better price for those fish in Newcastle, than what you will in Sydney market. Your bream, whiting, flathead etc. which we class as good fish, Sydney market will always beat Newcastle on those. Now I think the main reason is you've got higher class restaurants in Sydney which will pay bigger prices, probably more of them, so that puts the price up in Sydney on good fish, whereas common fish are generally dearer in Newcastle.

But the auction in Newcastle, what the buyers don't buy in Newcastle, go on to Sydney that same day. So they're auctioned at seven o'clock, the truck loads at Newcastle, it starts to load at Newcastle at twelve, they're loaded on a refrigerated truck and down to Sydney market. Now what has happened lately (I don't know why) is that we've had a fair bit of fish in Sydney market go to ice. You'll get a return back "To ice". Now this has only happened in the last four to five weeks.

JD What's that mean? That it's gone into storage?

FIDDEN Into storage. It comes out of storage and in a lot of instances, it's condemned. Now, I think that's an awful shame for that waste of fish, and I've got to try and find out the reason for it, because fishermen are coming to me now and saying, "Hey! What's happened?" I saw one chap there the other day and he had eight seizure notices in a period of a week for product that had gone to Sydney, gone to ice, come out and been seized.

JD What the health people had....?

FIDDEN The Department of Ag inspectors had seized the stuff.

JD As what?

FIDDEN As not fit for human consumption. You know, I think it's a terrible waste of product and there's got to be a reason for it. It's not the fishermen there. They've not done anything different, so it's got to be something happening down the other end.

Now, when you get problems like that and with the new market that we've got in Sydney, and the Dutch auction system, these problems come back to fishermen, and right now, in the fishing industry, you've had a downturn in prices last three months - a hell of a downturn in prices. The market doesn't seem to be able to hold up with the quantity of fish on the market floor. At one time you could get a good quantity of fish on that market floor. Prices would still hold up and the market would still hold stable. This last three months I'd say, for some reason or other, as soon as you get a quantity of fish hitting that market floor in Sydney, down goes the price, and they drop dramatically. Next door to nothing, you know.

JD Is competition from imported fish a problem?

FIDDEN Yes, yes, it's a big problem, and I think this is where some of the problems are coming from, either overseas or inter-state. I spoke to one of the buyers' representatives in Sydney, only about three weeks ago. He said today in Sydney, the buyers are only.... the shopkeeper's only buying about 30 per cent of his product from Sydney market. He said 70 per cent he's buying either from outside sources, or imported, and they maintain that in those shops in Sydney, provided it's white fish and boneless, people buy it.

JD They seem to have gone off brown fish, don't they? They won't clean it themselves.

FIDDEN Won't clean fish themselves. We see it here. The wife and daughter run the local shop at the co-op up here, the Tea Gardens there. Filleted fish, they can work all day filleting fish and sell it. Blackfish, mullet, a ready market for the fillets. They can put the whole fish in the show case there at one third of the cost - or one third of the price there - sell very little.

JD One reason perhaps is, that many, many mothers now work, don't they? They just don't have time to fillet fish.

FIDDEN Yes, yes. Also I think, people have got to be educated towards eating fish, know where the bones are in fish to eat fish. Like we can sit down and enjoy a whole fish because we know where the bones are in it, how to eat around those bones. People today want to sit down with a knife and fork and eat the lot. They don't know how to eat round bones.

JD Is the industry doing anything to educate the public in preferences for seafood?

FIDDEN Well, they've got an advertising campaign. Newcastle was the first marketing body in New South Wales that I know of, to advertise on television. We started a programme here about six or eight weeks ago. We've got another one running now on seafood. At Sydney market there, they've got some wonderful courses going to educate schoolchildren, which I think's great. That's the future of the industry in twenty years' time. If they start at school level and educate those kiddies, twenty

years down the track, they're going to be teaching their kids to eat fish. So I think that's the right track. That's the future.

JD Do you think there's been changes in people's eating habits in regard to seafood?

FIDDEN Well, I don't know whether I can personally say that. I don't know myself, firsthand, whether there has or not.

JD It's not evident through your outlets?

FIDDEN No. Look, over the years we've had these fluctuations in prices and I don't know altogether what governs them. Well, go back to the early '60s there, and we had prices which were absolutely shocking. We were getting down to fourpence a pound in the early '60s there, for beakies.

JD When you say "beakies" - if I could interrupt - what are beakies?

FIDDEN River garfish.

JD Oh right.

FIDDEN River garfish, or sea garfish.

JD Yes.

FIDDEN Blackfish. I saw us catch 180 boxes of blackfish in a shot one day on the beach there, and get one pound for the 180 box of blackfish. I think the **Newcastle Herald** did a bit of a run on it there, the prices in those times, and then you got through a period when we came to the decimal currency and that came in, and prices seemed to go up for some reason or other. Right now, and I forecast this, the next six months, twelve months, prices are going to be bad on fish. There's already started this downturn as I say. I don't know what it is, whether it's this Dutch auction, whether it's just a trend that's happened, but the prices that we've been getting in the last three months, I'd say are down at least twenty per cent on the same time last year.

JD There seems to be a considerable mark-up from the purchasers on the floor of the market to what the consumer in the shop pays. Do you think that mark-up's a problem - a factor in people turning away from fish?

FIDDEN Well, it could be, it could be. I suppose you've got to look at things and all right, if a fish shop proprietor borrows a lot of money with high interest rates, he's got large overheads today, and I suppose he's looking for a return on his capital outlay. They tell me to set a fish shop up today costs you a damn lot of money, so I suppose these are all governing factors. Also with our Government that puts extra charges on to either the selling of the fish, or the catching of the fish in as much as our licence fees go up. Our licence fees when - about five years ago - escalated from \$2 to \$100. That's not a bad mark-up and jump in one go. This year they've gone from \$100 to \$300 with this CFAC - Commercial Fisheries Advisory Council. So there's a pretty big jump. Our maritime charges have all gone up. Our licence fees and our boats have all gone up.

I suppose this all contributes towards the escalated price of fish, but the difference from the retailer to the seller, at times I don't think it's justified. Like when you get.... we'll say mullet, selling in Sydney market there for 40 cents a kilo, which it does a lot

of times there, you never ever see it in the shops under about \$2.50. Well, I think 100 per cent mark-up, maybe would sell a lot more fish.

JD It seems to be a big variation between retailers too.

FIDDEN Yes [laughs] you get into the likes of those classy places down at Sydney there, at Centrepoint and those places where their rents must be astronomical there, the public pays for it.

JD Presentation is vitally important, isn't it?

FIDDEN Oh, that's everything. I reckon people eat with their eyes.

JD Yes.

FIDDEN You go down to those retail shops at Sydney market there, where everything's presented beautifully, well iced, nice and fresh looking, and a hell of a variety of stuff, it's magnificent to even see. It's great. We go down there, and we see them kicking in the boat, but to see them presented in those shops like that, it's absolutely great!

JD There's a lesson there, isn't there?

FIDDEN Oh definitely. Like look, this is again where.... well semi-government bodies can ruin things to a certain extent. Newcastle Co-op, we put a new retail shop in there, wanting to present the fish the same as they are presented in Sydney market. They wouldn't let us. The council wouldn't let us. The health authorities of the council, they have different codes there to what they have in Sydney. They had to be under glass at Newcastle there where the public were away from the fish, whereas you get down to Sydney there, they're all on these open shelves. They're beautiful.

JD Yes, I've never seen it so well done anywhere as in Sydney.

FIDDEN No, it's magnificent. And the variety of fish there today! God look! Go back to what? Ten, twenty years ago, and in the average fish shop you'd probably have ten varieties of fish there. Down Sydney market there's stuff that used to be thrown away. Now that's presented and sold and there's a demand for it - a hell of a demand for it. Your little occies, your cuttlefish, your rock cod that people used to throw away, they're all on sale there now. There's a market for them.

JD Even the fish-heads.

FIDDEN Everything, yes. You get these blue-eye heads and they're in the shops down there. A variety of prawns and your what? Your yabbies and stuff like that. Never seen it before. I reckon it's great.

JD Could we turn to another one of your interests? I know you're very prominent in the professional fishermen's organisations. Would you like to talk a bit about that? On the local scene and how that fits in with the broader, perhaps state-wide scene, and then even the national?

FIDDEN Yes, well I suppose you know, you get snowballed into these damn jobs to a certain extent, and once you get involved, it seems to be an on-going thing that you can't get out of it. I suppose we saw (or I saw) so many changes in the industry, that I

thought weren't for the good of the industry, that you start and get involved. I think the major one that started everything rolling was when a Minister a few years ago, stated that he was going to close a lot of the estuaries. We had a big meeting at Hexham. We got that stopped. We got a moratorium placed on the closure of all estuaries for five years until such times as more research and everything had been done, which was great. Then we saw more regulations coming into force all the time, or being enforced all the time, which restricted your work that you used to do. The work's all changed today to what it was 20 or 30 years ago. You find that you can't do the things. You're restricted in certain things today.

They started off then. When we had a change of Minister, he wanted a body that truly represented New South Wales' fishermen to talk to. He was having splinter groups that were putting individual views up that probably weren't the views of the majority of the industry. So he formed this Commercial Fisheries Advisory Council, and that was last July, and appointed people from different regions of New South Wales on to that body, and he tried to get as much representation as he could from the different areas. He cut the State into seven zones, and got one estuary fisherman, and one outside fisherman from each zone, on to this body, appointed them, plus five individuals from representative groups that were endorsed fisheries, like your abalone and your tuna, and your 117 which is a prawn endorsement, so that he would have representation there.

JD Were they all fishermen or were they merchants and processors and....?

FIDDEN Well, the whole of the council - the Commercial Fisheries Advisory Council - is, or originally was, fishermen. The Minister has said that in the event of any one of those people not being able to attend, they can appoint someone to go and sit on that council, and he may not necessarily be a fisherman, which to me is wrong. I think sitting round that table they should be all fishermen, and I hope that in the future, that they will be active fishermen sitting round the table always. I think right now that if you've got into a situation where the fishermen sort of left that meeting for some reason, and you've got people sitting round the table that weren't actively involved in fishing, you wouldn't get a true view of the actual fishermen, because what you can get is people sitting, I suppose, making decisions there for their own gain or benefit, which would destroy the thing.

As it is now and if it's set up properly, I think it will be a great thing. It's worked very, very well. The thing's been mainly involved in structural management up to date. A little bit of policy making and what happens is this, you've got regional advisory committees that meet prior to the CFAC meeting.

JD The what meeting?

FIDDEN The CFAC, the Commercial Fisheries Advisory Council.

JD Right.

FIDDEN They take the views of their regional meetings to the CFAC meeting.

JD Can I just ask, is the Department represented at that CFAC meeting?

FIDDEN Yes, yes. The Chairman is appointed by the Minister. You have an Executive Officer who at present is a Department of Ag chap, and you have the Director of

Fisheries at the meeting there, plus any other department people who we want to drag in for information.

JD But they wouldn't have voting rights?

FIDDEN No, no. the organisation as I say, I'll repeat myself, it will work great. It will be great provided the Minister listens to it and providing you don't have the people sitting round the table influenced by views of some bureaucrats, and that can happen. You can get manipulated at different times, people can be manipulated at different times unknowingly.

JD Are the fishermen members appointed or elected?

FIDDEN At present they're appointed. The voting procedure they hope will be in by June. I think the next meeting of CFAC, the appointed committee there, will be the last. They see it as being the last and then there will be elected committee from then on.

JD Now that's the State scene. When we come to the national scene, how do we stand?

FIDDEN Well look, really I don't know because I've mainly been involved with.... I'm the estuary representative, and we're all governed by State waters. The outside chap who is Russell Kerr from Crowdy for this area, he's the off-shore fellow, was governed by Commonwealth. I think once this OCS is signed, this Off-shore Constitutional Settlement signed, where the State takes over from the Federal Government, the whole scene will change. You'll become more involved, I suppose, with different matters. I think there's a New South Wales Fishing Industry Council. I don't think it's been very active lately. They're talking about trying to revamp it and get it going where you have a couple of members of CFAC sit on this New South Wales committee that goes to the Federal scene. But mainly as far as negotiating with the Federal Government, it's mainly been on an individual basis, or a group basis, like you'll get three or four fishermen get a delegation together and go to the Federal Minister.

JD There's no advisory body of the national Government as there is with the....?

FIDDEN Well, I think there probably is, but where it's made up, I wouldn't know. We're not involved with it.

JD Could I ask you what are the relationships between the fishermen and the Fisheries Division?

FIDDEN Department.

JD Or Department.

FIDDEN Well, until such times as this committee was formed, you had your individual contacts like your local inspector, and in a small country town, most times your local inspectors were pretty good. With rules and regulations I don't give a damn who it is that's enforcing rules and regulations, in my opinion there's only one way of enforcing rules and regulations, that's commonsense. Anyone can read whatever they like into regulations and rules and everything, that's the main prevailing factor that should happen in a small country town or wherever you are, and here in this place, I think

we've been very, very lucky. Our inspectors live in the town, their kiddies go to school with our kiddies and they've been good. They're reasonable people.

Over the years I've always had a pretty good relationship with the chiefs down in Sydney there. I think they're pretty receptive to most people who've got reasonable ideas on fishing. You'd probably get people with radical ideas that want to push their own barrow, but I've always got on well, exceptionally well with them down there. This move to Orange with the Department of Agriculture is going to be a retrograde step as far as the fishing industry goes. I think the Department of Ag, fair enough to move to Orange, but the Fisheries Division should stop on the coast as I see it.

Right well, I suppose just to wind things up, I'd go to these meetings and negotiate with the Department of Agriculture only to keep the industry viable for the kids of the future, so they can enjoy their lives as I've enjoyed mine in the fishing industry.

JD Thank you, Geoff, and thank you very much for this interview.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Geoff Fidden of Pindimar, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with JOHN GARVEN

INTRODUCTION

John Garven is a well known fisherman in both the professional and sports fishing fields. He has been a professional fisherman for 30 years out of the Port of Yamba in New South Wales and has been highly successful in sports fishing at both state and national level.

In this interview he provides a wealth of information on many fishing methods including beach seining, long lining, drop lining, trawling and fish trapping. He also discusses the areas he has fished, river beach and off-shore to the sea mounts and as far afield as Lord Howe Island. In the course of the discussion he deals with pollution, conservation and research, marketing and management, aquaculture and his concerns for the future of the industry. He is informative, enthusiastic and articulate and makes a valuable contribution to this oral history of the Australian fishing industry.

The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey in Yamba for Murdoch University on April 6th, 1990. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD John, would you first of all record your full name please.

GARVEN My name is John Howard Garven.

JD And your date of birth.

GARVEN I was born in 1935.

JD And where were you born?

GARVEN I was born at Maclean, a small town in the lower Clarence River.

JD Were you brought up in that area?

GARVEN I was brought up on a sugar cane farm, a rural area that's quite famous in the Clarence River for the sugar cane growing. It's the most southerly cane growing area in Australia. I went to school at the small public school at Palmer's Island, a one teacher school adjacent to the mighty Clarence River and, of course, my introduction to the fishing came through my family, my father in particular. I spent most of my childhood either close to the sea or close to the river fishing with my father who'd

done that type of thing for many years. So from an early age I was quite familiar with the fish population in the Clarence River.

JD Was your father a professional fisherman?

GARVEN No. My father was a cane farmer and had a cane farm at Palmer's Island which was handed down to him from his father and his father before that. In fact they were the first settlers on Palmer's Island and originally started cane farming in the 1860s and took up a square mile of land which they cleared and started cane farming. The cane farm now is only a small portion of that square mile but that farm is now, or rather there are two farms in our family's name adjacent to one another. They're still being carried on. I work them part time or seasonally with some help and I am now a professional fisherman working in that industry also.

JD John, when did you start as a professional fisherman?

GARVEN In the 1960s I became a professional fisherman. Licences were quite easily obtainable and as a part time fisherman, to supplement my income from the farm or any farm work we were doing, I took on fishing and started off in a small way with small boats and so on, doing some river fishing. Eventually I branched out into sea fishing with small boats and gradually, through the period in between, I've upgraded into larger vessels and now most of my fishing activity is off-shore fishing from the port of Yamba.

JD What species of fish were you fishing for in the river, say?

GARVEN Mainly in the river fishing I did a small amount of net fishing. I did prawning with a small boat. I did line fishing, mainly for species like mulloway or jewfish and bream. They were the higher priced fish so I concentrated on those before I graduated into sea fishing even though I'd done a lot of fishing from the shore in the sea, off the headlands and the beaches and was quite conversant with the type of fishing that was happening out there.

JD Were you doing netting from the beaches?

GARVEN Yes. It's a multi-specie fishery in this area and you have to take the opportunity to catch anything that's available in season and yes, netting was one of the things in the sea that we did, beach seining it was called where you row a boat around schools of seasonally migrating fish along the coast, mainly sea mullet, bream, luderick or black fish and you hauled those ashore, mainly with a crew of five or six people.

JD Was the Australian salmon along these beaches at all?

GARVEN No. The Australian salmon was only a rare visit to our area. We would catch the occasional one but it was a rarity. Most of the Australian salmon stick to the colder water further south and don't reach this far north except occasionally in winter time.

JD Were you getting a fair return for these fish, these earlier days?

GARVEN Looking back on it, I think the high price fish were probably the same high priced fish as they are now. Jewfish, bream, whiting, were the high price fish. If you went offshore, the snapper were the high price fish and there were some very low price fish which were hardly worth catching. In fact some species were shunned

because of the very poor prices but comparing the prices, say 30 years ago to what they are now, I think they would probably [be] comparable with the high prices you get today.

JD When you started fishing offshore, you would have found, of course, that your costs would have increased quite markedly. You'd need much bigger boats and things, wouldn't you, much heavier gear, I imagine?

GARVEN That's right. When we graduated to bigger boats, more expensive boats, more expensive equipment, it was necessary because of the distances we had to travel. My first big boat in the ocean was a 36 foot boat or eleven metre boat and it was of a planing hull. It was a triple diagonal planked Oregon boat with a Volvo Penta diesel engine of 240 horsepower. I could get a speed of about thirteen knots. This was sufficient to take me off shore twenty mile every day and return. The costs were quite high but the catches were significant enough to cover those costs and it wasn't a worry. In fact I can remember saying, back in 1971 when I first got this larger boat, that it wouldn't matter if the price of fuel doubled. We would still be able to make a go of it. Fuel was not a consideration in those days. The cost of diesel fuel for [the] boat motor in those days was seventeen cents a gallon. Now, of course, it is around about 55 cents a litre. So the costs have skyrocketed lately in the last ten years because of the fuel crisis. We can still make a go of it providing we catch something, but in the previous years you could spend a lot of time searching for fish and the cost of the fuel was not exorbitant. Nowadays we have to be very careful that we don't waste a lot of effort, waste a lot of fuel and catch nothing.

JD John, during your career in fishing there'd have been a lot of innovations, I imagine and you'd have been in quite a few of them. Would you talk about that a bit?

GARVEN Well the innovations probably covered every aspect of fishing right through from the handline fishing where my era saw the nylon fishing line come into being. It saw synthetic nets for prawning or meshing, nylon nets came into being; innovations in new types of techniques of nets and gear; in trawling, in equipment. We have radars. We have very, very sophisticated depth sounders. We have satellite navigation, all sorts of navigation aids. We have good radio communications. So all those innovations plus the down to earth ones where people just learn better techniques in catching fish on a line or using the right type of hook or even knowing the weather and the various seasonal things that help you get success. All these must be called innovations, I presume. We're gradually getting it all together. Unfortunately, as we get smarter and we get better equipment, the fish get scarcer.

JD John, could you tell us a bit about the method you're currently using in your fishing.

GARVEN We're now branching into some new types of fishery in the last few years. I now have a larger boat again, a twelve point five metre fibreglass planing hull vessel, a higher horsepower and faster boat than the previous one with better carrying facilities for the fish, handling facilities, ice rooms and so on, better navigation aids and we are looking at new fisheries. One that I was very interested in for quite a few years was catching of the yellow fin tuna by a long line method off the east coast, New South Wales, mainly on the north coast of New South Wales but there was a market in Japan developing for raw tuna called sushimi tuna. Air freight became more available, better services, quicker services, better methods of handling them and after a few years of a lot of research and a lot of trial and error we eventually became more proficient. We got into the system of long lining for these yellow fin, as well as a lot of

other fishermen. Some years it has become quite lucrative. Other years it's been a complete failure because of the low prices.

We also fish on the offshore sea mounts situated 120 mile off shore on the north coast of New South Wales. I was one of the first ones to fish on the Britannia sea mounts and the Queensland sea mounts which are very close together. Through trial and error again we established that there was a resource of blue eye trevalla which was thought previously to be only a southern water specie, a deep water southern specie, a cold water species. A lot of other fishermen decided that that was a good thing too and now there's quite a few boats operating in that fishery. We are now, at this stage, talking to the Australian Fisheries Service on a management plan for this area because we were concerned that there was too much effort going into it and if we can contain that effort until the stocks are researched and the quantities available are known, we think that we should have a limit on the amount of boats and entries into this fishery. That's a new fishery for us, as well as the tuna long lining.

One of the more traditional fisheries that I'm still involved in is the snapper fishery by a method known as fish trapping with a wire netting fish trap of quite a large size fish trap, baited, set over night and attended on a daily basis, well off shore. This was quite a big fishery in past years but it has gradually declined until our concerns have been forwarded to the Fisheries Department and they have initiated the research into the snapper fishery and now agree with us that the snapper decline is very serious indeed. This now is not a full twelve month of the year fishery for us. It is only a very limited seasonal fishery because we cannot afford to fish it any longer because of the amount that we catch.

We do catch other fish on the lines such as bar cod, deep water cod. We fish for pearl perch which is a very high priced fish, mulloway off shore, any fish that is in season we catch and make use of. We did have some excursions to the Lord Howe Island, Middleton and Elizabeth Reef areas in the last few years and found quite good stocks of fish there. Unfortunately the Australian National Parks Service decided to create a marine reserve around the Elizabeth and Middleton Reefs and excluded us from fishing without consulting with us, without even establishing what stocks were there. We believe we knew more than they did about the stocks and the potential of the area but that has now been excluded to us and I believe it was a potentially rich area for a limited fishery. Lord Howe Island is still available but it's quite a distance off shore, being 300 nautical miles off shore and our small boats are just not quite capable of fishing that regularly.

Most of the other fishing we do now is opportunity fishing such as sea mullet in season. When there's some sea mullet on the beach we tie our big boats up. We gather our crew together which maybe is other boat owners in the same port. We get our small boats and our nets out and take the opportunity of catching some seasonal travelling fish such as bream or sea mullet. Most of the other fishing done by other people here consists of trawling for king prawns and school prawns in the ocean and trawling for school prawns in the river and the lakes. There has been quite a bit of agitation in the last few years that the river fishery should be curtailed or closed so as to allow those stocks of prawns to migrate to sea and become larger and more valuable. I believe that time is not far distant that we will see a lot of curtailment of fishing activities in the estuaries, mainly because of public pressure but, I think, because of conservation ideals as well.

JD Are they the same prawn that is caught in the estuary as is caught in the ocean?

GARVEN Yes. All the prawns that are caught in the ocean are reliant on the estuaries for their juvenile stages. The eggs or the spawn washes into the rivers. The small ones live for a short period and grow in the estuaries. Then they migrate to sea and become adults in the sea and so the cycle starts over again. So the estuaries are very, very important for the prawn fishery. The king prawns are a very large prawn. They migrate along the coast but they originate out of estuaries further south and migrate north in the deep water, whereas the school prawn probably only extends from the mouth of the river a few miles, once he goes to sea at a mature age.

JD Just before we go off methods of fishing John, you mentioned the blue eye trevally that's caught on the mountain peaks, the submerged mountain peaks, what method of fishing do you use to catch those?

GARVEN The method that everyone uses right up and down the coast, and I think even to Tasmania, is a drop line method called just a drop line. It's a very heavy weighted line that goes to the bottom in 200 - 400 fathoms of water. It takes down a baited line with maybe up to 100 hooks on it to the bottom very quickly. It is then winched to the surface after a short period and the fish taken off it and rebaited. Maybe three or four of these are used in rotation but it's just a drop line method with very heavy weights, probably anything up to twenty kilos of weight to take a lot of hooks to the bottom quickly. After an area has been found with a sonar or a depth sounder when the fish are located or the contours of the bottom suggest that maybe fish would be there, the line is set, probably with floats on the surface to be retrieved in a short while while others are set, and so the rotation goes on. So it's very deep water fishing for a specie of fish which is quite a valuable food fish and has an acceptable market.

JD Is the vessel drifting whilst this is going on?

GARVEN Yes. The vessel is navigated around the sides of the cliffs of the sea mounts under water till a special place is found, the lines are set and then the vessel can either drift and wait for a few minutes or it can go and set another line and come back. So it's just working around a small area all the time picking up lines and putting them back. Then if the fish disappear, well new ground has to be searched out and found before the lines are reset.

JD In these line fisheries or methods of fishing, you use bait, of course, do you catch your own bait?

GARVEN Sometimes we do. Sometimes we can use mullet for bait, tuna for bait. We can get bait off the trawlers that work on the prawns where they have a by catch of octopus or squid or trash fish. So bait is readily available. Depending on the species that you're after, we can always find a ready source of bait. In the case of long lining for tuna where the lines are set on the surface attached to floats and many kilometres of line are set with many hundreds of hooks, in my case 300 hooks on about sixteen kilometres of line, the bait we use at this stage mainly consists of blue pilchards from Western Australia which are packeted, frozen and transported over here as a source of bait for both professional and amateur fishermen. It is a big industry in Western Australia supplying the east coast with bait. Because of the quantity of bait we use where we set 300 hooks a day, or sometimes twice a day, we use a lot of bait. So the Western Australian pilchard is a reliable source of bait but when we can, we can supplement that with fresh yellow tail or fresh slimy mackerel which the trawlers can catch here or fresh squid which is very good bait for the tuna. So a big supply of bait is necessary for long lining for tuna.

JD Is that bait that you purchase, is it supplied through the co-op?

GARVEN It can be supplied through some co-ops. The fishermen acquire it when and where he can at the best prices. Sometimes some fishermen have orders from various bait places, from bait markets and we buy our bait from the Tweed Bait Supply which imports from Western Australia semi-trailer loads of blue pilchards and supplies the coast with bait on a regular basis.

JD John, the marketing arrangements in New South Wales are controlled through a marketing authority, I understand, or at least partly controlled. Would you like to talk about that?

GARVEN The Government runs a Fish Marketing Authority which has a central fish market in Sydney and the members of that Fish Marketing Authority are the co-operatives made up of fishermen all away along the coast. Fishermen's Co-Operatives, they are called. Members are the co-operative and really we belong to the whole system. The system was brought into being, I think, in 1946 after a lot of problems with fish marketing in Sydney because of low prices. The post-War period had high supplies of fish and there were low prices and because of various problems this Fish Marketing Authority was set up to probably attempt to supply the large metropolitan areas with fish, to get rid of the fish that the fishermen were catching at a better price. That probably did a good job in those days.

Since then the whole fishing industry has changed. The marketing has changed, the demand has changed and probably that system is not as necessary as it was in the formation years. There's quite a bit of discontent about poor prices of fish, about government monopoly on the fish supplies and just at present there is an inquiry into the fishing industry right through from the catching to the marketing and may be there will be a freeing up of the marketing of fish because nowadays it is quite a contrast to what it was originally. Where once it was a buyers market, nowadays with a lot of high priced fish and very dwindling supplies, it is more a seller's market and a lot of fishermen now believe, in this day and age, that we should have more say into the marketing of our fish and the prices we get and that there should be a freeing of the marketing and that private enterprise will probably do a better job than the Fish Marketing Authority in monopolising the sales of the fish. I believe in the future this will have to come because it's happening elsewhere in Australia and I think it's only a matter of time that the producers have more say in the marketing of their fish.

JD Do you feel that in other parts of the fishing industry, management techniques that are applied and so on, that the fishermen, through their organisations, are listened to by government?

GARVEN In the past they probably haven't been listened to as much as they should, mainly because the organisation wasn't there. There's been various organisations that have failed in the past but we believe we're getting a system now called the Commercial Fishermen's Organisation or Association throughout the State where we have area representatives. We believe now that we talk with government on a lot better terms and we're having more input into the management of our fisheries. I believe that we're eventually on the right track to management of our fisheries. Where once the fishery was managed as a whole by the State Fisheries, now there seems to be species management and we have things such as a tuna management system in operation which is run by the Federal people, by Canberra. It's a Commonwealth managed fishery but in consultation with New South Wales Fisheries, of course. We have an offshore sea mount fishery just being put into place, a management scheme put into place. We're going to have a snapper fishery or an inshore fishery scheme put

into place soon and us fishermen are having a big input into those ideas of management.

JD Could we have a look at licensing? That too has changed, hasn't it, in recent years?

GARVEN Licensing has changed a lot with the idea now the Government has of the user pay principle, where all research and management of a fishery is paid for by the participants in the fishery. So licence fees, boat licences, net licences, your personal licences and all sorts of endorsements are skyrocketing in price. Where once a few years ago I was probably paying twenty or \$30 in licences for all my boats and all my equipment, I now am looking at \$3,500 with a possibility, if I'm endorsed for a new off shore fishery, which I've been involved in for years, but if it becomes a managed fishery, I might be looking at another \$2,000 per year as a fee for an endorsement to fish in a fishery that I've been participating in for years. So we could be looking at thousands of dollars a year. This is a big problem because some fishermen feel that they're just going to be forced out of fishing because of the high fees. Whether the Government decides that if someone goes out, they'll advertise that position for someone else who's got more money, is a big talking point in the industry at present.

JD It's of considerable concern to fishermen?

GARVEN It appears that big Governments look on big companies as the way of the future for the fishing industry. Of course big companies can afford to pay higher licence fees if the small fishermen are forced out and they have the monopoly. So they have the whole fishery and, of course, they can afford then to pay the high fees.

JD This interview is continued on side B of this tape.

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD John, there are many, many rules and regulations now governing fishing. Are they irksome for fishermen?

GARVEN Probably they're becoming more so. Some people see it that there's too many restrictions. Probably for some reasons it's a good idea. For safety reasons the Maritime Services Board have probably increased their restrictions on vessel requirements, on the equipment they carry because vessels are operating further ashore now and so on. So yes, there's more restrictions. There's more equipment that you have to put on to meet the standards. There's other restriction fishing activities such as the bad bars and the conditions of the river mouths for entry to the sea. Other problems are, of course, the higher fees that the fisheries are putting on for people to enter the fishery but mainly the regulations are safety regulations. They've got to carry life rafts. Their equipment must be inspected. There's fire fighting equipment [that] has got to be up-to-date, a lot more equipment and a lot more standards now days than there were. So probably less accidents that way, but of course, the bar conditions are very extreme on this part of the coast with the river entrances. So much caution has to be used in crossing the bars and there are quite a lot of accidents, bad accidents and there's been quite a few in this area in the past. So I think they will always happen. It's just people's experience that counts in those cases, I think, and bad circumstances sometimes and people getting caught out in bad weather or rescuing other boats. There are lots of problems that the fishermen encounter in this area.

JD Some of the other problems, what about the question of pollution? Is that a problem in this area?

GARVEN Pollution is a problem in metropolitan areas round the large cities such as Sydney and Newcastle and the Wollongong area. It is not so much of a problem in the country areas but there's a potential there for it to become a problem. Right now, in the Clarence River, we have talk of a large pulp mill being introduced by a Japanese company. With the effluent from a pulp mill running into the river, or discharged at sea, we can only see major problems arising, as has happened in most pulp mills throughout the world. We don't seem to be learning anything from the lessons learnt overseas or elsewhere and there's a big push to put a pulp river in the Clarence River area. Hopefully, that won't eventuate but we have a major pollution problem there. Other pollution problems, I think, are being addressed. They've been recognised at this stage. Maybe we've had some pollution problems in the past, but now they're being recognised and the problems are being looked at. I think we will clean up our act and keep those pollution problems in the country areas of the State to a minimum. The city areas have one major problem and how they're going to get over it, we don't know, but with the pollution we have things like metals and heavy metals. We have run off from the land with insecticides, herbicides. Most of these have been recognised and hopefully there'll be no more problems with insecticides like Dieldrin and Aldrin and other pollutants that come off agricultural land.

JD John, some concern is often expressed about the decline in stocks or the alleged decline in stocks. What's your view?

GARVEN Well most fishermen are the first people to note these declines. The Fisheries authorities seem to always be very reluctant to agree or concede that there is a problem. They keep telling us, "She'll be right. You're only imagining things" but lately we have had a small victory with our Fisheries Department where some fishermen who've been involved in the snapper fishery for years have been declaring that there's a very big decline in the stocks. The results from the market sales and the return from fishermen did not bear this out because the catch rate kept pace with the extra effort that was being put into it. However, all of a sudden, as we forecast, as some fishermen told the Fisheries, there will be a crash and the crash has arrived. The Fisheries people now admit that there is a 50% decline in the catch rate of snapper over the last twelve months and the decline is continuing at a faster rate. The only consolation that us fishermen have is that we can say to Fisheries Management, "We told you so!" However we hope that we can have some input into a management scheme which will arrest that decline. We will never get it back to what it was in the past, to the good old days, but hopefully we can get it part of the way back and we will have a stable catch of fish both for the amateur fishermen and the professional fishermen. There must be an amount of fish there that can be caught regularly each year without decimating the stocks or we will have another crash on our hands.

JD The fishing fraternity, the professional fishermen, are keen on more research into the stocks. Is that right?

GARVEN Yes. We asked the Fisheries that they spend more money on research. They have spent a fair bit on snapper research and have come up with these findings but we say there must be more research done into the environment part of it, into the decline in the stocks, what ever problem there is, over fishing, of course is considered by most people to be the major cause. If we can curtail the effort a bit, we can get the stocks back and then we will have to have some sort of restriction where we have only a certain amount harvested each year. The problem, of course, is how to divide that up between the recreational fishermen and the commercial fishermen. So it's a big

problem to get a management scheme in place for a fishery that's been declining for years and has now reached a critical point but we believe that the Fisheries management now, for the first time in many years, are fair dinkum about doing something about the problem.

JD John, you mentioned the recreational fishermen and professional fishermen and their, perhaps conflict of interests. You, I understand, have a foot in both camps in that you're a professional fisherman but also a very keen angler. Would you like to comment on that conflict, if indeed there is a conflict?

GARVEN Yes. Well firstly, I've had a history of being involved in both fisheries because from my original introduction into the fishing world was just by fishing out of small boats and hand line fishing and so on. I kept a keen interest in fishing as a sport and we went through the period of belonging to many fishing clubs and groups of fishermen. We had activities such as championships and State contests and so on. I became a member of the State team in Australian championships and I have won quite a number of New South Wales championships and Australian championships. So I've travelled over a lot of States and competitively fished on a recreational basis through the organisation of recreational fishermen, through almost every state in Australia. I have a pretty good insight into how the recreational people are involved in the Fishery and of course, through my professional fishing activities, I've been involved in quite a few of the commercial fishing activities such as management ideas and organisation and so on. So between the two of them, I can see how each group of people want the most for themselves, not so much in conflict, but with concern that the other people might get the edge over them and get the resource to themselves more or less.

In New South Wales it's probably not as big a problem as in some other States where you have a real conflict for the resource. I believe all the differences can be sorted out. After all, every one wants more fish and if we can get some management in to look after our resources and allocate those out fairly to everybody, I think everyone will be quite happy. I don't see that there's going to be a big ongoing conflict in our part of the world here in New South Wales for the resource.

JD Is there a mechanism whereby both parties talk to each other?

GARVEN Yes. In the past there's been a lot of organisations, committees and so on made up of people from both camps and they talk to the Government and I think it's quite useful. I don't think there are many problems that we can't overcome. There are some fisheries, of course [where] there is no conflict but there are things such as the estuary fishing and the close shore fishing, the in shore fishing where there's more and more people, more and more recreational people, competing for the same resource and there's more effort going into the commercial fishery. If we can get good management and look after our environment, we're going to have some there for everybody but how we divide them up is a problem that we've got to sort out in future but I don't think we will have much trouble in getting over that one.

JD Just turning back again to marketing of fish for a moment John, do you believe that we present our product well enough in Australia?

GARVEN Probably now we do. I think there's been a lot more thought go into it, a lot more interest, realisation that you just can't tip a load of fish into a fish tub and put a shovel of ice on them and send them off to Sydney and get the consumer to fall over backwards and pay high prices for those fish. We've got to look after them and we've got to present them in the right way. We've got to probably promote them through the

media to the public and once the public gets confidence in the product, I think that will solve the problem, but in the past it wasn't that way. There were gluts of fish poorly presented. No one wanted them. The buyer had the say in the price he paid for them and possibly he made money out of them. The fishermen didn't do any good out of them. The consumer didn't get any benefit out of them but I think nowadays presentation and marketing is the word and we find in overseas exporting of our fish, of course, that if we're not right up to scratch, we fall right behind and we've found this with marketing of our fresh fish to Japan, our sashimi tuna which has to be handled with kid gloves almost. We put the fish on a carpet on the boat. We don't bruise them or knock them around. We don't knock a scale off them. We really look after them very well and they go all the way to Japan and the consumer over there buys them according to the quality. So the price is dependant on quality nowadays.

JD Do you see any changes in the eating habits of Australians in regard to fish?

GARVEN Yeah there probably is. Probably once people bought fish by its name only. Now snapper was always a luxury high priced fish. It is quite a poor eating fish but you can't tell that to the public. They think it is marvellous so they pay a high price. Nowadays there are other fish which are getting a better name. Once upon a time a king fish was a very despised fish and a very low priced fish. Now the fad seems to be, the in thing seems to be to buy these exotic fish such as king fish, dolphin fish, broad billed sword fish, tuna. People are turning to eating raw fish, the Japanese style in Australia because there are more and more Japanese restaurants and the eating habits of people are changing. People are probably becoming more educated where once they just followed the crowd. As I said, snapper was the IN thing. They were THE fish to buy so people paid an enormous price for them and they weren't getting a good quality fish. It was alright for the fishermen because he cashed in on that but nowadays people are learning more about fish and they're understanding the various types of fish. There are lots of good eating fish to be bought.

JD Do you see aquaculture developing to any marked extent in this country, John?

GARVEN Yes. I believe we're only in the infancy of aquaculture in this country. We're lagging behind other countries and we're learning from them. Already there's been giant strides made in the production of sea run trout and salmon, atlantic salmon in Tasmania. We now have most of the northern area of Australia interested in the culture of prawns and other tropical warm water species of fish both fresh water and salt water fish and crustaceans. I think in the prawning business, the growing of farm prawns is probably going to threaten the traditional method of catching them with trawlers. I think the costs are going to gradually go against the fishing industry and the aquaculture industry will probably catch up.

JD That question of costs seems to be altering the character of the fishing industry to some degree. Is that apparent to you?

GARVEN Yes. It's probably affecting our fisheries here in Australia the same as it's affecting the world wide. The costs are the killer. In the Gulf of Mexico, in the US, the prawning industry is suffering just because of fuel costs. The farm prawn are making big inroads into their market, prawns of Equador, South America, from Asia. Just totally because of the fuel costs, the operating costs of those boats. Now if they can beat that problem in the future, the fishing industry may compete. Otherwise I can only see it going down hill until such times as the stocks increase because of the decline in the number of participants in the industry or they get better marketing methods or they could find markets with a higher price for their product. Probably no fishery will just decline into extinction. There will be different methods of processing,

different methods of selling and so on that will probably keep that industry going but I think the boom industries probably will suffer in turn.

JD John, you've obviously done well in fishing. It's been good to you, I know. What concerns you for the future of the industry?

GARVEN Well my main concern, particularly in the field that I'm in, is that the managers of the fishery who have a responsibility to the community to provide an on-going stock of fish, I'm concerned that those people haven't got the knowledge of past stocks or past fisheries to help them understand the amount of fish that we should have in our waters or the level of stocks that we should be trying to maintain. The good old days have gone forever and the bad days are here with us. Now somewhere between those two I think Fisheries Management must be concerned enough to try and get our stock level back up. Now I'm very concerned that the people I talk to from Fisheries Management are quite complacent about the stocks as they are today. We can't seem to impress on these people that there was a lot more fish in years gone by. Even though they were quite big catch rates in those days. Maybe I'm talking twenty or 30 years ago. They seem to be quite content with our levels of stock now and they don't seem to understand or want to understand that fishing was much, much better in those days. There's many instances I can recall where huge volumes of fish can be either caught or seen and if you tell these people nowadays about those stocks, they either don't believe you or think that you're just stretching the point or that long memories seem to increase the numbers of fish.

Our managers disbelieve some of the tales, the stories or catches that we can tell them about and they seem to think that we're trying to have them on about the levels of fish. I can clearly remember back in the 1950s when floods came out of the Clarence River, regularly came out with the dirty water and brought all the mullet or jewfish out ahead of them and they would be seen jumping around on the surface chasing mullet and many fish a day were caught. Up to a hundred fish a day were caught by amateur fishermen off the walls and the rocks. When I say to present fish inspectors or managers that you could see a hundred jewfish jumping into the air at any one time, in any direction, probably a mile, they look at you. You feel a little bit guilty about making these points but they look at you and think that you're dreaming or you're increasing your story by 100% or whatever. I remember right back to those times thinking that if I told this story to people in the future they won't believe me. This is exactly what's happening. I haven't imagined, or my imagination hasn't increased when I can think back to the day on Yamba Wall when I said to my fishing mates there, "There would have to be a hundred jewfish in the air at once, not splashes, not ripples or chops or swirls where fish had entered the water, but actually in the air at once chasing mullet." It's hard to believe now, a few years later, myself, but because it was so vividly brought to us and we talked about it at that point, I am quite confident that we are not romancing on that particular point. So when we say to Fisheries people we caught X amount of snapper or so many hundred jewfish or there was three mile of sea mullet on the beach, they seem to think that what stocks you have at present are quite adequate and that those stories of the past are purely romantic. So my concern is that these managers are quite content with what you've got at their particular time and won't put the effort into rejuvenating the stocks or putting some management practices in that will get you back to some of those higher catches of fish.

JD John Garven, thank you very much. Thank you for this interview and the points you've raised in it. It's been most interesting to talk to you.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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Verbatim transcript of an interview with NOEL GOGERLY

INTRODUCTION

Noel Gogerly is a fourth generation fisherman. His sea-faring great grandfather first fished in the area in 1883, and Noel entered the industry in 1971. In common with many fishermen on this central New South Wales coast, the Gogerlys are involved in a very diversified operation. They trap and trawl on the fishing grounds near Wallis Lake, and outside as far as the edge of the continental shelf.

In this interview Noel comments on the gear and methods used in pursuit of the many species they catch. He also discusses fishing for trevally for the Japanese Sashimi market, cycles in catch rates, the effect of pollution on prices, management problems, and marketing and presentation aspects of the industry.

As Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Wallis Lakes Fishermen's Co-operative, as well as being himself a successful professional fisherman with a very extensive background in the industry, he is well placed to add considerably to our understanding of the industry in this area, and he does this very well.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry, and was recorded by Jack Darcey at the Wallis Lakes Fishermen's Co-operative in Forster Tuncurry on 3rd of April, 1990. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Noel, would you first of all record your full name?

GOGERLY Noel Albert Gogerly.

JD And your date of birth?

GOGERLY 23rd of the 12th, 1951.

JD And where were you born?

GOGERLY In Taree, M R D Hospital.

JD And have you been in this sort of Taree/Forster area all your life?

Gogerly I grew up at a small place called Elizabeth Beach up the top end of the Wallis Lake until I was twelve, and then we moved to Tuncurry, where I finished my schooling. I left school at fifteen, did a little tiny bit of work at the bakehouse, then did four years dairy farming at a place called Denman in the Hunter Valley, and when I was twenty years of age I turned around and came home, fishing.

JD You came from a fishing family, didn't you?

Gogerly Yes, I'm a fourth generation fisherman. Dad fished all his life except during the War when he worked in the shipyard here at Tuncurry. His father fished and then did a bit of grazing, and then his grandfather (my great grandfather) was a great seaman, a sailor, and he did a little bit of fishing in the lake here as well, but he was mainly a sailor.

JD Your great grandfather would have been here in very early times, wouldn't he?

Gogerly My great grandfather came here in 1883, and settled at a little place called Booti at the top end of Wallis Lake. They came from Port Hacking down in Sydney, and their house is still standing now. It's the oldest house in the Sutherland Shire, in Yowie Bay. It's near Port Hacking in Sydney, on the Sutherland side.

JD Have you any sons?

Gogerly Yes, I've got two sons and two daughters.

JD Any of them shaping up to fishing?

Gogerly I think.... I've got one that's allergic to fish but he's still very keen, but the elder son is very keen to go fishing.

JD In the sixth generation....

Gogerly No, fifth.

JD Fifth. There wouldn't be too many people in Australia that have had five generations of fishermen in the family.

Gogerly No, I don't think so.

JD You don't think so.

Gogerly There's a couple of fourth generation fishermen in this port. We have in this port, we have the Elliott boys. They're fourth generation fishermen. There's quite a few old families round here that have stuck with the fishing industry. The Bulmers are another family that have been real old identities of the area as well. I'm just trying to think of some of the other older families. There'd be the Gogerlys, the Elliotts, the Bulmers, I think that would be about the.... and the Brambles, sorry, the Brambles are an old family as well - later fourth generation family. So there'd be about four families of us in the area.

JD To come back to your own career in fishing, Noel, when did you start? At twenty you said. What sort of fishing did you come in to? Was it with your father?

Gogerly When I was on the farm at Denman, I decided (over night) that I wanted to come back fishing. When I grew up I never ever wanted to be a fisherman. That was the last thing I wanted to be. I don't know whether it was because I'd seen how hard Dad worked on the beach. He was a beach fisherman as well as an outside fisherman, and once, as they say, once the salt's in the blood, you can't get rid of it. Over night I decided that I wanted to come back fishing, and rang Dad up and said, "I want to come back fishing, can you give me a job?" He got me a job with one of the Bramble boys, outside fishing, and I worked with him for three months, and then Dad and I bought a little boat from Crowdy Head, a little 24 foot timber-hull boat from Crowdy, **White Wings**, which was a very old boat, and that's how I came into the the fishing industry.

I had it up until 1981. I started fishing in '71, and I had that boat right up until 1980/81. Then I had my own bigger boat built which I've still got now. The boat I've got now is the **Adventure**. I had it built at Sou'west Rocks by Peter Gillies. It was one of the last boats that Peter built before the restriction came in on having wooden boats, or having boats built for the fishing industry, because of the freeze on licences. It's a 40 foot chine boat, and I powered it when I first got it built with a six cylinder Lister, 140 horse power, and Christmas twelve months ago, I put another engine in it and I put a V6 71G in it.

Initially I started off doing a fair bit of trapping with the boat.

JD That's for crayfish.

Gogerly No, for fish trapping, schnapper trapping, which I've been quite successful with the trapping. Dad trapped all his life for schnapper, and leatherjackets and lobsters, and with Dad's experience that... He trained me I feel, very, very well. You can't beat experience. I use now echo-sounders, radars. Dad used to just use landmarks, it was all in his memory, all the top spots, and I was very fortunate to have a very competent father in the fishing industry that helped me along.

Then we did nearly two seasons on the trapping. Then I started rigging the boat for trawling. I don't do a lot of trapping now, mostly trawling in it. We do lobster trapping on the continental shelf, straight out off of Seal Rocks. Takes us nearly four hours to steam to the shelf from here. It's a long way out to one of the furthest points on the coast to the shelf off Capel Hawke.

We have been very successful with the trawling I feel, mainly fish trawling. We don't do much prawn trawling here, but I've been very.... with Dad's knowledge once again, we find a lot of ground that's never been worked.

JD What sort of fish do you catch? What species?

Gogerly The main fish we catch now is trevally. In the winter time we catch a bit of bottom fish, flathead, latchet, dory and shark, but mostly the trevally for the Japanese Sashimi market.

JD They use trevally for fishing eaters as well [unclear]?

Gogerly Yes, we sashimi the trevally on board, then send it down to Sydney.

JD When you say you "sashimi" it on board, what is sashimi?

Gogerly Sashimi is a method of chilling the fish. You have iced brine water, very cold, and the fish have got to go in to the iced brine water as soon as they come off the deck. The quicker that you can get the fish in the water, the better the fish are.

JD Are they gutted?

Gogerly No, you don't touch them. You just throw them straight in the water. Any fish that is bruised or has got scratches on it, it's no good, so you just keep that aside, and try to get the trevally into the water as quick as you can. We've had a market now with the Japanese for nearly four years, and it's been quite good for us.

JD It's sold through the co-operatives?

Gogerly Yes, our co-ops. We weigh our fish in at the co-op each day when we come in, and the co-op acts as an agent for us. They have the buyers for the trevally lined up for us when we come in, and then it's transported to Sydney where it's packed, and then air-freighted over to Japan next day. Then it's sold on the Japanese floor within 48 hours after we caught it.

JD The price is determined in the Japanese market?

Gogerly We work on a set price. We don't play the Japanese market over there. The agent we deal through within Sydney, he plays the market a bit, but we just deal direct to him on a set price through the Sydney fish market, and then to the agents. So all our fish that goes to Sydney has got to go through the Sydney fish markets.

The trevally, once it's packed at the co-op - we've got to pack it in ice to keep the chill factor as long as we can. You can't freeze it so it's got to be done with the chill, with the ice. It's a fresh water ice we use. If you use a salt water ice, it freezes the fish, glazes the eyes of the fish and straight away it's no good, it's rejected. When it goes to Sydney the processor that we deal through, they pack it then into ten kilo blocks of fish.... sorry not blocks of fish, it's in ten kilo packets, in plastic with ice on the outside. Ice tends to bleach the skin of the trevally a bit which downgrades the fish.

JD So the flesh doesn't actually touch the ice or the ice doesn't touch the fish?

Gogerly No, once it leaves our premises it's in ice, but when it gets to the processor, he then takes it straight away from the ice, puts it into another brine for a few hours to regenerate the colour back into the skin, and then he repacks it, keeping the ice off it for the shipment. They send it over in containers of 860 kilo containers (air-freighted) straight to the Tokyo market, where it's sold at auction on the Tokyo market.

Garfish is another fish that's sent from the co-op here down to the processor to go to Japan. It's handled a little tiny bit different where when you put it in the ice slurry, from then on you can't let the ice touch the fish, because it burns very easily with the ice. It's got to be packed in plastic bags at the co-op and then ice around that outside of the plastic bags and then into the processor.

So it's a good side-line for the fishermen here in our port. It's a guaranteed price so that you know what you're working for, which is a big thing these days.

JD The cost of transporting, processing, packaging would be quite high, wouldn't it?

Gogerly Yes, it's.... handling of the fish and packaging of the fish is an extra cost on to the getting it to Sydney. We're very fortunate here at the co-op, we have our own trucks (eight ton trucks) and they go to the markets every day. So if we were going through contract carters and things like that, we would find it a bit difficult with the prices they charge on the cartage. It's a pool system we work on here, so it helps each fisherman individually and as a group.

JD There are plenty of trevally and garfish around?

Gogerly Garfish are very seasonal. Trevally are seasonal in that they usually don't start until about October. They start to peter out somewhere around about March. This time of the year, round March, April, they are very, very thick. Should I say May, the trevally cut out, not March. They're very thick now. The end of April when we start getting the cold westerlies, they seem to ease off then. That's when we start chasing the ground fish, the flathead, the shark and rays and stuff like that.

JD Is this trevally we're talking about, is that the same trevally that they get in the deep water trawls?

Gogerly Trevally, by all accounts there are numerous amounts of different species of trevally. We catch the silver trevally here. He has a yellow stripe down on the side of him. We do get him out to about 60 fathoms of water, but mostly in around 25 to 30 fathoms of water, is the most depth that we catch him here.

JD Noel, just to change the tack a little bit, I was interested to hear that you used to trap fish. Could you explain the operation? What happens?

Gogerly Well, a boat of my size, we use a six foot by four foot by three foot high trap, with two inch wire netting around it, a nozzle in the front with a bait bag inside it to put the bait in. Now the nozzle at the front of the trap, you always set.... if the tide is coming from the north going south, we always face the nozzle to the south so the fish have always got to swim up into the tide, and the smell of the bait drifts down with the tide and they go in to the traps. The main fish we trap with our fish traps are schnapper, morwong, and leatherjackets, and then you get the rubbishy fish as well as that, but they're our main (three main) species of fish that we catch in the trap.

JD What sort of bottom do you look for?

Gogerly It all depends on the time of the year. In the winter months you hang away a bit from the rocks, in the summer months you can fish pretty hard with the trap right up against the edge of the rock.

Right, the harder you fish to the rock the more different species of fish you catch. You catch pig fish which is a delicacy fish, very high priced fish. It's up in the price of lobsters. You're looking at the moment, pig fish around twenty dollars a kilo.

JD Pig fish?

Gogerly Yes, pig fish. It's a very white fleshed fish, and it's in great demand, a very beautiful eating fish. You get a lot of sweep, boots [another name for wirrah fish] any of that sort of fish that hang right real close to the rock, you get in the summer months. In the winter months when you head off the edge of the rock, you mainly just get your morwong, leatherjackets and schnapper. Schnapper seem to be starting to drop down in quantities. I'm not quite sure yet whether it's just been a seasonal thing

for the last four or five years. Dad always spoke of back in the early '50s there was no schnapper round, schnapper dropped right off. In the mid '60s, I can remember Dad had to give away outside fishing and come and work in the estuaries for a few years because the schnapper had dried right off again. So I think, personally, I think it is a combination of a bit of heavy pressure on the schnapper as far as fishing goes, and a seasonal thing that the fish have. I've got no doubt that within three or four years we'll see big quantities of schnapper back on our coast again.

JD Do you use the same pot for rock lobster?

Gogerly No. Our rock lobster trap is a small trap. We use a bee-hive trap the same as they use in Tasmania and Victoria. As well as that we use a little square trap that's made out of weld mesh wire, and then on the shore, we have in the weld mesh traps, we have three nozzles in those, and then on the continental shelf, we use a big trap (six foot by four foot by three foot again) and most of us use plastic-coated wire for on the shelf. The shelf has.... the east coast of Australia has one of the strongest currents going to the south all the time, and you might go four or five months without seeing the traps until the tide stops. At the moment our gear's been under for eight weeks now, and there's no sign of the tide stopping. Last year we set our traps in January, seen them one day in March, and then they went back under again until July, before we got them all home again.

JD You can't pull them in?

Gogerly No, the current out there at the moment is running at four knots, so it just takes the float straight under.

JD Would you still be catching rock lobster after all that time?

Gogerly They will still catch lobsters up until round about the end of April when the lobster sort of hibernates or starts to move back to the shore ready for the spawning in the shallow waters again.

JD The bait would all....

Gogerly The bait would be already gone. We use mostly a salted bait that we hang out and dry, and it lasts anywhere up till about three weeks, and after that well, there's no bait left in. But the lobsters still keep going in for company, and they eat the shell and the stuff that moves along the bottom with the big current. Traps that have been down for twelve months, the lobsters are still okay. There's no sign of loss of weight or anything like that. They're still eatable so they still seem to get plenty to eat on the bottom out there.

JD What about predators, octopus?

Gogerly Octopus is the only fish.... is the only crustacean out there that will eat the lobsters. Wobbygong sharks, they go in but they won't harm the lobster. They live together, the wobbygong and the lobster, and the other biggest headache out there, is hermit crabs. The hermit crab climbs in to the trap and it's nothing to get up to 100 kilo of hermit crabs out of one trap with the shell. You usually get them early in the season, and then as the season goes on, they move away and they don't trap. When the lobsters are trapping, the hermit crabs stop trapping. For some reason they won't trap together.

JD Do you get a season of what the West Australian rock lobster men call "lights", the recently moulted fish?

Gogerly You mean the lobster that loses its shell?

JD Yes.

Gogerly Usually round about June here on the shelf. If you haven't got your traps home by June, you will start to get the soft-shelled lobster.

JD They're not as valuable?

Gogerly Well, we just throw them back because they're unmarketable, so you're better off just throwing them back and hoping for next year that they'll be there to catch when they've got their shell nice and hard again. You just can't market them because their shells are too soft. If you did ever cook one, they usually haven't got much meat inside them and usually boil away.

With the trapping, the trapping has been an industry that has fluctuated in the numbers caught in the last fifteen years. I've seen over the fifteen years numerous boats come and go in this port. It's been a port that really the only ones that have been able to survive the port, have been the multi-purpose fishermen, the ones that can turn and do a little bit of prawning when the prawns are there, do a little bit of trapping, a little lobstering, go and do a bit of trawling when the fish are there. We're one of the very.... I don't know whether you'd call it unfortunate, parts of the coast where we have to rely on four or five different types of fishing to survive. Where once you go north of Coffs Harbour, you can work on prawns, south at Newcastle, you can work on fish trawling all the time, or do a little bit of trapping or whatever you want to do.

JD Isn't there a trend though to limit the fishermen to a particular fishing?

Gogerly This is something that the Fisheries are addressing right at the present time, trying to limit us to one type of fishing, but it just won't work on this central part of New South Wales. You just cannot survive on just one fishery. You've got to be doing a multiple two or three fisheries, whether it's estuary or whether it's outside, to survive.

JD Noel, would you say the size of the catch in the various species, has held up or has it declined?

Gogerly Well, once again I think it's quite serious north. Our tiger flathead which used to be caught in quite big quantities off the central coast, has declined for this part of the coast, but this season down the south coast, they've had one of their biggest flathead seasons for a lot of years. So it just seems to be a seasonal thing but it does seem to have eased off on this part of the coast, the tiger flathead. The schnapper as I spoke, I feel it's a seasonal thing. Lobsters are a species that has been really over-fished. The stories that Dad used to tell, the quantities of lobsters they used to catch, we just don't see them anymore. We don't see the big yellow lobster that they used to catch years ago. It seems to be a lobster that's died out or been caught out, I'm not quite sure, but very rarely we see the big yellow lobster now. We don't see the school lobster, but we do get a black.... what we call the black lobster. With our school lobster, very rarely will you see the school lobster now.

In the lake, I don't think the lake is a very seasonal fisheries. You see some years they mightn't be very good on one sort of fish and then other years, that fish is bigger than ever. This year has been one of our biggest prawn seasons in the lake. A couple of years ago you could have thought like it was dying away. We usually had a big fish. This year the prawns are there in abundance, It looks like it's going to be one of our biggest mullet seasons this year, so it is a seasonal thing that you've got to take over 20 or 30 years period to look at the ups and downs, but as far as throughput through our co-op, I personally feel.... you know figures show that it's not declining.

We're still getting a truckload of fish nearly every day to send to the market, so I don't feel that the quantity of fish have been depleted. It seems to always be a different species of fish in the estuary or outside that has its good year, whether it's crabs or whether it's fish, and just keeps on.... the supply coming in. We're very unique here at Wallis Lake where we have an outside fishery and an inside fishery. We have about 80 fishermen all told in our area here.

JD This interview is continued on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE ONE SIDE B

JD Noel, I wonder if we could talk a bit about some of the problems that are facing the fishing industry? What about the question of pollution that's on everybody's minds?

Gogerly Pollution is one thing that we're very, very fortunate here at Tuncurry, Wallis Lake. We don't have any big industries, we don't see pollution, but definitely in other parts of Australia, in other parts of the world, pollution is one thing that is going to - if it's not addressed properly - it's going to ruin mankind. The problems they had last year with the pollution in Sydney were very devastating for all the fishermen. Blown out of proportion with the media. Pollution is something that is.... when it was in Sydney with the big media write-up about the pollution, it affected our price of fish.... unbelievable! The unfortunate part about it was that out of all the fish that are weighed in at Sydney (go through Sydney fish market) there's only two per cent of the fish that have come from Sydney waters. The other 98 per cent come from New South Wales coast, South Australia, Victoria, Queensland, even as far north as Northern Territory, and it's something that the media blew right out of proportion.

In relation to polluted fish, the pollution problem was there. There is no doubt in anybody's mind. We've seen evidence on TV that the pollution problem is there, still is there. It's going to take a long time to address it, and get it right, but as far as financially for fishermen it did really hurt.

JD What, people turned away from eating fish?

Gogerly People turned away from eating fish. People still ate fish but the prices dropped unbelievable. We were only just (the deckhand and I) looking through the log there last year. We got thirteen cents a kilo for our trevally this time last year, twelve months ago on 1st of April. This, in today's market, trevally bought from a dollar forty to two dollars forty a kilo. So that was the sort of thing we saw twelve months ago. Two years ago the prices were something similar to what they are now, so it really,

really hurt the majority of fishermen, and as well as that, it hurt the shopkeepers, the fish merchants in Sydney, and surrounding areas.

We are very fortunate in Australia. We have pollution only on a mild scale compared with pollution in Russia, Norway. It was a fortnight ago I was talking to some Norwegian ladies that were over here on six weeks' tour with Rotary, and they said we're very fortunate in Australia, we don't know what pollution really is. They've got lakes over there that just don't move because the pollution is so thick.

So with the public much aware of the pollution problem now, I think we have caught it and it will be managed properly. Each week you're hearing of different places where they're trying to sort out the pollution problem. We have no heavy industry in the Great Lake Shire that can lead to pollution. We're very fortunate.

JD Let's hope it stays that way.

Gogerly Yes, that's for sure.

JD Could we have a look at some of the other problems that face the industry? The question of licensing and management generally seems to be a bone of contention among fishermen.

Gogerly Yes, it's something that should have been addressed years ago. Fishermen have been calling for management of fisheries, well ever since I've been fishing. I've been fishing since '71. They were talking about wanting management then. The fisheries didn't do anything about it. The fishermen just wanted the fisheries to tighten up on the licences, and we wouldn't have had to blow out. We have now. When we had the building slump in the '80s (the early '80s) the fishing industry went somewhere from round about two and a half to three thousand, nearly reaching seven thousand in '83.

JD Fishermen?

Gogerly Yes. Then it's dropped down considerably now to somewhere around about two and a half to three thousand fishermen in New South Wales now. Pressure on the industry has been greater with technology, there's no two ways about that. The fishermen all feel now that they're trying to enforce management quicker than the fishermen are able to accept, cutting back on licences. Instead of leaving the fishermen doing as he wants, as he has always done, and working along those lines, and having a natural decline in the fishing industry (whether it's retiring fishermen out of it, whether it's fishermen just can't make a go and then peter out of it) what you have now is an industry where licences, once you come into managed fisheries, licences become very expensive, so therefore, you have a lucrative business itself, just in the licensing side of it, which is good in some respects I suppose you could say, but bad in other respects. We're just going through another sort of crisis. We seem to be running through these crises as we're having management brought on us, where on the central coast of New South Wales, fishermen that have had to do three, four different types of fisheries are only going to be able to do one, maybe two, and we just cannot survive on that sort of restriction. We're a multi-purpose fishery. We've always been a multi-purpose fishery ever since fishing started in this area. Other ports.... south of Sydney as I've said before, can manage on fish trawling and it's renowned for its fish trawling in Sydney South. North of Coffs Harbour and Coffs Harbour are prawning areas so they are able to prawn twelve months of the year, and survive. But

we can't survive on fishing, fish trawling twelve months of the year, we need a little bit of other sorts of diversification in that.

JD Is all the fishermen's point of view taken note of by government when the rules are being made?

Gogerly Yes, but half of the time it goes through to a certain point, where we're at at the moment, with this Prawns 117 Endorsement. It was nearly through into Parliament. It had these restrictions brought on us until the mid-north coast - or the mid coast - fishermen in New South Wales found out about it, and we've endeavoured to have it stopped, which we have had it stopped. They're going to re-address it again now. So this is where we feel very unfortunate, that these management sort of plans sort of get pushed through without a full consultation of the fishing industry in general, in that managed area.

JD You found out about it just before it was imposed? You weren't consulted before the legislation was brought up?

Gogerly No, not really, no. It was only through a leaked document that we'd seen... and within 24 hours it was on every FAX machine up and down the coast in the immediate places it did affect in the wrong way. In our port alone, every trawler will lose their licence according if it goes through, and so will the other smaller ports around here, which is very unfortunate and unfair. You'd have to put it down to being unfair. For something that we did a criteria back in '83 to '85 to get into that fisheries and now we've had another criteria for entry put on us as well. So you'd have to call it unfair.

JD In some parts of Australia, Noel, there's a great concern among the fishermen that large companies (multi-national companies) are moving into the fisheries, particularly on the processing side. Is that a concern or a problem here in New South Wales?

Gogerly Yes to a degree. More so in the buying sector side of our industry, where if you get too many big buyers, they will manipulate the prices. There's no two ways about it. They can manipulate the price. With big companies, our interstate companies can handle the volume of fish, more fish than... got a lot of fishermen on the coast here can catch in any one week, let alone one day. The big companies can handle and process more fish than what our own co-op can handle a day. So when those big companies grow too big, you'll end up with a private enterprise taking over the fishing industry which would be very unfair. Personally myself, I think the Sydney fish market, the auction system before we went to Dutch auction.

The Dutch auction system we have there now, I think was the most fairest way and the most orderly way of being able to sell our fish. With the Dutch auction system we have in the Sydney fish markets now, there has been problems. I've no doubt that these problems will be sorted out. It's only a baby at the moment. It's only six months old. It's something that's going to take another twelve to eighteen months to be sorted out. There will be some hard decisions to make to sort it out but it will definitely be sorted out, and we just can't get away from our small buyers. Our small buyers are buyers that we look upon for our survival. Big buyers will manipulate the price and then we can expect the private treaty to set prices, which in other states it does work, but we feel it will be a disadvantage to us.

JD Would you say that the product is well presented in Australia to the final customer?

Gogerly The presentation of fish is one thing that Wallis Lake Co-op I would say, would have to be proud of. It's something that about some five or six years ago, we had Ken Errata from the Sydney Fish Marketing Authority come up, address two annual general meetings, come up in between those two annual general meetings, to describe to the fishermen how to present their fish, how to pack their fish, how to look after their fish, and it definitely has helped. Wallis Lake is very proud of their fish, the fishermen are. We're in a place where there's no pollution. Presentation is everything. If you present fish well, people will buy. If you put decayed fish in shops or something like that, or leave fish in the shops too long, it just won't sell.

We here try to keep a daily turnover of fish in our shops, just day to day. Our trucks usually don't leave for the markets until around the four, four-thirty, five o'clock and we're able to keep turning the supply of fish over until the next day to our shop, and what we don't sell we send to the markets. Our shop is.... our area here had grown quite substantially in the last few years, but the local clientele definitely appreciates fresh, well presented fish. There's no two ways about it.

JD You're the President of the (or the Chairman) of the Board of Directors of the Co-op, aren't you? Congratulations on the way it's being handled.

Gogerly I've been Chairman now for three years. I've been on the Board for thirteen years out of fourteen. I've found it since I've been Chairman, very challenging. It's something that I've put a lot of time in. It's a wonderful industry to be in. It's close to my heart. I'm very dedicated to the industry, and just the well-being and the well-running of the Co-op is very important for us. If it doesn't run right, we will be the losers, both financially and in any other way that you can think the Co-op will go down. We have thirteen on the staff, some casuals. I think there's nine permanents. So it's a primary industry in the town alone, let alone being the 80 other fishermen as well.

We handled in the vicinity of around four million dollars' worth of products last year through the Co-op, so it's not a little industry. It's quite big. It's second to the oyster industry in the town, so it's an industry that we're very proud of it.

JD Was your father involved in the Co-op?

Gogerly My father was.... he was never involved on the Board, but a fisherman who always stood by the Co-op, with his marketing and everything like that, he was a hundred per cent supporter of the marketing system. I think it's something that the majority of fishermen are, the supporters of the orderly marketing system we have in New South Wales, which is unique to other markets around Australia.

My father, Lionel, and his brother, Roy, they were two lads that grew up at the top in the Wallis Lake. The homestead was called "Booti". They grew up around the beach, around the ocean, around the lakes and that's all they knew. They did a little bit of timber work early in their childhood days, and into their teenage years. Then they started fishing outside. They built a little boat called the **Nancy**. They fished together right up until about 1963, I think it was, let's say 1963. Then they both came into the lake and started fishing and going their separate ways.

They fished with this little boat called the **Nancy** off Shelley Beach, a little small beach at the top end of the Wallis Lake. They had that for some years and the young brother, Les, decided he wanted to go fishing as well, so they sold the boat to him and he went fishing as well with Dad's brother-in-law, Bob Newman, and another one of their

brothers-in-law, that was Yorke Bramble. They all seemed to make enough to survive on.

Dad and Roy built a 22 foot timber boat called the **Sea Nymph** which Dad had right up until he gave away fishing. He retired from fishing before he came fishing outside with me. It was a little boat that had a Simplex engine in it, and they caught unbelievable quantities of lobster, schnapper, leatherjackets, and Dad tells of stories where when they first.... This is going back before they started with boats with motors in it, they used to row out, row off the beach with an eighteen foot dinghy, two sets of oars in it, go out around the point of Shelley, and they'd drop over a bit of old shark or something like that, and then pull it up to the surface, and catch the leatherjackets by hand. The leatherjackets used to be that thick that they used to be able to grab them by the tails and throw them in to the dinghies. When they had enough in the boat they'd row in and they'd clean them and then send them to market.

The stories that Dad used to tell about different quantities of fish, lobsters. What they called the wide lobster ground those days, was only about a mile off the shore. They used to row out first up and then they used to have a little hand-winch and they'd pull the pots - they used to be cane stick pots - they used to pull them up by these little hand-winchers, and the most that Dad ever had in one trap was five and a half dozen in one of these little cane pots.

When they had the launch, they had motors then, motorised winches, and they used to catch lobsters and the leatherjackets used to be that thick that they used to eat the bait before the lobsters had a chance to get in. They were a nuisance fish, but our yellowjacket as it was commonly known on this part of the coast, or a Chinaman-jacket, is more or less extinct now. We don't know where he's gone. When the whales went, so did the jackets as Dad always said, and the big yellow lobster that we used to catch - or Dad used to catch I should say.

The lobster industry, just after the War, started to ease off a little bit in the shallow waters, and then by the early '50s, they moved further to sea, and as each year has gone by, they seem to be going further and further to sea. Now we only go as far as the continental shelf (I don't know if they go any further) but we only go as far as the continental shelf, 100 fathom. There are some shallow water lobster grounds off Seal Rocks in the 60 fathoms, but Dad used to tell us some wonderful tales about the quantities of fish they used to haul, the travelling fish on the beach. The biggest quantity of fish they ever caught in one day was fifteen ton of black fish and mullet. He got fivepence a pound for his black fish, and sevenpence a pound for the mullet.

The stories that he used to pass on to us all. He used to love sitting down to tell us all about the different sorts of fish. He used to love the sea. Right up until he passed away he used to still come to sea once a week at least. He used to love the sea and he just lived for the sea. His grandfather was a very, very fine seaman. He rode out the Maitland gale which was one of the biggest gales that we had on the coast here back in the late 19th century. He was lost at sea for fourteen days, he and his cabin boy, and they sailed home after fourteen days with their load still on board, in to Coffs Harbour. So it just tells of their skill. The unfortunate part about it was, he was drowned in Wallis Lake, sailing home from Forster at the top end of Wallis Lake. They think he had a heart attack and he was only 63 years of age, and he died in the lake, after all the rough seas and water that he went through.

Dad's father started fishing in his early days with the Chinamen when they first came here, and they used to haul in the lake when Dad was only a boy. Dad was born in 1910 and in his early days, Dad told that the miners came up from Kurri and they

made a haul-net between them and they used to work in the lake, and that's how Dad first started fishing. It's something that's really stuck in the blood with the saltwater, and something I'm proud of, is being involved in the fishing industry.

JD Good. Well, thank you very much for sharing that with us. A good story and well told. Thank you.

Gogerly Thanks very much.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Noel Gogerly, fisherman of Forster Tuncurry, and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Wallis Lake Fishermen's Co-operative.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





Verbatim transcript of an interview with TOM GOODLAD

INTRODUCTION

Now aged 70 years, Tom Goodlad still holds a professional fisherman's licence but only fishes occasionally now. For many years he fished the lakes and Continental Shelf off Forster, Tuncurry on the central New South Wales coast.

In this interview he tells of the species caught and methods, boats and gear used in a variety of fisheries including scale fish, rock lobster and prawns. He also discusses changes in Fisheries management, marketing, pollution and relationships between professional fishermen and recreational fishermen and with Fisheries officers. Mr Goodlad has had a long involvement with the Forster, Tuncurry Fishermen's Co-Op and still retains a connection with that organisation. He is the Co-Op slipway attendant.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry. It was recorded at the Co-Operative's factory in Forster, Tuncurry by Jack Darcey on the 3rd April, 1990. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Tom, would you record your full name please?

GOODLAD Yeah. Thomas Alec Goodlad

JD And what's your date of birth?

GOODLAD 21st of the first, 1920.

JD And where were you born?

GOODLAD Scotland, Orkney Islands.

JD Orkneys, where you? What island?

GOODLAD Meagher.

JD Ah. When did you come out here?

GOODLAD Oh, 1927. I was only a young fellow.

JD Young fellow, yes. The whole family came out, did they?

GOODLAD Yeah.

JD Good. When you came to this country Tom, where did the family settle?

GOODLAD Oh we spent a couple of years in the Riverina and then we came here.

JD Did you go to school here?

GOODLAD Yeah, a couple of years here. That's all.

JD Did you go straight into fishing after you left school?

GOODLAD Oh I did a couple of years oystering first.

JD Oystering?

GOODLAD Yeah, tried that out too.

JD What at running an oyster farm?

GOODLAD Yeah, just working on a farm before I went into.... Oh I did a bit of fishing before I went into the Army.

JD You went into the Army?

GOODLAD Yeah.

JD What, during the War?

GOODLAD Yeah.

JD The AIF?

GOODLAD Yeah. Up round the island in the small boats.

JD Did you?

GOODLAD Oh yeah.

JD After the War you came into fishing, did you?

GOODLAD Yeah, I went straight into fishing then.

JD Here in Forster?

GOODLAD Yeah. I started off in the lake up here.

JD Yeah, and did you stay in the lake fishing?

GOODLAD Oh only two or three years.

JD Did you start off with your own boat or did you start with someone?

GOODLAD Started [on] another boat then I went on working my way up.

JD Yes. What were you fishing for in the lake?

