



Ern and Heather Chapman

You've lived here all your life have you Ern?

Ern: Well I had my seventh birthday up the Watagan Road here about a kilometre - that's forty nine years I've been here.

And did your folks come here from somewhere else?

Ern: They came from St Alban's. My mother was a Jurd.

And you were from the area, Heather?

Heather: Yes. I was reared over at Laguna House. My father and Les Sternbeck were brothers, and my mother came from the Newcastle area.

And you've been here all your life - went to school here?

Heather: Yes.

Were you both at school together?

Heather: Later on, for a little bit down here at Laguna school we were.

Ern: I went to school up Watagan here. There was only about seven or eight of us. My sister and I went there for as long as it stayed open. Then they closed it and we went back to Laguna school.

What did you do after you left school?

Ern: We were dairying then, but before that, when I was still going to school, we used to market garden.

All sorts of veggies and stuff?

Ern: Yeah. Peas and beans, and corn and melons were our biggest.

And was there a lot of market gardening done around these parts then ?

Ern: No. Dad was the first one to start market gardening in this area - selling melons and that in bulk. There used to be two markets in Cessnock then.

This was as well as the dairying, or before, did you say?

Ern: Mainly before. But we still always used to grow a patch of melons.

When your Dad started dairying, were you on the milk?

Ern: We were on the cream, first. Then we were on the milk, and then when the tankers came in we gave it away. We would've had to put a new bridge across the creek to get to the dairy.

And you would've had to stand all the cost of that?

Ern: Yes, because the property was on both sides of the creek. When I got out of dairying it was a couple of years before the tankers came, and I drove the milk truck. I drove it for Bob Armstrong for a few years and then I went back to dairying because Dad had taken a stroke. I dairied for a while until I got the job back driving the milk truck after Col Andrews bought Armstrong out.

And was that what you kept doing?

Ern: No. Later on I just kept the property and ran a few head of cattle, and then I got a job with Cessnock Council. I was with them for twenty three years.

You're not with them now?

Ern: Not since I had trouble with my heart.

And Heather, what did you do after you left school?

Heather: After I left high school I went to Newcastle and lived with my grandmother for a while and worked in a shop there, and then... I came home and got married!

Where'd you meet? At one of the local dances?

Heather: Well we knew one another before, but mainly at the dances. They used to have a dance in Wollombi Hall every fortnight.

So you got married. And had kids?

Heather: Yes. We've got two sons - and now we've got four grandchildren.

Were you both from big families?

Ern: Only two in my family.

Heather: And I've got two sisters and a brother.

Have they all moved away?

Heather: Yes.

Ern: My sister and her husband still own a property out there. They've retired to Nelson's Bay.

Heather: That's Val and Bill Crump.. Val is Ern's sister.

Is there any part of your life that stands out in your memory for any reason?

Ern: Oh, it's all been sort of good. We've battled a bit - worked real hard, especially earlier in life. I was

sort of doing two jobs. Times were tough. Like when I built this house, people would ask me why I didn't put a chimney in it, with all the wood that's about. But when I was younger I got sick of using an axe. I was one day a week with the axe getting wood - for the dairy, for the house...

Hard work with just an axe.

Ern: Yes, and a horse and spring cart. So I said no, I'd rather just press a button.

Do you think you still would have made that decision if chainsaws had been around?

Ern: Probably not. What it took me an hour to get you'd get in ten minutes with a chainsaw.

When I was driving the milk truck for the second time we moved to Cessnock. We were in Cessnock five days a week from when the boys started school till when they started high school, but I was out here every weekend. I bought two blocks of ground in Cessnock and I was going to build, but I loved it that much out here that Friday evenings couldn't come quick enough. So I decided to build this house here. We'd been living three mile away from the high school when we were in Cessnock and it was twenty five miles from here, but to catch the bus from here only took ten minutes longer, because the local bus went such a roundabout way.

Did the kids prefer it out here?

