

**AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY BERNARD O'NEIL WITH MR MAX O'NEIL OF PARK HOLME, SOUTH AUSTRALIA ON THE 14TH OF OCTOBER 2004 IN REGARDS TO THE PROJECT ON THE HISTORY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA AND ALSO THE HISTORY OF THE ANIMAL PLANT CONTROL COMMISSION, AND MAX'S CAREER IN THE PEST PLANT AUTHORITY.**

[Note that the interview was recorded at a time when Mr O'Neil was experiencing some memory loss: the transcript should be read accordingly. Mr O'Neil did not provide comments and corrections to May 2007.]

**Tape 1, Side A**

It's the *Pest Plants Act*.

[0:45] Thanks, Max. Perhaps if we could begin with your full name and date of birth and a little bit of the personal background – the Max O'Neil story.

Yes, righto. Joseph Maxwell O'Neil. I don't use the Joseph side of it. That was my father's name. He didn't survive World War I, made it a bit awkward for some time, but the Repat. were fantastic and looked after me and my sister, younger sister.

You were born in the wartime, World War I?

Yes, 1916.

The date?

That I was born? February the 16th, which means that in three months or so I'll be 89 – that's a long way away.

Good innings. Your father was a soldier in the war?

Yes, that's right. Army bloke.

You were raised by your mother?

Yes.

Living in Adelaide?

Yes. We lived with my grandfather for a period of childhood. Then we went to live in Torrens Park in a war service home.

Torrens Park would have been a bit of an open area?

(laughs) Yes. There were three houses on Torrens Park.

Did you have some boyhood experiences that you remember about that time?

Not really, other than the abuse that used to fly backwards and forwards between the kids in our district and those ones that went to the college.

Scotch College?

Scotch College, yes. Walked through the middle of Torrens Park, close to our place. I'm really joking about that: there was no abuse, but some rivalry. I don't think we quite made the distance.

The open area at that time: were you wandering in the hills, wandering around the suburb and so on?  
Yes.

You were able to get out and about pretty freely?  
That's right, yes. It was a lot more (laughs) casual in those days.

[3:35] What about your schooling? Were you interested in school?  
I went to Mitcham School for a start.

Mitcham Primary?  
Yes. Then I went to Urrbrae Agricultural High School the first year it opened. I went from there, after the first year, to Roseworthy Agricultural College.

You say you went to Urrbrae in the first year it opened ...  
Yes.

... that's your first year of secondary school?  
Yes. Oh no, no. I went to a technical college for a while. I was 15 when I switched. I was going to follow my uncle through fitting and turning and things. Went for a holiday with my mother's sister in Victoria and got the farming bug, so I went to Roseworthy College. (laughs)

I was wondering how that came about, that interest in farming, because it's ...  
Yes, I'm sorry about that.

No, that's alright. That's why I was asking before about the local environment, whether you were out and about doing things.

The college there was a fantastic upbringing, really. It wasn't easy. We did 8 hours' lectures one week, 8 hours a day, and the following week we did 8 hours on the farm, and some of them were difficult: 40 cows to milk, 10 of them by machines – they were brand spanking new – and the rest were done by hand; and 50 horses.

Were you living at the college?  
Yes, it was a live-in. They were kind enough to let us off one weekend a month to go home – a weekend was from Saturday morning to Sunday afternoon.

What were you studying? Was it a particular course?  
Diploma of Agriculture.

Were there other courses at the time?  
Everything to do with agriculture and whatnot. There was science and chemistry and all those sort of things as are applicable to agriculture.

So it would have been a general sort of training?  
Yes.

By that stage were you interested in being a farmer or working on the land?

Yes, really, I suppose. I didn't have any real direction in those days; I just wanted to get involved with farming. We had a lot of sidelines there: we had a football oval and played in the Gawler Association, same with cricket, and there was a .303 rifle range, swimming pool, so there was lots of fun as well.

So it was a little world ...

Mind you, we played in all these things in the Gawler associations. Every Saturday afternoon we used to sit around and talk about how we nearly won! (laughs)

That's a sort of student life!

(laughs) The minister came out every Sunday and carried out a church program – except for the Catholic lads (three or four of them); they galloped off into Gawler in a horse and cart.

It sounds like it was a bit of a student life where you participated fully in the campus.

Yes, that's right. There was no mucking about, you had to pull your weight.

Was it a 3-year ...

Yes, a 3-year course.

... course you were doing?

Yes.

This must have been about the depression time.

Yes.

You went to Urrbrae you said for one year?

I was at Urrbrae for a year.

For the one year you'd be about, what, 15-years-old?

Yes, 15.

So you were heading off in that direction of agriculture and you're not going to be a fitter and turner or any other trade.

(laughs) No, no.

That's interesting. Was there any particular pressure at that time, because of the depression, to have a job? As a young kid coming through, what are you going to be doing?; what are you thinking about?

Of course most of the kids' parents were out of work so it wasn't so much what you wanted to do, it was what you could do.

Do you think that might have been a factor in your mother sending you over to stay with her sister? To get you interested in something like farming?

No. That was just a Christmas holiday thing from the ordinary school. We used to go there each year from childhood.

I got the impression from what you said before that it was a special trip you'd made, not a regular holiday.

No, no. I was just wandering around in circles there.

[10:00] OK. The Roseworthy experience: with your studying for the diploma, what expectation did you have about a career or a job or an occupation?

I was going back down close to where my auntie was, of course, where I learnt the farming bug, which I did. I went down and worked at Bil??? Station for a while and went to a number of places around the place and finally the war broke out.

Where was the station?

[Billings?] Station?

Whereabouts?

That's in the Lower South East; it's this side of Naracoorte. There I met my wife.

Perhaps you should tell that story.

A farmer's daughter. (laughs)

She was the farmer's daughter?

Yes. I was a lucky guy. We were together for almost 60 years. Terrific lady, mother and wife.

You met in favourable circumstances.

Yes.

It perhaps gave you extra incentive to make some more trips there!

(laughs)

How much farming experience did you gather post-college?

I worked for five or six years before the war broke out and ...

You were working on the farm ...

On farms, different farms, yes. I went and bought an old truck and went superphosphate carting at one stage. That's fairly solid going. A bag of super in those days weighed 187 pounds. That's about 13 stone so I was a bit ... I was a bit upside-down. (laughs) I should have been on top of the bag instead of the other way around.

Did you have a strong physique, a strong constitution then?

Yes. Perhaps I didn't come out too well on that because at the end of the football season an old chap there, a farmer who'd come here from Germany, said to me, 'If you go super carting next year I will cut your bloody throat'. (laughs) So I apparently didn't do well at footy that year.

These sorts of jobs, were you just doing them on a casual basis for whoever needed you?

No. The super ... What do you mean? Are you talking about the super?

Were you working for different farmers?

No, no. I only worked for three different ones, but they were not seasonal work. They were full-time work. But they swapped people around a bit in those days. Some people stayed in the one spot for a long time. But some of the things were a bit hard to take. You'd go and play football every Saturday, for instance, and you'd sit on the back of a truck with their legs apart and a bloke sitting there, you've got probably 10 or 15 sitting in the back of that truck and we'd go across to Edenhope about 50 miles away sitting on the back of the truck and get back to Frances, and we'd untie the horse from the fence and the bloody thing would gallop all the way (laughs) the last three miles, which was the last thing I wanted, of course, after ...

So you picked up a range of skills – the horses and operating machinery.

Yes.

[14:35] You mentioned, Max, the superphosphate carting. The use of superphosphate – fairly well-accepted by then?

Yes. It was widespread, yes. You couldn't do without it, of course: a hundredweight to the acre or something like that.

Did the nature of the soil in that area need a fair bit of super.?

That's common for Australia needing superphosphate particularly and also nitrogen and potash.

I was wondering whether that early experience in the super., if it had stimulated any interest for you in the soils and the nature of the land?

You were living with it, on the land and with the land, it was your future so you had to realise that you were working on something that was important.

But you were perhaps different to some of the farmers and the cockies and so on, whereas you had a diploma and you'd come from college.

But the diploma wasn't really coming out of popularity for the farmers ...

I was going to say in a sense you had a ...

That's right, yes.

... in what you'd done whereas most of the farmers are practical people.

That was a part of the shifting around a bit, but the farmers were clued up pretty well, reasonably well, at that stage of the game. It was a good life.

[16:30] You went through you said for five or six years before World War II came along.

Yes.

Did you sign up for World War II, enlist?

Yes. I spent 5 years and 23 days.

In what arm?

In the Air Force. Like all the rest of us that didn't end up being pilots we were hopping mad when we found we were wireless operators, as I was. But when it's all settled down you all had a job to do and you went ahead and did it. I was 2 years in Britain and 6 months in Western Australia, Coastal Command, and 12 months in ...

Papua-New Guinea?

New Guinea, yes. At the end we were flying along heading to a place called Coraview[?], a group of the AIF there about to take the place, when our radio jumped into gear and told us that the war was over, but to carry on with our strike because, as we knew, there was a unit of the Sixth Division there perched on the ridge waiting to take over and you couldn't leave them there. So we bombed from about 3000 ft then we dropped down to rooftop height or treetop height – (laughs) there were no roofs there – and flew around and strafed the place while the Army went in and attacked it. Some of those blokes were killed but we couldn't find how many that were killed because the war was over and nobody was prepared to talk. Coming back was quite amusing, on the way back to base, because we had an unauthorised passenger on board. We couldn't really say no. It was completely not supposed to do this because if you were shot down and that bloke was killed, his family could sue the pilot and that sort of thing. So we were told: I've never heard of it happening. Anyway, we got ... He never said a word, an Air Commodore; of course, that's a very big bloke. He had been in World War I, right at the end, and he'd just stopped flying when the war finished. He'd spent the whole of the war in Melbourne with Bomber Command, the boss of the joint. He didn't stop talking ... (laughs) We got out of the aircraft and he exploded!

What was he doing on the plane anyway?

Just sitting there. He bludged a ride and went with us.

He wanted to go on the raid?

He did, yes, which was a quite odd sort of thing, but what do you say to an Air Commodore?

What was the name of the place you were ...?

Coraview[?]. Odd that there was a ridge, that's about all you could say for it.

That was in New Guinea?

Yes.

So the war was over and you had to return to Australia.

