WITH RHONDA ALEXANDER
5 June 2000

I = Interviewer R = Respondent

TAPE 1 – SIDE A

I **This is Trish FitzSimons recording Rhonda Alexander, 5 June 2000, for the Channels of History Project.**

Rhonda, could you just start by telling me where you were born and what date and what your name was when you were born?

R Oh, right. Well I was born in Rockhampton and my name is Rhonda Alexander and I came out to Boulia with my mother and she met my father as, well, Dad, and she lived in Boulia for a while. She worked at the hotel and then she went out to Herbert Downs when I was only a little baby and that's where I stayed.

I So you've grown up with a stepfather?

R Yes.

I Yes. So when you were a little baby you came to the Channel Country with your mother?

R Yes.

I And so your married but, I mean, I'm Trish FitzSimons, ever was, ever will be. Am I understanding that you were born Rhonda Alexander?

R No, I was born Rhonda Hill.

I Hill?

R Mmmm. And in May 1946, and I guess I went out to Herbert Downs, it would have been about early 1947, no I was too young. 1948.

I So you probably don't remember your first view of Herbert Downs but can you think, what do you reckon were your earliest memories? Which may have nothing to do with the land but if you think back in your life, what are your very earliest memories?

R A very old homestead with dirt floor and us kids used to … eventually there were five girls and there was just a dirt floor and we had just a trestle table. You put the bowl on one end,

you washed up like that, the water ran onto the floor and things like that, and we had an old wood stove. No vehicles or anything like that. Horses, whatever. And then at night time for our baths … all the water had to be carted and that was from what we called Duck Hole, and you'd take the sulky down, bring the water back and store it, and we'd do that once a week. And while we were getting the water Mum would do all our washing in the creek and hang it up on the bushes and that, and us kids of course would go swimming and mucking around. And then, with that water, it had to last a week so we'd have a great big bathtub. First in was the one that was the last in the time before sort of thing, so you at least got one clean bath, and you just all had a bath in that one big tub because we just didn't have any other water to spare.

I And this was the late forties?

R Yes. And … the house was done up in 1956 so we went right up through to 1956 before the house was really done up.

I And this house you're describing, was this the main homestead of Herbert Downs or was this one of the workers' properties. I must have been thinking about your name and I failed to get whether your stepfather was the manager or the stockman or what was his relation to Herbert Downs?

R Dad was the overseer. Herbert Downs was run from Marion Downs Station and it still is, so it's an outstation of Marion Downs and Dad was the overseer. And that's about … no, he used to ride the boundary by horse and that'd take probably three or four days on horseback, so Mum would be there by herself and just us kids, and if there was a medical problem or anything like that – thank goodness there wasn't – but if there was, well it was touch and go. You sort of had to go to Bedalia Station. Dad would nine times out of ten ride over to Bedalia Station and they'd come and get us children and take us in to Boulia.

I So Marion Downs must be absolutely huge because Bedalia, I know, is out to the west …

R Yes.

I … twenty kilometres. Marion is …

R South.

I … seventy kilometres south.

R Sixty-seven.

I Sixty-seven kilometres south, so how far out of town is Herbert Downs?

R It's about fifty miles. To the homestead, that is.

I But Bedalia would be closer to you than Boulia?

R Oh Bedalia's, yes. Yes. It's about fifteen miles to the homestead at Bedalia from the homestead at Herbert Downs. I'm just guessing because it's a long time since I've been there. But Marion Downs, incorporating Herbert Downs, and there's another outstation called Bredolbin which you will go through tomorrow going down to Bedourie way, is 5,000 square miles in area, so it's one of the … it is the biggest property in the area.

I So who were your playmates as children?

R My sisters. So we had plenty of fights too.

I And would there have been other stockmen with wives on the property?

R No. No. We were there by ourselves so it was quite isolated for my mother, and quite lonely at times, because Mum was a city girl, whereas Dad wasn't. Dad was from out here all his life just about.

I So what attitude to the land, like we started talking before we started turning on the tape, what attitude to the land do you think you absorbed from your mother?

R From Mum, I think it was the hard life, but you got in there and made the most of it, and from Dad, he just loved the country, and we all grew up loving the country. But my other sisters still loved the country but found the isolation was just too much for them and I was the only one that stayed here and sort of married and went to Marion Downs.

I So really you'd moved within the one station …

R Not very far. Not very far. I went away to boarding school, then I came back to Mt Isa and worked for a year as a secretary. Then I came down back to Dad and Mum at this stage had decided to leave anyway. It was too lonely for her. And I just, well muddled around with Dad for a while and then Bill came on the scene and we got married ten months after I met him and went to Kurabulka. Bill was managing Kurabulka at the time.

