INTERVIEW WITH LIZ DEBNEY
Recorded 4 June 2000
Updated 16/12/09.
TC is from tape 10_BC_DV
Topics in Bold

I = Interviewer R = Respondent

TAPE 1 – SIDE A
TC from 10_BC_DV

I **This is DAT Tape No. 5. It's 4 June 2000. Trish FitzSimons sound recording. Erica Addis on camera. Channels of History project and we're with Liz Debney out on the property that she and her husband manage at Glen Ormiston.**

R Oh well, it used to be. Because the men are working, so therefore I'm getting paid more to cook for them today. I gave them bacon and eggs. It's all very political. Don't get me started.

I

R I'll look above you, at a spot on the ceiling.

I So Liz, fill me in. Where and when were you born? And what was your name when you were born?

R 00:01:19:18 I was born in Brisbane in February 1954 several days after, I think, the Queen's visit, which was one of the reasons, I imagine, I was named Elizabeth.

I And Elizabeth who?

R Lawler.

I And how did you land up … I mean, I know this is not your first property in the Channel Country, but how long an association with the Channel Country would you have now?

R **Romance**

00:01:48:03 Ummm, I first came out to this part of the world when I was 18. We had … I grew up in Brisbane and we had friends who were managing a property out here and I came out to be housemaid on Coorabulka which is south of Boulia, and that was where I met Mal. That was in 1972 and we were married in '74. We spent the next three years in the Central Highlands. From there we came back to the Channel Country to Monkira. He was head stockman there. We then left this company briefly and went to Cordillo Downs which is in the north-eastern corner of South Australia. From Cordillo Downs we went up into the Gulf Country working for another, a different company. We were there for ten months. Then we rejoined the North Australian Pastoral Company and went out to Alexandria in the Northern Territory for six years and from there we came here and we've been here for thirteen-and-a-half years. 00:02:55:09

I So it's a lot of Australia you've …

R Yes, yes. I've lived in, what, three different states if you count the Northern Territory as a state but always in, apart from the Central Highlands, always in the more remote areas.

I So you said you came out to work on Coorabulka as a housemaid.

R Yep.

I Were you seeing that as a brief sojourn from your life in Brisbane …

R Yes.

I … or were you looking for a future?

R 00:02:23:21 No. At the time, when I left school … I did Year 12 back in the days when there were university fees, which is why I find it so amusing now when uni students get so upset about fees, because in our generation you either had rich parents or you didn't go to university, or you got a scholarship. So I didn't, and I wanted to do agricultural science at uni, and to that end I did a science and maths for Year 12 and I matriculated, but only

just, and I certainly didn't get a scholarship to go to university, so I spent the next 18 months just working in various jobs. The first 12 months after I left school I was studying at QIT, as it was then, doing a Diploma in Medical Laboratory Technology and working … I worked at UQ in labs there. Then I realised that wasn't what I wanted to do at all and had a couple of office jobs in Brisbane which I hated. Then I had the opportunity to go out to Coorabulka, and that was mid-year, and I decided I'd do that and at the end of that year I'd apply to Teacher's College which my mother was very happy about because she just thought that was the ultimate career for a girl was to become a teacher. But I didn't ever go back to Brisbane.

I And the dream of agricultural science, what do you think that dream was about?

R That was just about living in the bush. Yeah. I just wanted to … I'd always wanted to live in the country and not live in the city.

I And was that, in Brisbane you'd lived right in the suburbs?

R No, we lived in Kenmore, so two-and-a-half acres, dirt road, at the time.

I

R Yeah, I didn't have them but other people did and, yeah.

I And what was it about the country life that pulled you?

R I really don't know. I don't know.

I Had you been out onto properties?

R 00:05:48:15 Yeah, we had friends who owned properties out near Meandarra(?) and we'd been out there. I'd been out there a couple of times and just loved it. I just loved the open air, the being outside, the … mmm, so I really don't know what it was that … and I think going out to Kurabulka, it was just, it was an adventure. It was … mmmm.