Yes. That wasn't any difficulty. It took us too long to get back there. You couldn't catch a boat tomorrow. (laughs)

You were in a bit of a hurry. What did you plan to do when you ... What did you think you would do when you came back?

I went down the South East again.

Got back into the farming life?

Yes, to some extent. Then applied for a soldier settlement property, which was the biggest disaster I ever got into.

Had you married before the war or during the war?

No ... what was that?

Had you married?

Yes. We were engaged and were about to get married when the war broke out so we tossed up. I thought it would be a bit silly to get married straight away and then go and get killed or some damn thing, but Barbara saw it the other way around. So we got married and it took longer to get into the Air Force than you'd think, damn near 12 months by the time they got organised etc. So our first child was born just as I was about to leave to go to Britain. We ended up with three of them.

So you were then going off after the war to soldier settlement with a wife and ...

And three kids.

... and three children, by the sound of it.

Yes.

[23:00] Because we're talking here about agriculture rather than the personal side, perhaps if we could just explore a bit more about your soldier settlement experience. You said it was a big disaster ...

Yes. You had to take whatever property that you were offered, which is nothing wrong with that, really. But the chap that got the block that I eventually got, he apologised almost immediately and said that he couldn't stay on it because his wife's father wanted her to come back to New South Wales and he was a big landowner and he'd given them the property. So I inherited it: the worst thing that ever happened to me, because it was a terrible property.

Where was this?

At Penola, near Penola.

Near Penola. How big was it? How big was the property?

Six hundred acres, if you counted the swamp and the trees that were on it. I pigheadedly stuck with it for 7 years and then handed in my lease and went back to Adelaide with less money than I started off with.

When did you take up the land? You had it for 7 years.

I've forgotten the exact year it was.

46, '47, something like that?  
Yes, round about there, yes.

Because the war finished in '45, you more or less came straight back.  
No, it was a bit longer than that. It took 5 or 6 years to get ... No, it was 7 years to get the settlement.

Really?  
This was the second settlement that I was offered.

That was the second one. The second one was at Penola?  
No. What I meant to say is that there were groups of the settlement things offered periodically to the people. It didn't all happen at once. This was the second intake.

I'm with you, OK. So you went back to farming and then some years later took up the soldier settlement?  
No. Oh, I see what you mean, yes. Back working, yes.

After the war, did some farming ...  
Yes, I was just working, yes.

OK. We can look at the dates later on when we get the transcript or whatever. So you were really then in the 1950s when you were on the property.  
On the 1st of February. It's in that book there anyway.

Yes. We'll have a look. There'll be a chance to correct the record. That's helpful just to get that sequence so you came back and a bit of farming again for people, and ...  
Yes. Then I ...

On the soldier settlement block, what were you intending to grow or ...?  
Fat lambs.

Young lambs.  
Yes.

What was it like for growing?  
It was terrible.

Terrible.  
To be a bit technical about it, there was about 300 acres each side of the road. On one side of the road it was quite good country and on the other side it was totally virgin, they'd never seen 300 acres there. There was a lot of swamp there and the rest of it hadn't seen superphosphate in its total life. But when I saw it it looked fabulous and my father-in-law, Barbara's father, was there and he was quite taken with it. What had happened is that there was the virgin country that had never seen superphosphate, as I said, and it was sown to a heavy rate of ryegrass and



clover. It was alright to put the clover in but on raw country like that to add ryegrass is total stupidity. So the following year there was nothing, just some clover but no ryegrass or anything else. I whacked a bag of superphosphate on for seven years and it didn't get any bloody better. On the other side was 32 acres of gums and when I had a look at them obviously they were ... not 32, that's not right, I'll have to look that up. It was only a small ... But I eventually borrowed a line compass from the LDE, which is the crowd that made the ... the government set up ... that developed the blocks, and there was 120 acres of ... there and the first 33 was the thing that was in the *Government Gazette*: how many acres of gums were there and there was, as I said, over 100 acres there. The South Australian scheme wasn't very good, it wasn't good at all. No comparison with the Victorian thing. I had a look at ???LDE?? Station at one stage which was cut up, my grandfather came out from Scotland with his family and – that's my mother's family – he came out there as an overseer on the ???LDE?? Station, way back. They ought to be kicked to death. (laughs)

So there's a little bit of farming in the blood, perhaps.

Yes. It must have twisted the farmer around a bit, though, was half-Scotch and half-Irish. (laughs)

You mentioned the Victorian blocks. I was wondering, did you have a choice of where you might go? Could you have gone interstate if you'd wanted to?

I could have, yes. I'd have had to ... There's nothing to stop me going interstate like that, but you'd really have to go over and take residence there before you had a chance of getting a block, I would think. In my case I could have just gone over there and said, 'I want to try and get on the ???LDE?? station if I can. Please let me have one', and 'My grandfather made this a good place for you'. (laughs)

You were saying 7 bad years on the land: were there good times?

Of course there were, yes. All good people all round and that sort of thing. Towards the last 2 or 3 years my wife was working in the local town and I was out in the pine forest falling trees for a quid and too pigheaded to quit, and eventually the writing was on the wall: if I wanted to continue standing upright (laughs) I'd have to quit.

Max, I was asking about were there good years more in terms of the success of the property ...

Not really.

... with the lambs.

No. The property wasn't there really, because at the end of the 7 years I just handed my lease in and recommended that they cut it in halves and give half each to two adjoining properties which weren't much better than mine, except that they didn't have a swamp as much as I had, all that crook stuff I was talking about. But another bloke put in for it. He lasted 3 years, around

about 3 years, and he tossed it in. The last time I saw it it was a lonely house sitting in the middle of a big paddock and it was owned by the adjoining landowner. It was no longer soldier settler land.

Were the blocks all linked together?

**[33:27] End of SideA, Tape 1**  
**Tape 1, Side B**

[0:05] ... your experiences outside of the farming life, I suppose, the toughness of the land. Were there other people in the area who endured the way you did, just hung in, hung in, hung in?

Yes. On the other side of the main road through from Naracoorte out to Mount Gambier there were soldier settlers and they were dairy farms, small properties, three or four there in a row. In the wintertime they were mostly underwater. Cows were walking around trying to chew tucker and get a mouthful of water at the same time. It was a disgrace, really, the whole bloody scheme. In Victoria if the landowner offered them some land and it was the arse end of the property, if you like to call it that (because that's what they used to say), and it wasn't much good, they'd say 'Alright, we'll take half of that and we'll take the same amount of your good country' and they had their law to do it. So did we, but our people bragged that they never ever used that part of the law. But the Vics weren't as stupid as that: they took half and half and, like I said, everybody was happy. The farmer still had enough because he would have handed ...

These were State-based schemes rather than the Commonwealth?

Yes, they were State-based, yes. Controlled entirely. That was the other thing: I cannot understand why Agriculture wasn't in control of that, but it was automatically put in the charge of Lands. What Lands knew ... didn't know anything about land except how to lease it. (laughs) The chap – what's his name? He was the father of the chap who took over after Dunstan as Premier ...

Corcoran?

Corcoran, yes. He's a nice bloke. His father was a lot bigger than Corcoran was. He approached me one day at ??? and said, 'You're in a hell of a mess. I'd like to take you down to Lands Department and have a yarn to Mr Peters and try and sort things out for you'. I thought 'That might be a good idea', although by that time I was at the stage where I didn't give a stuff whether I stayed on it or not. Anyway, we got in Peters' office and Corcoran said to him, 'I'd like to know what you can do for Mr O'Neil. He's having a pretty rough time'. That's as far as he got. Peters says, 'Absolutely bloody nothing'. No, he didn't say 'bloody'. He says, 'Absolutely nothing. He's the worst settler of this scheme or the First World War'. So Corcoran walked out and left me. I don't blame him. So I cancelled my lease.

Several years later I heard a bit of a rustle in the seat across the desk. I looked up, and there's Peters sitting there with his bloody hands on his walking stick –

Walking cane, yes.

– and he looked at me. He didn't recognise me, of course, and he said, 'I am Mr Peters. I used to be the Director of Lands'. (laughs) I hate to think what I should have ... (laughs) I just quietly said to him, 'I know exactly who you are. What do you want?'. He didn't want anything: he was just reinventing himself. Old bastard.

This is some years later?

Yes.

By then you'd change working careers.

I was working for Agriculture then. (laughs)

[5:10] Yes, when you'd changed. Perhaps we should look at that now, Max, that transition: you obviously made a decision to leave the settlement block ...

Yes, I did.

... your lease was expiring or you were not going to renew.

The first thing I said when I decided to go and have a yarn was to run into Lex Walker, who'd been at Roseworthy College with me. He'd upgraded his diploma to a degree and he was now the director of the ...

He would have been the head.

Yes, he was just below the director, anyway.

The head of a branch, basically.

Yes ... I'll think of it in a moment. He was head of the Division, chief of the Division of Plant Industry. Very senior bloke.

We got there!

Yes. He already knew what strife I'd been in and I got a job without any arguments at all. He suggested that I go into this system because I could go along quietly and I wouldn't be under a great deal of pressure initially, which was a good thing.

Just to clarify things, Max, had you sought out Lex or did you just ...?

Yes, yes.

Sought him out ...

Yes. I was a bit wary about getting in touch with him because I didn't come out of that place with much of a thought about how good the head was, and ...

Did you keep in contact with some of your student colleagues?

Not to a great extent. Yes, I knew what was happening and I went to Old Scholars' dinner at Naracoorte and that sort of thing. But ...

Gives us an idea ... ..

Yes, yes, yes, I knew he was there.

Had you had much contact with the Department of Agriculture?

Yes. Frank Pearson was the local ag. adviser based in Mount Gambier. He used to come around and swear and curse and what have you, predominantly. In fact, he put up so many arguments as to why certain property should be wiped out and all that sort of thing that he was told by the Department to back off and he was to stay away from Lands settlement properties. They didn't do that willingly, of course, they were still owned by the Department of Lands. Now, I'm talking to you but I don't really want this to be done in ... put out in detail, of course.

You'll get the chance when you have the transcript and so on. If you don't like things that's fine. It's good to get some stuff down now and a little bit later we can add more or can take some out – fine, that's part of the process.

It's a disaster in the process of what I thought was a fairly good life and I don't want to dwell on it, that's all it amounts to. That's finished, as far as I'm concerned.

