INTERVIEW WITH ISABEL TARRAGO & SHIRLEY FINN
3 September 2000
Timecode refers to tapes 67_BC_SP
Topics in Bold
TF = Trish IT = Isabel SF = Shirley

TF **So this is Betacam no. 67, it's still DAT tape 24, the DAT's on 36 minutes 9 seconds, and this is the second Betacam tape interviewing Isabel Tarrago and Shirley Finn at Isabel's house, 3 September 2000. 67_BC_SP**

Another part of relationship between black and white, certainly reading things like Dawn May, who's written about the history of Aboriginal people in the pastoral industry, talks lots about sexual relationships between black and white – a lot of it pretty ugly. She talks about a history of station gins and … but going back to the period that you're familiar with, how did things go?

IT **Race Relations/Intersex**

19:01:28:04 Ummm on the station, we didn't have that much problem, I don't think on Glen Ormiston, but throughout the Channel Country you'd have ummm, you'd have people … you'd have big camps, for instance, in Boulia. We'd come in for the races, come in for the rodeos or whatever carnival you like ummm and a lot of people used to ummm talk about the managers from different stations going down to the blacks' camps, so to speak, just on dusk. They'd go down there to see one of the nice girls, fool around and probably stay there, and then just on sunrise you'd see them going. Ummm a lot of that happened and ahhh and when these girls had the babies and all that, weren't helped. They were forgotten. They had to rear the kids up to themselves and ahhh you know a lot of people don't know these things but there is a lot of people out there – managers probably, drovers, you know well-to-do men, that have been down that road, been to the blacks' camps just for the young girls.

TF And did that set up, then, a competition between the white wives and the black women in the camps, or was this more something that was when white

men were out there single? Because I know, for instance, now some of the women, like the managers' wives would talk about bad blood, bad feelings between they and young women now working in the stock camps. I'm wondering how that influenced relationships between women, black and white.

IT 19:03:48:08 A lot of the men were married men at the time. Ummm I think there was some ill-feeling there towards them but a lot of them, I think, just got on with their lives ummm and sort of forgot that it happened.

TF So it was just accepted. It was just part of the …?

IT **Women/Work/Aboriginal**

19:04:18:16 Yeah, and I think, you know, what you're talking about, Trish, I think there is some part of the ummm women in the stations who really can't accept that their husbands did fool around and I guess that's something, you know, that you have to come to terms with and, yeah, it does leave a nasty feeling in your blood, I guess. I mean, it's one of those things because most of these job camps never had the women other than … black women were very good stock, stockwomen, and they were actually helping ummm the family too, you know, because you must remember that in those days they never got paid and it was family basically getting together in groups. And some of the women did go out and help and ummm you know, like my mother, for instance, but it wasn't an instant there that she fooled around with the men and that but she was actually in a situation where she could have, could control the process, and well she was in a powerful position too because she was normally the cook. And, you know, when you're in these positions, you're in a powerful position like the cook. I mean, because if you didn't cook, I mean, no one would get fed and …

SF I believe that …

IT She had young girls working with her, our mother …

SF She used to bring them over to, from Dajarra …

IT Or Boulia.

SF From the camp.

IT From the camps and that and I mean …

SF **Gender Relations/Race Relations**

She virtually ran the station while the manager was away. He'd go away ummm to the bores. A bore might break down. He'd be camped out there for a couple of days and she was left on her own at the station with nobody.

TF Where would the manager's wife be?

SF Well, he didn't have one.

IT He didn't have one.

SF He didn't have ummm he was a single bloke ummm and ummm …

IT **Gender Relations**

19:06:23:20 And the companion … the wives, you know, managers start I don't know when, but the managers started getting married and coming on stations, you know. It was a fairly lonely lifestyle ummm and managers started to bring their wives on board then, which really did impact on Aboriginal women because women were already at the stations, so the wives took over the jobs …

SF As cooks.

IT … as cooks, so there was, you know, not only ummm relationship processes sexually, there was a economic relationship that white women were taking over the role.

TF So Granny Brown, having been out there much earlier this century, you're saying would have been unusual, and that the standard practice of managers having wives came later?

IT Yeah.

SF 19:07:24:20 I think, in the early part when Mother was growing up there was a lot of the older ones, the older managers and their wives that were there and then down the line ahhh you got the single ones, the young ones, who ummm have just taken over from the older managers ummm and they've married ahhh people like … people from Boulia and the manager now on Glen Ormiston ummm yeah, well they do everything. There's no need to have ummm Aboriginals out there working.

TF What you're talking about there, I think, is that the pastoral industry over the last five or six decades has come to employ fewer people.