I And you were born on Kurabulka, June, weren't you?

R No, no, no. My father was head stockman there when I was small.

I One thing I need to get straight. How does overseer relate to head stockman? I don't understand that hierarchy.

R You have your ringers and your jackeroos. Then you move up the ladder to head stockman and then to overseer and then to manager. Sometimes you might go from head stockman to manager.

I So overseer is a position of great responsibility on a big station with all the stockmen?

R Yes, and he's directly under the manager, and a lot of times your overseer is the one that you leave in charge if you go away. If you've got one. But in these days it's very hard to get an overseer so you have a head stockman and you can term him as head stockman/overseer if you wanted to, but usually a head stockman is a younger man and your overseer is a bit older with more experience.

I And when you talk about the isolation that your mother experienced, can you just explore that a bit? Like, how often would she have seen other women. How did she get in to the kind of the life of the station? Would she have been on a wage from the company, for instance?

R No.

I What would … if I could get a picture of your mother's life.

R Mum … I'll put it this way. Mum was a city girl, fell in love with Dad, went out to this isolated station which was pretty, what's the word, sort of archaic, but most people that knew Mum called her Hilly and she was just a doer. She just got in and did things and it didn't matter if it was hard life or not. I think that was the best thing about Mum is that you got in and did it. It didn't matter what it was, but to see another person, she mightn't see anyone for up to six months at a time and it wouldn't matter who … if you were lucky you might see the mailman, if he could get through, and he was in an old T Ford, old Sid Jones, wasn't it? But he was … that was getting on later, too. But, yeah, she wouldn't see any … well she wouldn't see a woman for months, so she just made do, so we had lots of fights with Mum and Dad. Mum and Dad had fights because there was nothing else to do

and then you were great and you went out for walks, you went … yeah, I think Mum just took us for walks and things like that, and she cooked for us. If the station, if the men from Marion Downs came up, that's the stock camp, Mum would cook for them sometimes, but she still didn't get paid for it because in those days she was just expected to do it. I guess she wasn't liberated.

I Do you ever remember her complaining about those things?

R No. If she didn't like anyone, she soon let them know. Because she didn't like the head stockman from Marion Downs and every time she knew he was coming she used to … we had deck chairs. She'd fill them up with water when she knew he was coming and she wouldn't cook anything for him, because he'd come over and he'd want to sit down and have Mum serve him tea and biscuits. So she'd fill everything up with water, she'd wash everything and then just tell him he couldn't come in. But I did see him one day come in and he sat in the water just to … oh, he was a horrible fellow. But no, on the whole, Mum was just, you know, she accepted it. That's what she was going to.

I And when you say she might go for months without seeing another woman, where for instance would your food have come from? I mean, obviously meat would come from the station?

R Yes.

I But even like would there not be the odd trip to Boulia for shopping or …?

R Not really. If you wanted something you'd get it out on the mail and our food used to come from Marion Downs, so Dad might go down to Marion Downs about once every three months and they'd give him a big order and he'd bring it back.

I So those big stations almost functioned like a town in their own right?

R Yes.

I They'd have a ten-gallon thing of honey and give you a gallon of it or that sort of thing?

R Sort of thing, yes. Yeah, you had the two-pound tins of syrup and treacle, tea, stuff like that. Big bags of flour. Bag of sugar. Pretty much the basics. Tins of peas, beans, not much else. And that was it.

I You mentioned that isolation might have contributed to the breakup of your mother and stepfather's marriage, I think?

R Mmmm.

I Do you want to just talk about that a little bit. I can imagine. I'm not surprised.

R Mum just … it was just too much for Mum eventually and she came and lived in Boulia for a while, and then from Boulia she went to Mt Isa and lived in Mt Isa. But her and Dad, like they never ever actually got divorced and they stayed really good friends because luckily Dad could understand it. He was a loner but he knew how other women felt because his mum's sort of like the same … his mum suffered as well. So, no, they were really still good friends and well, they're still good enough friends that Mum died eight years ago and Dad wants to be buried beside her. So that's how they've still remained like that, because Dad really understood that Mum needed to be with people.

I And were there Aboriginal women or Aboriginal kids on that property when you were there?

R Not at Herbert Downs. Every now and then you might get a couple out there. Not a lot. But there were at Marion Downs. There was always a big Aboriginal group down there.

I And at Herbert Downs was there a station that had a family there?

R No, just us.

I So as the overseer, you had like the station property of Herbert Downs. So he was overseer for all of Marion Downs?

R No, no, just Herbert Downs.

I Right.

R And he did all the bores, the fences, checked the cattle, all that sort of thing, and then he'd give a report to the manager at Marion Downs at the time.

