



## Kel Connell

*Kel Connel was born in Granville, NSW in 1927 and spent most of his childhood at Salt Pan Creek on the upper Georges River. After leaving school he was apprenticed as a boilermaker with the NSW Railways, learning painting and signwriting along the way. After that he had over seventy jobs, initially mostly as a welder, but covering a wider range of occupations as time went on - like chicken farmer, plumber, clown, puppeteer, wedding MC, artist, TAFE teacher and builder, to name only some of them. Kel lives with his third wife Theodora at East Gosford, NSW.*

---

I was born in 1927 in A'Beckett Street, Granville, but we didn't stop there long after I was born. There was a bit of domestic trouble in the family. My mother came from a long line of fanatic Catholics, and my father came from a long line of fanatic Irish Protestant alcoholics. They met during the Depression somehow - I don't know the details, but sometimes opposites attract. Dad didn't hit it off too well with the relatives on the Catholic side of the family. We had to go and live with them because he didn't have any money, and I was the little illegitimate Protestant - well... I was almost illegitimate. I broke a record for premature babies - I was born two months after the wedding! (*Laughs*). So we moved from Granville to Summer Hill, and from Summer Hill to Undercliffe, but I spent most of my childhood at Saltpan Creek, at the tail end of the George's River, near Bankstown. Saltpan Creek's very wide and very shallow. The early settlers made big round pans which they'd let fill up with water at high tide, and the water would evaporate and turn into salt, and that's how they harvested their salt in the early days. There are various names for the area. It was Saltpan Creek, then later it became known as One Tree Point, and now it's Padstow Heights Estate - quite a rich area now.

In my childhood days it was a farm area, with chooks and ducks and cows everywhere. My brother and I used to look after cows for the local dairy farmer. We'd see him in the early mornings coming home asleep in his horse and cart - the horse knew the way home. The cows soon ate all the grass on his property. They even ate the bark off the trees. I remember the property had all these trees and they were all dead - stripped. So he used to graze the cows by sort of letting them run around the streets, and after school my brother and I would act as a couple of cowherders. We'd take the cows for a walk and bring them back. I think we got something like eight shillings a week - that was for every day after school and weekends. Mum took six bob of that for board, which left us with two shillings between us. But in those days two shillings would buy you two big bottles of lemonade and two big bags of lollies. We used to guts out on Sundays and blow the lot! But Mum always got first cut.

The town was a sort of hillbilly town. I even saw a photo of our neighbours in an American magazine, and the caption referred to them as "Australian Hillbillies". They used to have chooks and dogs and animals living in the house with them! I used to deliver parcels to them later on when I became postman for a while, and if anything needed a signature they'd have to get one of the schoolchildren to sign, because they weren't literate. Many of the houses had dirt floors. Some of them were made of logs. In the Depression a lot of people just went out there and squatted, and built shacks on land they didn't own. One guy was a stonemason, and built himself a nice sandstone house on land he didn't own. After the war the owner of the land came and took it over, so the stonemason moved to a different block and did the same again. He figured that he raised his family, and it cost him two houses, but he got free rent for all that time, so he reckoned he came out about even.

My Dad wasn't a very nice person. He was drunk nearly all the time. He served a sort of apprenticeship in the Depression in a biscuit factory. (Ironically, in the Depression, biscuit factories were doing OK because people like sweet, cheap things, and when they could afford it they bought biscuits. The other thing that did well in the Depression was bicycles. I've known guys who would walk from Stanmore or Summer Hill to Circular Quay, to save the threepenny tram fare. They'd go and work on the boats, and they'd drill rivets out by hand, with a breast drill, and that's hard work. So when they got a job, the first thing they'd do was to save up their money and buy a bicycle. And when they got the sack they'd have to sell it again, at a lower price, so the bike shops were doing great. Insurance companies did well too. Workers took out insurance in case they got killed on the job - that way their families would get some cash, because there was no compensation for the families in those days if you got killed on the job. ) But Dad came undone with the grog. They're not good people to live with, alcoholics, so I left home early. We moved to Saltpan from Earlwood - I think he got into a bit of trouble with a woman somehow when we were in Earlwood. I was too young to work it all out. But he had an eye for women, my Dad, when he wasn't drunk.

When we lived on Saltpan Creek Dad was always driving trucks and that. He'd been in the Army as a driver during the second world war- he got sick of being a pastrycook. Nobody else but Dad would think to do this, but he bought an old truck that used to be used for carting nightsoil - a dunny van. He'd found that the trays that Gartrell White used for their cakes were the same size as the openings in the side of the dunny van where the cans used to slide in. He put angle iron in there and filled them up with trays. He steam cleaned it, spray painted the whole truck, and went into business as a cake retailer! He'd buy them from the factory and go around all the shops selling them. Only Dad would have thought of converting a dunny truck to a cake wagon! It was funny. We were short of money in the house, yet very often we got sick of eating cakes. We didn't have money for clothes or shoes or that sort of thing, but we could eat cake! Dad was doing all right with the cake retailing - he had a good sales manner about him, but eventually he went bankrupt because of the drinking and smoking and wasting his money.

Dad was a bit strange. He promised both my brother and me a bike for Christmas, and he gave us one bike to share between us! So we spent a lot of time fighting over who would ride the

bike. We found out later that the bike used to be a tandem that had been run over by a bus, and Dad's uncle had a bike shop and he cut the middle part out and welded it back together. One day it fell apart when my brother was riding it.

Our toilet was up the back of the yard and it was horrible. I never liked to sit on it and I used to perch up on the top of it, which is how I got called "sparrow". I was in there once when Dad came home drunk. He barged in, saw me perched there, and went back out yelling out: "Cripes! There's a kangaroo in the shithouse!" I was the eldest, I was about seven or eight at the time, and somehow it became my job to dig the hole and bury the stuff. The can was too heavy for me to carry, and I had to drag it.

The house was on tank water, and when it didn't rain my brother and I would have to row down the river in a boat to a council park and fill up these four gallon drums with water, bring them back home, carry them up a ladder and tip them into the water tank. This was because Dad was never home - he was either up the pub or hung over. We only bathed on Fridays, and that was always in salt water from the river. I'd have to get that from the river too. I'd go out into the river with two buckets and get the salt water and bring them back. Mum would put them on the kitchen stove and heat them up. She had a tub in the corner, and my sister would have first bath because she was the only daughter, then all my brothers would have a bath, and of course everyone that got in would have a little wee wee. I had to wait till last for my turn because I'd be too muddy from getting the water. By the time I got in it, it was grey and it stank. So now, if I have a bath, I stay there for an hour and really enjoy it! That sort of thing affected your attitude, because when it rained you felt happy - you had some time off. Even now, I'm still happy when it rains. I don't even own an umbrella or an overcoat. Sometimes good things come out of hardship. By the time I was ten I was doing a man's work, pretty much. I chopped all the wood and did lots of other things around the place. Both myself and my brother, who was younger than me, became Captain of the school. We were pretty athletic kids. I was the eldest of eight. Mum had six with my father and then the marriage broke up and Mum married a second time and had another two.

My first job after school was in a factory that made aircraft components for training planes and Wirraways and things like that - that was during the war. I was operating hand presses, and it was very boring - you'd just sit there and pull the handle all day. I didn't stay there long, and I got a job locally, as a postman. I put my age up to eighteen, (I was only fourteen at the time) but they were desperate for a postman, so I was the local postman for twelve months. It was during the war, as I said, and it was sad at times. We used to get telegrams bringing word of those who'd been killed in the war. Mostly they were handled by my boss, but I still saw a lot of sadness. Women used to wait for letters from their husbands - sometimes they'd wait six months for a letter, then get twenty in one heap. Some women cracked up, some went promiscuous and started going out with other fellers and that.

I was only a shy kid then, but I'd started to feel my oats, like. A lot of girls used to wait for me who lived on farms and were lonely. I was too dumb to realise that some of them had a crush on me. I could have had a real good time! There was quite a shortage of men around the place, because of the war, but the Yanks solved that problem when they came out. The Pommies came out as well, and that put a sparkle into many of the girls' eyes!