SF Yes, that's right.

TF Do you want to talk about how did the pastoral industry shift over the last fifty years?

IT 19:08:18:10 When we were on the stations, ummm they were dentured by an Act, you know. All the Aboriginal people that lived on stations were under an Aboriginal Act which is that that whole process of welfare, ah of money being sent in to your nearest police station, Boulia, Urandangie, whatever, and really those stations were built on labour, on you know free labour.

TF Now what's shifted that?

IT **Pastoral Industry/Aboriginal Labour**

19:08:57:04 What shifted that was the equal opportunities of wages, equitable wages for everyone. And what shifted there was what you've just heard in the last couple of weeks, Malcolm Fraser give the memorial speech on Wavell Hill, the Goorinji elder. Now he was the man, the Goorinji elder, that changed the face of Aboriginal people working on properties, on pastorals, and he challenged, because they were all … they all went on strike. So that history of Wavell Hill actually changed the face of pastoral employment, which meant that they had to pay Aboriginal people for their

service. And that's what Malcolm Fraser was talking about. He still didn't realise that, you know, stations were under this process of Crown, you know, politician … oh, Crown what do you call them, Crown legislation. When that case came to fruition, it was evident that managers, these station managers, who own these stations, could not afford to pay all of us, you know. They could not afford, so what they did, they removed everyone '65 we packed the old red Dodge. 19:10:25:04

SF Yeah.

IT But we went up to Jimborella.

SF That's right, yes.

IT That's our new state place that we stayed and Arthur Price was there. An old station manager.

SF And Barrum Nathan.

IT **Race Relations/Aboriginal Labour**

19:10:37:00 And Barrum Nathan, so Barrum was an Aboriginal man and worked with our father and he sort of said … you know, because this was a shock to our family. Well my Mum and Dad worked thirty years and never got long service, you know, of all that. So we went to Jimborella, what, about six hours' drive or … it's on the other side of Roxborough. So we all arrived up there with our, just a truckload of things, and then my Mum and Dad stayed there but I think when that happened my father's heart just collapsed. I mean, he was a man that worked all these stations and when equal pay, they couldn't even look after him. Didn't even make an effort to look after my father and mother. Not even an effort. So we moved.

SF And from there we …

IT We went into the … she went in as a cook, that's what she learnt. As a cook, she took up all the hotels.

SF Hotels. She cooked in Mt Isa, ummm …

IT Boulia.

SF Yeah, Boulia.

IT Cloncurry.

SF All that, all over. Went to Mt Isa and that's where we sort of settled, there. We went to ummm Isabel from there she ummm …

IT I didn't go back to school.

SF … she ummm went to Batoni's chemist and worked in Batoni's chemist. Both of us worked in Mt Isa Mines in the mess and ummm …

IT '65 I think, wasn't it?

SF I think it was the sixties, yeah.

TF Going back, to understand this you've got to go back. Where was your mother's traditional country and where was your father's traditional country?

IT **Traditional Aboriginal/Native Title**

19:12:24:00 Glen Ormiston. They were born and bred on Glen Ormiston.

SF On Glen Ormiston station.

IT My father's down number six bore, down near Carlo, and my mother was born at Meetukka. So that's our traditional ground. So, you know …

SF Glen Ormiston is our home.

IT That's our home.

TF And did your parents participate in any way in traditional ceremonies associated with that country?

IT 19:12:52:10 Oh, yeah. They were the leading … My mother was the leading ceremony singer and my father was a senior law man.

TF So where was your parents' traditional country? Your Mum and your Dad?

IT 19:13:07:07 Glen Ormiston station. Ummm my father is born number 6 bore, that's down near the Carlo end of Glen Ormiston ummm where all the is. That's our dreaming. And my mother at …

SF Meetukka.

IT … Meetukka. Old Glen Ormiston. So where Glen Ormiston's sitting now, that's the new Glen Ormiston.

SF Because they had a big Aboriginal camp there.

TF And did your parents, either of them, participate in traditional responsibilities for that Glen Ormiston land?

IT Oh, yeah. Very, very … my father was a senior law man. Ummm my mother was a ceremonial woman who ummm did all the songs and danced and … yeah, we're from very, very high law people and all our family, my Dad's four other brothers, all law men, and ummm …

SF Well respected.

IT … well respected.

TF So how did they manage to combine those traditional responsibilities with their work on Glen Ormiston?