I So you mentioned that for your sisters, like for your mother, the isolation was a bit much, but that you stayed on with your father. What was it do you think that made you loyal to that way of life?

R I don't think it was loyalty to the way of life. It's just I liked it. That's it. Full stop. I just like it. And I don't want to leave it.

I And did that mean that you got involved in your father's work?

R I don't know so much about I got involved, I was made to be involved, and we all were, because Dad didn't have any other help. So as us girls got older we all had to help out, and that was with fencing, mustering, the whole lot.

I So describe for me the kind of jobs you would have done at what sort of age.

R Probably the one I remember the most when I had to do some fencing for Dad. I used to help him with fencing and I would have been about eight or nine years old, and that was straining fences, and in those days …

I Using those ratchety things?

R We didn't … they're modern. We had like a Y strainer, a piece of wood that was like a Y with a hold in the end of the Y, and you put that on the wire and you just rolled it around. I twisted it around like that and then when you had it tight enough, you just pulled it around onto the post and then Dad would tie it off. But if you, and in my case I was so small, nine times out of ten it used to get away from me, so then I'd be in trouble. 'Go on, can't you hold onto it!' So, yeah, and then my sister, she was two years younger than me, she followed on as well and then Judy, but the two younger ones didn't do quite as much because by that time Dad could get help.

I And do you think that if you'd had brothers that would have been different? Like, do you think you were the best sons your father ever had, if you know what I mean? Or do you think that gender wasn't a big issue anyway and that this was just what kids in the district did?

R Most kids helped. Boys probably more than girls. Depending on … it depended on the father and the mother, too, how they were. Like Dad just felt, you know, you just got in and helped. You just got in and worked. It didn't matter whether you were female or male. And Mum, he never ever asked Mum to help though, in the hard stuff like that, which was good, but no I think if he'd had a boy, yeah the boy probably would have had to work harder than us girls.

I And were you paid extra by the company?

R No.

I So this was just part of the service delivered to NAPCO?

R Yes. I don't think they really realised what was happening because you didn't see you, the top people much, in those days. And you just got in and helped. Yeah, we just helped Dad out because there was no option. But I think I would have still helped anyway.

I So can you fill me in, then. You mentioned that you met your husband and ten minutes, not ten minutes what am I saying?

R Well, yes, it was probably ten minutes, we decided that was it, even though he was rotten drunk on rum.

I So tell me that story. Where did you meet your husband?

R Oh, in Boulia at the Debutante Ball. I came in with someone else and I met Bill in one of the dances. That was it.

I At your Debut?

R Mmmm. And we just decided, that was it, and as I say, Bill was rotten drunk, could hardly stand up, and I didn't drink, and the other person I went with, he got so wild with me that it wasn't funny. Usually Dad and I used to talk about everything but on the way home I apparently just sat there and Dad said 'Is something wrong?' 'No.' 'Oh, do you like Bill Alexander, do you?' 'Yeah.' 'Mmmm. Do you think he's nice?' 'Oh, he's alright.' And that was it.

I How old would you have been?

R I would have been 18.

I The concept of the Debut Ball, as I understand it, was that it was like when the girl was entering a social world, potentially entering kind of marriageable age. Had you met other boys before Bill Alexander, that you'd known well?

R Only one. No, I'd been engaged to him and decided to ditch him. For Bill.

I You were engaged …

R I wasn't engaged then but I had been engaged to him before and we just decided that it wasn't right anyway. So I had actually broken off with him but he was nice enough to be my partner for the ball. Then, poor fellow … so that was it. And then Bill and I got married ten months later.

I So at the time, at the age of 18, so this would have been, what, late fifties?

R 1964.

I 1964.

R On the 11th November.

I So when you were envisaging your future, what were your dreams of the future as an 18-year-old?

R I don't think I really had any. Like, I wanted to write. It was probably the one thing I mostly wanted to do was write. But because, well, we were just so poor that we just … we just didn't have dreams, or we probably had them but they were in the back of our mind and because our knowledge of life wasn't as broad as probably today's children, but I think we had probably a better life. But, yes, no that was the only thing I can remember and I still want to write, so it hasn't gone away.

I Where do you think this dream of writing had come from? Did you know women who were writers?

R No, I just loved reading. I can remember pinching Mum's torch and getting a book and getting under the bed at night to read. No, I just always loved reading, and I wanted to write.

I Where was your source of books?

R Anything I could find. It didn't matter what it was because we didn't have many books but if someone brought a book there and left it there, I'd read it. Like I went through medical books. Mum had a medical book so I read it from end to end, sort of thing, and … it didn't matter what it was, I'd just read it.