Ern: Yes. Nev's just built that new house next door - he's the eldest boy. But his little feller is sick with the croup and they've had to move closer to the hospital. He's a mechanic for the Cessnock Council. The other boy lives in Cessnock too. He works for Shortland Electricity.

Did you feel cut off from medical help and that sort of thing in the early days?

Ern: Well, our only transport was a bus. I bought a car when I was sixteen, (I didn't have a licence), but Dad never had a car. He only ever had the horse and sulky to meet the bus, or to go to town - or else somebody around who had a car would take you.

What would happen to the horse and sulky while you were in town? Was there somewhere to leave it?

Ern: You used to leave it in the church yard. Let the horse out and just leave the harness and everything there - it'd still be there when you came home.

Reckon that would be the same today?

Ern: No. They'd take the sulky too!

What other ways do you think life has changed since those days?

Ern: Oh well, life has changed tremendously. We'd go to town now twice a week - we're going somewhere nearly every day - whereas then it'd be three weeks sometimes before you'd go to town.

I suppose better roads would have helped too.

Heather: It was a gravel road all the way to Millfield.

It wouldn't get graded too often, I imagine.

Ern: Actually it used to get graded pretty regularly - more so than the little strips of gravel do now, because there was a gang of men worked in the area here with the grader and a backhoe all the time. If you got a shower of rain the ganger that was in charge would put the grader on the main road and forget about whatever else they were doing.

This was to take advantage of the dampened road?

Ern: Yes.

When you were a little girl Heather, did you have any responsibilities? I mean, there was a big farm attached to Laguna House, wasn't there?

Heather: Yes, a dairy. But I didn't really have to go much to the dairy. My father was in it with one of his other brothers and he had older sons so I didn't have to do much.

So you got it easy, eh? Compared to the fellers?

Heather: Yes. Occasionally I'd help out, though.

Did you have other chores around the house to do?

Heather: I used to have to help my mother with cooking and cleaning and that sort of thing. I used to do that from a young age but I didn't have to go out and do much outside work.

And did you like school?

Heather: Yes.

What about you, Ern ? Did you like school?

Ern: No. I hated it.

All the fellers seem to have hated school and the women liked it! I wonder why that is?

Heather: I didn't like missing a day - especially at high school.

So you really enjoyed it. Did you do well?

Heather: Yes.

Ern: She was dux of the class each year at high school.

But for you, Ern, it was a time you'd rather have spent doing something else?

Ern: Yeah. I'd rather do a day's ploughing with two horses than go to school... We got our first tractor in 1954.

What sort was it?

Ern: A Ferguson TEA 20.

I've got one of them. It's still chugging along. They're indestructible aren't they? Did you buy it new?

Ern: Yes... for 720 pound. I can't remember whether that included the carry-all and the disc plough or not. They might've been separate.

Did it last you a long time?

Ern: Till the sixties. Then we updated and bought a Fordson.

You would have grown up with horses. Were all the kids good riders?

Heather: I never used to ride. My sister did though. She was good.

Did a lot of the girls ride?

Heather: Oh yes, I think most of them used to. They didn't have pony clubs and things like they've got now, though.

I would have thought you'd have used them just for transport around the place.

Heather: Yes, well they did. My sister always rode her horse to school but I always rode a bike.

What was it like riding a pushbike on those really rough, stony roads?

Heather: Hard work, but it was just something that you did and didn't take any notice of. Mail days, everyone from up Murray's Run and Blaxland's Arm used to come to our place for their mail. I used to carry the mail bag home on the bike. That was hard work!

So was your place a bit of a social centre of the area ?

Heather: Well, a lot of people used to come for the mail, and Uncle Les up Murray's Run used to bring their cream down to our place to be picked up.

And I suppose you knew everyone?

Heather: Yes. You used to know everyone then. From the head of Murray's Run to Millfield. We don't now - there's a lot of new people moved in.

