

INTERVIEW WITH ISABEL TARRAGO & SHIRLEY FINN

3 September 2000

Timecode refers to tape 68_BC_SP

Topics in Bold

TF = Trish

IT = Isabel

SF = Shirley

TF So this is Betacam tape 68, it's still DAT tape 24 and we're on 1 hour 11 minutes and 7 seconds. This is the third Betacam of an interview with Isabel Tarrago, nee Hanson, and Shirley Finn, nee Hanson, and we're at Isabel's house. 68_BC_SP

So how was it, given that your parents didn't get any cash except what went to the policeman, how was it that you two went to private schools? Because that would have cost dough.

IT 20:01:13:10 Well, I often said this to Shirley too. It's a mystery. I really don't know the answer, Trish, but I tell you what, there's more to it. My brother and my sister went to Brisbane Grammar School and that's the most elitist school you could possibly go to and I think, from when we were talking, that my sister was the first Aboriginal girl ever to go to Grammar School, and my brother. So all of us went to boarding schools. So somehow, with ... I don't know. I can't answer it. Our parents never told us. They wanted us to have the best education that they could possibly give us. They said, and it was very clear, we had to live in the white man's world now and you had to use the tools that they use. And, you know, our father was a very ummm very astute man, and our mother, very hard-working, and they did have, you know, they had a lot of friends in the pastoral industry, a lot of friends. So I don't know. I mean, we were there, we were all educated, we were very well educated. We've all had jobs. Never unemployed.

TF Do you think it might have been that the fees were paid ... because the station owners couldn't have paid your parents without upsetting other station owners, could they? Do you think it might have been the station owners paying your fees? What do you think? Where do you think the dough came from Shirley?

IT 20:02:56:18 Collins and White? I don't know.

SF I really don't know. I think it's just a mystery, you know. It's hard to say.

IT One would hope that it is remuneration for the hard work that our family did.

SF That they did on the stations.

IT And I think, if that's the case, then we're pretty happy with that, you know, because four kids got highly educated out of a process where education was not the flavour of the month, you know, because we weren't really into all that but ...

TF And why were you two educated in Charters Towers, whereas your elder brother and sister came to Brisbane, do you think?

SF 20:03:42:06 I first went to ... first of all, before we were sent away to school, we were taught correspondence and then, because Mum couldn't read or write but managed to keep us sitting at the table and did a bit of correspondence at the beginning, and I think it just got sort of hard for her and ummm with the help of the managers and ummm I think just sending us away was a lot easier. But, of course, then I went at six years old but Isabel didn't go until she was ...

IT Five.

SF ... oh, yeah. Probably seven, I think, Isabel started.

TF But why Charters Towers?

IT **Topsy Hansen**

20:04:31:20 Oh, because it was closer, because Brisbane was really a bit hard. Because Mum used to like bringing us back and I think she didn't like ... well, the train, you know, the station manager used to drive us into Dajarra and we'd get the train together. I think she enjoyed that, the train ride, because she actually was able to take us back to the school and settle us in and then do her other thing, because she was a great gardener, and she

enjoyed ... because the train, I know sometimes when she'd go home she'd have all these plants, all the cuttings and everything, people used to give her. But I think because our brother and sister went away to Charters Towers, it was a bit hard for her. Ummm Brisbane.

TF You said when I interviewed you before that you thought it was because Granny Brown was in Charters Towers.

IT Yes, she was.

TF That's probably what I'm fishing for.

IT Yeah, yeah. Granny was. Yes.

SF She lived in Charters Towers, old Grandma Brown. But also the climate ...

IT Yeah.

SF 20:05:34:04 ... too, probably, and a lot of ummm, a lot of kids from Boulia and the stations went to Charters Towers as well, because you've got ummm old Mr Katter's sons. They both went to Mt Carmel College and I think, you know, they were from Cloncurry. I think it was just a close-knit where others were going.

IT Yeah. And, yeah, I think Granny Brown had a big influence because we used to go there for weekends and ...

SF Yeah, and she'd come down to see her and, yeah, and you know take us out for the weekend.

IT Aunty Yeah, and Uncle Doug, that's the other eldest daughter.

TF I went to boarding school at eleven and I bawled my eyes out for three months but I can't imagine doing it at five. Did you feel cut off from your parents and the land, or did you accept it?

IT 20:06:38:08 Well because Shirley was there, I was all right. I had an elder sister at the school so I felt comfortable but I think when she left it got, you know, it got a bit hard for me too, because it's ummm you're on your own

and then you just don't get home or go anywhere, and I think one stage there I got so ummm anxious that I think Shirley and Mum had to come to Charters Towers and live for six months, which I remember.

SF Yes.

IT Because I just fretted so badly.

TF You said that your Mum didn't read and write English but spoke five Aboriginal languages and was highly educated in traditional ways, do you think there's a way that you got a white education at the expense of an Aboriginal one, or do you feel like you managed both bits? Do you know what I'm saying?

IT 20:07:37:08 Yeah, I know what you're saying. Ummm they were very strong traditional teachers. We, I mean, this façade that you've got in front of you now, it's very traditional. My mother spoke, and we learned a lot. Ummm we can't practise it here but still today our aunties and that come from Boorooloola. At they came down and they just ceremony and that in the house and we can, we can move into cultures very comfortably. Because we don't speak the language all the time, but if you're sitting around long enough, it comes back. Not as fluent. It'll come back because we learnt it as small kids, small, and you don't forget that. But, yes, I regret that I can't sit down and speak a fluent language and ummm that's a compromise, I think Trish, we had to do because that's what my father was talking about. We have to live in the white man's world now and he always said you've got to be twice as better than them. And we've always been like that, you know, you have to strive but that didn't sacrifice our traditional values because I think Avalina is very, very instilled and Shirley's young girl, Jackie. I mean there's a choice there as well because there's so much that you have to hang on to and it is very difficult because you've got to step in two worlds.