I used to deliver letters on a bicycle. (You supplied your own). I remember the first day, when I got home my legs were like concrete. Oh boy! I was in agony! I remember paying my young brother Johnny threepence - I gave him a trey bit to take my shoes and socks off! I couldn't even move that far! But of course after a few weeks I could ride the bike backwards almost, you know.

My boss' wife was a bit of an old dragon. He was the victim of a mustard gas attack in the first world war. He was more a victim of Australian humour, actually. Somebody cut the pipe on his

gas mask as a joke, and he didn't find out that the pipe was cut till the jerries dropped the gas bombs. It affected his hearing. It turned out, I think, to be an advantage for him, because when his wife was giving him a bad time he used to turn his hearing aid off! I was employed there as a postman, and she had this general store where she sold everything - groceries, chicken feed - you name it, and she used to get me to deliver her groceries for her - (without any extra pay, of course). She took advantage of the fact that she was married to my boss. She ran the grocery shop and he ran the Post Office, and she imposed upon me a lot.

I remember once when my bike had a puncture, I borrowed my sister's bike. It wasn't too bad on the flat but she forgot to tell me that the brakes weren't all that good. I had to go to an address that was right down the bank of the river, and the road was on the top of a mountain, and it was a windy road down. So down I go, and I'm going faster and faster, and when I went to apply the brakes nothing happened. I'm taking every bend wider and wider, and in the finish the momentum was such that I couldn't control the bike, and I went off into the bush. I'm hurtling down the side of this mountain at reckless speed, trying to hang on to the basket of groceries, which was hopeless. I was even bounced off the seat, and I was sitting on the carrier at the back - I must have looked like a racing tadpole! My sister's bike was a slip-sprocket so I couldn't even use the pedals to try to slow down. The only thing I could see that would stop me down near the bottom was a big tree. The bushes slowed me down a bit, and I came to this tree, hit it, fell off the bike, and all the groceries scattered down the mountainside. I wasn't seriously hurt. (We were pretty tough kids. I never lost a fight till I fought in the ring - but they fight to rules there!) I went and picked up the basket and went up the hill and got all the groceries, and put them in the basket. There were busted bags of flour, and broken eggs, broken biscuits - you name it, everything was broken. I just shoved it all in the basket and took it down to the house where it was supposed to be delivered, but there was nobody home, so I left it on the back doorstep. I was really worried the whole weekend, you know, because I thought I was going to be in real big trouble when the boss' wife found out about it. As it happened, when I walked into the Post Office on the Monday, the woman I'd delivered the groceries to was there, and she said, "I don't want you bringing any more deliveries down to my house." I pretended innocence, and asked her what the problem was. She said, "The animals got into it all - possums and everything. I can't afford to have that happen again." So I got away with that one!

Next I got a job with the railways in the paint shop. That introduced me to painting, a bit of signwriting, and stuff like that. But I wanted a trade, so I got myself apprenticed as a boilermaker at Eveleigh Workshops. In those days it was common for boilermakers to swing a 28lb hammer. That's big! You do it by learning to use your body weight rather than using your arms. You use gravity. We used them for shaping tube plates and things like that. The tube plates might be an inch thick. You put 'em in the furnace and make them hot, then you bash 'em. A bit like blacksmithing. We used to use them up at the Chullora Railway Workshops. We used to call it The Abattoirs there because every couple of weeks a bloke'd go off on compo because of the hammering.

When they did a tube plate, they'd put it on the mould and dog it down with metal dogs. The tube plate is circular, and the blokes stand in a circle and they all hit in rhythm, bangbangbangbangbang - as I'm lifting the hammer up the next bloke's hitting. We had steam hammers in the blacksmith's shop, but these tube plates had to be shaped by hand. In a way, there was a certain prestige to it. With the blokes who worked in The Abattoirs, you had to be a good hammer swinger - you had to be good to get in that job, even though it was dangerous.

There were other jobs. I knocked down cold rivets with a seven pound hammer. They use cold rivets on a casting which is fitted to a chassis where there is a lot of vibration. Normally on structural work and stuff of a lesser consequence they use hot rivets. Where they use a cold rivet the hole is accurately drilled to a certain size and the clearance of the rivet is down to a minimum. The rivet doesn't fit loose - you have to belt it in so it's a really tight fit. The labourer holds the dolly at the back of the rivet and there's two of you there who are boilermakers, and

you both belt the hell out of it. And it's done with one bloke swinging right handed and one swinging left handed, and both swinging in unison.

When I left home I went and lived with my grandmother at Stanmore, and I was pretty lonely. I used to walk around the streets. I never knew how to make friends because we were brought up a bit remote. Sometimes I'd walk around the parks just to be near people. I suppose I was a sort of street kid, but I had my grandmother's house to go home to, to sleep in.

Being an apprentice I didn't get much money. One day I walked past the Police Boys' Club, and I looked in and saw all these blokes in there doing exercises. I asked if you had to pay and was told that it was free - sponsored by the government to keep kids off the street and stop them getting into trouble. I used to go down there and sit in the corner and watch all these blokes boxing and wrestling and that, and I thought that was all right. I became a regular ornament there sitting in the corner. One night the trainer, this big bloke who was a 19 stone wrestling trainer, bullied me to join the rest of the mob. "But I haven't got any shorts," I said. "You have now," he said, and threw me a pair. I thought to myself: "Gee, I'd better do what this bloke says!" He was about six foot two. Anyway, he got me in there doing the exercises, and they were no sweat to me. I did them easily because all my life I'd been rowing boats and chopping wood and carrying water. People wanted to know what gym I came from.

I'd been going there for a few weeks when the trainer put me in the ring to wrestle this bloke. He hadn't been trained how to fall, and I broke his arm! They all knew me then! They reckoned the Club had been open nine years and they'd never had an accident. I had more strength than I knew what to do with. I was pretty solid. So when I went into boilermaking and started swinging the hammers, to me it was more like swinging an axe.

In my wrestling training I had three or four amateur wrestles. I only won one, and then they cancelled me out because I was a couple of ounces overweight, and I wasn't good enough to wrestle in the next division. I went on from wrestling to boxing. I was really lucky with my first fight - I struck the NSW Welterweight Champion my first time in the ring! I was lining up before the fight to be checked out by the doctor and this big bloke is in front of me. He wasn't solid like me (I'm built like a wrestler) - he was more or less like a tadpole, tall and skinny, but with arms like a gorilla. I thought, "Jeez, I wonder who's going to get this bloke. He looks a bit good." Then I heard him tell the doctor his name, and I realised he was the bloke that I had to fight! I think I lost the fight then, before I was even in the ring! Anyway, I got in the ring with this bloke, and I was a bit keen to make a quick job of it and I got stuck into him. I made his nose bleed, but I think possibly I might have had either too much stamina or not enough brains to lie down, because in the second round he was belting hell out of me and I couldn't defend myself. Anybody else would have fallen over, but I was like a brick wall, and stayed standing up. The ref had to stop the fight! (*Laughs*). I was taking too much punishment. It was in the papers the next day. He broke my nose a little bit and I never got it fixed, which is why I still talk with a slight twang now. I broke a record that night - I had two fights in one night - my first and my last!

But back to my apprenticeship: In those days steam and manpower and air pressure were the main sources of energy. A lot of our tools operated on air pressure. I remember when I was at Chullora they used to have a concert once a fortnight for charity in our lunch hour. There was a guy used to get up there, he'd wet his hands and by moving his fingers he'd play a tune using the air pressure out of the end of the air hose. He was fantastic! They used steam hammers a lot in ship construction, and there were a lot of rivet guns too, in those days. A lot of boilermakers finished up deaf as a result. And of course you didn't wear any hearing protection in those days either. The labourer, too - he'd be inside the firebox and the boilermaker is outside. The noise was terrible. And the loud noise, coming out as a rhythm, too, would put you to sleep. When you're doing it you're not so conscious of the noise.

