

WITH LIZ DEBNEY
Recorded 4 June 2000
Updated 16/12/09.
TC is from tape 11_BC_DV
Topics in Bold

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent

Okay, so the time code is 33 seconds, it's now 3945 here. This is Tape 11 camera.

We're still in tape 5 DAT. We're interviewing Liz Debney in the lounge room at Glen Ormiston, 4 June 2000.

TC from tape 11_BC_DV

So we were talking Liz about the relationship between managers and their wives on properties and you were saying that whilst you mightn't directly be deploying particular men, that you're looking at the overall strategies, how did you and Mal negotiate stuff about things environmental on this property, and do you think in general that women take any different role than men in that regard, or are you working very much to company direction?

R Gosh. What was the first part of the question?

I Well, how do you and Mal do it?

R 00:01:13:14 Ummm, probably we've both got very similar philosophies as far as the environment goes and I think it's very similar to a lot of people who live out here in that if we don't, we know if we don't protect this environment nobody else will because we're the ones living here. I really don't have anything to do with the day-to-day running of the place where that's concerned. For example, the grader driver Mal will, he directs the grader driver when we've got one, which we don't at the moment, and he has him constructing boys which are bumps in the road to direct the flow of water to stop erosion and that's probably the main management strategy that he does on a daily basis, as far as the environment goes. We did have a landcare group in this area, which we were very much part of, but it has since folded just due to lack of numbers, just too few people and too much distance and nothing ... landcare is something that you really need a

concentration of people who can get together to do things for it to work. I know of other managers' wives that are terribly interested in the environment and probably it's something that they get very involved in and they're on committees. It's not an interest for me in that way. What else was there?

I Is there company policy in that regard?

R **Pastoral Companies cc Environment**

00:02:56:14 Yes. Yeah, the company employs an environmental person whose actual title I've forgotten. We call him the grass man or the landcare man but, yes, they're very much aware of it and this is only in recent years that they've employed somebody like that. Each property has a satellite map, or a satellite photograph, huge satellite photograph, and they use that for new fence lines. If new fence lines are being put in, they use the map to work out the best place to put the fences and that sort of thing so, yeah, the environment's definitely a ... we're looking after the environment. Another ... at lunch time when you asked Mal how many cattle, he said 'At the moment we have 7,000' and the significance of that is that in an extremely, in a good season, the two properties us and Roxborough can probably run twice that many or even more, but because we've had dry times and it's company policy that you de-stock, you don't flog the country, because we've had a lot of cattle, of breeder cows, be sent away because it's been very dry but now we're having a very good season, a lot of them are coming back.

I Somebody that I interviewed early on in this process, whose family had owned a big station and recently sold it, put to me the notion that generally owners of land have looked after the land long-term a lot better than companies because companies were needing to extract maximum profit for shareholders but that they didn't feel too bad that the property had now been sold to a company because the companies had recently woken up to the need to look after the land. What would you say to that kind of perspective?

R Ummm, I would say that that's a, oh what's the word?

I Generalisation?

R Pastoral Companies cc Land Owners

00:05:22:10 Generalisation. That that person's frame of reference is coming from being a private person. There's definitely a company/private sort of ... there's two, polarisation almost, in these areas. You'd probably find company people that said the same thing about private people, you know, 'Private people. Never look after their places'. Yeah, I think it's too much of a generalisation. It's my experience over the years that ... and I've seen this happen on several occasions, where a private property has been next door to a company property. The private person's criticised the company left, right and centre until they wanted to sell the place and then they go begging to the company, basically, 'Oh, you know, please buy my property for millions of dollars' so the companies are fine when you want to sell your place but I think there have ... it's like anything, there are good ones and bad ones. Good companies, companies that have managed the country well, companies that haven't. Private people that have managed the country well, private people that haven't. It's the same with staff. Some companies manage their staff well, some don't. Some private people do, some don't.

I Now in relation to how the company impacts on your life on a daily basis, I'd like you to explain how Glen Ormiston relates ... you know the stuff we were talking about at lunch and the mail plane coming in once a week. On a daily basis, how is the fact that this is a company property, how does that impact on your life?