I So was Coorabulka a company property?

R Yes, it's owned by North Australian Pastoral Company.

I So, what, you went to their office in Brisbane and put in an application?

R 00:06:30:00 No. No, no, no. I knew, the people that were managing Kurabulka had lived down at the end of our street until I think 12 months before. Their daughter and I were at high school together and their son and my brother. The daughter and I weren't very good friends but their son and my brother were extremely good friends and so that was how I knew the family and he was at boarding school, the son, and used to come home for weekends to our place and one time he came, he was at our place on his way back to school and I must have been complaining about how much I hated my job and he said 'Oh, why don't you go and work for Mum. She's been crook and she's looking for someone to give her a hand'. So I did.

I Would applying for a job as a jillaroo ever have occurred to you?

R Not in those days, no. I just didn't have the background or the …

I So when you came out to Kurabulka, tell me your first impressions of both the land and the company structuring and how things went there.

R **Women/Land**

00:07:38:03 First impressions of the land were … Kurabulka doesn't have many trees, particularly around the house, and that was the first impressions was this incredible openness and I'd been told by someone in Boulia about this and I couldn't conceive of a place where there weren't any trees. First impressions of the homestead area was the noise of the generator which was totally unexpected. I hated it then and nearly 30 years later I still hate the noise of a generator, so …

I And of the company structure? Like, how did a housemaid …?

R Well, a housemaid was obviously at the bottom of the thing.

I The pecking order.

R But I was, although I was employed as the housemaid, I was companion/help to the manager's wife. I was treated like one of the family so I certainly wasn't, you know, left in a cold little room all on my own and all that sort of thing, so …

I I know that going back historically, say, at Mt Leonard. I don't know which company owned it, but this idea of lady's help/companion help to the manager's wife has got a long history to it. Do you think that's true in NAPCO?

R **Work/Pastoral Companies**

00:09:02:18 Ummm, oh probably going back, way back then, but I would say that my ummm, the time that I did it, it was the last of, we were, there were other girls on other stations, often the daughters of the managers, who were housemaids, and we were the last of them. It just seemed to die out after that. You still get some people, even today, busy mums who are teaching their own kids, who will employ a girl to help with the housework but that concept that you're talking about went, I would say, was gone by the mid-seventies.

I So what would have been your daily routine in that first job as lady's companion?

R 00:09:49:04 Ummm. Doing the housework, which is just … and I couldn't do housework before I went there and it's just as well I learnt because I hate it and I've managed to avoid it ever since but, yeah, just doing the washing and the ironing and the cleaning the house, and a little bit of cooking and …

I Just for the manager and his family?

R Yeah.

I So not for the jackeroos or …?

R 00:10:18:20 No, no. A little bit of cooking. I started to learn to cook there because I couldn't cook either, so a little bit of gardening.

I And it was a life that appealed to you?

R Yes. Yes, it did. Mmmm.

I So how, then, tell me about meeting Mal and how you made the next step which was the Channel Country.

R 00:10:47:20 Well he was working at Kurabulka. He was a jackeroo there, so that was how we met and we both left there at the end of that year so I was only there for the six months and he got a job in the Central Highlands on another NAPCO property and I got a job nearby as a governess, and then we were married the beginning of the following year.

I So we're talking now kind of, what, '72?

R '74.

I '74.

R 00:11:22:10 Yeah, '73 I worked as a governess and he was on another NAPCO place which the company doesn't own now, and then the following year we got married.

I And so it's a long time that you two have been with NAPCO…

R Yeah.

I … I mean I understand that you moved away from them. Did you plan a life together with NAPCO?

R **Pastoral Companies/Retirement**

00:11:44:08 Ummm, not necessarily with NAPCO, no. We certainly planned a life together but not necessarily, and on stations, we'd always … could never conceive that we would do anything different and it's only now that we are not only conceiving it, we're actively planning to do something different, but back then, when we were first married and I was 19 and he was 20, so we were extremely young, that was as far as we could see stretching ahead of us, our life would be on stations.