TF Clearly your parents were both skilled at stepping across those two worlds.

IT Mmmm.

- SF Yes, that's right.
- TF One argument could say you two are doing it just with a different balance and I'm interested in that.
- IT 20:09:36:20 And I do regret, but I do think that Shirley and I are heading back home. I mean, we're just down here, and I always say I'm down here on someone else's ground. I don't feel comfortable, Trish. I need to go home where my spirit and my soul and my beliefs are stronger. And I think that's coming because ... it's taken us a long time but you don't have a choice in your process, I think, if you really want to get somewhere today. You have to really educate your kids and yeah, but I think that I can learn the language like my Mum and Dad. You know, I can get back there because my family is still speaking it. We haven't lost it. It's still, ceremonies are going in the ... you know, women's and men's ceremonies are going, it's just that we haven't attended. But they don't forget us. Ummm but you still can gain it. It's when it's lost, completely demolished, that you can't go back to anything, but I guess that's what keeps us going because we're very strong black women.
- TF I'd like to hear now, from each of you separately, the story of your family leaving Glen Ormiston. What you remember, what stage you were at in your life, what you remember hearing. And we talked a bit about it before but I think it's important. So Isabel, you first. How did your family come to leave Glen Ormiston?
- IT **Race Relations/Women**
- 20:11:10:04 Well I believe that ummm when Martin Hayward, the manager, brought in a woman by the name of Mary Robbins to take over the role of my mother, my mother politely said to Martin, who had been with my Mum for a long time, ummm 'That's it'. She saw the writing on the wall.
- SF Yes, that was virtually it. Ummm you, Mary Robbins came ummm, 'Topsy you take a holiday now, I'll do the cooking' and Mum turned around and

said, 'I'll be taking an extended holiday' and we packed the truck up and away we went. They never looked back.

TF Did you know at the time? I've got goose bumps. Did you know at the time that this was a really significant event?

SF Well, I thought ummm ...

IT I was too young.

SF 20:12:30:10 After cooking on a station for twenty-eight years ummm and running the station when the manager was away that a woman should come in and say to the person, you know, 'You take a holiday' and, as Mum felt then, she wasn't wanted.

TF And why wasn't she wanted? Why do you think that happened?

IT 20:13:09:06 Well, there was a relationship building with this manager who didn't have a wife and this woman who left her husband. I mean, don't forget that we knew the background history – well not me – but my family knew the background history because this woman was the woman that took my elder sister away in Roxborough and left her in Cloncurry, so there was no love lost with my mother and her, because she wanted to come back to a station life and Martin, I thought, did a very dishonest thing there and just said, 'Well, Topsy, if that's the case ...'

SF 'And you take a holiday.'

IT **Gender Relations**

Yeah. And it also, it didn't even get ... it wasn't only my mother, it was my father who really had never lived in a city, whereas my Mum was a very flexible person, very flexible woman. But my Dad was never. He lived all his life on a cattle property and the minute we brought him into a town situation, he just crumbled. So they really destroyed ummm a life ummm very quickly.

TF So did your Dad ... I mean, Mary Robbins was coming to take your mother's job but did your Dad, would he have still had a job?

SF 20:14:42:02 He went back. He left with us ummm and then he went back to Glen Ormiston but could not work there under the conditions, whatever those conditions were. Ummm and he came to us, he came back to Mt Isa to us there, and then he went to a place called Marquar Station and ...

IT Uncle Davey Brown.

SF Dave Brown.

IT Granny's ...

SF That's one of the sons. And ummm he worked there right up until he died.

TF So in the end for your family, then, do you think it was more ... how did the equal pay story relate to the Mary Robbins thing, do you know?

IT Didn't come into it. Didn't come into it. Ummm I would say, you know,
Martin She ended up with, he ended up with
her eventually when he retired in Charters Towers, and he was a great friend
of, you know, our Mum's.

SF Yeah, he was a great friend of the family.

IT Family. Great friend. But, I mean, they didn't want to do anything. I mean, you could have probably taken it further but what's the point? Ummm it was one of those things that ...

TF And all the Aboriginal people in the camp at Glen Ormiston?

SF 20:16:10:00 They had gone. They had gone prior to that. They were just
ahhhh some of them were just moving away and not coming back. Eventually
there was no camp at all and you only had the Aboriginal workers ummm in
the ummm in the camp there – the ringers ummm all the stockmen.

TF And what was driving that process from the Aboriginal end, do you think?
Why ...

- IT Why me?
- TF Were they being made less comfortable or ...?
- IT 20:16:39:00 Yeah, equal pay. They would have had to cater, under the Human Rights, from the Wavell Hill, under Human Rights and Protection on equal pay, they would have had to, you know, either organise social security ... it was just a minefield. So there was a lot of connotations to keeping Aboriginals on properties. They would have had to feed them and administrator, you know, the money and do all that sort of thing. So it became such a minefield. It was a lot easier under the Act. The station, you know, the police stations could manage that but under real issues, it was best to have any, you know don't have any of them there. And I think that made a big change. The dynamics changed ummm for Aboriginal people and we started, I guess, you know, started talking about how indigenous people made the pastoral industry because there's a big gap between ummm what they were paid in ration, and I think some got paid as a wage, but not many. I think if there was an evaluation done around the ridges, you know around the communities now, to see exactly how many people did get it, there'd be very few.
- TF Well I remember in a book by Ruby de Satge she talked about being paid as a drover but then told that when she was on stations she mustn't let the station Murriss know she was paid or it would create trouble so you can get the sense of ...
- SF Yeah.
- TF ... a lot of subterranean stuff.
- SF Yeah, yeah.