R Communications

00:07:12:02 Ahhh, well I'll just retrace a little bit. Back in the seventies this company was smaller but it owned Alexandria in the Northern Territory and these four properties in the Channel Country. It's had them for a long time. And in the Channel Country there were road mails and in the seventies the road mails just ceased and it meant that these properties were just left with absolutely no mail delivery whatsoever and this company made a decision then to buy a plane and service its own properties, which is what it's been doing since 1975 I think.

TAPE 1 – SIDE B

R 00:07:58:22 We now, in recent years, about two years ago, we now get a road mail from Boulia as well, which means that we have neighbours to the south who are two little privately-owned places, or not little places, but two privately-owned places. Until then, they just did not have a mail service at all. One of them would get their mail on our mail plane but they had no way of getting groceries or anything. So the company basically did it as a service, to provide the service to their people, and we get the plane once a week. He brings our mail and fresh fruit and vegies and bread and parts, vehicle parts and that sort of thing.

I So you ring through and order or email it?

R Mmmm. Oh, the office in Mt Isa isn't quite up to email yet. They've got the computer and they've got an email address but the fellow up there is still back in the seventies.

I And do you want to just explain that thing about how this property is a breeding property, like the way that the different NAPCO properties interrelate?

R **Pastoral Companies**

Okay. Well NAPCO is a vertically integrated company in that it has breeding properties and the calves are weaned and sent to grower properties. From there they're sent to the feed lot which is down in south-east Queensland.

I And how do you fit into that?

R 00:09:39:10 Glen Ormiston's a breeding property. When we first came here we had some breeders but we were also a fattening property, and that was back in the days when this company fattened for the Japops market, before they owned the feed lot. So we would get steers from the Northern Territory as well as breed our own, fatten them into those great big fat bullocks, and then send them off. But those days are long gone and now we

breed, send our weaners further down into the Channel Country where they grow, and then they're sent to the feed lot.

I And do those kind of shifts in the economic basis of the property, do they impact upon your life in an obvious fashion?

R No. No. Not really, no.

I So let's talk now about your interest in history. Where did that arise from and how did that lead you into an Arts degree and how did that fit into your life?

R 00:10:47:19 Okay. When I first, when we came here, well Glen Ormiston has an historical feel about it. I mean, this house that we're sitting in was 100 years old two years ago and there are diaries and other records here dating back from, some of them around the turn of the century. The diaries start a little bit later than that. Letter books. All incredibly fragile, but they're here, and during those first years that we were here it was something I always wanted to do was dig into all this stuff and do something with it but I wasn't sure how to and I was too busy teaching school and feeding men. And then the company had a history done. I've lost the word I wanted to use.

I Commissioned.

R Thank you, commissioned. Commissioned a history, which was written by Margaret Cowald and a fellow called Ross Johnson? Book's on the shelf over there behind me but I can't see it.

I I know Pam Watson's got a copy.

R **History/Work**

00:12:10:20 Mmmm, but when Margaret Cowald was doing the research she came here and I got talking to her and she suggested that if I did a degree that that would ... and I didn't understand then, but I know exactly now what she was talking about, would give me the skills that I'd need to do this sort of research, and I realise now that I've done the degree what she meant. So that

was how I started, why I started it, and I majored in history and literature but I also did a fair amount of sociology and I found that while I was studying my interest just sort of went in other directions, and then as I finished ... it took me six-and-a-half years to do it and the finishing of it coincided with me getting this, or with all this training culture developing within the industry and the company and me getting this part-time role within the company, whereas originally I wanted to ... I did my first degree because I wanted to be an historian. That's still something, and I'm still working, I started working through the diaries. I think I'm up to about 1946. It's very much something I do in my spare time which isn't very often. 00:13:42:02

I Now when we're talking diaries, we're not talking, I feel, happy ...

R No, no, these are all very much work diaries.

I So what might a daily entry consist of, just for instance?

R Ummm, men mustered such and such an area. Somebody else went out and fixed the fence. That a killer was, a beast was killed for meat. That sort of thing. Yep.

I Do you find that diary, do you pick up much on the race relations history of this property?

R No, not from the diaries. No. Although the language, of course, is very, well back in the thirties, you know, the Aborigines that were working here had names like Tommy and Billy and that sort of thing but no, there's not enough in there for that to come through.