I And that progression from jackeroo through to stockman, to head stockman, to manager, was that a standard pathway? Is that where managers mostly came from?

R 00:12:33:14 Yes, definitely. It still is but it's very difficult to get people that are committed enough to stay nowadays. Yep.

I And is there an equivalent hierarchy for women?

R Ahhh. Ummm. You mean if they work in the … if they do the stock work?

I Well, I guess I'm interested in both ways. Whether you saw women coming through that NAPCO kind of hierarchy and whether … I mean, I don't know for instance, whether as the manager's wife you're paid per se for that role, or whether it's just when you take on, say, cooking for the men.

R **Pastoral Companies/Work** 00:13:25:15 Yep. Well you've got it in a nutshell there. No, I'm not paid as the manager's wife. That role is not recognised. I'm paid to do the cooking, although my case is a little bit different because I have a part-time role within the company as the Training Coordinator for the company so that that … it's very new, very different, something that's never really been done before but, traditionally, managers' wives were definitely in the background. They moved with their husbands, obviously, when their husbands, and they went through the progression with them from … see a lot of … it depends where they, what their husbands do and when they get married. In our case, the fact that I married a stockman, that's very unusual. People usually marry a head stockman or a manager. For us to have done the whole thing together is not terribly usual, I don't think. And for girls, for career paths for girls these days, you hear of the odd female head stockman. They're becoming more and more common. Hopefully, in time there'll be female managers.

I So to your knowledge, there isn't so far a female manager with NAPCO?

R No, definitely not with this company. No. Or with any of the other large companies that I'm familiar with.

I It's jumping ahead a bit but I'm interested in this role of Training Coordinator. What do you do?

R 00:15:06:09 Well, the old jackeroo and jillaroo system has changed recently with the advent of the National Training Packages. You're not familiar with them. Oh, several years ago the Federal government developed, or instigated the development of training packages for different industries.

I This is not the training guarantee levy where you have to spend 1%?

R No. No, that's been and gone.

I Yes.

R 00:15:43:06 Beforehand, there was never any formal way that you could get qualifications, say, within the beef industry but there is now a National Training Package for agriculture and a stream of that for beef cattle production and young people can sign up as trainees, and it's exactly the same as being a trainee in any other industry. It's done through a registered training organisation and they come out at the end, if they follow the process through, with a Level 2 qualification and then a Level 3 qualification, and then you can go on and do Level 4, 5, 6 and so on.

I So it's almost like an apprenticeship?

R Yes.

I An apprenticeship for the pastoral industry …

R Yes.

I … that had never had that formalised.

R No, that's right.

I So what's your role?

R 00:16:36:23 Within this company, anyone who's employed now as a jackeroo or a jillaroo is given the option of becoming a trainee. If they do, we have an association with a training organisation in Charters Towers called Rural Industry Training & Extension and my role is the liaison person between the company and that organisation. So if they want to have anything to do with the company, they come through me and vice versa, most of the time. It doesn't always work. These structures don't always work. I organise the training. These trainees have on-the-job training and they also have some off-the-job training and I organise that, plus other training that's needed within the company, such as recently we had Occupational Health & Safety, so that's not just for the trainees, that's everyone on the stations, and I coordinate the organisation of that.

I So that kind of formal professional role would, I think from what you're telling me, have been pretty unusual for a woman in the pastoral industry in general and in structure in particular.

R It is, yes.

I When you were starting out, when you and Mal were starting a family and so on, did you have a desire for a career in that sense?

R No.

I Like, what were your dreams for your future?

R **Education/History**

00:18:11:16 Ummm. I don't think I ever thought any thought ahead of just being a wife and a mum. I'd always had in the back of my mind that I'd like to do further study one day and when I finally did, when I started my Arts Degree, that was because of an interest in history and that was why I was doing it but that's become … it's still an interest but I've now realised that there are a lot of other options open to me.

I I'd like to come back to that, actually, the passion for history. So fill me in a little bit on your life, you and Mal, with coming to Glen Ormiston. You

know, your children and that sort of thing. Just as much as you feel like filling in.