Is there much mixing between the new people and the longer term residents?

Heather: Oh yes. But there's not a lot of the older residents left now, who have lived here all their life. But some of the newer ones have been here for years and years.

Ern: But everyone seems to mix in. (*Digression*)

The schools you went to weren't the subsidised schools, were they? They would've been before your time wouldn't they?

Both: Yes.

So they were your ordinary state schools. One teacher?

Ern: Yes.

Always female?

Heather: I only ever had male teachers.

Ern: There was a female teacher for one part of the time here. Then there was an older teacher that was about to retire, then there was a young single feller came. It was his first school. At Watagan. But at the Laguna school the teacher lived at the school with his family. The residence was in the school grounds. It's gone today.

And what was school like? Were they fairly strict,?

Ern: Yes, very strict.

Did you get caned?

Heather: I don't ever remember girls being caned. Only the boys.

Ern: Well I had a taste of it a few times.

Did you have to do much to earn a few cuts?

Ern: No. Not really. It was pretty strict.

And is there anything that you learnt at school that you think you've ever used?

Ern: Oh yes. Definitely.

But I suppose beyond the three Rs, there must have been a lot of stuff..

Ern: Yes. That you never use. *(Digression).*

What about things like the CWA? Did you ever get into that at all Heather?

Heather: No. I didn't.

Did anyone around here join. Was there a branch locally?

Heather: No. The nearest would've been Cessnock. In latter years they had a Ladies' Auxiliary at school that I used to go to. We always went to church as kids.

Did you stop when you grew up?

Heather! Oh, for a little while, but I go regularly now.

What other sorts of social activities did you have other than church and the dances? Did people throw any parties or anything?

Ern: They used to often have a house party. And there used to be a lot of euchre tournaments from one house to another. Sometimes there'd be a dance on, and up the back of the hall beyond the people they'd have a euchre tournament on. And they always had a nice supper. The women always brought that - with a cup of tea.

No grog ?

Ern: No grog, no. You could have a drink, but you weren't allowed to take it into the hall.

Was that because people had been disorderly before?

Ern: No. That was the law then.

Heather: There wasn't a lot of that sort of thing around - drink and that. We never used to see it much at home - only at Christmas time and things like that.

Given that so many people are related to one another, have there ever been any big family gatherings?

Heather: Not really. Only amongst your own family. We've had a couple of reunions with Sternbecks in the last few years though, where there were a lot involved.

Do you have them at someone's house, or... ?

Heather: The last one we had was up at Uncle Les' where they all originated from. We had it on the flat down in front of Les' house. About 130 came, I think.

So they would have come from all over the place then ?

Heather: Yes. There were only a few of the old people left, but it went right down to our generation and on down to our grandchildren.

Ern: But the one we had before that we had in the Town Hall at Cessnock.

Gee! That must have been a big turnout, was it? Did it get local coverage in the newspaper?

Heather: No. It was just a private thing for the family.

That must make you feel part of a whole historical sort of scene, does it?

Heather: Mmmm. *(Pause).*

By the time you were young marrieds you had the power on?

Heather: No. We had an outside copper and cement tubs and a hand wringer. That's how I did all the nappies and that when the children were little.

Ern: We used to have to fill the copper by hand, too.

Heather: With a bucket - and the tubs, too. We didn't have water over the tubs, either. We used a chip heater for the bath.

I grew up with a chip heater. I remember that three sheets of Herald screwed up the right way would get you enough hot water for a shower.

Ern: I saw it tough. I didn't go through the Depression, but I wouldn't like to have seen it any tougher than it was at times.

Can you give me some examples?

Ern: Well, like we couldn't have the things you can have now. Now we just have what we want.

You couldn't afford any luxuries then...

Ern: Oh, perhaps occasionally, but not like now.

Do you reckon it's better or worse?

Ern: It's got to be better. Comfort, cars, roads, power - it's got to be better... But I wouldn't say you're any happier, because you were happy in what you were doing then - you knew no better.