I **Pastoral Companies**

Are there Aboriginal people working on this property now?

R No, not now. No. Haven't been for a long time.

I So what do you know about that history because, I guess, having interviewed Isabel Tarrago, I know something about her parents. But I'm interested in what you know about that history.

R 00:15:10:04 Not a great deal. I know little things like this was the ... Glen Ormiston was a very important trading area back before the days of white men and that's been documented to a certain extent. The trade was based on pituri and it does, there is still some growing here.

I Isabel McBride has written about that I think, hasn't she?

R **Aboriginal History**

00:15:40:10 Yeah, I think that's who it is, yeah. And you can find, or there have been found artefacts here that the stone that they're made from is not from this area, so I'm very aware of that, that there's an extremely rich Aboriginal history here as far as the trading goes and obviously the waterholes where this house is built, and there's another waterhole similar about 15k to the north of us, to the west of us. They would have been very permanent bases, I would imagine, where they'd lived. What else am I aware of?

I You would have lived here ... oh, sorry, I cut you off.

R I was just thinking with Isabel Tarrago's mum and ...

I Her dad was no ... her mum was Topsy Hanson and her dad got written inside my book ...

R Was he Snapshot? Was Snapshot her dad?

I Snapshot Hanson.

R Well they were extremely well-respected and sort of employees of ... they're part of the history of Glen Ormiston and very ... people who remember them, you know, love to tell you stories about Topsy and Snapshot.

I So tell me, I'm very interested in that. Tell me some of the stories you would have ...

R Oh, I can't remember any specific ones. Snapshot's in the diaries where I'm up to. He's already appearing in the diaries, yep.

- I And why would they be respected?
- R I don't know. I think just the people that they were. Just their ... they were the sort of people that gained respect and ...
- I Talking to Isabel, I'd have to confess to it almost sounding like a kind of tragedy. Isabel described growing up here as a child and this being traditional country of both her parents and then it was while she was away at boarding school and Charters Towers that ... I don't know what shifted exactly but I think it had to do with the end of the Act and equal pay for Aboriginal people coming through and so Aboriginal people no longer being welcome to work on the properties. I don't know whether 'ejection from paradise' is like an appropriate metaphor with how you're feeling right now, but yes, I'm just interested in your perspective on that and I'd love you to tell me the story of when you met Isabel.
- R 00:18:35:23 Ummm, Isabel came out here with her husband and daughter, I think.
- I Yes, she's got a daughter.
- R **Race Relations**
- Yeah, the daughter ... to scatter Topsy's ashes up at Lake Wandidda which is, I think, where Topsy was born, and I only met her the once and I remember thinking then I'd love to ... they didn't have much time but I'd love to sit down and really have a talk to her and find out what she remembers about growing up here and ...
- I How would you define race relations in this area? Do whites and Aboriginal people mix, or are you essentially in different tracks?
- R That's a very complex question to ask a person sitting here wired with a ... I mean, I have my own personal views. I have my views of the views of other people, so I guess it's what perspective you want me to come at it from.

I Well, the personal one is probably the easiest. Just how you ... because it's a key question for Australia at the moment, isn't it? It's something we've got to get sorted.

R Mmmm, and it's something that when you live out here it's very easy to get annoyed with urban people who automatically class us as racist because we may make statements like 'There is a problem in Bouliya with the Aborigines and alcohol', so if I make that statement in an urban context I'm likely to be classed as a racist, whereas I don't consider that I am. I'm simply stating an observation. Where was I leading to with that one?

I Well, it's all about perspective.

R 00:20:49:10 Yes. And I think familiarity, I mean, the six years that we lived at Alexandria there were a number of Aboriginal families there. My kids grew up and played with Aboriginal children and didn't actually have very many ... they had white playmates on other stations but the kids that they grew up with, and I mean my photo albums are just full of photos of my kids with their little white faces amongst all these ... I remember, when we first lived at Alexandria there was a school there and I did three years as the teacher's aide at the school when my kids were quite tiny and I remember walking into the schoolroom once and all these kids had their arms out and one of the older boys was doing a comparison and he'd obviously ... and he was a half-caste kid. He'd considered himself as normal and he was comparing every other kid to him so some were black, some were really black and some were pretty pale. And then my kids had their little arms stuck in front of him and he said 'Oh, you're really white' as if that was really bad, you know, and they looked terribly disappointed because they were really white. And that was the sort of thing that ...