GOODLAD Oh mostly mullet, just hauling. Mainly mullet, a few bream [and] blackfish.

JD And then what did you do?

GOODLAD Oh I went out trapping then outside.

JD Sharking?

GOODLAD Trap, snapper [unclear]

JD Oh. Could you tell us about trapping. I haven't talked to a [trapper]?

GOODLAD Oh it's changed a lot. We used to use, oh six foot traps, six foot by four foot six by three.

JD What, wire or steel?

GOODLAD Wire, used wire mesh, two inch wire. We'd bait them up with mullet or tuna, mackerel. Tuna's the best bait but we used to work the Shelf a lot for lobsters. There was dried bait. Used to get dried bait, oh once a week, sometimes twice a week if they were trapping good. Things have changed in that line too now.

JD Did you trap other fish beside lobster?

GOODLAD Oh yeah, we got morwong, leather jackets. Caught a lot of leather jackets out in the deep water around the Shelf but they were similar traps.

JD They were similar traps?

GOODLAD Similar traps, yeah, different nozzels. That was all. We went three years straight with nothing but jackets there one year out on the 80 fathom mark but it's changed a lot now. You don't find them. They're on different currents because when the jackets, when we lost track of them we lost track of the whales. So I think it's a different current.

JD There were a lot of whales off this coast [unclear]?

GOODLAD Oh yes, [you'd] just have to dodge them going out to the mooring [unclear].

JD What sort of whale were they?

GOODLAD I think they were the, oh the hump back.

JD Hump back. There aren't any around now though?

GOODLAD Very scarce now. Yes you don't see many at all. I don't know if [with] the different current they travel wider, or what. See we only used to work from the Shelf in but there could be different currents. That's where we used to get the jackets too, out on the edge of the Shelf in anything from 60 to 90 fathom but they just don't seem to be there nowadays. We definitely didn't catch them out. So I think it's just the cycle of the currents. That's only my idea.

JD There was a good market for leather jackets?

GOODLAD A very good market, yeah. They used to pay just as good as the snapper.

JD That was mostly sold in Sydney, was it?

GOODLAD Yeah. We used to send it to Sydney. Oh you'd get anything from a thousand to 2,000 pounds a day, tails, which is not bad. For snapper you'd be lucky to get 200 pounds so you're better off chasing the stuff you get a bit of quantity out of.

JD And they've declined in recent years, have they?

GOODLAD They've just lost track of them round this area. They're getting them down South Australia again. I don't know where they'll eventually wash up but I don't know whether the feeding pattern's changed. See those days they weren't trawling for royal reds out on the Shelf either. I don't know whether they feed on them. It's all guess work, what could have happened to them but definitely not there at the moment.

JD What sort of crayfish do you catch in this part?

GOODLAD The rock lobsters, they're school ones.

JD Are they the same as the West Australian or similar?

GOODLAD Very similar to look at. You get up, oh further north you get the painted lobster a bit, the coral one, but no these are the rock lobsters here. It was nothing to get a hundred dozen in a pull those days. My best trap, I got nineteen and a half dozen out of him, the one trap.

JD What, in one pull?

GOODLAD Yeah, one trap, nineteen and a half. The record here was [unclear] Nixon. He got 23 dozen of them.

JD In one trap?

GOODLAD One trap, yes, in the six foot traps.

JD They must have really been packed in?

GOODLAD Yeah, oh only up to the first wire, about a third full.

JD Of sized crays?

GOODLAD Oh, school crays about a pound and a half I suppose. Used to be about a pound and a half cray. If you couldn't get, oh twenty or 30 dozen you'd shift because they had just about had it. Now if you get that in a season you're doing pretty good. Bit different in the price too.

JD Was that in the days before they sent the tails to America and Japan and so on?

GOODLAD Yeah. Yeah they didn't send them. We used to get, oh ten pence a pound or somewhere like that, one and two pence if you're lucky. Now you're getting \$25 a kilo and sometimes a bit better so you've got to count your money [laughs] and that nowadays; but things, I don't know, have changed. I think it's all to do with the current myself. There's all different [unclear] along this coastline they reckon. Well they keep moving and I think the fish move with them.

JD Are there many more fishermen around these parts now than there were in your earlier times?

GOODLAD Oh well there's more so called fishermen. I'll put it that way. Yes there's more so called. Every beach has got a heap of tin boats going off now and they all class themselves as fishermen.

JD These are licensed professional fishermen?

GOODLAD They're licensed professional fishermen yeah, but they don't work the gear, just smaller gear. Where we might work ten traps round a certain area, they'd have a hundred traps all over the place. I think the fish the reefs and that out with the trapping and that and they're trawling that area round, specially the central coast here. There's not that much you can trawl. There's the reef and I think it's over-fished too for the same reason.

JD What do they trawl for?

GOODLAD Oh they're getting trevally at the moment here. They used to get a lot of flathead with a seine trawl but they got rid of them and they've got these otter trawlers now. I reckon they just.... After a certain time the big heavy boards, they just flatten the feed. Flattens the ground right out and there's no feed left on it, not [unclear - older?] feed; where the seine trawlers shoot a rope while you'd pull over the [unclear] and that and shoot back up again. It must affect the feeding pattern of the fish, I think the whole length of the coast 'cause it's not like some countries. You've got a very limited area that you can trawl here. It's like everything else. If you go over it often enough you must get it flat, I think. Once again, that's only my opinion.

JD Are there any deep water trawlers operating from here?

GOODLAD Not at the moment. You've got a couple go out after the royal reds in 200 fathoms. Mostly the blokes here only work up to 60 at the moment.

JD That's on the Shelf?

GOODLAD No. It's well inside the Shelf.

JD Is it?

GOODLAD The Shelf starts to drop off at 80 fathom. Anything inside that, you're inside but the Shelf is about from here, 30 mile out. Out of that 30 mile you'd be lucky to be able to trawl fifteen of it I suppose. There's the reef and things.

JD Tom, you started off fishing in the lakes and then you went outside. You'd have certainly had different types of boats for the different fisheries. Could you tell us what sort of a boat you used in the lakes?

GOODLAD Well on the lake when you're hauling you use, I use a launch to tow the gear round with. I use a twenty foot pump to carry the net and then you use a couple of winch pumps (that's to winch the gear in). In the older days we used to winch or hand winch we used to call it. Now they've got all power winches. You just sit back and pull the gear in, which is a big difference. We used to average.... On a hauling net we'd average about a quarter now on the old hand winch and we reckon that's pretty good going; 550 pound of nets we use. You'd have the same amount of rope, [unclear - up to the same amount?] on each end. Maybe you'd cheat a little bit and get a bit more [laughs]. I think that goes every time but they reckoned the lake was fished out then. Well there's still just as many fish in it as there was when I started and they reckoned it was fished out then and it'd been going for quite a while then. So it's the same old story I think with the lake. It's like everything else I think. The gear's getting a bit better all the time and it must affect the fish a little bit. Then we went from there out [in a] 36 footer out trapping snapper but most of our fishing was done then inside the 40 fathom mark.

JD You used traps for snapper, did you?

GOODLAD Yeah, a trap for snapper and morwong. It was very seldom we worked outside the 40 fathoms. Sometimes we'd get out to 50. [If] the fish got scarcer, we'd go wider so we got bigger boats then. We got into a 50 footer. We used to work out the Shelf a lot then in deeper water.

JD They were still timber boats, were they?

GOODLAD Still timber boats, yeah. Two years I suppose there was a couple of steel boats start to sneak into it but mostly timber boats then. Some used to be, oh 55 or 60 would be able the biggest those days but in this port particularly, [there] used to be about 40, 45 footers mainly.

JD Were the boats built here?

GOODLAD Yeah. A lot of them were built here, locally. One here was built in Sydney. The fishermen built their own boats a lot so [they were] a jack of all trades more or less.

JD Even the larger vessels?

GOODLAD The larger vessels, yeah. Yeah there was [a] 55 footer here, [it] was locally built. There's one here fishing now, she's a 50 odd foot. She's locally built. Oh they can turn their hand to most things. The power's gone up in them now, naturally. Where we used to work 70 or 80 horsepower, they've got a couple of hundred horsepower now to tow bigger gear and that when they're trawling. The trappers are still much the same. It's a bit over fished I think. I think that's....

JD How many traps are you allowed? Is it according to the size of your boat?

GOODLAD No. It's not like it is down at Tasmania and those places. [unclear - lots] is so many to the foot or something; so many feet, you've got so many traps or something. Here is unrestricted, your traps.

JD You can have as many as you like?

GOODLAD As many as you like with your pocket restricting you mainly. Working the deep water you use a fair bit of gear on them and you've got to bait them up. It's no good having a hundred out there if you can only bait 50.

JD Do the fishermen make their own traps?

GOODLAD Yeah, make their own traps. Yes, you make your own traps; make your own nets mainly.

JD Do they have escape gaps?

GOODLAD No, not really but the wire rusts out after a while. The wire doesn't last that long. If you use black wire you're supposed to have an escape hatch in them but we used to use wire net and doors. Well that rusts out just the same. I think some of them used to use complete black wire but I didn't go along with that. If they get cut off, they just stop there. Anything that's in [unclear] just die eventually. The wire netting, it only lasts, oh about six or eight months without any zinc blocks on. So if you lose a trap, the zinc blocks will wear off and it rusts out in no time. If you replace the zinc blocks, well they'll last, oh you might get eighteen months out of them then so [unclear].

JD Do you get many undersized crays?

GOODLAD No, not here. Not out in the deeper water. You get a few in, oh right in five fathom, right in the kelp but we never used to fish there years ago. You do get a lot in the reef shallow water now. As I say, these toy boats fish everything now.

JD Tom, is there a closed season on the crayfish?

GOODLAD No. There's not yet but there's talk about I think. There used to be a closed season on females once but they took it off, but they're talking about putting it back on, I think and it'd be a good idea. I think all fishing should have a little bit of a spell. That's why I think this particular area should be unrestricted, you can catch whatever's there. Then if you go for one species, you give another species a bit of a spell. Should be multipurpose here but it's not.

JD Your licensed for a particular species now?

GOODLAD Now you are. You've got to have endorsements to go prawning. You've got to have endorsements to go to something else, trawling. You've got to have different endorsements. You're restricted, well if you're restricted to one particular thing you're naturally going to fish it out, aren't you? The central coast is different from the south coast and the north coast where they've got different... Up north you've got your prawning nearly all year and down south you've got the tuna and all that sort of stuff, whereas here you can't really concentrate on one thing and do much good on it. It's always been a multi-purpose fishery in the central coast and they're just trying to

change it. I don't think it'll work. I think you'll see a lot more get out of the game through restrictions.

JD During your time in fishing, you'd have seen a lot of changes in the rules and regulations [and] licences?

GOODLAD A lot of changes, yeah. One time you just paid your licence and you'd go and catch whatever was on any where you liked on the coast. You'd have a New South Wales and a Commonwealth licence, well you could fish anywhere where that licence covered; Commonwealth any where in Australia and your State licence anywhere in New South Wales. Now your limited. You can't go prawning unless you caught a certain amount of prawns in the last couple of years. It might'n have suited you to go prawning those couple of years and if you haven't got your endorsement, well you've just got to sit and watch someone else catch them as they come, which I don't think is right. The powers to be say it is, so that's the way it is.

JD How does a young fellow get started then if he hasn't got a history in fishing? How does he get a licence?

GOODLAD Well he's either got to buy a boat first, a licensed boat, then he can get a licence or he can go as a deckhand and he can get a licence. The licence is not frozen. The fishermen's licence is not frozen, it's the boat's licence that's frozen. So you've got to have more or less a boat before you can go fishing or go [as a] deckhand.

JD Can you build a new boat and get a licence for it?

GOODLAD Well you've got to get the.... More or less take one out to get another one in under the system.

JD The idea is to restrict the number of boats?

GOODLAD Yeah, that's their idea. Slightly good idea but I don't know exactly how it works. They've got a point system now; so many points on the deck with power and everything else. I don't know how it works.

JD A bit complicated?

GOODLAD It's a bit complicated. I got out before that started [laughs].

JD But a deckhand who's served for some years as a deckhand can get a licence?

GOODLAD He's got his licence if he's a deckhand. If he's got a licence, he can get a master fishing licence then he's got to get a certificate to skipper a boat. That's not much problem to them of course. They can generally get that. Their biggest problem is getting to start off. A lot of them come in from families. Old people get out and the younger ones come in. I don't know how it goes.

JD It's a pretty expensive business to start off nowadays, I imagine?

GOODLAD I wouldn't like to be starting off at the moment. I think I'm on the right end of it [laughs].

JD To come back to the fishing, you mentioned that there are a couple of trawlers for the royal red prawns. Are there any other prawns off the coast here?

GOODLAD You get a few kingies, a few schoolies at times. They're in shallow water. The roy reds do that over the Shelf.

JD What about in the lake?

GOODLAD Yes in the lake there's kingies and school prawns and a few ridge backs. Oh they catch a lot of prawns here but they're not a very big prawn. You get the prawn dark every month in the summer time where you set your nets across the channel and they come out with the tide. The last prawns, they're ready to travel. Then they work the seine nets up in the lake. Oh they drag all over the place for them.

JD How does this balloting work?

GOODLAD That's a ballot for your positions in the prawn dark. Each month you have a prawn ballot. There's one to 23 pegs, I think it is now. Well you move up one each night and if there's more crews go in than the ballots and the pegs, you get so many blank pegs, "A"[?] pegs, they call them. So if there's twenty pegs and there's 40 crew, every second night's a blank. You go up one each night you're on. You get "A" peg, well....

JD And that ballot's....

GOODLAD Good for one month. That's all. Each month you have a ballot.

JD And it's conducted by the Fisheries Department?

GOODLAD Fisheries Department, yeah, choosing crew. If that's right and your ballot's right, you're in business. Luck of the draw then whether you get a good peg or a bad peg.

JD Tom, do most of the fishermen here fish for the Co-Op, the [unclear] Co-Op?

GOODLAD Yeah, the majority of them; or nearly all of them fish for the co-op.

JD Is there another....

GOODLAD No. If they don't fish for the Co-Op they've got to send them direct to Sydney themselves. That causes a problem because they've got to get ice from the Co-Op and boxes for market. So that all goes through the Co-Op, what's not sold locally. The Co-Op's got the local sales which is quite good and if [unclear] off the market floor in Sydney, well the more you keep off there, the better the price must be. Just demand rules the price mostly.

JD Do your fish that are not sold locally go straight to Sydney or do the....

GOODLAD They go to Sydney every day. The truck goes every day. Today's fish are on the market in the morning, but the weekends. Thursday is the last day for Friday's market and the next one's the Monday.

JD Do you find that Fish Marketing Authority is good for the fishermen?

GOODLAD Oh it must help a bit, I think. I was on that for a while too. If it's controlled right it's good for the fishermen. It's still semi-government.

JD But the fishermen are represented on it?

GOODLAD Yeah the fishermen, there's supposed to be a majority of fishermen on it. and depends on the bloke you get representing you but it mostly works out pretty good. They've got a few problems at the moment with the change-over to the new markets. I think they'll iron them out and that'll be quite good there but it's got to benefit the fishermen I think 'cause, well you've got your boxes. They supply the boxes. In the old days you used to have wooden boxes; used to go round and buy old fruit boxes and nail them together and patch up the old ones. When we got a bit more financial we used to have a box maker here at the co-op [and] make our own boxes. That was a bit of a problem too because if they were good boxes they got to Sydney and you very seldom got them back. Now you've got the grey crates. They're more hygienic and everything. Oh it's got an improvement, but I think they're trying to do their best. Well [if] you do your best, you must please some but you won't please them all I don't think. I never seen anybody [who] could.

JD Tom, there are lots of fishermen's organisations. There would be one representing the fishermen here, I imagine?

GOODLAD We've got a region and out of that region we've got a delegate on the Fish Market Authority. Each co-op's got a delegate for the region. Well they meet once every three months and they sort out their problems there and they give it to the delegate to go to the Market Authority or the Fishing Council as they call it now, that new one [of] the Commonwealth. They've got delegates in that too. So the fishermen have got a voice in it.

JD Do you think they're listened to?

GOODLAD No. Well, they like to listen to the bloke who makes the most noise I think. That appears to be the big time fellow. That's my opinion again but it looks as though they don't care two hoots about the little fellow. There's the blokes that over capitalise. They make a big noise and they get all the attention. That's the way it looks and I think that's the way it is. The little bloke, he battles on and he's there all the year round. He doesn't say much but if you cut him out you find a lot of scarcities in the fish market. I think they'd go for closing the lakes and all that sort of thing, the big fellows if they could. So if they can get the benefit of everything going north (prawns). They seem to squeal the loudest and they get the most attention.

JD Are those big fellows.... are they companies or are they owner/operated?

GOODLAD Owner/operated mostly but I think the Government would like to see them big company boats. Instead of looking after a dozen, they'd have one so I think that's what their aim is mainly, just reading between the lines. I think it would suit them. Up in the Gulf and that there's a lot of company boats but along the east coast here there's not.

JD Tom, there's a lot of fish imported from overseas now to Australia.

GOODLAD Yeah there's a lot. There has been a fair amount come from South Africa. You're used to seeing hake and that sort of thing.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Tom, one of the problems that many people are concerned about is the question of pollution. Do you think it's a real problem, either in the lakes or in the ocean in these parts?

GOODLAD Oh some lakes it is I think. This particular lake hasn't got much problems at the moment 'cause there's no factories or anything like that on it but I think Lake Macquarie and those places have got a little bit of a problem with the big power stations and that there. I don't think there's a great lot of problem around here. Around Sydney you've got problems, naturally. You've got big industrial things around there going in. Well it must affect them, but whether the pollution's got anything to do with the fish moving further to sea and that, I don't know. It could have 'cause you get all these [unclear], crop spraying and all that. That's all poison. You get a heavy rainy season like we've got now, it must run into the rivers. Well that could affect them. All the weed in this area here has died out. It's starting to grow again but that could be through wash off of the farms and that.

JD It did die out, did it?

GOODLAD The weeds all died out, yeah, the sea grass as they call it. That might'n be the cause of it but there's got to be a reason for it. Well I don't think anyone's come up with a solution yet. The swans didn't eat it all. That's for sure but it's starting to grow back. I think the pollution must affect them to a certain extent but it's beyond me. I don't know. I'd go as far to say it doesn't do any good.

JD There's been, in some parts of Australia, big changes in the species that have been caught. For example, shark fishing has changed. Barracouta has changed. Blue fine tuna's changed. There's all these sorts of changes. Is that the case up here too? Did you ever catch tuna up this coast?

GOODLAD Yeah. We get tuna up here.

JD Stripey tuna, is it?

GOODLAD Yeah there's lots of stripey tuna out here this season. There's been a couple, over the years, a couple of purse seiners up here but out round the Shelf there's quite a few yellow fin tuna in it. The Japs, we used to get tangled up with them a lot with the traps out on the Shelf, with the long lines.

JD None of our people do long lining?

GOODLAD I think there's a few do it now. The Japs don't come in there now but they used to shoot 40 or 50 mile of line out. Well that would get round one of your buoys and just keep sawing along the rope until it's sawed and you lose your trap. They were our biggest worry years ago but I don't they're much problem now. Coastal shipping used to cut a few head gears off but we would always get them back. We used to leave, what we call a bobbin float on. Well that would go under in the current and we'd

lose the head gear and shoot a sisal rope across the current. Well that would pick up on the buoy, two ends washed together and [unclear]. There's different ways I don't think the fish here has changed much at all, the species.

JD What about shark?

GOODLAD Oh we never did catch many shark here. Occasionally you'd get a few black tippers in the trawl but no point. We never went in for shark fishing much.

JD Never a big fishery here?

GOODLAD No. Never a big fishery. Still, you get odd ones here, not like down in Victoria and that where there's big business in the shark. If you get a nice little shark come in here now they all rush to get it. No one gets to [unclear]. All [unclear]. Oh it was never a big fishery here and tuna was never a big fishery here. We only went, more or less, after it for bait. If we got a bit too much we'd send[?] them. There's been big lots of school skipjacks mate out here.

JD That's the skipjack tuna?

GOODLAD Yeah. See a lot of them at times, in season of course. The yellow fin out in the.... You've got to get the currents to suit them. If you work the water temperatures, you'll find them.

JD Is there a problem between the recreational fishermen and the professional fishermen in these parts?

GOODLAD No. They seem to get along pretty well. The fishing clubs and that, they're very good. Occasionally you'll find the rogue, one bloke, he gets into a bit of trouble at times but no, we get along quite good with them. They're working together.

JD How do the fishermen get on with the Fisheries Department?

GOODLAD That's a pretty tricky question [laughter]. Not really good some times. It's not real good mostly, although we've been lucky here. We've got.... generally reasonably good. Like all Government Departments, you can always pick faults with them. We can always say it doesn't suit us but I suppose the majority is not too bad. Every fisherman more or less has a grouch, doesn't he?

JD How do you see the fishing industry shaping up in the future, Tom?

GOODLAD Oh I don't know. I think they're on the right track trying to get restrictions in but I think they're going the wrong way about it. I think if they limited the size gear you use and all that and the quantity of traps, I think you'd be better off than trying to limit the type of fishing that you go in for because you should be able in this area to catch whatever's there. So if you go on to one species, you give the other one that's getting a bit scarce a bit of a spell. I think that'd pay it off a long way better than trying to say, "You can't do this" and "You can't do that". If there was a flood of prawns come on, [and] you haven't got an endorsement for them you've got to sit here and watch someone come from up north or somewhere and catch them. You get no benefit at all. If they're not co-op members, nine times out of ten they'll take them back to their own co-ops. So the whole area loses [unclear] in my opinion.

JD Tom, you've been out of fishing for a while now, haven't you?

GOODLAD Yeah. I've [been] out for five years.

JD You don't fish at all now?

GOODLAD Oh occasionally. Yes I still go occasionally.

JD Still, you've retained your licence?

GOODLAD Yeah, still got my licence. Oh I still go and catch a few mullet occasionally with a mesh net and go for a run out Dungog sometimes.

JD Do you send them to the market or do you....

GOODLAD Yeah. I sent [them] occasionally through the market here, just to keep my hand in.

JD Have you got any other major interests?

GOODLAD Not really. Oh, I'm tied up with the club over the river there and look after the slip and that for the co-op. Oh I still keep in touch with them. Yes I still keep in touch.

JD You enjoyed your years in fishing?

GOODLAD Oh yes. It's a good life. You won't die real rich but it's healthy. Oh I think it gets in your blood. You just see some of them retired and talk bowls, well we retire and we talk fish. I think it's one of those things that gets in your blood and you just stick by it.

JD Well thank you very much for talking to us Tom and I hope you continue to enjoy your retirement.

GOODLAD Yes. It's my pleasure [laughs].

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Tom Goodlad of Forster, Tuncurry, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





Verbatim transcript of an interview with **BOB GORDON**

INTRODUCTION

Bob Gordon was born at Duntroon Military College and first entered fishing on one of the British steam trawlers which were brought out to New South Wales between the Wars to test the trawl fishing potential here. He has continued fishing since then but has also been much involved in the building of fishing boats. The best known of the vessels he built was the fishing boat renamed the **Dick Smith Explorer** which went into the Antarctic with a mixed crew and survived being caught in the pack ice.

In this interview Bob Gordon talks about boat building and design as well as the fishery he was involved in which is fishing for blue eye or giant bass. He also speaks of pollution and the destruction of the fishing grounds on the offshore sea mounts. He concludes the interview with an account of some of the adventures of his remarkable 73 year old sister who, when she is not sailing in various parts of the world or back packing alone in South America, sometimes fishes with him right off Sydney.

The interview, which is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry, was recorded by Jack Darcey on the site of the old Neptune slipway in Lavender Bay in Sydney Harbour, hard by the harbour bridge on the 28th March, 1990. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD This is an interview with Mr Bob Gordon, fisherman and boat builder of Lavender Bay, Sydney, New South Wales.

[First question and answer not recorded on tape]

JD Where were you born?

GORDON I was born in the Australian Capital Territory right at Duntroon College [laughs]. You can't get more Australian than that, can you?

JD No. When was this?

GORDON Oh 1921.

JD How did you come to be born at Duntroon?

GORDON Well my father was a British Army man in the cavalry and he was involved with the horses on Duntroon College at that time. The house I was born in was on the

Molonglo River and the house was flooded out the night I was born there. That's my only excuse for ever going near the water I suppose [laughter].

JD Bob, you didn't live all your life in Canberra obviously though?

GORDON No. We left there when I was six years of age, had to come to the city because my mother was a London girl born and bred and she referred to Australia as, "A God forsaken hole. Will be the death of me", and that was how I started to learn my mother tongue by hearing what a terrible place Australia was from a London girl [laughs]. That's true you know. She finished her life right in the bright lights of Kings Cross and my father finished his life in the back blocks of the Dorrigo on a grazing property.

JD So did you go on the grazing property?

GORDON No, no. I vacillated in between the two. I've spent half my time boat building on shore and the other half out on the billow harvesting from the deep.

JD How did it come about that you got into boat building, Bob?

GORDON Well I've asked myself that question all my life. I would say it was primarily a desire to escape from what happened on shore. My father wanted me to be a plumber and I spent a few months in the plumbing trade and that was such a dastardly experience. I was working on a block of flats at Coogee at the time and I looked out to sea and saw the white caps and the westerly wind blowing off shore and I thought, "That's got to be the place to go."

JD Yeah, so you built a boat for yourself?

GORDON Well I did. I started a boat when I was fifteen and a half years of age in Rushcutters Bay which is the property that's now the Cruiser Yacht Club. From the age of fifteen and a half to eighteen I went in several fishing vessels, a couple of the steam trawlers and a couple of very small otter trawlers down to 45 feet length powered with 40 horsepower diesels.

JD They were British trawlers, were they?

GORDON They were. They were British trawlers. They had been working as probably distant water trawlers in the North Sea until perhaps after the Second World War when they probably became redundant for those waters, or it was seen opportune to bring them to Australia to try and further the fishing in Australia. Fishing in bulk just didn't exist on this eastern coast, to my knowledge, until the steam trawlers started to bring their large tonnages into Sydney.

JD What were they trawling for? What type of fish?

GORDON They were trawling for everything that could be caught on ground that wasn't too foul to destroy their nets. Of course that was part of their problem. They had no such things as echo sounders, radar and it was a purely thing of calculating in their mind just what their position was on the water at any given time, unless they were in view of the land or it was clear enough so that they could watch the movement of the back land and the onshore land moving one against the other to judge whether they were going backwards or forwards or moving at all.

JD So they didn't go out deep sea trawling, they were inshore trawlers?

GORDON Yeah. There is no doubt they were targetting chosen table fish. Snapper [and] flathead would be towards the bottom end of the list [and] John Dory. They were in the habit of taking fish to sea and dumping it if there was a glut or if there was a sufficiency to satisfy the market at that time, a sufficiency of desirable fish, they would simply take to sea the others; like all nannygai invariably went to sea. It was only brought if they'd had bad weather and they were running out of ice and they had to come back for another load of ice, then they'd bring the nannygai they'd caught and probably the small shark and the like just in the hope that there would be a dearth of fish on the market and it would bring some price.

JD They were steam powered vessels, weren't they? Coal burners?

GORDON Yeah, they were steam powered, yeah. The fact that they were steam powered was contributed to their demise because they really carried a double crew. They had a crew in the engine room, engineers to work 24 hours round the clock with the trimmers or the firemen; firemen working in the stoke hole and a greaser and then of course they had a deck crew to work 24 hours around the clock. As I say their economics was pretty vulnerable because they were forced to work in the worse weather when their loss of equipment or damage may have exceeded the benefit of the fish they caught, whereas today's fishermen are more inclined to possibly be in the hostelry in bad weather listening to the weather reports for an opportunity to sneak out and make the most of it in the good times.

JD How many of those North Sea trawlers were out here?

GORDON I didn't catch that question.

JD How many of these trawlers came out from Britain?

GORDON Well the cams had four and red funnel.... let's say, ten of them. It's a bit hazy because one of them, the **Burry Mull**, which is named after a large variety of albatross seen off the coast of Australia, one of them was built to the best of my knowledge in Queensland of Queensland timbers and it was the only wooden steam trawler I'd ever heard of. I mean you may have record of more details of that and it was built for the Queensland Fisheries as a research vessel and some of the Queensland timbers had been poorly chosen so I believe it had a short life as a consequence to that. I did have a particular interest because one of the steam skippers I worked with, he'd been a mate in this **Burry Mull** and the name fascinated me and I took the trouble to find out that it was a sea bird.

JD The other trawlers however were sailed out from Britain, were they?

GORDON Yes they were sailed out. Well, not using the word "sail" in the true meaning, they did have a small steadying sail on the stern and that was more of a traditional thing in England but it wasn't a particularly sort of desirable thing in Australia. I couldn't say why but they had this little missen sail which was more of a riding sail but I have no knowledge that they put auxiliary sail on those boats, although they did carry a main mast for their derrick and I feel sure they would have a sail assisted passage from England as a consequence of the long voyage and the difficulty of carrying enough coal to do that trip.

JD And your first experience in fishing was as a crew member of....

GORDON Well I was sort of.... In those days you got aboard a boat or you left it. There was no signing or sort of preparation and I was invited by Captain Johnson. I served with him afterwards in a seine trawler that he owned. I was invited to do two trips with him and I don't know what my capacity was but I did everything that was expected of me and I couldn't see it as a life to either endure or involve myself with long term. Later when he left the steam trawlers and he had a big seine boat built by Halversons called the **King John**, I went with him on several trips until the Second World War terminated our fishing here and we were ordered to take the boats back to Sydney and had [to] apply for work with the Army or the Navy, whatever.

JD Bob, you then sort of shared your time, after the War I'm talking about, you shared your time boat building and fishing. Is that right?

GORDON Yes, yes, yes. I'd say I had a rare opportunity in that way. There's been lots of fishermen who probably out of necessity, and I don't want to demerit their effort, but probably out of necessity rather than a true love for boat building, an economic necessity, they're in the habit of building themselves a boat and sort of filling in for the off season. Of course a lot of fishermen around the world have known to be farmers to augment the shortcomings of the fishing but I did it out of a genuine calling. It's really a very strong commitment to me that's put boat building and fishing above everything else in my life.

JD You've built a number of boats, of course.

GORDON Yeah. I'm a bit superstitious. I don't quote the number of boats I've built. It would be twenty but I've assisted in a lot of boats. I've built hulls of vessels and it gets a bit sort of hazy around the edges when you think of just how much input.... The longest I ever worked on a boat was when I had no money when I started the 30 foot ten tonne boat when I was fifteen and a half years of age. That took me three years to finish 'cause I was working two jobs at least sixteen hours a day, seven days a week. Then recently I built a big vessel. It took me three years but it's almost a single handed operation and that was a 37 tonne steel boat I used for blue eye fishing for almost four years before I sold it for my retirement.

JD You've built both steel and wooden boats?

GORDON Yes. I spent 24 years building wooden boats and then I built steel boats in the main since then with one large wooden boat in between there.

JD And at least one of the boats that you've built has become quite famous, hasn't it?

GORDON Well, yes. That [was] the boat that was renamed the **Dick Smith Explorer**. I built that in the '60s for the first attempt at Japanese long lining and I imported a little Jap long liner hauler but we succeeded in catching tuna but it was very sporadic because with only one boat operating you couldn't get any idea of where the fish were disappearing to. You were going out. It was a total shot in the dark trying to target tuna on that basis as [has] been proven all through the history of tuna fishing. It's just a dead loss if you can't get the proximity of the area the fish is likely to be.

JD Why was Dick Smith interested in that particular vessel?

GORDON Well it may seem an over-statement but I've racked my brains for what other type of vessel he could take to Antarctica, especially to spend the winter trapped in the ice which has never happened ever to any small boat. I can't bring to mind any other larger vessel that's deliberately trapped itself in the ice but Dr Lewis, given him his due, he wasn't a prudent man given to caution but he certainly was prepared to try anything. He deliberately took a mixed crew of men and women and one woman particularly I became well acquainted with, she told me his answer to her question of why he was inviting her to go and he said, "I just want to see the result of that type of deprivation with a mixed crew of people sitting all winter in twenty, 30 sub-zero temperatures with the boat trapped in the ice and all the ramifications of possibly never getting the thing free again. Don't forget that same man went to Antarctica in a tiny little uninsulated steel boat on his own, rolled the thing over many times, got dismasted and as I saw it, it was purely for the purpose of just trying to get close to death without actually not dying.

JD [laughter] What was the characteristics of the boat that....

GORDON Well the boat, it had an individual capability that wouldn't be found in any other craft. It was a deep V, a narrow vessel that could be crushed by the ice without actually taking the impact. It had a tendency to rise in the ice. It was ultra-seaworthy. It was a double ender. The only self-righting fishing vessel that had ever been used commercially on this coast or probably any other coast. I've never heard tell of a non-capsizable or self-righting fishing vessel. Many people, or like I would say 99 out of 100 people would not be aware that the reason fishing boats are capsizable or readily capsizable (and they do capsize around the world, dozens of them every year) is purely an economic thing because it costs money to carry ballast. It costs fuel and it costs more money to put in service the vessel because there's a greater tonnage involved. So as much as we'd humanly like to hide the fact, all vessels, even passenger ships, are capable of capsizing and it's just an accepted fact of life that you can't afford to have them otherwise.

So anyway I'm trying to explain why the **Dick Smith Explorer** was suitable for Antarctica. It was simply.... Even though Dr Lewis, he did not ever advance this theory that he'd chosen the boat for that. That was his really secret addenda. He knew that he must not take an ordinary fishing boat down to Antarctica but he always referred to the **Dick Smith** as being an ordinary fishing boat.

JD What size was she?

GORDON Pardon?

JD The vessel, the **Dick Smith Explorer**, what size?

GORDON Oh what size.... Well in old Imperial measure she was 63 foot length by twelve foot beam by six foot six draught.

JD And was she timber construction?

GORDON She was steel. She was heavy steel. This is another anomaly. The MSB which we affectionately call the Maritime Circus Board, they at the time didn't really have their act together and to be on the safe side they would follow the scantling, the sizes in the structures of their fishing vessels when they started to survey them and register them, they would follow Lloyd's larger vessels and they didn't bring into account (they still don't bring into account) the tonnage of the vessel that goes on the length. So the **Dick Smith** being very narrow for its length or long for its beam if you

like, it had massive plating which would amount to [a] present day measurement of eight millimetres. That made it sort of semi-impervious to the damage that was likely to occur in Antarctica you see. So it was over-built.

It didn't detract from its usefulness as a fishing boat but it made it a lot more expensive to build and very annoying. Right at the time I was building it the surveyors came down and said, "Why did you bother to use the heavy material? Others are getting away with lighter steel." [laughs] Anyway that's always left me with a nasty taste that my hard earned money had to make a contribution towards the theory of Naval architecture rather than what I'd been accustomed to where old boat builders made a model and they worked it as a kind of an art where everything was in sympathy with the material you use, the skill you had and that's why boat building around the world has its characteristics and is an art form, but of course when theoreticians come into the picture, they destroy all that. That's sort of what's happening to the world today in every sphere. They only see the dollar sign and they only see quantifications and they turn their back on the art form.

JD Bob, was this vessel, the **Dick Smith Explorer**, built to your own design or did you get the plans from somewhere else?

GORDON Well it was originally a design, an American design from Francis L. Herishoff[?] who was America's foremost yacht designer and his father before him. I wanted to built it in steel so I had to do a slight compromise, or let's say an adaptation, but for all practical purposes it was the work of Francis L. Herishoff, an American designed boat I'm sorry to say [laughs], but I must add that there is no such thing as a typically Australian boat. I've been trawling in Tasmanian ketches that had centre boards that were built to go up the rivers in Tasmania, shoal draught. If they had the right skipper they were capable of making a living. The typical seine trawler is an adaptation of the Scotch trawler of a similar use and whether it's the Port Phillip Bay boats in Victoria or even the sharpies of Queensland, they've all got their origins in some other nation.

JD This **Dick Smith Explorer**, how was she powered?

GORDON Oh she had a four cylinder heavy slope speed, 1,000 rpm. It was a Damlier Benz diesel. It was installed as a new power plant and it survived for about twenty years in that vessel. No doubt the rigours of Antarctica took their toll because they had to put the blow lamp on the block to sort of thaw it out to get it going and when it was taken out of the vessel everyone marvelled at how it ever did survive and keep running until it did.

JD Did you build all your vessels here in Lavender Bay?

GORDON I built them all in the two bays which are adjoining each other, Berry's Bay and Lavender Bay. What is now Saw Miller Park, a public reserve, I built boats in the middle of Saw Miller Park. I built boats for twenty years in Berry's Bay on the western side until they wanted it for a car park for the marina. Now the same thing's happened in Lavender Bay here where I've been for over twenty years. The North Sydney Council have missed the opportunity to claim the land for water front activities for the public and the developers have acquired it through the Land & Environment Board to build town houses.

JD You won't be building any more boats here in Lavender Bay?

GORDON Well the Mayor of North Sydney and Robin Read, the MP, they've both given me the unofficial assurance that they will do everything in their power to allow me to continue wooden boat building on this site where we're making this recording. I think it would be a suitable gesture and a statement to the hundred years of history of boat building. After all this cradle and slipway here and this area has [had] 100 years of use for boat building.

JD Does this slipway have a name other than Lavender Bay slipyards?

GORDON It's known as the Neptune Slipway.

JD Right. Bob is there still a demand for wooden vessels?

GORDON That question takes me somewhat by surprise. If we're talking about the geographical area, say on the east coast of Australia, I would say the state of the fishing here is in such a state of flux that any new vessels coming into the trade would be sort of, I guess, in the lap of the Gods. It's just hard to define what course it will take.

JD Do you feel there's a bit of lack of confidence in the future of fishing in these parts?

GORDON Well the estuaries are all polluted you see and it's one thing to have pollution but it's another thing to be aware of the fact that human nature is built in that way that they don't like bad news and they don't want to address anything [that's] got an unhappy connotation about it. It's a bit like being an undertaker. Like in this day and age everyone should have the attitude of a person prepared to live with their shortcomings but that's not built into the human thing. So as a consequence to that, I've worked on this harbour site for 50 years. I've seen ongoing and total degradation of the water. Black fishermen used to come down here to pick this cabbage weed. Now that hasn't grown for fifteen or twenty years. The water is filthy. There used to be signs up there warning you against swimming. Now they don't bother to replace the signs because everyone knows you don't swim in the harbour but there are occasional unsuspecting women who bring little kids down here. I look upon that as deplorable because in third world countries.... There's only two places where the water's badly polluted, that's in third world countries and those who haven't seen the light or those who have got an insular kind of ecology that is exposed to degradation more readily than some other parts, you see.

Like they're trying to get rid of the pristine environment of Antarctica. They're trying their damndest, aren't they? So while they're still trying to decimate Antarctica, what are we supposed to be doing on our home ground. So I'm making a great story of a simple question you asked me. If there's a million dogs in Sydney and they all excrete on the footpaths and in the gutters and it all washes down into the George's River where our famous Sydney oyster comes from, and that all washes down into Sydney Harbour, and if you open up all the resorts along the coast, then you increase the population and all the estuaries and all the foreshore become degraded, as we've seen it happen here in the built up metropolis, then the inevitable must be the declination of the fishing industry as a whole because all the big fisheys have their beginnings in these places where they're reefing out the mangroves and despoiling the foreshore and putting vast insulations. Even big residences have their private marina in front of them and the highly toxic anti-fouling paint, whether it's [unclear - burontin?] or whatever anti-fouling, it's highly poisonous and that all gets into the food chain, you know.

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Bob, in your career in fishing, you'd have seen many, many changes in all sorts of directions and one of the most influential, I suppose you could say, has been the managed fisheries - limited entry and regulations and rules that are applied now to all fishermen. Have those rules been effective or not?

GORDON Well the bottom line is that we've got to look at it rather, not cynically, but in a practical, realistic way. The protection of the resource is based on research and of course even research men aren't oblivious to the fact that they've got to build their little empire and they don't want to work themselves out of a job any more than the police force or any other administrative arrangement. So I believe that the research people are sort of restricted by certain elements such as, as we've seen with the backlash from the industry when they tried to curtail the gem fish operation, you could probably say blind Freddie would be aware that the adult population of the gem fish has been cut down to such an extent that they have really, really created an economic long term situation because waiting for the stock to recover with so many valuable vessels doing the waiting, and the costs building up, is not preferred to looking at the problem before it happens. We can't really blame the research people because they would argue that they hadn't been brought into the problem early enough and because of the demands of the fishermen trying to exceed the reasonable catch, they don't get the opportunity to do their job as it would ideally be done.

There's another thing of course, it's far easier for all the administrative officers in the Fisheries control to stay on shore rather than be out on the boats. Like I've had, what 25 years catching blue eyes. Now we've seen the blue eye available off the immediate coast of Sydney here, say going out 25 mile. We've seen that drop down to one-tenth of its potential when the fishery first started.

The big harpooner cod as they call them, they used to come into Sydney market. Well, you know, they'd go from one side of the floor to the other, these giant big groper. Now I was particularly friendly with the senior research officer, Stan Hines of the CSIRO and he told me that grophers fight for their bit of territory. Once you've caught them, that's the end of it. Of course no one, NO ONE, I say, was addressing that problem. The fishermen would simply say, "Well if we don't catch them, our mates will", and there was no input from the Fisheries one way or the other.

The same went for the blue eyes. By the method of blue eye fishing dropping heavy weights on the sea bottom and dragging it and destroying the growth, they've effectively destroyed a sea mount which is only 21.7 miles from Hornby Light, only shown on Navy charts, probably for defence reasons or whatever and it comes up in a spectacular way. It rises 100 fathoms and I don't suppose there's one person in a thousand in Sydney is aware of this spectacular happening that was absolutely alive with fish that is now almost bare. Of course there are sea mounts 200 miles off shore rather than twenty miles and there's been an attempt to do the same thing with them without any control.

I'm only addressing the details that I'm intimate with. Having had a hands on relationship with blue eye fishing, I developed a type of fishing with hydraulic line haulers. I had ten on my last boat and I'd only put down three or four hooks with a very light weight and instead of heaving a drop line that was capable of destroying a hundred blue eyes with a hundred hooks if the line broke, which they invariably do....

They say they lose an average of one line every trip and the main part of their catch may have been on that one single line. With my method, I very seldom lost either equipment or fish and I did not damage the bottom, but of course my catch rate would only exceed theirs when the fish were scarce because I travelled over the bottom, I drifted whereas they put a line down in one place and if the fish aren't there, well they don't catch them. Of course if there was a mass of fish, I was restricted in my number of hooks. So therefore that was my bad day.

Anyway that will give you a brief outline of some aspect of research and conservation of the fish stocks. On shore, immediately on the water, you've got the destruction of the little fishes' habitat and out at sea you've got the destruction of the bottom because the day may come when otter trawling is outlawed because it has a destructive effect on the ecology of the sea floor. If you could imagine what really happens to all the minute creatures, whether they be hermit crabs or any other kind of life, when a great chain comes rumbling along and big otter boards, it's a destructive path wherever an otter thing goes. It's only because they can't fish the reefs and lose their nets, the fish get a chance to sort of get together again and have another go at what was their favourite ground [laughs].

JD Bob, you've retired now from fishing, haven't you?

GORDON Well I would be most distressed if I thought I was never going to go out onto the deep again and do some more fishing but it won't be with the intention of trying to survive economically. It'll be for the joy of it.

JD Are you still building boats?

GORDON Well I will most certainly build another wooden boat, or two and make sure that when I leave this spot here there's someone to carry on, to show how wooden boat building was done. I'm sure that's a necessary.... It's one of the things. If it's in my power, I've got a statement to make for all the boat builders who have worked here and who have all passed on and sort of thrown up their hands thinking, "Oh well, the big money will come in and destroy this. Instead of having a water front activity for the children to see as I saw them, there'll be a bit of antiseptic lawn and multi-million dollar town houses coming down to the water with a private marina", and that is horrific to say the least.

JD Bob, anything else that you'd like to talk about before we finish?

GORDON Yes. If you could give me a gap in the conversation to think about it, I'm sure I could think of something. Well I caught.... At one stage we were talking about journalists and their sort of unprincipled ways of how they put their own story together, I caught the first fish that ever went through the Sydney Fish Market, I believe. It was retailed at over a thousand dollars and it was a broad billed sword fish. I'd already had a disappointing experience with the newspapers at some stage so the Herald journalists politely asked me my name and I said, "Look you can say anything you like about the fish but I'll be taking action if you mention my name." So this came out on the front page of the Herald and a big photo of ourselves and the fish and the buyer of the fish. The caption underneath was, "The prize broad billed sword fish and the fisherman of the **Harbinger**" without any name to them you see.

JD Bob, after a lifetime of boat building and fishing, if you had your time again would you go fishing, do you think?

GORDON Well Jack, to put it into its right context... Let's say a fisherman would never retire, only if he became physically incapacitated. Well that would be most of the cause. They simply feel that they'd be fairly infirm and give over to their sons or something but I'm not in that kind of position. I don't believe I'll ever retire because my lifetime involved in either boat building or fishing hasn't been work. It's been a hobby or a dedication and when I think of catching the blue eye, that's the giant bass, in deep water, my last boat was crewed mainly by my old sister. She's 73 years of age at the moment and until last year she was coming out with me and we would be out of sight of land at sunrise and we would drop down into 300 fathoms and bring up these giant bass, or they call them blue eye in the fish market. When you think of those sort of times, you can't imagine how you'd not want to repeat that while you were still physically capable.

JD Your sister is a remarkable lady Bob, isn't she?

GORDON Yes. She spent all her life.... She's crossed the Atlantic three times under sail and she's been back across the Atlantic on other occasions in big luxury power vessels; many years in the Mediterranean; many years in the Caribbean; many years away from Australia. She's also a professional skier and an ice skater. [laughs] Another thing was that I'd say she's the only woman who held an Australian fishermen's licence of over the age of 70.

JD And didn't she do some back packing?

GORDON Well she's just spent eight months back packing in South America on her own and she's now waiting in Florida for another charter vessel to go as crew on a return trip to Europe. She has obviously got a lot of friends in Europe and so she'll go and spend time with them before coming back here.

JD And how old is she now?

GORDON Ah, she's 73, yeah.

JD Any other brothers and sisters?

GORDON No, no.

JD Well Bob, look it's been great to talk to you, fascinating.

GORDON Yes, alright. Thanks Jack. I hope it makes some small contribution.

JD It does indeed. Thank you.

GORDON Very good.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Bob Gordon, fisherman and boat builder of Lavender Bay, Sydney, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer

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Edited transcript of an interview with **NORM GRANT**

INTRODUCTION

Mr Norm Grant has fished Wallis Lake and surrounding seas on the central New South Wales coast since he first entered fishing after World War Two. He was a pioneer of the Danish seine trawling method of fishing (Danish seining catches fish not prawns) on that coast as well as of shallow water lobstering (New South Wales lobsters are different from the southern "rock lobster") and he has been very prominent in fishermen's organisations. He has served on the New South Wales Fish Marketing Authority.

In this interview he discusses the seasons and areas in which the various species in these waters are caught, as well as the reduction in catches due to too much pressure on the resources and the destruction of habitat, the need for research and for better dissemination of research findings. Having himself been involved in a serious accident on board his vessel and having assisted other vessels in trouble, he is well placed to discuss the hazards of seafaring which he does. Towards the end of the interview he expresses a rare appreciation of the sea and its creatures.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry. It was recorded by Jack Darcey at the Wallis Lake Fisherman's Co-operative Society in Tuncurry, New South Wales on the 4th April, 1990. (Forster and Tuncurry are twin towns but on opposite sides of Wallis Lake. They are often referred to as Forster/Tuncurry). There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

GRANT I'm Norman Muir Grant. I reside at 15 Douglas Avenue in Forster. My birth date is 3rd May, 1928.

JD Where were you born, Norm?

GRANT I was born in Waverley in Sydney.

JD Did you come up to this part of the world on your own?

GRANT I came up and with my parents had a farm at Cooalongalook which is eighteen miles up the river. I joined the Army and then when I got out of the Army I went into the fishing in about 1947, '48, say '48, I think, beginning there. I started in the river meshing with an old fellow that used to live on the other farm. He was half farmer and

half fisherman. That's where I got my interest in it all, apart from my father being a keen amateur fisherman all his life and working with professionals.

Then I came and I deck handed on the **Enterprise** which was sunk on the bar. I left that and then moved on to the **Snow Goose**, a boat owned by George Forsythe which we trapped with. It was just a trapping boat at that time. There was no seining and no trawling in the port at that time. Then I left that when he left and went back to Sydney. He got too old and retired. I went on to another boat called the **Barry John R** which was skippered by a fellow called Dave Emmerton and we were particularly engaged in lobstering at that time; lobstering and snapper. There was very little hand lining done or if there was a lot of hand lining done, it was done by the smaller boats. There were no speed boats in those days. It was all old wooden trawlers or wooden trap boats, I should say.

Then I had a holiday down in Eden and we got a lot of prawns here at that time. They were changed... I think I might be confused. I got a bit ahead of myself. When I left the **Barry John R** I bought my own boat from Sydney and I bought it up here. I trapped and lobstered and then that was about the initial start of the big runs of prawns and Dr Raycek came up here many, many years ago. I can't tell you the date he actually came here but it must be 30 years ago. When the prawns were first found off Newcastle we moved down there. Dr Raycek came up from Sydney and did a survey right through the whole coast. He was attached to the Fisheries Department at that particular time. We put on prawn gear and then we prawned and lobstered and trapped according to the amount of flood water that was coming out of the rivers; predominantly prawned after the flood waters. In between times, in the lobster season, we would lobster. In between those two times we'd go snappering. They were our bread and butter sort of business.

Then I went down to Eden, as I said, and when I came back here after, I saw the seiners working down there. There were no trawl boats those times. They were all seiners. I had a look at Ulladulla and then I came back to Newcastle and then after talking about the fishing conditions up in this area with one of the seiners down there, a fellow called Chris Delosa, who was a very successful seiner down there, he bought his boat up here. A mate of mine that had another trap boat, we had a look at this system and decided we wanted to do it. So I think, probably in about 1960 (don't quote me on these dates, they're just rough), we started to learn how to seine. At that time we didn't know anything about it. We knew nothing about nets. We knew about traps and netting in the river but we knew nothing about trawl nets as such in seining.

So we finished up, we learnt all those. We rigged our boats out or that and we went seining and I've done that ever since. I worked then from Newcastle as far north as the Clarence River. We still did other things at the same [time]. As I said, this is a multipurpose fishery so that even though we were at the tail end of the seining. Well the bottom end of it is, I suppose, the Bass Strait where there is the most prolific lot of sand flathead and tiger flathead which was caught, predominantly caught by steam trawlers, Cam's & Red Funnel Steam Trawlers. (Cam's & Red Funnel worked old English steam trawlers up to about 1960. They came out from England under their own power.) We are at the other end, the other extreme so that our seasons were short and there wasn't near as much fish got this far because they had to be strained through all the nets from the whole coast and by the time that they got here the season was nearly finished and they were in a hurry to get wherever they go. So we had a limited season on those. Usually you would get a run in August for about a month. Then you wouldn't get any and then you would get them at the end of

September, October.... no October, November and December, and that would finish your trawl season as far as flathead were concerned.

With your dory season you would usually get them and sand flathead. Sand flathead and dory came at the same time in the wet season. When the rivers were flooded was much the best time. Probably because of the dirty water, they couldn't see the net or whatever, but that was the season for sand flathead which is still the same today which is in March and April.

Also we would all go lobstering in the shallow water. I think an old fellow, Trevor Trotter and myself, we initiated the first steps into the very shallow water lobstering which was very lucrative at that time. Everybody would usually work from, say 30 fathoms to the Shelf, the edge of the Shelf but in September one year, a little earlier than September, July, we started and we set pots (lobster pots) right in shore from whatever the boat would float in, say seven or eight feet of water out to ten fathoms with tremendous success, anything up to fifteen or twenty dozen a day out of 40 odd pots.

We lost a lot of gear, naturally because there was so much movement, so much surge and pots moved around but we persevered with that. That became a full industry from about 19... oh I suppose 1965 right up to the present day. They're still doing it, although the lobsters have dropped off dramatically but that was one of the most lucrative things always. So our season's virtually Christmas time.... We start at Christmas time. That is the time when the hardest nor-easters blow and worst seas on the bar, remembering we never had the new breakwalls here at that time. (Nor-easter is a north easterly wind. A hard nor-easter is a "black" nor-easter. They were only old breakwalls. We had a lot of losses with boats and with men. Probably lose about two boats a year and one or two men a year. You had to wait outside and work your tides to get over the bar. Instead of waiting for the sea to go flat, what you would do is wait for the biggest swell you could see and ride it across the bar. When it went away and left you, your boat just landed on the sand and you laid over and waited for the next one to wash you over. Did a lot of damage to the boat.

Christmas time we would always have off till the worst of the nor-easters stopped. In January we used to fish for snapper in the shallow water, in the very shallow water; January and February. March we would go seining. March, April for sand flathead and dory and that's when we worked all the way up, probably to Laurieton, Port Macquarie; say a 50 mile radius, something like that. June we would go and do one month's snappering because there's the most snapper at that particular time, and still do to this day, they go out onto the mud and they feed on various sea worms, big seaworms, amazing. I've caught them in the net seven and eight feet long and as thick in the front as your thumb. The same worm that you catch on the beach and they also feed on a funny looking little crab that sits up and smiles at you. That happens in June.

July we would start to put our traps out. We'd take our seine gear off and go back into the lobster fishing with all our wide gear out then, from 50 fathoms to the edge of the Shelf, say 90 fathoms. Once that was all set, we'd work that every third or fourth day or, weather permitting, whatever we could. Then in September we, as well, put our fleet of shallow water gear in which was from, as I say from seven or eight feet of water, whatever the boat would float in, out to about ten to twelve fathoms. Then we worked the outside lobsters in the good weather and you could nearly always get around the rocks because it was close to shore. As the lobsters started to die off, seasons started to wane for them, both for the inshore lobsters and in November then we'd go, well October actually, from the middle of October through till Christmas time,

we'd then go back into seining with the odd day of going trapping. On a very calm day you would go and pick a day to go out and get your gear from the deep water and bring it home, get what lobsters were left over. The same thing applied at Christmas time. We would then go (beginning of December) go and pick up all our small lobster gear and bring that back home and then we're back to Christmas again which we would have off. That sort of was the system.

In between times all of us, or 90% of us I would say, would work the darks (between the full moon and the new moon) up the river. It was pretty hard work. When you got a bit older it was getting a bit tough because you'd come down from the river. You would start early in the tide and you might get home the first night because there would only be a couple of hours of tide, of ebb tide; set pocket prawn netting I'm talking about. As it got later, an hour later each night, at the end of the twelve days you were getting home at three or four o'clock in the morning, or even daylight. Most blokes were keen enough to go and have a cup of tea, get their food and go back and get on their boats and go straight back to sea and they did this continually for that twelve days. At the end of that twelve days you usually had a couple of days off.

The prawning was very lucrative in those days, some thousands of pounds. I've seen six and seven thousand pounds caught off one peg in eight hours and there was 23 pegs in the river, so the amount of prawns that came out of here was absolutely unbelievable. The majority early in the piece were school prawns. Later on in the year they would get into the small king prawns and there's three channels here. Strangely enough each channel had their own variety of prawns. The channel that came out of the rivers, usually the Wallambra Channel, would predominantly be school prawns. The Bulmer Channel was an enormous channel [and] they would be "greasy backs" and "schoolies" and a mixture of small kings, but in the main channel which came out of the lake, after the first run of schoolies, the second run (next dark) would be predominantly small king prawns. We would go out and we would catch them outside if there was a flood and silt out there to hold the prawns, otherwise they'd just travel north. One year we did follow them right up as far as.... Well I myself followed them up to Port Macquarie until they finished and just left them. We reckoned we'd gone far enough. I think the wife was getting a bit upset about us being away so long. That seems to be about the season and the way things worked in that general run of this multipurpose fishery here.

JD Norm, other than the crayfish which you mentioned has dropped off, have the other specie held up alright?

GRANT Nothing's held up. Nothing has held up at all. As I say, we put that back down to the innovation of board boats as opposed to our boats or Danish seining which uses very light gear, all natural fibre ropes; particularly light gear. Somebody made an analogy that it was like the rapier to the broad sword. It's more like a mini bus to a bulldozer actually because the board trawlers or otter trawlers with great steel shod otter boards and tremendous power.... Power has become a mania with people now. They get more power and more power. Even if they can't use it they still put it in. Gone off on the American tradition I think. If it's big, it's better if it's bigger. If it's heavy, it's better if it's heavier. This just ploughs the bottom up; removes all the silt, the coral and fern growth. Everything is absolutely stuffed.

In various places here we've got on well known trawl grounds, where there used to be three or four feet of silt, trees, coral, all the vegetation that's under there, it is now down to great big black, hard, shiney mud. It's nearly coal. It's very nearly coal and you can break it off with your net and get it.... There's not a fish on it; nothing on it, just plain smooth as concrete.... You break pieces off and you can bring them up and

you can break them in your hand and shake them and they look dry and they're shiny like a piece of black coal. This has been done over the years from the people just going up and down, up and down and just ploughing it and ploughing it until the soil erosion is just down to bedrock again. As I pointed out once before, not only do you lose the silt from that habitat for the flathead and all the fish that live on the bottom, flounder and your gurnard and the whole array of fish, that silt is picked up by the great southern current, goes down until it hits the first piece of reef that runs at right angles or whatever (doesn't necessarily have to run at right angles) but it fills all the crevices up, the tide keeps the top of the rock showing. It washes it clean so you can't get a net over it, but it also destroys the habitat. That silt is foreign to the snapper. It ruins that habitat for the snapper. It also ruins it for the majority of the flathead and the fish that feed on [the] silty bottom. Some of them go in there in big areas. If they're big crevasses or big basins they will move over there but that effectively moved the fish from one possie where you could get them to another possie which was surrounded by reef where you couldn't get them. Whether that was good or bad.... It was bad for the fishermen. It might have been good for the fish but [laughs] there was not big enough areas to save the habitat that the fish live and fish have definitely dropped off dramatically.

JD Norm, other than that damage to the ecology, what about pollution? Is that a problem in the lakes here or at sea?

GRANT No, no. Pollution isn't a problem yet because it's only the last.... It will be in the future but up-to-date it is not a great problem. The farms were small and they were rather poor. As I say, I came off a farm. We could never afford to buy chemicals. In my days it was horses not tractors. There might have been, you might have got an eco count from animal faeces or something like that, but even then not enough for the vast array of lake. There wasn't a great deal of cattle; nearly all dairying any rate. So your herds of cattle were, oh probably, I think from 25 to about 60 would be a large farm. So, no. The problem with pollution now would be car bodies and plastic and actual rubbish that is thrown in the rivers and lake.

JD More litter.

GRANT Yeah, litter more than anything. It's a particularly clean lake and it's well governed by the Government. The fishermen look after the place because they have to look after it. It's their livelihood. There's hardly any farms left around now. They're all smaller developments and probably will have a run off of overflows from septic tanks and things like that, but at this stage I think it's not populated enough to do much damage. As I say, in the future I think it will.

JD Norm, there's been an influx of fishermen. There's many more fishermen now than there were years ago. Is that right?

GRANT Oh yes, oh yes but that.... I don't know whether I should say this or not but it is much better to live in sunny Forster with its beaches and clean water and a relaxed life-style that goes with it than it is to live in Chippendale or Newtown or Leichardt or somewhere like that. If you're on the dole at Leichardt, it's much more comfortable to go and live in Forster and be on the dole in Forster. The thing is that there's been an explosion over a good few years of development here. People that came up here.... Fishing licences were too easy to get. Anybody with a few dollars could go and get a fishing licence if they were out of work. If you held a fishing licence you weren't supposed to be on the dole but I mean you have to be very naive to believe that. So it was nice to go and have a bit of net or go and get a job on a boat and draw the dole and draw the wages at the same time. I don't think a lot of the skippers realised it.

They were a bit naive, or some of them I talked to were. They supplemented their dole by doing a day's work with a brickie or a day's work with a fisherman or whatever but to be a fisherman they had to have a licence.

One of the ideas of bringing block licences is in the case of a tuna boat (a pole boat) where you had say, twelve fishermen to use the poles in the tuna season which say, for argument's sake, lasted three months (just for argument's sake), when those twelve people that had licences walked off that boat, they still had their licences. So there was twelve licences off one boat that they weren't going to use unless they wanted to go back to sea or do some other type of fishing 'cause the tuna season had finished. They had those licences then to go and use them for anything that they wanted to use them for. Licences were bought and used in those days against the Tax Department badly. They were abused badly because it was a fisherman's prerogative to get his gear less sales tax. That was used extensively by people that wanted to dodge sales tax. Then they supplied everything for their mates. It got that bad that they'd even walk along and have a look at a number on a boat. Our numbers are six inches high. We're obliged to have them there. You just get the number of the boat, go down to Sydney and buy what they wanted and just write that number down. Nobody's question them. They were much too easy to get hold of.

When I was in the Fish Marketing Authority we changed that to \$100 which I actually was against because I didn't think that \$100 was near enough. It didn't deter anybody because a jewfish is \$100. Half a dozen snapper is \$100. So it didn't deter them at all when they had the opportunity to supplement their dole or various other payments by going fishing. What happened, it blew the fishing.... When I said twelve men on a pole boat, that's quite right but there was dozens of pole boats too. So you had dozens of twelve men with licences that they could use. They had them for nine months of the year just in limbo unless they particularly wanted to use them.

So the Department brought in a block licence system. What the skipper can do now is, he can buy a licence, pay \$50 each and buy a licence that he holds on the boat alone. Now he can go and pick up anybody off the street if he wants to use them for three months or two months. If they're on the dole they're supposed to go and tell the Social Security people. I doubt that very much but he uses it and he keeps those licences, but when they walk off that boat, they haven't got a licence. He still has them on the boat and he can go and hire another twelve men or whatever for the next trip which was a very, very good idea. It cut them down, but yes, there was too many fishermen on the coast. A lot of it was because when the building boom slumped around the coast, genuine people with families couldn't find anything to do. The innovative ones, they just went and bought a punt or built a punt and got a bit of mesh net and they went up and tried to make a living for themselves and keep their families going. A lot of people didn't like going on the dole. There is still a few people that are a bit proud and don't want to be on the public purse string. As a matter of fact, there's quite a few of them but there's also a fair number of other, whatever you want to call them.

JD Norm, you were very much involved with the fishermen's organisations and negotiations with the Department and that sort of thing.

GRANT Yes, yes. I started roughly about 1970. As I say, I haven't got a head for dates but I think roughly it is. I started with the Union of Fishermen's Co-Ops on the Board and then I became secretary I started originally in the central region. We had three regions. We had a northern region which was predominantly prawns, as I said. We had a central region just multipurpose fishery and then we had the south coast which was predominantly seine trawling. Those days they were the three regions, north, south and central region. From each region the co-ops picked their delegates.

Each co-operative picked their delegates. They in turn sent two men to their regions and one of those men from the region then went in to the Union of Co-Operatives. Those meetings were held down in Sydney.

I was secretary of the region for, I think, something like about twelve or fourteen years. Then I was on the Board of the Union of Co-Operatives for probably two or three years, four years, something like that. Then I became Chairman of it and I was there for about another six or seven years. Then I went from there into the Fish Marketing Authority and I served a term in there. Then I think I'd had enough of it. I had more enemies as fishermen, friends and enemies at the same time and apart from here I seemed to have enemies everywhere. Didn't matter what I did, when I thought I was doing a good job, everybody thought I wasn't [laughs]. There was too much conflict. I got a set of ulcers and I had to go to hospital and after about twelve, fifteen years of it, it just got far too much for me. I couldn't cope with it so I got out. Other blokes didn't last as long as I did. Other fellows sort of managed it but I couldn't manage it after that.

After I left it, it turned into a group called the APF, [rustle of papers] the Australian Association of Professional Fishermen. I can't think what it stands for. It eludes me. It replaced the Union of Co-Operatives anyway, with a different body. They had the same problems that we had, I think probably a little bit worse with the various departments and the Federal Government started to poke its bib in there at that particular time. It only lasted a couple of years and it went into chaos. Then things were in limbo for two or three years and just lately they've come up with another system, what they call CFAC, Commercial Fishermen's Advisory Council which is made up of delegates. This is past my time now. I've been out of it for some time. They are an advisory body from nearly all the co-operatives. There's about fourteen or fifteen of them. There is a departmental chairman, I think. The rest are all fishermen. They have then got an advisory body advising them and they advise the Fisheries Department who advises the Minister.

As far as I'm concerned, it's beat before it starts because I never ever saw two or three fishermen that could agree, and how you're going to get an advisory body of probably eight people from each co-operative advising their CFAC member who has got to go and win over another thirteen or fourteen people who have then got to go and win over the Fisheries Department who have then got to win over the Minister, is beyond me. I think why we had such success in the Union of Co-Operatives for so long is that there was only six people there and we virtually told the fishermen what they wanted, but we'd be generally on their side because we were working fishermen the same; like what was good for us was good for them at the same time. I think it was because there was so few people, at least sometimes we could agree, but when you get great masses of people it's very hard to get them to agree. So I think it's a disaster but that's just my opinion. It also cost us \$200 each to finance these blokes too [laughs] on our licence which upsets me a little bit; over and above our licences.

JD What's the relationship between the fishermen through their organisations and the Department? Are they on side with each other or do the fishermen feel that the Department ignores their viewpoint?

GRANT I think the average fisherman, now I say average fishermen. There are a few good thinkers and very bright men fishing now [with] very good educations and well and truly up-to-date. Peter Bell would be one of them. There's various other people too that I can mention. I think that the average run of fishermen though think the Fisheries Department is a team of bureaucrats. They're very cynical about them; laws, petty laws, things that don't make sense to a fisherman. Same applies to the Maritime

Services Board. They seem to live in a world of their own in that great big office drinking cups of coffee. This is how they feel and we're about as far divorced from them as you can possibly get. They make laws, we obey them or we don't obey them. If you don't obey them and you get fined, it's a sort of occupational hazard. Getting better, I think. Getting better but I don't think that's got a great deal to do with the Fisheries Department.

I think it's the fishermen themselves who have found it harder and tougher to get along, that are policing things more themselves, perhaps more learned, younger people with better educations, people that can hold their temper more and negotiate better. I think probably it will iron itself out and deplete the population of fishermen too. Once you get smaller and smaller units into it I think you can negotiate a lot better. With the old, old people.... When I first started fishing most of the fishermen were illiterate. Quite a few of them couldn't read or write and now with the younger people and their education, yes I think it's better, but they still have a cynicism against all bureaucrats. I think that's probably the Australian way, isn't it? [laughs]

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Norm, earlier on you mentioned the loss of boats and men in this area and you yourself have had accidents I understand. Would you like to talk about that?

GRANT Yes. The biggest cause of our accidents years ago was that boats were smaller, under powered, some of them down to petrol engines which are a hazard in themselves because of the type of fuel they use. Machinery wasn't, what can I say, it wasn't....

JD Reliable?

GRANT Yes reliable but, I can't think of the word that I'm after; something that's quick. You go into gear, you go into it quick. Some of those old things used to take ten minutes to get you there. They were unreliable and slow. Bar harbours have always been a disaster and bar harbours, particularly ones opened to the sea, and haven't got shelter by headlands and things like that, come up very, very quickly. Ebb tide makes it a lot worse because some of those old boats could hardly punch the ebb tide or the surf in the normal sea. So when you put a big sea on there and a hard ebb tide, that's how we turned over quite a lot of boats. I did most of the rescue work for the police for about ten or twelve years and we salvaged and picked up, oh quite a number of boats off the bar; commercial boats and tourist boats. That was the biggest danger. The bar was our biggest danger in those days at that particular time.

The other dangers are, you know you've got winches. People years ago always wore aprons which are things that flap about all over the place and they flap under and flap into winches and luckily these days we wear bib and brace overalls which don't flap around. You've got the dangers of spiking and poisoning from fish like fortescues and bull routs and the normal sort of things that fishermen put up with. They don't say much about it. Occasionally the otter trawlers have big problems, particularly the big ones that work out very wide where wires snap and because the gallows, the pull off the gallows is very high in their boat. The fulcrum is up high and they would spin

round and just turn over without any problem at all and vanish from sight which has happened on various occasions to the big boats round here.

I myself was pulled into the winch. I was boarded by the Fisheries in a patrol boat in half a gale. They didn't understand. Seining had been gone for about seven or eight years or ten years before they'd started in the Fisheries Service and they just came aboard without any idea of how it had been operated or whatever. They came across at the busiest time, well the most critical time of the whole seining operation and stood around gaping around. I couldn't move on the deck and I fell over and fell into the winch and it dragged me into the winch and went round and round. Consequently I broke my collar bone and got a fractured skull. Broke my nose and pulled my shoulder off my body and half my hand and got squashed up a bit which necessitates five operations and nearly two and a half years in hospital on and off. These are the little things that you will find all the time.

Some of the other hazards you do get which, to the average layman would seem ridiculous but quite often you get a net or a rope round your propellor . It's very easy to do and if you've been getting fish, being trawl gear, whatever you catch.... If you catch a tonne of fish for argument's sake, usually half of it or three parts of it will go back over the side as unsaleable stuff, under size stuff or whatever. Of course in those days there were sharks galore. You could nearly get off your boat and walk round on their backs and get back on dry again. In many instances all of us, not only myself, we'd have to get over the side and get underneath the boat. You could reach out and touch the sharks with your hand. They'd be feeding all round from the stuff that's floating. Even though you might have been going ahead and you stopped it, the amount of stuff you've been throwing over is going with you with the tide. They would just follow the feed down and they'd be all round you. Strangely enough, the sharks didn't worry me. After the initial fright, and there was plenty of that, sharks weren't the most dangerous thing at all. The most dangerous thing of being under there was the boat going up on a sea and then coming down and crushing you. You had to get under there and wedge yourself into the quirk of the boat, onto the rudder or wherever you could cling on and go up and down with it. Nobody seemed very upset about that. I did. I was panic stricken the first time that I did it but it's mainly imagination.

I think the worst part is when you first.... You don't jump over the side or dive over the side in amongst them. You slide yourself as close as you can alongside the tuck or over the side, try to become a part of the boat, and the first and most terrifying part is when you can't see, when your legs are dangling in the water. It's alright once you can get under with a mask or goggles on and you can see, you lose all the terror. Then the worst part is getting out again when you sort of hang waiting for somebody to pull you over or you pull yourself over [and] your legs are dangling in the water again. You imagine your feet are going to disappear but it's amazing how used you can get to that sort of thing and it becomes part and parcel of the day's work.

JD What, would you go over because there was some entanglement on the....

GRANT Well if a net or rope gets round the propeller, you have to unwind it or you have to get down and put the knife into it. You have to get rid of it some way because it's not.... With seine ropes, they get round there and jam the shaft (propellor shaft) we never used to cut them. The best idea is to unwind them if you can. Takes a bit of a while. You've got to come up and get a few breaths and hang around a bit but you have to do that. On the odd occasions you do have to cut them, but nobody likes to cut their rope if they can possibly avoid it.

There was worse danger. Like, I've seen block and tackle swinging around that you couldn't control, and there were little safety things. We would never ever open our back hatches while we were retrieving our nets because our hatches were between the two ropes. We never let anybody on the back deck while we were retrieving our ropes because the ropes would always, especially in high speed, they'd bring all the foul rubbish off the bottom, debris off the bottom and it hits the back of the boat. If you don't see it and it's coming three or four hundred feet a minute (300 feet a minute), it flies over the tuck and [could] take your head off or whatever. Also it can snag up. A rope can break and they spring and they'll cut you in half if you're unlucky. If you're lucky it'll knock you over the side. All those sort of things....

All the skippers that I know that had any sense at all always made their own little set of safety regulations for themselves and they instilled that into their deck hands as they got them. In the normal course of events there has been not a great many accidents at all for the amount of fishermen and the amount of fishing there has been around. I think you become very wary because you're on your own, you can't get help or it's well away usually. So particularly the older people like me, caution is always uppermost in your mind. When you're young you don't seem to have that caution. It's a bit of an adventure but as you get older.... Mostly the skippers on boats now that are doing well are fairly old people. There's a few young ones but the young ones here that do own their own boats and are making money are pretty sound sort of blokes. You don't get any ratbags or anything like that. Of course it's always in the back of your mind you've got to look after your crew. You're responsible for your boat and the crew are your responsibility. That's it.

I think fishing will improve. I think that it will be sour for some years and I say that because I think that's been knocked about too much but if the numbers of fishermen are reduced, fishing effort is reduced, particularly with the otter trawlers or they're moved out into an area of deeper water, which I think should be done anyhow, I think in the long term with the reduction in fishermen and the moving out of boats, that fish will come back. I think as the habitat grows, the fish will come back here. Now if they're not hurt too much and there's no heavy fishing effort on to them, I think in the years to come it'll probably be a very, very lucrative industry for a small amount of people. Those small amount of people, I would imagine, would catch more fish than the dozens and hundreds of boats all mixed up together now because, you know, they're splitting schools up. If you can rest fish you can give them time to school up. All our catches in the lake where we have the weekend closed are mostly caught on the Monday morning. It's given fish time to school up. During the week everybody's running here, there and everywhere splitting them all up. They're all diving for weeds. They're diving for whatever to get protection. If the intensity of the fishing is let go and you can rejuvenate the habitat, I think it will be very lucrative for the younger people later on.

I'm a little bit sorry.... I suppose this is progress and I don't like it, but one of the things that upsets me more and more is the innovation of electronics into the industry. As we go further down the line you can damn near pick up a prawn, a single prawn, with some of the gear that they've got now. You can pick them up in any depth. You've got sonar equipment. You've got radar. You can work off a micrometer on the scale of so many metres to where you actually want to go. They've taken all the hit and miss out of it and I don't think that.... Fish don't know anything about electronics. I think it's a bit too much of an ambush on them, much too much. I'd rather see them go back and ease up on the electronics. I know if people heard me say that, they'd kill me but I think that would be better for the industry.

JD It's also very, very expensive to set up now as a fisherman, isn't it?