Was there more of a community feeling then compared to now?

Ern: No. Everyone's still pretty friendly. Whenever you went to anyone's house you were always part of it - you'd get a cup of tea and a welcome.

Didn't that mean that it took a lot longer to do things? I mean, if you drop in to drop off some eggs or something and it takes you a half hour or so to do it by the time you've had a cuppa and a natter...

Heather: Yes, I know. But you seemed to have more time. I don't know why. Now everyone seems to be in a hurry.

Ern: Time meant nothing to you then.

And the dances that were such a social hub for everybody - did they start to drop off when television came?

Ern: I'd say it started with the clubs. The dances still went for a long while after TV came. But TV ruined the picture shows around here. Cessnock used to have them - and there used to be a picture show at Paxton, another one at Aberdare. West Cessnock had two in the main street. They've all gone now.

Heather: But a lot of people got married and moved away - a lot of the younger ones. There wasn't the numbers to go to the dances when that started to happen.

Ern: But all the old ones used to go. It used to be sort of the number one outing.

Heather: We used to take the children. They'd go to sleep and you'd put them under the seat on a blanket and pillow.

Ern: We used to go to a lot of dances. We used to go out to Mangrove Mountain, St Albans and out that way if there was nothing on at Wollombi. I don't think there's a dance at Mangrove Hall now.

I went to one years ago that was held after the Country Fair. I don't know if they still do that. I think they do. But they're certainly not fortnightly.. Did you get television soon after it became available?

Heather: We got it soon after we went to Cessnock.

Ern: We didn't have television here till we built this house.

And the clubs. I've never thought much about them. When did they start coming into their own? What's around? There's an RSL at Millfield...

Ern: Yes. And the one at Mangrove that not long ago moved to the new building near the golf course.

Yeah, but the new one looks like everything else. I used to like the old fibro joint. It was a real one-off and I was sorry to see it condemned. When did the clubs start? After the second world war?

Ern: Well I can remember the original one at Millfield being built - that'd be going back to about the sixties I suppose. Probably would've been earlier than that for Cessnock. But they weren't the clubs that they are now. Now everyone strolls in, but then it was strictly for members only.

Now they just want to make a bob out of them, eh?

Ern: Yep. Sign the book and everyone's welcome. *(Pause)*.

Any stories about fires or floods?

Ern: Yes. There was the '49 flood - it was very big here. Around that time we were on one side of the creek and during the flood we never had any groceries for three weeks.

There'd have been a bit of creative cooking going on during that time, was there?

Ern: Yes. Plenty of dampers, though the flour was starting to run out towards the finish. Ray Crump walked around the mountain to Wollombi shop and carried what he could coming back.

They couldn't take horses?

Ern: No. There were too many fences.

But you would have been pretty self-sufficient then, wouldn't you? You'd have had enough stuff kicking around to last you three weeks?

Ern: Well, we always had a side of bacon hanging up, and we always had plenty of chooks. And we used to always have pumpkins in the shed that we'd grown ourselves. We wouldn't have starved, you know, even if it had gone for another three weeks.

Still, three weeks was a long time. Did you start to think it was never going to go down ?

Ern: Oh, I suppose so. I was about ten, then.

And as a kid, were floods good fun? Were they exciting and adventurous and that? Did you enjoy them ?

Ern: Oh they were, but we didn't actually enjoy them. But we used to go rabbiting. The rabbits would flock on to islands that you could walk to knee-deep. That was another thing that we would've eaten.

Did you ever go rabbiting just for the few bob you might make out of it?

Ern: No, but Dad used to. He'd sell the skins.

Do you remember when they were bad?

Ern: Yes. They were really thick.

Could you go out now and get a rabbit?

Ern: You might get a couple if you went now, but you might go out three times and not see one. Other days you might see three or four, you know.

D'you reckon that there's more wildlife about now than there used to be?