In those days, when you applied for a job you had to put down your religion and all the other

information. The idea was that if you got killed at work they'd know what minister to call to do the last rites. But that meant that all your foremen and managers and supervisors knew what religion you were. In the government departments it was pretty bad, because it did matter what religion you were then. It was best if you were the same religion as the majority, but it also depended on what religion your boss was sometimes. At Eveleigh I must have been a different religion to the boss and it didn't matter what I did, he picked on me. I was always wrong. One morning I got to work early and I had to go to the toilet. I'd changed into my overalls, but I hadn't put my boots on and I was sitting there putting my boots on and he came down and saw me and docked me for being late.

The bosses used to dock the apprentices - say threepence out of your wages if they caught you washing your hands too early or something like that - to make an example of you. It was pretty tough. And pennies were important. I mean, in my first job I was only getting a guinea a week as an apprentice, and my grandmother took fifteen shillings of that for board. We got paid fortnightly. I'd go out to the movies once a fortnight, and I'd be broke after that.

Anyway, this bloke picked on me because of my religion. I was a Protestant. I suppose I could have said I was whatever I needed to be, given my Irish name. (Although he was drunk most of the time, my Dad told me some weird stories about the family. His father was supposed to have been a Boer War veteran and his name was supposed to be Patrick Terrence O'Connell. He was born in County Cork in Ireland. He deserted my grandmother. I think he was already married himself when he married her, but he came here from New Zealand, so they didn't catch him for bigamy. She was full of hatred for him when he deserted, and I think she went to New Zealand to try to find him. She converted that hate to Catholics in general, and she changed her religion and would have nothing to do with Catholics from then on. But she could hardly be a Protestant with a name like O'Connell, so she dropped the O. A lot of people used to think I was Catholic because of my name.)

Anyway, to get back to the bloke who was picking on me because of my religion. After some time the apprenticeship supervisor came down to talk to me, because he'd been getting a lot of bad reports about me. "You've never had any problems before," he said, "what's the matter?" I told him that I thought the boss was picking on me because of my religion, and he told me that they'd had similar complaints before about this same boss, so he transferred me to Chullora, which was a lot better.

I came into boilermaking at a good time, too. Before I came into boilermaking, if they put a bloke on, say, spark arresters and he did a good job, they'd leave him on spark arresters for the five years. He'd come out of his time and he wouldn't know anything about welding, boilermaking, riveting - all he'd know about was spark arresters. And of course that restricted his employment chances, because where could you get a job fixing spark arresters? They only use them on boilers. But by the time I became apprenticed the supervisor of apprentices drew up a programme so that you did so many months riveting, so many months plate work, so many months marking off, so many months welding, and you'd work through a programme. So after you did your six months electric welding, you then had to do your six months oxy welding. It was a good idea, and it needed to be done, because a lot of apprentices weren't getting a good deal.

When I finished my apprenticeship I got a job in a factory that made flame throwers. The sort they used in the war. I don't think the owner of the factory wanted the war to end because he was making a lot of money making the flame throwers. When the war finished and we kept making flame throwers I asked him what was going on. My mate who was working with me said, "There's no flies on this bloke. He's now selling the flame throwers to farmers to get rid of blackberry bushes and rabbits." You could put the flame thrower down a rabbit hole and it would burn all the oxygen out of the borrows, so if they didn't burn they suffocated.

He was a bit unscrupulous, this fellow - he was into money in a big way. I noticed that some of his brass castings weren't so good - one farmer got badly burnt when the casting broke and sprayed kerosene on him. It was the worst job in Sydney in those days. Unions weren't all that strong. This bloke had his little factory in Redfern and our bathroom consisted of a tap in the back yard. At four o'clock we gathered round the tap to wash our hands. He expected you at seven thirty in the morning to have your overalls on, sitting at your bench, ready to light your torch. When the bell went at seven thirty you lit your torch and you started welding, and you didn't stop till the buzzer went. You worked from bell to bell. There was no few minutes washing up time - you worked right till four o'clock. We did have a single toilet, but it had no light globe. There was a woman working in the office and there were no facilities for her. If she wanted to use the toilet she had to go into the pub across the road. That was my first job as a tradesperson.

On my first day I turned my torch off about three o'clock in the afternoon and had a cigarette (I used to smoke in those days). The next morning the boss was waiting for me, and he said, "Yesterday you had your torch out for ten minutes. I don't pay you to smoke". The day after he said to me, "Yesterday you only did 43 cylinders, and the bloke next to you did 45. I want you to do the same number as him." I said, "That sounds fair enough, but did you notice that ten percent of his leaked under pressure?" He said he wasn't bothered about that, but when my mate's work didn't pass the pressure test, it was always me that he gave it to to repair. It put me under terrible pressure, so I only stayed there about four or five months.

Then I got a job making welded steel roof trusses and stanchions and things like that. After the second world war there was a building boom on and they were begging for tradespeople. There were so many jobs! Everything was on the go. I stayed making trusses for about six months, by which time I was the one with the most seniority there, because everyone kept changing jobs all the time. So at 21 I was a sub-foreman, and a foreman by the age of 22.

I began to use the system myself. One time there I can remember I went to a walk-up-start job, and if you gave your notice before nine o'clock you could leave at the end of that week, but if you waited till after nine you couldn't leave till the following week. So you had to make up your mind within the first hour and a half whether you liked it or not. A lot of jobs I'd start at seven thirty, find I didn't like the boss, and by quarter to nine I'd give notice. At one time I had four jobs in five weeks.

That's why bosses like to have a bit of unemployment around, otherwise the worker gets too powerful. That was Menzies' idea when he was in - to break unionism in Australia. One of the techniques he used was to bring migrant labour in from Malta and Greece and all these countries where there was no unionism. I worked with some of those guys, and if the boss called them they used to run. They used to *run!* And that's not the Australian way. If a boss called us we'd say "Yeah? What d'you want?" I worked with one guy that came from Malta, and he said that in Malta his father owned a big goat farm and a vineyard, and when his sons grew up and got married they still worked for the father, and he still controlled all the economics of the whole farm. The father bought their food, and when they wanted a pair of boots they had to go to their dad. When this bloke migrated out here and got a job, it was the first time in his life that he had ever received wages - money in his hand. They had a different attitude to it. But I do think that some of the Australian workers were abusing the system a bit too much in many respects.

Mind you, the bosses abuse the system, too. I've worked on both sides of the panel - I've been abused and persecuted as a worker myself, while on the other side, I had my own business when I made wrought iron gates and fences. I had a guy working for me there who took advantage of me. I wasn't a bad boss, either. It was only a little backyard place, and I used to invite him into the house, and we'd have morning tea with my wife. He used to work all day Saturday, and one day he was doing a rush job, and he was measuring each piece of steel, one at a time. I said to him, "Look, mate, make yourself a jig, then you slide it up to the stop, cut it off, slide the

next one up to the stop and cut it off, and so on.” It was common sense, you know. But what he did was to pick a piece of metal up off the floor, which happened to be an offcut, and just a little bit too short, and used that to set up the jig. He cut so many thousand of these pieces - they were to go into a big fence - it was a boring job, I must admit. But when I found out they were all short and went back to him to talk to him about it he just said, “Oh well, that’s it. Give me my money, I’m going home.” So I had to work till midnight that night to do them, plus there was all that metal that he had wasted came out of my pocket. It does you good to look at these things from both sides I think.

I did the course to learn signwriting while I was apprenticed at the railways tech. because it was free and I thought I might as well. My Dad and my brother and my brother-in-law all had trucks and they wanted a signwriter to do their trucks. I’ve always been artistic so signwriting became a bit of a sideline for me. My boxing and wrestling training meant that I was also able to work as a part-time PT instructor at different places like gymnasiums and health places. I’d done a bit of weightlifting and that and I was still pretty solid.

The first job I had, I had to join the sheetmetal workers’ union. Then I got a job working on bulldozers and rotary hoes. Most of the fellers working there were blacksmiths, and I had to join the blacksmiths’ union then. Another job I got, I was working on pipe work, and one day a bloke came out in a suit and asked me if I was a plumber. “No,” I said, “I’m a pipefitter.” He said to me, “If you don’t join the plumbers’ union I’ll stop the building site.” I said “OK. I’ll tell the boss.” He didn’t mind what union I was in, so I joined the plumbers’ union, which was great, because plumbers get a lot of extra incentives. I got promoted, and I finished up being a supervising plumber doing air conditioning work and mechanical plumbing - which is not the same as house plumbing.