GRANT Oh yes. A good boat'll probably cost you a quarter of a million dollars. I'd say you'd get a reasonably good 50 foot, something between 50 and 60 feet for about a quarter of a million dollars. Then you could put any amount of money into electronics on it, that you need. It could go from anything but I don't think that's actually in the fishermen's interests and I don't think it's in the fish's.... I'm sure it's not in the fish's interest. The problem is, they cry efficiency. Everybody wants to be efficient, more efficient all the time. Fuel's a dreadful price now. I think that you have to get out and you have to get back and you don't want to be mucking about. Where you used to, years ago, time was nothing and fuel was very cheap but now it's in and out with a hatch full of fish or prawns or whatever it may be.

Of course electronics will allow you to do that but I think there should be a lot more work done into research of life cycles of fish because they're only finding out about the red roughy now that they're 50 years old. Before they're virtually grown to a saleable fish or a reasonable fish to fillet. You couldn't knock schools of red roughy about now too badly when you know that it's 50 years before you're going to replace them. Other fish grow very quickly. You can sort of pick them but I think the research should [be] done and the research should not stay in the Department. I don't think the Fisheries Department, although they do research, doesn't come back to the grass roots fishing, at the co-op here for argument's sake. They might say they have it and they've done the surveys and they have. I don't disagree with it but nobody's ever come up and said, "Look, this is what we know about snapper. This is what we know about prawns and we're here to tell you and explain it all to you." We just don't know. So we're left in the dark in that respect. That's only a problem of communication. Apart from that I don't suppose there's much else I can tell you.

JD Have you enjoyed your years in fishing?

GRANT Oh if I had my time over again I'd do nothing else, but then again I'm finished fishing now. I don't know what the next ten or twenty years is going to bring but I think it will eventually.... If I can survive the next ten years, I think the rest of the time would be very good and very lucrative. I'd say if I had my time over again from the War, from 1948 up until say, 1980, in that era, and of course that's the era when I was most active and young, yes I would do exactly the same thing again. I think it's the greatest life in the world. It teaches you reliability and responsibility. It teaches you care for other people, [to] look after things. You become a very good greenie, a very good greenie.

I'll never forget the little story, I suppose this is a little bit sentimental but may be you might like to hear it. I was seining one day and I got a great big manta ray, the most beautiful fish I've seen. We landed him on the deck with a lot of fish and he was underneath. There was fish over him, good fish too. There was dory and snapper and there was flathead, sand flathead. You name it, it was there. It was beautiful. He was laying on the deck and we scooped all the fish off him. If he'd have flapped a couple of times, twenty boxes of fish would have gone over the side. He'd have kicked them over the side. We've had it happen before with black rays and shark and things. You've got a good shot and all of a sudden you end up with nothing with them kicking and splashing around the deck. This fellow lay nice and quietly. When we cleared him off enough, and cleared the fish away from him, he had great blue eyes. I'll never forget them and everywhere I walked he watched me and I said later (I got very sentimental and soft hearted) and I said (to John, my deck hand. I had two deck hands at that time. John and I often rowed), "I think we'll lift him back over the side." He said "Oh don't be bloody silly, he's worth money for the flaps. He's good money". I said, "No.

Let's get him back over the side." It really got to me, and we couldn't. He was much too heavy. He weighed about 200 weight. We couldn't lift him over the side and he was too slippery and I'm being abused by the two crew. I went inside and got a needle. I knitted up a sling for him [laughs]; big homeward bounds there about fourteen inch mesh [laughs] and I slid the sling underneath him and we lifted him up, rowing all the time, and I put him back in the water. He swam round the boat for, oh ten or fifteen minutes and I watched him, and then went away. I felt good for the rest of the day [laughs].

We had fish, two big cobia, black king fish that used to come up to the boat every time we went off the "Hawke" (Cape Hawke) We had them there for five or six years. One was about six, seven foot long I suppose and the other one was about five foot and we'd hand feed them. They'd meet the boat and you'd hand feed them. I never said anything to anybody for years then one night in the hotel I mentioned it to somebody who then mentioned it to somebody else and we lost the fish. They never came back again. Somebody said some idiot had gone out there and shot them, which I believe is true. I know who did it as a matter of fact but he doesn't live here now. Otherwise I think I would have gone and punched him in the nose. I was very upset about that but I blame myself for opening my mouth, anyhow. There have been some very wonderful times in my life and of course you've got the freedom of going away to other ports and meeting other people and you see other types of fishing. You get other ideas from people. You meet other families and you see life from very, very poor people to very, very rich people; people who own boats, who've got crews working them to blokes who have just started out and are really battling for a quid. [There's] a lot of comradism in fishermen. They'll fight each other like mad but if they've got to pull together and face the common cause, they do and very strongly too.

I can remember years and years ago when we were down.... when flathead prices got down to a point where we couldn't afford to catch them. I threw a heap over the side, twenty or 30 boxes over the side. They were two and a half cents and I couldn't afford to catch them for that so we just dumped them. Things got bad and we got.... This was the days when the Co-operative Union was there, we finished up, we all got together, had a meeting at Ulladulla as a matter of fact. Old Tory Puglisi was involved in it and we bought a semi-trailer with all used old net and we dragged it into Parliament House and put in on Parliament House steps and pushed a big fat policeman in front of the semi and then we took three other trucks, one out to Leichardt, another went to Newtown. One went down near the markets I think, loaded with flathead, and we gave them away in the streets to everybody. Of course we forced the Government and the Fish Marketing Authority at that time to do something to upgrade and put up minimum prices on fish and actually got a better deal for ourselves. That was a whole coast, a union of the fishermen that all got together in an hour of need or a crisis situation and stuck together until we did it. So there are times that we do stick together but it doesn't happen [laughs] very bloody often, only at times, unfortunately.

JD It's still for the individualistic [unclear].

GRANT Yes, yes. Everybody's a hunter and everybody is his opposition until you've got a common cause. I don't think that's how it will always work.

JD Norm, thank you very much. It's been really a good story.

GRANT It's been nice talking to you.

JD Thank you and best of luck for the future.

GRANT Oh well, you know, I'm only going to go fishing and shooting and do what I've always been doing I suppose.

JD That ends this interview with Mr Norm Grant of Forster, Tuncurry, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





Verbatim transcript of an interview with JOE GRECO

INTRODUCTION

Joe Greco is the manager of the Ulladulla Fishermen's Co-Operative and a board member of the Sydney Fish Marketing Authority. He is a descendant of a long line of fishermen and is closely related to the Puglisis, another fishing family well known in fishing circles in Australia, Argentina and Europe.

In this interview Mr Greco tells of us family background, the difficulties faced by Italians in Australia during the War years and the early conflicts between Italian and other Australian fishermen, now thankfully resolved. Joe Greco is an acknowledged expert in the handling, processing and marketing of fish and expresses concern over the problems facing the industry particularly in relation to fishing methods, pressure on the fish stocks and environmental problems.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry. It was recorded in Ulladulla, New South Wales on the 22nd March, 1990. The interviewer is Jack Darcey. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 020 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Joe, would you record your full name first.

GRECO I'm Joe Greco and I was born in a little town called Milton which is four miles north of Ulladulla on the 12th June, 1939.

JD And have you lived in this area all your life?

GRECO I've lived in Ulladulla all my life excepting for a couple of years when I went to Sydney and managed a fish processing plant in Sydney and then came back and worked on my brother-in-law's boat for the next twelve months. Then commenced back at the fish co-op.

JD And you're now the manager of the co-op and have been for some time?

GRECO Yes. I'm the manager of the Ulladulla Fish Co-Op. I first commenced work there after selling my motor mechanic business and garage that we had in Ulladulla in partnership with an Australian gentleman. I first started work at the fish co-op on the 26th June, 1972. I terminated my employment there on the 23rd August, 1979 and I recommenced my employment again there on the 11th January, 1982. In that period

was the two years that I spent one year in Sydney and one year on my brother-in-law's boat, the **Marina Star**.

JD So you actually had a year's hands on experience on a fishing boat?

GRECO Yes. My ancestors and father were all fishermen and uncles and I've always had fishing in my blood. When I finished school (I went as far as my Intermediate) I wanted to go fishing but my father said, "I would prefer that you take on a trade and then later on, if you want to go fishing,..." He said fishing was a hard life. He fished from the age of five right through until he was about 65. He preferred that I not go fishing, have more of a home life which he never had.

JD Your family came originally from Italy, or close to Italy?

GRECO Yes. The involvement in the Australian fishing commenced with the eldest uncle, mum's eldest brother, coming to Australia in 1920. He was a set line fisherman and he started fishing out of the port of Wollongong with set lines and the main species of fish caught then was snapper. He worked out here for about twelve months. Then he called out his father, which was to be my grandfather, and his second eldest son called Sam. They worked a further two years. Then they called out the grandmother, four sisters and two brothers. At that time they also brought out Joe Puglisi's fiancée. They were married in Australia and they later on had four children. My father, he came to Australia in 1927. At that time you had to have a sponsor and the sponsor[s] for dad coming to Australia were my grandparents. Dad came to Australia in 1927 and dad came from a little town called Santa Maria Luscala which is a little fishing port on the east coast of Sicily which is just down from Ushreala[?], a town called Ushreala.

Dad's main method of fishing in Italy had been using nets and when first coming to Australia he went fishing with the set lines with the grandparents. Later on he built his own little set line boat and he was working in partnership on that boat with his eldest cousin, Joe Puglisi. Their main areas of fishing initially were from Wollongong to Sydney and then later on they started to work the south coast of New South Wales, mainly out of Ulladulla and down as far as Montage Island. While working out of Ulladulla with the set lines they could see there was great potential in the Danish seine fishery as there were about three or four Australian fishermen working with Danish seine gear out of the port of Ulladulla. Dad being a net man decided that if they had a Danish seine vessel and his experience and knowledge with nets, he could possibly out fish the Australians. So they decided that they would upgrade from the small long line vessels and go into the Danish seine fishery.

So dad having the yearning to have a Danish seiner, they had moved to Ulladulla with all their families in 1936. They moved from Wollongong down to Ulladulla and [were] fishing with the set lines. Then they decided to build the first Italian owned Danish seiner and they got a boat builder from Huskisson, a gentleman by the name of Mr Setri, to build their first Danish seiner. In those days to go fishing, if you had a vessel over 50 foot in length you had to have a ticketed skipper on board. So they mentioned this to Mr Setri so they finished up building the first Italian owned Danish seiner which was 49 foot ten inches long. They named it the **Little Michael**. My grandfather's name was Michael. So they started fishing with that out of the Ulladulla area and they were doing very well. As dad mentioned, they could out fish the Australians and that's just what happened. They were out fishing the Australians. In fact the first day they went fishing I think they bought in about 40 boxes of flathead and other species of fish. One of the Australian gentlemen came over to dad and said, "What did you catch today Joe?" Dad said, "Oh we got about 40 or 50 boxes." He also said, "Did you lose any

gear?" Dad said, "No." He wouldn't believe dad so dad said, "I'm telling you the truth. You can have a look down the fish room." When he saw it he said, "Well you're the only fisherman that's done so well on his first day without losing gear." Dad had only gone out with the same gentleman on one day previous just to see how the gear was worked, but they had a knowledge of the grounds because, fishing for snapper, they used to set their set lines on reef and so they knew where the reefs were and where the sand was. So this was a great help once they went into the Danish seine fishery.

JD Your family sort of spread around Australia, didn't they, to other ports, other parts of Australia?

GRECO Yes. The eldest uncle, Joe (this is the one that came to Australia first), he had four children by his first marriage, three daughters and a son. He had four children through his second marriage which were three sons and one daughter and then on his third marriage, which was with an Australian woman, he had two sons. They are still mostly all in fishing. Two of the eldest boys are in Port Lincoln, working out of Port Lincoln. I'm sorry, there's three fishing out of Port Lincoln. One's in the tuna fishery. One's in the prawn fishery. The eldest boy used to be in the tuna fishery which then sold out and is in the policy making of Fisheries in Port Lincoln. The two youngest boys of the third marriage are working up in Ballina and they are prawn fishermen up in that area. One of the boys is in construction work in the Canberra area.

JD Also the family has fishing people in other parts of the world, I believe?

GRECO Yes. On my father's side we are pretty well spread out. We have in dad's family, seven brothers and five sisters. There are three brothers and one sister living in Argentina at a place called Mardell Plutta. The three brothers are in the fishing and even the brother-in-law is also in fishing. The sons of the eldest uncle in Argentina [are] in fish processing and canning in a very big way. There are still the two brothers and.... I'm sorry, three brothers and, I think, three sisters still in Italy also in fishing, still in Sicily. In Australia there are two brothers. One was dad, who passed away eight years ago and the other brother is still living in Ulladulla. He has retired and has three sons still working in the fishing industry. Going back to pre-War years, we had an influx of more Italians coming in to Ulladulla through the eldest uncle's second marriage. He married into the Lavell family who were prawn fishermen [and] used to prawn in Sydney Harbour. So when they saw how well the Danish seine fishery was in Ulladulla they decided to have two boats built and then they moved to Ulladulla. So fishing was going quite well in the Ulladulla area. This is with the Italian Danish seine fleet now operating out of Ulladulla.

Then we started to come into the War years and in 1939 the War commenced and the Italians, being allies of the Germans, started to put a bit of pressure on the Italian community in Ulladulla and the American Navy then started to require vessels to work as supply vessels up in the islands around [the] New Guinea area. So the Government decided to take fishing vessels to use as supply vessels and the first vessels to go were the Italian fishing vessels out of Ulladulla. The Italian fishermen were paid the then going rate for the boats and they were taken up into the tropical waters north of Australia to act as supply vessels. Therefore that put an end to the Danish seine fishery in the Ulladulla area, as did some of the Australian owned vessels [which] also later on went. Some of these vessels returned after the War and the original owners were given the right to purchase these vessels. In the case of dad's boat, the **Little Michael**, it did not come back. We believe it was so riddled with the worm up there that they beached it and burnt it. The uncle's boat, the **Saint Michael**, came back. It

was quite riddled with worm at the time and a fair amount of under water lined planks had to be replaced but then he did go back into the Danish seine fishery.

During the War years a lot of the Italian fishermen in the Ulladulla area were interned. The Greco and Puglisi family were fortunate enough that they did not go to camp. After about a year, year and a half out of work a shipyard was commenced in the Ulladulla area by a gentleman called Mr Ken McLeod and he was to build vessels for the American Navy. So the eldest uncle, being quite.... I think he would have made a pretty good politician, he decided to hang around the shipyard and help here and there, wherever he could. Mr McLeod, seeing this, finished up employing him to help down at the yard. That led to dad being employed down there also and dad finished up being the boiler attendant to finish up steaming the planks to build these vessels down there. The other uncles, Uncle Sam and mum's youngest brother, Tory, were employed up in Huskisson cutting sleepers and knees for the Mr Setri that built their first vessel. So therefore, during the latter part of the War years, all the Greco and Puglisi and some of the Lavell family were employed in [the] timber or ship building industry.

During the War years the Italian community in Ulladulla were hassled a little. Seeing that the Italians were allies of the Germans, we used to have a fair bit of flack thrown at us at school. In those days the number of Italians compared to the Australians attending school was quite minor so therefore we used to get a fair bit of flack thrown at us from the Australians but as years go by and Wars ended, all these things have gone and the Australians and the Italian community in the township of Ulladulla were very well in harmony.

JD After the War there was also some strife, wasn't there, between the fishermen (mostly Australians from Eden) and the fishermen (mostly Italian) from Ulladulla, and didn't they put a line on the map and said, "You'll stay that side and we'll stay that [side]"?

GRECO Well after the War when the vessels all commenced working again, we had a bit of conflict there between the Eden fishermen and the Australians but it was mainly due to the Italian fishermen out fishing the Australians. So any time that we ventured, say further south than say Tathra, and the Italian fishermen would run into the Australian fleet fishing side by side, the Italian fleet'd normally catch two to one. I think this was more the reason for the conflict than personalities. So they more or less.... Gun shots were fired on some occasions; no casualties, but they then decided to draw an imaginary line, say off about the Tathra area and the Eden fishermen more or less worked south of that area and the Italian fishermen worked north. As years went by and inter-marriages started in the Ulladulla area and what have you, all that animosity passed and now we have fishermen working.... A lot of the Italian fishermen are working out of the port of Eden. In a lot of cases when fishermen from Eden are fishing for tuna, they come up and fish in and out of the Ulladulla area and the co-op handles their catch and everything has gone. Those animosities have now passed and all fishermen work in harmony.

JD And we're all better off without....

GRECO And we're all better off without them. How I finished up back into the fishing industry as secretary/manager of the fish co-op was, prior to leaving school.... As dad said, he didn't like me to go fishing initially unless I had a trade. Prior to leaving school of a Saturday and Sunday I used to work in a back yard motor mechanic's yard and the gentleman that ran that was a Mr Clive McCosker. Seeing that I was so interested in the mechanical side of things, he offered me a partnership arrangement if we built a

service station. So we purchased three blocks of land on the northern side of Ulladulla, just on the way into Ulladulla and we built a service station and motor mechanic repair shop. I worked in the garage for sixteen years and due to problems with my back, and my partner falling into ill health, we decided to sell the garage and I then decided.... At that time the then manager of the co-op decided to resign and move to Sydney and the position became vacant. I asked the then directors whether they would consider myself as being the manager, which they readily accepted.

The establishment of the co-op came about in 1956 [when] a gentleman by the name of Reg Adams, who prior to that used to manage the Eden cannery, approached the Italian fishermen and advised that they should form a co-op so that they would be able to have their fish marketed more easily because in the early days with the Danish seine fleet, ice used to have to be brought from Wollongong or Port Kembla. We had a very small ice works in the Ulladulla area over where the Ulladulla Civic Centre now stands but it only used to make small quantities of block ice and on a lot of occasions used to run out of ice, so ice had to be brought from Wollongong or Port Kembla. Each fisherman had his own truck and they used to bulk load the [ice] into the truck and bring it to Sydney. They had agents up there that had packing sheds. They would pack the fish specie to specie, ice it, document it and send it to market on behalf of the fishermen. So each fisherman had that extra worry about having to truck his fish to Sydney. This Mr Adams said well all this could be done at Ulladulla. [They could] build their own ice works and be able to handle the fish that way.

So they decided to form a co-op and they then purchased the old shipyards site [and] remodelled it to handle fish. They installed a ten tonne a day block ice machine and then that's how the co-op originally started. Going back to the early days when dad used to first fish out of Ulladulla with the set line boats, the only means of getting fish to [the] Sydney Markets in those days used to be by the old steam ships that used to come up and down the coast bringing the goods to each little port all up and down the coast. They used to get their ice down on the same vessel. It used to be packed in big wooden boxes that they used to use for packing kerosene [which] in those days used to come in four gallon tins. The four gallon tins were placed in wooden boxes so they used to use the wooden boxes for their ice as an ice box, send it down to Ulladulla in sawdust, the fishermen used to pick the ice up off the steamer, take it out of the wooden boxes, hose out the sawdust and what have you, crush the ice by hammer, pack their fish in the wooden boxes and return the fish in the wooden boxes back to Sydney.

The fishermen of today say "the good old days". Now with the modern co-op we have today, you press a button and crushed ice comes out at the rate of twenty tonne a day. In the early days when the ice used to come down by truck from Wollongong, it'd all start to stick together. You'd have to split the blocks of ice with an axe, lift them off one by one, put them on a wooden chute, hold them with a broom, crush the ice with a ten pound sledge hammer, take the broom away and let the ice fall down into the ice room; nothing like we've got today where things are made so easy. They say "the good old days" but I think we've got much better days now.

JD Joe, what sort of fish do you handle through the co-op?

GRECO The main species of fish we handle are for the domestic market and those species are flathead, morwong, john dory, snapper.... Any fish caught nowadays is marketable, not like the old days. So whether it's caught by.... We use the trap method. We use the long line methods for [the] catching of tuna. We use the pole method for catching of skipjack and we also use the.... Now, rather than a Danish

seine method, we are now using the European type otter board method which is a very efficient method of catching fish.

In the early '60s we had quite a large southern blue fin fishery off the east coast of New South Wales. They were mainly caught by the pole method, the American style of poling where you had live bait on board and you'd go seeking surface patches of fish, throw the live bait into the surface patch of fish and then start poling. It was a very efficient means of catching southern blue fin. I think the record off the east coast for one day for one boat was about 90 tonne of fish out of one patch of fish with about eight chaps poling. Later on they introduced the purse seine fishery into the southern blue fin fishery and that started the decline of that fishery and the demise of that fishery. I feel that if that fishery had not entered the Australian fishery, we would not be in the situation where we have quotas per vessel and total allowable catches per year. Each year that a quota is arranged at, it seems to be getting less and less and the southern blue fin fishery is in great trouble at the moment.

With the otter board fishery, being able to work in deeper water than the Danish seine fishery could work, we started to discover that we had a gemfish fishery off the east coast which normally runs from about May through to about September. We were catching these fish in the spawning run and over the years we started to deplete that stock. So now we have the similar situation to the southern blue fin fishery where we have [a] total allowable catch and individual quotas placed on us. All our fisheries are now becoming managed fisheries and as the policy of the Fisheries Department is "user pays", so we are now having to pay very dearly for our managed fishery.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

GRECO [The] gemfish fishery was developed off the east coast and was a major fishery to New South Wales. It is of the barracouta family and a very good processable fish and not a lot of bones. It only has the rib bones and the few pin bones along the centre of the fillet. So most of this fish caught off the Ulladulla area is sent to Wollongong or, in the past, to Sydney and was processed. A lot of this fish was frozen and exported to Japan but the majority of it would have been used on the domestic market. With its depletion and quotas placed on it, fishermen then looked to other fisheries. We have quite a vast skipjack tuna fishery off the east coast of New South Wales. It's pretty well Australia wide. They catch it off Port Lincoln in South Australia also but the main method of catching this off the east coast is by the old pole method using live bait to attract the fish to the vessel and then with poles, with lures on them and actually manhandling each fish on board. This fishery also is susceptible to the purse seine method. A bit of it is caught that way and I'd say more and more will be caught by the purse seine method in the future. The worrying factor of this is that as long as we don't do what we did with the southern blue fin fishery and deplete those stocks to almost extinction.

The biggest problem we have on the east coast in any of our fisheries, other than our surface fishery, is that our Continental Shelf is so narrow, when you take, say from Sydney down to about Eden, our Continental Shelf runs from, say sixteen to possibly twenty to 22 miles off shore. When you're working a demersal fishery, any workable ground is worked daily as long as weather permits. So we have the case of no regeneration or no spell on any of the stocks. So this in the long term could mean the

downfall of our New South Wales demersal fishery. So therefore we have in place what we call a managed fishery now where no more licences are issued, boats have been allocated units. We have different fishery areas. We have what we call the A sector section which runs from Sydney down to just south of Eden and we have the B sector fishery which runs from just south of Eden down to about Wilson's Promontory. Then we have what we call the south west sector fishery which is the southern end of Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia.

Since implementing this managed fishery and the unitisation of the fishery, large quantities of orange roughy have been caught in the southern areas in what we call the south west sector area. For bigger vessels to work that area and have the licences, as long as they had a south west sector licence and a boat not big enough to work it, vessels had to be brought out of another fishery such as the east coast A and B sector fishery. So we have over the last few years seen a big drain on the east coast fishery going to the south west sector fishery. The idea of managing the fishery was to try and put less effort into certain fisheries but what's virtually happened is we've increased the fishing capacity of all our fisheries. Units brought out of the east A and B sector fisheries of the east coast could have come off vessels that were, say 50 foot in length, gone on to vessels in the south west sector which could be 100 - 150 foot in length and seeing that those original units came out of the east coast fishery, these vessels at a later date as the law now stands, could come and fish if fish were found off the east coast sector. Therefore, rather than reduce our fishing effort into our fishery, we've more than tripled our effort into the fishery.

What worries me is that rather than have the family type operation that we have had in the past on the east coast, [we] could finish up in multinational or big company type operations and in the case if it is multinational, any profits gained out of that fishery could finish up into overseas hands. I think this would be a shame to see a fishery go that way.

JD Joe, there's a fish marketing authority in New South Wales that seems to be unique to New South Wales. Could you tell us about that?

GRECO Yes. We have a unique system in New South Wales for the marketing of fish. We have what we call the Sydney Fish Marketing Authority. The system in New South Wales is we have, I think there are 22 co-ops up and down the New South Wales coast. Any fish landed at those co-ops can be sold through that co-op to any person or market in New South Wales providing it is not in the Sydney metropolitan area. That's in unprocessed form. Any fish going into the Sydney metropolitan area in unprocessed form has to go through the Sydney Fish Market. This year a new building has been built and they're using a computerised Dutch auction system which is, I think, the first of its type [for] the selling of fish any where in the world. It is really something to see but any fish landed at any co-op can be sold any where in New South Wales.... Any fish sold in the metropolitan sent up through a co-op can be sold in the metropolitan area but it has to be processed. There are a few co-ops that have special licences to sell processed type fish in the County of Cumberland which is the Sydney metropolitan area. The Ulladulla Fish Co-Op has that agreement, as has some of the others.

The co-ops on the east coast are at present finding it a bit difficult through lack of quantities of fish caught. As I've mentioned before, [the] Continental Shelf, being so narrow, fishing grounds are worked every workable day. So fish stocks are being depleted. I am a bit concerned that, through the lack of quantities of fish, especially in the Ulladulla area, that we have a co-op that has been built over the years to handle quantity. We have a very big building down there that can manufacture with two machines running about 28 tonne of ice a day. We can store 110 tonne of ice. We have

holding facilities to hold fish in whole form, fresh. We could hold around about 1,500 boxes. Then we have also freezing facilities which we do not use as such. Any freezing facilities I have there at the present are only used as chiller rooms.

We are in the export market also. We are at present exporting different species of tuna to Japan and to the United States. We also send small quantities of garfish and trevally. The main species of tuna sent to Japan are southern blue fin, blue fin, big eye and yellow fin tuna. The most prized are the southern blue fin. These fish are all caught by the Japanese long line method. the fish are generally brought alongside the vessel alive, they are shot with a 22 rifle in the top of the head so that they will not bruise themselves on the deck of the vessel in their death throes. They are gilled, gutted and bled immediately, placed in an ice slurry which is sea water and ice or directly in ice to start to reduce their body temperature. They are normally unloaded daily. If not, they are still kept on board in ice for one or two days, then unloaded. Once unloaded, if not packed that same day for air freight to Japan, they are placed in large insulated bins completely covered in ice. When ready to pack, the Australian regulation is that the fish have to be from zero to plus four degrees. The fish are removed from the ice, all ice washed out of their gill and gut cavity. They are then re-weighed and each fish is documented all the way to Japan so that a fishermen is paid for his particular fish.

Two fish of the same weight could bring vastly different prices owing to the fat content, colour of meat and handling of the fish. We have had the same species of fish go from \$5.00 a kilo up as high as \$160 a kilo. In the case of a \$160 kilo fish, that particular fish weighed 153 kilos and was sold on the Japanese auction market in Tokyo for \$22,500.

JD For one fish?

GRECO For one fish. So when you start looking at prices like that, it often makes you wonder how much fish were caught in the old days by the pole method, sold to canneries and well you can virtually say wasted when you could see what return we could have now got for those fish.

JD Joe, you didn't mention it but you are a member of the Fish Marketing Authority?

GRECO Yes. I've only been on the Fish Marketing Authority Board for fifteen months. Prior to that period my uncle, Tory Puglisi was appointed to that position by the then Minister for Fisheries. On his retirement I was appointed to that position on the same method as my uncle.

JD Joe, is there a problem between the amateur fishermen and the professionals in this area?

GRECO No. Well our local State member is an independent and his name is John Hatton. He always gets a lot of enquiries and questions about professionals, or the amateurs complaining about the professionals depleting stocks and what have you. So he decided to call a meeting of amateur bodies and professional bodies at a special meeting in Sydney at Parliament House. It was a very well attended meeting. There would have been at least eleven amateur body representatives and eleven professional body representatives at that meeting. I think where most of the problems lay is independent amateur fishermen complain about their own personal problems but when it was brought up at the meeting, the amateurs and the professionals were completely on side with one another in what was happening to the fisheries. It's not the professionals that are depleting stocks and it's not the amateurs that are depleting

stocks. Especially on the inshore fisheries, I think it's more environmental problems where we have developers denuding river wetlands and all this sort of thing and pollution going into the sea that can cause havoc to fisheries. From what I could make of the meeting, we were both on the same tack. We both believe that it's other problems, not the amateurs versus professionals. It's more or less amateurs and professionals against environmental problems and what have you.

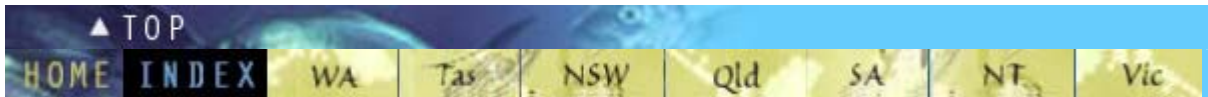
JD Right. Well thank you very much Joe for this interview. It's been very, very interesting and it's covered a wide range of topics. It was good to hear about your family, the early days and the problems they faced and how successful they've been. It's also good to hear about the co-op and the fish marketing and all the other things that you've discussed. Thank you very much.

GRECO Thank you.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Edited transcript of an interview with NEVILLE HARRIS

INTRODUCTION

Neville Harris, commonly known as Buck Harris, is a well known personality in the Yamba area of northern New South Wales where he has spent a lifetime as a professional fisherman. In this interview he tells of the variation in the number of fishermen, their boats and gear, and the methods and difficulties of the early days of prawn trawling in the Clarence River, its estuary and surrounding seas.

He also discusses the hazards of the river bar and the development of the fishing boat harbour at Yamba, a development in which he played a leading role. Later in the interview he discusses the formation of the fishermen's co-operatives, their advantages and disadvantages and speaks of the degradation of the quality of the water upon which the fish stock depends and the need for improved management.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Harris' home in Yamba, New South Wales on the 7th April, 1990. There are three sides on two tapes. The interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Mr Harris, would you kindly record your full name and date and place of birth.

HARRIS Neville William Harris, born on the 26th of the tenth, '28. I'm commonly called Buck Harris right throughout the fishing industry.

JD And where were you born?

HARRIS I was born in Williamstown, South Australia. I have lived also at Yarrawonga in Victoria and from there I came to the Clarence in 1946 at the age of seventeen and I have been a professional fisherman ever since.

JD Did you move up here with your parents or come independently?

HARRIS I moved up with my father. My father did a trip through this area in 1945 and what kicked off my fishing career was that my father was talking to some professional fishermen at Maclean and what most professionals have a tendency to do is that when they are making big money, they let the world know that they are rolling in money. So my father came back to Yarrawonga and said to myself and my other two brothers, would we like to go to the Clarence River and become professional fishermen. So we

decided, yes we would, and in 1946 we took off for the Clarence River and that was where my fishing career started.

JD So you really started with your brother and father, did you?

HARRIS Yes. I started with my father and my two brothers. It was a very difficult time. There were very few fish around during that period. We were net fishing for mullet in the early period of our fishing career. In the next twelve to eighteen months it came down to a situation where only myself and my youngest brother remained in the fishing industry. My other brother went back to carpentering and within two years from that I was the only one of the family that was left in the fishing industry.

JD Were you fishing the estuary at the time?

HARRIS I was, the same as most fishermen in the area. I was mainly catching mullet with small catches flathead and bream and the likes of that. There was a certain amount of sea fishermen trapping for snapper, hand lining for various species and the likes and that was where the industry was at that period.

JD There would have been a generation of fishermen before your advent on the Clarence. Did you have contact with them?

HARRIS Yes. I was very interested in talking to the elderly fishermen. Some of them, their ages were into the 70s and it was very interesting talking to them because they had an extremely hard life. They had to row around everywhere where they went to catch fish with these heavy net boats. They caught large quantities of fish and after rowing several miles to the fishing grounds they had to return home and pack the fish for market, they had a very hard life.

JD In your time however, you'd have progressed beyond that to some degree, wouldn't you?

HARRIS Yes. When I first started fishing in the river, nearly all fishermen owned boats that did have motors in them. Five horsepower, six horsepower engines was the main power for the boats. That was a major step forward from the old hands who only rowed around. At that period I fished for quite a number of years where I only had a small boat to operate with. What was one of the major step forwards in the fishing industry was the catching of prawns which started around 1948 and that had a major impact on the industry where quite a lot of the net fishermen went trawling for prawns and from that we looked at putting bigger power in our boats. At that time, if you had ten or twelve horsepower engines in your boats, you were really into the big time.

In the 1946/'48 period there were approximately, 60 to 80 crews in the Clarence River netting for mullet and various other species. In 1948 I have seen as many as 44 small trawlers working in the Lake Wooloweyah area which is a large lake in the Clarence River area, so it can be seen a major proportion of the fishing community had turned over to catching prawns.

JD That was netting in the river for prawns?

HARRIS Yes. In the river it was trawling for prawns. It started off in a very primitive way which was quite interesting compared with what we do today where we have one trawler working as an individual boat towing one, two or three nets; but when it started off in Lake Wooloweyah, which is only about three to four feet deep, we used

two small boats with five horsepower engines. We towed a net between the two boats that was called a dingo net. I'm not sure where the name originated from but it was commonly called a dingo net and that net never had a bag in it or anything like what we use these days as a proper trawl net. The operation of this gear was in such a way that the two boats towed the net forward and another man in a net punt followed along behind the net and when he thought that there were enough prawns in it, the two boats stopped and the man in the punt emptied the prawns into the net boat. The catches were spectacular. When you look at these net punts, they were capable of carrying two and three thousand pound of fish and they used to load these punts down very low in the water with prawns. It was a mighty effort by these very small powered boats towing a very primitive type of net. From this type of trawling it evolved into the otter trawl method we use now, where you use otter boards to spread the net apart and where each boat works as an individual. This happened in the late '40 and 50s. From that primitive start we've evolved into what we are today.

JD In those early times when you were using two boats, two smaller vessels, was that hand winches or did you have power winches?

HARRIS For many years when prawning in the river, we had no mechanical winches whatsoever. We had to physically pull the gear in by hand. It was no problem in the shallow waters of the lake but when we worked the deeper waters in the river where it could reach depths of 60 feet, we had otter prawn trawl gear which weighed quite heavy and we had to physically pull this gear up by hand. We had problems where sometimes we trawled up rocks, logs and various other things and then it became a very hard job to get your net up from the bottom of the river.

One interesting thing was the way that the prawns were cooked when prawning first started. It was a big operation. One crew would have anything up to six or seven men to operate successfully. There would be four or five men out on the lake operating the two boats which were pulling the net and also the net punt, but on shore you would have two or three men going through the bush gathering wood for the fire to heat the water for cooking the prawns. We had in those times, tan pots to tan our nets in and they were a 200 gallon squat tank. This tank doubled as a cooking pot for cooking prawns. These tan pots would cook hundreds of pounds of prawns in one go. The method that was used to cool the prawns was quite primitive. Hessian was spread out on the ground after the prawns were cooked and the prawns were spread out on the hessian to cool them. So it was a very primitive method of catching and also cooking prawns at the time, when you relate to what we do today.

JD Was it a daytime or an evening [operation]?

HARRIS It was a daytime operation at that stage. Another interesting point was that when these prawns were caught in the daytime, we were getting feedback from the Sydney Fish Market that by catching prawns in the daytime, they were looked at as being poisonous. This concept was a major thing in this period, that prawns that were caught in the daytime were looked at as being poisonous. However this rumour came to nothing and the prawn trawling continued to expand.

JD Did you ballot for positions each crew or did you go wherever the fancy took you?

HARRIS No. There had never been any balloting with prawn trawling. That happens with what they call set pocket netting where you ballot for a position on the shore of the rivers but prawn trawling is every man for himself. You put your trawl down and you just sample here there and every where with everyone watching everyone else and as soon as someone turns around and trawls back over the same ground,

everyone assumes that person caught a good lot so they're all in to get their share out of the school of prawns as well. When a good school of prawns are located it can get extremely hectic. At times their gear gets tangled with other trawlers' gear and cases have occurred of trawlers running into one another. That happened 40 years ago and it's still happening to this day.

JD And you get some strife between crews and skippers and so on I suppose?

HARRIS Yes. I've heard some very strong language used between crews, particularly in the lake where prawning first started. Many years ago one fisherman drew a shotgun on another fisherman and he said, "If you do that again I'll b... well shoot your head off next time." I think the language was much stronger than that but that's what did happen at times because when a school of prawns are located it is like a pot of gold and everyone's dipping their hand into it, and some get more than the other and tempers become very frayed.

JD There would have been some attempt at regulation of the industry, the prawning industry in the river, would there, in terms of perhaps size of nets and size of mesh?

HARRIS Yes. There always has been. When we first started prawning Fisheries put a size on the prawns we caught. A prawn had to be three and a half inches long when measured from behind the eye to the end of the tail. That is quite a large prawn and I have seen huge quantities of good eating prawns swept over the side of the boat and destroyed on account of this regulation. It was very hard to police by the Fisheries Department. They tried all sorts of methods to stop the small prawn being caught by increasing the mesh sizes and various things like that but in the end the Fisheries Department made what I feel is a very good decision, which was to eliminate the size on prawns. That decision has worked very effectively right to this day. It's taken a lot of the pressure off the fisherman and eliminated the wastage of prawns. Most prawns, when they come up in a trawl, are to the stage where they're not going to survive anyway if returned to the water. There has been a certain amount of destruction of immature stock by this no size regulation. It's never been addressed, I feel, by the Fisheries Department in a competent way because when you discuss certain proposals to eliminate this destruction of immature stock with the biologists, some of the things that you suggest to them, that they think you're trying to gain an advantage and you just don't get anywhere with them. So that's where, even to this day, there is a significant amount of immature stock which has been killed along with the marketable prawns just through the lack of the right sort of research done into trying to eliminate this practice.

JD Just to go on to other species Buck, in addition to mullet and prawn that you talked about, what other fish did you go for in the river?

HARRIS We caught a wide range of fish in the river. We caught mullet, jewfish, flathead, bream, blackfish, garfish and a few taylor which were the main species. A species that was a real headache to us, even to this day, but mainly many years ago, was the catfish. I have seen nets completely sink out of sight because they had that many catfish tangled up in them. A catfish has three spikes on its head and nets have even been destroyed because it was impossible to remove the catfish from the nets. The nets have been towed onto the bank and just burnt because you would have been there for days getting catfish out of the net. They were a real problem in those times, the catfish. The eel was a problem for many years. They destroyed quite a lot of fish which had become caught in the fisherman's net. A net would normally fish eight or ten feet deep and I've seen nets completely wrapped up as tight as a rope when eels take to it. The fish inside of the wrapped up net when attacked by eels have not one

skerrick of flesh left on them. They have the ability to be able to suck the flesh out through the layers of mesh and just leave the bones behind. We have pulled hundreds and hundreds of yards of net aboard the boat wrapped up like a rope about as thick as your arm and as tight as a rope, and spent days and days mending the net and getting it untangled.

Crabs were another problem in the summer months especially in the lake and oyster channel areas. The crabs, particularly the female crabs, would chew and gnaw large holes in your net and the common thing, in my early years of fishing, was that we would have to spend two days every week mending our nets because of the damage done to them. We'd fish three or four days and spend two days mending. That was a task that no one enjoyed, the mending of the nets. When I started fishing we used cotton and linen nets, they had to be tanned every fortnight, to prevent them rotting. We went out in the bush and gathered iron bark and oak bark off the trees and crushed it up and boiled it in water and then we tanned our nets in this solution. We had drying racks to dry our nets. It involved a lot of time and effort on our part doing that but then when the synthetic nets came into vogue in the '50s. It was a great thing. They do not rot. They still get the same amount of mending but we didn't have any rot problems. By not having to tan the nets it made it much easier overall on the fishing industry with the synthetic nets.

JD Buck, just before we leave the river, you mentioned the pests, if you like, the catfish and the eels and the crabs. Was there a market for those?

HARRIS Yes, there was a market for these species. In my early years there was no market for the eels due to their size. They have caught eels weighing up to 35,40 pound each. They were thicker eels weighing up to 35, 40 pound each. They were thicker than a man's arm and they were five feet long and very powerful. We knew that in Europe that they were a delicacy and there was big money to be made in eels if we could get them to Europe. The market was looked at there and we sent samples away through our co-operative but the problem was that our eels were too big compared to the European eel. Nowadays, yes there is a market for the eels and some fishermen have gone into catching this species with the use of eel traps. The eel catching has had a beneficial affect on the net fishing areas, particularly the Broadwater which is a lake about four mile by three mile and it is only about two feet deep. Most times it is covered with weed. A great area for fish to congregate but also a great area for eels to congregate. Eels and net fishermen, they just are not compatible but the eels have been thinned out considerably with these eel fishermen. They have made quite good money out of the eels and it's been a beneficial thing to the net fishermen in that they are able to produce more fish in a given time and have a lot less mending to do at the end of the week.

The species catfish during lean times have been cleaned and sent to market. I have cleaned them at three cents, four cents, five cents a pound. Really not worth worrying about but at certain times of the year the fishing industry becomes very lean, such as the winter months. You will go and catch anything to be able to make a few dollars. I've caught stingrays and cut off what we call the flaps and sent these to market. You use a cane knife and put the stingray on a wharf that's got a bit of a gap in the planking. You just saw down through the gap and cut off the sides of the flaps and pack these sections to Sydney. Similar prices to the catfish were received for the stingray flaps. I'm going back into periods in the late '40s, early '50s when these low prices meant the difference between eating or starving. By catching these low priced species during times of scarcity of our normal fish we relied on to make a living, we saw it as something to keep body and soul together.

JD Are the flaps of the stingray eaten? Are they edible?

HARRIS They are edible, yes. They have flesh that does not look very appetising. It looks similar to beef when it's cut. I've never tasted it knowingly. I think once I did get it served to me in a fish shop in Kempsey, but knowingly I have not tasted it. There's always a market for all sorts of fish flesh, always has been and always will be.

JD Just a sideline there perhaps, our sort of habits in eating seafoods generally seem to be changing.

HARRIS Yes. When I said there had always been a market for any flesh, it's not so much in what I term my early years of fishing, but mainly in the last twenty years since the migrants, particularly the European and Mediterranean migrants such as the Italians and the Greeks, where they eat species that we used to throw away off our trawlers when at sea. We used to throw away tonnes and tonnes per night of octopus, red mullet, cuttlefish, pigfish and trawl whiting. Anything that's got a bit of meat on it nowadays is marketable. This is thanks to the migrants. Well to give an indication of the value of the product we used to throw away, fifteen to twenty years ago octopus was hardly worth marketing. If there was a limited amount around, yes we would get maybe a dollar to a dollar fifty a kilo for it but only if there was a very small amount going into the Sydney Fish Market. If you glutted the market you virtually got nothing for it. These days, in the last twelve months I've seen prices as high as \$8.50 a kilo for octopus. So it's getting up to half the price of king prawns, where for many years we just dumped it over the side. I've seen individual catches myself as high as six and eight hundred pound of octopus in one night. It's become a very important species in the last few years because there are several hundred tonnes caught every year in the Clarence area alone.

JD To come back to your own career in fishing Buck, you ultimately went into a larger vessel, did you not? Did you fish outside or did you continue in the estuary?

HARRIS A lot of fishermen did what I did. We started off in the prawning industry in the river. I started off with an eighteen foot boat in the late '40s prawning. I built a 23 foot boat in the early 50s. It was what we'd term a river boat and I trawled the Clarence River for prawns but when the floods and freshes came the prawns were washed to sea. So in those times we were young and keen, so we pulled these boats up on the bank and we decked them in and made them into sea going boats. When you look at the one I had, 23 feet long and it was five feet six wide. So it was only a canoe but [laughs] I think back to some of the seas that we worked in. We crossed the bar in, what I thought at the time were mountainous seas, but you're young, you're keen, probably a bit foolish, but we went to sea in those boats in the early '50s and we caught quite large quantities of prawns.

One day I will always remember, my boat was completely decked in to counteract any large waves washing over the boat and that small boat of mine finished up with 2,000 pounds of prawns on board. It had a normal rudder type steering where you had a handle coming away from the rudder and you steered it with your foot. It was the common type of rudder those times and when I was standing on the back deck of this small boat, the deck was full of prawns, the little icebox I had on the deck would hold 900 pound. I had a certain amount, I think it was about two or three hundred pound still in the cod end, still hanging up on the boom. The boat was full of prawns and when I was coming in that day from the sea, which was flat calm, the back of the boat was completely under the water. The water was up to my ankles so it was only the front half of the boat that was above water and I'll always remember that day. It's an

unusual experience and probably a very risky thing to do but it was flat calm and that's what risks we took at the time.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Buck continuing this story of small vessels being decked in and then going to sea and catching enormous quantities of prawns as you mentioned, it would be pretty hazardous, would it not, particularly in view of the bar here on the Clarence River? Did many people come to grief?

HARRIS For many years when I went to sea in my small boat, I crossed the bar not only going out but also coming in in pretty hectic conditions. We were young, we were alert and we had some narrow escapes but for many years none of us lost our lives. We had some hair raising experiences but not what you'd term getting very close to losing your vessel. As time went on and the vessels became larger and I'm talking now in the 45 to 55 foot size, yes we have lost a few lives on the bar and at sea.

Probably the one that sticks in my memory most is the largest vessel that's ever been built here. It was a 70 footer. He was a very good friend of mine and he was a person that believed in helping his fellow man. He went out one day to help an amateur fisherman who decided to go to sea in a cabin cruiser with his family. This person was warned not to go to sea. The sea conditions were rough. They went down in this cruiser and got down in between the walls near the bar and next thing, they got into difficulties and the boat turned over. They were very fortunate; there was a trawler coming home and they were rescued by this trawler. So they got home safely but their boat was washed to sea. Now the fisherman I was referring to with the 70 footer, Jimmy Bultitude, he was a great person to help his fellow men and he felt sorry for these people that they were losing their boat as it was being washed to sea. It was upside down so he went out in his trawler in very hazardous conditions. A big sea was running when he went out and located this cruiser and he tried to tow it in over the bar twice, but the rope snapped when he got into the big waves on the bar. There was too much strain on the rope and the rope snapped. They eventually towed the cruiser into the surfing beach at Yamba where they ran a line ashore and this boat was pulled up on the beach. Unfortunately Jimmy Bultitude, when he left that area to go back to come in over the bar, although the boat was a huge boat, a big wave picked him up and speared him down the face of the wave and turned the boat completely over and down it went. He was trapped in the wheel house and drowned and his deck hand was very lucky to escape. He came out of it alright. The power of the sea can be demonstrated by this 70 foot boat in that, where it went down on the bar and was only there for a matter of two or three weeks, the only bits that were salvaged from it were the engine, the bow stem and a few odds and ends. It was just completely smashed to pieces. It finished up all over the ocean. Some pieces were trawled up. So a large vessel like that is no match for the power of the sea.

One other incident was when a fisherman was caught at sea and a cyclone came up unexpectedly. He lost his life. Another fisherman also lost his life on the bar. One other fisherman was very lucky, a chance in probably a thousand or ten thousand. There was another trawler coming in behind him at about 4.00 o'clock in the morning which would be unusual because normally you trawl to daylight and to come home at that time when you've still got valuable darkness to trawl in.... This other trawler was not

far behind the one that sank and he picked the bloke up who was floating around in the ocean. So you can be lucky.

JD Could we turn to some other points that you've been involved in, perhaps ashore this time. You've been very active in fishermen's organisations, Buck, and one particular thing, I know that you've played a very leading role in is the development of the harbour here.

HARRIS Yes it was a thing that I became involved in when I shifted to Yamba. For many years I was based at Maclean which is further up the river from the mouth of the Clarence. Then when I decided to shift to Yamba, as I was going to devote all my fishing life to the ocean, I found it was a real headache trying to find somewhere to moor my trawler. I led the fight to get a boat harbour in Yamba. It was a long hard slog. It took eight years to convince the Government to come forward with the money, but initially the Public Works Department said there was no boat harbour needed. Our co-operative fought tooth and nail against us. They thought if we got a boat harbour we would break away and form our own co-operative. So we had an uphill battle for eight years but finally we did get an assurance from the Public Works Department that they would build a boat harbour and we now have a boat harbour here that is more than what the Department wanted to give us; but it's what we felt we needed to service our boats and any fisherman that operates from this harbour knows they've got everything that they require, water, light, power unloading wharf, service wharf, everything's there. It's a... Well I was going to say it's a credit to the Public Works Department. I think it's a credit to the fishermen that we stuck to our guns and insisted that we needed a harbour of that standard. We've got something that'll do us for many, many years to come.

JD There's a lot of vessels there, aren't there? There must be 40 or 50?

HARRIS There is moorings there that will take 40 odd vessels. At times when the river fleet comes down, when the prawns get washed to sea, there is a shortage of moorings. It becomes a little bit congested around our service wharf where we have quite a few trawlers tying up there. There seems to be a certain amount of give and take with the industry, although the service wharf is there only to service vessels, under the circumstances we seem to say, we're only going to have you here for a few weeks anyway and just leave it go.

JD You mentioned the co-op. Would you like to talk about the co-op and marketing of fish?

HARRIS Yes. The co-operative was formed around about 1948 and it was at the time a great concept and I still feel to this day, it's been a great concept. We had the problem when I first started fishing that we had to pack our fish and send them to Sydney market ourselves. We packed them in ice in wooden boxes. They went by train to Sydney market. Consequently, with our lack of technology in that time, of handling products aboard our small boats and large catches which we couldn't handle effectively, a lot of our product was condemned by the time it reached the Sydney Fish Market. The formation of the co-operative was a good concept because we were going to have a facility on shore to handle and pack our own product. It's worked, what I would term reasonably well. There's been a lot of problems with it, mainly with quality of product. We have a huge fleet. I think that in this area there is a hundred vessels registered to work at sea. Some of those spend quite a bit of their time working in the river but there's a hundred registered to work at sea and at one stage there was 600

fishermen licensed for this area, but I think now it's down around about 350 to 400 at the moment.

The co-operative system, it's had its pluses and minuses. The pluses first would be that we have our product handled for us. We just catch the product. We cart it to the co-op in trucks and we weight it off and then we're finished with it, where before we had to see to the packing of it and loading of it on trucks and the likes of that. So we're getting our product handled for us. The minuses mainly relate to the marketing of our product. The co-op has a large volume to handle at times and our prices suffer due to this.

JD Are there any other prawns off the coast here?

HARRIS Except our main species which are king prawns and school prawns which are in the shallow areas up to 50 fathoms deep, there are the royal red prawns which are found in very deep water along the edge of the Continental Shelf. You get a few kingies, a few schoolies at times. They're in shallow water.

JD What about in the lake?

HARRIS Yes in the lake there are mainly school prawns and a few king prawns. They catch a lot of prawns there but they're not very big. Some fishermen produce a bad article and each species is put into a pool system. So the good product goes in with the bad product, it's sold on the market and mainly the prices relate to the bad product. So that is one of the minuses in the co-op system. I don't see any way out of it except the pool system but I feel that our quality control at sea must be upgraded.

JD Do you feel we in Australia present the product well?

HARRIS Firstly you must have a good product before you can present it well. This is where we're failing. When we look at the large trawlers that work the North Sea where fish are virtually put into a freezer still kicking, we must do that if we are going to take advantage of the Japanese market which.... Without a doubt, you must have a top quality product to get into that market. At the co-op we have blast freezers and good processing machinery to present our product in a very good way, but if the product is not a good product before it comes through the door, you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. We still have not solved that problem in the last forty odd years.

JD In some parts of Australia it's quite notorious that low quality fish are mislabelled as high quality fish and sold to the consumer under false pretences really. Does that happen in New South Wales do you think?

HARRIS I don't know about the latter years. It must go on because when you look at some of the product that we sell, take shark for instance. If we marketed shark in Victoria, yes the people know what they're eating. They call it flake down there. They know it's shark. They eat it. They relish it. It's a very good fish but in Sydney, if you put that in the window and marked it as shark, you would not sell it. So they use various other names to disguise it. I've seen it in shop windows. I've seen the species that we catch here, shovel nose shark, I've seen it in shop windows marked down as whiting and it's as far from whiting as you could get; but on the other hand, the quality of that flesh is in a category where when I have spoken to some professional fishermen, they've put it very high on the list as a quality product.

Also wobbegong sharks. You wouldn't meet a more nasty looking character with leathery tough old skin on it, but the flesh is beautiful; soft and white. I remember one

experience I had out there trawling one day, I had some friends from Sydney on the trawler. A catch came up and low and behold there was a big wobbegong shark in amongst it. So I grabbed the wobbegong by the tail and was about to throw him overboard and my friends said, "No way. You don't throw that one overboard." So these species, if you label them correctly, will not sell in the shops. So the way I look at it is, it's beneficial to me as a fisherman when those species are mislabelled.

One instance I remember well was when I was in the Sydney Fish Market one morning, I saw the cleaners there cleaning what we term the black tip shark, small blue looking shark, three, four feet long. They were cleaning and filleting these sharks and I said to the cleaner, "What will they go as on the retail market?" He said, "They will go to make up fish cocktails." I thought to myself, "So these socialites and friends getting around at their fancy doos, well they will be eating shark this time. They may think they're eating barramundi or something like it but that flesh was of a quality where it was being done up to put into fish cocktails. Now there would be some very discerning people there eating that shark and that's where the mislabelling of fish, I feel, should not be made too much of. I also know that a lot of the fish coming into this country that is marked down as hake and various things is absolutely terrible to eat. It's dry. It's got no flavour to it and I know full well that that fish in the country where it came from would be a very poor quality fish, but they have marketed it as whiting or hake, a common good quality fish right throughout the world and they get away with it.

JD Buck, you've been in the industry a long time. You've seen a lot of it. What would you say are the problems that confront the industry?

HARRIS I feel without doubt the major problem that our industry has had to contend with is related to the quality of the water in the Clarence River. Many years ago when I first started fishing, one thing that you do learn is that when you do have floods and freshes and even small amounts of rain, that fish do not like certain types of water. Obviously there is a lack of oxygen in it as we now know these days. You relate to the colour of the water, certain colours like the colour of tea. You can forget about catching anything in water that has got the colour of tea about it. The water from up river comes out of the mountains. It has a yellowish sort of biscuit colour about it. Yes that was good for prawns, fish or anything. So you become very conscious that fish do not like certain water conditions.

Now what evolved quite some years ago was flood mitigation. I just can't think offhand when it started. It would possibly be 25 years ago, maybe longer, where the low lying swamp areas surrounding the Clarence, and they were vast areas of swamp, were drained because some farmers wanted them drained and some didn't. The authorities in their wisdom said, "Right O, we are going to drain all these low lying swamps." Some of the farmers were dead against it because those swamps in dry times provided feed for their cattle from the grasses which grew in the shallow water. Anyway, what developed from that, was we noticed in the ensuing years that when we had a major amount of rain in the catchment area, particularly in the lower catchment areas where all these swamps were drained, that roughly about twenty years ago the fish developed sores. It always coincided with these freshes in the river, particularly in the summer months. You had a fresh in the river in the summer months and within a month to two months the fish were getting around with sores on them. When the fresh dissipated, the salt water came back in the river and the sores on the fish that we caught we noticed were starting to heal up, but how many fish died, or how many microscopic things died in the fish food chain, we do not know. In my opinion, flood mitigation has had a devastating effect on the marine environment.

For many years fishermen believed that pesticides and fertilisers were being washed into the river but I always said to myself, "There is something coming off the land that is causing it to the fish." I've always been cautious at times making a judgment on these things because I know in my early years of fishing I was wrong quite often. The Fisheries Department said no when we approached them through our organisation. They came up with some fanciful ideas about what was causing the sores on the fish and one was that the fish were being washed down from the higher reaches of the river and when they were washed against snags and rocks the dirty water entered the wounds and this was causing the sores, which was, when I heard about it, a load of codswallop, believe me.

I attended a couple of seminars while I was Chairman of the Professional Fishermen's Association. The marine biologists had done a study of the northern rivers of New South Wales and they have found that by draining these low laying areas, the water table was lowered considerably and in the soils there was sulphides. So when you get a shower of rain onto the dry soil, the rain went in, dissolved the acidic materials and when you got more rain on top of the first lot of rain, the water that came into the river from these former swamp areas had very low readings. Some of the readings were down around the PH of three and four. The biologists maintained that it should have been somewhere round six or eight. So you had very acidic water coming into the river.

The other thing was also, in these low laying areas, the grasses and the leaves and the various litter that dropped on this soil, that as the water was taken up into these leaf litter when it rained, started to rot. The rotting mechanism is bacteria that is breaking down the leaves and the grass. The bacteria needs oxygen to survive and so the bacteria was taking the oxygen out of the water in these low lying previous swamp areas. The acidic material in the soil was coming to the surface. So you're getting water coming out of these huge swamp areas which was very acid and also the oxygen content was very low. Some of the readings they got in Clarence, Richmond and Tweed Rivers were oxygen readings down around one and two where it should have been somewhere around seven, eight and nine. So it is difficult for fish to live under those conditions. The biologists, at the time when I attended the seminars, were fairly sure that the red spot disease was caused from the fish being subject to this water quality. The fish were under a certain amount of stress. It was affecting the mucous layer on the outside of the fish and from this a very small sore started and away it went.

To give an indication, a dramatic thing happened in the Tweed. It happened several times over a number of years. When they had a fresh, it completely killed everything in certain areas of the Tweed. It was an aluminium sulphide that came out of the soil in this big swamp area which had been drained. The water in the river adjacent to this area of swamp went gin clear and not one thing survived in that area of the river. It completely killed every organism both on the bottom and also free swimming. So we have a system here in the Clarence River which has been forced onto us by the Agriculture Department. The Fisheries Department, from what I can understand, they never put up much opposition to it but we were very concerned about it at the time that it would have a devastating affect on our fishery. I believe strongly that it has caused a significant decline in various species, prawns and various other species and species that we don't even catch.

Let's look at two species, which I was aware of when I came to the river in 1946, that there was literally millions of them in the river, and that was biddies and herrings. Two very small fish. They would be basically food fish for the larger fish. They were never ever caught commercially by any fisherman but they were in huge schools. You could

look over the bank or under wharves, anywhere you liked in the 1940s and they were there in vast quantities. Nowadays you can.... Well I always do, it's a common thing. I always look into the water wherever I go and I see very few of this species these days. They have practically disappeared. The fishermen used to catch a handful in their trawl nets but it was only a minimum what we caught. So in my opinion we never had any affect on them. Two other species that have disappeared has been a soft shelled mussel which used to grow ten, twenty mile inland from the sea, a soft shell mussel and there was a black sort of a mussel type of thing which used to grow on the piles on the wharves. They have disappeared also. Now those types of things, the mussel type, they were not able to move when the freshes come down in the river and the types of water which I feel are very injurious to marine stock would have a great deal to do with the elimination of these species.

So when you look at the food chain, the food chain starts off with the mangrove leaves falling in the water and microscopic organisms eating away the leaves. That's where the whole food chain starts in the fishing. Now when you get things like that in the water and the water's got no oxygen in it and it's acidic, little tiny things like that just cannot survive. So that has devastated our industry, the quality of the water.

JD This interview is continued on side A of tape 2.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

TAPE 2 SIDE A

HARRIS Another thing which flood mitigation has affected the fishing industry in an adverse way, is by draining these swamp areas.... As I said previously these swamp areas have been huge areas. They were not very deep. They were a foot to two foot deep and as a young person I used to go into these swamp areas when the fishing was a bit lean to shoot ducks. I would sit on the banks in the mangroves and while I was sitting there, I was aware of the vast quantities of small fish that were in these swamp areas. You would see the mullet jumping and the things we term mud gudgeons swimming around and there were vast quantities of fish life in these areas. So these low lying swamp areas were a great nursery for the fish to grow as immature fish and to grow up eventually, like the mullet into a marketable size. All the mud gudgeons and similar type fish in these swamps eventually became the food for larger fish in the river. When we had a large flood, the floods covered all these low lying areas and a lot of fish migrated out of these swamp areas into the river system. We were aware of that because when we were trawling we would get quite large quantities of mud gudgeons and various things that we knew came from the swamps.

Many of the mullet that reached a marketable size stopped back in the river system, but also while the floods were up there was a certain amount of fish trapped in the swamp. Fish that came from further up the river were also trapped in these swamp areas. So that became a source of food fish, these low laying swamp areas. Now that they are drained, these vast areas are no longer areas where there was a nursery or sources of food for the fish in the river. So we are slowly strangling our environment in the river and it's turned into a huge drain and we're using it just to drain all the swamp areas, all the pesticides and fertilisers and you name it. It's just become a drain. So the fishing industry.... Where we have been blamed for over fishing the stocks and that, I feel that a lot of it is to do with improper drainage which has destroyed a vast area of our marine environment.

JD What other problems do you see facing the industry?

HARRIS Looking at it in a long term basis, I can see where there has been indications from the Department of Agriculture to look at these swamps and to see what can be done about it, about the quality of water coming out of them. I have not got much confidence at all in anything being done of any significance where it will have a marked affect on the river system. The only way that you could do it is to go back to where nature was 30 years ago and let the swamps be as swamps and wetlands like they were before, but being realistic that will not happen. Farmers are farming these areas. They're running stock on it at the moment and there's no way that they will ever go back to where it originally was. The Department of Agriculture, I feel will probably do a token thing here and there and they can indicate that yes, they are doing something, but no. It will not.... The river has been degraded, and long term I feel it will only produce far less fish than what it's capable of, mainly due to the quality of the water.

We also have the situation where we have the amateur fisherman. He's becoming more mobile with his boats and fishing gear. The number of amateur fishermen are increasing year by year. So the stocks have been put under a lot of pressure over the last few years and it's going to continue in the years to come.

Management proposals have been looked at in the last year or two and is certainly going to be looked at in the future but I feel that, particularly in the prawning industry, it is twenty years too late. We have said for many, many years that the fishing licences have been issued willy nilly by the fisheries Department. There should have been a halt called to them fifteen, twenty years ago when we saw the escalation here in the number of trawlers being built; the size, the amount of gear that they were towing, where now they are saying, "Right O, we're going to do something about it now", but it's fifteen, twenty years too late. If they were to listen to us in the early stages, because we could see what was going to happen, and we could see the fishing effort that was being put into it, but they would say, "No. There's your fishing graphs. That's the amount of stock you've caught for twelve months. It has not declined." We would say we're putting a lot more effort into catching, by a lot bigger boats, but they would not listen to us.

Most of the conservation measures that have been implemented in the Clarence River have been by direct consultation with the fishermen of this area asking the Fisheries Department for various things to be implemented, to conserve the stocks and to see where stocks were being damaged and put measures in place where this damage would be prevented. When you look at it, they were supposed to be the managers. They were supposed to be looking at our figures and managing the fishery and there's no way that they managed this fishery. Their record is, well it's no record at all. They just let it stumble along and we had to try and rectify the various things that we could see were being detrimental to our industry.

It's very difficult to get your message through to Fisheries Department officials. They are reluctant to accept what you are saying as being the right way to go, but in my last meetings with Fisheries and the information that's been coming out from the Fisheries Department, I feel that at last they're on the right track, management authorities look like being set up to advise on what should be done in various fisheries and these management authorities will be mostly based by fishermen's representatives and their feelings on the matter will be put through to Fisheries and really, to put it into a nut shell, the fishing industry will be regulating the Fishing Industry. I feel that is the way to go. Bureaucrats, in my experience, have very little knowledge of the fishing industry, what's likely to happen, what may happen or what's going to happen

in the future. I think that at last, that they're on the right track by getting the fishing industry to regulate the fishing industry.

There's various things just at this very moment which are going to be put in place by Fisheries and I feel that they're using a sledge hammer to kill a fly in various recommendations which are going to be put in place.

One thing that, they're looking at is penalties. Now a penalty, if you are caught with a net that's slightly over length, the penalty would mean that you would have your boat tied up for three months. When you relate to that, some of these trawlers would incur a fine basically of \$50,000 for loss of work in that period. If you're paying your boat off or paying a home off, your home and your boat would be lost because you couldn't survive for three months with no income coming in. You're on a three point system. Your second offence, you are tied up for twelve months. Automatically you would be wiped out of the fishing industry. The third offence, you have your licences confiscated. To me there is nowhere that I can think of in Australia that horrendous penalties of that category would be put in place. If you had a net slightly over length, you could have it one or two fathoms over length which may sound a lot but in what the fishermen would catch with that amount of extra net would be very minimal. I show a lot of concern where the powers that be that make the laws that we've got to work under, are not looking at it in a realistic fashion.

JD Perhaps, would you feel that they don't understand the fisherman's point of view?

HARRIS They certainly don't. They are reluctant to accept the fisherman's point of view. There's not only myself but many fishermen I can think of that have had access to fisheries to try and get a point across. They do not. I feel they think that you're trying to gain an advantage. Fishermen, if they are in a position where they are appointed as managers, they should be able to sort the wheat from the chaff and to know whether you are speaking truthfully or not but they will not. In my opinion, the periods I have spent talking to the Fisheries Department, they are reluctant to accept anything that you say.

JD Buck, for all the problems facing the industry, nevertheless would you go into it again?

HARRIS The fishing industry, if I had my life over again, I'd say yes without a doubt. I would not like to start fishing at this period in time but if I had the choice of having my life over again, yes without a doubt. It is the greatest game that you could take on providing that you can put up with working at sea and working of a night. I've talked to farmers and dairymen and they reckon they've got a great life but I say to them, "Look, your stock is running around in the paddock there. You have got to treat diseases. You've got to provide food for your stock. You've got to be on hand to milk the cows." I said, "You get a flood or a fire, famine, it affects your stock." I said, "Our stock is running loose on the ocean and we've just got to go out there and round it up." That is the big advantage. We can tie our trawler up, go away for six weeks, six months and come back and the stock is ready out there to round up. You can't get anything better than that. It's a very free and easy life and the Australian fisherman, he's basically, well I suppose I was going to say a lazy bloke, but quite a lot of them are. You tend to have a very relaxed life, and you get to the stage where quite often fishermen say, "Oh it's a bit too rough, the weather. We won't go tonight." You can pick and chose whether you want to go to work or not.

I had a very good life, but from now on I don't think that I could hack it as well from now on, where we are going to be controlled more and more by bureaucrats in what

we do, when we go to work, what sort of gear we can use, how often we can use it. I feel the time will come when some bureaucrat in Sydney will punch a computer and say to me, "Next year you can only work three months or six months in certain periods." He will predict when we can fish and how many fish we can catch. Now that is being done in some other fisheries, I think one or two in Australia and overseas. To me, when I've seen the fishing industry as I've known it that you can get a flood or a fresh or a change of the weather, your stocks can come and go very, very quickly and working under that sort of system where they are predicting.... I've predicted thousands of times in my life what I'm going to catch next month, next year; 99% of the time I've been wrong. I just give up predicting. The younger fishermen will say to me, "What do you think that this fresh is going to bring", or "this flood" or "what's the season going to be like next year?" I say, "Forget it" because you cannot predict what nature is going to do, how much rain we are going to get or when and where, and how often.

We're virtually individuals, fishermen. We work at sea. We do our own thing and when we look like we're coming more and more under the control of bureaucrats, it's not going to be a very pleasant industry to work in.

JD Incredibly so.

HARRIS Yep.

JD Buck, thank you very much for this interview. It's been very, very nice to talk to you. It's good stuff. Thank you.

HARRIS Good.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Buck Harris of Yamba, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with ALEX HEYNATZ

TAPE 1 SIDE A

BT This is an interview with Mr Johannes Alexander Karl Heynatz. The interview was recorded at 2 Easton Street, East Ballina, New South Wales, on 14th April 1988. The interviewer is Brian Verle Tate.

Okay, will you tell me your full name, please?

HEYNATZ Johannes Alexander Callen Heynatz.

BT Callen Heynatz?

HEYNATZ Yes.

BT And where and when were you born, Alex?

HEYNATZ I was born in a place called Marstal [on the island of Aero].

BT And where's that?

HEYNATZ That's in Denmark, on the mouth of the Flensburger Fjord.

BT Right, and what was your date of birth Alex?

HEYNATZ 22nd March 1895.

BT And what was your father's name?

HEYNATZ I'm not going into any of those now. I told Max I'd start from when I got to Australia. All that is past history.

BT Can't you tell us about when you went to Valparaiso?... [break in recording].
Alright Alex, we'll skip your early days in Denmark, but if you could just tell me - how old were you when you first left home?

HEYNATZ When I first left home it would be.... permanently you mean? It would be oh, fourteen and a half, fifteen.

BT Right, and you went to sea?

HEYNATZ Well yes. I wasn't supposed to go but I made sure I did.

BT You were very keen on going to sea?

HEYNATZ Well yes, that's one thing.

BT What was the first vessel that you signed on?

HEYNATZ That was a Norwegian barque in Liverpool. We'll start there.

BT Okay. So you signed on in Liverpool in England, and what was the name.... do you remember the name of that barque?

HEYNATZ Oh.... [pause]. I'm bugged if I can think of the name now.

BT It doesn't really matter. Alright....

HEYNATZ And we went to the west coast of South America.

BT And what were you carrying, what was the cargo on that one?

HEYNATZ Coal. Coal from Cardiff. It was all that in those days.

BT Do you remember roughly how many there were on the crew of that vessel?

HEYNATZ Well I wouldn't like to say, I would say there were about twenty-something.

BT Yes, right. And so when you went to sea on that vessel had you had much previous experience with boats?

HEYNATZ Oh well, I was never off boats. I was always on boats. I'll give you an instance. The island where I was born on there was a confirmation day that there was about thirty-odd boys confirmed and there was one stopped ashore - all the others went to sea. That's the type of thing it was.

BT So that town obviously produced a lot of young seamen, the town you came from?

HEYNATZ Well yes. Some were foreign trade, some went....

BT Yes. Okay, when you first went to sea, the vessel that you went to South America on, was that your first long voyage that you'd been on?

HEYNATZ Yes, that's the first big ship. I'd been on smaller ones before that.

BT How did you find that big long voyage, was it fairly dangerous?

HEYNATZ Oh no, it didn't worry me much. The only thing was that you climbed up so high and the ship looked so small, and when you sighted a gale around Cape Horn there was a rule in those days that you be allotted certain sails. You'd possibly be the one that would take the main royal and whatever happened that was your job. So I had the main royal on this particular trip and it came undone. You see the lashings get loose and they fly about, and then of course you are the one that has done the damage. YOU didn't do it properly; YOU go up and YOU fix it.

BT Good Lord!

HEYNATZ That's the way the rules were.

BT And were you particularly frightened in that storm that you had to go up and reef the sail?

HEYNATZ In that gale in Cape Horn I had to go and fix it up.... and I got frost bitten.

BT From that same voyage?

HEYNATZ Yes, that's when I got that [indicating finger].

BT So that's your right middle finger.

HEYNATZ Yes. All the fingers were frost bitten, but that's the only one that didn't recover.

BT Do you still get trouble with that finger, Alex?

HEYNATZ Oh yes, sometimes.

BT And how were you treated as a young sailor on board the vessel?

HEYNATZ Oh, I happened to be a happy-go-lucky fellow. Do you remember seeing pictures of boys with big rosy cheeks in the old country? Well, I was that type. And everybody liked me because I had such a pleasant appearance. I suppose I looked like an apple. [Laughter].

BT And were you a big boy at that age - were you solid, or how did you handle the work?

HEYNATZ Oh no! I'd have been a stunted type of a fellow, I've never been very big. Strong enough!

BT So on that voyage you reached.... where was your first port of call on South America, do you remember?

HEYNATZ In South America I think we went to a place called Iquique.

BT What country is that in, do you know off hand?

HEYNATZ That's in Chile.

BT Right. And all your cargo went off there or only part of it?

HEYNATZ Just coal.

BT Yes; and all the cargo?

HEYNATZ No, most of the trade used to be in nitrates and they'd get the nitrates and they had a peculiar way of loading in those days. The broad outline of an old pyramid shape in the bottom, then in the midships they would start the same again, otherwise

the ship would get too stiff. But I left her in Valparaiso [correction] Iquique, and I finally got to different places down the coast - Antofagasta, and one thing and another.

BT When you say you left the boat, did you....?

HEYNATZ Oh I deserted.

BT You jumped ship?

HEYNATZ Yes.

BT What was the reason for that Alex?

HEYNATZ Oh, no reason. It's a lousy life and....

BT So you'd had enough really for a while?

HEYNATZ Well I thought I might.... I fell in with a Norwegian chap who'd been there for years and he must have seen I was a soft touch and he persuaded me to set up a drapery store further down the coast, later on. Everything was in his name and I had no knowledge or experience, but I got two hundred pounds (which was a big sum in those days). You can imagine two hundred pounds in 1910.

BT That would be a couple of years wages for a man, wouldn't it?

HEYNATZ Oh easy. I remember getting two pound ten [shillings] a month.

BT Good Lord! So well that was probably about four or five years at least of your wages. Where did you get that money from Alex?

HEYNATZ I had my mother send it out to me when I explained what I wanted.

BT And what happened to that drapery business?

HEYNATZ Well I got very sick. Whether he slipped me a mickey or not, I don't know, but I was taken to Valparaiso and when I got back the business was gone and so was my money.

BT So he conned you?

HEYNATZ Yes. [Laughter].

BT He certainly did. Okay, so after the drapery business, what was your next step, what did you do then?

HEYNATZ I went down to what they called the shipping office in Valparaiso and I signed on on the whaling station further down. I think they called it Wellington Island, at the mouth of the..... [pause] What do they call the short cut through?

BT The Magellan Strait?

HEYNATZ Through Patagonia.

BT Oh yes, Patagonia.

HEYNATZ I just can't think of the.... And I got very sick again so I had to give that away, and I came back and I came out here on the sailing ship called the **Susanna**, which happened to be a German ship.

BT Alex, just before we move away from South America; the whaling! Do you remember much about the whaling?

HEYNATZ Oh no, I only just.... I was too sick to even take notice. But I've been whaling since so I know a little.

BT Right. Where did you do the other whaling, was that out here?

HEYNATZ Out here.

BT Oh that's interesting, we'll talk about that later. That's good. Okay then, we'll talk about how you managed to come to Australia.

HEYNATZ Well I came out on the **Susanna** and I deserted that thing.

BT You made a bit of a habit of jumping ship, didn't you?

HEYNATZ Oh well, it was an easy thing to jump ship - just pack up a few things and you're gone.

BT Where did you leave the **Susanna**?

HEYNATZ Newcastle.

BT And do you remember roughly what year that was?