Ern: Absolutely a lot more. The wombats are just breeding ... they're going to ruin the place.

Is that because people don't shoot them any more?

Ern: That's correct. Because they're protected. But they're mining the creeks. I don't care what anyone says, they're causing the erosion of the sand that fills the waterholes in.

Is Watagan Creek getting ruined the way that Wollombi Brook up Murray's Run way has?

Ern: Not so far, but in places, yes.

Are there nice waterholes still?

Ern: Yes.

What about as a boy - did you have a swimming hole and that?

Ern: Yes. We had a swimming hole - about half way between this house and where I was born, up the road.

Heather: There used to be platypus in it too, didn't there?

Ern: Yes. Still is.

Did you get time as a kid to fish or swim much?

Ern: No. I was usually always busy. They used to have cricket games and tennis tournaments, but I never joined in. I was always wanting to earn a bob.

Did you go to those things Heather?

Heather: Not sport. No.

It must have been another one of those social activities that kept everybody in touch.

Ern: Yeah. There were four tennis courts in Watagan then that I can remember: Woodbury's, Lynch's, Cleve Crump's over here, and one at Laguna. They used to have quite a few friendly games.

Who played who at cricket?

Ern: There used to be a team here at Laguna once, and a team at Wollombi. They'd be in the competition with Cessnock. There used to be quite a few teams around. I think they used to play on their own ground once and play away once. Bellbird had a team, and Mulbring - and Paxton and Ellalong. It used to be quite big.

I didn't realise it was that well-established. Was that confined to the fellers, or did the women go along and barrack?

Ern: Oh no, the women used to go along - those that were interested, like. They had a friendly match where Laguna played Wollombi only last Sunday. We went down for the afternoon, but that's the first time for probably twelve months that they've had a game, but they're going to try to get the younger teams going again in the competition if they can.

What about football ? Did anybody play football ?

Ern: No. Not much in this area. It didn't take. *(Pause)*.

What stopped these valleys being used for citrus orchards? Was it that it was better grazing country?

Ern: No. The frosts are what stops them. Up on the hills like around Kulnura they don't get the frosts like we do.

Did everyone grow much the same sort of stockfeed, like saccolene, and... ?

Ern: Yes. And when it was harvest time for, say, saccolene, we'd go three or four mile either way to help one another, and when it come your turn they'd come and help you. See, it was a busy time, and when you were putting the silage down you had to do it quickly, and everybody used to help everyone.

Does that still happen, or has the technology changed things?

Ern: No. There's no dairies about now, and anyway you can do more for yourself because there's more gear now.

But people are still basically helpful and cooperative these days by and large, wouldn't you say?

Ern: Yes. But that sort of thing isn't done as much now.

I suppose it must have become quite a regular thing. Every year...

Ern: Yeah. Every year you'd be putting the silos down for the cattle - when the saccolene got to a certain stage and had the head on it.

And you'd put that down to fatten the dairy cattle. They didn't do that for ordinary cattle?

Ern: No. Mainly they throw them a bit of hay now, or put them in the improved pasture - the clover and oats and that.

Given that Watagan Creek comes out of pretty heavily forested areas, there doesn't seem to have been as much timbergetting around here as perhaps might have been expected. Was there much when you were growing up?

Ern: There'd be two log lorries'd go out every day - mainly pit timber. There was quite a bit of logging really.

Would this go to Millfield ?

Ern: Yes. There were two sawmills there, plus O'Hara's at Cessnock - they used to do a lot of carting. Then there was Turner's sawmill - I'm not sure if they combined with O'Hara's or not, but they used to be roughly where the big Franklins shopping centre is now as you go into Cessnock.

Did you get very far afield around the district?

Ern: No. I did while I was driving the milk lorry, but before that, no.

Heather: He used to pick up at Mountview, and Congewai and Quorrobolong...