When I got married to my first wife I decided to become a chicken farmer. I did that for a few years, but I didn’t like it enough to keep at it forever, so next I joined the Air Force. I was in the Air Force for six years. I got to the dizzy rank of corporal. I liked the uniform. I felt good in it. I felt it made me look a bit more handsome and sexy, you know, and indeed, I did have a couple of ladies that fell in love with me - though I hope not only because of the uniform. But there were a lot of aspects of the Air Force that I didn’t like. For instance, you lose a certain amount of your individuality. You’ve got to toe the line from the moment you walk in. You’re a robot. They put me in a group of thirty men and we had to train, carry the rifle, march up here and back again. And you’ve got to do what they tell you otherwise you’re in trouble. When my Dad was in the Army he was always in trouble for what they call “silent contempt”. (I think that rule could well have been brought in to fix my Dad, who was a pretty contemptuous sort of bloke if he didn’t want to do something.)

I had a fair bit of trouble in the Air Force, too. I didn’t mind working with guys that had some wisdom or intelligence, but I didn’t like taking orders from idiots. I used to tell them what I thought, in blunt terms, and I was always in trouble. But I came out with “conduct exemplary” on my discharge, which I was proud of.

---

At the time I was having a bit of trouble with my ex-wife and her in-laws. Coming from an environment where my Mum and Dad were both alcoholics, I became pretty much squashed, pretty much destroyed. We all did. I was pretty much a victim. I found out later, when I did therapy after my marriage breakdown, that I was a victim and I went looking for a tyrant, and I found one. You know, if you’re a doormat you’re not happy unless people are wiping their feet on you. I put up with it for a long time, then I started educating myself. I read every psychology book I could get my hands on, but it’s not much good if one person is sensitive and finds they are talking to a brick wall. I couldn’t talk about anything emotional or psychological to my first wife -

she just said I had a dirty mind. It got to a point where I didn't like what was happening to me, and I didn't like what was happening to my children, so I started to develop, or grow. The marriage broke down then.

The first marriage had lasted twenty two years. We had six kids. We had four - two boys and two girls - and the doctor said my wife had a twisted womb and that we couldn't have any more. Eight years later we had another two. I should've sued the doctor. I think my first wife had big problems from her childhood that made her a bit sadistic. She never talked about it. I don't know what the problem was, but she would go into a sulky mood and not talk for two or three weeks at a time. The atmosphere in the house was terrible. There was no affection, no demonstration of love. That broke me up, and I had a nervous breakdown in the finish. My children were all screwed up. When the marriage finally broke up I had to go and have group therapy. I was still functioning, but if I had a cup of coffee I'd spill half of it. I knew something was wrong. I was shaking, and I had no confidence. I couldn't look people in the eye. I'd have hysterical crying fits that lasted up to half an hour. I was pretty messed up emotionally. I went from a supervisor plumber with 30 men under me to a charge hand with one bloke under me. I lost the ability to give orders. Instead of going up I was going down. I was on a self-destructive path. I became suicidal. I became accident-prone. So I went to group therapy and started to pull myself together.

But some of my kids didn't do so well. My eldest boy got into drugs. He overdosed on heroin and died in his sleep. My second eldest son committed suicide. My youngest son finished up spending half his life in prison. (He's out now.) My eldest daughter got into LSD and marijuana and she was shackled up with a bloke who grew his own. My youngest daughter worked in the Cross for a while, though she's straightened herself out now. But they had a troubled life.

I believe that the worst atmosphere that you can bring children up in is a remote atmosphere, and the best gift you can give a child is creativity. I'm happy at the moment because my son who was in gaol rang me today to tell me that he is actually painting again, and selling them. I feel that could be his salvation. My two daughters contact me now and then, but the youngest daughter's still got a bit of animosity towards me. When we were divorced, my ex-wife got custody, and the daughters were influenced by their Mum. My ex-wife brought them up to hate me. But I never returned their animosity. They'd send me nasty letters, and I always used to send them birthday cards and Christmas cards with nice comments. In fact, something happened about three years ago that I'd been waiting for for twenty years when my eldest daughter wrote to me and said in it, "Dad, forgive me. I didn't know." Even my own sister, when I left my first wife, criticised me for leaving such a beautiful woman - because our problems all happened indoors. In the street she was an angel. When my youngest son committed suicide the rest of the family ignored me at the funeral, but my sister saw how my wife snubbed me at the graveside and she also realised then how things had been, and she apologised too.

---

Mostly I worked as welder. That was why I could change jobs. I could go anywhere, because I could handle the work and they were always looking for welders. So I went from boilermaking to becoming a fitter/welder, to maintenance welding, to pipe welding... I just kept changing jobs - in engineering, most of the time. Gradually this led me into air conditioning work, where I became a supervisor.

I was always on the lookout to make a dollar or two, having a tribe of kids. I saw an advert in the paper for a part-time barman, and I tried that. Another was for a part-time wedding MC, managing weddings. I tried that. Then I saw an ad for a part-time entertainer for children's shows in Bankstown Square, so I thought I'd give that a try. This woman and her husband had a contract to entertain at Bankstown Square. Every Saturday they had a hundred kids or so in this little

auditorium, and we'd entertain the kids while Mum and Dad went and spent their money. It was like a babysitting centre. She had a few applicants but she liked my personality and gave me the job. I was to start the following Saturday. "Ever done any puppet shows?" she asked me. All I'd ever done was to entertain kids with funny sketches and that, so I said I hadn't. "Well," she said, "you've got six days to learn, because I want you to do a puppet show next Saturday." So I went home, made some puppets, wrote my own play, and did a puppet show. When I'd finished she said, "OK. You went well. Now next Saturday we want another puppet show, but a different one to today's because we'll have the same hundred kids, so we can't have the same show every Saturday." I was there for ten Saturdays, and every show I was on stage for an hour, and I did ten different puppet shows. After that I thought nothing was going to faze me, so I became a puppeteer. Now I do weekend clowning. I'm known as Kello the Clown. That became a hobby while I was a TAFE teacher. Art became a hobby as well, and now I'm doing part-time art teaching as well. So since I've retired I've become a clown and an art teacher.

---

When I first joined the Tech as a welding teacher I was doing part-time work at Randwick, and the boss there told me how it was better to be on full-time because you actually ended up working less hours for more money if you take all the side benefits into account. So I started as a full-timer at Ultimo Tech. My boss at Ultimo Tech. was an overpowering turd. I used to call him "Come in, shut the door, sit down" because that was what he always said to me before starting to blast the hell out of me. I was just recuperating from my marriage breakup, and he knew I was sort of squashed, and he just put the boot into me. When a vacancy came up for a full-time teacher at Randwick I applied for it because I knew Randwick and I liked Randwick, and I was well-known there. I was the obvious one to get it, and I did. I stayed there for two or three years.

My second eldest son was in and out of mental homes. He'd got brain damage in a car accident - he was the one who later committed suicide. Working for the Tech. in those days you had to do three years' country service, and they classified Gosford as "country". When I put in to do my country service I asked for Gosford as a special preference, so that I could keep in touch with my son in the mental home because I was worried he might commit suicide. So that's how I came to come to Gosford.

At first I was pretty lonely. I used to joke with my mates that I'd probably marry the first ugly old woman I saw with three or four kids. I was living at Buff Point in a little weekender. I moved in in the January, to start work at the Tech. in the February, and the week before I was due to start was when my son shot himself. The police came and knocked on the door and told me, and I was pretty shook up, but I still had to front up to the job at the Tech.

When I went in to report to the Principal he as much as said to me not to unpack my bags - that I wasn't really wanted there. I thought, "Jeez, this is a bloody great reception." I went down to the workshop and asked them what was the matter with the boss. "Haven't you worked it out?" they said, and explained to me how the Principal didn't have the necessary qualifications to run a B class college, only a C class college, so he didn't want the place to develop because he'd be transferred - which was what happened. The college started to grow and they had to transfer him out.