[9:35] I was just wondering – and I meant to ask you earlier when you were doing the super work and so on either side of World War II – whether you had much contact with bureaucracy: Department of Agriculture, Department of Lands?

I used to see fellows like Frank Pearson and so on. But I suppose we were cheeky enough to think we could cope on our own. We should have been able to at that stage of the game.

The Agricultural Bureau: did you rely on them?

Yes.

Did you belong?

In the South East I did, yes. But they weren't all that active at that stage of the game.

Was it something that you belonged to because it was 'everyone belonged' sort of thing or did you ...

No, no.

... or were you active in it?

Yes. We were active in it. At their meetings, of course, usually there'd be a bloke who had been to the College would be the president. We helped other farmers that were there as much as we could.

The Agriculture Bureau is one way of getting information out to the ...

Yes, that's right. Afterwards, when I went back in the Bureau, I used to call in to Bureaus on the way back. They were always pleased to see us and they were able to talk a bit more down to

earth than they had been in other places. I enjoyed the Bureau things. The best people to talk to were over in the West Coast. They're funny people.

It's interesting how you get the regional variations. You've got your South East people, your Riverland people, your West Coast people and they do have different approaches.

Of course, yes. But you can sort those out quite easily enough. You know the soil types that are there and that gives you a pretty good idea what there is and you pick up from other people as to how active one area is. Over on the Eyre Peninsula, for instance, it's a lot more effective than others. It was quite interesting, but hard, hard work. You'd set off to go over to Eyre Peninsula and you used to get a phone call to say, 'I didn't get around to giving you a shout. Can you add me to your list?'. 'All right'. So you'd be 10 minutes earlier or half-an-hour earlier, and you'd probably end up talking at a Bureau meeting at 11 o'clock at night. But it was all good fun. They were all eager beavers. But the Eyre Peninsula people, if they didn't like anything they'd say, 'That's bloody rubbish!'. (laughs) I'd say, 'No, it's not'.

They weren't there to waste their time.

That's right.

[13:20] They'd tell you. We're going to look a bit more at your working career with Agriculture. Perhaps you could pick up there: you've got Lex indicating a job would be available.

Yes. Then he suggested that it would be better for me to approach somewhere that there was a weed section. A part of that was in its infancy. We were just changing to the chemical weeds control at that point. Hector Orchard, who had been at Roseworthy College at the same time as Lex and I were there, he was the boss of that and quite a brilliant bloke. So I fitted in there quite well. But in a very short time Hector headed off to an Agricultural Bureau meeting. He was always running late – overworked – and drove a bit fast and hit a bloody great spoon drain and was killed instantly. Which really mucked things up. One of the typists in the typing pool, Marie Caskey who you'll hear a bit about on your beat, probably, she was an item. They would have got married, but there was a wife in the way that wouldn't nick off (although she'd nicked off a long time but came back). So really there was Marie Caskey in the typing pool and myself and Lex Walker, who was Chief of Division of Plant Industry, to run the show. Of course, Lex had his hands full. But there were a few blokes around like Peter Barrow who was a young graduate from the university who had a lot of common sense, who quite happily helped me quickly get on top of some of the things that I'd lost in the meantime in the farming field, because two-thirds or three-quarters of the farming field, the weed control thing in those days, was straight out farming or cultivation and those sorts of things.

You had a bit of relearning, refreshing and updating your knowledge and so on.

Yes. But at the same time, of course, in the chemical weeds control, that was developing.

Hector Orchard and the Victorians and New South Wales basically had done a lot of talking

together etc. and holding field days and they were developing that fast so I had that side to do as well. Marie, of course, she'd typed all of Hector's work, not only letters but publications etc. So between Marie and I for the next eight months we put together the Weeds Section. She'd just handed me a bulletin which we'd put together – she was in the typing pool, you know, this wasn't her job at all – and we'd just put this thing together and she'd typed it up when in walked Mr Tideman. I proudly showed him this bulletin – probably 20 or 30 pages or something, the book, a full-sized book – and three days later or two days later Don Stacey, the bloke who ran the library and all that sort of thing and was the fellow to do the printing etc. and publishing of the bulletin, he walked into my office and threw a handful of papers down on the table and he said, 'Your name is on this and under Mr Tideman, but it's so bad technically that I will not publish it'. I gave him the spare copy and he said, 'Thanks very much' and went and published. That was my introduction to Tideman and it never got any better. Unfortunately, if ever a man ought to have been kicked to bloody death for ruining his son it was his father, who in the Electricity Trust was known to the troops – not the hierarchy – as 'the original bastard'. And he was. Died young. (laughs) That was good.

[19:20] Perhaps we can explore a bit more about that working relationship when we ... and how that worked. I just want to go back over to a little bit of the time frame – it might be a bit hard so don't worry if you can't think of it – do you know when you started with the Department?

About 1957.

'57, so Weeds was fairly new.

Yes.

How long after you started did Hector Orchard die?

I'd probably been in the Department three or four weeks or something like that. Not enough, not really long enough to learn much from him.

It was more or less immediate.

Yes. I think I explained to you that I had a job ... no, I didn't. The first thing I did, which lasted for a few months, I had to go through and look at a batch, spread around the State, of demonstration plots that were established by the Department and had been for a while I went around and weeded out the ones that were achieving nothing or were outside their usefulness and shut them down. So that might have been 5 months, perhaps, or something. I'd managed to pick up a bit of stuff in between because I knew I was coming in to work with Hector.

So you started on like a probation or ...?

No. Not as far as I know! (laughs) I'd learnt to drink a bit of grog during the war, but that was a very common thing then.

I meant there, though, it's not as if you started on a trial basis to see if you'd be suitable for the job.

No, no. The people that were needed for that sort of thing were pretty thin on the ground at that stage. But to get back to the grog for a moment, I was 24 when I joined the Air Force and I had no alcohol or cigarette [background??] at all. I was a bit of a prude. I didn't think much of people who did drink and did smoke. But after a while, when I got out of the aircraft after each night we got back and the others were having a smoke etc. – not all of them – I gradually got into both habits anyway, which took a while trying to get out of and I periodically dropped back into it. I'm not talking about drinking to the extent where I couldn't stand up or anything like that – although I have to admit that sometimes those things almost happened.

In wartime you're talking more a nerve steadier or ...

That's right, yes.

... a release after flying.

Yes. Not immediately afterwards there was ... not vodka, doesn't matter: one of the wines anyway and brandy and what have you that you could have a drink, but only one glass. That applied to all squadrons. But very, very few. At that stage of the game all I would do is go to bed. Have something to eat – have something to eat first, of course, and coffee and tea.

You reached the start of ...

I'm sorry, I'm wandering a bit.

You've reached the start of the Agriculture Department and you've got touched on a couple of early experiences with the publication and Arthur Tideman and so on. Perhaps we might pick up on that story on our next tape on the next visit.

OK.

Rather than push you too far now.

Just remind me next time that – although I can remember myself – a couple of other blokes came in at that time.

Yes. We'll pick up on this because we've covered a good overview of your ...

Yes. I've been too garrulous.

... farming and now we're ready to go on Agriculture, so ...

I've been too garrulous with a lot of that, but we'll cut that down.

You'll get a chance to look at the transcript here and the transcript ...

That's a good system to do because it saved me worrying about what I shouldn't say because you can cut it out.

[25:00] Yes. No, there's no problem about that. OK, so we'll put a pause on for the moment.

**End of Side B, Tape 1**

**Tape 2, Side A**

**AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY BERNARD O'NEIL WITH MR MAX O'NEIL OF PARK HOLME, SOUTH AUSTRALIA ON THE 19TH OF OCTOBER 2004 IN REGARDS TO THE PROJECTS ON THE HISTORY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND THE HISTORY OF THE ANIMAL AND PLANT CONTROL COMMISSION. CONTINUING THE INTERVIEW OF THE 14TH OF OCTOBER 2004.**

[0:30] Max, last time we just finished at the point where you were joining the Department of Agriculture, having the soldier settler's experience, post-war farming and war experience. You described those experiences of yours. You were just about to start with the story of your work in the Agriculture Department and perhaps we'll pick up there.

Yes, that's fine.

You described how you had the job through Lex Walker ...

I've described that.

... you've described that. What sort of work were you going to be doing in the Department? What was your job?

I was to join with the fellows in the Weeds Section. The main one there, of course, was Hector Orchard. Hector and Lex and I had known each other from way back, even back as far as before the war when we were only kids who spent time at Roseworthy Agricultural College, 3-year diploma course. It was nice to see them again, particularly Hector who was running the Weeds Section and making a great job of it. This was right at the era of the beginning of the pest plant control with chemicals. Previously, and in all my experience, of course, had been cultivation and all those sort of things, farming means of getting rid of pest plants. By the way, they were called 'weed plants'.

'Weeds' or 'noxious weeds'.

Yes, that's right. Lex Walker of course was there, the Chief of Division of Plant Industry.

When you say you were coming in to work on the weeds, what was your position, what was the ...?

Just as a field officer.

A field officer. You weren't an office clerk or an office person?

No, no.

So, working out in the field. With other people?

Yes. There were others in the Weeds Section.

Everybody working as a team?

Not so ... Well, yes, but we worked individually mainly within the team.

Did you have an individual ... each individual have a region, an area to look after?

Eventually, yes. But at that stage of the game, of course, they couldn't point upwards.

Were you based in Adelaide?



Yes. I had a lot to learn for a start. I understood the agricultural side of weeds control reasonably well, everybody else seemed to know something about as well, but the new setup of chemical weeds control was completely not ... I was not on my own with that because even most of the fellows in the Department were really, other than Lex Walker and Hector, nobody else really knew anything about the chemical things, except for one bright spot – a lass in the typing pool and Hector were something of an item and she did all his typing for him so she knew almost as much as Hector did ... Marie Caskey her name was. She went all the way through with us: left the typing pool when we became a statutory authority and after I retired she was still there. (laughs)

[5:20] We'll have to track her down. But how did you go about learning the chemical side of things then? You'd come in new to the organisation and new to this area ...