Ern: Yes. Armstrong had the run for a lot of places. You used to get shifted about, though mainly you'd have the one run. In the time that I was with him I did the lot.

Was that an enjoyable job, driving around the countryside?

Ern: I used to like it.

Heather: It was heavy work, though.

Ern: Yeah, it was heavy - because of all the back orders. We used to cart all their fowl feed, and all their dairy meal for the cows, and pollard - and all the fertiliser, that was the hardest.

Oh I see. So you were humping heavy stuff all the time.

Ern: Yes. And on the run out here when I worked for Armstrong, you'd leave Cessnock at four o'clock in the morning to come to my first pick-up twenty mile away. I used to make the first pick-up at half past six - that'll give you an idea of how much stuff you'd have on. You'd unload your empty cans on the way out plus whatever they ordered. There weren't many days that you didn't have a few ton backload.

So it was really a general delivery truck as well as a milk lorry.

Ern: Yes. You could even send in for a new hat if you wanted.

Heather: Mrs Armstrong used to go down the street and do the shopping for anything the men couldn't get. When our son Neville was little and we'd first brought him home my mother sent in for a bottle of Harle's Baby Friend, and it came out on the milk truck.

Harle's Baby Friend?

Heather: Yes, because he suffered with wind bad. It's still around today - you can still get it. It's a herbal mixture.

Did it work?

Heather: Yes.

The life for the men seemed to be physically hard, no matter what you did in those days. In one way you'd think that it would've kept them fit - all that exercise. But as I talk to people about this, it seems that the heavy work seemed to wear them out!

Ern: I think they were healthier than we are today. They used to do a lot more walking...

But the stories I've heard about the sort of food the timbergetters would eat when they were camped in the bush - the diet didn't always sound all that well balanced to me. You know, day after day they'd have corned beef...

Ern: Corned beef and spuds. Yes. When they'd camp cutting timber, they'd go out on the Monday morning and come back on the Friday lunchtime. The truck'd take them out and pick up a load of logs and they'd camp for the week and catch the truck back in on the Friday. Some of them might live it up over the weekend because they had their pay in their pocket.

And do either of you remember the pub that was there before the current one at Wollombi ?

Ern: It was a two-storied one.

Would Friday nights have been a pretty boisterous affair, with all these blokes coming back in from the bush?

Ern: Yes. But not like it is today though, at weekends. Wollombi is really alive now.

It was a bit sleepy back then, was it?

Ern: Yes.

Which way do you prefer it?

Ern: Oh well, we've got to go with the times ...I like to go down there now of a Friday night - have a yarn to everyone. I do love a drink, but it's not the drinking - it's the company and the yarns. It's good to have a local watering hole.

Ern: You can have a nice meal there of a Friday or Saturday night in the dining room.

Heather: There used to be a shop there opposite the tavern on that vacant corner - they used to sell everything. They had bowsers there...

Ern: Everything from biscuits to a pair of working boots - bridles - whatever you wanted. Ern Willis used to run it.

Was he there for a long while?

Ern: A long time.

What happened to it? Don't tell me it burnt down!

Ern: No. It eventually got pulled down. The first car I ever bought - a '27 Oakland - I bought off Ernie Willis.

Oakland. That's a brand I haven't heard of.

Ern: The bodies were made by General Motors, but I can't tell you much more than that, except that there was a real big motor in it. It was up on blocks for years and years before I bought it - it only had about 27,000 miles on it. I wasn't old enough to drive it. Sometimes I'd drive as far as the pinch going into Bellbird and then Dad would take over.

~~**Heather:** Willis' used to do grocery deliveries. That shop and the other shop. One used to do it one week and the other the next.~~

Ern: He used to come and pick the orders up on the Monday morning and they were delivered back on the Thursday.

Gee, you'd have to be well-organised with your household planning, wouldn't you? Was this before telephones?

Ern: Well, we never had the phone on at that time. Heather's people would have, but we didn't.