But being so lonely, I decided that I had to get off my butt and do something about it, so I started the first 30s-plus singles club in Gosford. I put adverts in the paper, and I started to get letters coming in. I had something to do, and I started to get parties organised and that. At one of the parties that was held at Woy Woy I met a woman who had four kids, just like me - two girls and two boys. We were both attracted to each other and eventually I moved in with her and then we got married. We went to Canberra for our honeymoon and the four kids came with us! But the kids didn't accept me too well. Her eldest daughter still loved her Dad and she had a

loyalty there. And the eldest boy was hyperactive, which put stresses on us. She also was a woman of women's liberation feelings - she not only felt that women were equal to men, she thought they were *superior* to men. We lived together for about two years, and when we got married we broke up after about twenty months. I don't have any bad feelings towards her. It just didn't work.

After she and I sold our house and split the cash I bought this little place here. I was back to loneliness again, and I was reading the Sunday paper there one day and there was an article in it with my present wife's photo. It reported how she'd been arrested at Sydney Airport by the Immigration Department because she didn't have any papers. She'd come to Australia previously from Ghana with her first husband, and their daughter was born in Australia and is therefore an Australian citizen. They went back to Ghana and the marriage broke up and she came back to Australia with her daughter.

But because her papers weren't in order they put her into Villawood. It's a terrible place. They've got no identity there. No money. Nothing. They're on 24-hour closed circuit television. There's no privacy. Some of the single men used to masturbate in front of the closed circuit TV as a sign of disrespect. Before I went there they even had the cameras in the toilets and bathrooms, but the Human Rights people made them stop. And there were no provisions for children - nowhere to play, no school. It was a humiliating place.

The fact that her daughter is an Australian citizen created a problem for the Immigration Department. At one stage it looked like the mother, Theodora, would be sent back to Ghana and her daughter, Rita, was to be left here under foster care. (This was all in the article I came across in the paper.) I thought this was bureaucracy gone crazy, and I felt sorry for Theodora, so I wrote to her. There's seventeen million people in Australia, and with that article in the paper, I was the only one that wrote to her. (One woman did ring her up from Queensland.)

So Theodora and I became penfriends. Then I went to visit her and I started to take her daughter Rita for outings on weekends. Theodora and I started to talk of getting married. The *Sunday Telegraph* got onto it and did two stories about us. Then George Negus rang us and we went on the *Today* programme three times. So my courtship of Theodora was carried out at Villawood. It was worse than a prison. (I used to visit my son in prison and at least he could make me a cup of coffee. There were no provisions like that at Villawood.)

I went to visit Theodora one day, and when I presented my visitor's form the guard tore it up and told me I couldn't visit her - because she was discharged that morning and was waiting for me to come and take her away! So we picked up Rita, and I brought them up here and we had a party.

We were still having trouble with Immigration, even after she was out of Villawood. They weren't keen to give her Australian citizenship. We were married by this, but just because you marry someone you don't automatically get Australian citizenship - you've still got to struggle. So I said, "Bugger Australia, then. Let's go to Africa to live." So we rented this house out, sold all our furniture, packed up and went to Ghana.

I'd sent the father-in-law money and he was organising the building of a house for us. The first thing I did when I got to Ghana was to sack the building contractor because he was stealing from me, and I became the building contractor. I built a six bedroom house - two bathrooms. It was in two wings. The servants lived in the guest wing. You have to have houseboys over there because you can't leave your house empty or you'd get robbed. It's not a good idea to have the servants living with you, and we had a big block of land, so I built a two-bedroom house next door for the servants. Then I found that the culture shock was too much for me so I had to come back to Australia.

I can't get over the first time I saw a person being beaten almost to death in the street. He was

a burglar who was robbing the house next door, and I was instrumental in catching him. I caught him, and in no time at all there were twelve, thirteen guys bashing him to death. I just freaked out. I ran in and grabbed him, and stood these guys off. I got my carpenter who was with me to go and get my wife and she came in the car and we took him to the police station. Then, while I was signing the report, the police started bashing him up in the police station! He had two accomplices and they wanted to know who his accomplices were. He was in a terrible position because if he dobbed his accomplices in he was dead - or he was gonna be dead anyway. I couldn't take it, and I signed the paper and walked out. The guys that were beating him in the street told my wife the next day to tell me that I was a very lucky man. Because I had white skin they knew that I wasn't an accomplice. If I'd have had black skin they'd have assumed that I was an accomplice and they would have killed both of us.

On another occasion my wife went to the bank, and caught someone trying to steal our car. All the people came and grabbed him, and they wanted to pour petrol on him and set him on fire in the street! My wife said to let him go, and withdrew all charges, then they were angry with her for spoiling their fun! But that was the worst side of Ghana.

The country itself was very enjoyable, most of it. You know, it was happy, lovely kids, beautiful people. And they don't have any age discrimination over there. If you're ninety and can still dig the potatoes, then that's what you do.

I stayed there about a year and a half. The houses are still there. It's an option if ever we want to go back. The father-in-law would have liked me to stay and be manager of his plantation. (He's got a big palm oil plantation.) He said they'd see me all right, because I fitted in well with the general society. I was even described as a black man with a white skin, which I took as a compliment. We've been back about three years, now.

---

I retired from the Tech nine years ago - about the time I met Theodora. I was fourteen years with the Tech., most of that at Gosford. I liked teaching. I liked teaching the boys - the apprentices and the night classes. It was good. But a lot of the public servants were so hard to work for. They were so petty! If you showed any initiative, it wasn't encouraged. I used to laugh and joke with my students because I believe teaching should be fun, and learning should be fun. They used to spy on me to see what was going on because there was too much frivolity in my classrooms. Yet my kids were still passing the exams. But you're not allowed to laugh - it's a serious business, you know. (*Laughs ironically*).

I used to have a lot of problems because I had this attitude towards learning. I had a lot of problems with the Administration people. They were like old fogeys as far as I was concerned. The problem, too, was that they'd been working there for so many years, and many of them only had two or three years to go till they got their lump sum on retirement and they didn't want to rock the boat. So they'd get very, very conventional, and people like me make them nervous.

So what happened was that women started to enter the Tech. system as teachers, but the men had more opportunities for advancement, the male rate of pay was a bit more than the women's and all that sort of thing, so the Women's Liberationists got together and said, "Hey! We want equal rights with the men!" The Education Department couldn't argue with that and said OK, fair enough, we'll put men and women on an equal basis, equal opportunities, everything equal right across the board. Then the men teachers said, "Hey! Wait a minute! What about this? The women retire at fifty five, but the men don't retire till they're sixty, in the government services." (In the public service it was 65 that you had to work to). "We want equal rights with the women. Drop our retirement age down to 55." So they did that, and it turned out that I was over 55 at the time, so I said, "Thank you very much. Give me my lump sum. I'm going."

There were so many teachers getting out at 55 that it was causing a shortage - and costing them a lot of money as well, because they've got to turn around and train somebody else, which is two years at a teacher training college. So what they did in the end was to stop it, and say that you can retire at 55 but you don't get your lump sum till you're 60. You go out on a reduced pension. Well a lot of people drop dead before they're sixty - especially men in pressure jobs. Teachers, policemen, and doctors are three of the highest on the list of heart attacks, and very often a lot of them die within two years of retirement. So the Department stood to win. A lot of teachers decided to keep working till they were sixty, rather than go out on a reduced pension. But I took my lump sum and got out while I could, and that's what helped to finance me to build the two houses in Ghana.

I bought another place up at Karuah, near Nelson's Bay. We've got a little two-bedroom cottage up there which is rented out. The tenants are pretty good. No problems. Probably the oldest house in Karuah. It's made out of Australian ironwood - it's a very tough wood, like steel. Some of those old houses are morticed and tenoned together. It's a really old house, but it's been clad with imitation brick.

(I remember I was up there fixing a window when the Newcastle earthquake hit. I was up the ladder hammering, and when the quake came - they felt the tremor even up at Karuah, twenty six mile away - my tenant's wife came out and asked me to stop hammering so heavy because the house was shaking! I was up the ladder and didn't feel a thing. The ladder must have taken the shock or something.)

---

When I retired it wasn't as though I had to adjust to an entirely new life. Aside from the period in Ghana, I was already doing a lot of part-time stuff, like puppet shows, and I had art lessons in this house. I've been teaching art here on a Saturday morning and one night a week for years. So when I retired I was prepared for it. I had sufficient hobbies. But so many people don't.