HEYNATZ Oh it would be about 1910 - early 1910 or something.

BT Right. And where did you go when you first jumped this ship? What did you do then?

HEYNATZ I got recaptured and they put me on board. Just when she sailed and was getting towed out through the heads at Newcastle I jumped over the side and swam ashore. I got along what they called Stockton side - that's the north side of Newcastle - and I got as far as Anna Bay eventually and some farmer people took me in there.

BT Did you start any work immediately when you arrived in Newcastle?

HEYNATZ Oh no, not as far as on the ships go. No. When I deserted ship you had to wait until.... And a strike happened to start and the damned thing was five weeks or seven weeks. I think it was called the Peter Boland strike or something - I can't remember. But anyway I had to wait a long time, and these people were very good to me. They had a son-in-law that lived at Nelson Bay and he was fishing there, and that's how I became a fisherman.

BT This family, had you told them exactly what had happened to you, how you'd come off the boat and all that?

HEYNATZ Oh they all knew, yes.

BT And they were still quite good to you?

HEYNATZ Oh yes, very good.

BT Alex, in those days did the authorities try to arrest any seamen who jumped ship? Did they make much of an effort?

HEYNATZ Oh yes, they did try to put them back but they were very half hearted, in fact in those days they were enticing people to desert because the population was so small out here.

BT A shortage of labour too, I guess?

HEYNATZ Yes. Seamen in particular they wanted.

BT Right. So your first contact, as you said, with fishing was with the son-in-law of this family?

HEYNATZ Yes, in Nelson Bay.

BT And what was he doing, what was his type of fishing?

HEYNATZ Oh well, anything. It was all seasonal in those early days you see. When fish are in full roe they school, and that's the time you go and catch them because they are all heaped up ready for you. For instance I can recall getting two shillings a basket for mullet, ten shillings a basket for bream. That was about the price range in those days.

BT That's not a bad price I suppose, really, is it?

HEYNATZ When you come to think of a basket being between 80 and 100 lbs it wasn't bad was it?

BT That's true.

HEYNATZ It wasn't shopping baskets.

BT Alex, just getting back again to when you jumped ship. Did you have much knowledge of Australia before you got here?

HEYNATZ None.

BT None whatsoever! So there was nothing that you knew that made you want to jump ship, it was just a matter that it was a convenient port?

HEYNATZ Well I'll give it to you this way. You are getting two pounds ten a month and I was told I can get six pounds a month if I jumped ship.

BT So that made it pretty inviting, didn't it? And what sort of money were you earning in those early days on the fishing boat working with this son-in-law?

HEYNATZ The funny part is we earned some very good money at times, and I was of a very saving nature. It was no time before I had a bank account. But there were no cheques, nothing like that. You all lined up at the Post Office on Friday (or whatever day the pay day was) and you'd get money orders from Sydney, and that's how I got paid.

BT How many blokes were working on that boat with you? Just you and this other fellow, or were there others?

HEYNATZ There were two men to a boat mostly.

BT Yes, and you'd have to go out at night as well as day, or mainly in the daytime?

HEYNATZ Oh well, mainly daytime.

BT Did you have to go far out?

HEYNATZ Oh no, this was all after school fish inside. Port Stephens harbour and that sort of thing. You'd wait for them to come along the shore, you see.

BT And where were you getting rid of your catches in those days?

HEYNATZ I beg your pardon.

BT Where were you selling your catches in those days?

HEYNATZ Oh, mostly in Newcastle. There was a steamer running there called the **Karua** in the early days, and you just put them on board loose with some ice broken on it and away they'd go.

BT They'd take them down to Sydney probably?

HEYNATZ No, Newcastle!

BT Down to Newcastle itself.

HEYNATZ Which is only a few hours run.

BT Alex, did you have papers in those days? Did you have to have seaman's papers or anything like that when you were moving?

HEYNATZ Oh yes, but you've got to leave them behind - you don't get any papers when you desert.

BT Oh, they kept your papers on the vessel itself, you didn't keep them in your personal possession?

HEYNATZ Oh no. What I mean, you've got personal letters which are left behind.

BT Alex, I understand you spoke a number of languages in your early days.

HEYNATZ Oh, yes. Well I'll tell you the outline of that was that being born in Denmark close to the German border, and my mother's parents were living in Flensburg and when they got elderly I had to go with her to look after them. I had two years schooling in Germany.

BT So you spoke German, you spoke Danish....

HEYNATZ Oh well, when you speak Danish you speak three languages.

BT Yes, you speak Norwegian and Swedish as well.

HEYNATZ Well yes, they are more or less dialects.

BT That's right! What about English, did you have any knowledge of English before you....?

HEYNATZ No. When you're young it comes natural, it's no trouble to learn anything.

BT Did you speak English reasonably well when you arrived in Australia, or mostly after you arrived?

HEYNATZ Oh, I wouldn't say it was reasonably well but I spoke it. But I was only just a matter of weeks and I could speak alright.

BT Alex, how did you find Australia when you first started to live here? Did you find it so culturally different from what you'd been used to?

HEYNATZ No, I think at that age you take everything as it comes. Oh no, everything was alright. I palled up with the young fellows around the town and we went to dances and that sort of thing.

BT Was there any bias towards you in those days or were you just treated as one of the young blokes? They didn't....

HEYNATZ No, no bias at all, in fact they respected you I think more than anything.

BT Well you probably had more experience than most of the young blokes at that age I guess, didn't you? Being at sea.

HEYNATZ Well, I don't know about that. But I suppose then, also being close to Newcastle which in those days was metropolitan you can say, they would mix very readily, and especially Scandinavians and that - they were very welcome.

BT Well I think that's pretty much the same now. Scandinavians are fairly popular people because they don't upset anyone.

HEYNATZ They didn't form cliques like you see Italians, Greek. And I think that's why they were more popular than the other type.

BT Which brings up the point, did you run into many other Scandinavians in those days at all?

HEYNATZ Oh yes. I had fellows come to me - shipmates that I'd met them once or twice and they came to Port Stephens. Cobar was a great [place] - they all made for Cobar.

BT Why Cobar?

HEYNATZ Mining. And they wanted riggers and that sort of thing, see. I always gave them money to go. In those days when you had a sovereign you had a half sovereign case, and then you had a sovereign, a sovereign case, and you slipped it in with a spring loaded thing.

BT Oh, is that right!

HEYNATZ And so I give them some money to go with and that sort of thing.

BT As you said too, you were probably a bit of a soft touch were you?

HEYNATZ Oh, I suppose I am. Still am.

BT Right, so when you were at Port Stephens how long did you stay there, Alex, working with that bloke?

HEYNATZ Well, I would say.... I saved my money and in those days a man would get a share for himself, that's for his labour. If you had a boat and net you'd get a share for that. The fellow I was working for (I don't want to mention names - he's a very good fellow just the same), he used to drink a bit and didn't save his money. I did. And I said, "If I buy another boat and net would I get a share?" "Oh yes!" So then you lay on to popular hauling spots if you get it. You lay on perhaps nine boats or seven boats or whatever happens to be there, and you get the fish in one, two, three, four, five and so down the line. Now the first school of fish that comes along, you're entitled to reject it or shoot it. So if the heap was big enough you'd say, "We'll shoot". If it wasn't big enough you'd say, "Well, let them go". And the last boat in the line used to do that, he'd never go at a small lot you see. And that's how that works.

BT That's fairly democratic.

HEYNATZ Oh, very good.

BT Was there any conflict in those days over those particular positions that were held and that?

HEYNATZ No, if there was it was very minor.

BT It never got into violence or anything like that?

HEYNATZ Oh no, you'd go down and if you were the first there you'd take number one position and so on.

BT It was an unwritten rule and it was understood by all of the blokes I guess.

HEYNATZ We had a big tripod built nearly right on the waters edge; you see you'd climb up and you'd sit there and you'd see the.... you don't see the fish exactly, in some cases you do, but you see the shadow that they make. There's the fish there, the bottom there, and the shadow is down....

BT On the bottom. So you watch that.

HEYNATZ like a mirror.

BT Whose job was that, did everyone take it in turns to spot, or what?

HEYNATZ The ones with the best eyesight.

BT Did you do that a bit?

HEYNATZ Oh I was up there, yes.

BT In all sorts or weather too, I suppose?

HEYNATZ Oh, that wasn't any trouble. You were well protected with clothing.

BT Right. So you had obviously saved a fair bit of money when you were doing this work.

HEYNATZ Well I did. I`d always had money, I was never without it.

BT And what did you do with the first lot of money you got together then, did you buy a boat?

HEYNATZ I bought a boat and net. I got an extra share, so I got two shares.

BT And what was that first vessel's name, do you remember?

HEYNATZ Mmm?

BT What was the name of the first boat that you bought?

HEYNATZ Oh that's not a boat, that's just a net boat and net.

BT Oh, I see.

HEYNATZ And then I bought a.... we were sailing in those days and I suggested I buy a motor launch. "Oh" they said, "it costs a lot of money", but I did buy a motor launch and there was an engine made in Newcastle called an "Acme", a petrol motor it was. I mean, I suppose it would be 6, 7 horsepower - could have been 10, and I got a share for that, so I was drawing three shares and the boss was only getting one.

BT So you were well ahead of him.

HEYNATZ He was the brains so I let him have it.

BT Yes, right. Do you remember how much that first one cost you, that first motor boat that you bought?

HEYNATZ Oh, yes. I think I've got a fair recollection, something like 120 pounds all in.

BT All up!

HEYNATZ With a cabin on it and a little shelter for the engine.

BT Were you still only in the actual enclosed waters at that stage doing your fishing, or were you starting to go out?

HEYNATZ Oh sometimes we'd just venture outside of the heads.

BT Depending upon the seas, I guess.

HEYNATZ Well yes. And all fishing in those days was seasonal, you'd get garfish at night, and then garfish in the daytime would come at certain times. And you'd shoot them in, these garfish, and you'd go and pull your net so far as there was one rock, and get hold of the end of the rope and swim to the next, and so on.

BT You'd swim?

HEYNATZ It made your haul four times the one that you originally started with, and you'd get perhaps 120 baskets or something like that in the shop of sea garfish.

BT And how long were those nets?

HEYNATZ Oh, those nets would be.... I couldn't rightly say. [Pause]. That wasn't great length, no!

BT And how did you sell those? Did you sell them the same way as you sold the other ones?

HEYNATZ Oh, the same way as the other ones.

BT And what would a basket of garfish, for example, fetch?

HEYNATZ Oh, I think that was only about.... might have been seven shillings.

BT And what sort of other seasonal fish were you catching at that time, Alex?

HEYNATZ Oh, you'd get what they called a trumpeter whiting come in, you see. You'd get some of them, which is really the off season. And you might have a trip up the Mile Lake, which is.... you know where the Mile Lake is at Port Stephens? And you've kept some of the big black fish - big mullet - and have a couple of weeks there, and by that time some other season is around.

BT What sort of social life were you having at that stage? Did the fishermen have much of a social life amongst themselves in their community?

HEYNATZ No. Years later the.... what was he? He was the Chief Secretary - used to run the fishing industry - invited me up for a cup of tea. He said, "Alex, what's the

lowest form of marine life?" "Toads and worms, I suppose" [I replied]. "No", he said, "fishermen - they are the outcasts of everything." And they were. They were drunken, retired or sacked school teachers, there was every breed you could think of was fishing.

BT And did you think that was right?

HEYNATZ It was the last card in the pack.

BT And that was right was it?

HEYNATZ And that was correct. The lowest form of marine life as he called it. He said, "Make an effort to try and alter that."

BT Do you think that changed later on?

HEYNATZ I did. I started from then on.

BT And what sort of blokes were then attracted to fishing? How did you manage to attract other sorts of fellows to fishing?

HEYNATZ Oh well, I suppose there's the matter of evolution. You go to another place and I think from there I went to the Manning, and there was no money in that. And so I drifted. I went to.... [coughs]. Forster! And I was working with Cecil's wife's father for a while. I was only a kid then, I couldn't have been very old.

BT Same style of fishing at that time, Alex?

HEYNATZ No, the lakes fishing and big nets, big long nets, shoot them and take you four hours to pull them in and that sort of thing. Winches and all that.

BT And did you have the same boat at that stage or did you have another one?

HEYNATZ Oh no, I'd sold everything and cashed in and was at a loose end again.

BT So when did you end up at Laurieton, which is where I think you were based for quite a while?

HEYNATZ Well, after fishing at Cape Hawk for a while I was with a fellow called Jensen and we went up. We'd heard about this Laurieton, and I remember there was no railway in those days - only in stages to Newcastle, so far, and then you'd get to Taree. Then from Taree the next stage was to somewhere else. Taree had become a popular place to ship fish from by rail. And then the rail extended to Kendall - so that's why we went up to Laurieton, there are two or three big lakes there, you see.

BT Okay, we'll just hold it there; we'll have a break and we'll change the tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

BT Continuing the interview with Mr Alex Heynatz, this is Side 2 of Tape 1.

Alex, before we changed the tape we were talking about how you moved on to Laurieton, however there's another....

HEYNATZ No, there's one episode that I missed which is interesting.

BT Yes, I'd like to talk about that.

HEYNATZ I told you it was very seasonal in Port Stephens, the fishing. There was a fellow Boris Geneff, he was a Russian, and he was the best educated man I ever came across in my life, but he had a little boat fishing and he couldn't make a do of it, so he asked me to go with him and I did. We made money out of crayfish. I suppose that would be the first few crayfish they ever shipped much. And the war broke out. The next thing big headlines in the Newcastle paper - "GERMAN SPIES IN PORT STEPHENS". [Laughs]. Up they came and arrested us - took our cameras, took our belongings. Down to Victoria Barracks. And I refused to say a word until I'd seen the Danish Consul. The upshot of it was we were both released, but we didn't get our camera back. Being war time I can understand that. But all we were doing was taking photos of the scenery, and if it was a farmer and he had a prize cow we'd take it, and that sort of thing, and we were making big money. When I say big money - fifteen pounds a week and the likes of that, against what other people were making - two pounds ten [shillings] on the roads. That was the wages on the roads - two pounds ten a week.

BT Why do you think they grabbed you, someone thought you were Germans because....?

HEYNATZ Oh, I'm taking photos, and especially photos at the entrance to Port Stephens is very pretty. There's an island there and there's two big headlands. It was more or less unspoilt I suppose in those days.

BT How long did you spend in gaol?

HEYNATZ So they took the camera and everything, and then we both fell in love with the same girl in Port Stephens, and therefore bad friendship arrived.

BT Oh, that happens!

HEYNATZ So he went his way and I went mine. He won, anyhow.

BT Oh, he got the girl, did he? Oh well, he probably had more money than you, did he?

HEYNATZ Oh, no no, he didn't. He was always a smart cookie, that fellow.

BT Whatever happened to him, do you know, Alex?

HEYNATZ Yes. [It was] years, I met him after I was on the Fish Authority, we were opening up Newcastle as a depot for the Fish Authority - I was a member of it then, and he was on the floor - sweeping the floor, cleaning the floor. So he hadn't been getting very far.

BT So he ended up a cleaner virtually.

HEYNATZ Oh yes.

BT Alex, when the police grabbed you, how long did you spend in gaol before they actually released you?

HEYNATZ I was only in about three hours, and I had seen the Danish Consul and told him the story, and he said, "Oh, I know the family" - and I was out.

BT Gee, you were fortunate weren't you? I guess you can understand the suspicions of people at that time, as you say, the camera and everything.

HEYNATZ Well anyhow, I was a youngster - I suppose I might have been of military age, I doubt it.

BT Was this the First War?

HEYNATZ I'd only be eighteen or something.

BT So it was the First World War, right.

HEYNATZ I wouldn't be eighteen, I think I was only about eighteen when I went to... eighteen or nineteen, when I got to Mullers Lake.

BT Right! Okay, so we'll go back now to when you were telling us before about how you then moved on to Laurieton. You said that the shipping facilities, or rather the transport facilities for fish were better.

HEYNATZ Oh no, no. I want to put you in the picture this way. After the railway progressed there was untouched fishing facility, or very little touched, so naturally you were doing alright there. You got quantity, so that's why I went. Previous, as I say, I was working for Cecil's wife's father in Mullers Lake.

BT Okay, so when you settled at Laurieton did you then decide to buy a boat straight away or what was your next step?

HEYNATZ Well, I bought a boat and net before I went to Laurieton and had it all ready, and then we went back - with the crew that I was with - I just stepped on my own boat and I took my gear, and boats, and nets and towed them all up to Laurieton.

BT What was the name of that vessel that you had then?

HEYNATZ Oh, that was only a small boat like a big overgrown launch.

BT So at this stage you still hadn't moved into big out....?

HEYNATZ No, nothing big.

BT Nothing large, right. And what were you fishing for at Laurieton, what was available there?

HEYNATZ Oh well, everything that was mostly in lakes and estuaries and that sort of thing.

BT Were you getting crays around there, too?

HEYNATZ They came from then on - that's where I started, see?

BT So you were basically fishing in Laurieton in the river most of the time?

HEYNATZ Rivers and lakes, yes.

BT Were you getting better prices at the time or were the prices pretty much the same.

HEYNATZ Oh, well it was better. It wouldn't buy much for what we were getting.

BT Between the time when you first arrived at Laurieton and the incident involving the wreck of the **Iron Chief**, had you got bigger boats then?

HEYNATZ Oh yes, I got a boat called the **Why Worry**, it was the first chine built boat and it was ill constructed, you know, a lot of mistakes and she was leaking like a sieve.

BT Where was that one built, Alex?

HEYNATZ Somebody at Laurieton built her.

BT Did you have a lot of trouble with that one?

HEYNATZ Oh yes.

BT So how long did that last, that boat?

HEYNATZ Oh, I would say two or three years. By that time I got other boats then.

BT How many blokes did you have working for you at that stage.

HEYNATZ Oh, you'd have a crew of two or one, depends on what you were doing.

BT Were they good crew, the ones you had?

HEYNATZ Yes, some of them I had six or seven years.

BT What sort of a boss do you think you were in those days, do you think you were a good boss?

HEYNATZ Well they called me Captain Bligh.

BT That set you up a bit you reckon?

HEYNATZ They said the food was alright but they never had time to eat the bloody stuff. [Laughter].

BT You worked them pretty hard then?

HEYNATZ Well I was a hard worker myself and I expected them to. And I had to try and make a living for them as well as for myself, and I didn't appreciate any slackness. If they brought a bottle of booze on board I'd drop it over the side before we got out.

BT No drinking on your boat?

HEYNATZ No.

BT Was that a general rule or did the blokes....?

HEYNATZ No, that was the rule. No booze while working, and women and dogs weren't allowed - one brought fleas, and the other trouble.

BT That's fair enough! Alex, I think you had another nickname too, didn't they call you Hans Christian Andersen?

HEYNATZ [Laughs]. Oh, I think that's what this fellow called me - yes, Max used to christen me that.

BT Why did they call you Hans Christian Andersen, I wonder?

HEYNATZ I think I used to tell them a tale or two.

BT I'm not surprised. Okay Alex, you got rid of this first boat, which as you said wasn't a very, very good vessel.

HEYNATZ Yes, we caught alight, had a fellow by the name of Nicholson with me, he was a resident of Tuncurry, and we had to swim for it. I got as far as the headland but the engine still ticking over and the bloody thing alight. And then we got to where it was a bit sheltered around the corner - managed to get her there - he jumped off and left me. Getting too hot. And I reckon he should have stayed a bit longer, but anyhow! After he went and I heard him in the water, I went too, and we let the boat take its own course, and he climbed up the rocks and I helped him up, and he said, "I'm right, I'm right". But in the meantime the sea washed me back again. I said, "I'm buggered if I am!" So I swam a bit further and there was a little cove, I think they call it Heynatz Cove now, down there, and the boat obligingly in due course drifted right in there, and you could have stepped off it dry footed.

BT So all that wasn't necessary?

HEYNATZ Yes, wasn't necessary. Put a rope around the blooming stanchions and you could have been towed in.

BT And what happened to that boat after that incident?

HEYNATZ Oh well, I think there was a small insurance on it, it wouldn't be much anyhow.

BT So she was scrapped, virtually. You got rid of it. So what was your next boat, Alex?

HEYNATZ That was the **Sea Hawk**, I think.

BT And how much bigger was that?

HEYNATZ That was quite a nice boat, it was 70 feet long, or just on.

BT Oh, a big vessel. And how many crew would you need on a boat of that size?

HEYNATZ Oh, one or two, it all depends on what we were doing.

BT And was that built at Laurieton, too, that one?

HEYNATZ Yes, I got a fellow from the Manning to build it, a shipwright.

BT And he was obviously better than the first one you had.

HEYNATZ Oh yes, it was a proper boat.

BT Did he build many of your other boats, that same bloke?

HEYNATZ No. I got another fellow to build me some.

BT Okay, so **Sea Hawk I**, that must have been a real joy to operate compared with....

HEYNATZ Oh yes. In the meantime, we weren't into wheelhouses even then, we were still steering everything by tiller.

BT Is that right?

HEYNATZ A great big tiller. I suppose there would be eight or nine feet along the deck, and you wouldn't have a wheelhouse, you'd have a canvas dodger.

BT And that was just to keep the spray off you, I suppose?

HEYNATZ Yes, and get some shelter. But they are very easy to manoeuvre when you have a tiller on them, especially on bar harbour work and that sort of thing.

BT You reckon that was better than a wheel?

HEYNATZ Oh yes.

BT What about in the open sea when the big seas are running, they'd be a problem wouldn't they?

HEYNATZ Same thing. Very easy to handle.

BT Is that right! And what....

HEYNATZ The only thing that I had, I'd stand across the tiller, you see, between my legs. And the tiller had a great big knob on the end of it and about this much [indicating] sticking out of my trousers, like where my legs parted, where I used to stand. They all used to make a joke of this. [Laughs]. What a sight it must have been!

BT Did you use much navigation in those days, or was it all just by memory and experience?

HEYNATZ Mainly in those days there was no such thing as echo sounders or anything.

BT Radar - none of that, of course. What about radios, did you have radios at all?

HEYNATZ No radio, nothing! And you went by marks, cross marks. For instance you get a prominent bunch of trees on this hill and a peak of a mountain there - you get that in line, and then you get another cross bearing that is from there to there [indicating], and that's where you are.

BT So it was mainly on point?

HEYNATZ So if you couldn't get land marks, as we called them.... you'd get them by gun.

BT So if there was heavy fog or rain? That was a chance [you took]?

HEYNATZ You'd take a stab at it, mostly you'd miss out or something.

BT What if you got trouble, Alex, what would you do? Would you have flares and things like that if you got any trouble?

HEYNATZ No, I don't think we were compelled to carry anything.

BT What, you didn't bother to use those at all? Any flares? What would you do if you got into trouble out there, if your motor broke down for example and you were out a fair way?

HEYNATZ That's up to you how you handled it. You had a sail mostly.

BT So your auxiliary was a sail virtually. Right!

HEYNATZ I always carried sails.

BT What vessel did you own when the **Iron Chief** ran on to that reef?

HEYNATZ That was the **Sea Hawk**.

BT **Sea Hawk I** or **II**?

HEYNATZ One! [Pause]. I've got to explain something there. Now the **Iron Chief** ran on the reef and holed itself, and she beached herself. By beaching themselves it's always the case that they go finally broadside and the sea finally washes the sand away from the stern and from the bow, and then it finishes sitting on the pinnacle, and that's why they break in half.

BT Break their back, yes!

HEYNATZ Well now, that's what happened to her. But I was working for Sydney Marine Underwriters, they engaged me to put pumps - salvage pumps and other gear on board, so I knew the position inside the ship as well as outside. And that's why I

went in and went through the surf around the bow where the deepest water was, because it scoured it out, and I took the crew off. And then I had to back out again, see. And in the meantime I got badly knocked about. The boat knocked about with things hanging out over the wreckage.

BT Were there heavy seas running that day, Alex?

HEYNATZ Oh, tremendous seas.

BT How did the **Iron Chief** get to go on to that reef, onto the man made reef, do you know?

HEYNATZ Bad navigation I would say.

BT What was the visibility like, was it bad or what?

HEYNATZ No, perfect I think. Carelessness I think.

BT And was it during the day or the night?

HEYNATZ It was night time. But it's not for me to condemn the skipper.

BT Sure! And what was the **Iron Chief** carrying, did it have cargo?

HEYNATZ Iron ore, I think, she had at that time.

BT And she was running north, wasn't she; she was heading north?

HEYNATZ Yes, she was going north.

BT How far away when you first got the job to go and help? Were you in fact on land when you got that job?

HEYNATZ Oh yes. I had a contract with the Sydney Marine Underwriters to look after any calls and that sort of thing.

BT Okay, so you went out there and as you said you took the crew off. Do you remember how many crew there were on board the vessel?

HEYNATZ Well, including the salvage crew which was on board also....

BT So they were trapped on there too?

HEYNATZ so there was, I think, approaching the sixty or seventy mark - I forget now.

BT Yes, so there were quite a few on. How did you manage to get them from the **Iron Chief** on to your boat?

HEYNATZ Oh well, in between snatches I could see a break. The bridge protects part of it, see. And then when the chance came - there's always a lull between two breakers - two or three rush on, you see, and then two or three more, and so on.

BT At this point the interview was suspended owing to the illness of Alex, and it resumed again on 28th April 1988.

Okay Alex, before we talk again I understand that there are some things that we missed in our earlier interview that you want to speak about.

HEYNATZ Yes, very important too, I think.

BT Okay, well let's talk about this one you were just mentioning a minute ago when you were in Newcastle again.

HEYNATZ Now this is when I... After I'd been fishing in Port Stephens for six or seven months I then bought the boat and net, but, I had this sweetheart I left in Kukimbo. It was most important to me because I never had brothers and sisters. Anyway, I left them in care of friends in Port Stephens, in Nelsons Bay, and I joined the ship called the **Nympha**, an Italian ship, in Newcastle. It's a matter of everybody deserting in Australia so you have no trouble getting a ship.

Now the average voyage from Australia to the west coast of South America was anywhere between the 32, 40 from thereon. However the record at that particular time, I don't know since, for a sailing ship was 28 days from Newcastle to Valparaiso - that was by sailing ship.

BT That's only a month, isn't that quick!

HEYNATZ Yes. Well they go down south in the Roaring Forties.

BT Pick up the big winds down there.

HEYNATZ Yes, some go north of New Zealand, some go south. Anyway I joined the **Nympha** just to go and see how things were. The other thought that I might catch the bugger that "done me" for my share of the money. When I got there she was married. Fickle women!

So I went back to Valparaiso and there was an elderly gentleman looking for somebody. He said to me, "How do you come to get in this country, this is no country for a young boy like you." They didn't have enough women there and sodomy was rife, I think. In fact I was offered a tin of condensed milk but I didn't like it so I didn't have the condensed milk. [Laughter].

Anyway, he talked to me for a while and said, "What can you do? Can you steer a ship?" "Steer a ship" I said, "I'd take it through the eye of a needle." And he said, "Can you box a compass?" - "Try me!" So he started and I had to give him the reverse... SW, see NE and so on. But then the smaller degrees that come in, it's hard for a land man to understand. And old quotations and that. "My God," he said, "you're pretty good." And I said that I supposed I'd practically lived and grew up with one. And he said "If I give you a job as quartermaster you are too young, but I have a Chinese crew on deck, and a Chinese crew below. And there's only a few white officers and you are very young. But I'll give you a go anyhow."

So I signed on as quartermaster on a boat called the **Lord Lonsdale**, which was a steamer, and back to Newcastle. Well in those days the saying was when the Chinese run away from the ship the Master is responsible for so many hundred pounds a head. Eleven deserted and I was a night watchman - which is a duel calling position when

you are a quartermaster - you are a night watchman as well. So I thought, oh my God, what will I do - if I stop these bastards they'll put a knife through me. So I packed my little bundle and I was gone.

BT It was better to be away than back there to cop all the trouble.

HEYNATZ I didn't like the being saddled. So years after, it would be three years after, he struck me in Newcastle again, I used to often go to Newcastle from Port Stephens, and I said, "Too late! I can't come back now." And he was a really nice old gentleman, I could have stuck with him I think. But anyway I didn't.

BT Well Alex, the last time we were speaking we were talking about that dramatic incident you were involved in when the **Iron Chief** ran on to the....

HEYNATZ Oh, that was a long time after that.

BT Do you want to talk a bit more about that incident with the **Iron Chief**? We got to the point where you recall you were telling me the seas were fairly heavy and you were getting your boat in close and you were getting the crew off in stages. Every time there was a surge you'd get in....

HEYNATZ No, no, no. It doesn't work like that. Previously, if you can understand the goings on of the insurance company, they off lay to each other. I mean, before they can make up their minds about a wreck, or a sale or a salvage, they've got to have a meeting. And that's always the case. By that time the damned thing is a total wreck. But anyway, I had to put pumps on it, so I was engaged to put salvage pumps and God knows what on board, and a salvage crew, which swelled the numbers of the people that had to be rescued. I can't remember whether it was fifty-seven or fifty-four, or whatever it was that was on board, that I had to rescue. But being in and out around the bow of the ship, I was using her as a breakwater. But when the big seas came over and smashed right across the top and as high as the bridge, just one sheet of water, and I knew that when the ship went broadside you'd get deep water around the stern and around the bow because that's made by the tide, and that washes away. I tried to hail them to see if there was any rubbish inside that I could lay there, but the distance was too great, he couldn't put to sea. Anyhow, I made up my mind to go in, that was my chance. And being a bar harbour man that is one of your tricks.

BT To know when to run and when not to, yes.

HEYNATZ When the swell is long enough to do something. So I went in and some of them were very reluctant to leave the big ship. The bridge was holding and that was about all, but finally they came - how many there actually were I couldn't say - whether it was fifty-seven or fifty-four. And the same procedure there was when I'm laying amongst steel girders poking out through it here and there, and there was only one way I could lay and that was to protect my propeller and lay bow end to the very highest structure of the bridge. And then they had to watch their chance to get on board. And fifty-four - they all had bloody boots on, and we had no boots - tramping all over me. There was a tiller, we used to use a tiller in those days, which takes up a lot of room. Some of them had to tie themselves to some of the stanchions, and some had to go below, while some wouldn't go below.

BT Just hang on a moment, I'm running out of tape. Just a minute.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

TAPE 2 SIDE A

BT This is continuing the interview with Mr Alex Heynatz, this is Tape 2 Side 1.

Alex, you were just talking about how these fellows then scrambled down off the **Iron Chief** onto your boat and they were jumping all over you.

HEYNATZ Yes, of course that was done in stages when the sea allowed.

BT So you got them all off?

HEYNATZ Yes, got them all on board.

BT And what state was the **Iron Chief** in at that stage, was it breaking up then?

HEYNATZ Oh she was broken in half.

BT Oh she was completely broken, yes! Was there a lot of debris in the water?

HEYNATZ No, not just where I was, I got a clear spot but I could only fit the high part of the bow into [it] and there were some obstructions, but I managed.

BT Alex, were any of the fellows hurt, any of the blokes injured at all - that you took on board?

HEYNATZ No, nobody injured.

BT Okay, so there were none injured. Were there any lives lost?

HEYNATZ No there were no lives lost, nobody was actually hurt that I know of.

BT Did you have a chance to talk to the skipper of that boat?

HEYNATZ Oh yes, we became very good friends after.

BT How did he feel about the loss of his boat?

HEYNATZ He was in error and he had to take it. See they hit the mermaid and then beached themselves, which is only a short distance - say a couple of miles at the most.

BT There's still some of that wreck left, you know. They dive on it now, it's down underneath the water, but it's a diving spot now for divers. Divers go down there now. So it's providing some use for some people.

Alex, as a result of that particular rescue I understand you were granted a medal by the Royal Humane Shipwreck Society. How did you feel about that, you must have felt very proud to receive that medal?

HEYNATZ Well, I went to Sydney at the invitation, there were some other medal receivers - a great to-do in the Town Hall - here the conquering hero comes! And they pinned the medal on your chest and you're as proud as a peacock. And everything is alright, and you go home, and you find you've got a repair bill to pay.

BT They didn't cover that, the insurance company?

HEYNATZ Well I don't know, I couldn't say for sure.

BT So between the time of the **Iron Chief** and the time the Second World War broke out you were still engaged around Laurieton in fishing, is that right?

HEYNATZ Yes, and of course I was constantly retained by the Sydney Marine Underwriters for any wreckage or anything - I had to go and see about it.

BT Marine salvage work?

HEYNATZ Yes, for salvage. And to compensate me for it I got all the work on the coast, such as cleaning anchors. In those days they had an anchor, or several anchors, and big reels of salvage wire on each breakwater or in each port, and I'd go from port to port as it suited me, and if I got bad weather while I was in there I'd do this job, you see. Re-oil them and re-wind them and so on.

BT That was pretty smart, to cover yourself for when the weather was not good enough for fishing - you always had a second string to your bow.

HEYNATZ That was the idea.

BT That's good business.

HEYNATZ So I had income when other people couldn't work, and I always had the right stuff with me to do it, reel in and chip the anchor if it was rough, and re-tar and that sort of thing.

BT Alex, they tell me that at that time down at Laurieton there were some fairly big lobsters being caught. You were getting some big lobsters were you?

HEYNATZ Lobsters? Oh yes, I started there and people came from Sydney wanting to start a factory but I had to find the money, and they wanted to get the profit, and I wouldn't be in it.

BT You had to put up the money but they wanted.... yes, sure.

HEYNATZ They all wanted my business I was catching that many.

BT Were they big size - good size?

HEYNATZ Oh yes - we'd get them up to 6 pounds.

BT Gee whizz! And whereabouts were you getting those, in close or....?

HEYNATZ Oh, in close and out fairly wide.

BT And what sort of traps were you using - the big pots?

HEYNATZ No, the ordinary lobster pot mainly.

BT Alex, I think you married about this time too, didn't you, down at Laurieton?

HEYNATZ At Laurieton, yes.

BT And how was the work going at that time? Because around that time it was the Depression and a little bit after the Depression. So was work still fairly plentiful for you?

HEYNATZ No, we couldn't get anything for our fish. So I bought a big International truck. I didn't actually pay cash for it - a sort of lease/lend business, I knew the man exceptionally well. I started a fish fun up to Tamworth and did very well. I rented space in the freezing works. And then I went to Armidale, and that's where I made one great mistake.

BT What was that?

HEYNATZ I had some good salesmen that I had in Tamworth and I shifted them to Armidale, and they had their girlfriends and every weekend they were taking my trucks (my delivery trucks)....

BT To visit the girls.

HEYNATZ which I should have foreseen, but I didn't - I wasn't worldly wise.

BT No! So you were actually catching the fish and trucking them all the way up to Tamworth and Armidale.

HEYNATZ Oh yes, we had to go through Kempsey in those days.

BT What did you do in your spare time? You didn't have much spare time, I suppose, did you?

HEYNATZ Well, there were all sorts of complications. I'd have to go up occasionally to straighten things out. They'd fight between them - storekeepers and fish shops, and my deliveries and all that. And they didn't always start work early enough, they waited until they were hoisted out of bed I think.

BT Alex, in those times obviously you were doing a lot of work, did you have any other recreational interests - anything that interested you particularly apart from your fishing?

HEYNATZ No, I was only working - it was all work, all bloomin' business, but you couldn't get anything in Sydney for anything. Jewfish - 40/50 pound, I'd get 4 shillings for them.

BT Hardly worth catching.

HEYNATZ That's what sent me up to the Tablelands, when I had seven small delivery lorries bought very cheap. I think I got the Rugby for about 70 pounds. [Pause]. Essexes, and Buicks - all sorts of things.

BT Did you keep that up for many years, that travelling around to sell your fish?

HEYNATZ Oh, about 3 years I suppose.

BT What, there wasn't a need for it then? Your fish sales picked up, did they?

HEYNATZ Well you see, nobody did the right thing although it wasn't all dishonest. I won't say that. But if you neglect your work you are dishonest, so that's how I hit down on the idea of I'll supply them and they'll buy them off me, and then the rest was up to them. I let them have the lorries on a cheap rental to pay it off. Some paid it off, some never paid off.

BT Alex, were you into prawning at all at that stage while you were still down at Laurieton, or did you only take that on....

HEYNATZ Oh no, no prawns - never thought of them.

BT So you only took that on up here! Alright! Now I understand before the Second World War you'd built your fleet up again and you had, what, was it two or three vessels before the Second World War?

HEYNATZ Three.

BT Three vessels! What were the names of those, can you recall?

HEYNATZ Yes. One was the **Why Worry**.... my best boat was the **Sea Hawk**.

BT **Sea Hawk I**, was it, or **Sea Hawk II**?

HEYNATZ **Sea Hawk I**

BT And the other one, the **Sea Rover**?

HEYNATZ Then I built the **Sea Rover** but I never got to use her. I got an engine out.... what do you call it now? In bond! Got it sent out in bond, and the Navy grabbed her.

BT That was on the outbreak of the Second World War, was it?

HEYNATZ Yes, outbreak of the war. So I had a beautiful big boat and no engine. Then the scare came and they were going to sink her where she was, and there was only about 2 feet of water under her at low water. So that was a bloody silly thing. And the Yanks came to the rescue there and took her.

BT Now was that happening a lot along the coast, Alex, at that time? Were the Yanks requisitioning a lot of vessels?

HEYNATZ All vessels that they wanted.

BT How do you think the blokes felt about that, were they happy to have their vessels requisitioned or did they try to avoid it, or what?

HEYNATZ Well I tried to avoid it by always being absent - but I shouldn't say this. But I had a friend who was in the Post Office up north and when wires were coming through he'd tip me off.

BT Well that's good information.

HEYNATZ And when I was down the coast and I'd get information I'd shoot up here. And when I'd get information again I'd shoot off down there.

BT You were coming up to Ballina at this time, were you?

HEYNATZ Yes.

BT Fishing, or you had friends, or....?

HEYNATZ Oh no, we were hand lining and carrying no gear or anything much.

BT Now your sons, just before the war your sons were working for you - some of your sons? The two oldest were, weren't they?

HEYNATZ No, one of them.

BT One of them! Which one was that that was working for you?

HEYNATZ In fact two of them were, but one of them was - it was Cecil.

BT Right, he was working for you.

HEYNATZ And this is the story. They said, "We are taking your boat and we want you. You've done a lot of marine salvage work. You've got a very good name. We want you to take charge of the North West Pacific for salvage work." And I said, "I won't go UNLESS I get my eldest son constantly assigned to me." I said, "I can't do all those things myself and I trust him." And he was pulled out of the.... he couldn't be drafted into the Australian Army because they got him, see.

The youngest, I tried to get him out a little later when he became of military age but he wouldn't have it.

BT This was Charlie?

HEYNATZ Yes, that was Charlie.

BT And before you went up to New Guinea, did they fit your vessels out properly? Did they fit your vessels out differently to the way you had them?

HEYNATZ No, not a great lot.

BT Did they paint them down here in naval colours?

HEYNATZ Oh yes, a green I think it was.

BT And did they install machine guns on them at that time?

HEYNATZ Only a pop gun on the top.

BT So you headed off. Did you take all three in convoy with you as you went up?

HEYNATZ Oh no, I wasn't even there then. They'd flown me to New Guinea. Now what happened is while I was in Sydney and waiting for certain things, I invented a patent and I was left down there demonstrating this bloody patent - staying in the pub all the time.

BT What was it?

HEYNATZ It was only based on the old smuggling days - you have your wire penant, the big lifting penant and that sort of thing down, then the smaller wire and smaller wire, until you have just a small one, and they are contained in a perforated container with salt and sugar. And this was the old smuggling days - the Chinese sloop - and that's where I got it from. And when it melts, up comes the float.

BT Oh, I see, yes.

HEYNATZ And then they had the position of the ship and they had four penants they had to get hold of them. So in the meantime there were so many supplies came from America that they wouldn't be bothered with any of them. If the ship sank - let it sink. But he was constantly with me. And then they said, "We want you up in New Guinea, there are 7 big barges and some other smaller, can you lift them?" I said, "I can't tell you, I haven't even seen them. I know how to do it." These big timber scales, you might have remembered them in Sydney, they'd lighter off the ships - great big, flat topped pine ones they were. Planking about four inches thick. And evidently launching them off the bigger ships they used to damage them, and the damage would probably be on the bottom. So there is a way of passing wires through and over, and then you give it to a ship - and it has got to give a quick pull and stop. And then that slips them on their back.

So I.... what would you call it? Anyhow, I tore one to pieces to get material to repair the others. I can't think of the name.

BT Did you have to do any of the repair work yourself on these salvage vessels?

HEYNATZ Oh yes, I did some. Then I got the natives, they could do all that sort of thing. And you pulled it down and put a new part in. And then you flip them back and - Bob's your uncle!

BT Were they just American barges, Alex, or were they also....?

HEYNATZ No, they were all commandeered out of Sydney Harbour, where they used to use them as lighters for packing timber. You must have seen them in Sydney.

BT I've seen photos of them, yes.

HEYNATZ And all machinery, whatever they wanted to shift, they used these barges. They were mostly 120 by about 45.

BT So Alex, when you were up in New Guinea, were you sort of commissioned into the American Navy as part of this deal that you were in?

HEYNATZ Yes.

BT And what, they gave you rank I guess, did they?

HEYNATZ My rank! I've forgotten my rank somehow.

BT Were you a Lieutenant Commander or something like that?

HEYNATZ No, I think Lieutenant. I might have been Lieutenant Commander later.

BT Were you treated as sort of a member of the American Navy while you were doing this job?

HEYNATZ Well I got along well with them. The average attitude was "Oh, the bloody Yanks!"

BT I think there was a bit of (some degree of) jealousy there, wasn't there?

HEYNATZ Yes, the pay range you see. And I was just the opposite - if I had anything I sent some down and got some. I shared it all out where I thought it would do the best, too. For instance, there was a big ship which was torpedoed by Japs in Milne Bay which capsized outward, and left the hull exposed you see, on one side. And I got the 101st Workshop, I think it was, to cut a great big hole in it on the side and then put some steel stoppers where I could fit the legs in and I used the cargo booms and sheerlegs snapped together like that [indicated].

BT Oh yes, right.

HEYNATZ And then I had a good lifting arrangement that I pinched off the Aussies, and when they found that out they wanted to go halves. So that was fair enough. So our people got four or five trucks and about 40 cases of beer and whisky, and I put them where they did the most good. Then it was handed over to the Aussies because it was their cargo.

BT How did the Australian servicemen who were up in New Guinea at that time feel about what you were doing? Did they resent what you were doing?

HEYNATZ No. Not at all.

BT You got on fairly well with them! What about pay, Alex, were you paid fairly well by the Americans?

HEYNATZ Well I was paid so much it was embarrassing.

BT Is that right! Do you remember how much you were getting a month, for example?

HEYNATZ Oh, about 500 a week.

BT Is that right!

HEYNATZ which was big money against a footslogger.

BT Yes, about five bob a day or something. Alex, when you were up in New Guinea were there any situations you were in which were a bit dangerous?

HEYNATZ Oh plenty, but before I'll say how I got there. All the things seemed to be dragging on a bit. So I thought I'd get my teeth removed and get a full set of teeth. Mills & Mills of Broadwater. They said, "Oh, we can do it in about a week." I said, "Go ahead!" So they took all my teeth out and took an impression but that's as far as I got. They put me on a Lightning aircraft and away I went. Of course they said to me, "Are you ready to go?" I should have said no, but I said "Oh yes, I'm ready to go."

BT And you left your teeth behind.

HEYNATZ I left my teeth behind and that would have been over 40-odd years ago and I've still got the same teeth.

BT So what, the Americans gave you some when you got up there, did they?

HEYNATZ No, no.

BT Oh, you eventually got those ones.

HEYNATZ And I fitted them myself. [Laughs]. And I've still got them!

BT And they are still going well! So you were going to tell me about these situations which you found yourself in which you could describe as a bit dangerous. Now what happened.

HEYNATZ Oh, lots of things. This is how they came at me lots of times. I was one of the few - the only one, in fact, that I know of. They'd all come to me and they'd drink in canteens where their officers congregated, and I didn't go home and call them all nasty names. Some of them were good Yanks. So I got favourite treatment in one way, and certainly did in pay. So much so that I never claimed as a Returned Soldier, because I was a civilian employee of the American Navy in salvage work. [Unclear].

I was sent on quite a few missions that I had to possibly use it if it occurred. I don't think the Japs would have let me off with it.

BT You were in a unique position, weren't you? You were serving in an active war zone but you were a civilian, which was very strange.

HEYNATZ Active, yes, in one sense that's the way you could put it.

BT Yes, that's right. And were any of your vessels you were on when you were up in New Guinea ever get under attack by Japanese aircraft at all? Were you ever attacked?

HEYNATZ Oh yes. I had to come down. Cecil was left behind when they flew me out, and I'd be up there two months and three months before he got there. He came up as

an engineer on the **Sea Hawk** and they got caught in a cyclone off Breaksea Spit, that's off Sandy Cape, and there's very few who've got knowledge of getting through. There are two passages - very difficult to get through. But they couldn't make headway, they couldn't do anything. He spotted this and he put the boat through it and they got into Hervey Bay that way, out of all danger. You see a trawler only has a limited amount of power.

BT Okay, so in New Guinea after you'd done a lot of work, all around New Guinea you were doing marine salvage, were you?

HEYNATZ In the early stages it was only Milne Bay, they couldn't be anywhere else. The Japs had all the rest. So then we went up and I followed a track between a little island and the mainland, we didn't have to go out into the main channel. Lots of small craft. And then gradually we got up to Cape Rover [? unclear] and then Coral Bay and so on. And in those days the Japs had all the peninsula that let them work the Owen Stanleys. And the Yanks got up there finally and blocked them on the south side but they were still in charge of Cape Nelson. Many a time on a certain job we had nobody to take a barge up. And I'd be there having a drink with them and I said, "Oh, alright, I'll be the bloody mug." And I'd take the barge up during the night, camouflaged with bushes and mangroves.

BT And you'd stay in close to the shore, I guess, on the way up?

HEYNATZ Right in through the mangroves or something. And then bring the empty one back. I'm no hero - I don't know whether I ever dirtied my pants but sometimes it would be pretty close.

BT Did you get any medals from the Americans for service or anything like that?

HEYNATZ No. I would have if I had stayed.

BT And was the war finished by the time you came back?

HEYNATZ Oh no, no. I only got as far as Finchhaven. I had leave coming and the boy wanted to get married, so when we got back I decided I wouldn't go back.

BT Right! I think I'll change the tape again, Alex.

END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

This interview continues on [Tape 2 Side B](#).

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with CECIL HEYNATZ

INTRODUCTION

Cecil Heynatz and his brother, Charlie, started fishing with their famous father, Alex Heynatz, when they were still boys. Cecil was the eldest son and when his father's vessel was commandeered for War service, the then nineteen year old Cecil went with it to New Guinea as engineer. There he rejoined his father and together they did salvage work and then fished the surrounding waters to supply an American Army Hospital.

After the War, Alex Heynatz with Evans Padden, of Evans Head, pioneered the sea-trawling for school and later king prawns, off the New South Wales and Queensland coasts, an industry which Cecil, now the owner/operator of his own vessel, is also involved in.

In this interview Cecil Heynatz tells something of the colourful family history and of his own adventurous career at sea. He also gives an insight into early trawling methods and subsequent developments, as well as some of the problems currently confronting the industry.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry, recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Heynatz's home in Ballina, New South Wales, on 10th of April, 1990. There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Would you record your full name, date and place of birth, please Cecil?

HEYNATZ Yes. Cecil Heynatz. I was born in Laurieton, 1921, 15th of July.

JD Laurieton is quite close to here.

HEYNATZ Yes, away from north of Taree, south of Port Macquarie, half way.

JD Yes, and were you brought up in Laurieton?

HEYNATZ Yes, until I was thirteen and a half, I left there.

JD Yes, and then where did you go?

HEYNATZ Oh, I went with my father when he left home, and we went fishing up at Sou'west Rocks, fish trapping.

JD Your father is the sort of "old man" of the fishing fraternity in this part of the world, isn't he?

HEYNATZ Yes, he used to catch lobsters by the 100 dozen a day down there, you know. Terrific!

JD Can you tell us how he came to this country? He originated in Denmark, I believe?

HEYNATZ Denmark, yes. Well, he was a sailor. From fifteen years of age as far as I know, he was cabin boy, or whatever you call them on the sailing ships. He did a few trips out here and then they decided (he and his mate) decided to jump overboard in Newcastle. They used to catch them and put them back on again (the same with my father-in-law, he was a Swede) and they finally got sick of that so they let them stay there you know, in Newcastle, and he got sick of being on boats and everything. Then he walked from Newcastle up along the beach to Port Stephens. Had a bit of a job there with nets (fishing nets) off the beaches, and bream fishing round the headlands with nets. Then he made his way up to Forster, and the first bloke he had a proper job with in Australia, was my present father-in-law. He's dead now, of course. He died at 92, old Swede.

But they used to catch fish by the barrel-load, you know tons and tons, and they used to never even bother keeping mullet or anything like that. They just used to let all that stuff go and just get the bream and the whiting. They were the only things that were worth much money in those days.

JD Your father is 95 years old now.

HEYNATZ Yes, last month, March.

JD So that would be 80 years ago, wouldn't it?

HEYNATZ Yes, mmm.

JD He came ashore.

HEYNATZ Yes, probably a little bit before that too, but that's as far as I know. But I think his first little boat.... I don't know what the first little one was, but his first boat to work outside.... he fished in lakes and that you know. Then when he decided to get better still, he left Forster and went up to Laurieton with a boat called the **Why Worry**. That was a pretty good name wasn't it, really? I don't know much about the **Why Worry** days, because I wasn't even thought of, I don't think, because it was early. I can't remember it really.

JD That was probably a sailing vessel, was it?

HEYNATZ No, no, it was a little motor boat thing, a little motor boat, and he lost that out off Camden Haven. She beached on the what they call the "washout", down from the telemast you know, pilot station. He swam ashore with his mate and they sort of.... I don't even know much about the rest of it until I was going to school at eight years of age, and he.... Mr Gray built this boat for him. From Taree he was, and he built the boat called the **Sea-hawk**, 52 feet long. She had one of those old pluggy sort

of diesel engines. You had to heat them up with a blow-lamp, and God knows what, and using black fuel. I can vaguely remember her because I used to go out fishing on it all the time then, weekends and.... because he was a real successful lobster fisherman. He used to get 100s of dozens of lobsters. He used to pen them up in the river in big crates that were made of Oregon pine. That used to float. He'd put 40 dozen lobsters in a big crate. They used to just float around until he was ready to go to send them to the market. He used to send them all down live. If a lobster arrived down in Sydney dead, it wasn't worth anything. They threw it away. It's a different idea nowadays, you know, you drown them before you even cook them.

I used to start going out fishing with them and I used to get a penny for a schnapper and threepence for a cod or threepence for a schnapper over ten pound. I used to go to school on a Monday, a rich kid [laughs]. I used to be the envy of a few of the kids too.

JD Your father figured in a rescue at sea.

HEYNATZ Well see that's.... He used to be such a good seaman and such a game man, that the boat called the **Iron Chief** went aground on the Mermaid Reef, just north of Crowdy and south of Laurieton, and he had the job (while they were trying to see what they could do with it) he had the job of standing by day and night, to make sure that.... and to try and take pumps and all that sort of thing out to.... and to keep the crew safe, and they were going to lay anchors and God knows what. This bad weather came and she started cracking up and he had to go along side the **Iron Chief** in a hell of a sea. He got the 42 men off and brought them into Camden Haven in a.... They used to talk about how big the sea was, and those following were breathing sighs of relief and yahooing, and I can remember when I got to the school, in the schoolground, looking down at this boat coming in with all the men sitting around the bulwarks. There was a great party on that night, you know.

Many years later, of course, he got his Humane Society Certificate and a medal, a big silver tea and coffee service, and he was the hero of the joint for a long time.

JD He was a great seaman, wasn't he?

HEYNATZ Oh yes, he was very game. The only accident I ever saw him really have was when I started going out.... oh, I think I was about twelve years of age. I went out and he got his leg caught. We were shooting a big sea and he had no wheel or anything, a great big tiller. It used to take two men to hang on to the tiller, one each side you know. The idea was to shoot the waves in and this wave came over the back and he got his leg jammed between the back mast and the gear lever, busted an artery in the calf of his leg. It went up like a football in a matter of minutes, you know, and his mate had to take the boat up to the wharf, and in no time at all he was back working again anyhow [laughs].

JD Yes, a tough person.

HEYNATZ Oh yes.

JD He used to set the shark nets off Sydney beaches I believe?

HEYNATZ Yes well, that was much later on. When Dad left home he went to Sou'west Rocks then, because I left school at thirteen and a half then, and I went to work with him. We went to Sou'west Rocks and worked the boat out of there. He was the instigator there of saving a man's life too, on the pilot vessel. He helped save the

bloke. It was a boat exactly the same as the **Richmond**. You've seen the boat down there? The same man built those three and they reckoned they're unsinkable. Captain Lylie was his name. Lylie got killed in Port Macquarie in a boat, and this other deckhand boatman was almost drowned up at Sou'west Rocks. But I think one of them.... I forget now, but I think one of them did get lost.

Anyhow while we were there, we got this word that they wanted a boat to fish for sharks. Crandon Shark Fisheries down at Sydney. We had to set a thousand feet of net on every beach from Palm Beach down to Cronulla. A thousand feet of net a week. There was us and another small boat. That's what we did, and we used to take on some terrific seas you know, to try and do it. But talk about sharks!

JD Did you actually catch shark in those nets?

HEYNATZ In the net, yes, and the mash was 24 inch mash. You can imagine a prawn net, an inch and a half mash. Well this was 24 inches long. Oh yes, you'd get say, ten big sharks in one net, at Cronulla and up at Whale Beach. All different sorts, tiger sharks. Bondi was well known for big sharks and old grey nurse and the whaler sharks, say the tigers and the big white death fellow, because the sewerage coming out there used to attract the big sharks, see. And they'd go up the rivers too, of course. That was where we got the biggest sharks, was around that sort of place.

JD Was the idea to thin them out so that swimmers would be safe?

HEYNATZ Yes, so that they were safe, yes. We used to have to cut the back fin off, and the bottom part of the tail off, as a guarantee that that's how many sharks you got each week or you know.

JD Was there a bounty on them?

HEYNATZ Not a bounty but it was proof that you caught those sharks. We used to dump the carcasses out to sea further away from the beaches.

JD There wasn't a market for the flesh in those days?

HEYNATZ No, the only thing that.... later on in that part of the thing, you could save the fins and you could ship them through to China for shark fin soup, and that sort of thing. That was the only thing.

JD That, of course, was pre-war, wasn't it?

HEYNATZ Yes, yes. Then when that contract finished, we sort of went up to.... He went to Laurieton for a little while, but then we went down to Forster fishing then. Anyhow it wasn't too long before we shifted south. I think we were there for about two years, eighteen months, when the War broke out. He got word from a mate of his who was stationed down there, that they were after the **Sea-hawk**, and he had another big boat too called **Sea Rover**.

JD That was the Americans wanted it?

HEYNATZ Yes. Well, the Commonwealth.

JD The Commonwealth too.

HEYNATZ That was "lend lease", see. They suppressed our boats and then "lend lease" was passed over to the Americans. Anyhow he got word there that they were after it, so we went out next day (I didn't even know what was on) we went out next day and got a load of fish traps and headed for Ballina. We had been up to Ballina before, and he thought, "This place should be all right." I didn't know, you know. I'd been up and looked at it but I didn't know what was going on. Anyhow he went out and got a load of traps and the next thing we're up here in Ballina in a couple of days' time. Now we stopped here and oh! we slayed the fish. You've never seen anything like it! But anyhow I think it was about two months, and the next thing we're loading the traps on and we're back down in Forster again. I couldn't make out what was going on [laughs].

JD He didn't tell you?

HEYNATZ No, I didn't know really. I thought we were dodging Japs or some other damn thing, you see. Anyhow then when we got back to Ballina he bought a house round in Martin Street, where the Tamar and Martin Street [cross] and the next thing we left down there and we were back up here again. Anyhow we were having tea one night, thinking about how many fish we had caught and how many we would get the next day, and a knock came on the door and there was this great big important looking Australian Army fellow. And he said, "I'm here to tell you, don't move that boat again." He said, "There's a big sticker on the mast and it's suppressed by the Commonwealth." We said, "Oh." So they gave us seven days to get our traps ashore and deliver the boat to number ten Walsh Bay, Sydney [laughs]. So we did it. We had to, of course.

Incidentally I was.... the day that I left home, like went down to deliver the boat to the whatsernames, to the Commonwealth. But Dad had to report to an American Army Colonel, a bloke called Colonel Bradford. Oh he went up and said, "Just look after the boat for a while." When he came back he'd signed on with the Americans, told me what he'd done. He said, "Cecil, would you like to join the Americans?" and I said, "Well, what else can I do? What would be there?" He said, "Oh engineer, you've handled the engine for so long." I said, "Righto," and I said, "I'll go up and see how I go." So I signed on as an Engineer 4D to look after the **Sea Hawk's** engine, and you know, when I left....

JD How old were you may I ask? How old were you then?

HEYNATZ Well, I was twenty, about twenty, yes. No, I was nineteen and a bit, because I was just going to say a while ago when I signed on with the Americans, when I got back up here on just a bit of a furlough, and then to have to go straight back to Sydney in a couple of days, I read my call-up for the Australian Army, and I thought, "Thank God for that!" I'd have made a terrible soldier so.... [laughs]. So that's what I did.

JD You remained as a civilian but employed by the American lease?

HEYNATZ We signed the contract and we (six months' contract) and we got our 25 per cent bonuses and all that, and we were to be treated as officers if we got captured by the enemy. First class travel everywhere and the trouble was that Pop started talking about salvage. I was quite happy to talk, you know, try and look after the boat and everything, and four days after Pop got back down to Sydney again, they flew him to New Guinea to salvage some of the stuff that was sunk up there by the Japanese raids and everything. I was three months before I got up there. They had to alter the boat and everything, and I had to be night-watchman on it. We went up through

Torres Strait. Well, I made sure I called in to Newcastle. I had engine trouble off Forster where Renee was [laughs] and then a little bit of fuel trouble off Laurieton to go and see my mother. Then we arrived up here on the way, you know, where we were heading for New Guinea. We had to load bombs and everything you can imagine, ammunition and everything, in Brisbane. We had a 50 calibre machine gun mounted on the bow, and one on the stern. 500 rounds a minute they used to fire, and I had to be the gunner, and tell the other fellows how to fire the gun and everything. Pull them apart and we used to have to fire one cannister each, out of each gun a day, then pull it apart and put it back together again.

JD Did they give you any training for this?

HEYNATZ No, it wasn't necessary anyway really, as you just stood there and hung on to it. Oh we got pretty good but anyhow we arrived up in Brisbane, and we went to Bulimba. We got another skipper there. The first bloke, Captain Keen, he wasn't real good. I think he was a... oh a Post Office worker or something. He didn't know a thing about it. Anyway he shot through and he went back again, and got a different job with them down there, an American job, you know, but he was an Australian. Anyhow then we waited a few days (eight days I think) up in Brisbane. We got another skipper. Anyhow we took off then and we left in south easterly gales. Oh atrocious weather in Brisbane, coming from the south east. I thought, "God! What's going to happen to us?" We had an Italian speaking sort of a bloke as a cook, and the Captain and myself. We took off for New Guinea actually.

We went up along the coast and we got to White Bay bar, and oh! it was just mountains and blowing a gale! The seas were two and three and one on top of the other, and no way in the world you could get near it. So we went up off White Bar Bay. I said, "Well, the only thing you can do is get up there off Fraser Island and see what we can do in the morning." Anyway this old skipper, he... I don't know whether he panicked or not, or he couldn't handle the boat, but I was up on the wheelhouse. We were straight up off Fraser Island and we were punching this gale to keep off the shore you know, and next thing, the thing slewed round and I thought, "What's wrong?" I raced down and he'd hurt his crutch. He'd ruptured himself on the wheel. So me and the Italian bloke (the skipper went to bed) were all night punching as hard as we could out into this sea, you know, just off the light... you could see it behind us, the Fraser Island light. I said to the bloke, he said, "What's going to happen, Cecil?" I said, "I'm damned if I know." You know I think... it was daylight next morning anyhow, we were more or less in the same spot, about three miles out of Fraser, and I said, "The only chance we've got..." I could talk to the skipper down below, I said, "The only chance we've got," I said, "there's this channel marked a couple of miles north of Fraser Island light, that with a bit of knowledge of the bar harbour," I said, "we should be able to shoot the old **Sea-hawk** across this breaksea spit," because there was a channel down. There's another one up miles further. "Oh," he said, "I can't help you. You do what you like. You do what you think's best." So the wind abated a little bit, and we went along and you could pick this place out, you know like a bar, where it was good there but big seas, but on the other was all just turbulent water. I said, "Well, we've got to go in then," and he said, "Righto, do your best, It's still blowing." I had this old Italian bloke looking and telling me when the waves were coming big, and it was about a mile and a half, you know, in through broken water, but we never copped any. It was as good as gold, you know.

Then when we got inside we breathed a sigh of relief and we turned to port and down towards Fraser Island, and we layed in there for eight days until the gale finished, in a place called Platypus Bay. The wheelhouse doors wouldn't shut or anything, you know, everything was screwed. We lay there for eight days before we could head up towards

Gladstone. We lost that skipper then. He had to get off and we got another old skipper called Captain Everard, and he ended up taking us through, all the way up, Brisbane, Cairns and through the Whitsunday, up through to Townsville, up through to go over to Thursday Island, through Albany Park, you know up the top, Cape York. We were only there four days and we went across to Port Moresby through Coconut Island and all those reefs, and ended up in Port Moresby there then.

Then, of course, we were there about four days and the old **MacDhuie** had been sunk there in the bay, in the harbour, and we left there and we went down, and we had to get to Milne Bay, a place called Fall River, it was named in those days. That was your American code name you know. Of course, we had a code name for ourselves and like flags we had to show if we were challenged. VKJW (I can remember it like it was yesterday) were the flags to fly, and then the code for the day we had to fly. Anyhow we had one trip. Oh we left Port Moresby. It was such a nice day we called in at a little place up there (a beach) we saw these native fishermen there. Anyhow we tried to help them catch some fish and all we got were some dugong in their net.

We left there next day and we went through down past Samarai and up into Milne Bay, and delivered the boat to Fall River in Milne Bay you know. We were there for a long time and the next thing we found that Pop was down at a place called Aiyoma. We were tied up at Gillygilly and at Aiyoma and he was down there salvaging Japanese barges that had been sunk when they landed, trying to take the bay over. Anyhow he started talking pretty hard and he ended up getting the boat to use what he wanted for it. We were there when that 105 planes.... the biggest raid that the Japs made on New Guinea actually, they reckon. Pop was up getting stores up at Gillygilly and I was eight miles down the bay watching these stupid dive-bombers and God knows what, and Pop's going round in a circle up in Gillygilly. I didn't get hit anyhow because I was right in amongst this calafillum tree, this fig tree [laughs]. Pop was lucky, he never got touched.

Then he started.... oh well, I was there for a few months. I went and I decided.... oh we didn't have.... time had run out for the contract and we did a bit over time. Anyhow we thought, "Well, it's no good worrying about that yet." We knew we could sign up again, and Pop started talking about.... Oh, we went down, and I used to swim every day, and dive down into these barges and everything. As a matter of fact, I've got a nice little badge in there I would like to know what it means [laughs]. I got it out of these Japanese barges you know. When we got the Japanese barges up, they came straight up out of 70 feet of water like that. You lifted them up with a blitzwagon with a winch in it, straight up like that in among the coconuts, and we had native boys working with us, and we used to have to tangle up the thing, and then get the barge up with wire. We had these native boys working with us and they had to get stuck into the engine and everything, and wash it all off with fresh water, and rub the rust off, because the Australian Army wanted them to use them, you see. Anyway when we got the stuff all washed off and everything, then they used to take the engine apart, and take them away and get them done up. They used about five of them, you know. They were about 70 feet long. The Army was using them up and down Milne Bay. Very interesting.

JD How long did you stay up in New Guinea, Cecil?

HEYNATZ Well, I just going to Oro when we got up there, like as I say, the contract was whatsername.... When we left Milne Bay, we had to deliver the boat up to Oro Bay then, and Pop started talking about fishing. I was working, you know, carrying bombs and towing barges. It was artillery stuff and everything on it, up and down the bay, and we had to go to Oro Bay then, up round the top, and Pop started talking about

fishing to the colonels and everything. Anyhow the next idea is that we had to.... we got another boat called the **St John** with a freezer on it, and we went out and started fishing for the American hospitals. We went right down to places called Tufi and out to Goodenough Island, supplying the fish and oysters and everything for the hospitals.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE ONE SIDE B

HEYNATZ Everything you can imagine, oars and everything all ready to do our fishing with. We even had traps made and when we were going back again, we went back on a boat called the **Mactan**, that the Americans had commandeered and they had it as floating accommodation for American personnel and everyone. We went back up on it with this fishing gear. Beautiful big sort of a liner I think it was, but only about 5000 ton - 6000. It was a nice boat and everything and we went up to Milne Bay with that.

When we got the gear off, then what we had to do was to leave and go out to what they call Louisiade Islands. That's 250 miles out south east of Milne Bay. Pop and this Everard fellow, they went out there and they were catching marlin and reef fish, everything you can imagine, and we were bartering as well. We had cases and cases of twist tobacco to give to the natives for fruit, and all that sort of thing. We used to come home loaded with that sort of thing.

We had a bit of trouble with our freezer. The first trip was very short, but we did get out to Russell Island and get oysters, and what they call sedest and pannaweaner (most of those things are war-time names, you know, planes were crashed on them and all that sort of thing) and then take it back and give it to the American hospital. That was half way down the bay in Milne Bay just near Artillery Hill, they used to call it. But oh, we caught a lot of stuff, and brought a lot of gear back to them.

The thing is with the fish traps, it didn't work like it does in Australia. You haven't got the current right, and your traps wouldn't set straight. You got a few lobsters in it, but that's about all, and we did most of our fishing with trolling lines for sort of marlin and pike and Spanish mackerel, or reef mackerel, and there's another big reef fish up there, a big green fellow. That was very popular, and when we got the oysters.... We got oysters out at Russell Island, and they were exactly the same as Sydney Rock oysters you know. Oh you get a bag of oysters off one big flat rock, so that was good.

And another place we caught a lot of fish when we were at Oro Bay. We left there, went down off Tufi and then out to Goodenough Island. The only thing is that when we fished out at Goodenough Island, they had what they call a "skeleton coral", and you couldn't tell what was under the surface, until we realised later on that if you had sunglasses, you could pick reef out a mile away. That was a brown sort of coral you could pick out, and you never got into trouble. But staghorn coral was a bluey thing, and the brown sun-glasses didn't pick it up.

Pop steaming along there this day, and the native boys are supposed to be looking out with their glasses and everything, and instead of that they were waving to everyone, waving to these Marys on the shore, and the next thing, high and dry on this damned coral and didn't he go crook! [laughs] Anyhow we got off that half way through the

night, but we lost a few lines because they just sank and got all in the coral. That was at Goodenough.

Then when we fished in further up towards Oro Bay and the sunken reefs in there, that was pretty good. What we did see one day too, was this big American boat (torpedo boat) come flying up past us, and we're chugging along at about eight knots, and the Yanks waved and that to us and everything. They got out of sight of the thing, and we just kept on chugging along, and the next thing we saw a boat in front of us. The next morning we went along side of it and there was a... The American torpedo boat had hit this reef. The top part of the boat kept on going and left the bottom on the reef, and the top of the thing's here like that, and the Americans were not getting off this damned boat. That's how hard it hit the reef.

Anyhow up round Oro Bay then, we came home from another leave. We did the three trips up. Flew home then from Lai. We flew home there from Lai, landed in Townsville. I think we got sick of it then for one reason, but they wanted to tax us. We reckoned we were free of tax up there, but the Australian Government decided to tax our sort of fellow then, and we didn't sign up again, and that's when we came home and we bought a boat at Laurieton.

And we were still living in Ballina, of course, but then we went down and the only boat we could find on the coast was this boat, a V bottom boat, 53 feet, being built down at Laurieton, by a bloke called Dobson.

JD Was this after the War now?

HEYNATZ Oh no, the War was still on, and we rigged it out and brought it back up to Ballina, with the Southern Cross engine in it, after we put that in, and got it fitted out for seine netting, because that was the go in those days you see. You couldn't even keep it, if you had a boat that was in any ways good at all. This one wasn't, it was an ill-shaped V bottomed thing that would roll the milk out of your tea. Anyway we bought that one, and that was safe. The Navy didn't want that sort of thing or the Americans or anyone. They were the only types of boat that were safe to buy, or diagonal plank things, anything that didn't look real good, they were safe. They could go seine netting so that's what we wanted to do.

So Pop got me to go down to Eden for a couple of months, and I worked on a boat called the **Tern**, with old Bill Cordon, a Scotsman, to learn seine netting. So we did that and I came back up and we tried to catch flathead and morwong, and everything out here. Well the morwong aren't thick enough here because they're not a trawl morwong with a black spot on their side. But while we were trawling around we started running into a few prawns out at sea you know. That's when Pop got the idea, well there's got to be prawns out here somewhere. The bad trouble was that we had a seine net which is a digging type of net, with ropes around and the net, pull it together and it's supposed to dig your flathead out. Well, we used this for trawling. I tried the same thing here with our seine net, but all we were getting was what they call a mess. It was a live thing called passionfruit flower. It's for all the world like a passionfruit flower. It moves like that, moves along the bottom and everything and grows out on the reef from this big up to that big, you know. We used to get tons of it and lose our nets and everything because of the mud and that, but we always had these few king prawns and a bit of school prawns in it, you know, and in those days the passionfruit flower was that thick, you can't get inside fifteen fathoms to get no passionfruit. You used to get whiting (sea whiting) and that, but there's no tiger flathead in that close here, only the sand flathead, which you didn't get a lot of anyhow.

But anyhow once we got to know how to do it and everything, everything was ready then, we went down to Eden then, and Pop was starting to build what he called the best boat. When we were up in New Guinea, he'd worked out this, drafted this boat out on a big chart that the Americans had given us, and he had the **Castlereagh** all worked out. What she had to look like and everything, 72 footer or 65 footer, and he came home and I stopped down at Eden. I was there four years actually. I was there when the War finished in 1945, and he had the **Castlereagh** ready, and he was up here prawning with Charlie as a deckhand then, my other brother.

They started to really catch prawns which it was pretty hard, because they didn't have any charts of all the close reefs and everything. They had to hang on to their wires while they were trawling along, and the least little bump they had to yell and, of course, you had to stop this damn big **Castlereagh** ploughing on, and nine times out of ten you'd tear hell out of the net. Charlie always tells me about it, you know, how Pop used to go crook for not yelling out early, and Charlie used to say, "I can't yell out before it bumps, Dad," [laughs] because you had no echo sounders or anything like that. And him and.... I think he sort of got friends with Evans Paddon and they were sort of working in together and saying what was best and which was that.... Pop to this day claims that he was the first to catch a lot of prawns, and Evans reckons he was, and it still.... I think it will go on for ever and ever. But it was you know, Pop's baby, and when he really got to working out how and where, he was very keen on marks. He could go like that and trawl around anything just by landmarks, you know, and Evans, of course, we used to fish right down to Evans Head, and from Broadwater down into Evans Head Bay, there's hardly any snags at all, where up here you've got a reef that runs from down the double sandhills, right down to the big slide at Evans Head. You had to go inside or outside of that to catch prawns, and Lennox Head was very good because you could fish right from Lennox Head up to Byron Bay, and hardly get snagged.

The only thing we ever caught up in Tallow Beach as far as snags went was sailing ship anchors, where the sailing ships used to get the timber off Tallow Beach, Tallow Creek. They'd float the logs off and take that away, and then they'd get caught in a gale and they used to have to ship their anchor and let it go, and you know, get out in to it. That's where we used to catch these damn five and six ton and a half anchors - all that sort of thing. There's one of them down on the headland at Evans Head, one of those big anchors still.

When I was ready to come up in the **Sea Hawk 2** I built a little cottage down there, and 1945 when the War finished I was still down there, and then we came up and started fishing up here with him. I started getting a boat built then, the boat that ended up being called the **Memphis Belle**. Then I gave him some opposition when I got that one up here [laughter]. He used to put us on a quota of a ton a day because the markets were all glutted. We'd be home and finished work, and cooked and everything and in the ice-works at half past nine of a morning, you know, with a ton. We'd only get two bob a pound at the most for it, and since then.... We had done it the hard way because we still had digging nets, believing that you had to dig your prawns out of the mud. Everyone had the same trouble, and gradually worked out into the king prawns, and when you had a flood, your king prawns would come in and mingle with your school prawns into about say twelve or fifteen fathoms. Then you'd be getting both, and scooping up all the little rubbish and shells and what have you. We used to have to hand-sort, all that sort of idea, but your new nets now, you've got a lead line which fishes six inches higher (up to six inches higher) and more in different parts like up in the mud up in Queensland and everything, say a foot, and slightly ahead of your corkline and slightly behind that whatsername where it can't scoop into your nets see, and you get practically clean shots. Well, you don't scoop

anything off the bottom. You only get your fish rubbish or prawns, and we used to have to sort through all that little crab rubbish, everything that came off the bottom.

JD Does that lead line.... it's on the bottom, is it?

HEYNATZ The lead line is on the bottom, yes.

JD And the net?

HEYNATZ The net itself....

JD is a bit above it?

HEYNATZ Yes, when you're towing your net along, your board is going like that, see? Your lead line is fast right on the bottom of the board, and up the back of your board (about six inches or whatever you wanted it) that's where your net goes round, see? You're fishing above the bottom but your lead line is still frightening everything.

JD So the lead line causes the prawns to jump and they're caught in the net?

HEYNATZ Yes, yes. That's the whole idea of it, because then when you get prawns travelling already up off the bottom, you can find them with echo sounders and sonar and all that sort of thing like they do now, which makes it easier than anything see, because they know what they're doing. The same with fish. They trawl on.... find a heap of fish and straight down through it and then lift it up. It's unreal really the way they do it now in comparison to what we used to do.