Going back a bit, up in Murray's Run there were only the three families for a long while - the Sternbecks the Nichols' and the McKays. Were there many up here in Watagan?

Well, I can give you the whole lot. The top end was McMullens. Then you come to Dan Langan, then you come to Woodbury's. Then you come to Lynch's on one side of the creek and Crump's was the other side of the creek. Then you come to a place that Albert Hawkins owned but never ever lived there, then to our place, Chapman's. And then you come to here, where this house is - we owned here and Crumps owned the bottom side of the road.

This is a brother to Bill Crump, is it?

Ern: No, a different Crump.

A different family completely?

Ern: Yes. Then, years ago, Joe Carrol owned the next place and then Pryor Woodbury owned the next one.

Pryor Woodbury? Was he something religious, or was that just his first name?

Ern: No, his first name was Pryor. They were the real older identities.

So that was the situation when you were a kid, is that right?

Ern: Mmmm. And the old place right up on the corner - Bill Culley lived in that.

That's the old slab house on the corner of the main road and Watagan Road?

Ern: Yes. He was an old man when I came here, and his daughter married Pryor Woodbury, and they were on in years too, when I came to live here.

Did you hear tell of any of the earlier history of the district? Like, was this settled as early as Murray's Run?

Ern: I guess yes, but I don't really know. There were some old ruins, before that new house was built down where Pryor Woodbury was - they call it the new house but it's been there a while now. He used to live in an old slab place. I can remember that. I even went in there to have a drink of water or a cup of tea with him.

...And up the top where McMullens used to live - well I only got word last night that Ben Cameron passed away, and he lived up there at one time. His father and my Dad were first cousins. There's only the odd post left standing up there where the house was.

And most of the early houses would've been vertical slabs?

Ern: Yes. Oh - there's one I missed. Around the corner here Maud Sternbeck used to live. I bought the property when she died. It was an old slab place, too.

And the white ants never ate them out?

Ern: No. But they picked the hardest wood, though, when they were building them. It was clever the way they fitted the round timber rafters into the roof and that.

I suppose the original ones would have had shingle roofs, would they?

Ern: Yes. The dairy up there was sandstone, but it had a shingle roof.

Have you had any experience splitting shingles with a froe and that?

Ern: No.

Shingle roofs would've been a bit of a fire hazard I imagine.

Ern: I suppose they would've been, but what else did they have before corrugated iron? I've had a little bit of experience putting a bark roof on.

Yes? What, in that old pioneer way?

Ern: Yes. It was on the corn shed on the place where I was reared.

What kind of bark did you use ?

Ern: Stringybark. You'd lay it out on the ground and put weights on it so it would keep flat. You put a fall on it and it'll last years.

Did you scrape the hairy side back or... ?

Ern: No. We didn't. The ridgecapping was bark too. We'd put a pole on either side and three strands of plain wire onto each pole. We'd put one on each side and let them hang down as far as they could. The wire would hold the ridgecapping on and the weight of the poles would hold the bark.

Was there much underneath to nail onto?

Ern: Not much, no. There were quite a few rafters - they were round poles, and an adzed out pole to take the ridgecapping.

Yes. I enjoy building out of round poles, and tying things together with wire. I get a kick out of using what's around, you know.

Ern: My two sheds over there are built out of round timber.

That's from trees from hereabouts?

Ern: Yes. From up the back here. *(Pause)*.

And you've never been threatened by fire ?

Ern: Oh, we have had the odd one, but nothing serious. That's another thing: everyone used to burn off - every year. Well... if you lit that side of the hill this year, next year you'd light this side of the hill. Then you'd lock the hill paddock up so it'd be warm for the cattle - they had the tree coverage. And that's another reason there's been more fires lately. You do get a break these days when you can light it, but it's so short that often you can't get a fire going.

You've only got kikuyu here in patches, but it's just about everywhere down in Yarramalong. Why the difference? Were your native grasses so good here that you didn't have to worry?