I was just about to get around to that. Hector went off one day to an Agricultural Bureau meeting up in the north somewhere. He used to travel fairly fast and leave it pretty late, and he hit a spoon drain and was killed instantly. That was absolutely catastrophic as far as the Weeds Section was concerned. He'd been working very thoroughly with New South Wales and Victoria and between the three States they were starting to sew things up pretty nicely. Of course, he went down the drain. Fortunately, Marie had written all his stuff and she knew pretty well as much as he did except for the fieldwork, so that really saved the day. Hector had said a few days before he died, he'd produced a list of a number of bulletins and weeds booklets that we would write and Marie would type. Of course, that left us in a bit of a hole ... Anyway, we plodded on. What's-his-name came across from Kangaroo Island – his name escapes me for a moment and I'll catch it up in a minute – and, apart from a shaky start, he joined the team and came along pretty well. But it was pretty hard going.

One day there Marie handed me a bulletin, a sheet of stuff that I'd put together and she'd tidied up and typed. That was the last of the bulletins and booklets that we set out to write. At that time, about an hour later, in walked our new boss – Arthur Tideman. We were pleased to see him, we'd waited 8 months to see him, but it didn't quite work out that way because I handed him a spare copy of the thing and 2 days later Don Stacey, the librarian who did all the publishing of bulletins and all that sort of thing, walked in and dropped a heap of paper on my desk and he said, 'This has got your name on it as well, but it's so bad technically that I won't publish it'. Arthur Tideman had rewritten that bloody book, straight out of the uni, which is complete stupidity. I doubt if they'd have taught weeds control because it's such a small subject and they had so much other to do. Anyway, that's the way it went.

How long into your time at the Department was this? When you were fairly new or ...?

Yes, it was only a matter – I don't know, it might have been 2 or 3 months I suppose.

So he was the young fellow coming from the uni with fresh ideas and ...?

Yes, to take over from Hector Orchard. Hector had been killed. To follow along that line a bit, he didn't stay a long time in the Weeds Section because – it might have been a year or two – but the position of Chief Horticultural Adviser became vacant as that chap died so Arthur took over in that position but he remained attached to the Weeds Section, of course, through the Weeds Advisory Committee, which was mostly local government people that we were dealing with.

He served on that committee ...

Yes.

... afterwards on that?

Yes. He stayed with that committee right through until we became a statutory authority and after I'd retired. But he had his hands full on his own. But I'll leave that part for a while.

Were there other Agriculture Department people on that committee?

No, they were mostly the ... You've got the copy of it there.

That's a later photo, but the early times were they still local government mainly?

Yes. Its purposes were for local government to give us advice.

I was just wondering how much input the Department had. Did it run the committee, did it provide the secretariat, for example?

No. The Weeds Section ran all that sort of stuff, that was the whole ... it was entirely ... I don't really know how that committee came into being in that form, I don't remember any special conversation about it, but it was something I'm pretty certain that local government may have initiated to get their chatter into the thing.

You showed me the photograph here of the 1975 or about 1975 photograph, and you were on the committee. Do you remember when you joined or ...?

It just depended on what was happening. If we wanted some information from the local government and any one of us in the Weeds Section could whistle them up a bit, although mostly it was done during local government tours around the place. We had to work through local government all the time and that's where the Authority to do the work was.

But were you serving on the committee as such?

No. It's hard to know whether we were on the committee or we weren't. We had a lot ...

You turn up in the photograph with the other committee people so I thought you must be on the committee.

That no doubt was a meeting of the Weeds Advisory Committee, that photograph. I don't remember it being taken but I'm on the thing so I must have been there. (laughs)

[14:10] To go back to the earlier part of your career, Max. You mentioned earlier about chemicals and not having any experience of chemicals for weed control. How did you acquire that experience?

There wasn't a great deal of it and it only came in in bits and pieces. There were always people from chemical companies haunting us with some gunk they wanted us to try out. We were always very happy to have that stuff to try out. That's the way it worked in all other parts of the Department that you'll read when you read that stuff I gave you a while ago regarding this crop spraying thing that I did. A chap wandered in one day from a chemical firm and he said he was looking for one of the blokes in the Ag. part itself, and he wouldn't be there for a few days so I agreed to take it and hand it over to him. But, as always, I said, 'Give us all the information left, right and centre and I'll repeat it to him'. When he'd finished talking to me about it I asked him a few questions and I said, 'Will you give me a tin of it too, please, because I reckon that's what I want'. That's how that became my field, just like that. If it had gone to that other bloke and he used it without telling me, I might never have got round to that.

A lot of learning on the job then ...

You're learning, yes ...

... these sales reps and so on.

Learning all the time. These people were coming round all the time. We were mixed up with chemical firms.

But how many people, how many firms, for example, were ...?

Half-a-dozen, probably. All competing against each other! (laughs)

With different sorts of products?

Yes.

Say 'This one's better than that one', and ...

They would have all sorts of other products too for horticulture and what have you, most of them would. They used to haunt the place pretty solidly in those days.

Were people in the Department and the farming community and so on fairly receptive to the use of chemicals?

Yes, they would be very receptive. A lot of the places were eager beavers to get their hands on the stuff.

Because this was something that was going to improve crop production and crop return.

Yes. All the old things of poisons and what have you have killed a bloody sight more than the weeds that they were supposed to kill. They'd more or less worn their welcome out properly and yet everybody was pretty eager to get into it, as I said a moment ago.

At the work level, did you worry about the poisons, the toxic aspects at all?

No. That's the first thing they told us if they brought in a can of something. If they didn't start with the poison factor of so-and-so we'd stop them and say, 'What's the danger factor?'. Not only from our own point of view, because we would have to do the research work – although it wasn't my job to do research work, but of course everybody, as we got used to the idea, got involved. We didn't call it research work, it was a bit of hit and miss.

Trial-and-error research.

Yes.

Do you remember any cases where you said, 'No, we won't touch that chemical or that product'?

No, I don't think that ever happened – not with me anyway – and I don't think it would have happened with anyone because the chemical companies understood better than we did the poisonous characteristics and they wouldn't foist anything on like that because that would be the last lot they sold.

Was there any need for you to do further studies to perhaps understand the chemicals? Were you encouraged to do some study?

There were pamphlets and booklets explaining all these things that came round. The chemical companies would hand them over or you acquired them in different ways. There was a lot of study going on, yes.

In a formal sense? Did you go back to Roseworthy College or the university to ...?

No. I remember going to Roseworthy College a couple of times for writing schools and that sort of thing, but no I don't think. It was a learning curve most of the time.

[20:25] You said earlier, Max, that your job was in the field and that you all had an area, eventually had an area to look after: where were you based work-wise?

I'd better go a bit further on that. There were field officers based all around the State in different areas. We in the Weeds Section visited those people and worked through them. That brought the whole of the Department together on these things. But we used to talk a lot to farmers at meetings in the local town and the local hall. They used to always finish by 10 o'clock but somehow or another the watch got up to 11 o'clock or so most of the time. We talked to district councils at their meetings, talked to the councillors themselves, and those ... There used to be a bit of language went around most of those! Some of the councillors were very hostile about the idea of extra money, and they were farmers of course, most of them were – shopkeepers and whatever as well, as you'd expect. A very interesting life and I guess we learnt more in the opposite direction than we gave them, perhaps.

How long did you stay in this area of the weeds as a field officer?

I took over from Arthur Tideman when he went to the other job I mentioned a while ago. But the work didn't change much. I still did as much fieldwork, pretty well, as we did before.

[23:15] Did you have a favourite area of the State to work in? Where you were more interested than somewhere else.

No, I don't think I could say that. But I would have to say that the easiest people to work with were over in Eyre Peninsula, the West Coasters. If they thought you were a bloody idiot they'd tell you that you were a bloody idiot. Complete honesty. Now, you don't get that too much anywhere. But it was a very interesting life.

There were lots of history things that came into it. I remember five of us went to the West Coast one time and there were five councils altogether at that meeting. It didn't seem to worry them to drive a couple of hundred miles home at nighttime. That was a very solid meeting on changing the whole history of the approach to weed control, and we had a bit of explaining to do for a couple of abortive attempts we'd made. There was a chap from over the other side of Ceduna out in the [ranges??]. He was in there saying a few harsh words. I remember saying something like, 'That's the silliest bloody thing I've heard this year'. There was quite a big roar of laughter. When the meeting finished the chairman nominated this fellow for a vote of thanks. And Roger Brockhoff – Roger Brockhoff is a very well-known bloke in all sorts of things, and still is, an orchardist just in the foothills there, nice bloke any way you look at him. But that chap himself had a history: he came to Port Lincoln on a Norwegian ship. He was a cabin boy and he'd had enough of mucking around by the bloke who ran the ship so he took off and he went all the way past Ceduna and he was found by one of the pastoralists there and he was nearly dead. They don't know how the hell he got there except that he had to have walked or run. He probably hadn't had anything to eat. The pastoralist there took him in hand and eventually, when he grew up, he became a pastoralist on his own. He was allocated a block of land from Adelaide. He was the bloke that was swearing at me. Very nice bloke.

You really got to meet a few characters.

Yes. But you know ...

Probably not just one story, there must be many stories of humorous things or incidents that you had.

Yes, so many pleasant things. You'd start off talking at a Bureau meeting and it would start off it was due to finish at 10 and you were lucky if it finished at 11. I set off one night about 11 o'clock from a place at Clare and I'd forgotten that I was not going to that Bureau meeting and I'd booked a room in a hotel about 40 miles away, and I got sleepy and shut the engine off and had a little snooze and woke up in the frost. (laughs)

The cool night air. But what about the people you worked with: any particular characters there? You mentioned Hector and Marie and Arthur ...

Yes. They were all characters in their own right. The big thing with the Weeds Section is that we had to work on our own a lot from the Department's point of view.

As a unit?

Yes. They all had their own specialties. Gosh, can't think of his name now; think of it in a minute. He lives up at Kapunda now ... If you really had a couple of rough diamonds that you had to pull into line etc. you'd send Les Hoff. (laughs) He was a big lump of a fellow and he'd sort of tap them on the shoulder and say, 'Now, listen, just back off a little', and he'd just get it done. But that individualism throughout the Weeds Section was a vital factor.

A lot of individual characters, but then again you've got to work as a unit, as a team.