R **Work/Women/Land**

00:19:12:04 Yep. Okay, well we came here when … when we came here we had two children, Megan and Matthew. We actually have three children. Anna, who died when she was three in 1979, Matt was born the following year, so he was six months old when we went to Alexandria, and the kids were eight and six when we came here. And I think, then, I sort of say to people now 10 years ago I could not have conceived of ever not wanting to live here, whereas now the thought of still being here in 10 years fills me with horror. But I think that's a lot to do with the middle age, what do you call it, mid-life crisis, and all that sort of thing as well. So the first six years that we were here was just … you just sort of live from day to day because when I had two kids, I was teaching distance ed, plus cooking, and you know, your whole life is just so busy that the days just roll into each other. And then Megan went away to boarding school, but that didn't really change the pattern all that much, and then when Matt was … four weeks before Matt was to go to school he was killed in an accident and, yeah, that's where the changes …

Accidents

I

R 00:20:44:00 Mmmm, mmmm. And at the time, because a lot of people … I know one reaction to grief is to totally change your life and I have a very close friend who lost her 15-year-old daughter two years ago in an awful accident, and that's what she tended to do was change everything, whereas I was the opposite. When Matt died, everything had to stay the same. It wasn't allowed to change. Everything just had to stay the same and it took a few years for us to realise that it's okay, we're allowed to leave now. But we're still here, but …

I Everybody picks their own way through that grief.

R Mmmm, definitely, yep.

I I had a brother that died five weeks before I was born and, although it wasn't my grief then, I could see, yeah, it's a long, long process.

R Oh, it's a lifetime.

I Reading, say, that Flying Nun book Liz, I was so struck, and it's probably partly the women that were selected and Ann Marie's work, but there are a lot of accidents out here.

R 00:21:49:24 Yeah, yeah. And when you read that book you'd think that it happens to just about everybody but there are, and I don't know whether it's to do with the lifestyle or what it is, but I've been to a lot of funerals and none of them, very few of them have been old people.

I And it seems like it tends to be things mechanical. I mean, it's cars and …

R Mmmm. Helicopters.

I Is that something that women out here talk about a lot? Or do people cope with those tragedies by not talking about them?

R 00:22:34:16 Oh, it depends on the person. Yeah, it … well, with our, because we've been through it twice, and three times if you count our young friend, the first time when our daughter died, we were very young and we didn't have a network of friends and we just coped on our own. It was as simple as that. We just dealt with it the best we could but when Matt died we'd been here for six years. We had an extremely close-knit community of friends and it was a community tragedy. It wasn't just ours. It happened to everybody. And then five years later when our young friend Kate was killed, it was the same thing. It was … and it happened to the same group of people.

I And does that sense of community around tragedy help?

R 00:23:38:02 Oh, definitely. Mmmm. Yeah, it's, I think, well one of the most difficult things when you're dealing with grief is … or one of the

biggest needs that you have is having other people who will discuss the person who's died as though they were a normal alive person …

I Not with everything kind of

R Yeah, yeah, and will just keep bringing them up in conversation and that's what we find that people do. They're just … if it's appropriate, they'll be brought up in conversation.

I So driving out here Liz, it took us two hours from Boulia. I probably remember seeing about four mail boxes. Maybe I wasn't looking.

R No, you should have only seen two, three, three, sorry.

I Okay. Three. In my experience of community in the city, the people that I would define as community, all live probably within five kilometres of me, max. How does community function for you here? What does community mean and how do you intersect with other people out here?

R **Education/Social Life**

00:24:59:07 Ummm, it's just the same sort of concept but with bigger distances between them, between people, and people will travel several hours to get together with other people. Back in the late eighties when we were here with two young children, or two primary school-age kids, there were a lot of primary school-age children in this district and a group of us got together and started what we called the Georgina Activity Group and we also formed an ICPA branch – Isolated Children's Parents Association branch at the same time, or just soon after – and we started having regular activity days once a month during this part of the year when everyone can travel, and people would travel up to three hours to go to them and I think that was what developed this sense of community.