I

R 00:22:14:00 Yeah, so it's, in the big picture for the record I think John Howard should say 'Sorry' but I didn't used to think that. I've come around to thinking that over the last probably twelve months because I really think ... I'm a great believer in life in general. One of my philosophies is 'draw a

line in the sand and move forward' and I think if he got that over and done with, we could all draw a line in the sand and move forward.

I So what shifted in the last twelve months?

R Ummm, probably his stubborn attitude has made me think about it more. I think, yeah, I don't know, I'd have to sit down and really think that one through.

I You've lived on this property through the era of both Mabo and WIK.

R Mmmm.

I What do you remember about hearing of those decisions coming through and has there been like a ripple effect out here?

R **Native Title**

00:23:31:10 Ummm, oh definitely. It seems to have gone very quiet lately but there were claims on properties around us and I know that the people involved have been very frightened and worried by it. Once again, it's one of those things that it's fine when it's happening somewhere else, I mean the whole Mabo thing, it just seemed ludicrous that they didn't have ownership of those island, or that island, but when it comes closer to home that's when you start to think 'Oh, yes, I'm not so sure'. Yeah, I don't know that handing back vast areas of Australia would solve any problems. It's ...

I So is this leasehold or freehold?

R Leasehold.

I Leasehold? So it's then subject, as I understand it, potentially subject to a Native Title claim?

R Yes, most of western Queensland is, yeah.

I Are there Native Title ... I'm not aware of any Native Title claims here?

R No. Not that we know of, no.

I How often would that issue come up for discussion?

R Oh, not very. No.

I And where would you run across Aboriginal people in your life?

R 00:25:04:10 Ummm, well occasionally we have them working here, just from time to time. Coming on to the place, there's a pig catcher. We have a feral pig problem here and we allow people to come on with permission. There are some people that come on to Roxborough without permission and that's frowned upon but we have some people who have permission to come here catching pigs and one of the fellows that comes quite regularly is an Aboriginal fellow that ... what else? I've got friends who employ them. I know some of the people, Aboriginal people, in Boulia personally. There's one fellow that, when Mal and I were ... when Mal was head stockman at Monkira he was the grader driver down there and we're still good friends, you know. We see him in town, we have a big yarn and usually talk about old times and that sort of thing.

I So if I was to say that from a city perspective, I mean for me, from a city perspective land and questions of race around land seem to me a pressing issue for Australia. I look at this film and the process that I've travelled through in the ten years since I started to think about making it and questions around race and land have grown bigger in my brain. Does that accord with your perspective or do you think I've spent too long in the coffee shops of Brisbane?

R **Native Title/Aboriginal History**

00:26:51:03 Yes, I do. The thing that I always think of when people start discussing this is if you go back before white people came to Australia, where would the concentration of Aborigines have been? Now, I'm only guessing, but I would imagine along the coast where the concentration of white people are now. And I know that every now and then a few rednecks bring this one up but to people living out here it's a very real question. How come it's alright to give the outback back to the Aborigines but you don't

give the coastal areas back to them? And it's very political and it's all to do with politics and economy and from my perspective, if we're going to give back areas of land that was their traditional land, let's be fair dinkum about it and give them back areas of the coast. 00:27:57:09

I Yes, I mean, there's a couple of things in there. One is I think it's certainly true that human beings, all of us, you know the NIMBY? Not in my back yard.

R Yeah, exactly.

I So I think all of us find things harder to handle ...

R In our back yard.

I ... in our back yard. The population question. What I understand from Pam Watson who's done quite a lot of first anthropology and then history in this area, is that actually the Georgina was a really important population base.

R Mmmm. Yes. Yeah, actually it's ...

I ... for Aboriginal people and she's documented people that would walk from Windorah to the Bunya Mountains, that it was kind of good land, I guess. I think it's true that whites and Aboriginal people have tended to really value ...

R The same land.

I ... of land and this I would think is very valuable land.

R Mmmm.

I So moving on from that then, tell me about your current study.