Where two men can go out on a 55 foot boat now and trawl all night and all day, they just take it in turns to have a sleep or a steer. They can do the work that we used to have a skipper and three men on for sorting, and we used to have to pull our nets up and shake them out, and get all this rubbish out, and back over the side again. Now they use lazy lines, what they call "lazy lines". There's a rope that goes from your board down to above your net with a loop around it, you know. When your boards come to the side of the boat, you unclip this lazy line (a quick unclip thing) you hook it on to a rope that's on your boat, up through a block up top. Straight away you start winching on this lazy line. You don't pull your nets on board. All you do is lift your cod end full of whatever is in it, spill it, tie it, throw it over again. Then your little one comes up, or your other side one. You do the same with that, throw it over. Then your last one. Throw it over like that and away you go, you shoot away. You don't see your bag and everything, just your cod end.

JD Do you think they're still catching as many prawns as they were?

HEYNATZ Oh no, I don't think.... no. They very seldom have the same, I mean, say 25 baskets of schoolies in 25 minutes and all that sort of thing, see, but it's not the same. The only place that they'll be catching a terrific amount of prawns (a ten minute of five minute shot like up in the Gulf, banana prawns) they find it on their sounders and all that sort of thing, and they've got satellite navigators. You can pinpoint where those prawns were. You can turn round and go straight back through it again you know. They are up off the bottom. You can see a load of stuff as soon as you go through it, you pull your net up because you've got tons and tons of prawns in your damn net.

JD They get what they call a "boil", don't they?

HEYNATZ Yes, a mud boil. But that's what they used to do, but now with your sounders and that, you can steam through them and find them too, and see what it is, and you just go back into it.

JD There'd be a lot more, or many, many more boats prawning now off this coast, wouldn't there?

HEYNATZ But there's not as many prawns caught either, you know, even with all the boats. There's not actually as many prawns caught. The silly part about it is, that you were.... years ago small prawns were no good. They put a size on prawns. Well, small prawns are no good anyhow, you don't get anything out of them and they won't keep as well as good ones, and when you're sorting through and you're only taking the good ones out, you're wasting all that prawn, see? We used to use two inch net to get rid of a lot of that stuff, but when you get a ton in no time, they can't get out anyhow, and you're wasting that much prawns that they took the size off prawns. So that you can weigh in everything. Before when we used to go through a patch of prawns, or you know just bring it up and there's prawns there, you'd have a look at it and if there were too many small ones in it, pull the cod end string and let it go and move out, or in, whichever the case may be, and try and work it that way. But now with no size on prawns, well, you've got to grade your prawns but you're still killing out a lot of prawns you're not using anyhow.

JD Is that one of the reasons why there are fewer prawns about here?

HEYNATZ Yes, from here. I think the same as all your other fishing too, your mullet, your blackfish, your bream, your tailor. They're all caught in schools along the beaches and everything, while they're in full roe, and you're killing all that sort of stuff, see, which it looks like after all these years.... salmon the same. Salmon don't even come this far now. They don't get this far. They used to years ago, but now they don't sort of manage to get up here at all because there are none of them left to come up. Until that stuff is taboo for a few years, that time of the season, you'll get less and less, won't you?

And your amateur fisherman too. He's catching fish and sneaking it into the bag all the time, and there's a size on fish. A professional can't (or doesn't want to) keep that stuff anyhow. He's got to get rid of it and try and....

JD He wouldn't be able to sell it through the markets anyway.

HEYNATZ No, no. They get grabbed anyhow if they get undersized fish.

JD But the amateurs have been throwing undersized fish back?

HEYNATZ Yes and no. He's partly to blame for the scarcity. They blame the professionals but that's not right. I mean, the thing is they blame all the professionals and what they see is the rubbish fish. They might say, "Oh look at all the little whittings, six inches long, and that, that they're killing like flat up on the beach." But that isn't a fish that grows any bigger anyhow, and little flathead (little spiky flathead) they think, "Oh, killing all those little flatheads." Well a spiky flathead is no good to eat anyhow, and that's all they see too, you're throwing over the side. Different things you know.

JD Do you think pollution and you know, changes to the eco-system, is sort of having an effect?

HEYNATZ It's got to have. I can't imagine.... I don't know why when we first came up here, or even Laurieton, all the way down Ulla-dulla was seine netting down there, and Lakes Entrance, you could catch leatherjackets. If you got in a patch of leatherjackets, they'll eat every knot on your net because it's got slime in it, but now you can't even catch a decent feed of leatherjacket out here with fish traps. So every so many years apparently, before my time, they get what they called a "red" tide comes down and kills everything. It must get in the lungs of the fish and everything and in their gills and just kills them. They don't know what causes it. It's a sort of a red, red thing.

JD An algaec bloom, is it?

HEYNATZ Yes, must be. You see the red weeds sometimes come in to the rivers, you know, years ago. You see it occasionally now, but all those sort of things are detrimental to it, and I reckon the only place they're catching a lot of leatherjackets now (that's a Chinaman-jacket) is round South Australia, which has never had a lot of leatherjackets before. But, there's nothing here, see.

JD Cecil.... go on.

HEYNATZ And schnapper the same, see. They catch the big schnapper and he's in roe all the time, travelling up the beaches, the female like, and the schnapper (well, all fish) have got a size on that says it can spawn once before it's sizeable to catch for market, which is good, as long as you throw all of them back that's not sizeable. I don't know.

JD Cecil, you've been out of professional fishing now for some twelve years.

HEYNATZ Yes.

JD Did you get out at the right time, do you think?

HEYNATZ Oh I think so, yes. Yes, I got out at the right time because occasionally (even after I left) there was a couple of times that I would like to have still had my boat, but not very often anyhow in those twelve years. It's getting harder, plus the fact that they're not catching the stuff that they're used to and your expenses are that terrific now that well, two bob for fuel and we got a bit of a subsidy on that, and we used to call it about one and tenpence a gallon.

JD A gallon?

HEYNATZ A gallon. Admittedly your two bob was worth a lot of money, but when you get fuel today at, you know, over two dollars a gallon, it's unheard of, isn't it? And your insurances, your slipping, your licence fees, paint, everything has just....

JD All the electronics gear that they have.

HEYNATZ The whole lot that they've got to have, and your.... you know, it's just unbelievable how much it would cost now to be in a boat.

JD It must be keeping a lot of young men out of the industry? To raise that sort of capital to be able to go in....

HEYNATZ Well now they've got a quota. You can't just go and get a licence or anything. It wouldn't matter what you had now. Your licences are regulated now, sort of you.... the only way you can get a boat now would be to buy a boat with a licence and you can't even say you buy a.... say for argument's sake, you buy a 50 footer for say 100 thousand, and you had 300 thousand to spend. You can't put that licence on a 300 thousand dollar boat, and grow bigger like you could before. That boat, if you lost it, the only thing you could replace it with is a 50 footer, which is.... I mean it is the answer, because your big companies and everything just moved in and you know, up the Gulf, the whole lot of it. It's killed everything.

JD Yes. It's certainly changed the character of the industry.

HEYNATZ Yes. Yes, I think you know.... and here it's.... well, on your east coast, it's too late now to do much about lobsters, but Fremantle, as you should know, has the right idea. South Australia, Tasmania, those sorts of places have the right idea with lobsters, that there's a season. They've worked out when lobster are spawning. They have the traps made so that you can't.... well, little lobsters won't stop in it for a start, and it's that serious that if you were caught over there with a lobster out of season, you'd lose a 100 thousand dollar licence, all your gear and equipment....

JD You'd be in trouble with the other fishermen too, I rather think.

HEYNATZ I mean that is the sensible thing to be doing and it will work, because you're letting all those lobsters spawn each year, and you don't catch.... You see we used to catch lobsters with spawn on it, and you send them away, it didn't matter, you know, it just....

JD We've done some remarkably stupid things in the fishing industry, over the years.

HEYNATZ Oh terrible. Yes. Everyone has I think, that's a fisherman. He had to in those days because he'd go hungry if he didn't catch a lot of stuff, or he'd be too hungry in himself. Something wrong [laughs].

Oh, before I forget I want to tell you that bar harbours are not as nice as they look mostly. You get a little bit careless on them, you're likely.... well, in my years, I only took the windows out three times on a 57 footer, and I got very wet the three times. You can easily lose your boat.

JD Lots of boats have been lost in fact.

HEYNATZ Oh lots, yes. Lots of them, yes. A bit careless coming in and spin around and over.

JD Or the weather's not quite right.

HEYNATZ You've got to be too careful. I'm too old for that now, so.... [laughs].

JD Right. Well, Cecil, thank you very much. It's been great to talk to you. You've told us things that we hadn't heard before.

HEYNATZ Sorry if I talked too much.

JD Not at all, not at all. Thank you.

HEYNATZ Thank you.

JD That ends this interview with Cecil Heynatz of Ballina, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with **GEORGE MCRAE**

INTRODUCTION

George McRae was 83 years old when this interview was recorded in his home in Hawks Nest, New South Wales on the 2nd April 1990. The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey as part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry.

Mr McRae has been retired from fishing for some years now but has four fishermen sons and several grandsons in the industry. His daughter also married a fisherman. He started his working life intending to be an accountant but clearly has found much satisfaction in his life as a fisherman. As is evident from the interview, he has an excellent memory for the boats and nets, species and prices that pertained in the Mile River fishing in his day.

During the course of the interview Mr McRae comments on the establishment of fishermen's co-operatives, the building of fishing boats, the pressure of population and the prospects he sees for the future of the industry. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD George, would you record your full name please.

McRAE George Farley McRae.

JD And when were you born, George?

McRAE 30th January, 1907.

JD Where?

McRAE At Raymond Terrace.

JD They have another name for that area now days, don't they (or they use)?

McRAE [inaudible]

JD Is that a town or a street or what?

McRAE No. It's a town.

JD It's near here?

McRAE About half way from Newcastle to Port Stevens, Tea Gardens.

JD And have you lived in this area all your life, George?

McRAE Yes, at Windy Whopper.

JD Windy Whopper?

McRAE Yes. That's [unclear] south of Tea Gardens.

JD On the same water?

McRAE On the Mile River.

JD Oh, it's on the Mile River?

McRAE Yes.

JD And your father was a fisherman?

McRAE No, no, no. He was a timber....

JD He worked in the timber industry?

McRAE Yes. He was a shipping agent for his father's timber coming from the mills up Mile Lake.

JD So your grandfather was in the timber industry here?

McRAE Yes, yes, at Mile Lake.

JD Do you know when your grandfather arrived in this area, about? Would have been the last century, wouldn't it?

McRAE Yes, yes. In about the middle of the 18th century.

JD So the family's been here for a very long time.

McRAE Yes, yes. There was a big family of them. His father and his brother married two sisters, the Farley girls. I think there was about eight, nine in the grandfather's family.

JD Did they all settle around these parts?

McRAE Yes, around the bush. There was only bush work in those days. It was all timber.

JD Were you brought up in what is now Hawks Nest?

McRAE Yes, Tea Gardens.

JD Tea Gardens?

McRAE Tea Gardens. Hawks Nest was the first place here that people lived and they transferred over to Tea Gardens.

JD How did Tea Gardens get its name, do you know?

McRAE Oh, I've heard it a dozen times [laughs]. I think there was someone, a company, I think it was, tried to grow tea there but it wasn't a success. I think that was the start of it.

JD When you left school George, what did you do, what work?

McRAE Well I picked up odd jobs, tally clerking and then I joined the wharf labourers.

JD Where were the wharves?

McRAE Oh the boats used to moor in the harbour.

JD But it was what port?

McRAE Port Stevens.

JD And what else did you do?

McRAE Well [laughs] I had a fishing line. I was catching fish, getting rid of them one way or another, mostly by barter. I did shift [the] odd box. I could catch a box of bream or a box of flathead.

JD That was with a hand line?

McRAE A hand line, yes.

JD From a boat?

McRAE Off the beach.

JD Off the beach?

McRAE Yes.

JD What sort of fish were you catching?

McRAE Mostly bream and flathead.

JD And you came into the fishing industry that way?

McRAE Yes. The inspector caught up [with me]. I had to get a licence. They were only five bob in those days, half a crown for six months. Five bob was five bob.

JD Yeah. Would this have been during the Depression years?

McRAE Yes, yes, '27.

JD You weren't married then though?

McRAE No, no. I didn't get married till '32.

JD You wouldn't have carried on with a hand line for long, would you?

McRAE Oh no, no. In fact I borrowed the money of the mother. She sent me the cheque from my brother's pay from the Education Department when he [was] teaching; seven quid. That was a fortnight's pay and I bought six bundles of net with that. I rigged that and went fishing.

JD From the beach?

McRAE Yeah, yeah, mostly flathead.

JD How did you shoot the net from the beach?

McRAE I just put one end ashore and shoot along; only had six strips. Shot along, put the other end ashore and then....

JD Haul it?

McRAE No, no, bump it. It hit the bottom with a stick. You go along and bump them off that way.

JD What sort of fish did you catch that way?

McRAE Flathead mostly. I specialised in catching flathead.

JD And then what happened? Did you go on from there into other....

McRAE Oh later on, yes. I finished up with a beakie net and then I got a mate and went beaking, sea beaking.

JD Beakie, that's a type of fish?

McRAE Sea garfish, sea garfish. They're prevalent in here, prevalent for, oh, nine months of the year.

JD They a good size?

McRAE Yeah, big beakies. They weigh up to, oh, pretty well a pound weight.

JD That's quite a big garfish, isn't it?

McRAE Oh yeah, yeah. That's the biggest of them but they're all good fish, sea beakies. Then in [the] travelling season I had the hauling net.

JD That's when the fish travelled?

McRAE Yeah, yeah, when fish travelled; mullet, blackfish and bream. Oh and lots of other sorts, king fish, jewfish, tarwhine. They're the main fish.

JD You'd have fished from a boat when you were going for those species?

McRAE Oh yes, yes. You [unclear] on a boat. There was two to a crew. You had your notified shots on the beach where you worked. The fishermen asked for those to be gazetted, like.

JD What is a notified shot?

McRAE Well the position you can work.

JD Oh yes?

McRAE It's a spot on the beach, a place on the beach that you work from.

JD And that's your place.

McRAE Yeah. That's where everyone's got to go if they want to work that shot. There was three shots on this side. One was at Mile Point. That was at the mouth of the river, another one at Barnes' Rocks and the other one down [at] Jimmy Beach.

JD Where they the only places?

McRAE They were the only places. No one was supposed to come in between those shots while you were layed there. If you wanted to lay on Mile Point, you layed there. If you wanted to go to the rocks, well you layed on the rocks and then the other shot[s] were down the beach but no one was to come in between there.

JD How was it decided who would fish where?

McRAE The fishermen themselves, among themselves, wherever they wanted to go and lay on, that's where they layed on. They had to take their turn, of course but the Department's law was you only held that shot for 24 hours but we used to hold it until we shot. I think you had to go back behind the other boats then, once you had your shot. There was quite a few crews working in those days.

JD More or less than now?

McRAE Oh more, more in those days, yes.

JD They'd be pretty well queued up for a shot, wouldn't they?

McRAE Yes. You'd be laying there for a week sometimes without having a shot. You had to have the weather right for the fish to travel. They get bigger shots now these days of course because they've got different sorts of nets. We were only allowed 150 fathom, that's 300 yards of net and you weren't allowed to bag in it. Your centre had

to be straight net, whereas now they've got these great bags in them. They'd hold 2,000 boxes of fish, the way they're catching so many these times.

JD Were your nets hand hauled?

McRAE Yes, yes; all hand hauled unless you had a diver. That was a bottom net, a net that went to the bottom. They had winches.

JD What would they be used for?

McRAE In those days power had only just come in, in those days, around the mid-twenties.

JD They were a small powered winch, were they?

McRAE No, no, no, hand winch. Powered boats I'm talking about.

JD Oh, I see.

McRAE It was mostly sail and pulling about.

JD Sail, was it?

McRAE Yeah. When they went up the Lake fishing they sailed up there or pulled or got towed behind the store boat that went up.

JD When you say pulled, you mean road is it?

McRAE Road, yes, road.

JD It's a different world, isn't it?

McRAE I'll say it is. These times it's all bloody speed; speed, I mean speed too.

JD Yeah. They use outboard motors now, do they?

McRAE Oh with the fishing to shoot their nets off? Yeah, mesh nets they use them.

JD Did you have a number of different nets for different purposes?

McRAE Oh yes, yes. You've got a mesh net; like the flathead net I was telling you about, that's what they call a mesh net, gill net. Then there was the beakie hauler, a whiting hauler and the travelling fish hauling net; three different nets.

JD Did you go for salmon along here at all?

McRAE Oh they're an outside fish. Oh yes we used to catch them too out there but they were only good for lobster bait. You'd get four bob a dozen for them. That's when you could sell them.

JD Where did you sell your catch?

McRAE There was lorries started to operate in about the mid '25s from here. Previous to that the steamers used to come in and pick them up in the harbour. They'd carry their ice. Hunter River boats went up the coast. They called in.

JD Take them to Sydney?

McRAE Yes, take them to Sydney; big boxes, seven hamper cases, they used to call them. They hold seven baskets. A basket was known as a hamper in those days.

JD Would that be about the size of a box now days?

McRAE Oh, well yes, roughly about the same, 60, 70 pound. I think they've reduced what you put in your boxes now. I think it's down to 25 kilos, I think, mostly in a box now. That's classed as a box.

JD Do they still go to Sydney from here?

McRAE Yes by truck. See well these trucks started.... well individuals owned them and it all depended who you wanted to take your fish, who you shipped with, see. It's no good chopping and changing about all the time if you weren't satisfied. They'd come back and give you whatever they thought was right. Well if one bloke would give you more than the other, well you went to him but I stuck to the one bloke all the time. Old Ernie Kysman took my fish down. We were quite satisfied with what we were getting because we knew what we were going to get. Then when the markets opened up, you didn't know what you're getting. What went to Sydney [you] practically got nothing for.

JD You'd have been in fishing when the co-ops started, wouldn't you?

McRAE Yes, yes. I was at the first meeting when they formed it. There was only five of them. We worked from here to the Bay. Didn't Ike tell you that?

JD He talked about it, yes. Did you find the co-op a good idea?

McRAE Oh later on it was, yes. Once it got settled it was but we couldn't get a decent manager to begin with. They were robbing us all the time.

JD The managers that you had?

McRAE Well that's who it was, for sure. One lot of mullet's still in Dark's Iceworks somewhere. We never worried about them but we'd know that a lot of them were going north to some of the lobster men up there for bait. There'd be a time, if we'd have pressed any charges at all it would cost us more than what it was worth. I had records. I used to do the settling up those days. I knew what was going on but what's the good of complaining. You got nothing out of it; only went in more debt.

JD To come back to the boats you used George, were they built locally here?

McRAE Yes, yes. A lot of fishermen built their own boats but there was a chap used to work out the mill down at Windy Whoop harbour at Dulverson, he built my boat. There was three, four boats he built for me and the boy.

JD Could you describe the boat? Was it a clinker, carvel- built boat?

McRAE Carvel-built boat, sixteen foot. It was a big boat; sixteen foot with about [a] five foot six beam; carvel-built, two pair of paddles.

JD Two pair?

McRAE Two pair, yeah.

JD 'Cause you had two people on board.

McRAE Well she'd be blowing hard when you go to shoot off to catch your fish.

JD What timber did they use?

McRAE White beech.

JD That's a local timber?

McRAE Yes. White beech was the main timber. Oh they have built them out of meranti but white beech was the main thing. New Zealand timber was karri. That was very expensive. It was the better timber but it was too expensive.

JD How did white beech compare with huon pine?

McRAE Well, no beech is the best. Huon I pine, I think that was more of bigger boats they used that for, I think.

JD George, did you do prawning as well?

McRAE Yes. I started prawning in 1935. A mate of mine took me up there, Abe Sheener (you might have heard of his name) in '35. I never had a net but when I came home I made my own net. [I was] up there for a fortnight. When I went back next time I had my own net.

JD It worked alright?

McRAE Oh yeah, yeah; best net on the river [laughs]. I always say that but it was the same breed of net as what they're using these times.

JD But it would have been a cotton net wouldn't it?

McRAE Yeah, cotton. Five bundles of net went into that net. Now it's the same principle as what they're using now but they put more net into them; six or seven bundles. Course they've got longer nets these times too but it had to be ten fathom in those days. Now it's practically eleven fathom. Instead of reducing it when metres come in they left it at twenty metres. Well that gives you an extra, another two yards, like 22 yards you've got. So you've got to have more net for them these times but there's seven, eight bundles in some of those nets they've got now.

JD It's a pretty big net, is it?

McRAE Oh yes, yes. Oh you don't want them any bigger.

JD Too difficult to handle?

McRAE As big as what they can work, yeah. Any rate the Department's got restrictions on the length of rope like you can use and the length of your net from the cork line back to the tail end of the bag. So you can't put too much [unclear] into it.

JD Do they check the nets very often?

McRAE Yes, regularly. If they think there's someone getting them over size, well they call up for a measurement. The inspectors do that.

JD George, in your time in fishing there'd have been a lot of new rules and regulations brought in.

McRAE Oh yes. Well fishermen in the olden days have their own rules among themselves. As long as things went OK, well the Department didn't say anything but now I think the Department's making the rules and you've got to comply with them.

JD Are they good rules?

McRAE [laughs] We thought ours were but some of these the Department makes are not. When they put the ballot on this prawning business here [it] was no good.

JD What was that about?

McRAE That was in '79. We had our own rules for prawning but they started this caper in, oh '33, 1933 I think it was. Well you had to have a boat and a net, be licensed of course, yourself and your boat and net. We attended a sale, or what they called a sale to see who shot that night, every day at 4.00 o'clock. That was from full to new moon. Now since the ballot comes in, you ballot once a month for the whole of the month. See our sales were every day. When the War was on they came up here. Manpower was laying idle all the time there. Course they wanted tucker, fish for the troops and one thing and another. So they brought in, made us work to a rule that [if] we weren't fishing, we could go fishing and prawning. Whereas our rule, we only had prawning for that fortnight we were there. Couldn't go fishing. Well after the War we didn't relax the rule because it suited us. We still went fishing and prawning. That was professional fishermen.

So then later on there was Tom, Jack and Harry, everyone coming in. If you had two quid you could get a fishing licence and you'd get a net and lay on up there and you'd have other jobs besides. The Department didn't try to stop that. We asked for a sale on the full moon. Like the rule was that they brought in, every fourth day.... You had three days off and the fourth day you had to be there otherwise you were [unclear]. Well we asked when they starting talking about bringing the ballot in.... They've got [a] ballot in all the other places. We asked for a sale on the full moon the same day as they held their ballot in other places and they wouldn't give us one. A ballot had to be uniform all round.

JD And that didn't suit the fishermen here?

McRAE No, no, don't suit. What's the good of a ballot mate? It all depends on your luck. You might'n get a shot. It's only, well a bloody lottery. That's all it is. You were depending on that for a living. How would you like to live expecting to win the lottery to keep yourself going? That's how this ballot works as far as they're concerned. My

boy struck it lucky a couple of darks back there. It's not actually the night you draw because if it's a good night you can draw a good night but the weather's up against you. The night he drew there'd been crook weather. The weather was fine enough. Along came the prawns. They got 100 boxes in the one night.

JD Do you think there's too many fishermen fishing the river?

McRAE Oh no, no, no. If they're not making a living they've got to get out as far as that goes.

JD Do many people come into the fishery and then go out again?

McRAE Oh they come and go all the time, yes, yes. The most fishermen are the descendants....

JD Of fathers who were fishermen?

McRAE Of fishermen, yes; descendants of fishermen.

JD Yes. George, is there a problem with the recreational fishermen at all? Is there tension between the recreational and the professionals?

McRAE Well not so in this place. I believe there is in some places but not here.

JD George, you've been out of fishing now for some years, haven't you?

McRAE Yes, yes. I pulled out in '67 when I was 60 years of age. It wasn't the age that took me out at all. I'd sold a property at Windy Whopper and decided I'd knock off fishing and go up the lake prawning. I worked every night then. Every chance I got I worked. That was before the ballot came in, of course. I worked every night and was making a comfortable living up there. Then when the ballot came in, that was the end of that.

JD So you don't have a licence now?

McRAE No, no, no. I finished up giving everything away and getting the pension.

JD Do you do a bit of fishing for yourself?

McRAE Not at the present time, no.

JD You started off intending to be an accountant, didn't you?

McRAE Yes, yes.

JD Do you regret that you didn't carry on in that profession?

McRAE Oh no, no. No fear. I've had a fair life. Fishing is a healthy life.

JD You enjoyed it?

McRAE You your own boss. You can please yourself when you go to work whereas in this office work, it didn't suit me.

JD [Are] any of your children involved in the fishing industry?

McRAE They all are.

JD How many children do you have?

McRAE Four boys are fishermen. One served twenty years in the Navy. He came back and he went fishing. The other three started from the word go when they left school. I've got one daughter married to a fisherman.

JD So you're very much a fishing family now, aren't you?

McRAE Oh yeah, now it is. Jeff's sons are fishing; three of them.

JD They're your grandsons?

McRAE My grandsons. The other grandson from the boy, he's a jackaroo. He took to the bush.

JD Well that's in the family tradition too, isn't it?

McRAE Yes, yes. Way back it is.

JD George, how do you see the future for fishing around here?

McRAE Well I think the estuary fishermen won't be on the job for much longer in my way of thinking.

JD Why's that?

McRAE Well the places are growing up all the time. You're getting that much public around you, there'll be no room. They complain all the time, the public like.

JD Do you think they're affecting the fish?

McRAE Oh no, no, no. The fish are just as thick as ever. They're catching more mullet these times than what they had over the years. Of course it's those nets, as I told you about it that's doing that.

JD But there's still plenty of fish around?

McRAE Oh yes, yes, any amount. They've got bigger hauls of fish [in] late years than whatever I got. I used to sit on that beach out there from one Christmas to the next just waiting for fish to come. They all went down that beach, no matter what species you like to mention. You start off with Christmas time. You've got your sand whiting. January, February your flathead start to travel, go out and your beakies come from the sea. The sea beakies come in. You've got them for nine months of the year. In March your mullet start to travel. They last for a couple of months, I suppose. Then your ground fish come, your bream and blackfish. You used to get the king fish too then; Salmon [come] in the spring of the year, November. Spring every year there's tailor

travel down. Then you get trumpeter whiting [in] November; November's trumpet whiting. [Then you're] back to Christmas again.

JD So you'd have something going all through the year?

McRAE Yeah, all the time.

JD That's still the case?

McRAE I've sat there for five weeks on end and not had a shot, not with the nets. Then within two days I got a big shot of fish.

JD This interview is continued on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD George, you were just about to tell us about a shot you did for king fish.

McRAE Yeah. Well that was the last shot I had. It was the best shot ever I got. It was in '52, 1952. One of my boys had just started working with me; 160 fish, average 40 pound. That's the biggest catch of king fish I've caught but I caught lots of them, oh 40 or 50 fish.

JD Did they bring a good price?

McRAE Oh yes. We got a bob a pound for them those days.

JD That was a good price then.

McRAE Yes Jerry Gruvis in Newcastle bought them.

JD Did the tailor sort of slacken off here?

McRAE Oh yes, yeah. They'd come some seasons.... One season there, I don't know exactly now when it was. It was just after the War, I think, after this second War. The beach.... There was thousands of boxes of tailor on this beach and the following year those tailor, well I don't say they were the same bloody tailor, but their season, the tailor season was up on the Queensland beaches. They stopped the fishermen up there from catching them.

JD Why?

McRAE There was too many. They couldn't handle them. The same here. Well they did handle them out there but they're a heavy fish. They go to the bottom and you've got a job to get the damn things out. If you're not prepared in the first go to have ropes round you and get them to the top, you can't get them up.

JD Where they canning the tailor?

McRAE No, no. We were getting two pound a box for them, what we were sending to Frank Hanlon. I think that was before the co-op opened.

JD Was he smoking them?

McRAE Yes, yes, Hanlon. He had a big business smoking in Newcastle. We got one freight, 140 boxes. We shifted them direct from Nelson's Bay. A truck took the straight through to Sydney and we gained on that price that Hanlon was paying us because 314 pound for 140 boxes or 280, that's 34 quid extra we got by sending them direct to Sydney. There was lots of shots of tailor over the 100 mark. Some of them 200, 300 boxes they were getting in their shot.

JD Are they a fish that stays in close to the shore?

McRAE Yes, yes, yes. They generally get in the holes along the beaches in big schools the same as the salmon. The salmon all get into one school; thousands and thousands of boxes in them. Through the War the bay men, they wanted me to go out but I wouldn't be in it. There was five or six of them there from the bay [who] used to go out and catch them. The soldiers were at the bay. The Yanks were there. They were feeding them on them. The patch that was out there, they were shooting them in, shooting them all in and then malting[?] them; letting them go again. [They would] take what they wanted, they'd take their 100 dozen or a couple of hundred dozen. They were doing that two or three times a week whenever they wanted them; whenever they could afford them.

JD What, they sort of paddocked them, did they?

McRAE No, no, no. They didn't go away then. They used to hang around there, [unclear - sick or thick?]; just quieten them down a bit so they didn't want to travel. They were getting their 90 pound, 100 dozen in those times. That's better than your four bob a bloody dozen that we used to get.

JD George, anything else you want to tell me about the fishing?

McRAE Oh, no, not that I know of. Have you ever been.... You haven't been yourself, a fisherman?

JD No.

That is the end of this interview with Mr George McRae, fisherman of Hawks Nest, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with **BARRY MCROBERTS**

INTRODUCTION

After a varied series of employment experiences both in Australia and overseas, including a period of service in the Army, Barry McRoberts became involved in the establishment and the management of the Ulladulla Abalone Divers' Co-Operative of which virtually every abalone diver in New South Wales is a member. He has served as chairman of the National Fishing Industry Council and also as chairman of the New South Wales Fishing Industry Council. He is currently consulting to the abalone industry.

Barry McRoberts' knowledge of and experience in the abalone industry is extraordinary. In this interview he tells the history of the industry in New South Wales and the management techniques applied in it. He also makes detailed comments on the hazards to divers' health and the inroads of illegal diving and exporting. He discusses marketing conservation of the stock and career prospects in the industry.

The interview provides an excellent overview of this important industry. It is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry. The interviewer is Jack Darcey. There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Barry, would you record your full name please.

McROBERTS Yes Jack. It's Barry James McRoberts and I was born on the seventh of the twelfth, 1938.

JD And where were you born?

McROBERTS In Sydney and lived in the western suburbs of Sydney out Endfield area.

JD And you've spent your whole youth in that part of Sydney?

McROBERTS Yes. I went to Croydon Park Tech which was not noted for its academic achievements and I think I failed every subject but football which I got a jersey for when I left.

JD Your family were not in fishing obviously?

McROBERTS No, no. I went from one dead end job to another. I worked in lolly factories because I was a greedy kid and then biscuit factories when I got sick of lollies. Then I joined the Railways and became what they called an engine cleaner then which is an acting fireman in the days when they still had steam. Worked in brick pits and then finally decided that it all looked too hard to make a living at for the rest of my life and joined the military. I joined the Army when I was about twenty, I think (nineteen or twenty). My young brother joined the Army not long after me. I left the Army in October '68 and that's where my fishing connections started. My brother had not known that I joined the Army for only a three year term and he joined for a six year term and when he heard that I was leaving he decided he'd leave too, well before his term was up. He bought a prawn trawler on the Hawkesbury River and everytime the Provost used to come and chase him, he'd go out prawning and I think that's where I first became involved [laughs] in the fishing industry. I used to help him clean the boat. They were old bait boats that Zane Gray had and, oh real old relics.

So then I drove trucks because I was in a transport unit in the Army, and I drove trucks and finally joined the Edgell organisation. Somebody suggested that I should strive for something higher than a truck driver which I really loved. I enjoy truck driving and I became involved in the marketing side of Edgell's organisation under a guy called Neil Kellett, and left the Edgell's organisation to work with Neil Kellett in his business and we opened a wholesale distribution premises here in Milton, just up the road from Ulladulla. At that stage I first became aware of abalone divers. The abalone divers had approached me to store abalone. They were having trouble selling it. At the same time we were interested in harvesting seaweed out of Jervis Bay and we needed to do that with divers. So that's where the connection with the diving industry started. I don't know why I was so outraged about the marketing practices that existed in the abalone industry at the time but it seemed that the divers were being treated as pawns and the processors at large seemed to be doing rather well. It was suggested then that we form a co-operative of these divers and the premises that I had in Milton became the first registered office for the cooperative and the cooperative was formed formally from the old Association of divers in 1975.

I left the area in 1975 and spent nineteen months overseas in Asia, Asia Minor; worked for a while in Britain. Back to my old love as a truck driver, a worked in Scotland as a truck driver and saw a lot of Britain [laughs] that way. So it was quite a cheap way to travel and then took a job in the United States. I had a visa for the States and I got a work permit, or I got a Social Security number which allowed me to be employed. Didn't work for long but worked in Warner Bros studio as a carpenter for a while and I've never driven a straight nail in my life and God help us, I don't know if anybody ever sat on or stood on anything that I built. Went to Mexico and finally came back to Australia pretty well broke and decided this is where I wanted to stay after all.

After I'd been back a few months I was invited to take up my old job as secretary of the co-op, the one that I'd started. There was no wages which didn't make it such an attractive proposition [laughs] and the co-op was having its problems and there wasn't much money around and the abalone industry was in decline. So for the first few months I did it for no wages until we got the thing back up on its feet. We at that time had about 110 divers in New South Wales (round about 110) who were considered to be involved in the industry one way or another. It was obviously too many divers for the state of the resource. There'd been a study by the Government in 1975 by a senate select committee which suggested the correct number of divers for the State was 33. So obviously something had to be done. So we set about trying to introduce a management regime to reduce that 110 divers to the desired number. The best we could come up with without creating too many hardships for people involved in the industry was 58. So you can imagine there was another 52 divers in the industry who were very, very upset about how that management regime was introduced but it was

introduced on the basis of history in the industry. People who had spent six months in each of the preceding three years working in the industry, they only had to have worked one day in any of those six months in the year. So it was about as fair as we could get it under the circumstances. By no means the best system, but the best we could think of at the time.

We had a hostile bureaucracy at that time who was opposed to limited entry regimes. The state of the resource was such that even the bureaucracy couldn't ignore the need for some sort of input control or output control on the industry. So we achieved a number of 58 and all those people.... That was in about 1979/80 when we arrived at this figure of 58 and we decided to achieve the number of 33, what we would have to do was have unconsolidated licences. Everyone who got a licence in that 58 were considered to be unconsolidated licences and when they wanted to sell their licences, or when they wanted to leave the industry, they would have to consolidate with somebody else so that it was two out, one in. Then having consolidated a licence, a licence remained a consolidated licence and could be transferred on one for one basis from there on in. That was introduced, as I said, in about 1980 and brought the New South Wales' regime pretty much into line with what was happening in other States where licences had been restricted and transferable for some time. I suppose being last to manage an industry (of any of the States), we did have the benefit of seeing the other good points and failures and we considered this system to be the best system to reduce the number to where we needed it to be reduced. There were changes within the bureaucracy at that time which meant we had moved away from some of the rather reactionary thing that had applied in the past. Even though we developed reasonably good relationships with the bureaucracy, there was still some pretty well entrenched management principles and philosophies that applied which were contrary to our thinking.

With the changes within the bureaucracy we found a more receptive group of people in government to deal with. They were at least prepared to listen to what we had to say and they still had some rather strange ideas about just how much an abalone diver should earn. I found that a little difficult to accept given that everybody else in the community was entitled to get rich but the Department of Agriculture Fisheries Division at that time had this peculiar attitude that fishermen.... somebody else should determine what's a reasonable income for a fisherman. Of course, coming from the sort of background that I came from where the harder you worked the more you made and the more you're entitled to, I couldn't quite come to grips with their thinking at all. Probably that attitude is still maintained in some dark and dusty corners of the Department where the Government wants to have some decision making powers of the income of a fisherman in general and an abalone diver in particular but I think we've made some progress and I think it's been recognised that our industry has within its rank and file and its participants some pretty forward thinking people and people from a diversity of backgrounds that mean that the common wisdom allows us to develop within the industry itself some pretty appropriate management techniques. So I'm pleased to say that our relationship with government has improved quite considerably.

The community still maintains some unusual attitudes. They seem to treat us.... treat the divers at least pretty much as the sort of people they'd like to see in movie theatres but they don't necessarily want them in their lounge rooms. In other words, they like to hear of the romance of the thing and the conflicts but they don't like them being fat cats or they consider them fat cats and they don't like that much at all and you wouldn't want your daughter to marry one, not unless he's a retired diver. We still encounter that attitude and from within our peer group in the fishing industry sometimes we're rather scathingly commented about as "the fat cats". Of course I think it's the tall poppy syndrome. The abalone divers quite often came from, as I said

earlier, diverse backgrounds and therefore didn't come into the fishing industry with any preconceived notion of what a fisherman's role was and they were quite prepared to go out and develop their industry, not just at the harvesting sector stage, but to take it further and to co-operate in processing and marketing their product.

Now that had happened in the fishing industry before, particularly when it came to processing, but not so much marketing. There wasn't quite as much attention paid to marketing in the fishing industry as there had been in other industries. Because the abalone divers got off their backs and went out into the market place and learned what their customers were looking for and applied it to their processing and their handling technique, they tended to do well and of course any group who's doing well is likely to suffer the slings and arrows of his comrades who are not doing so well in other sections of the industry [laugh]. So that happened but government also recognised the contribution that the abalone industry was making to the marine exports. The current export earnings is about 140-150 million dollars a year.

JD That's from the whole of Australia?

McROBERTS From the whole of Australia and that puts us about number three as marine export dollar earner in, I think, lobsters and prawns [which] are probably the only two commodities that are bringing in a higher return. So I think that also contributed greatly to government's attitude to protect the industry and to apply management techniques and to try to maximise the economic benefit for the community at large, I mean export earnings. That's what it's all about.

What I found interesting was the way the people changed in the industry over the last fifteen or twenty years. What we saw in the early days were people who were, as I said, from a diverse background and they tended to be people who came into the industry from skin diving or the surfing movement and they were life-style people and they had no real regard for accumulating wealth. Many of them had no real regard for accumulating wealth and they tended to spend their money almost as quickly as they made it. They were exploited but they didn't care in those days. They just went out and dived harder and worked more. As the industry became a little more sophisticated, people started to look at it as a business and even people who had no inclination to be divers, looked at the potentials of the abalone industry, the management that applied to the industry, what long term prospects were for a business man. So we found people investing in the industry as businesses rather than drifting into the industry from a love of diving or lifestyle type of background.

JD Are they still owner/operators?

McROBERTS Well in New South Wales particularly we've striven to maintain that. We believe some industries such as diving should never be corporate controlled industries when you're applying... where the effort to derive an income is controlled by somebody other than the individual who's putting himself at risk. We've seen property rights attach to licences in some States and it's meant that companies have been able to buy up licences or finance people into licences and in some cases those licences will never be owned by the people who've been financed into them. It brings additional pressure on the individual as to when he should work and when he shouldn't.

In New South Wales the industry has said there should be no outside pressure on a diver as to when he works and when he doesn't work. If he doesn't feel like diving, he shouldn't dive on that day and he shouldn't be subject to any pressure to go to work other than what he believes he's capable of doing on the day. It is a hostile environment and the dangers associated with this industry or participation in this

industry are not necessarily the ones that the public hears about and sees, such as the shark attack and desperate deeds by desperate men in the water. They're more the cumulative effects of a long time in a hostile environment and divers in New South Wales will work on average (in the water) of 105 days a year. They will spend on average five hours a day in the water. Now the type of problems associated with that, the type of risks to the health associated with that are not the shark attack because in fact we've never lost a diver to a shark in New South Wales, but we have a lot of divers who've suffered from respiratory disease and bone problems, hearing loss, ear nose and throat problems generally and we haven't been able to establish it clinically yet, but we believe there's also the possibility of neurological problems. You can't place yourself in a hostile environment for a continuous period and not suffer, in my view, some effects of that. I am sure that anyone who spent any time in a hostile environment under pressure and there's been any amount of Wars that have occurred where people suffer and they don't necessarily suffer straight away. They suffer some time in the future. So I've always worried about that and some of the more responsible people in our industry have worried about it.

JD They're all hookah divers, aren't they?

McROBERTS We were down to about two snorklers in New South Wales up until a year ago. There were a couple of guys, one Rob Kershaw in Narooma particularly springs to mind. He preferred to work with a snorkel. Our divers now are working.... the great majority are working with hookahs. Originally they used oil lubricated compressors and even though we found the oilless compressors are less reliable, we've encouraged our divers to use them in preference to the oil lubricated compressors. We don't believe there's a filter system anywhere that is totally effective so we like to recommend to our people, of course we can't enforce it, but as a co-op we recommend that where possible [they] avoid oil. Divers approach their diving differently. Some will work long hours at relatively shallow depths, some say ten metres, and others will work shorter hours at deeper depths, say 25 metres, to 30 metres in some cases. They tend to be rarer than the guys who spend a lot of time in relatively shallow water.

In New South Wales the resource was depleted very quickly and it's meant that you have to work about double the number of days in this State, compared to say Victoria, South Australia or Tasmania, for the same tonnage.

JD Is there a quota applied?

McROBERTS There is a quota of ten tonne per diver in New South Wales. In Victoria for instance it's twenty tonnes per diver and they could probably pull that tonnage in about 60 to 65 days in Victoria; 105 days for ten tonne in New South Wales gives you some idea. In Tasmania it's 16.8 tonne and in both South Australia and West Australia of course it's a meat weight quota which I think is around about eight tonne. The industry has.... as it's matured, some of the glamour has gone from it if you like and the romance of the industry but the pluses are of course that government and some people in the community (not enough) are realising that this is a precious resource and it needs to be nurtured and strict controls have to be applied, even draconian measures as far as penalties are concerned have to be applied.

If I can give you some idea of the impact of illegal fishing, Prince's report (Jeremy Prince's report) which was conducted in 1989 (it was commissioned by our industry in New South Wales) showed that probably one point five to two times the pressure on the resource occurs from illegal full-time participants in the abalone industry. So he's identified for instance 75 full-time illegal operators in the NSW industry and yet we

only have 44 licensed divers in the industry. Now that means there's a leakage in revenue from the State of about \$20m a year, given that the legitimate industry is worth \$10m. It means that it's not only leakage of revenue for the State, but nationally it's lost because these people don't declare it in their tax. It also impacts on our reputation overseas in many cases when this product finds its way into the market place and is sold as Australian product.

JD They perhaps would also take under sized fish?

McROBERTS Absolutely. That's the most worrying feature from the abalone divers' point of view is that we work to very strict size limits which were recommended by industry to maintain the stock as best we can and of course an illegal operator is only interested in getting in and out of the water as quickly as possible with as much fish as possible, so he takes the juvenile stock which is distressing because it shows a total lack of consideration for the environment and for the industry at large. We can understand them not being concerned about our industry because they, as I said, the community attitude varies and some people look at us as a mob of cowboys or fat cats running around the ocean in high speed boats but we can't understand their lack of concern about the environment.

JD How do they quit their catch?

McROBERTS Ah the illegal operators?

JD The illegal operators.

McROBERTS Probably the way most of it is quit is through restaurant connections in the areas that they're working out of where the product is filtered back into the Chinatown area, particularly. The buyers are there and that's to be expected because our market, our legitimate market is predominantly Asian so the Asian community recognise the value of the product and utilise it. So it's only to be expected that that's where the product will be directed and it's directed from those areas into ship stores which are not controlled by the Quarantine and Inspection Service and also it's dried and disposed of dried, where the weight is reduced to 10% of the original weight and the value is enhanced quite enormously, I mean probably US\$260-\$265 a kilo for a kilo of dried abalone meat is achievable. So that's the main market in New South Wales.

In other States we found some processors have actually processed it up and exported it quite illegally and recently in New Zealand where they suffer similar problems, multi-million dollar seizures have occurred quite recently and those people were drying it and freezing it and disposing of it, again through the markets in Taiwan, Hong Kong etc.

JD And New Zealanders have a similar licensing arrangement?

McROBERTS They have a quota system in New Zealand where there are about 110 quota holders and they have [an] 1150 tonne quota for the nation annual quota. So the illegal activities impact quite dramatically on not only our individual incomes and our industry as an aggregate income, but impact on the community in lost revenue and environmental damage and it does become very, very serious if it's allowed to continue. The penalties to the legitimate industry for quota breaches are very severe. A first offence in New South Wales, you lose 20% of your quota. Second offence you lose 50% of your quota and third offence you lose it all and that's a condition of your permit. You don't even have to go to court to lose that. So we find by applying those

sort of penalties to our own members, we can guarantee that anyone with half a brain is not going to take a risk with a...

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 2 SIDE B

McROBERTS ... with a licence that's worth five hundred and eighty odd thousand dollars. Now government tends to manage our industry very well because it's within its charter to manage it, but it can't manage illegal activities. So we always have to be on our guard that government, in its frustration, will impose tighter and tighter controls and more restrictions on the income of abalone divers in an effort to reduce the pressure on a resource even though the unwelcome pressure may not be coming from the legitimate industry, but it's coming from a section of the community which is totally uncontrolled.

JD Is it the case that the Fisheries Division doesn't have the resources to police the illegal poaching sufficiently well?

McROBERTS I think that's true but in today's environment I think we have to recognise that the user or the beneficiary has to pay for resources that are allocated for protection of his industry. Now it's identifying the beneficiary that we have trouble with. Who is the real beneficiary? Is it just our members who benefit from good fisheries management, or is it the community at large? So again government says, "Well we'll put more inspectors on and we'll be more effective in our policing", which is sometimes debatable whether that's the case, but we can't charge the community at large, therefore we'll apply the additional costs to the people that we can charge. So we have a sort of a cautious view about allocation of more resources. We believe that given the current state of resources, yes, there is room for improvement, but better use of resources and some lateral thinking would produce better results.

We also have to contend with, again, community attitude where it seems that even if you've got an effective surveillance and enforcement service, what will the courts do when an offender who comes before them? Now if you're an armed robber or a rapist, you'll bear the full weight of the community's disapproval of your actions but when somebody is asked to cop a very high penalty for poaching abalone, or will we send him to gaol, well the magistrates quite often say, "No, no. It's a misdemeanour. It's not a crime", and that's because the community awareness is not prevalent. It doesn't reflect the real destruction of the environment. If we did in forests what we do in the sea, it would be high profile and visible. If you said for every legal logging operation in the forests you've got two illegal logging operations, then it would be a high profile thing. If you said people who are entitled to shoot a number of kangaroos each year, two illegal ones for every legal one and they're exporting it, again the section of the community would be up in arms, but because when they drive past Ulladulla harbour and they see the blue water and the blue sky and the sand still there, it's not apparent and therefore they say, "Oh, blimey. So what. He took a few hundred illegal abalone." It doesn't matter to them. So it's trying to get the message across to the community and have the courts reflect community concern.

Of course the illegal operators have become more sophisticated, just as the legal industry has become more sophisticated. Illegal operators know exactly what they have to do to survive. Realising the courts rarely punish juveniles, they put the juveniles in the water and they're not much at risk. They pay the relatively low fines

for the occasional offender who does get before the courts and they have very sophisticated networks of... of distribution networks.

JD In other words it's a very highly organised racket, really?

McROBERTS Oh very highly organised and of course again the community attitude and the political attitude is an interesting one. Whilst the community is quick to condemn the involvement of the Asian community in the distribution of this product, they will rarely condemn any other groups. It was interesting from our point of view because the indigenous Aborigine communities in this area have, as demonstrated in Prince's report, a very heavy involvement in this illegal harvesting of abalone. Politicians and the community are loathe [laughs], they're loathe to criticise that but quite prepared to criticise the Asian community. So it's a double standard applies. If we get up and say, "Aborigines are involved in illegal harvesting of abalone", we're called racist. If we get up and say, "The Asian community is involved in illegal trafficking in abalone", the community says, "deport them" [laughs]. So we find that a bit hypocritical. We believe the Prince report is probably the most authoritative report today and it clearly shows who's involved in New South Wales and just what the cost is to the community.

JD Barry, could I ask you, do you get many diseased abalone?

McROBERTS Well there's very little research been carried out. There's stunted fish and what was thought to be diseased fish discovered in, for instance, stunted fish discovered in Bass Strait. Diseased fish have been identified in South Australia. There's a discreet stock, we believe, in Sydney that exhibits some rather unusual physical characteristics that mean that their product doesn't perform well when thermal processes are applied to it. It's not suitable for marketing. We've asked for that stock to be examined. So far it's been revealed that it's not a parasitic infection and it's not an aged stock. We haven't yet determined whether it's affected by pollutants. We're more inclined to think that this occurs as a natural consequence of its location. In other words, if the water isn't oxygen rich, the food isn't there or there's a little too much fresh water from time to time coming in. We don't want to jump to conclusions. It's something that we have to be aware of but there is no need at this stage, in our view, for panic. I suppose this sort of phenomena is sort of noticed in other stocks of other fish around the world and before we all jump onto the band wagon of pollution, pollution, pollution, we want to be sure of our facts. We have noticed some, yes, and we do avoid it, just don't harvest it until we're satisfied what the reasons are for it being the way it is.

JD And research is in train?

McROBERTS Oh yes. We have sent samples of this away for examination to the Central Veterinary Laboratory and of course it's a costly exercise and some of these activities can't be funded by government, even though they should be funded by government. The bottom line is that government just doesn't have the resources available to it to carry it out. So in those situations we undertake the research, as we did with the Prince report and all we seek then is government to recognise the cost to the industry and when it's looking at some of the more contentious aspects of management such as resource rental etc, that we ask government to recognise is what industry has already spent. We have commitments from politicians that say, yes they will recognise it. We don't hold much store or faith in those commitments, but none the less, we have them on paper.

JD Barry, shucking I think it's called, where the fish is removed from the shell, is not allowed in New South Wales at sea?

McROBERTS No. Many years ago, in fact when we first introduced or recommended to government size limits, I think it must have been about 1976 I think (I'd have to check that) when we recommended a minimum size limit of four inches. We asked then that shucking at sea be banned because obviously we wanted to see the fish measured, even on a random basis. Now over the years we've lifted the size limit as an industry initiative from 100 millimetres or the four inches to 115 millimetres which really recognises that industry has adopted a responsible attitude. Our abalone in New South Wales as a general rule reproduces at about 95 millimetres to 100 millimetres. We've lifted our size limit to 115 millimetres to make sure that there are a couple of reproducing cycles at least, probably more. So it's imperative that we don't have shucking at sea. We need to be able to measure our stock. Now that's not only done by the State Government. In our organisation where 42 of the 44 divers left in the State are in the one co-operative, our executive with the support of its membership, has said all abalone will be measured or checked in the co-operative as well and any that's found to be undersize, a warning is issued. That catch is confiscated, a warning is issued to the member and if it happens a second time, then an inspector is called to the premises. So industry has taken a very, very strict view of under sized harvesting.

Of course you've got to be careful that you don't do anything silly. Quite often a mistake will be made and a deck hand who's new may put a couple of under size in the catch inadvertently. Those under size... firstly we would say should not have been collected in the first instance, but given the nature of the environment that the diver's working in, there'll always be one or two but then it should be put in the bag and taken back down on his next drop and replaced. Well your new deck hand can, when he's busily manhandling a catch over the side and trying to keep the boat where it should be, will sometimes miss one. So within reason we allow a guy one mistake and then we come down on him like a tonne of bricks, or we call the inspectors in and let them decide whether they're going to take action or not.

JD Is the product that you harvest mainly greenlip?

McROBERTS It's mainly blacklip, well it is all blacklip in New South Wales but of course the New South Wales Co-Operative has been viewed by the rest of the industry in Australia, particularly the harvesting sector, as a successful organisation. So we have members interstate and we do get some greenlip up from Victoria, yes but all of New South Wales' production is blacklip, but you get variations in that. I mean the blacklip, in certain area's we'll find what we call "tigers" in there which are striped. They're still *haliotis rubra* but they've developed a sort of a special characteristic of the area. It may have something to do with the genetic stock in that area or it may have something to do with the food in that area. We're not sure.

JD But not a hybrid?

McROBERTS No they're not a hybrid in New South Wales so much but we have found hybrids in the stock that come up from Victoria, for instance, that are not quite greens and not quite blacks and they're very interesting. The market itself of course has different needs in different locations. The Hong Kong market prefers greenlip and always has. The Japanese market doesn't particularly want greenlip. It will prefer blacklip but I think brownlip, for instance which comes from Western Australia, has a place in the Japanese market that hasn't fully been explored yet. I think the brownlip

is probably the closest variety of the haliotis to the domestic Japanese stocks and would be likely to achieve pretty high prices in that market.

JD Do you also export the shell?

McROBERTS Yes, the shell is sold. Greenlip, of course, has got [a] very, very high value bringing for its "A" grade (and it's graded, greenlip).... It goes mostly to Korea but that can bring as much as \$18 or \$19 a kilo to the diver (that's Australian dollars). Now blacklip shell fills a different slot in the market. It is used in pharmaceuticals and traditional medicines and the like in China and it only brings about \$1200 a tonne, but yes it is exported. Of course production from New South Wales is mainly on-shell production for the Japanese gift pack market and a gift pack.... therefore we're selling the product on the shell. So we don't produce a lot of shell in New South Wales.

JD Barry, are there many newcomers into the abalone industry?

McROBERTS Yes Jack. There's quite fluid movement now in and out of the industry. The older divers who recognise that [it is] time for them to move on and put their knowledge to use in other areas in the fishing industry, or just retire from the health problems that we heard about before. As the industry has matured, its profile has changed and it's attracted new entrants, people who we may have mentioned earlier have [been] attracted to the potential, the investment potential, for the industry. Divers, for instance, we are now down to 44 in New South Wales (if I can use it as an example). You might recall that I said originally when we cut it off, we cut it off at 58 so we've got about thirteen or fourteen new people in the industry that have come in in New South Wales. Certainly that's the case in other states where people buy in. That's been encouraged by a number of things.

Firstly the industry is benefiting from rather sophisticated management now. Probably the best managed fishery in Australia is the abalone fishery, even though it's different states with different ideas but in essence they reflect pretty sophisticated management technique and I think the recent Mexico abalone conference pointed out that Australia's management and New Zealand's management is the best in the world for abalone. So that's attracted a different type of person into the industry. The industry itself has been recognised by the rest of the fishing industry and if I can give you an example, the National Fishing Industry Council which is the peak body for the fisheries in Australia, appointed me as its chairman in the second year of the National Fishing Industry Council. They didn't appoint me as a person, they appointed me as a part of the abalone industry and a part of the fishing industry that achieved the majority of its goals: the first chairman in the New South Wales Fishing Industry Council, again the abalone industry. I think that's a reflection of how the fishing industry's view has changed a little over the years about the abalone industry even though the tall poppy syndrome is still there but if you're going to appoint people to your organisations, you look around for the people who've got it right for their industry and the abalone industry seems to have shone in that area.

So the new entrants come in because they've seen the abalone industry prosper. They've seen it develop in a controlled way. They've seen it adopt a pretty high profile in industry committees, in rural affairs and the prospects for our industry are good. Again we've integrated our operations. We have off-shore offices looking after the promotion of our product. There are trade delegations from the abalone industry regularly into the market. The divers themselves spend a lot of time in the market so I think it's safe to say that the abalone industry is up amongst the leaders when it comes to the fishing industry of getting its act together. Certainly it's given me a lot of

pleasure to be associated with it and watch it develop in what, after all, is a relatively short time.

JD Barry, I don't think we made it clear at the commencement of the tape that you are the manager of the Abalone Fisherman's Co-Op here and that your organisation handles the catch of virtually every abalone diver in New South Wales. That's correct is it not?

McROBERTS Well I'm the ex-manager. What I'm very proud of in our company is.... and again it's a reflection of the diver's approach to things that they believe that as small as our organisation is, the employees in it must have career prospects if they're going to have good employees. So instead of.... What they do is remove the people at the top and move them sideways and shift them around. So I'm actually the marketing consultant for the Abalone Divers' Co-Op and I run the Hong Kong office. It allowed the people in our small organisation some career prospects and just to show that they're not sexist, our executive officer is a woman, Margaret Butler. She's our secretary and public officer for the Co-Op and we have a production manager, Gary Kenon. So I think that in itself is again a reflection of the thinking of the divers. They don't just let people keep seats warm and hold positions down. They move people around to make sure that their organisation stays healthy and yes we do handle just about all the abalone in New South Wales and we have a strong industry association in New South Wales of which I'm the executive officer but it's a small organisation, but it's probably selling now.... Well I put \$7m worth of product into Japan last year. This year it's putting product into the market from South Australia, Tasmania, Western Australia and Victoria.

So I hope to see the organisation prosper and it's of course diversifying its operation. The abalone industry no longer just sells abalone but it value adds ad we sell gift packs and we produce abalone shell jewellery and we want to develop the potential of our product here in Australia rather than just become commodity suppliers to the world.

JD Barry, you've told a great story. Thanks very much for it.

McROBERTS Thanks Jack; ok thanks Gwen[?]

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Barry McRoberts of Ulladulla, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with ERNEST MOTUM

INTRODUCTION

Ernest Motum, commonly known as Ike Motum of Tea Gardens, New South Wales is now 80 years old. His father started fishing in these waters in 1891 and at fourteen years of age, young Ike joined him acquiring the first of his long series of vessels when he was fifteen. Except for a couple of years as a professional footballer, Ike has fished the lakes and estuaries ever since and still holds a professional fisherman's licence, though he does not market much fish now due to failing health.

In this interview Mr Motum recounts of the remarkable difficulties confronting fishermen in the 1920s and '30s. He also discusses the species caught and the disappearance of some of those species, the transport of fish to market, the prices obtained by fishermen for their product and the effect of some of the more recently introduced regulations.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded in Mr Motum's home in Tea Gardens, New South Wales by Jack Darcey on the 2nd April, 1990. There are two sides of one tape and the interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Would you please record your full name.

MOTUM Ernest Charles Motum.

JD And your date of birth.

MOTUM 12th September, 1910.

JD And where were you born?

MOTUM Raymond Terrace.

JD Where's Raymond Terrace?

MOTUM Between here and Newcastle.

JD Between here and Newcastle?

MOTUM Yes, about fifteen mile from Newcastle.

JD What, it's on the [unclear]?

MOTUM No the main road.

JD On the main road, I see. Were you brought up in this area?

MOTUM Yes, from a baby.

JD And you've lived your whole life on these waters really?

MOTUM Well I spent a couple of years away just before the War. I went to Wollongong playing football and came back to Sydney and then back home again.

JD Were you playing professional football, were you?

MOTUM Yes but there was no money in those days [laughter].

JD What, Australian Rules or Rugby?

MOTUM No, League; Rugby League. I've spent nearly all my life here and our people were fishermen. My father and his brother started fishing in 1891.

JD Here?

MOTUM Yes, here. Naturally we were brought up as fishermen and I started to work for them, for the old people, when I was fourteen. I spent about fifteen months with them and then branched out on my own at fifteen.

JD Did you get your own boat at fifteen?

MOTUM Yes. I branched out, rigged my own nets and branched out at fifteen years of age. It was a lonely life just then but we had our ups and downs. In fact when I first started fishing our prices were not too bad compared with the times but then the Depression came along and the prices fell. Just towards the end of the Depression the cannery opened and they paid us seven shillings a hundred pound basket of fish.

JD What sort of fish were they canning?

MOTUM Mullet; mullet we were selling. My father and I supplied over 2,000 of the first 2,200 baskets they canned. So we supplied quite a lot of fish to them.

JD In those days, this would have been a very small settlement?

MOTUM A small settlement, yes.

JD This was a tea gardens, was it?

MOTUM We used to catch a lot of fish and a good lot of prawns later on but we didn't start the prawning industry here till.... As we do it today, we didn't start here till I was about eighteen.

JD When you were fifteen and started fishing on your own, did you work sort of with your father, or totally separate?

MOTUM On my own. The old firm, like the older people were working and I worked separate to them. In fact they gave me little orders that I could supply that kept me going even right through the Depression. I was still making a bit of money right through the Depression. Later on when the older brothers broke up, my father and I went hauling with a hauling net. Then we had engine winches then for our hauling nets. Chapman & Toorak in Sydney supplied them [and?] the winches and we fished for so many years with them. Then we sort of gave up the hauling and went meshing.

During the bad times, such as the Depression, we [sent] as many as 80, 100 pound baskets to Sydney for two two penny stamps clear. That's all we got back for them, clear of the freight and commission and all that.

JD For 80 baskets of fish?

MOTUM 80 100 pound baskets of fish for the week and I got two two penny stamps back for them.

JD What, did they go off?

MOTUM No. There was no sale for them. Supposing they brought a penny a pound or something like or a half penny a pound. That was cut out in freight and that's besides your ice and for running to work with your benzine and stuff, you see, [and] juice.

JD Did you get many people around asking for you to give them fish?

MOTUM No. Well we could catch practically what fish we wanted at those times and people used to come and buy six pence worth or a shillings worth for their family. Everyone you asked how many's in the family, they'd say ten or eight, which you knew there was only four or five perhaps but you'd give them a lot of fish because to send them to Sydney those particular times, they [were] a dead loss. During the Depression it was a few shillings in your pocket so you were pleased to see them come along and want a dozen fish for a shilling [laughs] or sixpence.

JD Good for them and good for you.

MOTUM Yeah, good for both. Then the War came along and one thing and another and we got a little better price after the War. We were catching a lot of fish and prawns by that time. It was, I suppose you could say it was better times, but then you had to keep working hard to make a living just the same. There was no big fancy money about. It was just enough to live on.

JD I suppose a lot of the fishermen went to the Army and Navy and so on?

MOTUM Oh yes, yes. I'd hurt my knee at football and when I went to join the Army I was exempt. I couldn't bend my left knee far enough.

JD During the War was there a fixed price for your product?

MOTUM No. There's no fixed price. It's practically the same thing now. They did put a fixed price once on prawns on account of the size of it. When they were so many to the pound, the big ones used to bring a better price. I at the time that I'm mentioning

they put nine pence a pound on the smaller prawns and one and six on the larger prawns. See I think you had to have them, to get the big money, you had have them 32 to the pound. Anything under that was supposed to be about nine pence a pound, I think it was.

JD You used to cook them as well, didn't you?

MOTUM Oh yes, cook them. We sent one sample to America of prawns and we had to go by Government Regulations. We had to put so many green ones, so many green with their heads off and so many cooked ones. We had to bring them straight down and had them run to Newcastle, put in steel containers and flown over to America. I think it cost 78 pounds to put them in America. This is about, four, eight [counting] twelve pound of prawns but they said they were the best prawns they'd tasted but they wanted them large. They were beautiful prawns at the time. So therefore it didn't come to anything.

JD Cause you were sending them the largest that you had available anyway?

MOTUM Well we sent the normal size. We didn't pick them or anything like that. They wanted them larger. I don't know why because they were a good class of prawn. I'll show you some of them later on. In the early days local people wouldn't eat prawns. They wouldn't eat prawns. You couldn't give them away. I buried.... The first experience I had with cooking prawns, we cooked about six boxes of prawns and there was a regatta on at the lakes. We had to bury three boxes of them. We couldn't give them away. We weren't selling any. We just gave them away.

JD What, people just didn't eat prawns?

MOTUM They thought they'd poison you. Well we knew better because we'd been eating them since we were kids.

JD Now of course they're a delicacy, aren't they?

MOTUM Yes. I think they're about seventeen or eighteen dollars a kilo now.

JD It's interesting the way people's ideas on fish vary.

You know we now eat lots of things that we wouldn't have eaten before.

MOTUM Oh yes, yes.

JD Can we come back to the gear you used to use, the boats and the nets and that sort of thing. Could you describe the type of boat you started with?

MOTUM Well I started with a 23 foot boat with [a] seven foot beam with a Chapman engine in it, a five horse power Chapman engine in.

JD That'd be an [unclear]?

MOTUM Eleven foot paddles and that was my own private boat.

JD That was when you were fifteen?

MOTUM Yes, when I was fifteen. Of course you worked practically six days a week all the time because it was.... you know, you were trying to make a living. Most of the boats we had were wooden boats.

JD Were they built here?

MOTUM Well most of them were built here, yes. At the end of the War I did buy a 50 foot boat from Slazengers in Putney Point in Sydney. I went to a sale there after the War and bought a 50 footer and put two diesel engines in it. Then we had several other boats during the time. You could say you had 50 boats during the time of your life but nearly all wooden boats. Today they're fibreglass and aluminium and all types.

JD What sort of wood was commonly used?

MOTUM Mostly beech.

JD Was that a local timber, was it?

MOTUM Yeah, Australian timber. Some of them were karri pine, New Zealand timber and huon pine. One was huon pine from Tasmania and cedar. We've had cedar boats but that's mainly the mixture of oregon pine; select oregon pine was other boats we had. As a fact the only boat I have left now is oregon pine about, oh I'd say be over 30 years old.

JD Still in good condition?

MOTUM Oh still has a net on it. Still in good condition, yeah.

JD There'd have been a lot of maintenance on a wooden boat, wouldn't there?

MOTUM Oh, well you'd.... With the 50 footer there's a lot of maintenance on that, although everything was new. You see everything was new, bought new and put new engines in. Well we had no great maintenance on them but we've had several boats. Some we built ourselves, 28 foot boats, we built ourselves.

JD Was that commonly done, fishermen building their own boats?

MOTUM Well there's a few fishermen can do it and could do it. In the old days it was [a] common occurrence because there was a dozen fishermen about the place that could build good boats. If you wanted a boat you generally went to one of your friends and got him to build them or you built them yourself. We built several ourselves.

JD Some of the fishermen had a number of boats, I understand, and they used them for different fisheries.

MOTUM Oh yes. When we were hauling we'd have, oh one, two, three, four [counting], four launches and six or seven boats, I suppose with our hauling gear. Then later on when we had the big launch, the 50 foot boat, we had about six boats with us then. We used to work all that way from the big boats, when we had our crew for different things. We'd be mesh nets on some and some we'd have prawn nets on.

JD How many people would work together?

MOTUM Well we had as many as ten prawning at one time and as many as about five working from the big boat.

JD Ike, you've mentioned prawns and you've mentioned mullet. What other species did you go for?

MOTUM Well we had flathead, whiting, bream, blackfish, jewfish, garfish, every type of fish that's estuary fish in the New South Wales' coast; salmon, tailor, practically every type of fish we....

JD Are they still all caught here?

MOTUM Oh yes. They're still caught here, the same type of fish.

JD In the same quantities?

MOTUM Yeah, same areas. The only thing that I think has got very scarce is the tailor. We didn't catch them for fifteen years because there was no sale for them. When we got sale for them again, there was no tailor much to catch. We did the coast from, after fifteen years' spell with them, from Forster to Terrigal and no quantity of tailor. We got a couple of lots. That's all and there was a big.... We had Hanlon smoking tailor. Nothing to get a hundred boxes of tailor in a day and we could get rid of them. When he died there was no sale for them for a long while. When the sale came on for them, they disappeared.

JD And they haven't come back?

MOTUM No. They haven't come back, not in quantities.

JD No. Did you mention that there was someone here smoking fish?

MOTUM He was smoking them in Newcastle, a buyer by the name of Hanlon, Frank Hanlon.

JD Is he still doing that?

MOTUM No he died.

JD Is anybody?

MOTUM No. They could be doing it somewhere else now though I think some of the food, like Riba Foods or someone like that might be doing it but there's not the quantity of tailor. We can't find them.

JD Did salmon hold up, that's the Australian salmon?

MOTUM No. They've got scared like the tailor. They disappeared too in big quantities. They disappeared.

JD Did you ever catch barracouta in this area?

MOTUM Yes. When I was very young. When I was a boy we caught a few but not late years. They disappeared too, barracouta.

JD Earlier on when we were talking you mentioned the establishment of a cannery at ? It's not there now. What happened there?

MOTUM Well they were promised, when they first came there to can fish, they were promised too much of a subsidy which the Government.... It was only a promise. It never, ever eventuated. The company didn't do so good, although they were getting the fish very cheap. We were supplying them at seven shillings a hundred pound basket; a hundred pound of fish. It went on for a few years. It was very good.

JD That was a fixed price?

MOTUM That's what he was giving and we were selling to him. Sometimes we were going overland into Smith's Lake. You don't know Smith's Lake? You'll probably strike that on your way north. We used to ring up from here and get the bullock teams and a slide to put our boats and our winch boats over; take six boats over with their nets into Smith's Lake which is about three-quarters of a mile overland from the head of these lakes, Mile Lakes. We'd work in there during the winter. We caught a lot of fish in there, a lot of mullet especially, for the cannery. It was a living for us when the fish were scarce in this lake. The lake was closed in from the ocean and on three occasions I've helped let it out with shovels, long handled shovels.

JD Through the bar?

MOTUM Yes, through the bar, get permission from the council and let it out because it got a bit high for children to get to school and that sort of thing from round the lake. There was just a few families round the lake.

JD And they used to walk across the bar?

MOTUM No. We let it out to the ocean so the lake'd go down. The lake used to keep rising.

JD Oh, yes.

MOTUM It suited us because when the lake was up it was all a bit deep and a bit awkward.

JD Was there ever any crayfishing done off the coast?

MOTUM Not so much here. Plenty off the coast, from Nelson's Bay mostly. Some of the boys worked round the rocks from here, round the headlands, around the islands and most of the deep water crays were caught from Nelson's Bay. That's the other side of the harbour. You haven't been over there, have you? No. It's only a mile or two from the mouth of the harbour so they're directly outside. Not many men from this side go lobstering but they do a little bit round the rocks.

JD They still do it, do they?

MOTUM Yes, yes.

JD That co-op then came on the scene, didn't it? You were a member of the co-op from its earliest days?

MOTUM From this co-op I was the first member to join.

JD That's the Nelson Fishermen's Co-Op? There was a new co-op.

MOTUM Yes. It's a branch of Newcastle and it was formed first and then later on Nelson's Bay was formed.

JD Ah, right. Has that made a difference to the fisherman?

MOTUM Oh well it's made a difference to the fisherman and it's made a lot of difference to the handling of fish. There's a quantity of ice here and there's cool rooms, to their quality of fish. You wonder how you did without it.

JD Before the co-op you had to handle it all yourself, did you?

MOTUM We had to get ice from Newcastle. When the iceworks opened at Pendimer we could get our ice from there but after some years the Government closed it. For many years we got ice there but then we had to get them from Newcastle brought up by the Hunter River Company's boats.

JD Oh they brought it over by boat?

MOTUM Yeah, boatside, in big boxes, packed in sawdust. Then later on the lorries brought it up from Newcastle; by lorry when the road got through.

JD Did you also send fish to Sydney in those days?

MOTUM Yes, yes. Well what fish they couldn't sell in Newcastle they'd just ship on to Sydney. That's what I was telling you. We have shipped a hundred baskets of fish to Sydney. Never got paid for them. They're supposed to destroy them. We don't know.

JD That was in the days before the Marketing Authority was established?

MOTUM Yes, yes. Oh we've had a few bad days since the Marketing Authority has started. We had one lot of fish, one lot about 80 boxes for.... I think they bought [them], oh about under \$2.00. They couldn't be sold they said so they'd practically give them away to get rid of them and you would just get your freight out of them and that's all.

JD That must have been pretty disheartening?

MOTUM Yes because when you get a nice lot of fish, there's a lot of work attached to it, even in late years. See we started to clean our fish with the roe. Jeff was telling you about that at all?

JD That's for the mullet roe?

MOTUM Yeah, mullet roe. We were selling our roe to Sydney and selling the fillets. That's the only way we could get any money for them. Well then some people in Queensland came and bought them with the roe in and they paid a reasonable price

and took the roe and all and they handled them. Made it much better for the.... You could put a lot of fish in Sydney. When we caught big quantities, [you would] put a lot of fish in and they'd practically bring nothing. It wasn't worth your while working for them.

JD In your day you'd have seen many new rules and regulations brought in?

MOTUM Oh yes.

JD Would you like to comment on those?

MOTUM Well some are good and some are bad, in my opinion. We have to abide by them to a certain degree. Course we all break the rules occasionally, it's only natural. Luckily I've worked all my life and never been prosecuted, so I'm lucky [laughs] I suppose. You can't work the rules all the time because you've got to break the rules some time. You'd have some undersize fish or dead fish that you.... Every fish you handle, you can't just [unclear] it and put it on a board, specially if you're in a gale of wind and trying to get your fish out of your net and all sorts of things. You can only be a good judge or a bad judge.

Some of the rules are good and some are bad but they're putting different little rules on you all the time. I believe they're trying to now put a quota. It's a very hard thing for fishermen to work to a quota because now I can go out this morning and.... not quoting me, I would be going out. I could go out this morning and I could have a shot with a net, get 50 boxes of fish. I'd go out another morning and get next to none. So how can you put a quota on a fish, on your catch?

JD What are some of the other rules that are difficult to abide by?

MOTUM Oh well they want you to carry so much.... See you're experienced with boats and they want you to carry different things aboard your boat, your fishing boat, that's in the road all the time, in the road. We know there's accidents everywhere. They have accidents with new people that are not used to boats. They're the people that have the accidents. You're supposed to carry all sorts of things, your lights and jackets and pumps and all types of things, which is in your road. One regulation that you had to carry your licence in your boat, in a fishing boat. Well your licence would be wet through in five minutes because you very seldom go out fishing without you getting wet, You've got to act on the spur of the moment in some cases and you might have to jump overboard for something and your licence is on you. They told us to carry the licence in a bottle in the boat. Well that'd be nice. You'd smash the bottle or something like that.

JD Do you think the people who make the rules....

MOTUM Well they're generally fellows that come out of college and they haven't a practical knowledge of the game.

JD You don't think they listen to the fishermen enough?

MOTUM Very seldom they do. They don't listen to experience. They might listen to you but they take no notice of what you tell them. They think you're just telling them a tale.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Ike, you've held a licence now for some 66 years which is a pretty fair innings. You don't fish regularly now though, do you?

MOTUM No. My health won't let me fish, only occasionally. I applied for a licence because I thought I was entitled to have one after all those times, even if I only want to get out and catch a box of fish. They've granted me a licence.

JD Can you sell your licence to another fisherman?

MOTUM No, no. I never ever contemplated selling a licence.

JD But can they be sold?

MOTUM I don't think so. I think you can sell your boat with a licence. I don't know about your own licence. I don't think that's saleable.

JD It varies from one fishery to another.