I own my own house here. I'm not a drinking man, and I gave up smoking thirty years ago, so I saved my money when I was working. When I retired it wasn't as if I had a big problem. It just gave me more time to do my hobbies. Art...I've done metal sculpture as well, because I spent all my years as a welder. I think in metal. (*Picks up a professional-looking stylised metal seahorse.*) That's the sort of thing I do. I've won a couple of prizes for some of my metal sculptures. I don't do it as much these days, though. I make them out of bits and pieces - motor car parts, bumper bars. (*Picks up another one.*) I cast this head by the lost wax process. I had to go to Sydney Technical College to learn how to do that. They had a foundry at Darlinghurst and I did the whole lot. It was great.

I've enjoyed my retirement. It's been really good. I mean, I'm not really retired at all. A mate asked me what I was going to do with myself and I said "You'd have to be joking! There aren't enough days in the week!" He said he dreaded retirement because his whole life, his social contacts and everything, was involved with his job. I felt sorry for him.

My Dad was the same when he retired. I went to see him one day and I said "Look, Dad, you're drinking too much. You can't live like this. You haven't got your job now to fill in your day." And he said, "Yes. And that's the problem. I don't have anything to do." He didn't have any long-standing friends. He'd go down the Club every day and drink a bottle of wine. He's dead now, but he could've lived a lot longer if he'd been a bit more sensible. I think the boredom kills them. They don't establish the proper lifestyle and it gets to them.

---

I counted them up once, and I've had over seventy different jobs, though a lot of them were in the same or a related industry - though a lot of them weren't, too! My first job, looking after cows; then being a postman; then an apprentice boilermaker. Then into weightlifting, boxing, wrestling, PT instruction, chicken farming, signwriting, art, metal sculpture, fitter, blacksmith, sheet metal worker, boilermaker, plumber, teacher. (Along the way I've been a member of every engineering trade union.) Then clown, puppeteer, art teacher...

I can see in many cases how they all interlock with one another. When I've been boilermaking, I've had bosses say that they like the way I work because of my creative way of looking at things. I can see the finished project, and I can see problems that haven't existed yet. I can see how to do the job so that it comes out the way that it's supposed to, whereas a lot of guys don't.

I had one experience where I worked in a factory as a boilermaker. Mongrel of a boss. I found out later that at home he was henpecked. Used to talk to me like a pig. I said to him one day, "Bill. You'll have to learn to talk to me a bit nicer." All the men were afraid of him, but I went on: "I've got kids at home and I've got self-respect. If my son heard anybody speak to me the way you do they would lose respect for me as a person and as a father." He bellowed at me, "Well if you don't like the way I talk, you know what you can do about it, don't you?" So I took the next day off and got another job. I came in and gave him a week's notice, and he went in and told the Manager I was leaving. I was one of the best qualified boilermakers in the place. I was a welding expert and I was a good worker. I never gave them any trouble. The Manager must have had words with Bill because he called me into his office and told me they didn't want me to leave, that I was one of the best workers they had. But I left anyway. Some time later, after I went into air conditioning and got promoted up to supervisor/plumber, I was in the office one day in my white shirt with my black tie on, and who walks in with dirty overalls on but Bill! I looked at him, and I said, "Do I know you?" and he said "No." He didn't want to know me. I finished up where I was the boss and he was working on the tool! He'd been working there for years. He came in every day, the boss told him what to weld, and he sat there to weld it and he had no idea what he was making or what it was for. I couldn't work like that! I go into a factory, and its "What am I doing? Where does it fit? What part of the machine is it? What does it do?" and within six months I'd know as much as the foreman, because I'd want to *know*. I'd ask questions. That comes from the right side of the brain, you know. You've got to work out what's going on around you, you know.

Another boss I was working for came out to me with some problem or other and started to get a bit abusive. I just said to him: "Hey, wait a minute. I'm a human being you know. You don't talk to me like that. My job's not worth that much to me. My dignity's worth more to me than my job." I went on: "You're psychologically abusing me." He said, "How d'you work that out?" "Well, you're a boss," I replied, "you can sack me. I can't sack you, and as soon as I walk into your office I'm aware of that. And if you raise your voice to me you're abusing me." He replied, "Well, I've never had anybody talk to me like that before." And I said, "No. Because they're too bloody scared!" Even when work was scarce I've left jobs because of the boss, and guys have asked me if I had another job to go to. Usually I didn't, but I knew something would come up, because I'm a good worker and a welding specialist. When I worked in a factory I soon became one of the top five workers because I was responsible. I was the blueprint man, and I did the marking off. Markers off are very sort of special.

Another place I worked at it was rather funny. Myself and another bloke were the top markers and blueprint readers (a lot of blokes are good welders and good tradesmen but they can't read blueprints). This other guy and I just happened to take the same day off, and the rumour went round the factory that we were looking for another job. When we came in the next day the boss gave us a rise! He promoted the both of us to charge hands! I said to him, "You know, you're so full of bullshit. What annoys me is that we've been working here for a year or so, earning money for you. Yet today, because you're insecure about losing us you give us more money, but we're

still doing the same work we were doing last week and last month. I wasn't looking for another job - but now I am!" So I left. (The other bloke stayed.) I was pleased they'd offered us more money, but I was also offended.

---

I've lectured around the Central Coast on the right hemisphere of the brain. I've also lectured on the subject of body language and physiognomy - which is reading people's character from their face. I'm a bit of an expert on that. In fact I've been asked to write a book about it. I found out that Alan Peace, who wrote that book about body language, was born with a hare lip. Now he gets three thousand dollars a lecture on the lecture circuit. Now isn't that great! He was born with a speech impediment, and he makes his money out of public speaking! Sometimes a disadvantage can be turned into an asset. I've often said that not everybody has the advantage of a poor childhood. It *can* be an advantage. Look at me now. I'm nearly seventy and I'm fitter than a lot of blokes younger than me. I look after myself. My wife's twenty seven years younger than me - yet sometimes I feel younger than her. It's a mental attitude. And with clowning, I've got to be fit to do clowning. I did a show last year at Peppers at Terrigal that was four hours - from eight o'clock till midnight. Non-stop. Didn't even go to the toilet. That was a show for adults. And I do parties and things. But I don't push it these days. I've been teaching art with Tuggerah Lakes Leisure Learning for four or five years, now. My wife has a little shop in Gosford where she sells African artefacts - carvings and stuff.

---

When I was in Ghana there was an Australian gold mining company over there - (see, we're over there ripping them off) - and there were 61 Aussies working in this mine. They were a West Australian company and they recruit young blokes from WA. They've got to pass a welding test before they leave the country, then they fly them over there. A lot of them aren't suitable in their attitude. They go over there and all they want to do is screw around and drink. They don't want to weld. They don't want to work. And they get sent back. But there are some of them over there on two year contracts, and they make a lot of money - if they don't blow it on gambling and stuff. When I heard they were only 150 Ks up the road I jumped in the car and drove up, just to say hello!

---

I got a job while I was over there in Ghana. I rang up this company that was making farm machinery and water tanks and asked them if they were looking for a welder. I went down there to have an interview and the boss of the place talked to me for a while. With my experience and my knowledge - I'd done courses in fibreglass, and there was my welding experience - it turned out that I knew more than anybody in the factory, including their engineers. Even guys that had gone to university over there wouldn't have had my experience - because they hadn't had the exposure to it. They were using machines that in Australia I hadn't seen for thirty or forty years. I was walking around the place looking at these machines and making suggestions to them about this and that. They said they couldn't employ me as a welder because I was over-qualified, and offered me a job as Assistant Manager.

I had to work with the Pakistani manager, who I soon realised was incompetent, and it didn't take me too long to realise that the Director that owned the factory was senile. And I thought "Wow! I've got a big problem here." They said to me to lift the standard of the welding being done - to teach the men how to weld, but not to give them any theory because they wouldn't understand. I said to him, "Well, I could teach a monkey to weld, but you can't teach a monkey

to think like a welder. What happens when you make a mistake?" He said, "That's where you come in." They were doing something and they didn't know what they were doing it for. They just did it. (I saw this sort of thing over there all the time. I'd watch the concrete work, or the carpentry, and I'd say "That's not how you splice a piece of wood together." and I'd get them to do it my way - which I considered the right way - and they'd do it. But I know the next job they went on they'd go back to doing it the way they always have.)

