INTERVIEW WITH RHONDA ALEXANDER
5 June 2000
(Tape 14_BC_DV)

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.