R 00:29:06:16 I'm currently undertaking an Education Degree in Adult and Workplace Education which ties in very much ... in fact, I've been fascinated by how closely it does tie in with this part-time role I have within the company and I'm doing it with a view to having something to fall back on when we do leave this particular way of life.

I So that's something I'd like to unpick a bit. This would seem to be ... I haven't done my sums. Help me. You're 47?

R 46.

I 46. So you spent a lot of your life in western Queensland and ...

R Mmmm, all my adult life I've spent in western Queensland basically.

I So what are the things causing you to think about changing that and what imagine a future ...?

R 00:30:12:13 Okay. Ummm, well my age is very significant because back when you're in your twenties and thirties, twenty years is you're still going to be a relatively young person, whereas once you get to your mid-forties, in twenty years you're approaching being elderly, which is fairly scary. I really want to ... I want the next twenty years of my life to count and I guess I believe that I've done basically all that I can do here, that I am ready for a different, for other challenges and other ... to go down other paths. I think the mid-life crisis is a very real phenomenon and I think it's partly that, that just simply not wanting, just wanting a change, wanting to do something different. The problem is that neither of us have any desire whatsoever to live on the coast or in a city so the challenge is what do two middle-aged people, who only have a station background, do for the next twenty years of their lives? When we find the answer to that, we'll go and do it.

I And when you say the mid-life crisis is a real phenomenon, you look around you and see that you're not Robinson Crusoe in these kinds of feelings?

R Mmmm, yeah. I think a lot of it's got to do with people's personalities. I think some people probably just ignore it. Some people are frightened of change. It's to do with their personality. Sister Ann Marie and I have great long discussions about this every time she comes because, you know, she says 'Oh, but Liz, some people just don't want things to change' because I'm, you know, I like change I think.

I I mean, she herself is about ...

- R About to change, yes.
- I So when you say you don't want to live in the city or the coast, is that because you'd say you love the land?
- R **Women/Land**
00:32:35:00 Yes, yeah. I just love the outback, the open country, the colours, ummm, mmmm, the whole ... and I think I also like the idea of being a big fish in a little pond, even though geographically it's a huge area, socially and culturally we're, you know, big fishes in a little pond, whereas if I went to live in Brisbane I'd be a little fish in a very big pond.
- I So you like to know most of the people you run into on the street?
- R 00:33:09:15 Yeah. Mmmm. And just the, I guess, loyalty to the way of life. I don't ... I can't imagine not living somewhere where I guess everyone wears big hats and cowboy boots and it's just ... I'd probably be one of those people that look very much out of place in the city. Although I can blend in when I go down there.
- I Is there anything that you miss from the city, having grown up there?
- R Ummm. No. Not that I can think of.
- I So if you were to encapsulate the history of country women, this is I guess a sort of a rounding up question, the history of women in the Channel Country as you have known it, what would strike you?
- R 00:34:13:20 Ummm, I'd say, oh, the history. Ummm, in general most of the women who live out here are very much individuals, people who can enjoy their own company, who can cope with the things that this life throws up. I think you have ... I always say you don't have to be mad but it helps. But they're very much, they're a particular ... oh I'm generalising now but very much a type of person who really wouldn't be happy in the city and I think that's why quite often when we get together socially, because we're mostly women who are very much alike in those aspects, we enjoy our social gatherings but we don't need to have them every week or ... but by the same

token, one of the reasons that I am looking forward to a change from this particular way of life is that now that I don't have children to teach and ... because that, for me when I had my kids on School of the Air and distanced, that was like a little world that you were ... I mean, through the radio you were in contact with people every day and once that went I am starting to personally feel the need to have more people around me. But I think it's to do with the stage I'm at in my life and the fact that I don't have kids around any more.

I There was a quote, somewhere when I was researching before I came out here, there was a quote from a woman in a property in South Australia in the nineteenth century, something like 'I physically ached for the sight and sound of another human being', talking about great loneliness. Is that something you could relate to some form of?

R 00:36:39:12 Oh, not in that extreme, to that degree, because I mean, I see other human beings every day. But just, yeah, I've never known that sort of loneliness so I can't really relate to it. No.

I Had we not been with you at lunch today, you would have been one woman with six or seven men for lunch?

R Mmmm.