That's right, yes. Again I can't think of his name – the lad who worked in the pastoral lands and particularly went over to New South Wales, because the New South Wales people used to send sheep into the State covered with Noogoora burr, a very solid plant that we didn't have and we didn't want to be infested with it. He used to pull them into here pretty well and he used to meet a chap over there who was the weeds officer in New South Wales. They did some good things together, quite unorthodox mostly. Used to tell a story: the group that ... I must be getting tired or something, I can't think of the district council group, the name of them. Doesn't matter. They decided, anyway, that they'd go through the town and they'd round up all the kids' rabbits round the place and cut their throats. The local – Bill Style was the weeds officer over there – he thought this was a terrible idea and, of course, he was getting crucified left, right and centre. So he went out to see the chairman's wife and he said to her, 'Where's the kids' rabbits?'. She said, 'What do you want them for?'. He said, 'The Department's going to kill them all'. (laughs) That was the end of that story!

We'll have to pick up on some more aspects of the story in the Ag. Department in our next session and that will lead into your time with the Pest Plant Commission and the particular work you did there.

Yes.

So we might narrow the focus a little bit next time in our next session.

Yes. I've only ... That's just off the cuff. I've only been sort of coasting around the edge. I haven't got ...

That's fine. We'll be able to put some dates and ... to things as we go along now. We might put a pause on it for the moment and follow through perhaps in another session.

Yes, right, OK.

Alright, Max, that's got things going again nicely.

Is that what you want to hear?

That's fine for today, yes.

Yes, but that's too much waffle for ...

[33:20] **End of Side A, Tape 2**

## **Tape 2, Side B**

**... FOR THE PROJECTS ON THE HISTORY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND THE HISTORY OF THE ANIMAL AND PLANT CONTROL COMMISSION.  
[28.10.2004]**

[0:15] Max, thanks again for being involved in the project. We've covered a little bit of your personal story and a little bit of your working experience with the Agriculture Department, so perhaps today we could look at a little bit of your work in the pest control area ...

Good.

... and perhaps pick up on your involvement there.

Right, good.

You said you'd been working in the Weeds Section of the Department and that eventually led on to work with the pest control area.

Right. I really caught up with a couple of old friends at that stage of the game: Lex Walker who I'd known for many, many years, way back in the Roseworthy College days, and also Hector Orchard. Lex, of course, now was the Chief of the Division of Plant Industry, and Hector Orchard was the boss of the Weeds Section. So it was nice to get back with a couple of old mates. Hector right back in those days through our Weeds Section he now was a well-known bloke in Victoria and New South Wales. The weed control, of course, was in its infancy. There'd always been by agricultural methods, but the new system of using some of the new chemicals had just come into gear – a fair while back, I suppose – and Hector was really clued up on this but it was a new science really. There were only two or three of these new chemicals. The main ones used at that stage were just 2-4-D and two or three others, and it blossomed out enormously from there on. But to stay with the thing as it is at the moment, there was one other person there and that was Marie Caskey. She was from the typing pool, she used to do all Hector's typing the same as everybody else's, but they had a future between them – that's what it seemed like, anyway. (laughs) But I'd only been with them probably a month at the most when Hector ... We kept saying to him, he had a Bureau meeting way up north somewhere and he'd better go. He left very late. He used to travel fast. He hit a spoon drain at obviously a good speed and took off, and landed more or less on its nose and he hit the steering wheel and vomit and blood and everything all over the front of the car and killed instantly. But he wasn't found until a chap living up the road got a bit curious about two lights, one above the other: the lights were still on the car and it was standing on its side. That was a catastrophe. Marie, I don't know how she got through it but she did.

That was a rough introduction for you also, coming in and ...

That's right, yes. Of course, at that stage of the game I'd been involved with farming, I'd been on a Lands settlement property which was a disaster and I stuck there for seven years and chucked it in. But ... I've forgotten our plot.

We covered before, in an earlier interview, your move from ...

Yes, that's right.

... that land into the Department, so we probably need to pick up about how you got more closely involved in the pest control area. It was probably a bit later in your career with the Department. The Pest Board. We've got the Dog Fence Board already in existence and so on, but the Pest Board comes a bit later.

Yes, that's right.

In the '60s?

Yes, that would have been ... I can't tell you what date it would have been, but it ...

We'll get the date. We're into the 1960s rather than when you just joined the Department.

Yes. You'd barely be into the '60s. Probably '58 or something like that when I joined.

Were you involved in the first of the Board's work?

Are you talking about the Pest Plant Boards?

Yes.

Yes, but that didn't come for another six months or so from where we are at the moment.

We just need to look a little bit more on the Board ...

We've gone through into Parliament, the Bill did, and the whole thing was set up. Memory's bad.

You've written some recollections about that parliamentary experience, the draftsman ringing you up and so on and the Bill getting through. Of course, that will be covered in parliamentary debates and so on, what actually happened there. So we're looking really more at your personal involvement in the Board.

Yes.

How did you come to be closely associated with the Board? Did you have a particular interest in ...?

I was the Executive Officer at the Pest Plant Commission.

Yes, but how did that come to be?

Because I'd been in the Weeds Section for so long.

So you had a particular expertise, particular knowledge, about plants and pests?

I'd spent a good many months. You can't separate them really. Is that what you want to do?

[7:40] No. I was just wondering how it came to be that you were the person: did you have a particular interest, or could it have been someone else who ...?



I don't think so because I had ... I told you that after a while Tideman became Chief Agricultural Adviser because he was the only one with a degree around that could take it over. From then on I ran the Weeds Section for quite some months. Then I got fed up with the whole bloody business of that side. I rewrote the *Weeds Act* as a statutory authority. I thought I told you this: have I not?

Perhaps elaborate a bit more.

I wrote the Act. I'm sorry, I drafted the Act (laughs) and took it to the Parliamentary Counsel to have it taken into Parliament. Then I made a terrible bloody mistake: I handed in the stuff that I'd written and he picked it up and he said, 'You've written this in the form to go to Parliament. Why'd you do that?'. It was his job, you see. I said, 'We've put a lot of trouble into this and we didn't want it stuffed up by anybody else writing it'. I'm talking to the bloke who's supposed to! (laughs) He was not amused. I've told you this or not?

Keep going.

Anyway, it was rewritten, of course, in a different book etc. and a very neat young typist, a very pleasant young lady, did this. I was staggered when we finished: she got up, walked away on crutches and she was a polio victim, just staggering away one foot at a time. So there were five sessions in Parliament and the first one the Parliamentary Counsel turned up – Bob Docherty his name was, he's a nice bloke – and at 5 o'clock, Don Dunstan was the Premier, and we're sitting in a little box about this size here, and the wall up there and Dunstan was sitting up there and he looked down to ask a question, and he didn't ask any. That happened on the first night. The next four – there were only four – neither he nor the Parliamentary Counsel turned up. The Premier was there for the last one, but Bob Docherty didn't come any more. That more or less set that up as far as we were concerned. It went through, as you know. Then we were left ... Of course, we were on our own so we had to, or I had to, press on through with it to get it all set up.

Is this legislation to create a statutory authority?

Yes.

You said that Dunstan was the Premier?

Yes.

So that would be later in the '60s?

No, no. No, no, it was before the '60s.

You had Tom Playford as Premier till '65.

No. Are you sure? I'm talking ... when I corrected you then I was back when I joined the Department. It was six or so months later when I was talking about.

That's all right, Max. Go on. So we're actually trying to look at this transition into a statutory authority and coming under legislation.

I'm not doing too good. What do you want me to do now? Just set up the Authority?

In setting up the Authority, what are you going to do. You've got legislation through.

Yes. The legislation was through, yes. We just had to press on from there.

Did you stay with the Department of Agriculture, as an employee, or did you swap over ...?

I was still a member of the Department, I imagine. I never ever thought of that, but we were attached ... The statutory authority was a separate authority completely. We employed our own people and we paid them. We had direct access to Treasury. But we were attached as an authority to the Department. Now, that's the nearest I can come to it.

Did you stay in the Department's building, for example?

Yes.

So you just kept working ...?

Stayed in the same seat.

Same desk, same ...

(laughs) Yes, that's right.

Who came across with you to the Authority?

Bob [Christiansen]. Now, I've been kind of worrying about that a bit, some of them I'm not too sure. Whether Ray Alcock, for instance, was with us at that stage: he must have been. I'll ask him on the ninth [i.e., at former employees' lunch].

So there are a couple of you, perhaps? (telephone rings, break in recording)

Bob Christiansen, of course, we brought him in from outside.

Max, you were saying there in the pause, a couple of things in particular. Perhaps the first one is you've mentioned legislation for an Authority. But why was there a need for a statutory authority outside of the Department or outside the work you were already doing? Can you answer that one for us?

There are quite logical reasons for doing that. Perhaps the first one: we wanted to be completely running the show ourselves instead of being mucked around by people who really didn't know what they were talking about but had seniority etc. I won't go into any more detail on that. But it was good to carry through all of the people that we had in the section agreed to come out in to the statutory authority with us.

So you took the staff, of course.

Yes. We could then sit down and decide how much we wanted to increase activity and this and that and what have you which, of course, then gave us an idea of how much money we needed and which ways we'd use it. Having worked all that out I went across to – goodness me, I can't

think of the name of the fellow – Treasury, I suppose, and asked them for the money, told them what the setup was and they were very liberal I thought. They gave us more than I thought we might get. They were quite sympathetic to the changeover and it was quite a handy two or three hours. We really got a fair bit of money. I got back and Bob Christiansen, who was the chap we brought in who'd been an ex-New Guinea bloke, (laughs) asked how much money I'd got and I told him – I don't remember what it was now – and he said, 'You can pull the other bloody leg!'. About quarter of an hour later the Secretary of Agriculture walked in and he said, 'You got too much money out of Treasury. We didn't get a deal like that. So I've taken half of what you got'. I said, 'You can't do that. We're a statutory authority and it's our own money'. He said, 'I'm not interested in what you've got to say. I not only can take it, I have taken it'. The next morning he walked in and said, 'You're right. You are a statutory authority now and I can't take it. I've put it back', which helped us a bit.

It sort of suggests, in one sense, Max, that you're obviously still very closely tied in to the Department, but was there some ...

Yes.

... was there any ill-feeling about this Authority coming in?

No, no, not at all. No, it was quite an amiable thing. We were quite pleased about it ...

He was quite pleased, the Secretary, because he thought he had some money!

(laughs) Yes.

Did you have to deal with the Minister of Agriculture in regards to setting up the Authority?