I And that was a form of playgroup?

R Yes.

I You'd be painting and

R 00:26:09:11 Yeah, whatever. Just play a bit of sport. Just, yeah, we always would try to do some sort of formal activity with the kids, and that group is still operating. The numbers are greatly reduced because a lot of … well all the original children have grown up and are either still at boarding school or have even left school. There's one family that were in this district, or two families actually, that were part of it and have moved away but still one particular family will travel five hours to still be part of it.

I And would you, then, be emailing and ringing other women regularly for a chat, a chat with friends?

R 00:27:02:20 Oh, I don't have time to do much chatting, unfortunately. I wish I did. I have a couple of friends that I talk to regularly on the telephone for more than five or ten minutes. Otherwise, and I use email a lot to keep in touch with, not so much local people but friends who are further away and overseas even.

I Somewhere, I forget what it was I was reading, somebody was comparing the old days with the galah sessions on the party line and was suggesting that women were now more isolated in rural areas than they had been. Do you believe that?

R I think that's absolute and utter bullshit.

I Good. Let's get that straight.

R 00:27:52:14 Ummm. Yes, Ian McNamara used to push that line a lot, back when we were first getting telephones. I wrote him a letter. I decided he was a wanker after that. Better edit that bit. He's an icon of Australia …

I He's not an icon.

R **Communications**

00:28:18:00 … and this terrible woman's called him a wanker. Yeah, I don't agree with that. I actually gave a talk at a CWA thing in Charleville the other day and I brought that same thing up, and my belief is that people communicate, not the means of communication, and if people aren't

communicating any more because the party line's not there or they don't have an HF radio, well that's their problem not … I don't think you can blame the changing technology. Ummm, it's just made communication so much better for me. When we first came here we had HF radio, no telephone at all. Our only way of making a phone call was through the Flying Doctor base and it was a radio-telephone type setup and you could have three minutes a call, and sometimes you would have to queue for an hour for your three minutes call. A three-minute call to a homesick 13-year-old at boarding school is not adequate so it was one of the best days of my life in the bush the day we got a telephone.

I And was that about Telstra stringing out poles and bringing in the wires?

R No.

I Or is that about you forking out big bucks or …? What shifted?

R 00:29:40:09 Ummm, well we didn't, because we're on a company-owned place it didn't cost us anything so we were immune from the cost, apart from the cost of our phone calls. And our phone here is all radio telephone so there was no sort of poles and wires. It's all towers and dishes.

I So it was when NAPCO gave the money …

R 00:30:10:03 Oh, I'm with you. No, Telstra. It was Telstra, sorry. I misunderstood the question. It was Telstra. They had a program of bringing telephones. It started when we were at Alex. The phone was already on there before we left in '86 and we finally got the phone here in '91 and I think some of the parts of the Channel Country down lower were the last to go on, and they would have gone on in '92. So it was a Telstra program.

I But electricity you still don't have state-provided?

R No.

I So how does, we're sitting in a room with electric light. Where does that come from?

R 00:30:53:18 From the generator. Diesel-powered generator, which operates 24 hours a day in summer because of air-conditioning and fridges and things, and in winter it goes off at night for about eight hours.

I So I know I had the stuff from Julie Groves down in Houghtonvale, Women for Power, and it sounds like of those owner-run properties, people are only affording power for about four hours a day. Is that one of the advantages of being with a company?

R Oh, definitely. Yes. Yes, it's an issue that I know nothing about. I mean I'm aware of it but it's nothing … I've never experienced it. I've never lived anywhere where power was restricted and I wouldn't like to live anywhere where power was restricted.

I And with that community that you were describing, which sounds fundamentally like it was a community of women and kids often …

R Oh, no, the dads were there too.

I Okay.

R 00:31:59:18 Yeah, definitely. Yes, the … every activity day, the mum and the kids would go and probably 50% of the dads, and that would change. And it would just depend on their workload but the dads always tried to go. Yep.