I So it was like a hunger that you'd fill with whatever was available?

R Mmmm. That's what Bill reckons now. My house is so full of books it isn't funny. He said 'You've got a phobia about books'.

I No, you've got a philia. You can say to him you've got a philia. 'Philia' is 'love of'. No phobia, philia.

R So, yes, and I still want to write, so that's it.

I Where had you gone to school? We didn't actually discuss schooling.

R In Townsville. I went to … I stayed with my father's mother and went to school in Townsville to Year 10.

I From what age were you in Townsville?

R Up till I was 17.

I But from 5 or from …?

R No, no, from about 12. Yeah, it would have been about 11 or 12. I had a lot of catching up to do. Like, they jumped me up … because Mum tried to teach us girls but she wasn't very good at it and, of course, none of us wanted to be taught anyway. But we jumped, when I went away to school, they jumped us up two or three classes and then, luckily, I could catch up and my other sister … and then Dad said to me 'I can't afford to send you off to a full schooling but the other girls have got to come as well' and that was how we did it.

I So there wasn't formal School of the Air or anything?

R Not then.

I You just picked up what you could …?

R Correspondence, you could get correspondence schooling from Brisbane and Mum did that with us, and that was all. There was nothing like there is today.

I And was that a five days a week undertaking or was it every so often …?

R It was every so often. It would be 'Oh, mate, are the kids spare to ?' 'Yeah, righto.' So away we'd go with Dad, and then Mum might spend a couple of hours with us

in the afternoon, or we might only do two or three hours' work for the whole week because it just worked around what was happening, so no we didn't have a nice regimented schoolwork.

I And so your family, from the poverty you're describing, for your family to send you away to school in Townsville must have been a big sacrifice.

R It was. But I wouldn't use the word 'poverty'. We never thought of it as poverty. It was just our life. And even today, I still don't think we were hard done by because all us girls have gone quite well. I don't know whether we had the brains or what we did, but anyway we sure made the most of it.

I So going on, then, to your life with your husband, so you were 18 years old, he was head stockman did you say?

R No, manager.

I Manager.

R At Kurabulka.

I But he wouldn't have been manager at … oh, he's older than you, is he?

R Yes, he's twenty … he's five years older than me, so I was 19 when I got married and he was 24, and he was manager at Kurabulka. So I went there as the manager's wife straight off, which is not the easiest thing to do and probably the first five years of being a manager's wife was the hardest because I hadn't been in that sort of area before.

I So what was expected of you as a manager's wife, both by your husband and by the company and by yourself? What was expected and what were the difficulties of those expectations?

R Probably looking … when I went to Kurabulka there was a full-time cook, full-time cowboy gardener, a full-time housemaid. Now those three people were in my care, so at 19 giving instructions to someone, say, 35-40, who could cook (and I couldn't cook) wasn't the easiest thing to do. So, yes, I used to go and put some lipstick on to get brave enough to go and tell the cook that was a horrible meal. I wouldn't dream of doing that today but that was my little thing. And then, yeah, that was probably the hardest for me,

was to tell people what to do. And then our general manager from Brisbane came up and he heard the jackeroos calling me Rhonda and he took Bill and me aside and he said 'Look, Rhonda would be better off being called "Mrs Alexander", especially at her age', so we didn't want 'Mrs Alexander', and this is how 'Mrs A' came about. And even today, now, I'm still Mrs A to all the staff. In fact, my hair goes up if one of the jackeroos 'Rhonda'. It's 'Mrs A' to you. So, yeah, it was the general manager at the time, he was looking after me because I was only 19 when I went there, and he just pulled up 'I think for both your sakes, she should be called "Mrs Alexander" or "Mrs A", whichever you like, but not "Rhonda"'.

I And was being a manager's wife, were you on a wage from the company …

R No.

I … or was it seeing rather that to have all this household help was making your life easy?

R That was making my life easy. And it was easy. It was great. And then over the years NAPCO has taken … well, it really started in 1974 when the big cattle slump started and they virtually put everyone off overnight, so I went from … in 1974 we'd already been transferred over to Marion Downs which was a far bigger job than Kurabulka. I was, what, 25 I think, and I had the same help again there, only there were two housemaids, a cook, a cowboy, Bill had a mechanic, a boreman, things like that he didn't have at Kurabulka because Kurabulka's smaller. So when we went to Marion Downs it was a far, far bigger job for both of us, and being Mrs A really did work because I had staff from about 16 to about 70. You know, you've got the really old hangers-on, because they were really good old men, and by this time I'd got a lot more confidence in myself. I'd had to learn to cook by then as well and, to me, Marion wasn't the biggest job as it was when I first went to Kurabulka as a 19-year-old. And NAPCO still doesn't pay the wives, except a small amount of money, but if we do the cooking then we get paid award rate for whatever it is. But as a team, no we're still not employed as a team.