Yes. We worked pretty closely with him at that time. He was in no way antagonistic about it because the Authority answered to him anyway, direct to him, rather than going through the Department, so that wasn't a problem.

The Authority, was it replacing the existing Board as it was, or did you add new powers and new activities and so on?

It was just written into the Act as the same sort of thing as it had been before. It was up to us really to decide whether we'd put a bit more pressure here, there or somewhere else. We did make some alterations but they were nothing major.

Do you recall that the existing Board members came across to the Authority?

They did, yes. They were quite pleased about that.

Was it expanded?

No, we kept it the same as it was. I don't think it was ... there were six in the first place and it remained at six. No, I don't think there was any change there.

You, as Executive Officer, did you serve on the Board or were you there just in an advisory capacity?

I was sort of chairman of the committee. But they were very informal meetings. There was no real chairman. I suppose I was there just in case they started a fight.

But you kept minutes and ...?

Yes. Of course, then Marie, in the meantime, in the changeover, had left the typing pool and was now Assistant Secretary of the Board to Bob Christiansen. She had a couple of other jobs as well. She also kept us in line pretty well: if she didn't like something she'd up and tell us pretty smartly. But she still did the typing – just for us, not for the rest of the typing pool.

[22:15] As a group, you were all based in the Agriculture Department building?

Yes. I don't think any of us actually shifted out of our seats.

So you were working in Gawler Place?

Yes.

What was it like to work there? What sort of place was it?

It was quite a nice building, quite reasonable. There was a fair bit of room. Not a problem.

You'd grown with it.

Yes.

It had been your home for a few years.

Yes.

Later on you were in the Grenfell Street building?

Yes. That was a bit more substantial and a bit more posh.

But the Authority went across to that building as well ...

Yes. (coughs, break in recording) We didn't have any say if they changed the building, we would just have to go.

[23:25] We're looking at how the Authority got going and sort of work it did and so on, and now you, as the Executive Officer, you were more or less a desk-bound administrator sitting in the departmental building.

Yes.

Who was out doing the work, keeping the fields ...?

I was.

So you're in the field?

Yes, I was in the field all the time.

Did you have field officers or ...?

Yes, we had field officers, yes. Ray Alcock was a field officer and Bob Christiansen, he stayed in the office mostly, although he came to some of the meetings where his expertise would be

required, he would come along with us. But we continued to do the same sort of work as we were, going to Agricultural Bureau meetings and all sorts of gatherings around the countryside, all over the place.

Inspecting properties?

Yes.

Were you actually doing that yourself?

Yes. I was just working as an agriculturalist, the same as I had previously. Also going to New South Wales. We used to have a lot of travel to New South Wales. They were sending stock across to us. At one time there we were having some sort of meeting in the Department and I got a ring from the Director of Agriculture and he said, 'Hop on your bike. We're in trouble with New South Wales'. So I grabbed my car and went off to Broken Hill. Of course, in the meantime I knew what had happened. They'd accused us of ... No, let's go back a bit. One of the big problems from Broken Hill was a weed called Noogoora burr: a big burr, would be that long (demonstrates),  $\frac{3}{4}$ " long at least, and it was a whole stack of little things with sharp points on them, and they'd get hooked in the wool. In bad infestations the bush would grow up that high normally and they'd go up above, higher than that.

6 or 7 foot high.

Mmm. But mostly they were 3 or 4 feet. But sheep particularly, but to some extent cattle, would be covered with these things, they could have them all over them, stuck in the wool – ruined the wool, the wool was quite useless – and the big thing was to keep it out of here. The only other place was just out from Darwin, there was a lot of it there. We didn't have it in South Australia at all so we knew that their business of somebody sending sheep from – goodness me, my memory's getting bad on me – heading to Broken Hill, turn left and go up the trail, big town there. Not at Murray Bridge; further on. Doesn't matter, I'll think of it in a minute. From that area anyway. There was supposed to have been sheep, several hundred of them, taken to Broken Hill. I knew that wasn't really true. We got there and there's a big heap half the size of this house of hay covered in bloody Noogoora burr. The boss of the show was there, the boss of the stock firm, and I said to him, 'Who organised this?'. He told me the name of the bloke. I said, 'I'd like to talk to him'. He brought out a kid about 15, 16. I just shook my bloody head and I said, 'I think there's a nigger in the woodpile here somewhere'. So I pulled out my bloody pocket knife and cut the bands on the hay, all these stacks of hay that were covered in burr, and there wasn't a bloody burr in sight. They were all around the outside, somebody had put them there. I said a few words to him and the kid was shaking like a leaf, so I tapped him on the shoulder and said, 'Listen, mate, this joker is pulling my leg. He's not telling me the truth. There's not a bloody chance in hell that you'd have that job, is there?' He didn't answer. (laughs) Anyway, I wished him good luck and goodbye and I said to the boss there, 'The

Director and the Minister are not going to be very bloody happy when I get back'. But that's the sort of bastardry that came from New South Wales, so we were in strife a fair bit from them. But a lot of the pastoralists there too would send loads of hay or sheep, particularly, covered in burr to sell in South Australia.

Do you recall, when you were working with ... how many pastoralists you worked with, say compared to working with farmers in the more settled areas?

I don't think there was any difference, really. We were seeing as many of these people because in the cereal game and the rest of it; in their own sheep, they were covered with burry plants etc., so I don't think there was any differences really. No, I don't think there was any difference.

[30:40] I suppose in a way, Max, I was getting round to asking where you spent your time when you were out working: was it more pastoral or more farming?

Mostly farming areas. We had a bloke that looked after the pastoral country, that was his job and it was ...

Were you working with the Pastoral Board, for example?

Yes, we had contact with them. We knew what they were doing and they knew what we were doing, but we didn't interfere with each other.

You each had your own territory, so to speak?

Yes.

What about other boards – the Dog Fence Board or Vertebrate Pests?

We all had contact with them but not much, we were mostly in the farming lands. Most of the cures, of course, were farming techniques. We were all agriculturalists so we probably knew more about the agricultural side of it than the pest plant side. We went to Bureau meetings. It was a bit difficult: sometimes you'd leave home and you were about to leave home and the phone would ring and somebody out in Oodnawoopwoop would say, 'I heard you were coming up this way. Will you come and see me?' and you'd end up at a Bureau meeting at 11 o'clock at night, and you'd probably left at 6 in the morning.

The additional duties, additional demands.

Yes. One night I came back from a Bureau meeting late and I started off in the car and I realised that when I agreed to ... When I booked a bed in Clare I didn't realise I was going somewhere else, and I was a fair way away – about 30 miles away – and it was about 10 o'clock at night, and I'd almost got there and I thought, 'I'll just pull up for five minutes,' and I woke up about a bloody hour later. I got back to the hotel and the lady of the house started up as soon as she saw me. I was buggered. ... ..

[33:25] **End Side B, Tape 2**

### **Tape 3, Side A**

[0:20] Max, we just finished there at one point referring to other boards and authorities – I mean authorities that might have come into existence: the Vertebrate Pest Control, for example. Perhaps we could just explore a bit more about that. Your relations with other boards – Dog Fence Board, Vertebrate Pests.

We had a very wide – broad, I suppose you could say – lot of people and organisations to meet, and you could say that pretty well anything in the way of a board that you could meet one of us would have seen it at some stage of the game. Pest plant control was a pretty common thing. We were constantly under movement to look at areas and places and talk to people. We talked in the schools. It was amazing the number of enquiries you could get. I'd have to say that once we got started I'd probably never been so busy: we were under call pretty well any time you like to think about it. We could go away for a week, sometimes to the West Coast you might go away for a fortnight, and that would be on a conference run, of course, where it would be a combined thing with agriculture and dairy and God knows what else, so there'd be a whole stack of officers there and you'd spend all day talking to those people.

It was organised like a conference, like a seminar?

Yes. We'd attend a lot of local government conferences, perhaps to say a few words, perhaps just to be there in case somebody wanted to say something. The West Coast was a great place to be: they were funny people. I remember listening to a bloke one night. He was going crook about the weeds control and the troubles of us. As I got up to speak in answer to it I don't know how it happened but I said something like, 'I don't know what to say here because that's the biggest load of bloody garbage I've listened to this year'. Apparently it went all round the hall. There was a dead silence and then a roar of laughter. We got a good – what would you call it, what's the word? – we were popular people I suppose you'd say. They recognised that we, like the agricultural advisers, were there to help them. But most country people, especially the farmers, if you say something they don't like they tell you about it. But no animosity, though.

It sounds like there was a level of understanding in the farming community.

That's right, yes.

Did you have cases where farmers or pastoralists resisted the Authority and say, 'We don't want you on the property,' where you had to exercise powers?

I don't know of any time when they said that ... of any of them that said we weren't allowed on the property. I can't see that they'd try that, especially over on the West Coast. If the West Coast people thought you were a bloody idiot they'd tell you so in a nice way – well, comparatively nice – but they didn't get angry with you. Some of the people here were more inclined to get angry because they're not used to standing aside.

Of course, in one sense you could wonder why there's a need for the Authority because if in this case the plants are such a problem with weeds and noxious burr and so on, if they were a real problem for the farmer, wasn't it in the farmer's interests for him to clean it up?

Of course, yes.

For him to just go ahead and do it. Why do you need an Authority to tell him?

Things were changing all the time. The chemical controls which were well and truly in the go then were changing a fair bit, or there might be some things that they needed to know that they didn't quite understand: whether you could mix two different things for the same purpose, which is a bit of a ... I mean that was pretty complicated.

So was there a bit of a research role for the Authority?

Yes, yes. Although I would say that, if we could, we would probably at least go as far as a dual effort with the Department to do a problem, that's most likely what we'd do if we were having something a bit big for us to do on our own perhaps. There was some interchange between the Department and us of giving us the job to talk to a farmer.

[7:20] You mentioned, Max, the conference trip away, that type of trip. Did you have similar trips with, say, the other boards, other authorities? Again I mention Dog Fence and Vertebrate Pests. Did you try and link up with those people at any time to ...?

You didn't have to try to. There was a linkage and it went on automatically.

But did you find, for example, the Pest Plant and Vertebrate Authority going out at the same time and say sharing a vehicle or making a joint trip or something?