MOTUM Yes. I don't know. Just all the rules and regulations.... In fact they're putting some on now that I've never looked at. They still catch a lot of fish. There's still a lot of fish about. We had our bad seasons, very bad seasons, 50 years ago, 40 years ago and we've had very good seasons. Seasons come and go with fish and prawns. They've had a reasonable prawn season until the flood rains came away this time.

JD Does the weather affect the fish?

MOTUM Yes. Yeah weather governs fish a lot but they're still there. They're still about. Well you can't see them like you can in the fine weather but I think there's still plenty of fish about to be caught. The only thing is there are quite a lot of fishermen.

JD Is there more fishermen now?

MOTUM Yes there's more fishermen now than there was but they'll have their good and bad seasons. I think that what governs the seasons is what happens to the spawn. See there's millions of spawn [which] come from fish and I think that governs the season, what happens to the spawn when they've spawned. That regulates your season, that and the weather. See we don't know. The spawn could be washed up ashore or washed to sea with freshes or something like that and it might'n be so good the following seasons. They've had some very good seasons here in late years and I think it [will] continue on that way.

JD Good. Let's hope so.

MOTUM They will be good seasons and bad seasons as long as there's water.

JD Do you still fish a bit yourself?

MOTUM Just a little. My health stops me.

JD Do you send the catch to market?

MOTUM Just to the co-op. For the quantity I catch I use a lot now of my own [laughs]. In fact if I only got, say ten kilos of prawns, I wouldn't ship them. I'd keep them for a few friends and myself. We just pulled a few out for the chap that arrived today. They're a very good class of prawn. A good eating prawn. We think they're the best, actually. They keep very well. You can freeze them well. They've been in, say a month I suppose, those prawns I just pulled out there.

JD Right. Well thank you very much Ike. It's been very nice to talk to you and may I wish you a long and happy retirement.

MOTUM I hope so [laughs].

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Earnest Motum, commonly known as Ike Motum, of Tea Gardens, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with **BRUCE PADDON**

INTRODUCTION

Bruce Paddon joined his fisherman father fishing in the Clarence River and offshore in 1934 and except for War service as an Air Force pilot, remained in the industry until his retirement twelve years ago.

In this interview he discusses many of the changes he has seen during his years as a professional fisherman. These include the increased number of fishermen in the area, the decline in fish stocks, the boats and gear and prices pertaining in earlier times and the effect the establishment of co-operatives and the Marketing Authority had on the industry in New South Wales. He also mentions pollution in the river, relationships with Fisheries officers, presentation of product and some of the legendary characters who contributed to the fishing industry on the New South Wales coast.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded at Mr Paddon's home in Iluka by Jack Darcey on the 8th April, 1990. There is one side of one tape. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Bruce, would you record your full name and date and place of birth please.

PADDON I was Bruce Robertson Paddon in Maclean, 1918.

JD And have you lived in this area all your life?

PADDON Yes. I lived here, I did my primary schooling in Iluka, my secondary schooling in Armidale and after secondary schooling I came into the fishing industry with my father who had a 32 foot flush deck boat here. The main order of fishing was snapper fishing at sea and net fishing for river fish such as mullet, bream, blackfish, jewfish and that type of fish. There was no great quantity of boats here. There was two boats. We [had one] and another one called Al Skinner [had one]. We used to work from the Clarence River here down to the Sandon River. It was a three day trip: one day going down, one day fishing out off the Sandon and one day fishing our way back. Well that happened twice a week, weather permitting.

As you can understand, in those days there were far more fish than what there are now and invariably the ice box was full when we got home each trip. The ice box carried carried 1600 pound of fish which was mainly snapper, perch, jewfish, cod and that type of fish. We worked out to the Shelf. About twenty mile was about the

maximum distance we'd work at. It was a very slow process going out there in those days as we had sail. When the wind was favourable we sailed and when the wind was not, we had a sixteen horse petrol engine. You had to be very careful when you were going out there that you didn't strike a strong westerly. The bar here those days was a different type of bar to what it is now. Now it is one of the best bars up and down this coast.

JD How has it changed Bruce?

PADDON Well they built walls out but it's given them more or less an even amount of water. There's no great amount of water but it's an even amount of water right round from both the north wall, the south wall, out over the line of the beacons and that. It is more or less a continuous amount of water. In those days there was just a narrow channel straight out east, straight east. Both the spits, the one in the south and the one in the north, were down to, say three foot of water. It was a continual break except in very calm seas.

I started with my father in 1934 and I worked most of my young life until War time when I went away to England in the Air Force. In those days it was either snapper fishing or river fishing if the weather was no good, or in very calm periods, it was bull ringing mulloway round the headlands on the coast.

JD Bull ringing, did you say?

PADDON Yes. Well the 32 foot boat had a mast 28 foot high and one of us, my father first, then later on as he got older I did the work up the mast. We would go along the edges of the headlands and on the sand you would see these schools of mulloway. We had a boat behind, a small boat towing a small boat with a mesh net in it and we would bullring that school of fish.

JD Run the net around?

PADDON Run the net around them. Of course in those days the price was not very much. I think to remember, it was about three pence a pound, we were getting for mulloway in those days. mullet were practically unsaleable. Blackfish you couldn't sell. bream and whiting, yes they were alright but the main fish was snapper and we'd get six pence a pound for that.

JD Using that same bull ring [unclear]?

PADDON Oh no. The snapper fish were all hand lining. There was no trapping in those days. The trapping did not start here until after the War. I came home from England in 1945 and from then on trapping was the vogue, catching leatherjackets and snapper.

Then in about 1949/50, I believe, (I'm not exactly [sure], it's quite a while ago, I'm not actually sure of the actual time) prawning started on the river here and there was a chap here called Jack Ebling. He lived at Yamba and my cousin, Evans Paddon [lived] at Evans Head. They more or less pioneered the prawning up in this part of the coast. Well we caught prawns then [at] [laughs] three pence a pound. Mostly you went out in the morning. You did one trawl and you spent the rest of the day cooking.

There was no co-ops or anything like that. You had to cook your own product. That was sent away, packed here at our ice works and trans-shipped onto river steamers to Grafton and then by train to Sydney but there was a lot of work entailed in that.

JD Was the Marketing Authority working or operating then?

PADDON No. It was all agents then. I can't remember the actual date when the Marketing Authority took over. I can't remember it at all but that was a very big step in the industry when the Marketing Authority took over. We were given what they (the agents) thought we should get.

JD The Marketing Authority?

PADDON No, the agents. We were more or less at their beck and call but when the Marketing Authority took over the prices did appear. Then when the co-ops came of course we all started on the co-ops and that was really the making of the fishing industry on this coast here, the co-ops. Things have gone on. We started with school prawns right along the shore and we would never go beyond about, oh twenty fathoms at the most. Then someone decided they had a brain wave and they went out a bit further and caught king prawns. Well now the school prawn industry at sea is not near the industry that the king prawn [was?]. It's mainly king prawn.

The river prawning, that started around about the same time and it was just trawling but now pocket netting has started and, well I've been out of the industry for twelve years now and I don't know actually what goes on with the pocket netting now.

JD Bruce, to come back to your own career in fishing, could you tell us a bit more about the boats and gear that you operated and the species you went for later on?

PADDON Well in the early days a sixteen horse power motor and a 32 foot boat was quite sufficient to catch the fish that were available, but once prawning came in, a 32 foot motor was, well you could work with it but was nowhere near what was required. So the boat (my father's boat) was getting old. It was over 50 years old at the time so I thought, well I'd better branch out on my own and I decided I'd build a boat on my own. I started and I got the framework up. Then Jack Toyer, he was a boat builder, and he decided, he and his family.... There was Eric, Robert, Jimmy and Jack. Well they built my boat in the back yard. She was 44 foot long.

JD Timber?

PADDON Yes, spotted gum. I put a 76 horse power Gardner in.

JD That'd be a diesel?

PADDON Yes, diesel, which was at the outbreak, at that time, was quite adequate but I found that [in] a few years time there were bigger boats and bigger horse power. So I changed the 76 horse power to 116 horse power. That was the final engine that I had, that I saw my fishing life out with.

JD The trawler was one net or two?

PADDON One at the time, yes. Then two nets came in and when I left the fishing industry, three nets came in. I believe some of them use four now. One net was

sufficient in those early days. One yet, you'd get more prawns in one trawl than what they get all night now, in those early days.

Then you mentioned something a while ago about pollution. Well in those days there was no such thing as pollution in the Clarence River but we found out that there is something which I wouldn't like to go on record as me saying, in case I get a kick back from it, but is definitely some type of pollution that is being washed into the river in heavy rain. I believe some of the things have been banned now. I'll say no more about what actually it is. That affects all the fish and it's depleted our river stocks. Well it's unbelievable how it's depleted them. When heavy rains come and we get a run off, it goes into the river and it causes a sore on the fish which, in about 90% of the times, the fish die. Occasionally you will see a fish that has a healed up sore when the salt water comes back. Apparently this, what is called Bundaberg Disease, doesn't occur south of the Clarence River. There are some products of agriculture that are not grown south of this river. So I'll just leave it as that, as far as that goes. I won't say any more according to that. That has depleted our river stocks completely. Well not completely, well mainly.

There's another aspect. The only fish in our river at the present time that are seen in quite good quantities, is the mullet. The mullet can't be caught on a line. So that speaks for itself in one respect. I think you [are] still able to catch a feed of fish on a line. Anyone that can fish can still go and catch a feed of fish but certainly the amount of fish are not there that there used to be when I was a kid. In other words, the old saying was you had to get down below to put your bait on, which you haven't got now. All the fish would take your hand off.

No, I think properly managed, the industry will continue on. There's no doubt about that. They've started a lot of restrictions now which I'm not up on, seeing as I'm out of the industry which I think, a lot of them, cannot be anything else but good for the industry.

JD They're a lot more fishermen in this part of the world than there were when you started fishing?

PADDON Oh yes, yes. My father and another chap were the only two boats fishing at sea and now I don't know what the amount of boats are here but they started restricting the amount of boats, in my opinion, well twenty years too late. It was a good thing. It has been restricted now.

JD In your day did you have a close relationship with the people who were supervising the industry, the inspectors?

PADDON Oh yes. We knew all the inspectors and they were quite helpful, quite helpful. Of course some weren't. No, I've got no rouse against the fishing inspectors or the Department in that respect, none whatsoever. They're there to do a job and a fisherman, some fishermen, will not do the right thing. I'll put it that way, but as a general rule most fishermen look after the industry.

JD It's in their interest to do so, isn't it?

PADDON That's quite right. That's in their interest to do so.

JD Bruce, in recent times there seems to be considerable importation of fish from overseas. Was that always the case?

PADDON Oh yes. That's happened ever since.... well since I started fishing that's been on. In some respects it keeps continuous supply to the public but, Oh I don't know.... I think it is necessary. Actually it is necessary.

JD There seems to be a change in people's eating habits when it comes to seafood generally. We eat a lot of product that we just wouldn't have thought of eating years ago and they tell me that young people are not eating nearly as much fish as people used to. Do you think that's likely to be true?

PADDON Oh I don't know the actual statistics on that at all. I don't know what that would be. I'd be just talking through my hat if I even hazarded a guess on that.

JD What about the way the fish is presented to the public?

PADDON I think the fish is being presented much better than what it was before. I think since the advent of the co-ops, the fish go out of the water. The fishermen are made [to] look after their fish better or the product will not be accepted in the co-op. It goes straight into the cold rooms and it's chilled and frozen and taken by road to the Sydney Markets or the country outlets in refrigeration which, in my opinion, cannot be anything but good. It's got to be good for the industry.

JD Do you think some outlets mislabel the fish they present?

PADDON Oh well, that's human nature, isn't it?

JD It doesn't do the industry much good though, does it?

PADDON I think a lot of the country outlets would not be game to misrepresent the fish where most country person does a bit of fishing and they know what they're getting, but in the city, yes. I believe that quite a bit of that could go on.

JD During your time in the industry Bruce, you'd have met and associated with a lot of different people. Do any of them stick in your mind as being legendary characters?

PADDON Oh yes, Alec Anitz of Ballina. Yes definitely. In my opinion he would be legendary, yes, definitely.

JD Is he still around?

PADDON Yes. He's still [around] and he's in his 90s. I was at the eye specialist here last year and I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw him walk in. He didn't know me for a moment and as soon as I said who [I] was, "Oh yes". He realised straight away. He pioneered the trapping up this neck of the woods and from then he went into the whaling at Byron Bay. He was a skipper on one of the whale chasers at Byron Bay. When that [unclear] he went back into the prawning again and I believe he still worked fishing until about '80. No, he would be, in my opinion the most well known and respected fisherman up and down this coast.

JD Bruce, you mentioned that you've been retired for twelve years now. How are you filling your time in?

PADDON Oh a little gardening. I used to enjoy bowls until I was not able to play but a little gardening, a few citrus, few bananas, few fowls, mowing the lawn. I spend my time alright.

JD Fishing?

PADDON Yes, when I'm able to. Not as much now these days as I used to.

JD You don't have a licence now?

PADDON Oh no, no, no. When I finished in, what was it, '78 I think, I just finished with my licence and that was it. I didn't go back.

JD You sold your boat, and what have you got, a small boat now?

PADDON Oh a little aluminium one which I put in the water when I went to go fishing and comes back in the back yard when I'm finished but.... I forget what I was going to say just now. I was going to say something.

JD Did you enjoy your career in fishing, Bruce?

PADDON Well fishing is an outdoor life and I think most people, unless they're actually city born and bred, love an outdoor life. I enjoyed fishing. I enjoyed fishing right up.... In the early years I had a fall on the boat and I injured my spine and I more or less worked in a back brace for years. I do think if I hadn't have hurt my back I would more than likely still be fishing. That's what I think of it. I fished and fished and it was not work, it was fishing. When it became work I retired.

JD Would you recommend it to a young person nowadays as a career?

PADDON Oh, well it's a hard life but it's a good life. I think there's a lot of our present day younger fishermen here, they're doing very well. Once they've started on it, it seems to get in your blood and I don't think you'd want to go back to anything else. I fished here before the War. When the War came I joined the Air Force and I was flying in England. The moment I got my discharge from the Air Force, I couldn't get back into the fishing industry quick enough, which I think anyone in that respect did the same.

JD Right. Well thank you very much for this interview. It's been nice to talk to you.

PADDON Good. Thank you Jack.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Bruce Paddon, retired fisherman of Iluka, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Edited transcript of an interview with EVANS PADDON

INTRODUCTION

Evans Paddon is a third generation fisherman of Evans Head, New South Wales. He started with fishing with his father immediately upon leaving school. During the War he served as a pilot with the RAAF in the United Kingdom but returned to fishing after the War. He was a highly successful fisherman and together with that other legendary character, Alex Haynets, pioneered the ocean prawn trawling industry on the east coast.

As Chairman of Directors of the Evans Head Fishermen's Co-Operative at the time, Evans was much involved in the processing and marketing of the enormous catches of prawns that were common in those early days. Later he was engaged on government surveys for prawns along the eastern seaboard from Cape York to Wilson's Promontory. Later he trawled in the Gulf of Carpentaria and was also involved in tuna fishing. Like his father before him he was a world champion sculler. Evans Paddon is a living legend in both fishing and in the sporting sphere. In this interview he makes a very valuable contribution to Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry.

The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr Paddon's home in Evans Head, New South Wales on the 9th April, 1990. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

PADDON I'm Evans Paddon of Evans Head; born in 1913 at Ballina, New South Wales and we are the third generation from the original people who settled here back in the mid 1890s. Grandfather Paddon was a sailing master and he was taking timber out of Richmond and came and looked at the Evans River and thought that'd be the spot that he would put his roots down. He did that [and] became engaged in oyster farming. My father, James, was a world sculling title holder and he assisted in the oyster industry with his other brothers and then came into the outside snapper fishing, lobster catching, oystering and you name it. He was a workaholic.

I left school at [an] early age, about thirteen and went fishing with him. We did all the various fishing that time and were quite effective in catching the product of all varieties but had a big problem in marketing. Whenever we got our catch to the Sydney Fish Market which went either by rail three days after we'd caught it or on the coastal ships which took longer, the market was generally over supplied and prices were down. The market was run by agents and we found it very hard to earn a living. We generally had the tail out of our pants in those years.

Towards the end of the '30s the War came into the picture and I left the fishing to go into the Air Force and while there decided that I'd have to look elsewhere rather than fishing for a living.

JD Just before you go on, you served in the United Kingdom?

PADDON Yes. I found it very interesting. I was there for three years and I learnt something about the roots of our race (I suppose). I felt that we were, after being there for a while and bumping shoulders with the Pommies in general, that we out here were really only transplanted Pommies. I found I had to keep my wits about me to stay with them.

Coming home I decided that I'd go on to the wool and wheat areas having friends there and leave the fishing. Things didn't just work out that way and I found myself back fishing.

JD Were you back with your father then?

PADDON Yes. Father was still fishing, lobstering and snapper fishing. Catches weren't going up at all, although the years that the fishery was spelled during the War, did have a very marked effect on increasing the stocks of all our stocks, specially our coastal species. Along the beaches in the winter months when it was calm, you could see continuous shoals of bream, taylor, mullet, jewel, all in large quantities, and it encouraged me to think that still there might be a living. My interest was at sea and I secured small trawl gear, out of the Sydney Harbour, otter trawls, thinking that we might dispense with snapper trapping and jacket trapping with a trawling system which would have been more under our control.

In the process the first few trials runs with the trawl which was a small hand pulled otter trawl, we saw prawns in the catch. Realising that the area was a nursery for large volumes of juveniles in our rivers, and that our fishing of snapper indicated that the prawns were going to sea and being part of the food chain, we developed an interest in catching the prawns. Out of that it became really a bonanza. It was something that you could get your teeth into. There was money to be made prawning. It was a product that the public really were interested in. The fishery started at Evans Head. There was another group at Ballina headed by Alec Haynets who were also involved and the industry made very rapid progress. Anybody interested in the fishing industry immediately became prawn conscious, and because we were catching them here, all the small boats south and north of us, came to Evans Head because it was a safe port. We had developed a co-operative for marketing at Evans Head and we were quite prepared to handle the catch of all the boats that came along, until we were practically inundated. We had boats from everywhere, and by a certain amount of working together and a good deal of co-operation, we were effective in dealing with the processing and marketing.

JD Was there a prawning industry in the river at the time or before [unclear]?

PADDON The bigger rivers, the Clarence and Richmond, Tweed, are all nurseries for the juvenile school prawn in this area. There was just a certain amount of fishing went on in the rivers but there was nothing of note. The school prawn fishing business was conducted in the lakes much further south. We didn't have big lakes here and it was the knowledge of those people producing out of the lakes that helped us in handling and processing the large catches. A fellow that was a great help to us was one of the Masseys from Lake Illawarra. He had handled large quantities of prawns caught during

the runs to sea, in the darks of the night, and they knew how to handle prawns in volume, which was information that was very helpful to us.

Out of that we found that the demand, even though the production was growing rapidly, was also keeping pace, and we were aiming to sell our prawns mostly in the Brisbane metropolitan area with the objective of two shillings a pound, returned to the fisherman for his green catch. That worked remarkably well for three years or longer. That outlet became disrupted, as the industry stretched further north, the fishermen didn't support the marketing system we had developed which proved a mistake. We had a certain freedom operating from New South Wales with Section 92 of the Fishing Act which gave us freedom to market under our control. It was a shame in my mind to think that we couldn't have developed that industry there. It became pretty disrupted really so the volume we had to market from here, we went to Sydney to look for a larger outlet.

Being a co-operative, I was Chairman of Directors at that time, I knew the importance of marketing. The market had changed to a government auction system from the agents by this time which the Chief Secretary's Department administered. I had meetings with them pointing out the problems that we faced. They were very co-operative. Cecil Butsworth the Under Secretary of Chief Secretary's Department, was a marvellous person in that regard. The Market Manager, Howard Small, also contributed greatly to the success of our marketing of prawns in the Sydney Fish Market. Our fishermen benefited to a tremendous degree as did the retailers and the public.

JD Were you serving a local market or where you exporting at that time?

PADDON We looked at exporting but most of the catch at that time was sold in the metropolitan area of Sydney, reaching up to 40 and 50 thousand pounds of prawns a day in the heaviest catch period. The market in Sydney was capable of consuming about little less than half that per day. So we knew that to keep a price steady in Sydney we had to do something with that extra 25,000 pounds per day which was put into cold store. We felt uncertain of doing this in the sense that we hadn't had the experience of keeping a product such as prawn for a long length of time, but the Chinamen buyers who were some of the biggest buyers in the Sydney fish market, did just that. They were a big help in indicating to us that if the prawns were correctly prepared for cold store, they were a good product and would keep. It worked out just like that, so I'm very pleased about my side of being involved in that marketing set up because I knew that it was the life blood of a fishing product. Today marketing doesn't seem to be that sort of a problem because the product catch or volume is way down, and yet the product is still extremely popular. So marketing isn't to that degree so vital today. They'll sell themselves at very high prices.

JD Evans, subsequent to your pioneering of the prawning industry here, you did surveys for various governments, did you not?

PADDON Yes. As the industry grew, and it did grow very quickly and extensively, the Commonwealth Government whose director at that time was F.F. Anderson, another very co-operative and knowledgeable Federal public servant, was interested in extending the areas that prawns could be caught in. I had an 85 foot boat they were prepared to charter, and have it work the Queensland coast up to Cape York, which we did looking for banana prawns. We found some bananas. We found a certain amount of tigers, which in recent years have become very important in the Queensland fishery. It was interesting working inside the Barrier. There was a lot of country there that was

trawlable and a lot that wasn't. I look back on that with a great deal of pleasure. It rounded off my fishing knowledge.

We later went on a deep water survey, all the way down to Wilson's Promontory in Victoria still looking for deep water prawns. That wasn't nearly so successful. We didn't find productive prawns on the whole of that trip south, only very small areas of fishable stocks. We did find that the king prawn came out of Lakes Entrance in Victoria. It became obvious to me that those young prawns got there on the southerly current that runs down this coast, being carried that far south from the spawning in northern New South Wales and Queensland. When they became developed enough, they went ashore and populated the Lakes Entrance area. When they reached a stage of four to six inches they left the Lakes and proceeded back north. Since then they've been tagged and they find them back up at Cape Moreton in a very short time. So even though the currents are against them, they manage to get back to where they were actually spawned. So it was a link in the understanding of the behavioural pattern of the stock.

JD Later on you fished for prawns in the Gulf of Carpentaria for some years?

PADDON Yes. We went into the Gulf in the late '60s and worked on banana prawns. Rather a sad story there. We never had the marketing organisation that was necessary or that was along the same lines as we had here. Big business went into the processing areas and we found that it was most unsatisfactory. When the prawns were running the processing plants weren't capable of handling them. Often the catches had to be dumped. The marketing was badly handled and should have been much better handled. This would have benefited the fishing industry in the true sense. The trouble was due to lack of support and understanding by Federal authorities. The fisherman spends a pretty tough life. He's got to make hay while the sun shines and when his catch is thrown overboard, he's not a very amenable fellow to be with.

I found it very interesting, the control that applies in Queensland with the stocks. The rivers and the nurseries are not allowed to be fished by Queensland fishery law. An excellent approach. Heavy rains send them out into the sea or into the Gulf where they reproduce and the young ones go ashore again completing the cycle. A pleasing thing is, that the Queensland Government won't permit any fishing whatsoever within those nurseries. It's something that isn't the case here in New South Wales, and mores the pity and urgently needs introducing.

JD Do you feel the fishing of the nurseries is resulting in a reduction in the resource?

PADDON Yes. The American industry which is very similar to our own, particularly down in the Gulf of Mexico area and the everglades, they protect those nurseries very strongly. The juveniles and the nursery areas are not fished at all. Here in New South Wales, we are just slaughtering our young stock. It's unbelievable. I can't understand why the authorities permit it, but it is just going on and on. When we started to catch the outside or ocean stocks, we were obliged to catch them to a size of three and a quarter inches. This law protected the rivers in this area, where the juveniles were growing and they were allowed to grow and proceed to sea to spawn. I think that should now be brought into consideration again without delay.

JD Do you feel the management, the Departmental experts and administrators listen enough to the fishermen?

PADDON Yes and no. It's not an easy industry to administer. There's all sorts of things that we don't know that much about, pollution and restocking and the potential

of the stock to stand up to fishing intensity and all those sort of things are difficult. An understanding of the industry is vital and factual experimenting to see how the stocks are behaving and then protect them where it's obviously necessary to protect them. The authorities took the size limit off and today anything is legal. Of course if a fisherman is permitted to catch those baby prawns, he'll certainly do it. If he doesn't do it someone else will and the ball has started rolling. My suggestion is that a reasonable count, which is preferable to measurement, be put on the catch and whoever has illegal prawns in their possession, whether it's the fisherman, the co-op or the retailer, becomes liable. It'd be very easy to police, and to think that a lot of that catch out of our rivers, would count something round about the 200 to the pound instead of round about the 50 or 60 for ocean stocks. The devastation in the stocks is obvious and the overall final catch is greatly reduced. So I think it's something that anybody in authority should pay a lot of attention to.

JD Are there other factors perhaps that influence the size of the catch, pollution for example?

PADDON Yes. The world over, I think it's been established that fishing intensity does interfere with the stocks, whatever they may be. That applies here on our eastern coast to probably all our fish stocks, and whether it is only fishing or whether the pollution factors, that we've got to deal with these days are having a bigger inroad than we are aware of, who would know. It's in that area that CSIRO and the more scientific people could probably help. The fishing industry is littered with all sorts of organisations, groups and authorities and we don't seem to be getting down to a concise form of control. I think it's urgently needed.

JD Could we have a look at some of the other problems that confront fishermen? Along this New South Wales coast for example, many of the harbours are in rivers and there's often a bar that is quite dangerous to negotiate. Is that true? Is that the situation?

PADDON [laughs] Yes it is; too true actually. A lot of money has been spent on our coast with harbour works and so on, and it's lamentable to think that we are still making such obvious errors in the way we approach our harbour works. Any approach that puts the entrance walls to the east has just got to be completely wrong and results in dangerously sited bars. Firstly, the only time you can use them is in calm weather. Secondly, when the sea's on, it's positively dangerous to go near them, and thirdly, when the heavier seas break on the sand bars that form in the entrance, sand is put into suspension by the activity of the heavier seas, and with the flood tides, it passes into the river in suspension, and when it reaches calm water, settles to the bottom resulting in the first mile to mile and a half of the river being plugged completely with sand from the sea. The rivers are dangerous for the boats and blocked for flood clearances. Large sand spits practically block all the lower reaches of our coastal rivers and impede flood clearance.

JD And causes flooding?

PADDON And causes flooding, which can be overcome by reorganising the breakwaters, so that the entrance is turned away to the north. It makes it a very simple thing to approach or leave. If a boat can live in the sea it can enter the port if assisted by a northerly entrance. You just pass straight in to the west, passing the northern extremity of the breakwater, and you're into calm water. The sand that is passing continuously northward on our east coast is by-passed by the wall extending to the north. With no opportunity to go into the rivers, the ebb tide would scour the channel to the north, whereas dredging and that sort of thing is just a waste of

money. This is an area that I feel strongly about. Something should be done more constructively to get a better result. The easterly facing design has been persisted with for over a century, in spite of repeated failure.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Evans, to come back to prawns, you started it off here but I think you were also the pioneer of the prawning outside the estuary in the whole of Australia. Is that correct?

PADDON Yes. That's correct. Up until the end of 1948 outside prawning was not carried on at all. We weren't aware of the stocks that were available at sea. We knew the rivers were the nurseries for the younger prawns, but nobody knew that they went to sea to spawn, to complete the life cycle. I personally was interested in seeing if I could become more effective catching our fish, with a trawl set-up, and acquired a couple of small otter trawls that had been used in the Sydney harbour for prawn trawling, but I was more interested in fish at the time. We put them over to do some trial shots and immediately saw the availability of prawns in small quantities. We fished for something like twelve months with very disappointing results, as far as prawns were concerned. We discounted it as being worthwhile or profitable, but kept trawling because we were using the offal from the trawls in the fish traps.

JD For snapper?

PADDON Yes for snapper and leather jackets. Towards the end of '48, for reasons that didn't seem to make sense, the areas we were trawling became inundated with large school prawns. They got that plentiful that you just could not put the net over without catching prawns. That started trawling activity in a professional sense and we were able to catch and handle them. We had to process them and then market them which was so important to us. The word soon got around that there was money in prawns and that there was a lot of prawns to be caught which resulted in an influx of boats, especially the smaller boats from both sides of us south from Byron Bay and northward from Coffs Harbour. We were operating as a co-operative and we were obliged to handle the catch that was brought into the co-op, which we did. We had a very capable fellow as our manager, Stan Clark, and no obstacle was too big for him. We introduced steam cooking. We purchased a quick steam producing unit and exhausted the steam into the cooking tank and that seemed to give us a very effective cooking result (50 pounds of prawns), which stood to us later on when we were storing prawns in cold stores. If the prawn was thoroughly cooked it proved to be quite a good article to store.

Having got the ball rolling as it were (and of course this was the first time anywhere that prawns had been caught commercially at sea) we had to learn all the ins and outs. As I said earlier, Massey; Walter Massey from the Illawarra area on the south coast, was very knowledgeable in handling larger quantities of prawns. He was able to help me a great deal in putting into the chain of handling his knowledge on what to do and what not to do, which was tremendously important at that stage for us to get our product to the market in the suitable condition.

Of course, when things looked more promising we naturally started to develop the gear, and we got bigger nets, and then we had to develop the winching equipment, because once we got bigger gear we couldn't handle it without mechanical winches. There was a very helpful structural engineer close by at Woodburn who converted heavy duty truck diffs for double drum hauling winches fitted with drums, brakes and clutches. We really got a very proficient piece of equipment out of Ken Hardacre's efforts and our desire to get something that would work efficiently. The winches on the trawl gear that is used today hasn't altered much. Our basic approach was sound in those early days.

JD The size of nets or the number of nets each vessel has [unclear]

PADDON Yes, well of course there was only single trawling, in the early days. It did go to double trawling; now it's on to treble nets. I can't tell you much about the treble gear because it was never used early. It seems to be pretty complicated to me, but I did use double gear and that made a lot of difference. We made all our own nets as well as designing them. We used to get under certain conditions big heavy loads of ocean seaweed and kelp. If the nets weren't strong enough you'd just pull them to pieces. You didn't really know when you were running into weed. So that made us design the nets so the strength was in the right places and it made the nets much stronger and our designs were in line with the best American nets. We didn't have any problems we couldn't handle. We found that the intricate factors involved in a prawn trawl were not beyond us. We could make three nets identical and one'd be an outstanding one, one would be no good and the other'd be average. It was hard to get over that particular factor. So you weren't reticent about making more gear and when you got the good one [you] look[ed] after it carefully. It made a tremendous difference to your catch. The outstanding catching net was always a challenge.

The result was that the industry mushroomed tremendously quickly and the stocks appeared to be nearly unlimited winter and summer (there was no season about it). The size of the prawn was extremely large. Again, something that I haven't been able to really understand why. Of course they hadn't been caught, there was that factor about it prior to this but now the onslaught that goes on in the nurseries on juvenile stock is something that I'm thoroughly upset about. I don't think it should be allowed to continue but the authorities don't seem to think it's important. I haven't succeeded in doing much in that area. I would certainly think that something should be done. At that time, in the early part of the industry we often had to restrict the catches per boat. They would be put on a quota and the co-operative had that control and said, "Well sorry, we can't handle the volume of prawns", and that worked very well too and allowed the processing and marketing to catch up.

JD As time went on, trawling for prawns extended into other species of prawns, didn't it, into bananas and tigers and....

PADDON Yes. Here on this part of the coast the school prawn is caught up to about ten fathoms. [You] can get them further out but most of them inside ten fathoms. The king prawn starts to show up beyond twenty fathom. After the school prawn stocks appeared to be reducing we nearly exclusively fished king prawns. That was a very profitable undertaking and catches getting on towards a thousand pounds a night was current in those times. It's dropped down considerably these days but the juveniles of the king prawn, I think we lose most of them. They spawn out in the 40, 50 fathom areas and we've got a big sweeping southerly current that runs down this coast. The king prawn spawn is in the form of plankton before it becomes an independent

swimmer. In that time I think we loose most of our king prawn spawn being swept south and it never gets ashore to reach the nurseries.

The instance where it does way south is the Lakes Entrance area in Victoria. I did some survey work down there that showed that the young prawns did reach the coastal nursery. There was a sort of a backwater in that coastal current and they were able to get ashore and grew in the Lakes Entrance nursery and then left it and travelled very rapidly back up north. They've been tagged way down there and recovered at Cape Moreton in a surprisingly short time. We did learn something about that and up here with our school prawns, they spawn close in and they go back into the rivers very early, very small, and I think should be protected.

JD You then went further north and into the Gulf of Carpentaria and you'd be catching a different sort of prawn there, presumably?

PADDON Yes. The Commonwealth Government was interested in expanding the fishing areas and I did a two year survey for the Commonwealth Government. We went to Cape York and back and then up and back again. We found very rich beds of king prawns off Mooloolaba and from Tin Can Bay up. I think the king prawn go somewhere beyond Mooloolaba up to about Elliot Island, but don't go much further. Another variety of king prawn occurs there but not in great quantities. The big catch prawns in the north are the tiger prawn and the banana prawn. Tiger prawn very regular; banana prawn very irregular. He's something like our school prawns. If he's on, he's on and if he's not, he's hard to find.

JD When you were in the north some of the vessels there anyway seemed to process their catch on board. Is that right?

PADDON Yes. It's development that's occurred and very effectively too. The isolation of the Gulf of Carpentaria is pretty extreme. The conditions are, it's very hot. The seawater is also hot, up to 90 degrees Fahrenheit and so it means that keeping your catch effectively has been a problem. We did it earlier with frozen seawater and kept then in [that] and delivered them into the processing plants at either Weipa or Karumba for processing by the companies who had moved in and took over the processing side which was rather a shame from the point of view of the fishing industry because people outside the industry became interested in something that they thought there was money in. There was too but I don't think they did much good and we were at the bottom of the barrel. We needed co-operative marketing.

The fishing industry needs every help it can get and that would have been a big lift for the people who fished the Gulf, whereas a lot of them found that quite often their catch would not be accepted. I think we should have extended the co-operative handling business and dealt with the Japanese outlet direct. Had that been done, the fishing industry generally would have been much better off in that area 'cause there was vast quantities of prawns caught in the Gulf. A patch of banana prawns which would show on a sounder for five minutes trawling could result in from five to ten thousand pounds of banana prawns. You wouldn't know how to handle the nets when they came up. They found that the best way to do it was to dry freeze straight off the sorting trays, which they do now. With banana prawns they can quite easily, if there's any volume about, they get stuffed up. They just have to stop fishing and handle them but with tiger prawns which, I think most money's been made with them up there, they are trawled in a couple of hours' shot at night with, maybe a couple of hundred pounds of prawns per shot. So that goes into 25 pound cartons and dry frozen and then stored aboard until they've got, say 50,000 pounds of prawns. That's the normal

sort of thing that's going on in the Gulf today but most of the boats up there now are under the control of big companies. Most boats range from 80-100 foot in length.

JD There's quite a few women work on the boats, I believe?

PADDON Oh yes, yes. The women have proved very effective in more ways than one I suppose [laughs]. They are not resented in any way and are popular as far as deckhands and of course they work in the galleys and on the sorting trays. You live.... you really are a self contained community. You produce your own power. You keep your own lights and your own cooking set-up and your own water supply. You just stay at sea until that cold room is filled. Might be a month, two months.

JD Evans, do you think that the development of aquaculture of the prawns has affected the price of prawns from [unclear]?

PADDON I wouldn't think so. It's an area I don't know much about. I've always felt there was a lot of problems involved and no doubt it can be done effectively, although the Japanese and those people haven't been all that successful. They're still prepared to buy our catch and the prices were fantastically good. Not so good now for I don't know what reasons. Maybe there are other sources of supply that could be affecting it but the people that are fishing the Gulf today told me that the prices aren't as good as they were but again the advantage of those high prices didn't too often get to the fishermen, which is a shame to my mind because I think fishing is something that the Australian fishing industry, and particularly the prawning, has been developed by the fisherman. He's shown that he's capable of doing that. He's shown that he's capable of handling them properly and all the rest of it and should have benefited to a greater degree.

JD Could we turn to some of the other fisheries that you've been involved in. You were tuna fishing for a while I believe?

PADDON Yes. The prawn availability towards the end of the '70s, I suppose, made us aware that we'd better look for something else to do. The prawns seemed to then take on a seasonal aspect. They were available from spring through to the winter and then you had a long period of non-activity and it was during those periods that people did all sorts of things. I was interested in looking at the tuna. I went to Eden and into a bad season. That's interesting in as much as it was unheard of that you wouldn't get more fish than you could handle. That was the big problem. That year people were chasing them, and the tuna never really did show. That was before the intensity of fishing that did come later and could be blamed for reducing the stocks. This is the sort of element that comes into fishing in many ways and it just shows that we don't really know the answers to a lot of those questions.

JD Was it the southern blue fin that you were looking for?

PADDON Yes, yes. In the Eden area and Twofold Bay the stocks of fish there were mainly in about the 40 pound range and they'd come up out of deep water out on the edge of the Shelf in big masses as big as a house and they'd be probably a hundred tonnes of fish in that one school. You'd find them visually. The cannerys, of course, operated aircraft spotting and that sort of thing which made it much easier. The fish would appear to be sunning themselves right on top of the water. If you moved into them effectively and started to throw bait, yellow tail or pilchards, they were ravenous but when caught those fish they were completely empty, hadn't been feeding but they would feed on the chummed yellow tail. That was another thing I didn't quite

understand. I thought most fish, when they go off the bite and they're empty, you can't encourage them to bite but not so with tuna.

The poling operation I found very fulfilling [laughs]. I liked it. So when the fish got bigger you just had to throw them aboard with two poles and there was certainly plenty of activity.

JD Was it for the sushimi market or canning that you were....

PADDON Oh no. At that stage we were just supplying the canneries and five pence a pound was the top price.

JD It's changed now, hasn't it?

PADDON It certainly has. The price for prawns and snapper.... Everything today is up. I don't know. It'd just be hard to say, but twenty or 30 times.

JD Yes. Costs are up too of course.

PADDON Yes. I don't think they're up quite in keeping but when you've got a product (we'll go back to the prawns) such as prawns, and of course tuna is a lovely fish to eat if it's properly handled. With prawns, they are so keenly sought after that prices have just gone to the sky, as we would have known them. If we got four shillings a pound for king prawns, we thought that was pretty good. Today it might be eighteen dollars per kilo but of course the volumes are way down today.

JD Was there any other fishery that you were involved in? What about lobster?

PADDON Oh we did.... I started fishing very early with my father in the late '20s and we depended pretty heavily on a lobster season. They seemed to arrive somewhere about August, September, not a lobster about and then all at once all the traps were full as though a big school of moving crays had just covered the ground. Oh we would catch two to three hundred lobsters of a morning, say three pound lobsters, something like that but they appeared to be slowly whittled down until you found that they hardly occurred at all. Today they are there but that's about all you could say. Now whether that's fishing intensity or whether that's an evolutionary change, who knows but you wouldn't make a living on lobsters today in this area.

JD No. Not in this part of the world.

PADDON Not in this part, no, no.

JD Evans, how long have you been retired now?

PADDON Oh I suppose it's ten, fifteen years.

JD Did you sell out completely, sell your boat and....

PADDON Yes, yes; got rid of the lot of them. I had five boats one way or another and it was surprising. Some of them [were] very effective producers, didn't matter what crew you had on them or what you did with them, they were effective and others didn't matter what you did, they [didn't] quite make the mark. Something like the nets, if you got the nets working well they were right but if they weren't, that was it. So you had a battle with that sort of thing. Quite interesting. You never had too many

dull moments about the whole business which I was pleased with. After coming back out of the Air Force I thought that fishing wasn't going to be a way to make a living. I was going to go onto the land out western New South Wales but when prawns showed up I was quite interested to stay and am very pleased that I did.

JD How do you fill your time in now in retirement?

PADDON Oh, getting into arguments generally and not winning any. Trying to convince the authorities that we should do something about protecting those small prawn. I try to play a little golf. I've had a couple of hip replacements and I'm nearly new again now, so the sky's the limit.

JD Evans, your name of course is very famous in the world of rowing, sculling particularly. You were a world champion sculler, were you not?

PADDON Yes. I've nearly forgotten all about that Jack. My father was also world's champion. He won the world's title in 1922 in New Zealand and I won the world's title in Sydney on the Parramatta in 1948. For that business you need a strong back and a weak head and I think I qualified in that area.

JD It must have kept you pretty fit?

PADDON I think it has, yes. My father was a workaholic. He just went day and night. I had to follow him. I wasn't altogether pleased about that but he wasn't all that interested in what the results were. I felt that it was a little bit more important to pay more attention to working hard but making sure it was worth it. Anyway the rigorous sort of life that we did live I think keeps the human body functional. Apart from the hip trouble that I've had, I feel I'm very lucky really and keep pretty fit.

JD Well may it long continue.

PADDON Thank you Jack. Thank you very much.

JD And thank you for this interview.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Evans Paddon of Evans Head, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with TORY PUGLISI

INTRODUCTION

Tory Puglisi is a member of a very well known fishing family in several Australian states as well as in South America and Europe. He comes from a long line of fishermen and is himself widely known and highly respected in the Australian fishing industry. He was a foundation member and a long serving chairman of the Board of the very successful Ulladulla Fishermen's Co-Operative. He was also appointed to the Board of the Sydney Fish Marketing Authority by Government and served on that Authority until his retirement at the age of 70 years. Though he does not mention the matter during this interview, he was awarded the Order of Australia medal for his services to the fishing industry.

The interview is a fascinating account of progress that despite the vicissitudes of the Depression and the War years, this Italian migrant family has made. It is an inspiring story.

There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 020 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Tory, would you record you full name please?

PUGLISI My name is Salvatore Puglisi. I was born on the Island of Lipri and come out to Australia when I was three years old. The first one of my family to come over was my brother, Joe. He was eighteen at the time. The following year he called out my father, my brother, my three uncles. They all come to Australia and they all settled. First of all me brother Joe was in Woolloomooloo. He was there for about six months, then he went down to Wollongong because he knew a chap there that knew our family in the old country. So he worked with this chap in Wollongong and then after about twelve months he called out my father, [and as] I said, me brothers, me other brother and me three uncles.

They all settled in Wollongong, fished out of Wollongong and then....

JD They were all fishermen, Tory?

PUGLISI They were all fishermen. Then my father, he called out all the family. There was my mother, (one, two) five sisters and two brothers, meself and another brother. So we all settled in Wollongong. I found it hard as a kid but I couldn't speak Australian, of course, but we had a good family next door to us. Their names were Byron and they had young kids so it didn't take me long to learn the language.

I went to school in Wollongong. I went to the Christian Brothers. I sat for the Intermediate and passed but then the year after me mother says, "Son you've got to go to work with your father." So I left school. I was twelve and a half years old when I left school and I went straight [to] fishing with me father. I worked with dad for about two years and then I went to work with me brother-in-law. He had a boat called the **St Joseph**. He was fishing out of Wollongong too. He married me sister. So I worked with them and I had a very close association with him.

I stayed with him right up to, oh must have been about the year 1973 I worked with him. We were in partnership together and we had a very good relationship. Never had any arguments or nothing. As I say, in them days when I first went fishing with me father, the type of fishing we were doing then was set lining. That is, we had six lines. There was 120 hooks on each line and we used to set them. Them days we had to, we had to set them of a night time. It was all night work because there was a lot of leather jackets about and if whoever got faster got caught, and daylight come, we would get no more snapper. We mainly fished for snapper in those days. So it was all night work; very, very hard. We had no lights. Used to use hurricane lamps. That was the only light we had and to let lines go in the night time, just by the light of a hurricane lamp, you had to watch your fingers. Otherwise you'd get hooked, but anyhow that was alright.

As I say, in them days the only fish we used to keep or could sell was snapper. Anything else we used to throw over the side, but dad being resourceful.... Dad didn't like throwing good fish away. He used to keep them on the boat and (this was during the time of the Depression) a lot of chaps would come down the wharf. "Mick (my father was called Michael), any chance of a feed of fish?" "Oh yes, yes, no worries." So dad'd give them a morwong or a flathead or whatever we caught that we couldn't sell, but these blokes, they were very good too. They all had little vegetable gardens. So they'd bring dad a cabbage or some spinach or something which mum in due course used to cook for us. They were the good days, but they were the hard days. Snapper in them days, we'd only get four pence a pound for but a loaf of bread in them days only cost four pence too. So I can honestly say that during the Depression we never suffered. We always had plenty to eat and mum used to make our clothes. So we really never had a very bad time during the Depression.

Anyhow we worked there.... In them days when we used to go set lining, as I said before, was very hard and all night work, but dad had a, I don't know I still... Well later on in life I learnt meself too, but dad'd steam out or we'd steam out and when he thought it was the right place where the reef was, he'd say, "Right O, let's see how deep we are." Me being the youngest, the method we could find out how deep we are (how deep we were) and what kind of bottom was underneath us, we had a five pound hunk of lead and on the bottom we used to put on a bit of mutton fat and a line attached to this weight. So me being the youngest, it was my job to let her go. So every five fathoms we'd have a knot; ten fathoms there'd be two knots, fifteen fathoms there'd be one knot again and so on till we're up to about 60 fathoms. Anyhow, as the knots go through your finger you'd count and when the lead hit the bottom you'd lift it up and down a couple of times and dad'd say, "How deep are we?" "Oh we're 50 or 60 fathoms, or 54, whatever it was." "Right O, pull her up." So it was my job to pull the weight up and when I got it up you'd have a look under the light of the hurricane lamp. If you were on sand you'd see sand embedded in the fat. If it was on mud, well you always knew you were on mud because the weight used to sink into the mud so you knew, but if you were on reef there'd be jagged marks on it.

Anyhow, if we struck the reef first up (which was not very often), dad would say, "Oh that's good. We've got to go to the edge of the reef now so we'll go in a bit closer." So

we'd go in a bit closer. "Oh yes, still on [the] reef. Go in a bit closer" and sometimes you'd do this five, six times during the night, but that was the start. When he was right we used to let our lines go. Well every time the weather was fine we'd go out. We used to have to go baiting in the afternoon. We used to catch our own bait. We used to go after mackerel. Then in the afternoon, after we caught our bait, we cut it up and bait up our lines, go home to have tea, go to bed and get up again at 10.00 o'clock or 11.00 o'clock, depending where we had to go. So that was the life in those days.

Now I'm pleased to say that everything's changed. My son's a fisherman. He's called Michael after my [dad]. Things have changed. My son is the only fisherman in the family but he's got a boat called the **Torina M**, but before we had the **Torina M** we had a boat called the **St Joseph**. Now things have changed so much from the days when I was fishing to the present day. Now days they have on board, they have radars which can pick up objects on the sea up to about 40 miles, or even pick up the shore. They have a satellite navigator which means that if they're a hundred miles off shore, they can't see the shore, they switch this machine on. It's really a fantastic machine because not only it tells you which way to head for port, but it tells you how far out you are. Every mile that you cover, you've got an indicator that says you're a hundred miles out, then your 99 miles out and so on. Every twenty minutes there's another satellite comes over head and if you're not going directly on course, it'll tell you. So it's marvellous the modern machinery that they have now.

They've also got on board (he's got on board) two echo sounders which tells him how deep he is and also what type of bottom's underneath him. So that's the modern invention which has helped a lot and made life for the fishermen [these] days a lot easier than our time.

JD Tory, to come back to your own time in fishing, how many lines would you set?

PUGLISI We had, normally each boat we had six lines and there was 120 hooks attached to each line. So we used to let, what 720 hooks go every night; 720, pull them up, but then the worst job of the lot was we had to re-clean our lines the following morning. In other words we had to take the bait off if there's any bait left on, coil them back in the boxes, stick the hooks in the cork ready for the next day. So that was very tedious. We used to do that as soon as you got into port. Course now days very little.... Oh I think there's no more set lining being done. It's all trawling done with nets. All fishing is done with nets.

As I said before, in those days the only fish we could keep or sell was snapper. Nowadays, whatever you catch is saleable. I think this has been due to the people coming in from Europe, 'cause they are used to eating all types of fish and that's made it a lot better for the fishermen here. I was the pioneer fishermen for pilchards in Jervis Bay and in those days (that was in 1960) I could only keep twenty boxes of pilchards. There was an abundance of pilchards in the bay, but I could only keep twenty boxes. I'd get eight pence or nine pence a pound for them. If I caught 40 and sent them up to the market I'd only get two pence a pound so I used to have to let the rest go, but I started that and now my nephews, they have taken this over and they are doing quite well. As I said before, on account of the ethnic people coming into the country, they love sardines and not only the ethnic people but now the Australian people. They are learning to eat these fish too. That's due by mixing with the European people. The same with cuttlefish and squid. One time that was only used for bait. Now squid and octopus and cuttlefish sell very, very well on the market and the fishermen do well out of them.

We fished in Wollongong for sixteen years and dad must have been a bit of a wanderer, I don't know, but he was born in Aicreale. That's on the mainland of Sicily and then he shifted over to Lipari where I was born. We fished out of Wollongong for sixteen years but we used to travel up and down the coast. We used to go as far north as Newcastle and south down as far as Montague Island in our little boats. Life on board those boats was very primitive. We could not wash ourselves. Sometimes we'd be on board the boat for a week. You wouldn't be able to have a wash because the only water we had was for drinking and cooking purposes and we couldn't touch that. So sometimes we'd go for a week without even having a wash, but however....

We used to come down here to Ulladulla and dad liked this place down here. The fishing was much better than Wollongong so he decided to shift but first of all before he come down here, he said to my mother, he said (her name was Joesphine), "You'd better come down and have a look at the place where I'm going to go, or where we're thinking of going." So mum come down here. We rented a little place on the beach. Anyhow she stayed a week. So then me brother-in-law, he brought his wife down and she stayed a week. So then we all went back to Wollongong and the old man (I'll never forget) was sitting round the table. He said, "Well mum, what are we going to do? Are we going down to Ulladulla?" "Well", she said, "What can I do Mick", she said. "Wherever you go, I've gotta go." So that's why we shifted to Ulladulla. So we were the first of the Italian fishermen in Ulladulla. There was my father, like our family, me brother, me brother-in-law and the other brother. So we all come down here. We had three boats. One was called the **Mary**, my eldest brother's boat. The one called the **St Joseph** belonged to my brother-in-law, Joe Grego and the third one was the **Tory** which belonged to my father but I was working with Joe Grego at the time so I was with him.

However we fished here for a couple of years. We come down here in '37 (that's right), we come in '37 and [in] '39 we decided to start another type of fishing and that was Danish seineing. So we had a friend of ours that we knew in Wollongong, he was a boat builder, a Mr Settri. He lived in Huskisson which is 30 miles north of Ulladulla and we asked him would he build us a boat, and he did. It was 49 foot eleven inches. We couldn't make it 50 foot because if we did we'd have to get a skipper on board so we went one inch under the 50 feet. However we started fishing with this boat. We went netting, or Danish seineing it was called and we done very well. We done very well. We worked hard but we was catching plenty of fish. They were flathead what we were catching mostly, no snapper, flathead. So all the other fish....

JD Could I just ask you, how does the Danish seineing work?

PUGLISI Well we had.... There was a mile of rope on either side and a net in the centre. So what you'd do, you'd flow a flag over and you'd set like a big triangle; seven ropes on one side, the net in the middle and seven ropes on the other side to come back to pick up your dan flag. Once you got your flag on board, then you had a winch and you'd gradually haul your net in; but the net, really actually the net only fished for about twenty minutes. Used to take us an hour to do a shot, what we call a shot, but the net actually fished only twenty minutes. So we used to send the fish to Sydney.

JD Was it gill net fishing?

PUGLISI No, no, no. The fish were not gilled, no. They used to go into a bag, the same method (almost the same) as what we got now on the otter trawl. That's another type of fishing which all the boats are changed over now and the reason for that being that the net stays on the bottom longer but fish is.... Where we're

compared to twenty minutes with the Danish seine, these nets you can fish for three, four hours if you want to and they still fish all the time. Not only that, the otter trawl, you can go out in deeper water which we could not do with the Danish seine. The deepest we could go with the Danish seine would be about 80 fathoms, whereas with the otter trawl we can go up to 300 or 320 fathoms or 350 fathoms.

JD What size net would it be?

PUGLISI Oh, well the net.... They wasn't very big, the nets, but the mesh was three and a quarter inches. That was by law. We had to have them three and a quarter inches. That used to let the small flathead out which was a good idea. These nets now on the otter trawl, that'd be a minimum size is three and a half inches. That's the minimum size but my son, we go a little bit bigger, four inch and five inch because I feel that by having the bigger mesh, the net travels through the water quicker, better, and you don't get as much rubbish as a small net. So that's what we use on our boat. We use all big mesh nets and I find, or me son has found too that they're working very well; they're working very well.

We worked here, when was it in 1940. Oh we had our boat for about eighteen months and then the War erupted, the War broke out. So our boat was taken by the United States. That was round about, I think it was 1940/'41 I think, but anyhow they commandeered the boat but they paid us and paid us well. So we had no problems there. They paid us well. The only biggest problem we had.... We'd built three houses here, one for meself, one for me brother and one for me brother-in-law. I'll never forget, dad said, "We've built homes. Now next year when we work, whatever money we get, we'll pay the tax." Well what happened? The boat was taken off us so we had no money to pay the tax, but anyhow we got the money from the Commonwealth Government, then we paid our tax straight away. After the War we started fishing again. We built a boat down here. It was called the **John Dory**. We built it on the shores here at Ulladulla.

JD You built it yourself?

PUGLISI Well I helped build it, yes. We all got stuck in and helped build it. It was built down here in the shipyard where the co-op stands now, that was a shipyard during the War. I worked in there during the War. I was an enemy alien [laughs] but I couldn't help that because my father applied to become naturalised, oh after he was here about five or six years, but they knocked him back because he could not read or write in English. So me being under age when the War started, I was an enemy alien. Anyhow I got a job down here at the ship yards and I helped build.... We were building 45 foot tugs for the American Navy. It was a break for me but I liked the work and I think that [the] two, three years that I done down there, it carried me. It give me a lot of experience for later on in life when we had boats, when we built the bigger boats and that. I learnt the art of ship building. In later years anything that had to be done on our boats I used to do it meself. So saved a few bob that way.

When the War ended, as I said before, we built a boat and I had a lot of cousins in the old country that wanted to come to Australia but they couldn't come to Australia unless they were guaranteed a job. So what we done, our family, we guaranteed them a job on our boats. We had two boats at the time. We built another one after the **John Dory** and we got a lot of my cousins out here. We helped them. They in turn brought their wives out. They brought their families out and we helped them. We helped set them up in business by going to our friend up there in Huskisson, Mr Setri, and he built boats for them. We helped, of course. We did what we could and they prospered. They had boats and, of course, they were all.... Some live here now. Some shifted

down south. I've got relations everywhere. I've got relations at Ballina. Two of my nephews are fishing up there at Ballina. I've got nephews over at Port Lincoln in South Australia. I've got cousins of course, me cousins all over Italy. They're still there fishing. I've got cousins in Argentina. So [laughs]....

JD You're a world wide fishing family, aren't you? [laughter]

PUGLISI The Puglisi is all over the place. I think, I won't live to see it, but I'm sure that in years to come there'll be Puglisis in every State of Australia. There will be. I'm pretty sure there will be. Anyhow as I said, we helped our cousins and they all got established. They've all got their own boats now. Some have done exceptionally well. When they come out then, what we used to do in the early days, we used to have our own trucks and we used to take our fish up to Sydney; used to load them down here on the wharf bulk with ice and then when we'd go to Sydney they used to have a.... Joe Pearce or Sidi Fernandez, they used to pack them, pack them in there and send them to market.

So the old place down here, the ship building yard, it was laying idle so we all got together, all the fishermen down here and we decided to form a co-op. We formed a co-op with the help of a chap by the name of Mr Adams. He was a very smart man. He got us all together and we formed, we bought the building down there and we formed a co-op. I happened to be one of the foundation directors of the co-op. Me brother-in-law, Joe Grego, he was the first chairman down there. Anyhow there was seven directors and there was about, I'd say there was about, oh there must have been about 50, 50 or 60 members in the co-op. So what started in a little way, now our co-op down there, or was until last year, the biggest supplier of fresh fish to the Sydney fish market. It has been and I think the one.... When I was chairman, I was chairman down there for eighteen years (of the Ulladulla Fish Co-Op).

Then in 1979 I was appointed by the Government on the Board of Directors of the Sydney Fish Marketing Authority, a position that I held for ten years but I had to retire because I got to 70. They reckon you're too old, Tory now, so [laughs] I had to retire. I had to get out but it was ten good years and I learnt a lot there and I met some wonderful people, the other Directors that I met. We had ten good years and I know at one stage.... We had a lot of money down here at the co-op when we did the bank. I knew what was going on [at] the Sydney Fish Marketing Authority, so [we said], "What can we do to help the fishermen" one day at a Board meeting. Well I said, "Why don't we help the co-ops because the Sydney Fish Market Authority used to lend money to various co-ops to to help them, you know, either to get ice works or whatever, to improve the quality of their fish. So we were very lucky. We got a lend of \$381,000 from the Sydney Fish Market. I was not on the Board when I approached them and when I went there I was really shaken. I thought, "Fancy asking for this much money. I've got Buckley's chance of getting it" but anyhow, knowing the Board up there, knowing the fishermen down here in Ulladulla, they saw fit knowing what kind of people we were, they saw fit to give us the money, which we repaid while I was on the Board down at the co-op. Anyhow, as I said before, "What can we do to help the fishermen?" This is while I was on the Board. I said, "Well why don't we reduce the interest rate?" The co-ops were paying ten percent, see. So eventually, after two issues we got it down to five percent. So that was a great help, not only to the Ulladulla co-op but to all the other co-ops that was getting money from the Fish Market Authority.

As I said, while on the Board in the Sydney Fish Market I tried to help all the fishermen as best I could. Well we all did. We all tried to help the fishermen as best we could by doing this and doing that. I think it was ten wonderful years of my life but I'm sorry I

had to go because, as I said before, I met some wonderful people there and I'm still friends, still keep in touch with them, still keep in touch with the ones that I knew.

JD Tory, in your years in fishing, you'd have seen many, many changes in the management of the Fisheries, departmental management, licensing and restricted entry and that sort of thing. Would you like to comment on that?

PUGLISI Well I have seen a lot of changes from me young days to the present day but what they done, or what the Government done a few years ago, and I think that was a good idea, they stopped any more boats being built or licensing any more boats for trawling which I thought was very, very good because it got to a stage out there, the same thing happened. After the War, when we started it again we found that everybody was coming into the fishing industry. We had bankers buying boats to put some skippers on that didn't know nothing about the game and finish up, they would cause trouble with the blokes that was out there, the proper fishermen (let's put it that way). The same thing was happening with this otter trawling. So the Government put a stop [to it] which was a good idea, but what they've gone onto now, they've gone on to more or less telling the fisherman what he can do. In other words, a fisherman is only allowed to catch a certain amount of hake. Well I think that's alright, OK, 3,000 tonnes last year. This year it's 1,700 tonnes I've been told but to catch these hake or to catch these fish, the fishermen have got to pay the Government.... I think my son last year paid \$2,000 to catch his quota of gemfish which he never caught. I fear and I feel frightened that if they do this to all species of fish, a fisherman's got to outlay twenty, maybe fifteen, twenty thousand dollars to go and catch one fish. I sincerely hope they don't but they have done it to the gemfish. So God knows what they might do!

Another thing, what I fear, is they're trying to take their individuality off the fishermen. In other words, they're trying to take the individual fishermen away and put in big companies. I think this is what's behind their mind which, if that happens, it'll be the end of a fisherman as a fisherman. That's what I feel.

JD Tory, have you noticed much reduction in the quantity of fish that are caught?

PUGLISI Well, yes there has been a reduction but then we don't know.... Nobody actually knows what really happens. We don't know what happens in 200 fathoms. I've had cases here in me younger days where for eight months we nearly all went broke. We never caught a fish and there was not many boats about then. It was just after the War and we wondered, the game's had it. What are we gonna do. What are we gonna do? Then all of a sudden, it was the year just before, it was the year that I got married in '49....

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

PUGLISI Yeah the year 1949 we went out one morning, I'll never forget, **John Dory** and the **St Joseph** and we went down to a place called Pebbly which is about fifteen mile south of Ulladulla. We shot our nets over, we were Danish seine at the time, we shot the nets over and when she come up the bag was full of fish and from that day onwards we never saw so much fish in all our lives. There was fish everywhere. Wherever we went there was fish. Now where did those fish come from? I don't know and me brothers didn't know either. Nobody knew but I've noticed though with this otter trawl, there has seemed to be a bit of a reduction in fish. This year's been

particularly bad, although last year was pretty good. Well, I mean, we only think of... Like we go out today and we get nothing and say, "Oh the fish are all gone" but who knows, who knows. I do know though that if you keep on dragging and dragging and dragging, it must cause some effect.

JD There's a lot we don't know about fish, isn't there?

PUGLISI Well that's true. There's a lot we don't know. As I said before, we thought the game had finished but fish come from everywhere so.... One year they went after stripeys, poling stripeys this year. Last year there was none. This year blokes were catching up to twenty tonne. Where do they come from? Nobody knows.

JD That's a tuna, isn't it?

PUGLISI Nobody knows, depends on the commandeered, depends on the tide, it depends on the currents. That's all got a lot to do with it. If we get the wrong current here, if we get the southerly set, it's no good for the fish. If we get the southerly current or the current that goes north. What's it called, the northerly set, we always seem to do a lot better because that brings the cold water over from down Tasmania and it brings the fish up with it. So a hell of a lot's got to do with the currents, with the tides and I was always under the impression that once you got outside the Shelf there was no currents out there but I found out when we went out there that there's quite a lot of current out there. The water or the ocean's moving all the time. It's going round in circles. That's the way the world is.

JD Do the Ulladulla boats fish beyond the Shelf?

PUGLISI Yes, yes. Here we go out 300 odd fathoms, 320 fathoms. We don't really travel very far from Ulladulla but we go down as far as Montague. Sometimes we chase the gemfish up to Sydney, just depends on what you're doing or wherever you want to go.

JD Tory, you've finished fishing now, except for an occasional trip?

PUGLISI Oh yes. I retired round about 19.... I think it was round about 1980 I retired. I had a big operation and after that me son took the boat out. He said, "Dad I don't want you to come out fishing no more." So I got off the boat.

JD Yes. How old are you now, Tory?

PUGLISI I'm going on for 72. I still do a little bit in my retirement but I still do something. I mend nets for my son. I clean fish for me son that's got the restaurant. So I'm busy. I'm pretty busy. I keep meself busy.

JD You've got quite a workshop too, haven't you?

PUGLISI Yeah. I've got a workshop down there. I've got me own lathe and welder and oxyacetylene gas. I do a lot of repairs for my son on the boat; make things up for him. That keeps me going. It keeps me going and I'm quite happy.

JD Did you enjoy your years fishing?

PUGLISI Yes. As I said.... I haven't said before but I just passed my Intermediate exam and I don't want to blow me hat off here, but I passed me Intermediate and I

got a good pass. I was only in second year when I passed me Intermediate. I had to go to three years (third year). So dad had a bloke working for him. He left him. Me mother went up to the brother in Wollongong and said, "Tory's got to leave school." So I had to leave school to help dad, help the family but I never, ever regretted it. I enjoyed working. I enjoyed being a fisherman.

I used to love tuna fishing. I went tuna fishing in 1960 and I quite enjoyed that although my brother-in-law, he didn't like it very much. He reckons it wasn't working hard enough but when you got into a patch of tuna you were working alright and it was hard work but I really liked that game too so I've done quite a lot of different types of fish. I was pilchard fishing. We were meshing for sharks. That was another game that we done. We was Danish seineing, pilchard fishing, Danish seineing, otter trawling, tuna fishing. So I think I've tried me hand at everything. I was also long lining for shark out on the Shelf. That's another one. We done a stint at that too but every time we changed we always caught fish. We always caught fish and made a bob.

JD You and your family....

PUGLISI And the family, the whole family.

JD Well you've all done wonderfully well.

PUGLISI That's right, we have. No I have no regrets at all. I've no regrets. Only thing I'm.... Well I don't know. I suppose me son's the only.... I got three boys and only one took [the] fishing game on. One's a restaurateur and the other one's a carpenter but I'm hoping to see my grandchildren follow in their father's footsteps in the fishing game.

JD Your father, your grandfather was a fisherman?

PUGLISI Well my father was a fishermen and I know me father's father was a fishermen but then ahead of that I don't know but I think they must have been fishermen from a long, long, time back.

JD Yes. Well thanks very much for this talk. It's been a very, very interesting story you've told us. Thank you.

PUGLISI Good, thank you.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Tory Puglisi, retired fisherman, one time Chairman of the Board of Ulladulla Fisheries Co-Operative and Board member of the Sydney Fish Marketing Authority.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with **ALBIE SINGLETON**

INTRODUCTION

Albie Singleton has fished the Hawkesbury River for 50 years, that is from when he left school and joined his fisherman father on the river until his retirement two years ago, except for his years of Army service. As he says in the interview, probably he has travelled more miles on the Hawkesbury in search of fish than any man alive.

He describes the early method of hand netting for prawns and the later trawling methods. He was the inaugural secretary of the Fishermen's Co-Operative in his area and indicates the benefits to fishermen resulting from the establishment and operation of that organisation. He also provides interesting sidelines on early prices, relations with the Government and with recreational fishermen among other things.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded in Mr Singleton's home at Brooklyn, New South Wales on the 29th March, 1990. The interviewer is Jack Darcey. There is one side of one tape. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Albie could you record your full name please.

SINGLETON Albert Leslie Singleton.

JD And your date of birth?

SINGLETON 1923, 3rd September.

JD And where were you born?

SINGLETON Born at Pymble but only just while the midwife was delivering me [laughs]. We lived up the river at Singleton's Mills, twenty mile up the river from here.

JD That's the Hawkesbury River?

SINGLETON Hawkesbury River.

JD Have you lived in this river area all your life?

SINGLETON Haven't been out of here except during the War.

JD Yeah? What did you do during the War?

SINGLETON I was in the Commandos.

JD What the AIF?

SINGLETON Yes.

JD Where did you serve?

SINGLETON I had two trips to New Guinea and one in Borneo over the Owen Stanleys, Markham Valley, Ramu Valley the next time and then to Borneo the third time.

JD So you went up three times?

SINGLETON Yes.

JD When did you go into fishing then?

SINGLETON Beg your pardon?

JD When did you go into fishing?

SINGLETON Oh I was about thirteen and a half when I left school and went fishing.

JD So you were in the game before the War?

SINGLETON Yes.

JD Was your father a fisherman?

SINGLETON Yes at that time.

JD In this area?

SINGLETON Yes, on the Hawkesbury.

JD And when you came back from the War, you continued in the same game?

SINGLETON Yes, still fishing, yeah.

JD Could you tell us how you came to come into fishing?

SINGLETON Well that's all we knew. There was no other livelihood in the town, not at my age like. My father had been a prawn.... Prawning we were, prawning, practically since he came back from the first War. So we just sort of continued on.

JD And you, what worked as a deckhand for your father?

SINGLETON Yes at that time.

JD And then did you take the boat over?

SINGLETON Yes. He got very sick. He was knocked about a bit in the first War and he had to give it up like and I started working with different blokes. When I came back from the War there I had the boat [and] kept on working.

JD Was it trawling for prawns?

SINGLETON No it was hand netting in that time.

JD Could you tell us how it happens?

SINGLETON Oh yes. You have a net about 50 or 60 yards long and you had a row boat, a double skuller row boat and you'd shoot the net. One chap would walk along the shore and you'd tow down with the tide or up with the tide, whichever way it run and land. You'd go a certain distance; mostly the mud was too soft. You couldn't go too far like. You'd go 100 yards in one place.

JD So you'd have one man in the boat, offshore.

SINGLETON Rowing, yeah.

JD Yeah and one walking along the shore?

SINGLETON Yeah with the net.

JD You'd be limited as to where you could do that operation?

SINGLETON Oh yeah. Well you couldn't do it along the rocks or anywhere like that, only in shallow, muddy shores.

JD What sort of prawns did you get?

SINGLETON Beg your pardon?

JD What kind of prawns?

SINGLETON School prawns.

JD And you'd get good catches?

SINGLETON Yes, quite good.

JD Were there many people doing that sort of prawning?

SINGLETON Oh at that sort of time there was about twenty boats, I suppose.

JD All here in the estuary?

SINGLETON Yeah, from here to Wisemen's Ferry.

JD Did you do any other sort of fishing?

SINGLETON Not before the War.

JD No, and after the War, what did you do?

SINGLETON Oh in the winter time, like when the prawns went off my brother and I started working together. We used to go after mullet up the river.

JD Netting of course?

SINGLETON Meshing, yes.

JD Did you continue in the prawning and mullet fishing?

SINGLETON Yes.

JD You didn't go into any other sort of fishing?

SINGLETON No. Oh we went trawling; we were trawling then like after the War like. The idea come in, it was trawling, much easier than walking along the shore.

JD What sort of boat? You'd have had to have a new boat for the trawling, wouldn't you?

SINGLETON Oh actually we were only using small boats, using launches like but some had ten horsepower motors. We finished up with 40, 50 horsepower diesels, that sort of thing.

JD About what size boat would they be?

SINGLETON Oh anything from twenty to 30 foot.

JD And would they go further afield in the river?

SINGLETON No only.... Oh used to work just out past Lion Island, in the mouth of the river and up as far as, Colo, Colo River, about 40 mile up.

JD That's outside here and then up the coast?

SINGLETON No up the river.

JD Oh, up the river?

SINGLETON Yes.

JD And still for prawns?

SINGLETON Beg your pardon?

JD Still fishing for prawns?

SINGLETON Yes.

JD Where did your catch go?

SINGLETON Mostly to the market. We started a co-op down here.

JD Oh there was a fishermen's co-op?

SINGLETON Yes. Started it in, I think in about 1950. I was the honorary secretary of it to get it going. The wife and I spent all the time writing but only because she had a typewriter and that broke down so she wrote everything longhand [laughs] but then soon as we got going we paid a manager and carried on very well. It was very successful.

JD How many fishermen were fishing for the co-op?

SINGLETON Oh there was about 60 I think. Now there's down to about 35 members.

JD Is it still operating?

SINGLETON Yeah. Very financial and very good like, nice ice room and stores your fish. The carrier picks them up and takes them to market. You get top price for them. You don't have anyone short-weighting you or that sort of thing.

JD That sort of thing went on a bit before that, did it?

SINGLETON Beg your pardon?

JD That sort of thing went on a bit, did it?

SINGLETON When the agents were there, yes, quite a lot.

JD Did you find any improvement when the New South Wales Fish Marketing Authority was established?

SINGLETON Oh I don't know. I think actually it was. They changed over during the War. They cut out the Government controlled market like and they cut out the agents some time during the War. I was away at the time and the Government had to have [a] fix price on fish then but then they started that Fish Authority and they had the commission down to eleven percent. They put it up to twelve and then up to fourteen which is quite a big smack out of your cheque.

JD And is that still the commission?

SINGLETON Still the Commission but while the Co-Op, if it sells any, well it gets the full fourteen percent, if it sells any local stuff. Otherwise it gets a refund of about, oh I think it's about eight or nine percent.... about five percent from the market now.

JD For that fourteen percent that the market people take as commission, what do they do, in addition to selling the fish?

SINGLETON Oh, they pay you [laughs]. That's the main thing.

JD But do they provide the boxes for example?

SINGLETON No. We've got to buy our own boxes. They got plastic crates made and the Co-Op has to buy them and you've got to own them. That's about all they do. They auction it and they've got a depot where you, you know, it's down the market. You can take a truck load of stuff in there and get rid of it.

JD Do you still have to pay your own transport costs and that sort of thing?

SINGLETON Oh yes. There's a very good carrier here.

JD Do they provide the ice at the markets?

SINGLETON No. We supply that all ourselves.

JD You make the ice here?

SINGLETON Yes. We've got an ice making machine at the Co-Op.

JD Albie, does the Co-Op supply the bait and other gear for the fishing?

SINGLETON The which?

JD Bait.

SINGLETON Bait.... well no there's very little.... They do a bit of crabbing here now like. They got to arrange for their own bait. They get it from the fish shop out the front or catch fish themselves and store it in the ice room down there (cool room) for themselves for crabs but there's very few trapped fish in the river here.

JD What about nets and ropes and....

SINGLETON Yeah well they order it for us and.... or they order it for the fishermen (I'm not in it now) but they order it for the fishermen and it's always been that they didn't take [unclear]. You got a couple hundred of dollars' worth of net. A few years back it was as much as you would earn that week. Well they wouldn't take it all out that week. They'd take ten or fifteen percent to give you a chance to.... if you had a wife and kids, like. Some of the young people and that, everyone used to get a bit short at times fishing on this river. It's never been a big earning river or anything like that.

JD Does the Co-Op help people when they need a new boat, for instance?

SINGLETON No, no not actually. We were never financial enough for that sort of thing.

JD Can we have a look at some of the problems in the fishery here? Is there a pollution problem in the Hawkesbury?

SINGLETON Yes there is. It's quite a big one now like. At one time there you could fish in the winter time. I was telling you there we used to go up just below Windsor, a

couple of miles below Windsor and the fish was beautiful to eat - mullet. Now you've got to come down like 40 miles before you can eat it.

JD Why's that?

SINGLETON [laughs] It's pollution.

JD They develop a flavour, do they?

SINGLETON Yes and they also get sores on them and they call it, oh Bundaberg disease or something like that. I don't know what it is. You know, you couldn't eat a fish. You put it in the pan and you'd throw it out.

JD What, does it smell?

SINGLETON It smells, yes and you wouldn't eat it. You'd know as soon as you catch it like and you don't bother catching them so you don't go up there but it's coming from pollution up the top of the.... Which it's got to be. Like any river, there's always got to be a sewer. Well everything runs into it up the top and the further down you get, the purer the water is of course, if there's a stronger tide running.

JD It is tidal, isn't it?