The way they talked to the native workers in the factory was disgusting. They talked to them as though they were slaves. I didn't like it at all, and at one stage I asked the manager what happened to the Assistant Manager whose office I had. He told me "Oh, he went home one Friday and never came back." So that's what I did. I went home that Friday and didn't go back. I couldn't stomach it.

There are a lot of white people there who are genuine, but there's also a lot of white people there who are abusing the situation. Some of them sit back, and they drink their pink gins, and they talk to their servants like dirt, and they're enjoying a lifestyle they'd never have in their own country. They're the ones who love the place, but I was a bit freaked out by the poverty. We went for a walk one day and a little girl came up behind us and was pleading with me to adopt her because she was hungry. I still remember the eyes...(Pause).

In Ghana I saw how people live with the bare necessities. We had a caretaker looking after our house, and when it was time for him to go and for us to move in, the bloke picked up their grass bedroll off the floor and put it under his arm, his wife picked up the water bucket, and their three year old boy picked up the saucepan... and away they went! That was it - plus the clothes they had on their back. For a while there in Ghana I felt guilty because I had more than I needed.

But it's not all negative there. There was one shallow volcanic lake we used to swim in that was like heaven! They have a wet season, and after that the *hamatan* - the hot winds that blow across from the Sahara - after the country has been saturated by six weeks of rain the *hamatan* dries it out. But in drying it out, the whole country gets covered with fog for several weeks, and it's like living in a cloud. And if you went swimming in this lake, if you swam out too far you'd become disoriented and you wouldn't know which way to go to get back to land. So I didn't go out too far, because it was really weird, though the natives had some way of navigating in it. You'd only have to go out about ten feet or so and you'd lose sight of the shore!

I built a concrete fence along the front of the block of land that I built the houses on. It's about 250 feet long and we've got a concrete fence all along there. I painted murals on that. The whole 250 feet is a painting! As soon as you drive in the driveway you feel like you're in an art gallery. I did wall murals on the house. One was a mural of Africa, and the other one was a tropical island. When there was something to be done, like the wrought iron work for the servants quarters, I did it myself. I did all my own tiling, all my own plumbing, and I did a lot of stuff myself, and the in-laws just thought I was some sort of genius, you know. They'd never seen somebody that was so versatile. For instance, they backed into a tree in the garden and broke it. I just spliced it and put it together and stuck sticky tape around it and they were amazed. They'd never seen that done before, and the graft took, and now the tree's twenty foot high! They're still talking about it.

---

Before I went to Ghana I had a job up at Somersby. I'd been a tech. teacher for fourteen years and had sort of retired by then, but we were getting money together to travel, and I was a bit restless. Some of the work at this job was a bit boring, but even if the job is boring you can still be happy doing it. I took pride in my work. I was the oldest welder there, but I was the most productive, because I had a different attitude to the others. The other young blokes would only work half the day - they'd be in the toilet, reading comic books, or whistling at girls or some-

thing, and they made a lot more mistakes than I did because I'd done it all before. I was happy, and the other guys thought I was a bit weird. Because they hated Mondays, you see, they hated to get up in the morning.

I was only working three days a week, and I said to them: "At the end of the week the boss gives me four or five hundred dollars, but he's the one that's got the worry of coming up with that money. In a way the boss is working for me." You might argue that it was easier for me to take because I was only doing three days a week instead of six, but that again was a case of mental attitude. When I went there and applied for the job, they said they wanted to have me. It was a twelve hour day, six days a week, with mandatory overtime. (The other welders were taking home over a thousand bucks a week!) I said to the boss "Hey, ease off. I don't want to be a dead millionaire!" I ended up working the three days a week, taking Wednesdays and Fridays off. That suited me fine. Mind you, a lot of the young blokes there had a lot in the way of mortgages, paying off their house, their car, and their furniture - plus the cost of any kids.

---

I've never got into politics much - that's party politics, I mean. But I have changed a few things - mainly by writing letters and stuff. Matter of fact I gave a couple of talks at the Aquarian Vision Club recently, and that same thing came up. We were talking there one night about the passivity of a lot of Australians - how they put up with a lot of shit. I don't. I write letters. I've written eight letters about the French nuclear bomb testing. I wrote to the French Ambassador in both Perth and Canberra, and I've written to Chirac several times. I suppose I'm a bit of a stirrer. I've written letters about the disgusting way that the Americans dump stuff like MSG and DDT on the developing countries. (I saw that in action when I was in Ghana).

Politics is a dirty business, and I've never been tempted to go into that side of it, but they serve a purpose, politicians - we've got to have them. Like the police.

---

When I was a young fellow I was a bit aggressive, and I got elected as a co-delegate to the union in one place that I worked. After being on the job only for a few days my co-delegate was sacked, I think unfairly, and the men went out on strike in protest. So the next thing I knew I was involved in an all-out walk-out - and I'd only been working there for less than a week. The strike pay we got from the union would have been worth about four dollars a week, which was peanuts. I finished up as a speaker for the strike committee. We were going round all the workers in engineering factories, getting them to put money in to help support us strikers. The strike lasted two or three weeks or so, and I got pretty fed up with the whole thing in the finish. My wife was working at the time, which made it a bit easier for me than it was for some of the others, and one of the women she worked with was married to one of the strikers, and he was a bloke who liked his drink of beer. She mentioned to my wife that the strike pay was pretty miserable, and my wife replied that she thought the speaking committee was doing a good job drumming up support, and that she was getting eighteen to twenty dollars a week. But the other woman was only getting a couple of dollars a week because her old man was drinking the rest. Then she spread the rumour around that I was tickling the till and giving more to my wife! This was simply not possible, because I had to get and give receipts for everything that came in and went out, and everybody got the same. I was so disgusted with the way people would listen to this rumour that I got shot of the lot of them. When people are hungry or broke they listen to evil.

That episode had a strange repercussion because when I left that job I went and applied for another one at Villawood, and there was an excellent welder there who had done some innovative work that had saved the firm a lot of money, but he'd gone on to a better job. I took samples of my work in to apply for his job, and they asked me if I minded if they rang the last place I

worked for a reference. Of course the response they got was: "Oh, that Connell bloke? He was only here two days when he led a mass walk-out and everyone was out on strike for weeks! Don't have anything to do with him." They blamed me for everything! So that was a job I *didn't* get.

So I got a job with a slave shop - it was a terrible place. One of the other blokes there was giving me a lift into work one day and he dropped into a little factory on the way to see if they had a job. He asked me to wait for him, and I was standing on the verandah. He went in and got a job, then the personnel manager came out and saw me and asked me what I was doing there. I explained that I was waiting for my mate. He said: "Are you a boilermaker too?" I said "Yeah." So he said, "OK then. Start Monday". Just like that! Didn't even ask me my name. I worked at that place like a dog for a year, and I got myself a new reputation - I got clean again and lost my commo, trouble-making reputation. Anything like that goes around the industry really fast.

When I was making the big underframes for diesel-electric locomotives at A.E. Goodwin's, we had to work from 164 drawings. We had to make them upside down, which utilised my artistic talents - a lot of workers couldn't do that. We had to build a camber into them to take the weight of the electric motor, which weighed sixteen ton. If you made them straight they'd sag under the weight. We had a boss there who was a very heavy man, and the management were putting boilermakers onto jobs that were really fitters' work. If the boilermakers did the work they'd be in trouble with the fitters' union, but when they refused to do the work they'd sack them. They kept doing this - I think they were trying to break the back of the union. This boss' name was Blood, and we used to call him Captain Blood. He sided with the men, even though he was one of the management, because he'd come up through the boilermaker ranks himself. Because of this he got sacked too, and in the finish he could not get a job anywhere in the engineering industry. They blackballed him. He ended up working on the tools with a subsidiary of the place that had sacked him, so he went from being a manager back to overalls. If I'd been in that position I would have got a job outside the industry and then come back later. (He had a heart attack about fifteen years ago.)