I And I think you said before that at Marion there was quite a large community of Aboriginal people. Were they still there when you went there as …?

R No. We would have had about seven or eight men at the time, a couple of housemaids, things like that. But, no, the big community had left before we got there.

I Do you know when that had happened and what had fed into that?

R It would have been in the 1950s. A lot of them would have come to Boulia. There's still the old sites out there where they lived, and then we had the three old buildings that were called the blacks' quarters, because the manager that was there before us would not allow the blacks and the white people to eat together. So the blacks had their own kitchen and the cook at the time, she would cook the meals and then the housemaid would come and get them, because normally the housemaid was a dark girl. She'd come and get the meal, take it down to their kitchen and they'd eat it and then bring the dishes back. When Bill and I went there, we just didn't believe in this so we closed the Aboriginal kitchen up altogether and made them all eat together, and of course a lot of the whitefellas, they pretty much, some pulled out because of it, and then also the Aboriginals had to then sleep in the same quarters as the white men as well.

I So we're talking mid-sixties here?

R Yes. Well, no, 1972 when we went to Marion Downs, so it was still like that in 1972. But that would have probably been mostly the manager that was there before us.

I And so were the Aboriginal staff on the property single men or families?

R Mostly single men. Or there would have been married men but their families, wives, would have been in town here.

I So they'd come back to town for weekends?

R No, not always for weekends. Probably, what, once every three months, something like that. It wasn't much. But they were also under the Act then and the men … of the wages, they got the same wage but two-thirds of it actually went to the police in Boulia for … they were the protector, sort of thing, so two-thirds would go to them, the other third would go to the Aboriginal himself, so if he wanted to come to town he'd have that amount of cash, but the other two-thirds went to the police. The women would then go the police station every Thursday, I think it was, wasn't it? And they'd get like a piece of paper to say that 'Okay, Jimmy wants a pair of shoes from Donohues'. They'd give them a docket to go to Donohues. They wanted food from Min Min Store. They'd get so much for food and things like that, so the money was actually doled out to them.

I But in goods in kind?

R Yes.

I Yeah. And when did that system break down? I thought that system broke down at the end of the sixties but you're talking …

R 1966 was it? Or '67?

Other I think I was working at Donohues at the time.

R It was in the late sixties that they actually came out from under the Act. But some of them did still elect to be under the Act till eventually they just all came out and I think they're worse off now.

I So how did that … so you got to Marion in '72 and there were a number of Aboriginal men working on the property.

R Yes.

I How did that play out? Are they still there working now? Or did that system break down?

R Well, we still employ Aboriginals. We've got two down there at the moment. Both of them started with us in their twenties. Oh, well, actually, one started with us when he was 17, I think, and he's sort of on and off. Like, actually, I think he might get the sack if he arrives out there today because he didn't come home for work yesterday. But Dougie's been with us on and off for 20 years and John O'Keefe's been with us on and off for 20 years and last year we had actually five Aboriginals there last year. So we don't mind having them to work for us.

I And are their families, then, here in town?

R Yes.

I That's still the way that the system works?

R Yes. The only difference is if … all their money now goes direct to them, so if they paid into an account, to a bank account, and the wives have got a PIN number or something like that, they virtually just spend all the boys' money anyway. So by the time the boys get to town they've got no money because the wives can just get it out, or the girlfriends, or whatever. And they pretty much drink it, don't they, before the fellows get into town.

Other

R Mmmm. It's not good.

I So filling me in, then, on your life, have you had kids Rhonda, along the way?

R Mmmm, I've got three. My daughter got married in April. She's 32 and she's managing the Mungallala Pub.

I Where's Mungallala?

R Between Mitchell and Morven. And my son's been married, what, three years, or one of my sons, and he's managing Boratria Station near Longreach. He's got a little boy. And my younger son, who's nearly 21, he's at Boratria Station at the moment with his big brother but probably heading off to Emerald soon.

I So you've brought up kids that have continued to love the country life. How different do you think your children's childhood was than the one you'd had?

R Oh, they're living in luxury now, compared to what we had. I don't think they're any happier for it, though. In fact, I'm sure they're not, because they want, want, want now. And the two older ones, they're pretty good. The younger one is, I think, almost too outspoken for his own good and when it comes to occupational health and safety, it's got to be spot on, and whereas 20 years ago, 10 years ago, five years ago, occupational health was something that you looked after yourself. In other words, if you were going to get on a horse you made sure that your saddle was right and all your gear was right and yourself. So you took responsibility for yourself. Today, because it's so enforced, the workforce now looks to the manager, or to the person owning the business, to make sure that their saddle is alright. They don't take responsibility for themselves at all. It's a different ball game altogether.