IT **Pastoral Industry/Aboriginal Ceremony**

19:14:20:02 Well, they worked it ummm and these are all family in the camp. I mean they were all law men in the camp. This is how my father had his ummm mustering camp. He had all the law people and that there. They did all their station work and when the season finished they all went and did ceremony. And they were already there, you know, they were in the bush. They could just move and gather there for ceremonies and that. We've been, Shirley and I have been to a big ceremony there.

SF 19:14:52:10 Big dances when we used to go up to Jimborella for ummm Christmas ummm not often we used to go away because ummm at Christmas

time on the station, one year all the ringers and that, they'd go away to their homes because you had jackaroos there who'd come from Sydney, Brisbane ummm that couldn't even ride a horse, and Dad, our father used to teach them shoeing, mustering ahhh getting to know the country. And many a time you'd get jackaroos out there that would go off on their own, get lost and ahhh you wouldn't be able to find them and Dad would go out and find them and they'll tell him, 'Oh yes, we've killed a cow, ate the raw meat, killed something else, ate that raw'. Had no matches or anything like that. Then, of course, you couldn't light fires either because it'd … sometimes there we'd ummm it wouldn't rain and you'd have bushfires and everything like that. But yeah, we'd go down the big camp, watch the ceremonies down there, and ahhh we'd always … the old ladies would walk us half way because it was really dark. They wouldn't let us go on our own. 19:16:12:22

TF What you're saying is there'd be times of the year when the pastoral industry didn't need the labour?

IT 19:16:22:14 Yeah. It stopped on certain areas because you had to have time for the cattle to fatten up, so you don't, you know, you don't muster all year round and certain times of the year, you know, cattle would just be on grazing and everyone would just leave and just, you know, get your break, have a break.

TF Dawn May has had instances where stations have actually given Aboriginal people big carts to go off for ceremonies. Did you ever hear anything like that?

IT No, we had the sulky. We had our own sulky.

SF Yeah, we had our own big wagon.

IT And that dray, it's there at Glen Ormiston. It's out the front. That's my father's …

SF Big wagon.

IT … big wagon out the front.

TF So how would they have bought that without cash wages?

IT 19:17:14:18 That was ummm … this was that exchange program that I call in the bush. And Dad used to do a lot of work for a lot of managers and people like Sandy Anderson, his father, old Bill Anderson, wasn't it?

SF Billy Anderson.

IT Billy Anderson who owned Tobermory, now Sandy would confirm that. Like Bill would say to Dad, send word over to Dad to say, 'Come in, we need some help with all these cattle,' and he'd go in and, see, people like that would give. Dad had his own, you know, own horses, his own stock, and ummm I mean I don't know where the sulky came from but I'd imagine that it was given to him ummm in exchange of him doing some sort of work for them. Because they weren't allowed to pay him.

SF See with that wagon, big wagon they had, was a ummm he used that for brumby shooting and they were both, Mother and Father were both drovers as well. So that was a way of getting around because they didn't have cars.

TF When you said your mother was a significant … I don't know whether you used the expression 'law woman', but you said … what did she have particular responsibility about? I'm wanting you really to just explain about

IT **Traditional Aboriginal**

19:18:42:04 Well, her significance, my Mum is from … she's a rainmaker and that's her dreaming and she started the ceremonial songs. Someone has to start them, so the ceremonial song is your first place of entry, and that's an important process because you really have to do a lot of work for, you know, the songs and these are ceremony songs so it's only heard for ceremony and you've got to know a repertoire of songs. And our mother could just, you know, she spoke five languages, so she had such a ummm an intellect of language and yet she couldn't write English. I mean, that's irrelevant. But this, you know, woman was the pinnacle for any ceremony.

TF And she had responsibility, was it

IT No, that's my mother's father.

TF Right, what is

IT **Pituri**

19:19:57:10 Pituri is a narcotic drug. That's in the white terms of reference because Pam Watson told me. I didn't know that. Pituri is a narcotic drug but pituri is also a ceremony drug and it's my grandmother … my father's mother's dreaming, and it is our dreaming now, and we are the holders of that law. And I know for a fact that people do go down and try and cut pituri. When we last went down to the pituri place, there was nothing harvest because no one's using it now ummm and I know Pam went down there to try and get the seeds to try and propagate it so, you know, it can be grown out of the area, but it just didn't survive. So it must need that whole sand dune, you know …

SF Sand hills.

IT Sand hills to grow but it also needs a harvest. We're not doing that ceremony any longer. Shirley and I have got the song. My mother sang my grandmother's songs. We've got it on tape. We know the songs. It's on tape, recorded, so you know. The people can't claim that area because that's our area and it's the significance of that.

TF The Georgina River was very important to the pastoral industry but could you explain. It had significance too for the trade in pituri didn't it?