Ern: Well on the good flats here you'd get good paspalum. Over the years I've worked all mine growing melons, and you don't want kikuyu where you're growing a garden because it spreads pretty quick - but I do think it's a number one feed. I've only got bits and pieces of it that I've sown.

But the cattle keep that down? It's not a problem that you've got to keep slashing or anything?

Ern: Oh no. I wish it was all kikuyu here now.

Do you ? What is the native grass that grows around here and up under the trees? Is that kangaroo grass?

Ern: A lot of it is in the hills. The cattle eat it mainly in the winter time. But over the last few years I've started to sow a bit of clover and rye back down. *(Digression)*.

I was going to ask you, Heather - what about country crafts around the home. Did you get into that sort of thing ?

Heather: No.

Did any of the fellers have any hobbies like ...did they plait stockwhips, or make saddles, or... ?

Ern: Well, Stan Brown was the blacksmith down here at Laguna, and his father Bill before him. My grandfather was a blacksmith - he used to do a lot of little jobs for us earlier on, and gave Dad a few hints and that. He was a blacksmith at St Albans. He was also a blacksmith for Cessnock Council years ago - he made the grates up Vincent Street - the main street in Cessnock - and a lot of them are still there today.

When did blacksmiths start to drop out of the picture?

Ern: Well, I'd say when welders and boilermakers took over.

Again, it was technology that brought on the changes, wasn't it? When you can weld, I suppose all those blacksmiths' skills aren't needed any more. Is there anybody left that could, say, make a horseshoe from scratch?

Ern: There are some people around that can, but I couldn't pinpoint one just at the moment. But there was someone I heard about only the other day who shod a horse about a fortnight ago. He did it with the hot shoes - he made 'em there and then on the job. But I can't tell you who it was offhand... They were clever in those days. To get the right temper in the steel was the main thing. I only know a little bit about it, but if you put the water on it too soon it loses temper and the steel will go brittle...

And what about the saddlery for all those horses that were around? Did people take 'em to saddlers to get repaired?

Ern: Yes.

Didn't do much in the way of tanning hides or using leather?

Ern: No. Maybe a few of the older fellers about did.

A generation earlier probably would've done more for themselves because they had little choice, but by your time I suppose there were so many specialists around... (Pause)...And milking. I'll bet you were glad when the time came that you didn't have to do that anymore.

Ern: That's true. We used to hand milk for years - no milking machines.

How many cows did you milk?

Ern: I could do nine to the hour when I was ten year old.

Did this make you a gun milker?

Ern: Pretty good. I think the best would only do about a dozen - but I was only ten.

Didn't you get sore hands? You'd think you'd get RSI with all that repetitive activity.

Ern: No we didn't. And it's something you never forget. Like you put me under a cow now and I could still do it.

And to think I've never even had my hand on an udder. I wouldn't know what it felt like. Did you have big herds?

Ern: No. We never had a big herd. We went from about a dozen when we started dairying to about thirty five in milk. You'd milk them twice a day. When we were on the cream though we used to only milk once a day in the winter, because the cows wouldn't be producing as much milk.

I can imagine you there with your face in the side of a cow, milking for several hours a day, day after day. There were no radios to listen to, so what did you do? Just go off into a reverie or something? Didn't you get bored?

Ern: Nope. We never had time to get bored. The instant you put one cow out you've got to bring another one in.

Compared to the very early days, the regulations about dairies were tightened up a fair bit as far as cleanliness and all that goes, weren't they?

Ern: Yes. But mainly it was for the better. Better utensils - and cleanliness. See milk won't keep long if it's not clean, and the old methods wouldn't have been much good for milk, while it was quite good for cream. Cream'll keep for days, but the milk wouldn't keep any more than one day in the dairy.

Mmm. So when the floods come I suppose you'd lose it, would you?

Ern: Yeah. You'd lose a lot of stuff when the floods came.