I So there are tensions within that old company structure that your children

R Mmmm. Especially the younger one. The older two … there's a big gap, you probably … one's 32 and one's 30, and then the younger one's 21. There's a big gap there so the two older kids were sort of still responsible for their actions, whereas the younger one, he has to follow all the rules of occupational health and, of course, he's been away to boarding school, he's done this and that, and he's the one that's very aware of it. So if he can get out

of taking responsibility for himself, he will. He'll palm it off onto someone else because it's their job. So, yeah, it is different.

I And talking now about things environmental, you said something really interesting about how important it was to look after this country and I know you're involved in a number of different environmental groups. Do you want to fill me in how you became active in this area and what's going on in this area now?

R I don't really know when it started but I was about 13, I suppose, when I started shifting my uncle's stuff around in his garden and drove him silly. And then I went to Kurabulka and there was, well, at Herbert Downs you couldn't have a garden because there was no water, except what you carted in yourself. And then Kurabulka had bore water, and that's when I really started wanting to garden and I had to learn then how to use the salty water with clay soil. By the time I got to Marion, I was really into trying to work things out and eventually I wrote a book on gardening for all this area, on looking after it, and because I wanted to write about it, I got interested in the Society for Growing Australian Wild Plants.

I SGAP. I was a one time member.

R And then I moved from there to Greening Australia and it just sort of kept on going from Greening Australia to Landcare and now the issues are becoming really environmental on the whole lot and I guess I've just got really more and more interested in not so much the gardening section now as the whole environmental issue, and sustainability of the whole country for not 50 years' time or 100 years' time, it's for our … just forever. And when you look back at the number of animals that are extinct, the number of trees, plants and everything extinct, and it's all because of what we've done to the land, that we need to really sit down and start doing something about it.

I **It's Tape 15 for camera. We're still in the middle of Tape 7, I think it is, for DAT. It's Trish FitzSimons recording, Erica Addis on camera, 5 June and we're interviewing Rhonda Alexander in June Jackson's lounge room.**

Okay, so Rhonda, what do you see as the most important environmental issues facing the Channel Country and what kind of local activities are you involved in to address those needs?

R At the moment I think it would be chemicals and woody weeds. Probably woody weeds to start with because there are a lot of woody weeds coming down the channels and because cattle … there's far more movement of cattle and sheep, and also of road trains, shifting stock around, that they can actually get the seed and bring it into this area very easily, and without us knowing. And then, apart from clogging up the rivers and that, and the country, when you want to export cattle or sheep out of the country you can't get them out because of the … bur has a bur on it about this size and you've got to get a stock inspector in to go right through it. So with the Channel Country at the moment, I would say woody weeds is probably one of the biggest problems. Chemicals is another one because a lot of them want to spray these sort of things and if you've got cattle or sheep that are organically grown, you cannot have chemicals of any sort around them for the export trade. And then the other thing, possibly, is the management of your stock, that you don't have too many stock on that you eat out the property, or eat out the country. Introduction of exotic grasses, things like that which will actually take over from the native grasses is another thing that's going to be a problem. And if you get into the Cooper which will come up no doubt, with Sandy Kidd, is the harnessing of water and at the moment we're now looking at a draft paper for water management in the Georgina and Diamantina catchment and we haven't finished that yet. We're just looking at it at the moment, because we don't have a problem with the water, whereas in the Cooper they actually have licences for the water and they want to grow cotton in the area, and cotton brings with it chemicals and other insects, stuff like that.

I So tell me the range of organisations, you listed them off before, that you've been involved with.

R Well, there's the ICPA which is Isolated Children's Parents Association, which is probably one of the most important ones of all because that's the education of our children and I've been with … well I started our branch up 25 years ago and I'm President at the moment, and that's for geographically isolated children. It's getting them an education that is equivalent to children in the city. No better, just equivalent to what they've got. I'm Secretary of our Landcare group which covers 142,000 square kilometres. I'm Vice-President of our Georgina-Diamantina Catchment which comes into the Lake Eyre Basin. In other words, we sort of have to look after the Lake Eyre itself and that basin is one-sixth of Australia. There was a time when they were going to try and lock it up as National Heritage and we fought like anything not to, so what we do now is we're monitoring the

rivers, we're looking after the woody weeds, doing everything like that so that we can go back to the government and say 'Look, we are doing this. We are looking after our land and we're going to go on doing it'. So we're really fighting for that at the moment. I'm Secretary of the Historical Society, Secretary of the Camp Draft. What else is there?