That wasn't really familiar because there'd be a fair bit of wasted time by going along with somebody else although that didn't seem to matter because you could swap information. You couldn't afford to be a one-person show for pest plants, for instance, and forget about the other set-ups. They all dovetailed in together, you couldn't separate them.

That's where this story's heading, of course, because ultimately that's what's happened with Animal Plant Control forming one commission ...

Yes.

... and now it's going to the next stage of a more broad natural resource management with all the boards coming into one. It seems obvious that that's the way to go at the moment. Maybe it was a bit more territorial back then in the '60s, '70s, '80s?

No, I don't think it was territorial really. Of some sort of necessity there were separations in different organisations, and it was left to the organisations to work together when they had to. Now nothing will change much except that they'll be under the one boss.

Do you recall any attempts to bring the authorities together?

No, I don't think so. No.



[10:05] What about at that upper level then: what about working with the Minister? You reported to the Minister of Agriculture?

Yes. We reported to the Minister directly, completely. That wasn't a problem. There were several different Ministers in the time.

Some more interested in your work than others or did they just leave you to do your own thing anyway?

I don't remember finding any that weren't interested. They perhaps looked on it as a bit of a diversion and were quite happy to talk with us and pass on information.

Do you recall any Minister coming out on a field trip for example?

No. I don't think it would be practical at all to share a vehicle between the Minister of any sort.

They always had something else to do that they were handling or work or imaginary ... They'd always travel in their own vehicle.

I was wondering whether the Minister of Agriculture would take the opportunity to see some of the agricultural developments around the State ...

Of course. They would, yes.

... to see the work of your Authority, to see the work of others.

Yes. But most of them are a bit too busy to have to fly around like that because they'd probably see a lot of stuff that they really wouldn't want to see. Apart from that they might buy a few too many fights too, arguments.

But as Executive Officer I presume you were dealing with the Minister on a regular or ...

That's right.

... as-needs basis and so on. Were there any particular issues that come to mind for you in dealing with Ministers?

With the Minister himself?

Yes.

No, no. We got co-operation all the time. I don't remember any ... I suppose there were a few differences of opinions, but we were accepted.

[12:45] One area where I thought you might need to deal with the Minister would be the matter of enforcing the regulations, a policing sort of role where you could end up in a dispute with a farmer or a pastoralist. What was the Authority's attitude towards policing regulations and making sure that ...?

I don't know why this was but I don't remember any set-up where the farmer blankly said, 'You can go and get nicked' or something and wouldn't do anything. No, I don't remember any situation like that.

Would there have been cases, though, where you had to say to a farmer, 'Look, these are the rules, these are the regulations and you must abide by them'?

You'd say something like that, but they wouldn't argue about it.

I was just wondering whether some might argue to the point of how far can they take things before ...

No, I don't think so, no. The only place that I heard any arguments at all would be at public meetings. If you went to Cleve, for instance, you might find you were talking to 50 or 60 farmers – and their wives, perhaps, too. At times there they'd say, (laughs) 'You can get lost with that, mate', but that's about as far as it would go.

So I take it from that, Max, that you wouldn't have been involved in prosecutions or ...

No, not at all.

... talking to the Crown Solicitor about 'We have to get some ...'?

No, we weren't at all. I don't know why that is but we probably had a fairly good reputation as good blokes.

Did you work at maintaining good relations? Obviously, by going to meetings and so on you were getting out and about.

That's right, yes.

But did you actively cultivate that good ...

We attended that many meetings we didn't particularly want to attend any more – or I did, anyway. I used to go to a hell of a lot of meetings.

[15:20] What about at the broader level, say more of a national situation? Was the South Australian experience different to elsewhere in Australia? Were there similar authorities elsewhere in other States doing similar work? Their names might change and so on but basically doing the same sort of work?

I'm not sure but we may have had the first Authority. But when we started with the weed control the Victorians already had about three times the size that we ever got around to. They've always been very active on weeds and all sorts of controls, dog regulations and what have you.

What about a State like Western Australia?

You'd have to say most organisations from any State have very little contact with West Australia. There's too much desert in between. The Western Australians are nice people but they run their own canoe.

But there's agricultural trade in between States and so on.

That's trading and that sort of thing is quite normal.

But the various States would link up with the Standing Committee on Agriculture and the Ministers for Agriculture meetings and so on. Did anything of that type happen in regard to your work, the pest plant work?

I don't think so.

You didn't have to travel interstate? You mentioned Broken Hill, New South Wales and Victoria.

I used to travel interstate, yes, but very rarely went to Western Australia. We went a fair bit into New South Wales but only across the border, more or less.

Yes. But you weren't going to Sydney for meetings with ...?

No. We used to go to Victoria and they used to come here, but not necessarily Melbourne, not very often Melbourne; it would be a local town wherever the problem was.

And the reverse of that, Max, did you find other States – you've mentioned some contact with Victoria – but other States wanting to come and see you or at least making contact to see what the South Australian experience was?

Yes. Quite sure of that, but I suppose the phone or letter or what-have-you contacts were a lot more than direct visits.

Did the same apply to the research work? Were you ...?

I don't think it was any different.

No, but were you able to learn from the research being done in other States?

Yes. There was a flow backwards and forwards from other States of ... Quite an important flow, too, it was.

Two questions in one: where did you get your information from, and who did you provide your information to? How did the Authority get its results out and about?

There was a worldwide movement of publications, of stuff with all sorts of gear on it. There was a Department of Agriculture in each State and each State had its own booklet which went from one State to another. CSIRO and any of those people sent stuff all over the world.

So you were publishing research results and so on?

Yes.

You've shown me a couple of examples of like work-in-progress that's been published in the CSIRO forum. Would that have got written up and published as an article eventually?

Yes.

Either by you or by one of the other people?

Yes. Just as a ... About 3 years ago, 2 or 3 years ago, we found that our navigator that's in Britain, who lived in Britain, we found the squadron on the net, or Danny found it, so we contacted the squadron and they still meet, the squadron. In fact, Danny was going to go over this last meeting if he hadn't got crook. They were farming people so in talking to the son, who's not only a farmer but he is an agriculturalist with all sorts of qualifications, and I just mentioned to him that I did some work with CSIRO and the next time we rang he'd dug it up out of their archives and it was quite interesting to learn that.

Part of the world-wide information.

Yes.

Was there an active publication program by the Authority?

Yes. They were right on time all the time, monthly publications mostly. I'd have to say that some of the small set-ups didn't do much, or if they did anything for that they might pass a bit on at 'church' or something (laughs) but ...

[22:25] Do you recall any particular research projects that were notable? Notable successes, notable failures, got good results or you were pleased with them?

By the time we became a statutory authority the majority of the things had been found and written up and were pretty well-known. Pest plant control or weed control, whatever you like to call it, was a fairly big set up, but once it started there were so many people working in it that it became fairly well talked about or written about and there were only bits and pieces that came up or when a new chemical came out, and that of course was ... The herbicide companies moved around a lot within the agricultural places and our set up. Not the company, but a representative. Every time they got a new chemical they'd race in and say, 'Who wants to try this out?'. .

So you were doing a bit of testing for them in a sense?

Yes. We all had a bit of a go at them at times. That's what happened with the ... I tried to do something about the thing I invented with the chemicals that were around. There was just enough to point to the fact that I might be on a winner if I could find a chemical that was different to what was around. The following year a chap walked into the Department – I knew him quite well – with this tinful of stuff and he had a couple of propositions. The two chaps that were there with us in the Department weren't in the place that day so I agreed to take a tin for one bloke. Because he'd given it to me in complete detail, everything verbally, everything he knew, I decided that that was what I wanted so I asked him for a tin. I told him exactly why I wanted it. In fact, invited him to join in with me. He refused. Whether he didn't believe me or whether he was too polite and thought, 'You invented it; you fix it'. That turned out to be the thing I wanted, of course.

Do you remember the chap's name?

Oh.

Perhaps when the transcript comes ...

Yes. I could get it out of the stuff there.

When the transcript comes we could ...

That won't be today.

That will just help us track down the story and the date and so on.

Yes. Do you mean when we start transmitting again? (break in recording)

OK, Max, you've come up with a name after all.

Paul Kaesler.

This is a story you recounted a little bit in the memoir you've compiled.

Yes.

OK, we can work through that later.

Yes.

I asked if there were any successes or failures that stick in your mind. I suppose I was looking for the highlights or some of the highlights that you saw in your time working for the Authority, working on weeds, working on pests and pest plants. Anything come to mind that ...?

Not at the moment it doesn't.

Might be something to think about when you do the memoir: ...

Yes, that's right.

... 'This is something that I got a lot of personal satisfaction or the Department, the Authority, gained a lot of benefit from'. It might be useful jotting some of that down.

Yes. Of course, the work I did with the ... that we were just talking about, that was very early in the piece. It was before we changed to a statutory authority anyway, I was still in the Department.

[28:20] One thing we should clarify for the record, Max: you've provided a photograph of the Weed Advisory Committee in 1977. How does that fit into the story of the Authority?

That's a story on its own, really, within the set-up, of course. The Weeds Advisory Committee met frequently. I've forgotten the difference between them, but it was probably a month or a couple of months. Some of us always attended that meeting and took back stuff. They also came to some of our meetings as well. There was a big interchange between those. Most of them were councillors anyway, and any time we met with a council, which was pretty often, we talked to that particular person. So there was a big interchange there and they were very valuable – most of them. There were odd ones over the years that sort of (laughs) disappeared after a while, fortunately, that weren't ...

The Weeds Advisory Committee was quite separate to the Authority, the Pest Plants?

Yes. It was just a committee of a council. I don't suppose there was anything tying it together, but they were commissioned anyway in some way by the council to talk to us on any subject.

So was it something that came through local councils or through the Department of Agriculture?

It was stated in the literature, in the Act, that there would be an advisory council.

So the Department of Agriculture was overseeing it and responsible for it?

Yes. It was to advise the Commission.

I suppose that goes back to my question of a short while ago: why was there a need for the Weeds Advisory Committee to be separate from the Pest Plants Authority? Were the roles that different?

It was just a committee established by councillors to represent them but with the authority of the Commission to do so. I don't quite know how that comes about, but ... sounds a bit silly. It doesn't sound silly, but unnecessary.

Looking back now it ...

It was written into the Act that there would be a Weeds Advisory Committee representing councils. This is every council would have their own Weeds Advisory Committee.