SINGLETON Yes. Tidal up past Windsor. It's.... I think actually a five foot tide rises three foot at Windsor, five foot at Fort Dennison. Oh it's different now in meters. They got me beat with that, but [laughs]. [unclear] [With] a five foot tide it rises only three feet. That's two feet difference and it runs about an hour later. That's every twelve mile.

JD It doesn't go up as a bore, it just....

SINGLETON No, no. It just rises steadily like and runs up.

JD It would still have a flushing affect on it, in the estuary?

SINGLETON Yes.

JD Yeah. Is that pollution being investigated at all?

SINGLETON Oh I couldn't tell you. I had to give it up like about four years ago, five years ago, but I imagine that they do get on to it and that.

JD Are there any other scale fish caught in this river?

SINGLETON Scale fish?

JD Yeah.

SINGLETON Oh yes, brim, flathead, jewfish. It's a very good river like for all those ground fish and that.

JD Did you fish for those?

SINGLETON Yes, illegally [laughs].

JD That's another thing that would have happened during your working life, the introduction of limited entry fisheries. Is that right?

SINGLETON I beg your pardon?

JD You would have been in the fishing industry when limited entry fisheries were introduced?

SINGLETON Yes, yeah. It's only actually just lately that they've brought that in. Before, you could get a licence. Anyone could go and apply for a licence, a pound. You know it was a pound in those days. Your boat was ten bob. Now it's, oh I think it's about.... Well to get it registered, a boat now costs more than I spent all me lifetime in the licence and boat. Costs you about \$500, five or six hundred dollars to get it registered. When I started it was ten bob a licence (fishing licence) and ten bob for your boat.

JD Why.... It's just Government charges have gone up, is that [why]?

SINGLETON I think.... Yeah [laughs]. I don't know how to put this but they get some silly bloke sitting on his backside in the office. He decides he's got to make himself important so he jacks up something and doesn't enquire into it. I don't think Mr Greiner would like me saying that.

JD Is there a fisherman's organisation here in Brooklyn?

SINGLETON No, not in Brooklyn. They belong to one along the.... Covers like the metropolitan area, all along the coast now but usually you've got to stand up for yourself.

JD Do you feel the Fisheries Division take note of what the fishermen have to say?

SINGLETON Oh I don't think so, honestly. A lot of the fish inspectors.... Most of them are, you know, very decent blokes. A lot are ratbags and they couldn't make a living fishing so they'd go and make themselves a fish inspector; only a few of them. There's been a lot come and go in my time.

JD What about the recreational fishermen? There'd be a lot more recreational fishing now on the river than there used to be I think?

SINGLETON Yes.

JD Does that make much difference to the professionals?

SINGLETON No, not actually.

JD Is there a good relationship between the professionals and the amateurs?

SINGLETON Yeah, I think so. You get a few ratbags amongst them. Like they'll complain about.... If they see a trawler working they'll say, "Oh he's catching all the fish" and he's not catching anything.

JD Do you think any of the amateurs sell their catch?

SINGLETON Oh, a very limited few like. It wouldn't be worth worrying about the amount that'd sell it.

JD Is the quantity of fish you're catching, or the fishermen are catching now better or not as good as it used to be?

SINGLETON Oh I don't think it's quite as many but they're getting a better price for it and they're working a lot easier than they used to.

JD Can you recall any of the prices you used to get, say pre-War?

SINGLETON Yes. Four pence a pound for prawns. They're a little bit dearer now. Like [if] you don't get \$10 a kilo for that, they start to say [laughs] "Gees, prawns are cheap".

JD What were you getting for your mullet?

SINGLETON Oh it'd go.... They used to sell them by the box then. Be about 60 pound a box and sometimes you get six bob a box.

JD Be hardly worth sending them in, would it?

SINGLETON Well if you caught them, there was no good keeping them. If you got half a dozen boxes or ten boxes.... Well wages weren't very dear then.

JD Would a fisherman have been making as much in fishing as he would have made in other jobs on wages?

SINGLETON Oh probably.... You know you might have worked longer hours and harder but you'd still knock out.... A basic wage, when they started the bridge down here in '39 they were only getting three pound eighteen a week. Well you could scratch out like five pound fishing and prawning.

JD So you'd probably be a bit better off than the average bloke?

SINGLETON Yeah.

JD Do you remember the Depression at all, Albie?

SINGLETON Yes [laughs], very well.

JD Do you? What was it like?

SINGLETON Well, you know, there was no money anywhere. Everyone had to scratch around [for] a bit of relief. I wasn't working, I was still going to school then but didn't actually finish till about '39, I don't think, the Depression, till the War started. We seemed to find money everywhere then.

JD The fishermen perhaps would have been a bit better off again than the average bloke?

SINGLETON Yes. Well they could always eat some of their own catch, like.

JD Do you find that the young people nowadays are not eating as much fish as they used to?

SINGLETON Oh I think the price might have a lot to do with it. You know, you get that rubbishing food you buy, hamburgers. I don't say it's rubbish. I like them myself but there's that many different varieties where one time there was only.... you either ate meat or fish. It's totally different now.

JD There's a big difference in the price the fisherman gets compared with what the consumer pays for fish?

SINGLETON Well when you take it into consideration like, he's got to clean it. He wastes a big part of his fish cleaning and he's got to pay a fair rent for his shop and wages. Wages are about the biggest bugbear in any job I think.

The Co-Op down here, it's the best thing that ever happened for the fishermen like. You know you feel proud to think that you helped to start something like that for the young blokes. There's no doubt about it, it's marvellous for them. It's different where you had to go and get ice off the butcher or get it sent down from Hornsby and you wouldn't know whether you're gonna catch stuff or not. You're looking around or a box or a dump case, apple dump or a benzine box or something to send your fish in. Well you've got very thing now like that you have them. Carrier picks them up. You used to have to carry them over the station and wait there and put them on the train yourself. It makes it a lot easier.

JD And [you're] a bit more confident that you're getting a fair price?

SINGLETON You are. You're getting the top prices. No chance of the manager knocking you off or anything like that. It's very well run.

JD Albie, many young blokes coming into the industry here?

SINGLETON Oh yeah, quite a few but it's a bit harder to get in now. They've got to pay so much for a licence and so much for boats. You know like a decent boat now you're up to ten, twenty thousand. Before you weren't now that's stopped a lot of those young people.

JD And you have to buy a licence from a fisherman that's....

SINGLETON I believe you do. They never used to. It's only just happened just lately.

JD That wasn't the case when you pulled out?

SINGLETON Well you didn't then and you couldn't sell your licence. You weren't allowed to sell it. You had to either hand it in, or well you handed it in and that was the end of it.

JD How long have you been out of fishing?

SINGLETON Beg your pardon?

JD How long have you been out of fishing?

SINGLETON Oh about four years I think, four or five years.

JD What do you do with yourself now then?

SINGLETON Oh poke around and do a bit of gardening. My legs are pretty crook.

JD Go fishing?

SINGLETON I go out with a young chap [who] works on the railway. We go out after a few crabs occasionally and get a feed.

JD Did you enjoy your years fishing?

SINGLETON Oh yeah. I never knew anything else [laughs] but always did. [I] liked it. I liked the river.

JD Did you ever get the urge to try something else?

SINGLETON No. Well that's all I knew like. Like if you're a bricklayer you wouldn't want to go and get a job in an office somewhere, would you? I suppose I've travelled more miles on this river than any man that's ever lived. That'd be pretty certain I think.

JD I notice you didn't move away when you retired?

SINGLETON Beg your pardon?

JD You didn't move away when you retired?

SINGLETON No. Well I've got me home here and that. A nice home. I own it [laughs]. I didn't retire, I'm on a pension [laughs] but [unclear] pension from the Army. I couldn't work, otherwise I wouldn't be on it but I've enjoyed me life fishing.

JD It's a way of life, isn't it?

SINGLETON Yes quite a good way but it's hard work, just the same. You work five days a week where ever you're starting work. On the river here prawning you've got to be there at daylight. If you're three hours up the river, well you've got to be up there at daylight to keep with par with the chaps that live along the river. Then the weekend you've usually got a bit of a job to do on your boat or your nets or something like that. You don't get that much spare time.

JD You fished during the day?

SINGLETON Yeah, trawling but not for fish like, only trawling for prawns.

JD Are you limited in the number of days you can fish?

SINGLETON Yeah. It's closed the weekend for trawling. You can fish the full week, seven days like, for fish itself, meshing.

JD Did you ever try line fishing?

SINGLETON No [laughs]. The set line, it was illegal [laughs]. I did try it. I used to make a living there, oh a few bob out of it before the War and that when you're young. That's hard work. Now the bait you put on the line is worth more than what the fish is and there's too many boats running around, amateurs like. They'd drop an anchor and they'd pick up set line going across the river with their anchor so you wouldn't do much good with it.

JD Be a lot of noise down there too I imagine?

SINGLETON Beg your pardon?

JD Be a lot of noise down there with all the motors going?

SINGLETON Oh yes. It was very deep water though in a lot of places.

JD Some of the people you'd have known as fishermen would be pretty old people now, wouldn't they?

SINGLETON They're nearly all dead [laughs]. It's not as healthy a life as you think.

JD Isn't it?

SINGLETON No.

JD What's the problems then?

SINGLETON Well I don't know. You're exposed to all weathers and I don't know anyone that's much older than me.

JD Is arthritis a problem?

SINGLETON Well that's what I reckon I've got but I didn't put it down to fish. I put it down to Army but the Army didn't put it down to that so [laughs]... Oh you get worn out, that's all. Work trawling fourteen hours a day, it's not as healthy a life as they all say. A few of them lived to a good old age but a lot died young too.

JD Are there many accidents in the river?

SINGLETON No, very few. Oh it's a big river and most people have common sense like. It's not like the road or anything where you've got maniacs running around but you can get as full as a boat on the river and you're not going to run into another boat.

JD Are the recreational people in boats a nuisance to the...?

SINGLETON No. Most of them are pretty decent. [It's] surprising, most people are very decent and no matter what trouble, if you see a boat broke down, someone'll always come and offer to help you and you do the same for them. It seems to be the going thing on the river or on the sea even.

JD Alright then. Thanks very much for talking to us.

SINGLETON Yes. I've got to go to a doctors to get me leg dressed [laughs].

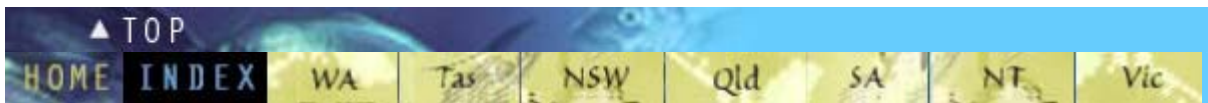
JD OK thank you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Albie Singleton, ex-fisherman on the Hawkesbury River at Brooklyn, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with DULCIE STACE

INTRODUCTION

Athol Stace is a very prominent fisherman in Laurieton, New South Wales. He has served for eight years on the Board of the Sydney Fish Marketing Authority, retiring from that position at the end of last year. He has also been the long-time chairman of the Board of Directors of the Fishermen's Co-Operative here. After a lifetime of long hours of hard work, Athol is able to take things a little easier now though he still fishes full time with his fisherman son, Ronald.

At the time of the interview he was taking a holiday, cruising in the Pacific. Fortunately his wife, Dulcie, agreed to be interviewed in his stead. This gave the project an opportunity to include the story of a fishermen's wife among those of its other contributors. It is well that this was so, as all too frequently the wives of fishermen remain the unsung heros of the industry. It is they who support their husbands through the good times and the bad, they who keep the home together and largely bring up the children, and they who worry through the long nights of bad weather knowing full well the hazards that men are facing.

It is fitting indeed that something of their story be told. Here Dulcie Stace does that and does it very well. The interview was recorded in Laurieton, New South Wales in Athol and Dulcie Stace's home on the 4th April, 1990 for Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry. The interviewer is Jack Darcey. There is one side of one tape. The interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Would you record your full name please.

STACE Dulcie Stace.

JD And what was your date of birth?

STACE 31st, the third, 1921.

JD And where were you born?

STACE I was born at Crown Street Women's Hospital in Sydney.

JD And where did you spend your early years?

STACE At Barellan, a little place about twenty, 30 minutes out of Sydney, until I was about fourteen and then we came back to Sydney because I had secured a job at

Crown Crystal, the handcut section of the glassworks. I was there for about four years and when I was about nineteen and three months, then I got married and came to Laurieton [laughs].

JD You married in Sydney?

STACE Yes. We were married at St Paul's in Sydney and had our reception in Sydney and then travelled home to Laurieton.

JD How did you meet your husband?

STACE I met him at a dance at Quails Dance Studio in George Street, Sydney about twelve months before.

JD And he was a fisherman then?

STACE No he wasn't a fisherman then. He was working in the same place that I was, only that we hadn't met yet. He was working at the glassworks too but then after we met, just about three months after we met, he came home then to work on the boat with his father and his uncle. Then the following year we were married and then that's how I came up here.

JD Athol's father was a fisherman?

STACE Yes. His father and his father's brother had the **Mowana** which was a fishing boat at that time. Then Athol came home to work with him, well to work with both of them but Uncle Eric had a lot of ill health and the sea didn't really agree with him. So he gave it away and Athol.... They sold the **Mowana** and then Athol and his father went into partnership then and built the **Jewel** which they are still fishing from today.

JD They built the boat themselves?

STACE Yes they built the boat themselves, yes.

JD Had they ever built a boat before?

STACE No, no but some of the fishermen here were boat builders, had built boats and they mostly all built their own here in those days, the fishermen.

JD Did they build them out of the local timber?

STACE Yes, partly, yes. They used to go up into the.... There was a lot more timber at that time because the place hadn't been developed to the extent that it is today and so they had plenty to choose from and they went up into the bush and got their own needs (as they called them) and the main part and then the other parts like they had to get like the decking and that, they had to buy. They had no tools much of any kind. They just did it with the few bits of tools that they had for those times and we had no electricity so there were no electric tools [laughs]. So it was just a matter of all done by hand.

JD It must have been a big change for you coming up to this place from Sydney?

STACE Yes, yes it was for a while but you get involved with the people and there weren't that many people actually anyway here but we made our own fun and we

joined different groups, country women, the church groups and we had [a] travelling picture show once a fortnight; oh all sorts of little things that we did to make our own fun. Oh we had a lot of dancing in those days. The School of Arts was always the main venue and we danced a lot. We had balls and then when the family started coming along, as they got older they had juveniles for the children and we had a lot of fun of our own making.

JD Did you have a house?

STACE No. The first five years we were married we lived down in the old home with Athol's mother and father. Then after five years we came up into where we are now and we're still in this same house, yes.

JD Did Athol fish inside or outside?

STACE Outside, always outside. Mostly for the main part was outside fishing but at that time you couldn't buy your own bait. They had to have bait to bait the traps so it meant that they had to go up the river of a night and try to get the bait that they needed for the next day. Sometimes it would be 12.00 o'clock when they'd get back of a night and it was just a few hours' sleep and then up, about 4.00 o'clock, and then off again. So it was a pretty....

JD Out to sea?

STACE To sea, yes and it was pretty hectic at times, but this only went on for around nine months of the year. Usually about December they would finish and then they did different other things until about early March again when they would go out and set the traps again. They didn't fish right through like they do today. They would go to the sawmill or they would go out on the beach catching mullet or doing just different things.

JD What, they'd work in the sawmill in the off season?

STACE Yes, yes. Not all the time but part time and just different things to fill in that time until like they went to sea again but today they just work right through. They don't take that time because they seem to have to work all the time now to make a living. I think fishing are getting more scarce, although they weren't a price that they are today in those days, but there were more of them. Like leather jackets were fairly plentiful. They used to catch snapper and they would get them in much large quantities than they do today.

JD Did they fish for crayfish as well?

STACE Yes, yes. I remember one catch, they came in with 84 dozen which was a fairly big catch on a not extremely big boat. They just looked enormous on the deck [laughs] of this boat but they did catch fairly good catches of lobster in those days.

JD Even though the catch was very plentiful, very often prices were not so good. Wasn't that [the case]?

STACE Well that was right in some ways. Like you take prawns, I've seen them get quite a lot of prawns and get about six pence a pound for them but they had their problems too then because there were times when they couldn't get to sea with the weather. They had weather problems the same as they do now. So they did have lost

time but sometimes they used to do beach fishing for the mullet. That was always for some of the fishermen but our fellows, it was around.... Easter was the worst time. Everybody seemed to have mullet and I've seen them work all night and get mullet, send them to Sydney and get a bill back for the cartage or whatever because they didn't want them. The market was glutted so there were lots of things like that that didn't always add up.

JD It'd be pretty disappointing?

STACE It was very disappointing, yes. Another thing which sometimes used to happen, they'd go out for mullet hoping to have them for easter and the darn things wouldn't come till easter morning. That was too late 'cause you didn't have anywhere to send them. There were no co-ops, nothing like that so there was no way to sell them unless you sold them to the public or something. It could be very disappointing at times, as well as good. So things like that. We'd stand down there keeping the flies off the prawns and the fish at times.

JD You used to help, did you?

STACE Not always, but we had to ring Kendall every morning that they were out at sea.

JD That's the women did?

STACE Yes because the men were at sea and we had to ring Kendall which was about five mile away for ice to be delivered ready for when they got in from sea. So if we forgot to ring for the ice, it meant they had no ice for their fish or prawns (whatever they were doing) and we were in bad trouble. At times I've seen us waiting for the ice truck to come down and they'd have a heap of prawns cooling them off and we'd be keeping the flies and whatnot off with branches off the tree. So a lot of things were against them not having ice on the spot. Then they would pack the day's catch. They had to go five mile to Kendall to the railway station and everything was delivered by train. So you'd just hoped that the trains were getting down there in time for the market the next morning.

JD That's down to Sydney?

STACE To Sydney, yes to the Sydney markets which weren't always reliable either because they didn't have.... The markets in Sydney in those times weren't anything like they are today, all computerised and everything. It's so wonderful today what they've got but at that time we had to rely on the train to get those perishables down to Sydney on time.

JD Athol served for a long time on the Marketing Authority, didn't he?

STACE Yes, for about nine, close to nine years on the Authority; eight years anyway, eight full years on the Authority. Previously to that he served eight years as chairman of the Co-Op here.

JD When the Co-Op was established here, did that improve things for the fishermen?

STACE Oh yes, yes, marvellously. How wonderful it was to have a nice plant with ice on the spot so that the fishermen didn't have to rely on anyone else to bring ice. It was so wonderful and to have somebody there to help pack your fish and see that your

fish got away on time. In later years then they were able to buy a truck and the Co-Op then had a truck to convey all their catch then to Sydney themselves, but of course that was a fair while coming, but just to have ice and facilities for packing your fish and plenty of boxes and all that type of thing, it just made such a difference to the fishermen which I think they would all look back on now and say the day that Co-Op opened was a wonderful event [laughs]. I think otherwise too, to know that they could come in from sea and not have all that terrible worry with their fish, not knowing whether they were going to get ice or not. So that was a good thing.

JD Yeah, not having to transport it to the rail themselves.

STACE Yes, that's right, yes. It was great.

JD Athol retired from the Fish Marketing Authority, what a year or so ago?

STACE Just last Christmas. In December 1989 he retired from the Authority.

JD But he still fishes?

STACE Oh yes. He loves it, yes. He still goes out with my son, yes. He's retired but he still fishes [laughs]. He still loves to go out. That's his whole life. Fishing's been his whole life and he couldn't think of anything else. Even now he can't stand for it to be a bad day that they can't get to sea which we've had a lot of lately. He just loves the sea and he just loves to go out and he's just loved the years of watching the co-ops grow and watching the fishing industry grow and especially last year when we were at the opening of the big new fish markets. It was just such a dream come true for him. It was such a colossal thing. You've got to go in there and have a look at it, which we did at the opening, and it was so wonderful. You couldn't imagine it ever coming to pass but it did and that was one thing that he's so thankful for because it means so much to the fishing industry.

JD Your son took over his father's boat, did he?

STACE Yes. Previously to that, in about 1973/'73 Ronald built a beautiful boat at Mooloolaba called the **Heather Dee**.

JD Ronald's your son?

STACE My son, Ron. He went up there to work first and the chap that he was working for was a boat builder and by going out with him.... He had worked with his father before this but things were a bit scarce here at the time. Fishing had gone off a bit so he decided he'd travel around and have a look around at different things in the fishing industry that he might be interested in. So he went to Mooloolaba and he worked for Neil Slarsen on Neil's boat. Up until this time we had a property at Bonnie Hills, a farm, big property and we decided we'd sell so after we sold the farm Athol told Ron to get a bigger boat built and that he'd go in with him. So they built the **Heather Dee** and she was built at Maloolabar. Then after some time Ronald brought it back down here. He sold that about two years ago and he decided to get a stebacraft which he's just finally finished off and he's waiting now to have the christening which is to be Easter Saturday and the **Jewel** which Athol has had for just on 50 years, she's to go to Sydney. A chap in Sydney is buying her and he's having her on the harbour down there. So they will be working from the **Haven Star** after Easter Saturday.

JD That's the new boat?

STACE That's the new boat, yes. The **Jewel** has done a terrific job and she's been a wonderful boat and we'll be sorry to see her go [laughs] but we don't have the use for two boats, so sadly she's the one that has to go. Course she's getting old now so she'll be well looked after down there. This chap that's buying her is going to have her as I think more of a showpiece type of boat down there so she'll be well looked after. So we're very happy about that because that's been Athol's life. I don't think he would have sold her otherwise [laughs]. I think he would have just let her sit in the marina but I think that that'll work out alright and Ron will have his nice new boat which should make things a lot easier. She'll be a lot faster. She runs beautifully and much faster through the seas and back home again. So that should be an asset to have them out there and back again without having to spend the hours of travelling that you do on a slower boat.

JD I heard someone comment once that it's a bit of a toss up with fishermen as to whether they love their boat more or their wives.

STACE Oh well it is a toss up. I think it's us when it comes to doing the washing and all that type of getting tea ready but no I think it's pretty even. They do love their boats [laughs].

JD On a more serious side though, being a fisherman's wife would have plenty of worries and problems I would think.

STACE It has had, yes. The worry of not having a two way radio in the early days. They just went out and you just didn't know what was happening out there and you just had to wait patiently for them to come home, or impatiently if they were very late. On the odd occasion I have known them to get to the bar and then be caught there and not be able to get in all night. To my knowledge that's happened twice to us and it is very worrying. All in all I think over the years you just say to yourself, well this is the life and we chose it, Athol chose it and I went along so we've just got to live with it and that's what you do. Different people have often said to me, "It must be terrifying waiting for that boat to come in?" I said, "Yes. In the real early days it was but" I said, "I've disciplined myself now that it's our living, it's our job and it's what he wants to do. You can't force them into doing something that they're not going to be happy [in]. So you just say to yourself, that's it."

It goes out, you get up.... For 30 years I was up at anything between half past three and four o'clock every morning; every morning that the sea was good. There were a lot of times when they didn't go out but it's early rising and then you get them away, then you don't get time to do much otherwise, only some odd jobs or a bit of washing [and] it was time to get the children off to school so they were long days, yes.

JD You used to get up every morning to get him off to fishing?

STACE Yes, yes. Then when my son started I had two of them to get off. He's only been married twelve years so he was late getting married. So I had him as well for all those years but now I'm wise now. I don't get up early now [laughs]. I leave it all ready the night before and Athol's quite happy about that, so that's it.

JD One of the problems in the earlier times must have been bringing the youngsters up, with Athol working such long hours and away from home for such a long [time] and then I suppose being very tired when he got back?

STACE That's right, yes. Actually it was.... In this respect it was the mother's job actually. Like you had a lot of the decisions to make because when they got home, if they'd had a long day or they'd gotten home and then had to go out after bait again at night, they only had that couple of hours in between getting home and going out again up the river and they'd be up there, as I said, till 12.00 o'clock at night and then with very little sleep up again early.... It was my job to keep the children, well to keep as many hassles away from him as possible. I found that there were times when he would not have seen our children for three days sometimes at a time because they'd come home from school and then they might go to a friend's place or they'd go to play or something. Then he'd be gone before they got back again and then often they were still in bed when he got up of a morning to go again so there wasn't that as close a relationship with the children in those days that he's got now because he's got no hassles now. What he does now, he just does it more for the pleasure of it and he has plenty of time in between to see the children. He doesn't have to go chasing bait and that type of thing.

So there is a vast difference between fishing today and fishing in those times because you don't have to be out half the night. Our fellows only go trapping, which they leave early, but they're home again.... depending on the day. If it's a good day and they're after.... They go out wide for their lobster gear or something, they may not get home till later but normally, just an ordinary fishing day, they're home by about 1.00 o'clock, so that gives him a whole afternoon to himself. Course they have to make traps and make gear and fix gear up in between times. They're always working at something but a lot of it's on the land now and not up the river at night and out to sea in the day, so that you have more time and it's not such a worrying time. When you're rearing the children and they're away a lot of the time, well a lot of it's left to the mother to discipline and all sorts of things. So that has it's different effect from today with the children all being away many years now and married and having lots of grandchildren and great grandchildren, you don't have those pressures now which is quite good. Athol just goes now because he loves it [laughs] not because he has to and I think that makes a big difference, yes.

JD In earlier times Kylie Tenant was living in this area, wasn't she?

STACE Yes. Her husband, Mr Rod, was the headmaster of Loreton School and she was very involved with her writing. Mr Rod was a great chess player and Athol's uncle Ern, who resided at Diamond Head (which is a few miles out from Laurieton along the beach road, right out to Diamond Head), he was a very well read man, Uncle Ern and he loved anybody that could play chess. So he and Mr Rod became firm friends and Kylie was writing all these books at the time. She wrote **The Honeyflow** and, oh two or three others and then she decided to do a book on Uncle Ernie So that's where **The Man on the Headland** [came from] because Uncle Ernie lived at Diamond Head which was a great big headland and that's where she got the name for the book, **The Man on the Headland**. She took up a piece of land out there at Diamond Head and she built this little, as she called it little place to get away, and he sort of put it together for her. He put this great big stone fireplace in it for her and that. I think she possibly did quite a bit of her writing where it was quite and that because Mr Rod being a schoolteacher with so many children in the grounds a lot of the time, she didn't have the peace and quiet. Anyway, she wrote the book **The Man on the Headland** which was all about Uncle Ern. It's quite a good book really but he was the headmaster, she was the writer but they lived here for many years and they had two children. I think Kylie had.... She'd done a lot of writing by this time and I think possibly she felt the need for children by that time so she had the two children. It was a very good book, I thought.

JD Well look thank you very much for this interview. It's been a delight to talk to you.

STACE Oh that's OK, only too happy [laughs].

JD That is the end of this interview with Dulcie Stace, wife of Athol Stace, fisherman of Laurieton, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





Verbatim transcript of an interview with **KEN TIDSWELL**

INTRODUCTION

Ken Tidswell came to Australia from a seafaring background and entered the tuna fishery in the early years of that industry in both South Australia and New South Wales. He was also employed on extensive surveys of southern blue fin tuna in Western Australia for the Commonwealth Government. He witnessed the dramatic influx of vessels into the fishery including the Japanese long liners and saw the effect of spotter aircraft and the change from poling to purseseine catching methods.

As a Churchill scholarship holder he had an opportunity to study Norwegian trawling methods and also observed Japanese fishing methods off New Britain. Following the downturn in the southern blue fin tuna fishery Ken Tidswell entered the Gulf of Carpentaria prawn fishing in partnership with George Raptus in the early days of that fishery. In this interview Mr Tidswell provides an insight into the establishment and decline of both the southern blue fin tuna and the Gulf of Carpentaria prawn industry. He also provides interesting comments on prices, crews and deployment of vessels as well as reporting his own shipwreck off Port Fairy on a voyage from the Gulf to Adelaide.

The interview is part of Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry and was recorded in Mr Tidswell's home in Booker Bay, New South Wales on the 30th March, 1990. The interviewer is Jack Darcey. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Record your full name please.

TIDSWELL Kenneth William Tidswell.

JD And what's your date of birth, Ken?

TIDSWELL 1st of the Fourth, '26.

JD And where were you born?

TIDSWELL Birkenhead in England.

JD And when did you come out to this country?

TIDSWELL 1949.

JD What were the circumstances?

TIDSWELL Oh we delivered a ship to Rabaul, then flew back to Australia and decided to stay here.

JD You were a seafarer then?

TIDSWELL Yeah, in the Merchant Marine.

JD Were you?

TIDSWELL [Yes].

JD When did you go into the Merchant Marine?

TIDSWELL 1943.

JD What company?

TIDSWELL **Smiths of Cardie** I think was the name of the first boat [laughs].

JD Whereabouts were you in the UK? Where were you....

TIDSWELL Sailing from?

JD Yes.

TIDSWELL Oh, Liverpool mostly.

JD And were you all around the world or....

TIDSWELL Oh, mostly, yes.

JD So where did you settle when you came out to Australia?

TIDSWELL Oh well the first job I got was on a boat that was salvaging the **Hunter**.... the name of the boat was the **Hunter** and we were salvaging a steamer, the **Patterson** at Nora Head. It had rifles and beer and all sorts of things on it. When that was finished the vessel went back to fishing and I stayed with it Danish seineing down at Eden. Then we converted it to otter trawling (the boards) and fished off Newcastle with that. Then we went back to Eden and it wasn't very successful. The owners decided to convert it back to Danish seineing. Jacky Gardiner was the skipper then and we did very well for a couple of years there. Then I was offered a job in Launceston to get the first tuna clipper going, the **Fair Tuna**. That was in winter in Launceston and [we] finally got her going in 1953 on the New South Wales coast. **The Fair Tuna** was a converted tug boat, 70 foot. After that I left her. Johnny Hill was the skipper at that time, a chap from Fiji. Then I left her and took over the **Fair Venture** and fished, oh from 1954 to 1959 when we purchased the **Estelle Star**.

JD You purchased the **Estelle Star** on your own account?

TIDSWELL No, no it was Owen Allan and Len Haggerty [in] partnership. We had her on the Twofold Bay slipway for, oh about six months; converted her from a ferry. John

Helmore was in charge of the slips there. It was a very big job in those days. We finally got it going and we started fishing in 1959 [in] New South Wales and went over to South Australia. That more or less started the rush of boats into the tuna fishery. We did fairly well that first year and then the Commonwealth Government wanted us to do a survey in Western Australia. I think it was 1961, I'm not sure. The area was from Doubtful Island Bay to Jurien Bay. There was a lot of very small tuna there, immature as far as we were concerned.

JD About what size?

TIDSWELL 50 to 60 centimetres long, the average; the occasional one about 66. We then told the Commonwealth that it wasn't commercial to catch them and they sent a team of CSIRO blokes over there to start tagging. Stan Hine was in charge of that. Reg Bradley, he was on board too with the CSIRO. They tagged thousands of them I believe. We never really found commercial size fish over twelve pound there anyway. We did go once to the Bight. We asked permission to go into the Western Bight but it was only granted for once. They wanted us to concentrate the area from Doubtful Island on. When that was completed we turned to commercial fishing in New South Wales and South Australia.

JD You were involved in the earliest of times in the tuna? That's the southern blue fin tuna your talking about?

TIDSWELL Yes, oh from 1953 onwards anyway.

JD What was the method you were using, Ken?

TIDSWELL I was poling, live bait and poling. That was the thing then.

JD How many crew would you have on the poles?

TIDSWELL Well on the **Fair Venture** we only had three of us. It was only a 40 foot work boat and on the **Estelle Star** we had six.

JD Was it the **Estelle Star** you used to survey the West?

TIDSWELL Yes. She was [an] 85 foot boat.

JD And did you have refrigeration?

TIDSWELL Oh yes, we had refrigeration on the **Estelle**, yes.

JD What bait did you use in the early days?

TIDSWELL Oh mostly yellow tail 'cause they live longer in the tanks and pilchards. Oh they were alright but they had a high mortality rate.

JD You used live bait?

TIDSWELL Used [unclear] with the live bait. You have what they call squids on your pole, feathered lures, and special shaped hooks so they fell open when you released the weight on them. Quite successful.

JD You were fishing out of Eden on the southern New South Wales coast, were you?

TIDSWELL Oh from Eden to Sydney.

JD Yes, and in South Australia, out of Port Lincoln?

TIDSWELL Port Lincoln, yes.

JD And how far afield would you go for the tuna?

TIDSWELL Oh [from] Port Lincoln you'd [go] a couple of hundred miles.

JD Was that beyond the Shelf?

TIDSWELL Oh to the Shelf and over it to the west, what they call the horse shoe.

JD And what about out of Eden?

TIDSWELL Well Eden from.... In the early days the fish were mostly around the Shelf area. When the spotter planes come in they did find them out further but the fishery changed. In the early days there were scattered tuna everywhere. Small boats trolled to and three tonne a day. There was fish jumping everywhere. Then later on, for whatever reason, there was very few scattered fish, troll fish and mostly what you saw were riplers.

JD What?

TIDSWELL Ripplers of tuna. They called ripplers big schools, oh and small schools but always rippling along on the surface. Then the fish that were on the Shelf sort of [went] wider and the whole scene changed. I think mainly one of the reasons was that the fishery in Western Australia started after we did the survey there with all the small boats catching very small fish. They caught quite a lot which affected the recruitment into New South Wales. 'Cause we did tag.... Well we used to go back periodically, every year from June/July to Western Australia and tag the fish in Albany. That continued up to 1968 (I think) or '69. We had one year there in (I think) 1963, this large school of small tuna we'd tagged, or part of what we'd tagged, you could see them all swimming there with all the tags on them. They just sort of schooled up off Albany there, Bald Head, the whole school of them. About six months later (I think) to the day, down south of Gabo Island there was these fish about fifteen or eighteen pound and we got that many tags out of the, it wasn't funny; the ones we'd tagged in Albany.

JD Which pretty well proved that that's the way they migrated.

TIDSWELL Oh yes. Some of those tags were recovered, oh seventeen years later; some off South Africa by the Japanese long liners.

JD What's the theory that they go around the world, is it?

TIDSWELL They don't quite know. There's no doubt they're between South Africa and South America but whether they go past the Horn and circumvolve, I don't know, I don't think so. I think it might be too cold for them.

JD It's always been a Commonwealth fishery, has it, or Commonwealth controlled fishery?

TIDSWELL In those early days it was sort of Commonwealth and States. You just bought a licence and you went fishing. There was no restrictions. All you had to do was put your fish returns in and pay a small amount for your licence.

JD In the school of tuna, were the tuna all of a similar size, or were they big fish, small fish?

TIDSWELL Oh in a good school of tuna you'd find them one size. Towards the end of the season you get them mixed up, small ones, large ones, even an odd yellow fin tuna in the school.

JD In with the blue fin?

TIDSWELL In with the blue fin. Towards the end of the season when the warm water used to come down. The tuna head off then down the Bass Strait in Tasmania.

JD Did you chase them off down that way?

TIDSWELL No we used to find that, oh once they got in the Bass Strait they'd be there for a while. One year they were very good there, a couple of years, but we more or less went to South Australia 'cause that was the start of the season there. At times though there was still fish both ends.

JD Ken, a lot of people came into the tuna industry then, did they?

TIDSWELL Well the influx started in 1965. We had a meeting with the Director of Commonwealth Fisheries and Dr Kesteven of CSIRO in Port Lincoln in '64. We asked them to sort of put a hold on 'cause we'd developed this fishery with old boats (converted boats) and we thought that if there was going to be a reasonable amount of money in it, then we should be allowed to make it to rebuild decent boats but they wouldn't put any restrictions on the boats. So (I think) in 1965 the first of the Yugoslavs came in and then the boats just came bigger and bigger and bigger. Then in '68 there was a bit of a drop in the fishery 'cause the Western Australian fishery had taken some of the smaller ones [which] had reduced the juveniles coming over to South Australia and New South Wales.

We'd also felt the effect then of the Japanese long lining which in 1963/'64, when they first found the spawning stocks of the blue fin, [which] was an extension of the yellow fin fishery off south of Indonesia, they had phenomenal catches. Where the average catch was three or four fish a hundred hooks, they were getting 50 blue fin a hundred hooks. It was absolutely phenomenal. From 1968 our fishery started to go down because of that. The recruitment was reduced. Not only were the Western Australian[s] catching the juveniles, they were also getting the effect of the Japanese fishing the spawning stocks off North West Cape.

JD Ken, you were into the tuna fishery in the heyday of the fishery and you persisted in it till it started to decline. When it was at its peak, what sort of catches were you getting?

TIDSWELL Oh in the early days on the **Fair Venture**, sort of two and three tonne, four tonne and we'd average about.... For four years on the boat we averaged about

150 tonne a year. That was from September until Christmas time. When we got the **Estelle Star**, the first year in New South Wales we caught (I think) about 420 tonne. Then went across to South Australia where we arrived late because we had trouble with the refrigeration. We didn't leave Sydney till February. We arrived in South Australia [and] we had bait with us from New South Wales. Our first catch we unloaded there was about 40 tonne. I think we got about 400 tonne there the first year.

JD So you were up over 800 tonne a year?

TIDSWELL For that first [year]. Our best year was 1964. We had 400 odd tonne of Eden and 720 tonne in South Australia. That was a good year. More boats but pressure on it and the spotting planes came in and they sort of covered a wider area. Where it was individual fishermen before, the planes came in. The planes made it easy for everyone directing the boats to where the area was. Oh the spotting planes became an air force in the end. I think there was up to ten planes at one stage.

In the early days in New South Wales, oh there was Kraft or Heinz or Greenseas. They've changed the name that many times but originally it was Greenseas Cannery. Brud Reece was the only spotter [in] a float plane and then when Kraft took it over they had twin aircraft. Aerial commands got bigger and Owen Allan had his own plane spotting. I think Kevin Warren had a plane too. He was spotting and they used that also for salmon spotting. I think at one stage when Kraft had their aircraft, I think it was costing them a million dollars a year to run it. Of course this put pressure on the fishery. There were more fish caught.

Then the first purse seiner that came in really was the **Espirito Santo** for Safcol. It had some good catches. The equipment kept breaking down on it and I went on it (I think) in 1967. I was the skipper and we had an American advising us and I don't think we caught a fish. Everything seemed to go wrong. We did shoot one big school in Disaster Bay estimated at about 300 tonne but a northerly gale came away and we got about seven tonne out of it and all the nets split up; lost the lot. I think the **Espirito Santo** then went on to oil rig work.

Then in 1968 I got a Churchill Scholarship Fellowship and went over to Norway to look at the purse seining over there and it looked a more suitable method of catching the tuna than the American way.

JD The American way was the poling method?

TIDSWELL No the purse seining with the power block up the top and shooting skips and everything away. With the Norwegians everything was lower different and [there was] a different stacking system to the nets. Then the **Maria Louise** was built on those lines. They brought a Norwegian skipper out to crew for it and it was very successful.

JD Did they use the same net?

TIDSWELL Oh, no. It was a very deep net built in Norway (I think) before the blue fin here. It was the first one, the **Maria Louise** and then the Yugoslavs built one, the **Boston Bay**. Oh, prior to this the **Tecoma** in South Australia purse seined but they hadn't been very successful. The **Maria Louise** did show the way with it and then the Boston Bay became very successful. The catches available to the pole boats was dwindling then.

In 1970 Frank Roder told us there was a good fishery up in New Britain, [unclear] so we went up with Colin Kyokio with the **Estelle Star** and the **Roslyn Star**. The **Catriana B** was supposed to come up but he never made it because of a Commonwealth survey or something. We arrived up there in Kaviang. I think we can tell some funny stories about how they were catching them there. When we got there we found the Japanese operation of skipjack fishing was about 30 men on board the boat. They had bait lights with natives looking after them all night. It wouldn't have been commercial for us so we came back to New South Wales.

JD That was skipjack tuna, though?

TIDSWELL Skipjack off New Britain there. The Japanese had a big operation there. Then I thought, well it's time for a change. I sold the **Estelle Star** and went up to the Gulf of Carpentaria prawn fishing. Purchased a boat with George Raptus, the **Seabird** which was an ex-Japanese long liner. We purchased it off a chap named Kennedy in Brisbane and I more or less bowed out of the tuna fishery then. It all changed from then. The sushi market was on and all that and we were up in the Gulf of Carpentaria so sort of lost interest in the tuna fishing. That's when it really changed and the high prices came in.

JD About when was that Ken?

TIDSWELL I think about.... I'm not quite sure. I think it started around in '74, might even be before. I believe Dinko Lukin was one of the first who sort of teed it up.

JD In your day in the tuna fishery, it was for canning, was it?

TIDSWELL Yes. We sold them to Greenseas in the place. That was mostly canning. They did pick out good lots of fish and glaze them and export them whole. I think they went to Italy mostly or America. I'm not quite sure.

JD The Japanese market hadn't been developed then?

TIDSWELL No not for the sushi market. I wish it had have been. We were getting four pence halfpenny a pound when we first started.

JD Can you remember what you were getting towards the end of your career in tuna?

TIDSWELL Oh our price was about \$168 a tonne (I think).

JD Still pretty low, wasn't it?

TIDSWELL Yes compared with.... They're getting \$800 a tonne for stripeys now I think, or a thousand. I'm not quite sure. I've not kept up with it.

JD Had quotas been introduced before you left the industry?

TIDSWELL No, no. There was no quotas. No the only quota was when the canneries were full and they couldn't take it. [They] just stopped fishing until they cleared it which used to happen in New South Wales and I've even seen it in South Australia where they've said, "Hold off for a day and hold the catch" till they could freeze it and get it into storage. I know in the early days we actually.... When we were fishing for

Safcol we actually paid to get the advertising. It was all deducted out of our money to get it on the market. The chaps in the early days sort of built that market up.

JD That was in the days when Safcol was a co-op?

TIDSWELL That's right, yes. I think we were getting about \$100 a tonne (I think). Then it slowly climbed up. I think in 1968/'69 I think it was only round the \$160, \$170. Sometimes you got a bonus on that at the end of the year. That was the Co-Operative bonus. Out of that bonus, what you should have got, a lot went to advertising things to get the tuna on the market in the early days.

JD Ken, you went prawning then, as you mentioned, that was in the Gulf was it?

TIDSWELL In the Gulf.

JD Gulf of Carpentaria?

TIDSWELL [Yes].

JD Out of what port?

TIDSWELL Oh we fished out of Karumba (was the thing) but we'd go to Darwin, even Weipa then down to Townsville and unloaded them down there. When the roads were blocked with rain you'd take them round to Townsville and unload then but you were carrying a hundred tonne of prawns in those days.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Ken, could we talk about your involvement in the northern prawn industry?

TIDSWELL Yes well we purchased this vessel, the **Seabird**, an ex-Japanese long liner (I think this is 1971) and proceeded up the Gulf. Then we were fishing for banana prawns there which is daylight fishing, day prawns. These were found mostly with the echo sounder; quite dense schools.

JD Are they the ones that boil?

TIDSWELL Boil, yes, boil mostly in the south-east corner on the east coast, the east cost of the Gulf. They don't seem to stir the mud up as much and you mostly find them along there with the echo sounder. We found one school off Christmas Creek, as they called it, down below south of Cape Keer Weer. We had a dan buoy on it and I think that dan stayed there for six weeks. We were shipping the prawns back to Adelaide and we used to go up and meet a steamer in the Torres Strait, unload them onto containers there and go back to the same mark down off Christmas Creek and the prawns were still there. It seemed like Christmas.

JD That transfer was done at sea, was it?

TIDSWELL Oh in the lee at Booby Island mostly... Goods Island (I think). We just anchored, the big ship anchored at the freighter and we just unloaded there and proceed[ed] back to fishing again.

JD For six weeks on the same patch?

TIDSWELL Oh well on and off, yes. They were there. They sort of seemed to stay in that one area. We'd go looking for the dan buoy and within half a mile of that dan the patch would still [be there]; whether it was the same patch or not, but they were still here. Oh I think they got about 400,000 pounds that first year there. We weren't there very long. We were new to it. The boat was in a bit of a mess so we [went] back to Adelaide and started to do a few repairs and get it organised. Then we started our second season there and that was quite good. [In] 1974 we, with my partner George Raptus, we decided to use the boat to its full capacity as a mother ship and we had (I think) six small boats fishing to us.

JD Your vessels or....?

TIDSWELL Oh they were all privately owned and they just sold the fish to us. Those days I think.... They were paying in Karumba (I think) nineteen cents a pound and I think we started off paying 40 cents a pound, I think it was. Could be wrong there; something close to it. We also had another vessel that we anchored and froze the prawns and bagged them. Also had another ship that came alongside us and took them down to Townsville or Cairns to unload them. [By] the time he got back we'd be full again and unload them again. The Raptus factory was bulging at the seams with prawns. There was a lot of prawns that year.

Of course that was after the floods in Karumba and it sort of put Karumba out. I think they were processing them a fair bit on Mornington Island. Then it got too much and there was too many caught and they even pulled them into the dirt there.

Then (I think) that's when [in] 1974 they decided, the Commonwealth Government, decided they'd call the restriction on boats. Previous to that there'd been quite a few boats that worked all the time up the Gulf of Carpentaria. Then there used to be quite an influx of east coast prawn trawlers that'd come up for a period and then go back to the east coast but when they called it a limited licence fishery [laughs] people started buying all the licences of the east coast boats and began building 70 foot boats until there was that many boats fishing in the Gulf of Carpentaria. I think there was over 290 boats (I think) in the end that were basically fishing there twelve months of the year. Of course the same as the blue fin.

JD The catches went down?

TIDSWELL The catches [went] down and now it's regulated and buy back schemes and all the rest of it. I often wonder whether all this restrictions are necessary or whether you should leave it to survival of the fittest. This management, I don't know whether it works or it doesn't work. Everywhere they manage it, the fisheries [have] gone down after it's been managed. I don't know. I suppose you can argue both ways for it.

Licences [have] become that expensive it makes it commodity trading on licences and it's big companies and big money now. Individual fishermen have sort of become a dying breed. That's all I can see of a lot of this management and licence fees and what have you.

JD Ken, what about the weather up in the Gulf? It's a cyclone area, isn't it?

TIDSWELL Yes but you don't get that many and you have plenty of warning. There's fairly good forecasts up there and you can steam out away from them, get out of the path of them. It's pretty well normal practice. You know which way to go and get some shelter. There is plenty of warning for them. Generally most of the weather there after that is south-easters that you get very fresh at times but die away during the day. Sometimes they do blow for two or three days but then they can get pretty nasty in the shallow water, especially down the south end of the south-east corner of the Gulf but on the whole it's reasonably good weather.

JD There are some of the trawlers that have some women crew?

TIDSWELL Oh there's quite a lot.

JD How does that work out?

TIDSWELL Oh they're very good sorting prawns and packaging and some of the girls now, they've made some of the boats; got their tickets. Some of them are very good cooks and they brighten the boat up quite a bit and they're very good workers.

JD What about the Aboriginals up there? Are they employed at all in the industry?

TIDSWELL No. I haven't seen any of them. There's quite a lot of New Zealanders up there though. They seem to have come from everywhere but no, the Aboriginals I haven't seen many in the Gulf. I think there's been one or two on boats but they sort of.... I think they're more in the rivers and what have you. There's quite a lot of rivers and barramundi up there so I suppose they can catch all they want up there. They're happy.

The Gulf fishery's become pretty hard now. Before these restrictions came in the boats were working 24 hours a day non-stop and a lot of ships [were] coming out to unload the catch and fuel barges to fuel them up and keep them going and the crews wouldn't see port for quite some time. That's how the companies operated and [of] course the fishery couldn't handle that.

JD They're mostly company boats?

TIDSWELL Oh in the end it was basically mostly company. There was a few individuals but not a great deal. Well there's still a few individuals there surviving, hanging in but the company's now, they're re-deploying their fleet elsewhere in the orange roughy fishing and over for the deep water prawns and in north west Australia. Quite a few of the fleet have been sold overseas. There's quite a buy back coming in. This all happened when I left the fishery in '81.

I was bringing the **Seabird** back to Adelaide for a refit. We had quite a few prawns on board and when we were off Port Fairy we hit some submerged object. We haven't found out what it was to this day but it tore the propeller shaft out of the boat. In about twelve minutes she was gone. We took into the raft and it blew a southerly gale, which I was glad [of] because if it was blowing a northerly we'd have been down in Antarctic but we finally blew into a beach west of Port Fairy. We'd been 30 hours in the raft. We were pretty cold and dry by the time we got ashore there. Barley sugars I'll

never eat again 'cause that's the only thing we had. We were quite thankful to get ashore.

JD Did you all get ashore?

TIDSWELL Yes we all got ashore, the four of us that were on board. We walked up the beach and found a gentleman painting, an artist. He gave us a lift into Port Fairy and we informed the harbour master and then all took off to Adelaide. There were various reports to fill in and finally got home to Port Lincoln. I thought then I might have a rest from the fishery [laughs]; give it away.

My son was studying [to be] a pilot and he got organised there and doing a bit of fish spotting. Then he decided he wanted to become a fisherman. I'd moved over to New South Wales so he thought he'd like to be a prawn fisherman on the east coast so we purchased a boat at Crowdy Head and he's been fishing on the north coast for the last three or four years now. He's got his worry now. I've had mine. I think I can put the feet up.

JD And how do you fill your time in Ken?

TIDSWELL Oh I've got a little boat here. I fish out in the bay, Broken Bay here for a few prawns now and again.

JD You've still got a licence?

TIDSWELL Still got a licence; still got a fishing licence. Not used to its full capacity now. I'm slowing down a bit. Anyway we can still keep an interest in the fishery through the young fellow I suppose. He keeps me busy. We just put new winches on for fishing the royal reds in the deep water. When the king prawns go off in shore he can go out there and catch them. You don't get very much money for them but at least it's better than not fishing at all. I can see how he goes from there on I suppose.

Oh I've had a good life out of fishing. It's been an enjoyable life and I've met some good blokes right through it and all round Australia. It's really been a good life. I've got no regrets.

JD Right Ken. Thank you very much.

TIDSWELL OK, good.

JD That is the end of this interview with Mr Ken Tidswell, ex-southern blue fin tuna fisherman and Gulf of Carpentaria prawn fisherman, and now of Booker Bay, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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Verbatim transcript of an interview with ERIC TOYER

INTRODUCTION

Eric Toyer is the builder, owner and operator of the large trawler **Topaz** fishing out of Yamba in New South Wales. The vessel is unique in New South Wales in that it processes and packs at sea and exports most of its catch direct to Japanese markets. These markets were developed by Mr Toyer and the target species in his operation is school whiting.

Mr Toyer served his time as a shipwright in the Australian Navy, qualified subsequently as a Naval architect and with assistance, personally built, launched and fitted out his present very sophisticated vessel. As well as being a most competent ship builder and fisherman, he has been very much involved in industry management at local, state and national levels. He is well aware of the problems in management and marketing confronting the industry and in this interview discusses them in depth. In doing so he provides a compelling and valuable contribution to this oral history of the Australian fishing industry which was recorded on board **Topaz** in Yamba Harbour as the vessel was being prepared for sea.

The interview was recorded by Jack Darcey for Murdoch University on the 7th April, 1990. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 021 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Eric, would you record your full name, date and place of birth please.

TOYER My name is Eric Toyer. I was born on the 1st May, 1946 in Hastings, Victoria.

JD And were you brought up in Victoria?

TOYER No. We left Victoria when I was eighteen months of age and we moved to Sydney where we lived on the river at Port Hacking, a place called Gray's Point until the age of six. Then my father went into his first (to my knowledge at that stage), fishing operation. He purchased [an] ex-Navy HDML, 72 foot long and also a 112 foot Fairmile. Those vessels were fitted with refrigeration and he left.... or we all left on the vessels themselves to go fishing in New Guinea and northern Australia. Unfortunately there was a problem with a business transaction. The business he sold was a successful bankruptcy and the project failed financially in Townsville and the boats reached as far as Townsville. It was unfortunate but that was, I guess, my first introduction to the fishing industry. That was a pretty adventurous trip for all of us, six children, on a vessel from Sydney to Townsville back in 1954.

JD Those Fairmiles would have been ex-service vessels, would they?

TOYER Yes, yes. The ex-Fairmile, 112 foot. There's a lot of vessels still in survey doing charter work on the Barrier Reef area. There's a few skulking around Sydney Harbour doing charter work but I guess most of them have almost seen their service days.

After that business failed we went back to Sydney and dad was a shipwright by trade, as was his father prior to him. They lived at Rock End, once again at Port Hacking. So dad went back in a boat business at Kirrawee until about 1957 or '58 (I think it was) when he had enough of the city life, I guess, and he took a job as tugmaster in the port works here at Yamba when the train walls were being built. So we moved here when I was eleven. It was a great life for a youngster. We spent all our time fishing or in canoes and we used to go and sit on the trawlers as kids. There was a lot of school prawns caught at that time. So we had a bait business. We used to sell bait to tourists and other such things and we had weekend jobs. We used to drive the old Begla ferries, you see, [as] relief for the people who worked there all the week. So we had a pretty interesting life-style as kids.

I joined the Navy at the age of fifteen to do my apprenticeship as a shipwright. I joined in January '62 and I served four years at western Sydney at a place called Quakers Hill doing my basic training, then went to sea and served on ships, the **Sydney**, the **Melbourne**, the **Stalward**, **Quamber**, **Vendetta**, the **Vampire**; served on the shore depots at Cutabill, Waterhen, Rushcutter. I did a diving course in the Navy and part of my activity was a tradesman diver. Served at HAMS Penguin which is now the diving school. The old diving school was at Rushcutters Bay. I served on the **Sydney** [unclear] to Vietnam in 1966 and again in '71, also '67 (I think) too. During that time in the service I was always interested in furthering my education and I enrolled in night school at the Sydney Tech College in 1970 to study Naval architecture which was a part time course four nights a week for four years. I managed some how to scrape through on that without dropping a subject. Indeed I took out the prize for the best student which wasn't very hard because there was only two of us survived the course without dropping subjects, so you either came first or second [laughs]. So it wasn't any great claim to fame coming first.

I left the Navy in 1973, February '73 after having served eleven years. I then took a job in the dockyard at Garden Island as a shipwright because I actually applied for a discharge because I was being sent to sea for my final twelve months' service and my sea shore roster said I shouldn't go and I was in my final year in night studies. So I applied for discharge and was granted that and I went to work at the drawing office. I had three weeks on the tools[?] at Garden Island working as a shipwright which was very frustrating with the unionism. I was transferred to the drawing office, the whole drawing section, where I was for five months. That also was very frustrating because we'd be given a job to do and allocated two weeks to do it and you'd do it in three days and then you were told to look busy for a further seven working days. That was pretty frustrating so that was a stepping stone to enable me to finish my studies and also I was looking for a job in private enterprise.

An opportunity arose in June that year when I was asked by the senior lecturer if I would go and work with his company in private enterprise. He had a company called Commercial Marine Design designing oil rig ships, tugs and a lot of fishing vessels. That was quite exciting work in those days as a lot of boats were being built, small vessels particularly. The Gulf of Carpentaria was our main source of income. We were designing 85, 90 foot boats to work up there. Unfortunately the ship building industry in Australia at that stage was going through a severe downturn and I always wanted to become a Naval architect and practise in that field but I could see that there was no

future in it because a lot of people were already in that field and with ship building dying, a lot of people [were] applying for jobs there. So I then decided that it was time to step away and to go to a new field of occupation which, because I had a lot of background with fishing at that stage, my two brothers were fishing and also my brother-in-law was fishing, so I had a good sound background to that. So I then decided to build a boat and go fishing.

That first vessel was called **Regulas** which I built in Sydney at a place called Homebush Bay which is an industrial area south-west of Sydney. That took eighteen months to build and I built it basically on my own. It was a 58 footer and I got some help at times but mostly I just worked by myself. Towards the end of the job my brother Robert was going to come fishing with me on that boat, he at that stage was transferring from different boats. He skippered the boat when the boat was completed and I went on the boat as a deckhand. I learnt the ropes that way. We bought the boat from Sydney to Yamba. We fished based in Yamba with that vessel for a period of two years.

In that time we looked at a number of areas of fishing but basically we were catching eastern king prawn. We fished from Yamba as far north as Noosa in the king prawn fishery, or what we call the deep water. We fished out to 120 fathoms [for] king prawns. We fished south as far as south west rocks for king prawns. Also we had a scratch at the royal red fishery at that stage. They had been encouraging samples caught by the Fishery Research vessel, the **Cappella** in '75. So in late '76, also in '77 we had a scratch at that fishery. Indications were good that there was a fishery there. We didn't catch any consistent quantities because it was a new technology thing. We had set the boat up to access that fishery but the boat wasn't correct in the configuration to access that stock. We needed to make major alterations to the vessel so being a shipwright by trade and looking forward to building another boat, I decided that I'd cash that vessel and build another vessel which, with my fishing experience, would suit the deep water fishery plus the shallow water fishery and put a lot more of my ideas into a vessel having had that two years' fishing experience.

With that, in November 1980 we launched the first boat called **Topaz**. It was 61 feet long, nineteen feet wide, a draught of nine feet. It was based on the first vessel with a few hull changes in shape, quite a different layout in the vessel itself. Having built the vessel, we began operating. Over time we developed the vessel into the first dry refrigerated vessel in New South Wales because we were targeting on the high volume, low price species of school whiting and also royal red prawn. It took some time, indeed it took twelve months from the time we fitted the equipment until we actually started operating with any success because we could catch and we could freeze but we couldn't access markets. We had a lot of time freezing bits and pieces of small catches of the product and shipping overseas to establish markets and gaining acceptance in the market place but after a period of.... it may not have been twelve months but it certainly was around a ten month period, we put our first full container away. Prior to that we had shared containers with other people with other products and we became accepted on the market place in our own right, one might say.

JD Can I ask you what market you were servicing? Was it Japan?

TOYER Yes we were servicing the Japanese market with the school whiting. Also we were the first to export royal red prawns out of Australia. We had some difficulty with the product because it was pretty volatile to handle and we found out that over time, over three containers in fact, that the refrigeration equipment we had on that vessel wasn't up to standard to handle royal reds in the format that was required in the market place. We were a bit naive I guess or we were just green because that market

hadn't been accessed before, the volatility of the product. At that stage even the east coast of Australia, there was no vessels with big refrigeration capacity, were actually targeting high volume, low price species. With that vessel also, in the freezer room, we could hold just on fifteen tonne of frozen product. As we progressed in the market place we had some difficulty with the capacity we had on the vessel because we had to fish to get one full container of one product to export. So there was difficulty with our cash flow at times because we fell into a poor catching season. We had a period of time before we unloaded a full container of product so that caused some difficulty.

So we needed to sit back and analyse what we were doing at that stage and we got on a roll and '85, '86, '87 was quite good. We ended up locking into one particular company in Japan, a company called Nippon Suzan[?] with the school whiting. We had a very good trading relationship with them. The royal red prawn fell by the wayside because of the freezing problems so we accessed the school whiting market. There was other niches in the market place we could service, which we did from time to time with elements of our whiting catch, the larger fish which weren't sought after in Japan but we accessed them to local markets at a greater price than we could export. Also we eventually developed a market in Japan for the large fish, which was termed as fresh frozen which was a fish that we froze at sea, shipped to Japan where it was thawed and sold as fresh. That was the larger fish. The other fish which the small grades... We grade our fish at sea. On the red spot whiting market we go into four grades. There's the smalls, medium, large and extra large. Small are 30 to 50 grams, medium 50 to 70, large 70 to 100 and over 100 grams is the extra large fish.

JD That's the whiting?

TOYER That's the whiting, yes.

JD What about the other fish? What species are they?

TOYER The other fish we caught with that, bearing in mind we were using prawn nets. We were basically targeting a by-product of prawns. We catch some prawns. We catch some bugs. We catch some John Dory. We catch some flathead. We catch some red mullet. We catch some boarfish. Depending on the season and on the quantity of those, we catch in winter sometimes a nice quantity of calamari. So it's, I guess, a multi-specie fish really but we had a situation where we're near our arm nor elbow where we were operating dry freezing conditions in a processing vessel but we were also keeping all our by-products, beyond our whiting as a fresh product.

JD And they would be normally sold on the Sydney market, would they?

TOYER Yes. Well that product we were unloading to the local fishermen's co-operative but we had the situation where we had a processing vessel but were still having constraints to keep running back ashore to unload 'cause we didn't have the physical volume on the vessel to further process this other product. So with that we took a decision to upgrade once again, put all our technology together which we'd learned because of our freezing equipment, bearing in mind Yamba's pretty isolated, technically, where we couldn't get local people who could service our equipment. So it became necessary for us to learn all these skills and refrigeration etc. Having learnt those skills we looked at the installation on our vessel and we decided that they could be done a lot better, knowing the end result that was required. If we started from the ground up, we know where we're starting, we know where we want to finish and we could change things on the way through to produce a better result. So we basically had two options. One was to put that vessel, the original **Topaz** into a major refit and change a lot of things or to sell it and build a new vessel. We chose the latter option,

to sell and start again and to upgrade and we purchased another licence to add to the licence of the other vessel to put the existing boat together.

The existing boat took two years to build. By this stage I'd managed to get my own workshop facility in Yamba in the industrial estate where we built the vessel. This new boat is twenty metres long. It's seven point three metres wide. It's three point three metres deep and the fundamental difference between this vessel and the previous vessel is that the previous vessel could carry fifteen tonne of frozen product. In this vessel we can carry over thirty tonne of frozen product. We changed from a shelf freezer to a flat freezer which gives us a better pack. It also gives us quicker freezing because we can control the quality of product better than with the shelf freezer. The product handling on deck is more streamlined. We have the freezer on deck this time, where before it was down in the room so a lot of double handling is deleted. This vessel is 400 horsepower or 302 kilowatts, where the previous vessel was 300 horsepower. In the engine room we'd have this time two generators which gives us a backup system because the generators are running 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks of the year. So we had room to put another generator in. We reduced a lot of the areas of maintenance on this vessel.

If we go into the machinery side of it, all our cooling, be it main engine cooling is keel cooled. The hydraulic [unclear] is keel cooled. The generators are keel cooled. The refrigeration condensers are all keel cooled which got away from a major source of maintenance on the vessel where we have condenser pumps or salt water services. We've deleted all that. All the installation of refrigeration equipment was done by ourselves, myself and my staff. I had some very good staff assisting me [who] worked on the job.

JD The vessel was to your own design, Eric?

TOYER Well basically the hull shape was a hull shape which we developed when I was working with Commercial Marine Design. I took the underwater hull shape because that fitted the licences I had. I changed all the other deck [unclear] and the top sides around to suit my own needs. So it's a shared design, I guess you might say, but I still stay in close liaison with my previous employer. We had a very good working relationship together.

JD How many people did you employ in the building of the vessel?

TOYER Well most times there was myself plus two [unclear] plus three, bearing in mind that a lot of the skills.... There was another chap, we served together in the Navy. He's had his own fishing vessel. He built his own vessel in Sydney and we had a very similar background. He's out of fishing now. He sold his boat a couple of years ago and he worked with me so I had the benefit of his experience plus my experience plus a very good tradesman. So between he and I we actually took other people on and we cultivated their range of skills to suit the requirement. Basically we decided to build the vessel up to a standard rather than down to a price and that was our approach from day one. It was unfortunate that the skills that we taught these other people, we had to sort of send them to other employers. It would have been very good to maintain them and go further with our boat building yard but you can't be in two places at once. Also funding was a problem. To go into that, we were just [unclear] and the boat's been funded by the Commonwealth Development Bank who have funded my fishing activities since 1975 so we've had a good relationship with them also.

JD The vessel was built here at Yamba at your workshop and transporting it to the water must have been quite a problem. It's a very large vessel.

TOYER Yeah it was a job in itself. Really I think a job is.... the bottom line is the boat had to go from the yard to the water. It's just a question of how you do it. The obvious way is you put wheels underneath it. Because of the weight and size of the vessel we couldn't have cranes to lift it. Also the ground contour, it's all like flood plain type area which is very soggy and boggy so you really can't put concentrated loads on the ground here without expecting to go through the crust on the top. So we used the same approach as on our previous boat.

We put wheels underneath it with a trailer and launched it like a normal runabout. We serviced the trailer, bought a trailer which came from Harvey Bay, a place called Urangan. The history of the trailer was Killingham's had it. They used to carry the separation plant through for the sand mines on Fraser Island with it and the separation plants were around 80 or 90 tonne. It's made out of sixteen aircraft wheels and I bought that in considerable disrepair laying in the grass at Urangan and we freighted it down here. We refurbished the trailer. We jacked the boat up and put the trailer underneath, put the boat back on the trailer and towed it down and pushed it in the water; pushed the boat in the water at low tide and then waited for the tide to come in and float the vessel off. It wasn't very far from the yard to the water. It's probably one and a half kilometres but when you're moving a twenty metre boat, it takes four hours.

JD What would this vessel weigh?

TOYER In its present condition it weighs about 150 tonne but bearing in mind that the capacity of the vessel.... We've got probably about 30,000 litres of diesel on board at the moment. We have a capacity of 40,000 litres. We have 6,000 litres of fresh water capacity. We have 1,200 litres of lubricating oil capacity. We have 1,200 litres of hydraulic oil in tanks. When the vessel came to the water it wasn't complete. We tried to keep it as light as we could with the winches and other such equipment off the vessel but the other side, we tried to complete the vessel as much as we could. Also we had to launch the vessel on a full moon to get the biggest tide we could; (a) we wanted the lowest low tide so we could push the trailer down into the water as far as we could and (b) we wanted the largest high tide so that when the tide came in it would float the vessel off the cradle on the trailer because we didn't not know how far.... We'd assessed how far we had to go but until we put the weight on the ground, we didn't know how far we could go on pushing the vessel into the water, but we got far enough.

JD Are you happy with the vessel? Does it work well?

TOYER The vessel does work well but it's not really what I wanted. We have certain constraints and we have to operate with the management regimes. One of the parameters are, we can't build a boat longer than twenty metres. So this boat is twenty metres long and we wanted a 30 tonne capacity in the freezer room. So to get that we had to have a vessel twenty metres long and we had to have as wide as we could get it [and] as deep as we could get it. This was the hull shape we ended up with. The hull shape was designed in about '74 (I think it was) to meet the parameters to fish on the east coast of Queensland, also to gain a ship building subsidy which we didn't get, of course, but at the time the original vessels were built, they did attract the subsidy. So they were designed for a purpose but [with] this vessel I did get my licences.

I would have preferred to have the same amount of units which is 100 units ([which] is the shoe box measurement as we call it) on a vessel which would probably be narrower and longer. That would have been my preference because it makes for a more sea kindly vessel. It gives us a better layout, more processing area and the boat's more sea kindly. So it's not what I want but it fits the bill.

JD Crossing the bar here in the Clarence River, is that a problem for vessels of this size?

TOYER Not normally, no but when the sea conditions are such, it's a problem for any vessel. It doesn't matter how big you are. You can never take it lightly and this is a good bar as far as bars go on the east coast. Generally speaking, if we can't get to sea, we can't work but the bar is a situation [where] it doesn't matter what size boat, you should never take it lightly because once you start taking things for granted, that's when you come unstuck.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

TOYER The boat itself is pretty well set out for extended periods at sea. The accommodation is, oh I wouldn't say it's lavish but certainly it's comfortable. There's a four berth [unclear]. There's a three berth cabin on the foreside forward. There's my cabin and the wheel house which has got a double bunk in there. The galley's well laid out. It's all fully airconditioned with ducted airconditioning. The boat is set up.... With our fuel capacity we can go to sea for a month, 30 days without interfacing [with] anybody else. That's our durability but we find that mostly, on the east coast, we might get seven, ten days before we have to go to port because of weather conditions. Often, because we're dealing with a high volume, low price commodity, there's a fair workload involved in it. If we get seven or eight days with catching a reasonable quantity of product, we're ready for a day or two off because it's physically very demanding.

The crew itself is made up of myself. I drive the boat. I've got a guy now who can take, oh he does take periodic control of the vessel when I have to go away on business and another chap on board plus.... I've got my twin daughters who are eighteen years of age and they're working on the boat at the moment also. They've very handy to have and it's good time to spend time with them. With our product being high volume, low priced again, there's a fair work load.

When the fish spill on the sorting tray they're graded into four different grades. They're then packed into cartons which are a random weight because the vessel's moving all the time. At sea it's very difficult to weigh products and so it's a random pack which averages out about twelve point seven five kg nett per carton. The cartons are then placed in our plate freezer. We have a horizontal plate freezer which has nine stations. Each station can carry up to twelve cartons of fish and that can freeze 108 cartons from ambient to minus eighteen celsius in six hours, which is a lot of refrigeration capacity. That in itself gives us a 24 hour throughput for the maximum of about three tonne of fish, simply because....

You can do your numbers and say, OK you can freeze four tonne of fish, a bit over four tonne of fish, but by the time we pack and load and unload the plate freezer and do that sort of thing it's only physically impossible to get three tonne in a 24 hour period through. There's another element of the human effort required and I've yet to find anybody who can work 24 hours straight in a sustainable period. We've all done it from time to time so therefore I guess our real throughput would drop back to, the best weight, two and a half tonne for a 24 hour period. Once it's frozen it's placed in the freezer room. The freezer room holds it at minus 40 celsius. The freezer room pulls the rest of the temperature out of the product which doesn't take much refrigeration capacity because most of the capacity is in the [unclear] stage where it goes from zero to zero but it changes state from, basically to solid. We fish towards a container of fish which we unload. We need to keep up our cash flow.

JD Unload it here at Yamba?

TOYER Oh we unload wherever we can organise a container to come from. To unload we need to notify DPI who come along and they do an assessment of our product. They have to do faulty tests. Having approved the batch we then unload into a refrigerated container. The trucks normally come from Brisbane to either Yamba or to Mooloolaba or where ever we're unloading. It goes from there direct to the ship or interstate to a storage yard where it's plugged in and maintained temperature. Then it gets on a place on the ship. The day the ship leaves Brisbane or wherever is the day that we're supposed to get paid and the letter of credit is cleared. Often it runs another ten days longer than that so we can be sometimes up to six or seven weeks without being paid from the time we're, say catching the product till we get the actual money in a bank account. That does create some problems on a cash flow basis, just for the logistics of that and some of your creditors and bankers get all very nervous. The boat's only relatively new. The boat has not yet reached its fishing potential so all this needs to.... It's all happening. It just takes time to put it all together.

JD Eric, are the girls planning to stay with you as crew or do they have other ideas?

TOYER They have other ideas and I don't think I'd have them. Simply because they need to get on with other things in their life as well. In one way I'd love to have them but the other way is.... They spent the last two years at boarding school at Armidale in New England Girls' School and they both passed their HSC quite well last year. They wanted a year off before going to Sydney to go to Uni down there so the outcome of that [was that] they were looking for a job. I said, "I've got a gap". I actually had a gap of one so they're actually sharing the job but it's good to have them on board.

JD Are they planning to go in to some form of training that will lead them back to the fishing industry in any way?

TOYER No. I wouldn't like to see that because.... I'll sort of go a bit further later on but I don't quite see a bright future with the way the fishing industry is going at the moment. For that reason.... My son also spends a fair bit of time at sea with me. He's eleven now, been going to sea since he was three. He's got his heart and soul set on taking over this boat but I think he's going to be disappointed because there's too much politics involved in fishing these days.

JD Actually we'll talk a bit more about that later. Turning to your involvement in the councils of the industry, you have been a member of various councils, I believe?

TOYER Yes. I guess I've done a number of things. One is I've been a director of the local fishermen's co-operative for a couple of years. I've been on the New South Wales

Fishing Industry Council since inception. I'm still a member of that body. I've been the New South Wales representative to the National Fishing Industries Council for a few years. I've been.... I gave odd input as industry rep invited by State Fisheries in the transition of the control of fisheries from Commonwealth to State, what they call the Offshore Constitution Settlement. That's not finalised yet in New South Wales. I remember the first meeting for that was on 24th April, 1985. So things don't change quickly in the fishing industry. We've been pushing for change because in this transitional period the Commonwealth don't want to do anything because it's going to be the State's problem later on 'cause the State can't do anything because of Commonwealth control. So it's a bit frustrating there but that seems to be coming to pass in the near future which, once that's happened, we may see some changes. Whether we welcome the changes, whether we don't time will tell but certainly there'll be a right climate there for change.

JD Eric, you've had an enormous breadth of experience in the fishing industry in many of its aspects. Where do you see the problems that face the industry? What are they? What are the major problems?

TOYER It depends if you take that Australia wide or locally. I'll take that as a local issue, at say [unclear] principally New South Wales. That's my area of expertise, I guess. There are problems there where, I guess fishing's not like other primary industries or many other industries where.... I should rephrase that because fishing is unique in one area, that we are dealing with what we call a common property resource which [is], you own as much of the fish stocks as I do but the difference is I pay an access fee to harvest those stocks. I feel that if I have that privilege to harvest those, [there is] also a responsibility to ensure that those stocks are harvested, (a) to the maximum community benefit and (b) to ensure that we don't damage those stocks by over-exploiting them.

So that in itself is, I guess you might say, a profound statement but with that, New South Wales is pretty unique because we've had a very controlled marketing structure where you sell your fish here to the local fishermen's co-operative or the Fish Marketing Authority. That's a pretty big umbrella to put over the industry itself. There's elements that go outside the structured marketing place which is termed black marketing. There's a number of reasons for that but that in itself restricts any change, any development because the marketing.... There's no incentive. Once you go beyond that rather rigid structure you become on your own, even if you belong to the association or the co-operative.

As I've experienced, even working through the co-operative and the processing and also marketing through them as I have done in the past, there's no degree of confidentiality in your business dealings because all the [unclear] transactions are presented to Board members. Suddenly you see yourself as being, it's all [unclear] probably earning too much money even though the commitments are higher, the range of administration is so much higher because in a normal co-operative system, all the administration and marketing costs are absorbed by the co-operative itself and it's paid by the various [unclear] fishermen. Once you branch away from that you go on your own so those overheads are possibly not as much but certainly the overheads per capita rise very sharply.

Also there's difficulty in communication, getting marketing yourself when you go out on your own because you're at sea catching fish. You're not available to answer your telephone. You need to have information. It's pointless developing markets if you then don't service the market. All you do then is lose credibility in the market place. That can work against you. It's the difficulty we have in being one out, that we can develop

markets but we need more product access to keep those markets buoyant. Sometimes I've been in a situation where I develop markets and I've had to go back and say, "Well look I'm sorry. I can't service your market" because I can't get enough throughput or the logistical problems [of] just to get a refrigerated truck to carry frozen products from here to Sydney. If I'm the only one doing it I need to have a truck load to send. To get a truck load together I need to wait and store it on my boat. In doing so you're creating yourself a cash flow problem. So all these are problems.