No, no, I'm not in the Golf Club. And President of the PCAP for this western area, Priority Country Area Program.

I Somebody has put to me the idea that often in rural areas it's the women that particularly take the running on environmental questions, and certainly on the small farm I grew up on, it was my mother that was much stronger on that stuff than my father. Do you think that's a general thing here or are you working as much with men as with women on these environmental questions?

R I would say that I'm working with more men but the women would be as strong, if not stronger, and the coordinator for the whole Lake Eyre Basin is a woman.

I Who's that and where's she based?

R She's Kate Andrews from Longreach. But on a whole, no, I think on a whole women are probably the stronger ones but it could be because they may have a little more time. Like my husband couldn't come in today for the meeting because he's working. So the women are taking up where the men can't actually go, even though they want to. So it becomes a partner thing.

I Now it's interesting. You're the manager of land. Well, your husband's the manager and clearly you're incredibly involved in the management. I guess two questions I'd have about that. One is, put very bluntly, what drives you to look after somebody else's land? You know, like I guess the land belongs to the shareholders of NAPCO.

R It's got nothing to do with NAPCO. I just like the land. Full stop. It just has something about it. You know, you can go outside, even just to empty the pot of tea outside on the trees. At Marion, where I empty the tea out you look over the river and up to the hills, and it's beautiful. You just stand there and look at it. And that's just … I see that every day, five times a day, just when I do the meals. No, it's just the land. It has nothing to do with NAPCO. But then I do go back to NAPCO and say 'Right, we've got to do this, this and this' and it mostly works.

I And is the fact that you're not on a wage individually for that, because that's obviously vital work, actually, for the shareholders of NAPCO, is looking after this resource – and I'm not suggesting that's why you're doing it. I hear what you're saying. But is the fact of not being on a wage for doing that work, does that rankle?

R No. No. What does rankle is that I'm not treated as a partner with my husband. I'd rather be paid … I would rather my husband and I were paid as a team. We're not. My husband is paid as the manager and he's expected to do everything with the books, the managing and that. The wife looks after the mundane things such as the house and the garden and things like that. So, yes. No I'd rather see it as a teamwork thing.

I It's not the first time I've heard this opinion put. Is there any kind of movement to try and edge the companies in this direction or do you feel … like, together with other wives from the company, for instance, is there any push that it should be like a management team?

R Yes. NAPCO wives are all shoving – hard. I don't think we're getting too far at the moment but because I know there are other companies that have already moved that way and it does seem to be a happier environment.

I So which are the companies that have started to do that?

R AA Company is the one that I know of in particular. And Kidmans are sort of looking at it. But, yeah, there are other big properties. I think [Hightsbury??] did look at it too but I'm not really sure because I haven't had much to do with them lately. But I know AA, the manager and his wife are employed as a team and, yes, NAPCO wives are shoving very hard but we're not getting too far, I don't think.

I Would it ever be the case that a man be employed as a manager if he was not married, with his wife?

R Yes.

I Single men are employed?

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R Yes. And sometimes it works. I don't think it's always to the good of the homestead area but then that's a priority, I think, NAPCO and some companies have got to look at, is what do they want. Do they want the profits which come off the land and a single manager can certainly do that, no problems at all, because he does have his head stockman, he has his men and everything like that. But, bring it to the other side, which is the homestead area. Does that go down the hill so that you've got rundown areas, homestead areas, whatever you want, which, yeah, I don't think it's to the best of the company, or even to the rural area, full stop.

I Is there anything – I know you need to get away – is there anything I haven't asked you about that you feel passionate about for a general audience to understand about what drives women of the Channel Country? Or you? You know, that's probably too big a question. You. Is there anything I haven't asked you about that seems really central to your life and what drives you?

R The country. The life. Community. Your children. Ummm, and I guess I just can't sit down and see things happen. I've got to get in there and sort it out. But I'm not what you'd call a person who rushes there and says 'We've got to do this'. I like to listen to everyone else's opinion and sort it all out like that.

I You're a good committee worker?

R Probably. I seem to be there a bit. And, no, I think it's just the life, full stop. I just love the life because I like stock work even. I used to do a lot of stock work but then once I had my third child I sort of felt 'Oh, okay, I'd better come home and teach him', whereas with the older two, I used to take them and teach them in the vehicle or sit them in the laundry and teach them there, or take them with me down the creek, wherever I was going. So they were a part of me, more so than my younger one, in that they had a wider vision of what was going on, whereas the younger one … I don't know whether it was old age or laziness or what, but anyway he sort of had more formal education at home and I don't think it's done any better for him. In other words, I'm not in agreeance with putting kids in a classroom completely. I think they need to get out and be practical and look after themselves. So that's my way of saying … teaching kids is get them into the practical side of the world and then they can actually see the environment as well. And they can hear Mum and Dad talking about 'Oh, the country's getting a bit dry, isn't it? We'd better get those cattle out of this paddock', things like that. Whereas, if they're in the classroom,

they're not actually seeing it and I think that's where they're losing out, and I would say that's what I did with my younger child. He's lost out on the practical side. He's had the formal education.