For a time there when I was an apprentice I worked in the timber industry. I dropped a steel bar on my toe and was on compo for a long time, which frustrated me because I was feeling fit but couldn't go to work. I didn't tell anybody but I went and got a job in a timber yard. My mathematics was pretty good, and soon I was helping the foreman work out the super footage, do the invoices and that sort of thing. I was only a young feller at the time, but he wanted me to become his assistant. Of course I didn't take that up, because I was still apprenticed to engineering, and I couldn't break that. But there were lots of opportunities around in those days.

---

When I was a young bloke we used to go to the pub a fair bit. They used to reckon I was a good bloke to get drunk with because I was a happy drunk. But it got to a point when I was in the Air Force that one day I just sat back and took a look at some of my drinking mates and I thought, "No. I don't think I really like these blokes all that much". They were loud and boisterous, and I don't know if it was a growing thing with me or what, but I took a look at them and decided that I really didn't want to mix with them. That was a bit of a turning point for me.

In the Air Force it's very difficult to try to live like a single man if you're married. The single blokes have a good life - they've got plenty of money in their pocket because the Air Force clothes you, feeds you and accommodates you and all your money is like drinking money if your single. But when you're married and you're lonely, and your wife's up in Sydney and you're down in Melbourne you want to get out a bit too. You could always tell the blokes who were from out of town because they'd play up merry hell, because nobody knew them. When I came into the Tech. most of my social contacts were outside of work, but I was a lot older then and my

interests weren't particularly compatible with the pub scene.

When my marriage broke down I joined Parents Without Partners. I went to one do up at Newcastle, but I found it a bit boring. One of the fellers said to me: "What's the matter with you? Everybody's talking!" I said, "Yes. But just listen. What are they talking about? Sex. They're talking about their husbands or wives that they've broken up with. They're talking about last Sunday's football. There's nothing stimulating going on." You know what he said back? He said, "Well, that's three subjects. That's pretty good!" (*Laughs*). And I thought, "Jeez, who does he knock around with? Blokes that only talk about one subject?" (*More laughter*).

---

I used to say jokingly to my students at the Tech. that the only reason I'm not Prime Minister is because I don't want to be. There's so many things that have happened in my life that I've dreamed about happening. When I first started art I thought it would be great to have an exhibition some day, and I've had two or three exhibitions of my painting and sculpture, and now I'm an art teacher. At another time I thought wouldn't it be good to be a plumber, and within two years I was not only a plumber, but I was a supervisor plumber with twenty men under me. It's amazing what you can do if you put your mind to it.

---

When I was first married and starting up the chicken farming, a began keeping some bees. I didn't know much about it, and when I first tried raiding the hive I puffed too much smoke on them and stirred them all up. I had all the wrong clothing on, too, and the bees got stuck into me. I headed for home, running across the paddock and yelling out to my wife. She opened the front door, saw me coming with all the bees, and she slammed the front door shut just as I got to it. I ran around the back, but she ran through the house and shut the back door as well. Luckily, I'd made a little swimming pool for the kids in the back yard, so I dived into that - fully clothed! "Why did you do that?" I asked her, and she said: "Because I didn't want the bees in the house!

My first signwriting job was for a factory I was working in that made roof trusses and travelling cranes. They found out that I did a bit of signwriting, and asked me to write a sign for them in my own time. They had a big traversing crane there with a big steel plate on it and they needed to put on it the maximum lift the crane could handle. I put the extension ladder up against this steel plate and drove two big steel bars into the ground so the ladder wouldn't slip. I run up the ladder, got my little maul stick into position and started signwriting. The factory was quiet - everybody had gone - and I heard this funny little squeaking noise. It took me a while to work out what it was. It was the wheels that the crane ran on, slowly turning...(*laughs*), and then I noticed that the top of the ladder was slowly moving down the plate! The crane was slowly moving down the track, and I had a terrible five seconds as I watched the top of the ladder move down to the bottom of the plate. Down I went! I was lucky my legs didn't go through the ladder as I came down - I could have broken my legs. I landed on my heels, and I walked like a fairy for two months - on my toes! It really hurt. My legs nearly got pushed up my bum!

When I was with the tech. I didn't get on well with the head teacher. One day I'd been across to Kibble Park to have a cup of tea in my tea break, and on the way back I got hit by a car. An old lady was driving, and I broke her windscreen as I went over the top and landed on the road. I was lucky not to come out of that as a paraplegic. One of my colleagues went back and told the head teacher about the accident, and the first thing he said was, "What time did it happen?" because he wanted to check whether it was in working hours or not. Not "How is he?" but "What time was it?"

Another time at the tech. I'd brought my own oxy bottles in to use in one of my classes, and that night someone saw me loading them into the boot and dobbed me in for pinching oxy bottles from the Tech! I went back to the Tech to get something signed only a couple of years ago, and I joked with the bloke in the office there: "I see the Tech's been going down hill since I left". "Yeah," he said, "we're still looking for stuff that you pinched while you were here." So you see how it sticks, whether it's true or not?

---

You ask me if anything stands out in my memory as being the best job I've ever had. I've got a few memories of, sort of... peak working experiences. When I was an apprentice with the rail-ways, one of the first engines that I worked on was the 3801. The Yanks thought Australia didn't have the technology to build that because it was a one-piece casting and we'd previously always made them out of plate and riveted them. That was a big moment - to work on the 3801. Later, at A.E. Goodwin's I was working on diesel-electrics. Again, the Yanks thought we couldn't make them - mainly the electric motors, but again we proved our technical knowledge and made them. I had eleven blokes under me when we were building the under-frames upside down, and that was a big moment for me, too. There was a lot of technical expertise required and there wasn't a lot of men there who could have done what I was doing. It makes you feel good. Then going into the air-conditioning field was completely new for me, and to end up there with thirty men under me was also another big thing for me.

Becoming a TAFE teacher was another thing I felt good about, because I considered myself a good teacher. I used lots of innovations in my teaching. I'd come in with a whacking big imitation bungler about a metre high with a rope wick on it and I'd say to the guys that if they gave me any shit I'd light the wick! I'd put a lot of work in. In the theory classes I'd divide them into two, and make it like a Sale of the Century sort of thing - like a quiz. I used to give them crossword puzzles to do where all the clues were to do with welding. We used to have a lot of fun. Teaching is a good thing to do because you're not only teaching skills, you're teaching mental attitudes, and I think that there's a lot of blokes out there that I've influenced in their life - hopefully for the better. And it wasn't all confined to welding. The boys used to treat me a bit as a father figure, and sometimes they'd come to me for advice about sex - most of the problems for teenage boys seem to revolve around sex, and many of them couldn't ask their parents. They felt easy with me. That was rewarding for me, too.

---

People either like me or hate me, you know, because with me what you see is what you get. I'm honest. This seems to make some people uncomfortable, but the people who feel uncomfortable mostly have something to hide.

I've adopted the philosophy that work is good therapy. It helps to give you self-satisfaction. It's like doing good for other people, doing charity work - that also helps your self-esteem. And you also have to have a goal. Just because I'm past the age when most people retire, my working life is far from over. I've got ideas about having a farm and going into permaculture. I've got options if I want them. I plan to be Australia's oldest living person!

It comes as a big shock to a lot of blokes that when they reach retiring age they're considered to be pretty well useless. I don't believe that. There are some things now that take me a bit longer to do than twenty years ago, but I don't put limitations on myself. I think that I can still do what I did before, and I just allow for the fact that it might take a bit longer. You might lose some brain cells as you get older, but we make up for it with extra wisdom - there's all that experience you can draw on. All that life experience has got to be worth something.

Life shouldn't be a bore - something that you have to endure. My life's been very interesting and I think it will continue to be, because that's what I do - I get involved, all the time. I don't particularly feel that I have to prove anything any more. I'm me. I like me. I'm happy with me, and that's good enough. I don't need to break any records. I don't need to be a millionaire. I don't need any extra glory. I learned to be happy with myself - but it didn't come easy.

*(Recorded September 26 and October 3, 1995.)*

---