I Would the concept, if I could call it gender loneliness, but being lonely for other women, is that something that bears any relation to you?

R No. No.

I It's been the state of your life, hasn't it?

R **Relations amongst Women**

Mmmm. In fact, to me, one of the most horrifying thoughts is more than about four women in one place at a time. I remember when my kids were little, I was visiting a friend in Toowoomba. She had to take her little one

along to an immunisation clinic and I was just horrified. All these women and babies. It was just scary. No, it's not something that's been an issue.

I So is there anything I haven't asked you about that seems to you really striking, to get some kind of sense of your life?

R Not that I can think of, no.

I Okay. I just wanted a bit of clarification about something you said earlier, that it was unusual that you and Mal married when he was a stockman rather than a head stockman.

R Mmmm.

I Why was that unusual? I know statistically you said that normally people married when they were head stockmen, but what was ... how was that so? Why was that so?

R Ummm. Probably because the fellows in particular don't get the opportunities to meet girls until they get sort of further ... I don't know, it's ...

I

R 00:38:59:08 Yeah. Although that's changing now that we're getting more females coming onto the properties. For example, our head stockman here and his girlfriend, who are very much a couple now, they both met when they were both working here four years, five years ago, and she came here as a jillaroo and he was a, you know, a young station hand. I had a girl working for me last year. She came as a female trainee and couldn't cope with the outdoor work and was quite upfront about it and was going to leave. I said 'Don't do that. If you like, you can give me a hand. You can do some cooking and stuff', so she did. She and a fellow who was working here are now a couple on a property up near Mt Isa. So it's starting to ... it's almost like it's coming around and there are ... people are ... because there are more girls coming out here, but mostly they were sort of, a lot of the women were

teachers or nurses and so the young fellows sort of didn't get to meet them till they were socially mixing in the same circles, that sort of thing.

I So they'd need to have a bit of a future ahead of them before they'd ever be considered husband material?

R I don't know. I don't know if that's how it is or whether they just ... mmmm. Don't know.

I What would it be about being head stockman that you'd have more opportunity to actually mix? I don't understand that.

R No, I don't ...

I

R I don't understand why I've said that either. Let me think. Ummm. Possibly more ahhh ... would go to things where you're more likely to meet people. Ummm. No, that doesn't make sense either.

I It would be about class, wouldn't it?

R No. It's not about class. It's ... I don't know. I've never thought it through.

I Would the head stockman have more responsibility that they actually have to do more business in town?

R 00:41:29:24 Yeah, that sort of thing, yep. They're more likely to be introduced to somebody, which I guess could be a bit of a class thing. This is the head stockman. But to be known, because they've been in the district longer.

I More established.

R You know, like if Clayton went into Boulia, there's a fair chance that people would say 'Oh, that's that young fellow, he's the head stockman at Glen Ormiston', whereas if one of those two young fellows that were there this morning went in, 'I wonder where he works'.

Tape Ends 00:42:04:18

I Historically there was something like one woman for every eight men ...

R Something like that, yeah.

I ... out here. Looking at the history, there would appear to be a pretty horrific history of, well some of it just sexual interaction between black and white.

[gap in tape here]

R And Alex, which is actually three properties, that there's two outstations. And one of them was telling me they just couldn't get over these girls and they just ... they do the same things the blokes are doing. Yes? Oh, and he just ... and then he got here and there was Tammy who's a very feminine looking young lady but she can ride a bike and do all these things, and ...

I This is the head stockman's girlfriend?

R Mmmm. And then they got down to Monkira and there's a girl working down there who I know very well because she worked here last year and Mary Ann grew up in this country. She's lived in this area all her life. She's not one of these girls who's come from the city to learn to be a jillaroo. She's basically done it all her life and apparently he just kept following her around and saying 'Oh, I just can't get over the things you girls can do', but the ultimate was they finished the motorbike course and they had the afternoon to spare so they went ... the station staff were going killing so they took these two fellows with them and Mary Ann had the axe and opened the head up and getting the brains out and this bloke apparently just shook his head and said 'You are one tough bitch'. And she didn't know whether to be offended or sort of thought, you know ...

I I was just going to say that, of course, the reply to chaps who are having that kind of difficulty with reality is to tell them what Ginger Rogers said about what she did in her life, which was ...