At the same time, there's no assistance from industry. Indeed there's a lot of, I guess, difficulty created in the market place because of that and because, I guess, the bottom line is you may be seen to be making too much money. Certainly everything I've earned I've put back in the industry, in this boat but the marketing in New South Wales needs to be radically reviewed and freed up to allow for the changes to occur.

JD Eric, there's just been concluded an inquiry into the marketing of fish in New South Wales. Do you feel that the fishermen and their point of view was taken into account sufficiently in that inquiry, or perhaps too much?

TOYER Well I haven't seen the findings yet. The report has been completed. I know the Minister has it and he has put a committee together to look at that which will be a couple of months (he told me last Wednesday) before the recommendations come out from that. Basically, anybody who wished to give input into that inquiry had the opportunity to do so. I was approached on a number of occasions before the opportunity arose for me to do that. I guess maybe in my position is a bit unique compared to most other fishermen but it was my understanding, also my experience that anybody who wanted to have a say could have a say. It went from there.

Once again, I'm not privy to the findings but there are a number of areas which cause a lot of concern. At the moment we have this brilliant new fish market in Sydney which has been constructed at great cost for some 30 odd million dollars, which industry has to pay for and I recognise that. The hardware, the building, the concept is tremendous. The engineering capacity is great, the finish, I've got no problem with. Actually I've got the utmost admiration for the people who put it together, both the architects and also indeed the engineer, Alan Hickey, who did a brilliant job.

As far as the bottom line, I guess, the sale of fish on the floor, I do have some difficulty with the auction system as such because it seems to be too erratic. It's been erratic with my product prior to Christmas. It's been erratic with a number of other fishermen I know in Sydney who have access to that market. They use that market every day. With fishing, in my activity, I like to.... I've actually worked towards putting a processed product in the market place so that I catch, I process, I nominate a price. If I find a buyer who is willing to pay that price, which there are many in the market place, then as I'm fishing I know how much money I'm earning. I know I'm either going forwards or going backwards. If I'm going backwards I just don't target that specie. I look for other markets for that specie or not only other markets but different presentation of that specie to try and upgrade the market place.

We have, just digressing a bit, a by-product on our boat here that normally we used to discard over the side. That's yellow tail which doesn't have a real value but I approached sea world at Southport late last year and because we have freezing capacity and we do catch this as a by-product and we pack that specie now for Seaworld and we get \$1.40 a kilo. That's not big dollars but the niche is there. If they want \$50,000 worth of product from me just on that by-product specie, in the New South Wales marketing structure I can't do that because I need to pack it and freeze it and sell it through a recognised outlet but being just over the border in Queensland, I

can ship direct to Queensland and not have that restraint upon my activities which demonstrates just part of the difficulties in the marketing structure.

The market is just not working, where we have a number of buyers approaching me, they wish to buy direct and I said I can negotiate a price which is satisfactory to both of us which is greater than that. Also the buyer doesn't have to sit on the market floor and wait for hours to buy his fish. He can buy over the telephone and have it delivered when he wants it and where he wants it which gives him more flexibility to run his operation. I don't think it takes an Einstein to realise that the guy with the fish shop, he spends three or four hours a day at a market buying fish, he's losing time at his shop so his business is suffering. So if he can buy it in a presentation that he wishes, maybe that's where the market should go and we get away from this cushion that the industry's been sitting on. I think the market in the past has served a very good, useful purpose but I think for the future we've got to look at freeing it up and that there will always be an auction market, room for that but I think over all we've got to look at the other side and say, hey we've got to look at what the market needs and adjust our laws accordingly to allow for that.

JD There's a considerable importation of fish into Australia. Does the marketing system influence that importation?

TOYER Well there's demand for fish in Australia so if there's a niche in the market place for imported fish which is generally around the high volume, low price commodity, that accesses fish to the table of the public. I think that's good because all it's going to do for our industry is create more demand for fish. Once again on the marketing side of it, we have the best advertising we could ever wish for in the fishing industry, the fact that seafood is health food but I don't feel we're capitalising enough on it to go back to the public.

Also there's, a difficult one here. Often management is put across with a market orientated influence. Like, to take a species of sand flathead which is a high volume, low price commodity, it's caught in South Australia and also Victoria and shipped to New South Wales and is sold on the market floor for 70 cents a kilo in a whole form. We need to look at that because we're pushing too much product from A to B in a volume size and maybe this needs to be looked at where we can process that and sell the fillets[fish?] in fillet form which does a couple of things. If it's filleted, once again and processed, the catcher knows what he's getting for it. The buyer knows what he's getting. We've got a standard of quality and we are reducing the time lag from the time that fish is caught until the time it's sold or processed which gives a better quality product and the freight costs are halved because you're only freighting the piece that's being eaten rather than all the frame and everything else. Perhaps that needs to be looked at in a broader form but this is getting back to the fundamental that we're going away from the fresh is best market back to a processed product market which is the way the imports come in. They're processed and they're presented in the format that most housewives want, an article which they don't have to prepare beyond cooking. That was our long term objective to put on this boat. Whether we see it through to fruition, time will tell because at the moment we can't get the permission to cut our fish at sea.

JD Presentation of the product is very important indeed, isn't it?

TOYER Well it is; presentation, also you sell your product on its quality. Because we pack it and freeze it we have, we believe possibly the best quality of product we can

put on the market place of the range of species that we sell. So that then creates its own demand. So that should be beneficial.

JD Could we just have a look at some of the other problems. What about management?

TOYER Well management has, I guess, to date been pretty ad hoc in what we call east coast trawl and I think ad hoc in a lot of other areas too. I think south east trawl would come into that one. I guess the Government in the early '80s decided that (that's Commonwealth Government) industry should manage itself to a degree so these management committees were set up where they took fishermen's representatives and put them in various areas to assist bureaucracy in managing. That's one aspect.

The other aspect is the fact that we have a very high turnover of staff of the bureaucratic side where we have.... In the last, say five years, we've seen three directors of the Australian Fisheries service, we've seen three directors of Fisheries in New South Wales and often the issues get lost in the changeover of staff. Of course that changeover of staff goes right back through, all the way down the line in the Public Service. I think industry, with this sudden change of philosophy where an industry manages itself to a degree with input from industry, I don't think in New South Wales.... It may be ready now but it certainly hasn't been ready in the past to take on that responsibility because we need to have some good men there who can disseminate the real management issues as opposed to the parochial and political issues. That's not happening at the moment. Hopefully it will happen but I see pretty dark days until it does happen.

Just in support of that statement about management issues, etc, just one a bit close to home I'm involved in is the fact that we're the only vessel in New South Wales that does any processing and packaging at sea. In 1988 there was the Aztec Report which was published in 1989 to do with the post-harvest technologies at sea and in the executive summary there's various issues and recommendations made. They basically follow the line of.... More than basically, almost follow to the tee the line of operation that we're conducting here in New South Wales which is post harvest technologies, training, skills at sea, having up-market processing and trying to find niches in the local market place of by-products to replace imported fish.

Unfortunately we're suffering management at a political level which is restricting our operations to a great degree as opposed to management on biological grounds where we've had support from the biologists in New South Wales, also the administration of New South Wales, and indeed we've been granted special permits to target a by-product specie using fishing methods and that permit has been withdrawn politically because the local fishermen have been to see the local member of parliament and has [been] granted support through the local political party. We've tried to redress that on a number of occasions and just only recently (last week) I had a session with the Minister for Agriculture who will not commit himself to the very fact that our industry would be managed on a biological basis or a scientific basis as opposed to a political basis. My own local member told me that the decision would be made on a political basis.

Now that leaves me with a degree of heartburn because we have a major investment of over a million dollars, one point four million dollars the boat's valued at, in an industry where we don't have control of our destiny. We've made investment decisions on information available and our viability is threatened by political decisions. I find that very hard to swallow. Because of that, if that's the tack that the industry's going to follow in New South Wales, I don't see any change in the near or distant future in New

South Wales because the post-harvest technologies that are here now, which is our boat, will disappear because I can't live with that which gives me a number of options, I guess. One is to sell out but there's no market for my boat in New South Wales. Two is to look for different avenues in fishing and that's what we're doing at the moment. I'm looking at the possibility of going into a joint venture in Saudi Arabia. Also I'm looking at opportunities in India and the Philipines because I don't see a rational future if we're going to manage our industry in a political manner.

JD Eric, whatever you decide to do, I hope it works out well for you. Thank you very much for this interview. It's been really of great interest. Thank you.

TOYER Well my pleasure indeed.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

Disclaimer





Verbatim transcript of an interview with KEVIN WARREN

INTRODUCTION

Kevin Warren has spent more than half a century in the fishing industry in New South Wales. Eden on Twofold Bay is his home port from whence he and his family now operate two trawlers. Kevin Warren is a thoughtful and innovative fisherman and in earlier times pioneered the blue fin tuna fishery off the New South Wales coast including fish spotting from aircraft. More recently he has developed a technique for catching strud tuna which combines purse seine netting with poling and which has proved effective and protective of the stock.

His account of the destruction of the blue fin tuna fishery bears reflecting upon, as does his concern for the fishermen of the future. In a most entertaining ending to this interview, Mr Warren reads some of his own stories in verse, all of which goes towards making this tape an outstanding contribution to Murdoch University's oral history of the Australian fishing industry.

The interviewer is Jack Darcey and the interview was recorded in Mr Warren's home overlooking Twofold Bay in Eden, New South Wales on the 17th March, 1990. There are two sides of one tape. The interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Kevin, would you please record your full name and date and place of birth.

WARREN Yes Jack. Kevin Warren. I'm 62 years old and I was born in Eden on the 23rd September, 1927. My family came here much longer before that. My grandfather settled into Eden in 1886. He used to work on and build the steamboats that sailed on the Murimidge but he left there and came down to Eden in 1886, settled here, raised his family and became quite renown as a boat builder. He built some beautiful little boats that sailed up and down this coast. He was [of] great recognition as a model maker and boat builder. He never did much fishing himself but his sons, as they were born, they went into the fishing industry.

At the age of thirteen I followed in their footsteps, you know. I've been fishing in Eden non stop ever since. I've NEVER, ever drawn a week's wage. I've never worked for anybody. I've always worked for myself from the day that I started [laughs] and we've had some good times here over the years. I think I can remember or recall on one occasion here when I was about fifteen years old, I suggested to the boys that we sail out of Eden and catch a load of fish because at that particular time there were still boats using sails to catch fish. Most of the boats had engines in them and ours did have a motor in it but I said, "Well we'll try and make history. We'll sail out, we'll catch a load of fish and we'll sail back into the wharf [and] unload" which is exactly what we did. We caught about three-quarters of a tonne of barracouta in a little 21 foot boat

that I had and we never used the motor. I think that's the last I can ever remember of sail being used in the port of Eden to catch a load of fish.

JD Were you mainly after barracouta in those days?

WARREN Yes, yes Jack. There was a big couta fleet working here then. There was a lot of blokes from Victoria, from Lourné [and] Queenscliff. I think all in all the fleet numbered, there was about 60 boats operating catching barracouta. That was during the War, the War years when there was nobody left in the port except the very, very young fishermen like myself or the very, very old fishermen, like my grandfather as all the rest [of] course had been called up and gone away to the War. Barracouta then was used to feed the Army and there was four or five buyers on the wharf at the time. I can remember then we used to get five pence a pound for barracouta but we had no trouble to sell them and buyers were just waiting there with big potfulls and bucketfulls of cash. There was no trouble to sell the fish [laughs] because there was just nobody left much around to catch them except, as I said, the very, very young or the very, very old chaps.

JD Were the boats the traditional couta boats?

WARREN The traditional couta boats, yeah. They were little open cockpit boats. They never had wheelhouses or cabins or anything on them in those days. Every boat was open right through to the bow. They were about 21 footers, the smallest, similar to the one I had, and the majority of boats were about 23, 25 and just the odd boat about 30 foot long but anybody who had a 30 foot boat in those days, he had quite a big boat.

JD In the early days anyway they had sail but then they started to put car engines in, I believe?

WARREN Yes they did, yes. The old 1928 model Morris Cowie and Morris Oxfords, if anybody can remember those cars and there was another really good one that made a good marine engine was the four cylinder Dodge. There was just about those three, just about took up the whole fleet. No marine gear box or anything, we just had the old clutch and gear change and propellers on them but they worked quite well. They were good little marine engines.

JD Just before we leave the family involvement in the fishing industry Kevin, some of your relatives were also on the whaling boats here, weren't they?

WARREN Yes Jack. I didn't see the whaling. My uncle Jack Warren (who's still alive) and Uncle Jack's 84 and he's still fishing. As a matter of fact he's only handed in his fishing licence this year. My Uncle Jack and Uncle Bill Warren, they both worked on the long boats, rowing. They were oarsmen on the boats in the whaling days. They've told me stories about it. They can remember when the last whale, the very last whale was caught, killed and processed in the bay at Eden.

JD It was a.... The type of whaling was by rowed vessel from the shore, was it?

WARREN Yes. We all know the history of the killers. It's quite a true story. It's been written about quite a lot, how the killers would come into the bay and swim over off the mouth off the Towamba River and hit their tails on the water [to] signal to the boats there that whales were in the bay. There was a big stir around the town then, there was fishermen come from all directions to get into the whale boats because they knew the wale was there and they'd go out in the..... about 30 foot long, the rowing boats, with five men, five men rowing and of course the harpoon in the bow. I don't

know a great deal about that. I'm not a.... but I do know they speared, harpooned, killed the whale and the whale used to sink to the bottom then when it decomposed a little bit it would float up to the top and then they'd tow it up into the mouth of the Towamba River and process it.

JD And the killer whales used to give the signal?

WARREN The killer whales gave the signal and their reward for that was.... The killers only ever ate the tongue and the lips of the whale. They never touched anything else, so that was their reward. When the whale was harpooned and killed the killer would go in, eat out the tongue and lips and then they'd leave. It was a sort of a fisherman and the mammals working in together.

JD To come back to your own involvement in fishing Kevin, you started off mainly after barracouta, but then the barracouta suddenly disappeared, did they?

WARREN Yes. The barracouta disappeared for no known reason. They were never over fished or out fished. They just simply changed and they moved out into the deeper water. Matter of fact there hasn't been any barracouta....

JD What did you do then, after the couta disappeared?

WARREN Well, as I said, we had a 21 foot boat in those days couta fishing and of course the War came to an end and my career then.... We went over to catching salmon for the fish canners. There was [a] fish cannery built at Narooma, another one at Eden. For the next fifteen, twenty years we worked the salmon fishery up and down the coast until we discovered that the southern blue fin tuna was here in vast quantities and we got a little bit bigger boat again. We went from a 21 foot to a 30 footer and then to a 40 footer and then we started on the southern blue fin tuna. That proved to be a very big industry, a very big fishery on this coast for over twenty years.

I saw the first, or actually did catch the first commercial load of southern blue fin tuna that was brought into Eden. That was seven and a half tonnes of fish in our little boat, the **Silver Cloud**. Oh there was a great day at the cannery because the cannery manager never believed that you could bring in that quantity of fish. Seven tonnes in those days was a lot of tuna and I can remember that day at sea, when I looked around the ocean and as far as my eye could see, there were schools of tuna, some of them, oh well over a thousand tonnes in a school. I said to the boys, "Look we've got to get into this fishery in a bigger way. We've got to stop in it because here's one fish that we'll never fish out". I said, "It's just not possible" but 25 years later I was to be proved very wrong and the advent of the big million dollar pole boat, the purse seiner that carried over 200 tonnes of fish, got into the blue fin fishery and in less than a decade that fishery was wiped out in New South Wales way beyond commercial extinction.

As a matter of fact, we haven't seen a southern blue fin tuna in these waters for over seven years. They're still being taken in Western Australia and South Australia but they're very small fish. They're the last of a dwindling stock unless something is done, a complete moratorium I would say. At least five or ten years without taking any sudden blue fin tuna at all. If they don't do that I think the blue fin tuna is in danger of extinction, complete extinction. Also then you would have to stop the Japanese taking the large parent stock from out off the east coast of New South Wales. The Japanese have been doing that traditionally for, over 30 years I suppose. It's a hard thing to put a halt to but if they don't do it, I can't see any future for southern blue fin tuna. As I

said, we haven't seen any for seven years and that's a fishery that I said that we'd never fish out and it would be there forever.

JD When you first went into the southern blue fin tuna fishery, how far off shore were you?

WARREN When we first started fishing southern blue fin tuna the fish could be seen here from the shore. They were right up the rocks. There was fish everywhere just touching the rocks most of the times and then as the number of boats increased, or more got into the fishery, the fish started to feel the effects of that fishing pressure and they moved out five mile, ten mile and then, oh for some eight or ten years they probably stayed along the Continental Shelf; that's about twenty miles out. Then, as I said, fishing pressure increased and increased and the last of the fish sighted here would be 30, 40 up to 100 miles out to sea. At one particular stage there was twelve twin engine aircraft spotting for blue fin tuna on the east coast. Four companies owned three aeroplanes each. There was close to 50 boats and as soon as a patch of tuna hit the surface there was a plane or a boat there to catch it.

We, the New South Wales fishermen (Eden, Bermagui and Ulladulla), realised then that the fishery was on the way out. We tried to tell the scientists (Garth Murphy was head of the CSIRO in Cronulla at the time) that the fishery was definitely finished but what they couldn't see, what they didn't understand, they're sitting back up there in their offices looking out the window and they've got all the statistics in front of them. They looked at a catch that wasn't dwindling. The catch was even climbing slightly year by year or remaining static but what they didn't realise was that the pressure being put on the fishery had doubled and trebled. So you get a situation there where you don't get a gradual dying off of a fish catch, you get a complete collapse and that's what happened. In one season there there was a complete collapse from, say 3,000 tonne to nothing. That's what happened [to] the southern blue fin.

JD So it was over fished because of the number of boats fishing it and the increase in technology I suppose?

WARREN The increase in technology, yes certainly. Well twelve twin engine aeroplanes, you had purse seine boats with huge nets 450 fathom long, nearly 100 fathoms deep and they completely wiped out every school they went into. There was also a lot of damage done to the fishery too but fish spotters could verify what I'm saying. It never ever came out but the schools of fish were so big, four and five hundred tonne and a purse seiner that was only capable of carrying 60 or 80 tonne, would net that school of fish. The end result was that the fish would die in the net, burst the net and 400 tonnes of fish would sink to the bottom dead. I've seen it time and time again. They just couldn't stand it. No fishery would stand that pressure.

JD What did you do then when the tuna fishery collapsed?

WARREN When the southern blue fin fishery collapsed Jack, we decided to go for the smaller fish, the skipjack tuna. Early in the piece I think the fish were only worth about \$300 a tonne. The cannery wasn't really interested in them and it was pretty hard to get into a fishery like that where the blue fin tuna was selling for around about a thousand dollars a tonne and we had to turn around and catch fish worth \$300 a tonne using more or less the same method. For three or four years there we weren't going too good at all but the situation changed. The local cannery started to import fish and immediately the Commonwealth Government stepped in and said, "Well we must have a world parity price on these fish." In other words, whatever the cannery was paying for imported fish, they had to pay us exactly the same and our fish price jumped from

\$330 to \$1 200 a tonne. That was an enormous jump. That happened about four years ago. Well that made the fishery a viable fishery then when we could get that money for our fish and we've stuck to that fishery. We're still in that fishery today.

JD Are stocks still holding up?

WARREN The stock, yes. With skipjack.... There's a big difference between skipjack and southern blue fin. With southern blue fin the fish follow the same pattern up and down the coast year by year, you worked on the same family of fish all the time, you took the huge breeding stock, you took the juveniles, the lot, but with skipjack, these fish are born and bred up in the islands, right up in northern Australia and when they get to about three kilo they migrate down the east coast. They keep going around Australia over into the Indian Ocean [and] they're lost to us. We never see those fish again so that means that each year we're working on a different family of fish which is a good thing in any fishery. There's a different family arrives every year and we can take what we like out of that family because we never see them again. That's a good thing about skipjack tuna. It's got a great future. It should go well into the future. The only way that they could be damaged is of course, is if they're over-fished up in the islands by the huge American super seiners and the clippers up there that catch up to a thousand tonnes and the boats that can hold a thousand tonnes of fish but it's being fairly well managed up there at the moment. If they don't increase the pressure on the fish stocks up there, there's a good chance we're going to have skipjack here for many, many years to come which is good for a cannery because they know they've got a fishery that they can rely on.

JD The skipjack is the stripy tuna, is it?

WARREN The skipjack is a striped tuna, yes. We call them skipjack. Our catches started off in the first years for about 60 or 80 tonne. Seven years ago we got 100, 150 tonne and we slowly increased our knowledge of the fishery. We used different methods of catching them. We didn't increase the size of our boats. Our boats are quite small. One of our boats carries twelve tonne, the other about 30 and we feel that if we stick to those size boats and don't get too big and don't.... The only damage that you could do in the skipjack fishery would be to allow too many boats into it. It couldn't damage the stock. I've already explained that the stocks are different each year but if Government doesn't realise that there need[s] to be a limited number of boats in the fishery to make it a viable fishery; I mean we can't.... Assuming that there's 2 000 tonnes of fish caught every year, if that's distributed between ten, fifteen boats, that's a dam good fishery, everybody's happy, but if 30 or 40 boats get sent to it again, no good. There's just not enough fish to go around.

JD Kevin you developed a new technique of netting these fish, didn't you?

WARREN Yes. We were the first ones to successfully use live bait, pole and live bait in our smaller boat (a 56 footer). She carries the live bait and our little purse seiner, we developed or built a net. It's quite small by purse seine standards, about 220 fathoms long and about 35 fathoms deep. When we put the two together.... We tried with a net at first. It wasn't successful. We tried poling. It was OK, poling, but when we combined the two operations and used the live bait boat and in the net at the same time, we found then our catch jumped from, oh 150 to 400 tonne the first year, 400 tonne the year before last and this year 530 tonnes. So our technique is improving year by year.

JD You're actually poling from the net?

WARREN Poling inside the net, yes. The pole boat goes into the school of tuna. There might be twenty, 30, 40, 50 tonnes in it and he'll throw bait and he'll start to hook fish with a pole and fish become quite excited, frenzy you might call it. While that's taking place we put the net around and close the bottom up very, very slowly. We don't take all the fish. The net's only capable of catching about 30 tonne and that's our maximum haul. Some of the schools are quite big. Some are 100, 150 tonne but we never.... They just don't fit in the net. We don't get them.... we don't kill anything. In seven years of operation we've never harmed any fish and I might have mentioned earlier how the southern blue fin were destroyed in two and three hundred tonne lots. That doesn't happen with skipjack.

JD How many polers would you have operating at any one time?

WARREN On the pole boat there's usually about six, six polers. It takes that many to keep the fish excited. The more hooks in the water, the more excited the fish become and it seems to be about six is an ideal number for a pole boat that size.

JD What sort of prices are you getting for those?

WARREN As I mentioned earlier Jack, we work on a world parity price they call it. It just depends. It's set world wide, the price for skipjack tuna. It can get quite high. It can get up as high as as \$1 600 a tonne. It can get down to as low as \$800 a tonne. Year before last was \$1 200 which was quite a big price. This year, \$900 which is still a fairly reasonable price, \$900 a tonne. The cannery of course has a problem that they have a very limited market for locally caught skipjack and about 2 000 seems to be as much as they can possibly sell at the moment. So we have a problem market wise. If we get too many boats in the fishery, the cannery will fill up much too quickly and won't be shared in sufficient to.... Well there won't be enough per boat sort of thing to keep the money in the fishery.

JD Do you ever see any of the southern blue fin tuna at all?

WARREN The only southern blue fin tuna we see now Jack is the ones that we catch on the long line. They're still off the east coast here. I may have mentioned earlier that there was complete commercial extinction. I was referring to fish that's taken by pole (that's the juvenile fish) and net. That hasn't been done. There just hasn't been any fish sighted at all but the large parent stock, they live out here on the edge of the Continental Shelf and at times the small boats with their long liners do catch some southern blue fin tuna; fish averaging say from 40 to about 100, 120 kilos but then you're only talking fish. A good catch would be half a dozen fish and that of course is processed, looked after and sold mainly in Japan, sold in Tokyo for the valuable sushi market.

JD And what sort of prices would they bring?

WARREN Prices again can vary but we have something here on our coast that fishermen can't do anywhere else in the world and that is that we're only two hours away from the grounds. That means the boats can leave here, go out, catch a large fish. Say they might only have one fish. That fish might weigh 100 kilos and he's caught over night, landed in port next morning and next day he's in Tokyo; he's on the floor in the Tokyo market. There's not too many countries in the world where you can do that. Now that fish, if it's in good order and it's quite fresh, it's never frozen. It only goes as far as chilled in ice and that fish could bring anywhere from 40 to a record

price for a southern blue fin tuna at \$130 a kilo or, in that particular case, \$1 300 for a single fish weighing a hundred kilos. Quite a big price.

JD Kevin do you see any future at all for the southern blue fin tuna?

WARREN I think if fishermen continue to fish southern blue fin (and that includes the Japanese), if they continue to fish them at the same level that they are now, I can't.... I still can't see the fishery recovering. The South Australian and West Australian fishermen are still taking them with live bait, pole and purse seine nets. The Japanese have [a] hundred, 150 boats at times working off the east coast of Australia with up to 50 kilometres of line on each boat and they are targeting on the huge southern blue fin tuna, the big ones, the parental fish. As I said, if that continues, I can't see the fishery recovering.

Our good Minister for Agriculture, Mr John Kerin last year tried to bring in a complete moratorium on the taking of southern blue fin tuna world wide, say for five years and the Japanese wouldn't listen and I'm afraid the local fishermen, well they couldn't stop. Our local fishermen possibly would have stopped catching southern blue fin tuna but they just couldn't see why they should stop fishing and the Japanese still allowed to fish and it's fallen through. I don't know, I don't know myself how long the fishery is going to stand that pressure. I don't think it can recover.

JD The quotas for Australian fishermen have been dramatically reduced, haven't they?

WARREN Yes. There is a quota on fish taken by purse seine and pole, you see, but there's no quota on a long line fishery because the small boats here with their long lines, they don't catch tonnes. They only catch numbers of fish and if any boat ever brought in a tonne on any one trip it would be an enormous catch, if it's processed and handled the way it is for the sushi market in Japan. So our long liners here can't do any real damage but when you look at 150 Japanese long line boats each with 50 kilometres of line, that's a very different story.

JD To turn to other forms of fishing, you have been involved in other fisheries, haven't you, over the years?

WARREN Um.... mainly purse seining for pelagic fishes, Jack. We've never been involved in deep water or trawling or anything like that. We've all stuck to pelagic fisheries and we've fished for fish canneries all our life. That means that we've taken Australian salmon. We still have good.... We started catching Australian salmon, I did anyway, in the early days, 40 years ago and we still get quite good catches of Australian salmon and one haul recently was 23 tonnes in one haul. So that fishery has stood up to fishing over the years fairly well. We've got a silver trevelly we catch here every year on a seasonal basis. It only lasts about a month. That's a good fishery too but not a good fish market wise; but we have out here off our east coast now....

We do have [a] fishery that's virtually untouched and that is the blue mackerel. Pilchards and jack mackerel fishery on our east coast has never been exploited. It's never been touched so looking to the future, if the other fisheries do start to feel the pressure, we still have that mackerel fishery. It's a pelagic fish that we caught by purse seining or.... mainly purse seining. There are other methods but the purse seining is the main method of catching blue mackerel and jack mackerel, and we're hoping one day that markets can be developed of that fishery and it would definitely [be] the biggest fishery, tonnage wise, in off the east coast; definitely the biggest by far.

JD Has it remained undeveloped because of public taste? That the market doesn't exist because people won't buy that sort of fish?

WARREN Well here in Australia, of course, our own local market, they're quite spoiled because we have some very nice fish here: the john dorys, the ling, all the trawl fish. They're a very popular fish and whilst the mackerel and stuff is eaten in other countries, I can't see that ever happening here in Australia, not for a long, long while. If we do develop markets for mackerel, I would say they would have to be overseas markets, people that are used to eating that fish and of course a lot of fisheries in other parts of the world, the mackerel fish and everything have been fished for many, many years and they're starting to feel the pinch whereas ours is virtually untouched. So a situation will arise where our fishery's going to pay off in the long term, if you know what I mean.

JD The pilchard is a sardine type fish, is it?

WARREN Yes, mainly used as a bait fish. Very popular. The West Australian pilchard fishery's been.... That's been fished for some eight or ten years. Very popular amongst sport fishermen but there's none canned or none eaten in Australia like it is in other countries.

JD This interview continues on side B of this tape.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Kevin you and your family indeed have always had a reputation as being very innovative fishermen. What other innovations have you introduced?

WARREN Many years ago Jack, fish spotting. We decided to introduce aircraft into fish spotting and one of the first planes that we ever used was a Tiger Moth and we used to have to don our helmets and gear and our warm weather gear and hop in the back and front of the old Tiger. We had no radio, it was just speaking tubes and we'd fly along the beaches, spot the salmon and then of course we had to communicate with the boats and the way that we did this, we used to get any old tins with screw on lids and we'd write a little note down, so many fish sighted here or there or twenty tonne of salmon on the next beach down, and we'd drop the tins out of the aircraft down to the boats, and away they'd go. Well we went from there to a.... we bought a little float plane, a Piper PR11 and of course we fitted that with radio. We were very modern then and we had that on our own for quite a few years until the.... I'm talking about before the southern blue fin tuna started. Then of course immediately the southern blue fin tuna fishery, when that got under way, all the canneries, all the big companies came in with big twin engined aircraft that we couldn't compete with so we sold our aircraft and we got out of fish spotting because it was done by the canneries then. The canneries and the companies spotted for their own boats and of course you had to pay for that, until the collapse of the southern blue fin tuna about seven years ago.

We're back in the fish spotting business again ourselves now. Our son's a pilot. He got his pilot's licence. We purchased a little Piper Super Cub and we're back in the spotting game again. It's just to give you some idea of how conditions change. You know how [a] fishery can rise and fall, and then take off along other lines. One good fishery we discovered using the aircraft, the young bloke, he was first ever to spot for mackerel,

blue mackerel [which] we didn't know lived in the bays and things round here and silver trevelly and never been spotted from the air but the little Cub, flying so slow and with such good visibility, we found these huge schools of fish in the bay at Merimbula and we didn't know what they were. Went up, put the net around them and come up with twelve tonne of trevelly. Well that year we caught 250 tonnes of silver trevelly and those fish were sold overseas. They went to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, before the Gulf War started and of course when they started fighting and waring over there, we haven't been able to get the fish back in there again.

We don't have a market for that fish now. That's a very big fishery that something needs to be done about market wise. The same as our jack mackerel and our blue mackerel and our pilchards. We've got huge areas of fish, tonnages of fish out here that there's no local demand for except for pet food. In Tasmania of course they're utilising this fish as fish meal. They're taking thirty, forty thousand tonnes a year putting into fish meal. We don't agree with that here. We won't allow fish for meal products or fish meal boats in New South Wales.

JD What's the fish meal used for?

WARREN The fish meal.... The idea's quite sound. In Tasmania the fish meal or the fish product (the mackerel that they take over there), the fish meal is used to feed the salmon. They have quite extensive large salmon farms over there; atlantic salmon, the farming of atlantic salmon. That does, that is.... Whilst I don't agree with fish meal myself (I don't believe fish should be put in the meal), but in a case like that where it can breed another fish stock, I think the idea's quite good.

JD Kevin, the question of management of the industry is a difficult one and the involvement of fishermen's organisations and their relationships to government, how do you find that?

WARREN Oh there's a lot of problems. Certainly there's a lot of problems 'cause there's so many different fisheries to manage if you go through the lot of them: prawning, trawling, inland fisheries, the tuna fisheries, the pelagic fisheries. So really all I can sort of speak on is something that I've been involved in. At the present time we're having great difficulty between Commonwealth and State management of fisheries. There's so many licences. We've got to have a State licence to fish in State waters, a Commonwealth licence to fish out in Commonwealth waters and so it goes on and on. We just don't really know who's in control. The Commonwealth say, "Oh we own the fishery (the tuna fishery)". The State says, "No they don't. We're not going to let them have it inside the three mile limit." This has being going on for years and years.

I think our minister, John Kerin, has come up with a set of rules and regulations or whatever you like to call them and we're sort of feeling now that if we go over, back to Commonwealth on Kerin's policies in fishing which are destined to look after the fishery. His main object is not to over-fish and not to allow part time fishermen in the fishery. Fishermen must be wholly and solely 100% into any particular fishery that he's interested in. Kerin has some good ideas there. I know he's going to make us pay for it. There'll be.... The fishermen who are privileged to be in a fishery will have to pay, pay considerable sums of money to be in that fishery but then there's nothing wrong with that if the fishery is managed correctly and it's not over-fished and not too many boats allowed in the fishery. We're more than happy to go along with the Commonwealth control of fisheries with regard to tuna and pelagic fisheries but at the present time, New South Wales are the only State that hasn't handed over control of those fishery to the Commonwealth. Every other State has and it seems to be working

out quite well but I believe in July of this year, the State has told us that there'll be a whole new ball game as far as they're concerned so I suppose what they mean then that the Commonwealth will control the fisheries under John Kerin's ideas and I think it should be quite good. We're looking forward to that.

JD Do you think there's enough research being carried out into the various fisheries?

WARREN Oh money's always been a problem. I don't know. I don't think there is enough research. The problem with research is it's never carried out until fishermen tend to suggest that there's something wrong, the fish aren't there. If it was done early, which I think is happening now. In new fisheries that is happening. In most of the older fisheries there's too little done too late and too little and mainly for lack of funds. You couldn't blame CSIRO really or any of the Government Departments for research when they just can't get the money to fund it. They haven't any money there or the money to do the job properly.

JD Do you think that Government listens to the professional fishermen's organisations?

WARREN Ah, they haven't. No, not in the past. Definitely not. They haven't listened but they are listening now and there'll be new advisory bodies formed in this new set-up that Kerin's going to get going there and there'll be fishermen, professional fishermen, with a history, a long history in the fishery. See the problem is over the years that when fishermen.... Most fishermen want to go fishing. They don't want to run around Sydney, Canberra to meetings and all that sort of thing and you'll usually find that the fellows who do do it are blokes who've got plenty of time on their hands and with little knowledge of the fishery. So what happens then, the Government's misinformed, isn't it, but if it gets the right representation from the right men, from the right bodies and the right fishermen, I think it should go along pretty good.

JD So you're fairly confident about the future for fishing?

WARREN Yes I am, I am. See it's definitely too many boats and too little fish. That's what Government says and they're quite right, but how do you narrow it down? Who do you take out of the fishery? The quite simple way to do it is you must prove your record in the fishery. We have a census into the fishery and those fishermen who can produce records, not as they say a net in the back yard or a bait tank in a shed or something. They say, "Oh I'm right. I've spent \$X of money. I'm allowed to go fishing", but he's never produced anything. So you must come up with those records. This is what's going to happen in the future. For instance, I go to the cannery and I say, "Right. I want my fishing records over the past seven years" and they'll say, "Oh yes Mr Warren. You've caught 300, 400, 500, 600 tonne per year." That's it: proof enough and if you can't produce that evidence, then why should you be in the fishery? Why should you hold a boat at the wharf and a licence that's not being utilised and you might just hop in with the Pit Street fishermen or the inland fishermen or farmer turned fishermen, whatever you like to call them. They'll jump into a fishery when it's at it's peak and they'll pick the cream off the top and then tie the boat up again. They're the ones we've got to eliminate. You must have a 100% involvement in the fishery I would suggest before you're entitled to be in it.

JD What about the young fellow trying to get started in the industry, Kevin? How does he stand?

WARREN Well the present setup, the way fisheries laws are, I think it's very, very hard for any young fisherman to get started, to get into the fishery, to get his own

boat and set up. It's just about impossible and that even applies to my sons, well not to my sons, my grandsons. We've got our grandson now, he's doing four years in the Launceston Training School in Launceston because looking well into the future, I think there's going to be a different breed of fishermen. It's going to become much more technical. There'll probably [be] a lot of fishing done in the very deep water out here, unknown commodity; we don't know. We didn't know the orange roughy was out there until a couple of years ago and it's proved to be one of the biggest individual fisheries in Australia, money wise. Now that can't be caught with any old boat, net or gear. That's a very high-tech fishery that one. Some of the boats that I know have got up to \$300 000 worth of electronic gear in the wheelhouses. The young fishermen today, without education, without some real knowledge and being able to operate that equipment, he's just not going to get anywhere.

It was alright a few years ago to get around with your backside out of your pants and barefooted and take a job [laughs] on a trawler and work your way up, and it's been done here, but that doesn't apply any more I'm afraid. We would have loved to have had our young bloke working with us on the boat. He probably would have trained and we could have made him skipper on board one of our boats, young Drew. He's in the Launceston College but we feel that he needs that four years of high-tech training because that's the way we think the fishery's going to go in the future, Jack.

JD Apart from the need for knowledge, there's also the enormous cost involved in getting started, isn't there?

WARREN Yes. Cost wise, especially nowadays with the new laws that's coming in, it'll be a father to son affair I think. It's the only way that young fellows are going to get into the game. Other than that, of course, if money buys everything and if money will buy licences and buy big boats, the danger then is that the big companies, the very big companies might take over a lot of the fisheries, buy them out and the young fellows then of course can always skipper boats for big companies but as far as the new breed of fishermen, the young fellows growing up ever owning and operating their own boats, I think it's just a dream. I don't think it's going to happen any more.

JD Do you think there's a danger that if it does become big companies, that it could well be controlled from overseas?

WARREN Yes, that's the problem. In the orange roughy fishery there's a big influx of New Zealand effort, New Zealand technology because they're the ones that pioneered the orange roughy fishermen. They moved into Victoria in a very big way, big company boats. Up until the present it hasn't really proven anything because a couple of those big companies have gone bust, bankrupt and the sort of the family fisherman that they seem to think is on the way out, I don't know. They seem to think today the family fishermen is finished but that's not been proved at the moment. The most successful boats operating on those big fisheries in Hobart and Portland at the moment are the owner/operated boats. Even boats that have to employ skippers aren't as secure, financially secure as the owner/operator.

JD Are these companies that operate boats, do they also operate the processing and export of the fish?

WARREN Yes, usually. Usually that's the first thing they get into, is the processing side of it but, of course, in Australia we've got some big names of Raptus, Poulos and, oh a couple of other big names, big Greek processors been in the industry for many, many years and they're very hard to toss, those fellows. They seem to have the processing game and the handling of orange roughy or any export fish, they seem to

have that pretty well sown up. I don't think that outside companies can push them out. They can buy into it, which they have done. New Zealand companies are now in with our local processors but I don't think they'll ever push us right out of the game.

JD In your years of fishing, have you come across any problems with pollution in this area?

WARREN In Twofold Bay Jack, I've been fishing here now, this year, for 50 years, half a century and I would say that the water in Twofold Bay at the moment is just about as clean as it was when we started 50 years ago. That doesn't mean to say that we can just run amuck and do what we like with the Bay. There has been some talk of shifting the Navy down here or building another ship wharf. North Broken Hill was talking about building another huge jetty over the bay to export more wood chip etc, etc. We're doing everything we can to block both those ventures. We don't want that, don't want that at all. Twofold Bay is a breeding ground for the small fishes: anchovies, pilchards, they all come in here to breed and those small fish, when they leave this bay, are the food, part of the food chain for the whole fishery on our east coast of New South Wales. See when you look at it, you come out of Sydney, Botany Bay, Jervis Bay and there's a big long jump to Twofold Bay until you get to Western Port and Port Phillip Bay. Now you knock one of those bays out, you spoil one of those bays, you're going to spoil a good deal of the fisheries along the east coast because the tunas, trawl fish, everything, salmon, mackerel, all rely on those small fish that breed in Twofold Bay and I think it's being watched fairly closely because even Bob Hawke and John Kerin have said that the marine environment.... They're very aware now that they must look after the marine environment and they're not going to have big industry just coming in and spoiling it so I think we're probably in a pretty safe position I think at the moment, as far as Twofold Bay's concerned but you understand what I mean. It's the only bay between Jervis Bay and Port Phillip Bay, and that's a long, long way. There's plenty of open coastline and bays but there's no sheltered bays where fish come into breed.

JD Do you get any algae bloom?

WARREN No I don't think that's ever been a problem here Jack that I know of. We were worried at one stage that the bay might silt up. We thought that with all the chipping and logging that goes on and then the heavy rainfalls and runoff into the rivers, the rivers into the bay (that run into our bay) but I don't know, for some reason or other, the bay seems to be getting deeper and deeper. I don't know what the reason for that is. It's very easily proved. For instance, in some areas where we used to haul our nets and use our nets in the bay five years ago, we can't do it now because it's all reef rock. That means that the sand has been removed and the bay's got deeper rather than shallower. So I think it must be keeping the bay fairly clean; clean of algae and cleaner.

JD Could we turn to a more personal note now? You right poetry, I believe?

WARREN Oh I've set myself to writing a few stories. I don't know whether you'd call it poetry. You want a poet to write poetry. There are just stories put to verse. I've done a bit of that over the years at times when we used to fish between here and Flinders Island and laying around Babel Island and Flinders Island and the winds would blow twenty, 30, 40, 50 knots for days and days and you'd get so fed up so on board the boat with no where to go so I used to pick up a pen and jot down a few stories.

JD Did you ever publish them?

WARREN No, no. Oh I will one day, probably. Everybody tells me that but I always say, "When I retire." Well I've retired this year so I suppose there's not much excuse now. I'll have to sit down and [laughs]....

JD It runs in the family a bit, doesn't it?

WARREN Ah, yes. Old Bob Warren, yes, he was a good old story teller. He used to write some stories. I have a book. I've put some down on paper, not many. I usually keep them in my head. Why, did you want to hear a story?

JD Yes. I would like to. Kevin would you agree to recording some of your stuff for us?

WARREN Oh yes I don't mind Jack. I don't know how I started, I got into this game. I think it was while we were over in Tasmania and we were laying around the islands there salmon fishing, around Cat and Babel Island over in Flinders and the winds would be blowing for damn near a fortnight there at one stage; down to 40 knots and up to about 70 or 70 knots and just for something to do I picked up a pen and started to jot down a few stories. Quite true, the stories.

It started off this way:

Well you can criticise a spelling
and the manner of the telling,
Put your nose in the air
you might say,
Why this Warren chap,
he should be smitten
for these articles he's written;
These things never happened,
not in our time anyway.

But shame on your mind suspicious
for these stories told fictitious.
The whole thing is done out in just and fun,
and there'll be no reimburses
if you're mentioned in these verses.
They're just fishy tales,
perhaps, just a trifle overdone.

And the first story that [was] ever written was about my old Uncle Bill, an old fisherman. He's no longer with us but he had some funny sayings and he used to say, "What a queer thing, aye" No matter what you said to Bill, this is what he'd answer, his manner of speaking. That was the first poem I'd ever written and it goes like this:

If you've ever listened round our club
whilst fishermen hold sessions
No doubt at times you've chanced upon
the strangest of expressions

Friend of mine, old Fisherman Bill
you'd bid the time of day
As like as not he'll answer back
oh, what a queer thing, aye?

He'll ask a mate just in from sea
how did you go today?
And no matter what his mate replies
Bill says, "What a queer thing, aye?"

I unloaded all my troubles
on old Bill the other day
About the fish we hadn't caught
the bills I couldn't pay

About a nipper three months old
another on the way.
You've got your trouble son, he said
But what a queer thing, aye?

A gentleman of great renown
met Bill the other day
I'd like to take your hand
Bill, he said
You're the eldest in the bay

I hear you have fished for whales, old boy
and sword fish with Zane Grey?"
You're right says Bill, how did you know?
Well what a queer thing, aye?

Still, he's not a bad old codger
when all is said and done
But he's getting on in years now
and the day will surely come

And when the sod is shovelled on him
on the shores of Twofold Bay
You'll hear old Bill say from the grave
well what a queer thing, aye?

JD Are you going to do another one?

WARREN Yes, no trouble Jack. This second story is about a couple of old fishermen friends of mine, or relatives: old Ike Warren, my grandfather and Charlie Scott, another old sea dog. He used to fish around Eden many, many years ago, way back into the whaling days. As a matter of fact, they fished long before engines were put in boats. They sailed their boats up and down the coast, poled them out over the rivers and bars and hoisted up the sails and sailed on their merry way to Sydney, Melbourne, Lakes Entrance. They carted fish, sleepers, wattle bark, anything they could do to get a few bob. Old Scott was a bit of an old devil too. He had some funny stories. He told me this one. Not in poetry, but about the mosquitoes pulling the boat one day. He reckoned they were so big they hooked on to the boat and dragged the anchor and towed the boat three or four miles down the coast. That prompted me to write this story [laughs]. We called it "The Bitanga Bay Mosquitoes". It goes like this, Jack:

Just six miles south of Eden
on the shores of Twofold Bay

There's a little cove cut in the rocks
where small ships sometimes lay

It was here that two old seamen
seeking shelter for the night
Dropped anchor late one evening
for the weather wasn't right.

Now a tale of what befell them
I've noted with my pen
For this very night they vanished
and were never seen again.

It was after dropping anchor
and they'd locked themselves below
For shelter from the mosquitoes
that had lived there long ago.

They were bigger than you've ever seen
or even read about in books
One farmer down there told me
they were mating with his chooks.

The mossies came in swarms that night
they damn near made the boat a wreck
They tried to get into the fo'c'sle
by boring through the deck.

And old Scott cried out in panic,
he said, "We'll be taken by these things"
So they took to them with hammers
and the clinched up all their stings

Well with the mossies safely fastened
now all was peace and quiet
The old timers and a rum or two
and retired for the night

It was Scott who first awakened
as the dawn was in the sky
And he opened up a port hole
and let out a fearful cry

I'll never touch the rum again
I'm going on the dry
To think that we're up in the clouds
like" he said
but you know that boats can't fly

It's those bloody mossies cried out like
when we clinched up all their stings
Now they've lifted up our vessel
by the beating of their wings

And where we are now Charlie,
by God I do not know
I can just make out the ocean
and it's miles and miles below

Well folk I can only guess what happened now
as this tale I do relate
But it's safe to say they flew away
right to the Pearly Gate

And I know for sure they'll let them in
those two old seamen brave and bold
For Peter on the gate up there
was a fisherman of old

And if you make it up to heaven
you'll see that boat there like as not
Skippered by old Ikey Warren
and his shipmate Charlie Scott

JD [laughs] What about one more?

WARREN Right O Jack. There's a story here, "The Man from Twofold Bay". It's about my grandfather.

An old fisherman is lying
with his kinsfolk round him trying
To be cheerful and to hid away their tears

But the tide of life is ebbing
and his thoughts are slowly spreading
And takes him back across the bygone years

And the gentle breeze is bringing now
the sound of axes ringing
In the forest where the big chips fairly fly

And at times he hears the cheerful
though the language something fearful
As the bullock teams in clouds of dust go by

He can hear the stockwhips cracking
and he sees the big beasts battle
On the rugged tracks that lead to Twofold Bay

And he dreams the cheerful greeting
of the timber getters' meeting
Around the campfires where the piles of sleepers lie

And across the bay at Edrum where the Kiah flows
and meets the blue Pacific on its bay
The smoke drifts up unheeded where the melting pots

are needed
for the whaling season now is under way

And he can hear those big sweeps swinging
and the long boat crews are singing
The harpooner in the bow as plain as day

And the wiley killers playing
near the long boats sometimes straying
As they lead them to the whales in Twofold Bay

He sees the water flying
and the mighty whale is dying
for the hard harpoon had met its mark with skill

And the long boats lie abreast
while the crew stand off and rest
And the hungry killers move in for the kill

He hears the lowing, as they battle
with the wild monaro cattle
As they swim them from the beachers to the schooner
in the Bay

And the gentle sea breeze willing
her sails are slowly filling
And her bow comes round to windward
as she slowly makes her way

But now he knows his life is ended
as he sees these visions splendid
As majestically she anchors in the lee

And he can see her canvas falling
and he hears his master calling
And he's sailing, sailing on forever
on a vast and endless sea

That was old Ike.

JD Kevin, thanks for that. Thanks for the whole interview. It's really been great to talk to you.

That is the end of this interview with Mr Kevin Warren, fishing boat operator of Eden, New South Wales.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

[Disclaimer](#)





Verbatim transcript of an interview with FRED WOODS

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Fred Woods is 76 years old and recently retired from fishing, he fished mostly in the South East region of NSW out of Eden as well as off the Victorian coast and has been prominent in the establishment and management of the Fishermen's Cooperative, the Fishermen's Association and the Fishermen's Club in Eden. On this tape he talks about these things and the future he sees for the Industry. He also has much to say about the methods employed in the very diversified fisheries that operate out of Eden or have operated out of that port in the past.

This is a wide ranging discussion with an acknowledged Master fisherman, it is part of Murdoch University's Oral History of the Australian Fishing Industry and was recorded by Jack Darcey in Mr. Woods' home in Eden, NSW, on the 16th March 1990. There are two sides of one tape, the interview starts at 022 on the revolution counter. At the end of the interview there is a reading of a poem entitled **The Admiral of the Fleet**, written by Mr Kevin Warren, a fellow Eden fisherman.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

JD Fred, would you record your full name, please?

WOODS Frederick Joseph Woods.

JD And your date of birth.

WOODS 30 April 1914.

JD And where were you born?

WOODS The small town of Kioloa about sixteen miles south of Ulladulla.

JD Were you brought up in this part of the world?

WOODS Yes, not really Eden, on the south coast.

JD You spent all your life on the coast of NSW?

WOODS That is right, yes.

JD Were your family involved in fishing?

WOODS No, my father had horse teams and was in the timber industry.

JD What in this area?

WOODS No, Kioloa, and that's about 150 mile north from here.

JD How did you come to come into fishing?

WOODS Well during the Depression I had a job on the Main Roads Board and then I went to Darwin and we came down to the Centre, and we were first to put that portion of that road in, we volunteered for that. War broke out and when we came back they were going to hold us in the one gang. My wife's brother had a fishing boat, I wasn't very happy shifting us out to a different spot, I'd only been married about 12 months and starting a home, so I went fishing seine, on a seine boat.

JD With him?

WOODS With him, yes.

JD What, did you start as a deckie?

WOODS Deck hand, yes, a novice really.

JD And where did you fish?

WOODS Ulladulla and right to here.

JD When you say you were seine netting what sort of fish were you catching?

WOODS Mostly flathead we were working on, but there was quite a lot of various fish, different fish, but flathead was the main catch and the one you were looking for really.

JD And that was to send to the Sydney market?

WOODS Sydney market, yes.

JD And what size boat did you have?

WOODS She was a 5l footer with a 40 horse motor in it - Southern Cross built in Australia.

JD Can you describe the method of fishing there?

WOODS Yes, we were using a mile of seine rope, two and a half inches round in circumference. We had a mile on each side and the net was set in the middle. It was run on an angle of four ropes and a turn for three and the net went over and you did three more and come back where you had a flag, or a dan we called it. And you picked it up, put one end of the rope on the drum capstan and the other was stationed above and it was on a capstan too, a double capstan on the winch and then you slowly went ahead and wound in. In seining previous it originated from New Zealand, but they used to anchor the boats and just wind that gear into them, but we started to tow the gear and that was Danish seine trawling.

JD And what length of net would it be?

WOODS Oh, the net wasn't so long. I mean to say the bag, I would, say in those days would be about 4 to 5 fathoms and then the wings would be about probably 10.

JD So it wasn't such an enormous....

WOODS No, no, not fishing very high. I would say round about... you had to haul on the bottom, of course, and had to - you wouldn't fish any more than about 5 or 6 feet.

JD And what size mesh would it be?

WOODS In those days we had two and a half and that was an imported net from England made by a company Stewart who used to make them in England, they were imported nets.

JD They were cotton?

WOODS Cotton nets, yes. A rope went down for the head line, but it wasn't sice it was a different type of stuff.

JD You would have had a fair bit of damage to a cotton net wouldn't you have?

WOODS The main damage was done by leather jackets, a fish called leather jackets. Anything that was meshed in it it would eat the whole fish and the net and all around it too. You would get tied up and we used to do a lot of damage and were everlasting mending. It was days, or all the time, mend, mend, mend. So it wasn't long before we became an expert at that.

JD You started as a deckhand. Did you finally go into your own boat?

WOODS No. Now there is a gap in between that when I was fishing. We came here and there were about 40 odd boats around and that's what really happened to fishing a lot. You couldn't sell the fish there was too much, overglutted the market. Whether it was luck or not, but the Americans came into the war and nearly all those boats were taken and went up around the islands, so we were all out of work. Previous to that I went through a winch and I was off at the moment. I'd joined the Air Force so I was entitled to go, but I didn't make that because I was kicked out. So I came back down and I had six months in Sydney and started work at a shipyard for about two years. Then they started to build the boats again and I went with my brother-in-law again, but then I had ambitions that I was going to get a boat, so that was it. So I was with him for about six months I think and then I came here to live and I picked a little old boat up and started fishing.

JD And were you still in the same kind of fishing?

WOODS Same type, yes, still seine fishing yes. We worked on that boat and then I finished up with the **Nimity Belle** and eventually got a share in it. Still the same type of fishing, but then we used to work from Newcastle to San Remo. In that period of time we worked from San Remo and back and then I changed from that, I sold that out and we bought another boat called the **Joan Marie** and I got crook legs and I went off fishing for about 12 months to two years and went into a garage and went broke, so I had to go back fishing - I could operate it with my legs. So we went back

to fishing again, the same type of fishing, and I worked at that type of fishing right up until I retired and sold the boat.

JD How long ago was that?

WOODS It was 4 years, 4 or 5 years last January. I worked until I was 70 on the boat. I started when I was about 26 or 27 and had a little break in between that is all.

JD You must have seen a lot of changes in fishing methods and boats and so on.

WOODS Lots of changing in fishing and seining because the other boats started to come in before I finished the board boats. There were a lot of board boats and they used to have come in... we had at that stage quite a lot of other work I was doing. I was doing the tankers here like in harbour. I was doing a bit of harbour work, a bit with CSIRO and a fair bit for the Public Works.

JD What transporting?

WOODS Yes, and they had buoys out and I used to look after them for them and take the depths and all that type of thing, but we still fished in between. But we were only fishing on one type of fish and that was whiting and we had to work all night time and that was the restrictions they put on us to give us a licence and now we are doing that was finished but there was only one more boat left I think, after our boat left, with seining and he changed over and so there's no seiners here now at all. Quite a few at Lakes, but not here.

JD Are they still fishing for whiting at all?

WOODS Yes, not here, no. But at Lakes they do. Japanese buy a lot of it.

JD That's Lakes Entrance?

WOODS Lakes Entrance yes. Well I can't remember the name, we were the first three of us to open Lakes Entrance up as a fishing port. We left Hefmoon and went down and opened it up and it wasn't long before it was pretty big.

JD How did you get on with the bar there?

WOODS Frightened of it, really frightened. We did alright with it, this boat was deep it was eight foot nine, so it was hard on it, the **Nimity Belle**, but the **Jadgalma** was only drawing about six foot six and was quite easy. I got better with it and used to it and it didn't seem to worry us any more. We would go in at a night time and it didn't worry us. But the biggest change in fishing to us was the benefit of the sounders, the echo sounders. We were relying all on our dive on marks. You would get a hazy day and you really didn't know where you were with currents that were carrying you away, so we had to rely on marks all the time and that is why we shifted around quite a bit. Fish would go off on the grounds that we knew and then you would get tied up on reefs you didn't know where it was or anything. So we all started to get echo sounders in. In those days they were up around a thousand dollars and that was a fair amount of money. Fish in those days were about a shilling a pound so you had to catch a lot, and as soon as you started to catch a lot you would start to glut the market, so it didn't work out. We averaged in the Sydney Fish market, we averaged I think for two years the highest supply there about 135 baskets in those days - that was 90 pounds. We averaged that for about two years into the market. The biggest supplier, but slowly

didn't, someone else went on. Then a lot of foreigners came in, Italians, Yugoslavs and all that type and it changed a fair bit from there, they got bigger boats.

Then next the tuna came and we did a fair bit of tuna fishing, we used to go up to the cannery with it. Then you would stop. The mulloway, well that was the next fish we started to catch in commercial lots. Then danagai, there were millions of them and they would drive you mad. You didn't want them. But now at the present day that is a change in fishing as they are worth a lot of money and there isn't any, so they were quite fished out.

JD Where did you catch the tuna?

WOODS Out here - they used to come right into the Bay, the whole Bay would fill up, right along. We started off with the poles out the side and would have 20 lines hanging over and I have seen the time we have filled 20 lines up. Of course you can imagine the hell of a mess as they would tangle one another up and it would take you half a day probably - oh, not half a day, but quite a while to clear everything.

JD They went off too didn't they?

WOODS Well that was killed by purse seine nets. See on tuna, a 60 pounder was a fish that was hard to handle. You could handle them, you would double up with poles but anything over that you used to lose a lot of fish. You never wiped the schools out or anything at all, but tuna don't spawn until he is a pretty big fish and as soon as they started to use purse seine nets they caught the spawn fish, little fish and everything. Over the last year or two there just hasn't been any type of blue fin here at all. They slowly sold their.... they restricted their sale a little bit too late and they gave each one so many tons to catch but it wasn't enough, so they sold their tonnage out to the bigger boats.

JD So there is nobody fishing for tuna today?

WOODS At the moment, this year was quite a good year on stripes, that is a different type of tuna, and here I think they got a couple of thousand ton here with the boats and they are still getting a bit of it, that is back to polling. No netting at all. So I don't think you can, you have got to have a special licence to get a purse seine net. Now they are restricting other types of fish, the hake or the gem fish. But I agree with it. It's not much good us taking it all out and there is nothing left, but they do growl if the fish is not big enough, the quotas are not big enough. But the scientists have gone into it and they can tell the age of a fish and if you are not getting enough fish at the end of the season, say four year old fish, well they just cut it out and you are getting less and less each time. I think it is pretty low this year, it's about gem fish time now and it has cut down pretty well I think.

JD Gem fish are deep water fish aren't they?

WOODS Yes he moves with the tides and currents. You get a few all the year around, only a few fish, but back in the season for a start now with the cold waters coming up and they move up the coast there are a few being caught. The boats are going well south at the moment some of them, from here going to Babel on the Tasmanian coast and they are going a bit of gem fish there now. It has changed in that way because it has changed to boards now and I would say one board boat is equivalent to four seine boats. On the seine boat you had to work all the time, there was no sleeping. One bloke just on the wheel and steering and you were shifting ropes and you were looking after two mile of rope to handle and put away. First of all you used to do it on the

deck, tow it down the deck and turn it that way. Then we put wells in just to drop down with the coil that comes off the drums around the coil and drop into the thing, but there is none of it now. Over there there is an old photo of quite a few tuna trawlers there. But it is nearly all board now.

JD Fred is there any other species that fishermen go for out of this port?

WOODS Yes. There are two types of fishing now. Salmon and mullet. Mullet in the season and of course salmon in the season, but it is not as thick as it was, but they use a different type of net to what they were using years ago. One time they would have the net on the end of the beach and they would just circle around the school, but now they are using little grass sanders for the type. So they can work in different waters, in fact they shoot a good lot of it over a reef and send the divers down if it hooks up or anything. They just send divers down and loosen it off. But they are getting a bit of mullet at the moment here and that is another travelling fish, but that only works for a couple of months of the year and it loses it's value very quickly.

JD Is that pulled off the beach?

WOODS That's off the beach yes. They are shooting off the beach the same old type of where they used to catch the salmon years ago. And then Kevies used little purse seine nets for slimey mackeral and other smaller fish. Some used for bait, for hand lining bait and that sort of thing. The cannery was using some I think in pet food, but I think that may have finished. They are still going for that Japanese - what do they call it for their tuna, it has a special name?

JD Sashimi.

WOODS Yes, there are quite a few boats working for that here now, but they are more or less not permanent boats, they shift up and down the coast, I think from Ulladulla and further up, down to here and work down. At the moment there have been quite a few boats here that have been polling for stripe tuna and has been the best year for quite a long time.

JD Is that canned?

WOODS Yes, canned here. Most of it is going into the cannery I think. Heinze has a cannery here and I think they are buying the majority of it. I don't think there would be any of it exported - that type of stuff now.

JD Do the deep sea trawlers land any orange ruffy here?

WOODS No. There has been a little orange ruffy caught, but it is only just patchy stuff. No, they are not working for it, it is still going well south. There are two or three of our boats, that is Eden, boats working down below but none coming in here.

JD And there is no crayfishing?

WOODS No, there is just a little bit of small boats that go and put a few pots over and get a few crays. They do a lot of mixed fishing, for shark or some other type of thing, but they are only small boats around about 30 footers. These and other little boats here that's all, you don't see much as they are mostly all out today. They would be

looking for something like salmon or mullet. There's quite a few of them there and they catch some type of fish just with nets, not much.

JD When you were fishing Fred, you used to be able to fish in New South Wales waters and also in Victorian waters.

WOODS Yes, Victorian and New South Wales - go anywhere. We would travel right from San Remo to Newcastle.

JD You couldn't do that nowadays?

WOODS No, no you are restricted now and that had to stop. It is all zoned and if you don't work... if you have a licence to work a zone you have got to take some fish from that zone during the year or you just don't get a licence there for the next year, or permit, or whatever the case may be. But I don't know what the zones are. I know there is a south-east and all that type of thing, but I don't know much.

JD You would have been in fishing when the sale of licences between fishermen came in?

WOODS Well, no. I just missed out. We sold the boat, but it didn't matter. We only just got the value of the boat that's all and then the chap that bought the boat from us he sold it in about 12 months but he got a fair bit out of it. But it didn't matter.

JD Has it had an effect on the fisheries do you think?

WOODS Yes. They build better boats I think. The main thing with fishing is improvement and that is the price. They are starting to talk in the \$100 box. We would be talking in our day in about four pound ten a basket - that would be a box and a half and that was big money and we were satisfied with that as it was going well. Sometimes you just couldn't sell it. They have no worries about ever glutting anything, they sell everything they catch today. Fish that we dumped in thousands of tons that can be sold and money made out of it. But of course they just chase the kind of fish that we caught either.

JDcatching them?

WOODS No, if they had that type of gear then in our time, they would have filled a net up every time. It took us a long time of fishing to really get down to the type of net that we want. A lot of experiment and all this type of thing and we were pretty efficient at the end of it. Of course everyone in those days knew how to mend a net and how to do a net and everything else. You did all your own gear. Now there is net sheds and professional fishermen working all the time just doing nets. I don't think half the deckhands would fill a needle, let alone use it.

JD There would be a lot more boats fishing nowadays would there than in your days?

WOODS Yes. Well not really I suppose, because they are bigger boats and they catch a lot more fish now. No, there wouldn't be. Of course they are scattering more over Australia, there would be more boats all over Australia catching if you are counting prawning and that. Prawnng helped us even in the old days as they took the boat when the prawns started on that coast up there and they filled a lot of these boats with prawning and a lot of them went tuna-ing which was another help out. As I mentioned earlier, the Yanks when they came they took a lot of boats out. Three times

when the fishing was glutted with boats and it was hard to sell stuff well they slowly went out. Then of course Cammes and Red Funnels they had big trawlers here in those days, big steam trawlers and they took a lot of fish. The crews were that big, and maintenance, and they died very quick.

JD They were fishing mainly for tuna were they?

WOODS No, they were fishing for all fish. They would do a 12 to 14 day trip and go right down to Babel and all that. They had a type of echo motor on them and they knew the grounds better than what we ever did. They worked off here.

JD Fred, would weather be a problem for the fishermen in this area?

WOODS Yes, but I think you can get enough time in. It's not a bad place for weather. It will blow, but it is straight from the south-west and southerly, but it's not really a bad place for weather. It has a reputation for one of the mildest climates in this portion here in Australia. But we get weather too, but that seems to have changed. South-west and easterly weather, I don't think we have seen one for years. It used to wash over the wharf here but that breakwater there has done a lot of good.

JD Is there a problem of pollution in these parts?

WOODS Not a lot. No, no, not a lot. I never see much of it. You will get a change of tides and currents. We get pretty hard tides and currents here but it wouldn't last long. If it came from further up, well it would wash away. The currents on this end of Moruya have a tendency to drift away to the sou-east so there is not that much here now. The harbour is pretty clean, nothing like it was. On those buoy chains down there the mussels used to grow like steam and you could use them, but now they have gone. All around the wharf you could mussel, but they have gone. Of course you are not allowed to, but there is always a certain amount of oil coming out of something. The only pollution that is affecting here yet.

JD Are there any oyster farms in this area?

WOODS Yes, but not a great deal. There is a bit over on the Quale River and up here in Broadwater, up there there is a lot of oysters. In Merimbula Lake. But they don't seem to have much water there with them.

JD But it is also quite a big abalone fishery in this area isn't there?

WOODS Yes, I don't know what would appear to be truthful, whether it would be 20 boats or not, I couldn't say. The next one of course is barracouta, it's big but they have a lot more ground to use than what we have.

JD They need reef country don't they?

WOODS Reef country yes, coming in on the reef and work. This has been very stable. The ones that went into it are still there. An odd one drops out, as he gets older he goes, but otherwise it has been pretty good. They are building that factory there now. They may have another reason I think. Some say they are going in for exporting fish, but whether it [is] right or wrong I don't know.

JD Is there any prawning going on?

WOODS In a small way. In the bay and down to Disaster Bay and a bit out the front, but nothing big.

JD And what about scalloping?

WOODS There was quite a lot of scalloping from that quarter here years ago, but they seem to have cleaned that out too. It will come probably again when they give it time, but over fished the whole scene, that is the way it goes.

JD Was it ever a barracouta port?

WOODS Oh, yes. When we first came here there were boats from everywhere. They used to sell them on the wharf. They would go and get their 40 or 50 boxes, or even probably more. Barracouta everywhere, you never saw anything like it. There is a bit comes in now, barracouta, but no one works like the old type of barracouta boat, no. There were boats from all over - like well down in Victoria - that came here, but I am going back 30 odd years, or it might be a bit longer than that.

JD It is strange that they suddenly disappeared.

WOODS Well we seemed to be caught out. Fish are peculiar things. One year, years ago - this is on salmon, down at the.... down there joining the wharf, fish always went in there and then went on. But they went in once and the fish went in and they netted it across and they got a lot out and eventually a flood came. They had to build a road, they were getting them for the Army and there hasn't been a fish gone in since. The same happened here at Merimbula, and the same thing happened at Narooma. They built pens there and when the fish were inside they caught them - no fish goes in there any more, so they don't really understand why. And that was salmon.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

TAPE 1 SIDE B

JD Fred, you were talking about the strange disappearance of the barracouta and you mentioned the salmon in some places. It seems to indicate that there is a lot we don't know about fish and their habits and life cycle and so on. Would you agree with that?

WOODS Yes, I agree right along with that. I mean they don't really carry their habits through as you would expect I suppose. They can change them and change them rather quick. Certain places that you fish heavy and catch fish, well you can fish it out or frighten it out and it may be only a matter of 8 or 10 miles, or less than that, that you can still get fish. Then after a period of time that something has had a bit of a spell you go back. I don't really know what goes on underneath me, it is beyond me to understand them.

JD There seems to be a need for a lot more research.

WOODS Oh, miles and miles of it. We did quite a bit with the CSIRO. We tagged a lot of fish and I might tell you something a little funny. We would bring the fish aboard, put them in a tank or something, tag them and put them overboard, but it didn't take the seals long to work out and they followed us around and when any of them went over they would catch them, but quite a lot of fish was caught later on after it, but we were walking out over the shell.... and the seals came along and got the best of it, so

we said we will steam inside and try. We had a shot but the seals were there with the steal, they just followed us in and we had to give it away for the night. We tagged a lot of fish in those times and they caught them. Man moved 50 or 60 mile - that was Mowall, a bit of flathead, maybe even further.

JD Was that the difficulty in this sort of research?

WOODS Yes, I worked for them for many years, got a shilling and had to save for a house on that.

JD You were also very much involved in fishermen's organizations weren't you?

WOODS Yes I was with the Co-op for many years, about 27 or 28 years. I was Chairman for a long time and I was on the Board there and about three of us started the south-east zone. A chap by the name of Gibson, Cliff Gibson, and I can't think of the other bloke's name - my memory is not as good as it was, we started and travelled around. They had New South Wales zoned off in different places.

JD What's that, the Co-op we are talking about?

WOODS Yes, that was the Co-op, then the zone was at a different time. We had our own Co-op and there was the south-east zone and that went as far as Wandara and the other one went to Wedong. It probably did some good and some bad. We would meet in Sydney a bit and talk the matter over. Then that was before the new markets started and eventually they finished the new markets in Sydney. The old market was there right in the city and then they shifted it to Black Wattle Bay. We were the first to travel from here with a load of fish, we caught it here and that was in the seine boat. We travelled here and went to Sydney and unloaded that at the fish markets in Sydney.

JD Transported it yourself?

WOODS Yes, we took it up ourselves, yes. We were going to Sydney for the trip - we got a write up about it too when we went to Sydney.

JD What did you use - a motor truck?

WOODS No, we took them up on the boat. Otherwise it was all motor trucks here. You used to load and go through. All different boats would put their fish in. They would be separated. First of all they used to go to a market - they went to agents. There were agents and eventually the Government took the market over and built the new market. We did put a good lot of money in towards that market - the fishermen themselves, because we were paying so much a kilo or so much a pound in those days towards it, but I don't know what happened to it.

JD The fish were auctioned up in the Bay?

WOODS Yes, I haven't been there since the new markets, but it [was] what they call the Dutch market now and I don't really understand it. I don't know how they do it really. I was going to Sydney next June or July to have a look at it. I would like to see it, they tell me it is beautiful.

JD Fred, the Co-op here was quite a big one but it was finally closed down?

WOODS Yes, it was bought by Heinz. We borrowed money there but things didn't go well. Fish got cheap, scarcer and all that. They built a lot of things, wasted money. Built a big cafe on top and all that type of thing and a new ice works had to come up. Then they started to pack a lot of fish here too. It looked good, but it just didn't work out. We had a lot of staff employed, so Heinz took us over.

JD You were involved in other fishermen's organizations too weren't you?

WOODS That was in the Club. Yes, we started the Club off - twenty-five of us.

JD It's a big Club.

WOODS It owns the golf course out there too, and the bowling club and everything there. We started off with twenty-five. I can tell you a story and it is quite good. We started the Co-op off and it was going well, so to start the Club off we just about had the same amount of directors. So when the Club started we kind of lent them some money - you couldn't do it today. The Club went like steam, the Co-op went back, so we paid the Co-op's money back with about 15% interest on it. So it worked out that way. The Club went like steam. Out of the seven there had to be five directors out of the fishing industry. They slowly changed it and it is not really going very well at all now.

JD You were given an award for your contribution to the fishing industry weren't you?

WOODS That was right, yes. A Centenary Medal, yes. There were a few in New South Wales, about seven or eight I think. Presented by the Prime Minister, which was alright. We had a nice party for the night and everything else. The women were invited. You paid your way up and they took a hotel, a pub, over - a motel in Sydney and put us all there. Right in King's Cross too it was, over the top looking down there. King's Cross has got a reputation of course in Sydney. No one went to bed I think of a night, looking through the window to see the performance. It was very good.

JD You have been in the industry for a long time Fred and have seen a lot of changes. What do you think the future holds for fishing?

WOODS It seems to change. It is not as free and easy as it was. There is not the friendship in it like it was in our days. It is hard to get the fishermen together and it is going out of a working type of man's work and going into bigger companies and is more or less controlled that way; and anyone today who has done well in it - the boats and that - everything is worth so much money, like the equipment is worth that much money. There is a long way more protection I should imagine, harder on the crews and harder on everything else. But then they are not getting the crew I don't think, as was as good as what they had in the old days, because the initiative is not there to gain very much out of it as it is only a working job. That's my opinion of it. But it will go on, it will carry on and on; and by time they must restrict, and they have got to restrict fishing and protect the fish. They have just got to protect them that is all on a line if they want to use it and I suppose it will slowly get down. But with the techniques they have and everything else and getting wider out fishing in deeper water, well it will carry on.

See we only used 25 miles here. It's not much ground is it? It is better as you get further down, it gets wider a lot off Lakes Entrance which is probably 50 mile and it seems to have held the fish better - Lakes, than what we have here. But of course they worked harder weather, bigger boats working all weather and that is why they really had to put restrictions on the gem fish because the smaller boat couldn't work

where the other boats were. They would get their quota and they wouldn't get a chance, we had rough weather. But it will carry on, fishing will carry on, it has to.

JD Still not a bad way to earn your living at?

WOODS Lovely. Oh yes. You know we used to meet back in those days friends, folks and women and everything. It was a good life - I have enjoyed it.

JD Well thanks very much for this talk Fred.

WOODS Ok, nice to have met you.

JD End of interview with Mr Fred Woods, retired fisherman of New South Wales.

The verses that follow were written by fellow Eden fisherman, Kevin Warren, and reflect the esteem in which Fred, as he is known, is held.

THE ADMIRAL OF THE FLEET by Kevin Warren.

The trawler men have just come up
With an idea hard to beat,
And each and everyone agreed -
An Admiral for our fleet.

A man selected for the job,
You will pick him at first sighting,
Don't mention names right here and now,
Let's call him Captain Whiting.

Didn't have to be rich to qualify,
Or own a tuna clipper,
Probably never seen a board trawl shot,
Nor ever been top skipper.

And they say it is clothes that make a man,
Well it doesn't mean a thing -
A cod end rope around his pants,
His shoes tied up with string.

And sometimes in an argument
A bit hard to understand,
A language known in Ulladulla
When he is talking with his hands.

He's helped an awful lot of folk
With ideas mostly sound,
Some say he's an eternal fishman -
He will always be around.

If trucks were miled up on the road
From here to Bateman's Bay,
They could not cart the feeds of fish
This bloke has given away.

And deckies who worked under him
Would agree with what I say,
The fishing knowledge he's passed on
Made top skippers here today.

And I ask you now to charge your glass
And rise upon your feet,
And declare that Mr Freddie Woods
Is truly the Admiral of our Fleet.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

END OF INTERVIEW

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