I And would there be kind of obvious class distinctions or distinctions, I mean are people very aware of the difference between the jackeroo's wife, the manager of the company, plus the owner-managed property, the Aboriginal people in town, are there kind of …?

R 00:32:38:16 Not in this part of the world, no. I've experienced that in other parts but I find in this little corner of the outback that there aren't enough people to start discriminating in those terms, so I've always found that people were very … everybody's equal, everybody's welcome.

I And how about that thing of how men and women divide their roles? One of the things that struck me, we interviewed Bid Campbell who's Nina's aunt, and an 80-year-old in Mt Isa, and she described her mother, you know, in the early days of …

R Oh, yes.

I … about 100 years ago, basically sounding like she did almost everything that her husband did and more on the land, and doing the kind of stuff with the kids. Bid was saying her mother said to her 'Don't learn how to cut down a beast' and 'Don't learn …', I've forgotten the other job.

I How to chop up wood.

R Yeah, don't …

I How to chop up wood. So that Bid then lived a life with more separate gender roles. In your experience of how men and women work together out in these properties, what are the roles and has there been obvious shifts that you've observed in that?

R **Gender Relations/Pastoral Companies**

00:34:02:10 In my experience, always being on a company-owned property, my role was always very much domestic and back in the days when I was a young wife, that was the expected role. There were very few women that had outside roles, but this is on company, larger company-owned properties. I'm not familiar with smaller privately-owned places. That is changing and I believe that it's something that these pastoral companies are going to have to deal with in the future because they're going to find that the women who are coming through as the new managers' wives will often be young women who started off as a jillaroo in the stock camp. And I think they're going to find that there's going to be less acceptance of the domestic role and that these girls and young women are going to want a little bit more of a role in the actual running of the property.

I Now you're probably partly thinking of your daughter there, are you?

R 00:35:22:07 Yes. Yeah, she'd probably … it's quite possible that that's … at the moment she's at university doing, studying … she's doing a Bachelor of Applied Science in Animal Production which is basically studying beef cattle, genetics and breeding, and she fully intends to have a future on the land. She can certainly cook, she's got as many housekeeping skills as I have and she asked me once when I was revving her about something to do with her housework, she said 'Well, how on earth was I supposed to learn these skills?' so it's interesting. The women that were my role models when I first came out here, collectively when I look back, they were obsessed with the state of their houses. Everything had to be spotlessly clean all the time and that was their accepted role and I probably absorbed all that and decided that that wasn't quite how I wanted to be, and even though the role that I've always had, particularly once we were managing a place, was the cooking and the domestic side, it was never enough for me, which is why I've done other things like studying and whatever. But, yeah, and I think that I was part of that, the first of the shift away from just placidly accepting that this is our role and … 00:37:26:09

I And in saying it wasn't enough, I want to go on and talk about your study, but do you in some way see yourself as the manager of this property as well?

R Yes.

I Will you discuss with Mal how people are going to be deployed or whatever?

R **Gender Relations/Pastoral Companies**

00:37:32:16 Oh, not so much how the men are going to be deployed but we consider that we manage this place together and that a lot of … we make a lot of decisions that I suppose technically are his decisions but we make them together and then he goes and implements it. And that is not the way the role is seen within, if I just talk about pastoral companies in general, they tend not to accept that, whereas most of the couples I know who are managing, that's the way they see themselves and there's a big, it's like they're at one end, the company's perception is at one end and the reality as perceived by the

managers is at the other and I'm hoping that one day they'll meet in the middle.

I So would that mean that if management came out to Brisbane to discuss strategy or whatever, you'd be expected to make scones whilst …

R You got it in one.

I And is there any … does that actually happen, do they come and …?

R Oh, yeah.

I And what happens when they come? What do you do?

R 00:38:52:08 Oh, it depends on who it is and what they're discussing but, yes, I'm not really supposed to be … I'm supposed to be seen and not heard.
00:39:02:18

I We must be about a minute from the end of the tape? Three.