I Last question. Floods, droughts, dust storms. Tell me the biggest stories, like the biggest issues you've had to deal with of crises and events from this climate and environment.

R There isn't any, I guess. I suppose … a little boy died in my arms eight years ago and there was just my son and myself there. My husband was away. There was no men on the station. From a motorbike accident. The Flying Doctor wouldn't come down because he was dead, or had died while they were en route, and they said no it wasn't their job any more. That would probably be the biggest thing that changed my life around, in that just to get in there and get something done. And the other time, I guess, was … I've never, ever worried about my children in the fact that if they got sick or anything like that, because I always thought 'Oh, well, I can cope with it'. And they didn't get sick much. So isolation wasn't a big issue there, with my children when they were babies. I think that was probably the biggest one, in the fact that I was by myself, but I've kicked myself into gear and I've got going again, and I keep thinking to myself 'Well, what would he have liked me to do? What can I do for him because he's not here any more?' So I get on with that, and the other thing is my husband crashed his plane two years ago. So that threw me into a bit of a flat spin, and he got out and he said … I was fixing him up on the floor and he said 'Well, do this. Have you packed my bag yet?' and I thought 'Oh, yeah, righto. You're okay. You're going to live' and that was it. So, yes. And looking after the men. You can strangle them one day and kick them up the bum the next day and then if they get sick, well you look after them.

Oh, and we lost Bobby Moses. How long ago was that? He was a white man that was incredible. He was an alcoholic, the worst alcoholic you could ever imagine. He absolutely adored my kids and would do anything for us. He got on the grog and he went to a man and said 'There's a million dollars in there. Would you look after that?' He had nothing in his hand and that person that he went to couldn't see that he needed help, and he perished, and we've never found him. And, yes, that's probably the saddest.

I He was murdered?

R No, he wasn't murdered. He perished. Because he wandered off in the DTs. But he did go to someone and say something that was extraordinary and the person that he said it to didn't realise that he was in the DTs and that he needed help, and that person didn't advise anyone, with the result that Bobby Moses just went off into the country and just perished, and we've never found him to this day. So that's probably the saddest thing.

I And so this was one of the workers on Marion?

R Yes.

I So as the manager's wife, you probably, although you couldn't have done anything, took it to heart in some way?

R Mmmm. It was sad because we haven't found him yet. We haven't actually put him to rest, you know. Those are the sort of things. Those are the sad things. With Matt, Matt's the little boy that died. He's the sort of a person, that it's something that's got me going.

I This is not … you were with Liz and … this is not Liz's Matt?

R Yes.

I Matt died in your arms?

R Yes. And my younger son, David, he was the one that brought him home and he was an absolute incredible child, my son. He sat with Matt the whole time. But that to me is a challenge to do something for Matt. And then there's … and my husband was just 'I'll strangle you now', because he sort of crashed the plane and then he started telling me what to do. So, no, I suppose those are the three things, apart from my little grandkid and kids getting married and giving you grey hairs. All those things but I think they're all pretty normal.

I Well you'd better get back and cook for them there men. That was fantastic. Thank you very much.

R By the clock, oh yeah.

I Okay. So just tell me your schedule from now till you go to sleep, Rhonda. What are you going to do?

R I'm going to drive home, which is about three-quarters of an hour and, hopefully, the stew's okay. Thicken the stew. Put the vegetables on for, what, nine of us, and make a pudding for them. And then after tea, wash up.

I What sort of pud?

R Don't know yet. I've got to get home and do it. And probably get something ready for breakfast and then I'll probably go to bed about 10 o'clock because I'll do a few things in the house and that's about it for tonight. And then tomorrow morning it'll probably be … I'm not sure whether it'll be 6 o'clock breakfast or half past six breakfast, and lunches enough for the boys.

I So your husband will tell you what time he needs breakfast to suit the work program?

R Yes. And that's okay. Like, we can start at half past five some mornings. Half past six is our general time but he'll just come in and say 'We'll need breakfast at so and so time and all the boys want lunches today' or 'All the boys will be home for lunch today', things like that. And then out of the blue he'll say 'And you'd better cut some lunch for me too'.

I Okay.

END OF TAPE