IT **Channel Country: Water**

19:21:30:20 Oh yes. Pituri was traded across traditional boundaries and in our ceremony, we have two dreamings - and the Arepa. Arepa's a dog and the dog actually carries the pituri in its mouth and it travels the sand dunes right up to Lawn Hills. And that's where that dreaming track goes. It goes along the sand, the old Simpson Desert rabbit fence, right along the sand dunes, right up to the Lawn Hills National Park, and the significance of

that is dreaming pathways. Now for the white people, the Georgina never dries. It's always a water that passes through there and it runs into the Mulligan, it runs into many other, Diamantina, many other rivers that it goes into but it's a significant place for pastoralists because it's always the watering hole for their stock. But it was also significant for us because it was our survival. We travelled the Georgina to do our ceremonies and ummm it's that, you know, where's there's water there's food. So it is a pathway of two cultures.

TF So white and black have valued the same places.

IT **Race Relations**

19:23:04:24 Yeah, for different reasons. And once the pastoralist takes the reason that their stock is more important to human, well then that's where the rivalry starts. But it hasn't because we've all used it and I think we can still use it if we understand our terminology of how do we learn to handle the landscape in which we live in. Because that's the fundamental reason why pastoralists, in our time, got on so well. Because they could understand the reason. When our family wanted to go and do their ceremonies and be very proud Aboriginal traditional people, we were allowed to do it but it's when someone says you can't do that is when they overstep the mark and says that my, you know, the white culture is more superior than the black. It's when we get into trouble.

TF The picture I'm getting in my head, and I'm interested whether you agree with this, is we're not talking progress here, we're talking with complex mixture, like when your parents were working on Glen Ormiston they were under this horrific Act, they weren't getting cash wages, somebody could hit your mother with a bough switch or whatever, and yet on the other hand, they were living on their traditional country. Now, there's wages, there's legal rights or whatever, and yet you two don't go to Glen Ormiston.

IT No.

TF How do you understand that passage of history, positive and negative?

IT **Topsy Hansen**

19:24:49:14 With sadness, I think, but it … the thing that really helped us was that they allowed ummm like the company stakeholders, or shareholders … Glen Ormiston's shareholders actually allowed, because Bill Fraser was on the managing board of directors then and I said to Bill, 'We've got to take …' well Mum actually told Bill. Mum knew Bill very well because Mum actually gave Bill the history, you know, he's a young fellow ummm that didn't know much history of the stations and Mum said to Bill, 'You make sure my ashes go back home, Bill,' and he said, 'Topsy, I'll always do that'. So that's when we went, when Mum died. I think that was ummm something that allowing her ashes to go back to her birthplace was a very significant ummm process for us, but even for her. But I think our, you know, with the new managers and that, you can't go back. They can't go back into that history because they don't know it, they didn't live it, they don't know it. And I don't even know if it was safe for them, you know, the new managers. But ummm …

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TF Let's go back a bit. Who owns Glen Ormiston? Legally owned, leaving aside traditional owners. But when you were kids, who owned Glen Ormiston?

IT 19:26:17:06 Mrs Fraser from Muldoolin owned Glen Ormiston, owned it. So that's where the Fraser family ummm but Bill senior, because he was the, he was one of the elders.

SF Yeah, I think it was Collins and White.

IT Who they married into.

SF Yes.

IT That reign of ummm will give you the history.

SF Yes it was Collins and White Company but then it was broken down into a pastoral …

TF NAPCO took it over, I think, didn't they?

SF Yes, but it …

IT **Race Relations**

19:27:02:12 Yes, but that's after she died. Mrs Fraser owned it. In her will she said never to remove the blacks from here. They are always to have a place in their, Glen Ormiston, because I think that she realised way back that, you know, when somehow through that whole history of families when they bought it, and when, I think when she died – she was killed at Muldoolin just down here near Beaudesert in a car crash – not long after that, I think they kept it on for a while but then they sold it and shareholders took over. I don't know the history all that much.

TF She was a relative of Malcolm?

IT Yeah, she was Malcolm Fraser's aunty and that's how Malcolm came out to Glen Ormiston all the time because Mother kept saying, you know, when Malcolm was Prime Minister ummm …

SF He was only a young fellow then.

IT Yeah, when he came out.

SF Actually I didn't know that until I read it in the book.