Which Act are you referring to?

Both. Either one. The old *Weeds Act* or the *Pest Plants Act* were both represented by Weeds Advisory Committee.

It's helpful to clarify that and we can look at the legislation and so on. It does seem, in retrospect, a little bit of duplication.

Duplication occurred a lot and it was necessary to a fair extent ... It's a bit hard to explain.

[33:20] **End Side A, Tape 3**

**Tape 3, Side B**

[0:05] A lot of them were not farming people anyway and so they had no interest really in pest plant control. So it was common sense to have a committee in council of people who could sit down and thrash things out and then come to us or write to us or what have you or ask us to come there. It's just common sense.

But the notion of Pest Plants and Weeds Advisory Committee, as you were just saying, there's such an overlap. Maybe I'm misunderstanding something. Maybe it's a ... but they co-existed, the Weeds Advisory and Pest Plants.

Yes. (laughs)

Did the Pest Plants have local government representatives on it as well or ...?

Yes. It was easier to leave the local government side of it as the Weeds Advisory Committee than rename them the Pest Plants Committee. Half of them would still say Weeds Advisory Committee, but ...

Max, just teasing out this particular issue and clarifying that both the Weeds Advisory and the Pest Plants coexisted: the photograph from '77 you've got Bob Christiansen and yourself in the picture.

Yes.

What was your role on the Weeds Advisory Committee?

I guess that photo was taken when we were talking to them for some reason. We didn't ...

So what was your position on the committee?

We didn't really have a position on the committee. If they wanted to have a committee meeting they'd have it, but they wouldn't necessarily tell us unless they wanted us to be there. We were not an essential on the committee; we were only there if we were asked to go there and say a few words.

So you were just the Executive Officer of the Pest Plants ...?

Yes, under that on the attendance. Bob was there as the money man.

I was just wondering if you had responsibility for this committee as well.

No.

Who would have chaired the committee then?

That was their own set-up, of course.

So this is a one-off sort of situation or did you go along ... Did you go along at other times to ...?

Not unless they asked us to.

But you went more than one time?

Yes.

But not necessarily regularly?

Yes.

Were there other committees where you got invited along? Other boards, other authorities, other meetings?

Not consistently, no.

But it did happen?

Yes, I have no doubt we talked to all sorts of bloody people at different times, even people who weren't really concerned with the whole thing, just people that they'd invite.

What about Lands Department? Did you have much to do with the Lands Department?

Not a great deal. (laughs) Not while bugalugs was chairman, boss cocky – what's his name?

Don't know, it doesn't matter. I hoped I'd forgotten his name.

[4:20] There's time to add later. Prompted by the photograph from the 1970s, 1977 photograph: the 1970s you've got a new department, initially in Conservation then it becomes the Environment Department. Did you have a role to play with the Environment Department?

Yes. Not a hell of a lot really. Not in my time anyway, no. In the earlier times we did, but then it wasn't an environment position then.

What about the more general environmental movement that grew up in the '70s: the environmental movement, interest in the land, land management, degradation of soil, degradation of land? Pest Plants fits into that movement at all?

We would have been represented at odd times; we wouldn't have had a permanent spot there I don't think. Those sort of things were sporadic rather than a once-a-week thing.

What about the work of the Authority? Did the general environmental movement – environmental consciousness perhaps is a better term – how did that impact upon the work of the Authority? Did it?

I don't think it had any ... We were conscious of it, of course, but I don't think it had any great problem to us.

Didn't add to the workload?

Nobody knew how many hours a week you worked in those days.

With the environmental movement making more suggestions, demands for better land management, better management practices for farmers and so on, that might have had some impact on the amount of work you had to do.

It would, yes. But farmers were difficult people in those days, they were funny buggers.

They're still difficult people.

Yes. (laughs)

Nothing's changed.

If a farmer wanted to know something, if you wouldn't tell him you'd just as likely get thumped; but if you tried to walk in and say, 'Now listen, buster, it's about time you did this or that' you'd get thrown out fairly quickly. You didn't interfere. But if they wanted to know something you'd have to tell them.

The environmental consciousness is something that's coming ...

That's quite different, yes.

That's quite different and that's something coming from outside the Authority, people saying to various land management authorities there should be new practices, new ways of doing things. In your case, the case of the Authority, you've got questions over use of chemicals and [appropriate use of the] land, the chemicals – disposal of.

But that was a big part of our job anyway. It was nothing special about it. It was something you had to do and keep doing all the time and you had to keep up. Sometimes there'd be changes in use of chemicals and the preparation of the chemical set up perhaps and an additive to the thing that you'd have to spread around. But Bob did a lot of that: something that happened around the office, he'd get involved.

[9:05] Did the Authority do much in the way of providing the chemicals?

Giving them to, you mean?

Giving, selling to farmers and so on? Or did you rely on the chemical companies?

The chemical companies, yes. We didn't sell anything to them at all. We might give them something, a little tin, perhaps.



Yes. On a testing basis or something?

Could be, yes. That would be more like it. Or if you suggested they did something that only required a small tin and you happened to have a can in the vehicle you might hand it over to them, but that really wasn't in the book.

I meant to ask you earlier when you were talking about research work but it comes back to the use of chemicals here: did the Authority have a laboratory or a testing facility?

No, not in my time it didn't.

Did you have access to the Department of Agriculture's?

Yes. We could have got testing done if we wanted to: there were places that would do that.

What about some of the research programs and papers that have been prepared and so on? Presumably you had to have some analytical work done, testing ... .. and so on. Where was that done?

Yes. The Department of Chemistry.

Department of Chemistry. Did you have much to do with the Northfield research centre?

Not a lot, no.

So you were more using the Department of Chem, and they were down on Kintore Avenue?

That's right, yes. They were there a long time.

[11:20] You carried on working with the Pest Plant Commission through to retirement?

Yes.

So you retired at age 65?

Yes, 65. It was 1980.

So you're one of those who could see it all the way through.

(laughs) Yes.

So that was in 19...?

1980.

1980 you retired.

January 1980: 30th of January. No, it was 5 days earlier than the end of January because on that day or the day before – it doesn't matter – one of the accountants dropped in to say to me, 'Did you know that they're going to change the superannuation deal at the end of this month. It's not going to be as good as it is now?'. I said, 'No, I didn't'. He said, 'When are you going to retire?'. 'Tomorrow'. (laughs)

You got some good advice.

I haven't written that anywhere. The bloke might have got the sack at the time: no, he wouldn't have, although it was confidential then.

You had a fairly lengthy career then in the weeds area and the pest plants area.

Yes. I joined the Department in '57 or '58 and that was 1980, so that's a fair distance.

Almost 25 years there.

Yes.

Pretty well all in the same area.

Yes.

Slight difference between being in the Department and being in the Authority, but essentially the same work you were doing.

Same work, yes.

[13:25] Perhaps it's an appropriate time, Max, to ask if you have any particular recollections about your working experience in your time in the Department of Agriculture and Pest Plants Authority, things that come to mind where you might sort of ...

Not at the moment so much, but I thought we might talk about that on our next meeting about the Commission.

All right. That'll be a prompt for you to go and do a bit of homework.

Yes, I might ...

... .. next meeting of your Commission mates and so on.

Yes. I might ...

... you'll have to jot a few things down, perhaps.

Yes.

I just note for the record, on the tape here, that you've been typing up some of the memoirs and some of the documents you have about your work experience. We might be able to tap into them in due course.

Yes, with any luck. (laughs) I started this a while ago, when we got left behind when the Department upgraded the salaries and we didn't and we had to, and when we did do, according to the females in the typing pool, Marie got a lot bigger lift in salary than they did so they all wanted to join our typing pool!

Sounds like, from the various stories you've told me and your reminiscences about your time with the Pest Plants, that you had an enjoyable working experience.

We were lucky. We had a really special batch of people. What's-his-name – I'm having a bad day for names, I'm usually not that bad – he was our pastoral land bloke that used to go out there, I can see his face quite well although he doesn't come to the meetings. He said to me once, 'It's a bit of a nuisance this going out in the pastoral country and a weekend comes up, nobody wants to see you on the weekend'. It suddenly hit me that it seemed a bit bloody silly. I said to him, 'If it suits you, work through Saturday and Sunday. We'll pay your salary but it won't be any different. If you're there for five days it won't matter if you work through the

weekend so long as you work'. (laughs) He got that far in front that the only way he could achieve this was to take time off so when he came home he could have his weekends. (laughs) In fact, he went to England once on his time off! He'd worked that many bloody weekends.

You have to be a bit flexible when you're working such long distances.

Yes. I don't think we'll put that in the thing, perhaps.

[17:20] One thing we haven't touched on, and you mentioned difficulty in recalling names and so on for the moment, we haven't actually touched on the members of the Commission – you've indicated a couple of staff members but the actual members of the Pest Plant Commission, where they came from and who they were and so on.

Yes. I thought we'd get all those together. It wasn't a big staff.

No, But the Board members, the Local Government Association members and so on. Any particular people come to mind?

No.

People who made valuable contributions?

Yes. These fellows here [in the 1977 photograph], yes. Malcolm Groth, the short bloke there, (chair creaks – This is a rowdy bloody thing, have to oil it) and Roger Brockhoff, they're the sort of people that we'll have to talk about. Malcolm's dead of course.

But there is a range of people over time and ...

Yes. We'll fix those. Marie will remember them all, I'd think.

The opportunity will be there when you see the transcript, or in your memoirs, to add a few lines about particular people who did particular things.

That's right.

The commission, the board, whatever you want to call it, there's always the 'do-er' and the person who can sit there ...

That's right.

... and the person who participates and so on. It's not always smooth sailing.

No.

Perhaps if we put that on notice for another time or for the memoirs.

Yes, if you can manage to do that.

Yes. I've probably pushed you a bit today because of time ...

That's all right.

... but if we put the stop on it for the moment and then we can always come back and reassess where we're at.

OK, that's fine.

Thanks for your involvement ...  
That's all right.

... so far, and telling me the Agriculture story and the Pest Plant story.  
I'll be a bit more on deck next time, we'll work through that ...

No, you've been fine. So thanks very much for your efforts, Max.  
That's OK.

We'll be in touch with transcripts and all sorts of things.  
That's all right, yes.

[20:10] **End of interview.**