IT **Topsy Hansen/Malcolm Fraser**

19:28:09:18 Yeah. Well Mum used to show off with him because I used to work in Foreign Affairs in Canberra and I said ummm … he'd say, 'Bring your mother around,' because he was Prime Minister, and she'd go to Parliament House and he'd be showing off like a, you know, prized peacock in the House, at Parliament House in Canberra, and he'd always acknowledge Mum. And he took her to, you know, the very posh dinner

place up there, Parliament House dinner, you know, where they have the … Mum would be welcome and see one of the things, Trish, when Aboriginal women looked after these young charge kids, young kids, they spoke language too. There's another friend of mine that, who's the major of Burketown Shire Council, she had an Aboriginal woman working. All of her kids speak so it's nothing unusual for the young white kids to come out and talk language with all of us, because they weren't ostracised, you know, they were embraced, and I think Malcolm felt very, very ummm at home with my mother because he was always very fond of her and so did Bob Katter senior. Mother looked after his kids and, you know, Footes from Mt Isa Mines, Batoni. These are all the people … 19:29:37:10

SF Tony, Tony McGrady.

IT Not Tony, we didn't have Tony McGrady.

SF Oh not out there but she worked with him in Mt Isa.

IT Yeah, she worked in Mt Isa but didn't look after his kids. But old Bob Katter senior …

TF So how was it, if Malcolm Fraser's aunt has said the Aboriginal people are always to stay here. That wasn't what happened.

IT 19:30:32:08 I don't know, Trish. That's what my Mum told me and I think, in the end, you know, the Fraser family ummm I mean these stations are so huge and so big and I guess, you know, they've got a business enterprise to think about and it's quite hard to maintain the stations as they were and, you know, the beef I think too, at that time, that things … the dynamics just changed. I mean, I wasn't very interested and I don't suppose Shirley and those, we all went our different ways.

SF **Pastoral Industry**

19:31:11:10 And I think, too, you have ummm ummm the old station manager, old Martin Hayward, at that time, when he left he knew all the

Aboriginals like the people in the camps, they moved away. Ummm everything sort of changed with new managers and the way they managed things. Helicopters took over. Motorbikes took over. There was no need ummm for the Aboriginal stockmen, or any stockmen. Maybe just the odd jackaroo who wants to come out and learn how to ride a horse, you know.

TF So the pastoral industry came to need much less labour in total?

SF Yes, I think so.

IT 19:32:05:00 I think you find that everywhere. But it was very sad, Trish, that, you know, our parents couldn't even get long service and …

SF Yeah, Dad worked there thirty years Mum was the cook. Our mother was the cook for twenty-eight years.

IT And you have got that and, you know, that's what I keep saying to Shirley that even our sister Bessie, I mean you know you don't hear much of us talk about Bessie because she was already gone …

SF Yes, she was …

IT … and moved on into another station. She was at Roxborough with Mary Robbins …

SF Mary and Bill Robbins.

IT … and then moved into …

SF Then after they left there, she went to Cloncurry.

IT … Cloncurry. You know, so she had another life.

SF And our brother, he – George – he went, he lived in Boulia because he was one of the first Aboriginal jockeys ummm to do the country. He never rode metropolitan or anything like that. He was out in Boulia, Dajarra, riding horses there.

TF And you said, Shirley, that you went off to boarding school when you were little but you ended up doing stock work as well. How did that work?

SF 19:33:20:14 Well, I used to … when we used to go, went to boarding school, I'd go home during Christmas and ummm help Mum in the house doing odd jobs and that for pocket money and things and ummm we used to just … every time Christmas came, we'd just go horse riding, you know, mustering cattle with Dad and things like that.

TF So what year would we be talking now? Approximately.

SF Probably back in the fifties. Fifties and sixties.

TF Was this riding just for pleasure or was it part of the work of the property?

SF **Physical Hardships**

19:34:08:12 Pleasure and part of the work ummm and helping Mother ummm in, because she was the cook. She was the only woman other than the camp that ummm was in charge of the station and ummm to help her out and … because in those days you didn't have washing machines and it was a big boiler that you put all the clothes in, stoke the fire up and you'd starch everything. You'd starch sheets and all those years they weren't coloured sheets, they were white sheets and, you know, in the red dust you'd be racing around trying to shut the house up to stop the dust from getting in. But, yes, I'd help Mother on the station many times at Christmas time. But then, of course, we'd only come home at Christmas time. We wouldn't come home three times a year. 19:35:13:20

TF Were you paid for that work?

SF Yes, a little pocket money. We'd get … that would be our Christmas … we'd go into town then and buy ummm our Christmas, do our Christmas shopping.

TF And how was it, you were at private schools, that obviously took cash. Where did the money for your education come from?

SF Mum and Dad worked.

IT And then we got … 19:35:43:18