



Lou and Delma Nichols

I get very confused about who's related to who. And I keep coming across Sternbecks all over the place. Now the one from up Blaxland's Arm - are you related to him?

Lou: Yes. He was my grandfather. He owned all... right up the road here and right down to the main road, Bucketty Paddocks out there, Blaxland's Arm - he owned all that.

And all of what is now Bucketty subdivision?

Lou: Bucketty Paddocks, yes.

That's the cleared bit near the fireshed on George Downes Drive?

Lou: Yes. On the other side of the road.

And all the Bucketty subdivision - that was his too?

Lou: Not all of it. There was Bucketty 1 and Bucketty 2. Charlie McKay used to own most of what's now Bucketty II. They lived up what's called Will O' Win now.

You said Sternbecks owned land at Blaxland's Arm. Didn't a Nichols also have some property there too?

Lou: Yes. Dad took up some land round there at Blaxland's Arm. Andrews' have got it now, but they've sold most of it.

So you've been here all your life, Lou, and you, Delma grew up in Yarramalong, is that right?

Delma: Yes, that's right.

And how did you two get together?

Lou: We met at a dance at the Yarramalong Hall.

Was this in the days when you had to ride a horse to get there?

Lou: No. We had a car then, but we used to ride over there years ago when they used to have the races at Yarramalong down below the bottom cemetery. That'd be back around 1940.

And did you work in the bush at all?

Lou: Yes. I had a few years in the bush, cutting timber. Eighteen I think I was when I started. I did a few years. I used to get three pound fifteen a week - for ten pound's worth of work.

And that was in the bush around here? Or up in the Watagans ?

Lou: Round here, mainly. I started off at Blaxland's Arm, and over the Watagans, and then all round. I followed the bullock team that I was cutting for. I only got ninepence a hundred super feet to cut it. To get fifteen bob a day I had to cut two thousand super a day and also help with the bullock. And half the time I was helping him with the bullock! I got started in the woodchopping business when I was working in the bush.

Competition woodchopping ? Did you do a lot of that?

Lou: I still do.

And whereabouts did that happen, mainly?

Lou: Oh, they used to have them all over the place. They used to have a lot in Wyong at one time, and round the shows and that. Sometimes round the back of a pub.

Like at Ourimbah?

Lou: Yeah. I was down at Ourimbah not long ago.

Delma: He's chopped at the Royal Easter Show, and he won at the Waratah Festival.

And what's your form like these days, Lou ?

Lou: (Smiling.) Oh... the young fellers are getting too good for me these days.

And after you stopped working in the bush, did you go on to straight farming ?

Lou: Yes. Onto the farm here.

Was that beef cattle, or were you dairying?

Lou: No. We never dairied, though we milked a lot of cows when we were kids, to feed the pigs. We used to separate the milk, make our own butter. Mum used to bake her own bread - all that.

It must have been hard on the women, was it? They must have had to work as hard as the blokes.

Lou: Yeah. Everyone had to work.

Delma: We used to preserve our own fruit and things.

And Delma, your family has been in Yarramalong Valley for quite a while?

Delma: Oh, all our lives. Mum was a Chapman from St Albans, but Dad lived there all his life. He was buried there. And his father lived there, too.

Always in the same part of the valley ?

Delma: Yes. On that property that was Dan Bailey's. He was my brother, and now it's passed on to me after his death not so long ago.

So why didn't people dairy here, Lou ?

Lou: Oh there were dairies here, alright. McKays dairied. Sternbecks dairied. There were dairies all down through Wollombi, at Watagan, Yango - all round. But then they all ...I don't know, they just all seemed to close up.

But you stuck with beef. Was it just beef?

Lou: Yes. Though we'd grow a few watermelons at times. When grandfather owned it he had beef cattle here. He used to sell them. Eight head a month at Wisemans Ferry.

How'd he get them over there?

Lou: He used to drive them over to Mangrove, and Douglas' used to take them around from there - up through Spencer to Wisemans Ferry.

Oh, by river then?

Lou: No. Drove them along the road. He'd get about five or six pound a head in those days.

That was a long trip for only eight animals, wasn't it? Any idea how long a trip like that used to take?

Lou: No, I wouldn't know. It used to take a day to go from here to Mangrove, but I don't know what it took Douglas' from there to Wisemans.

And that was the nearest place that he could sell them then?

Lou: I don't know, I suppose there would've been other places he could have sold them. Maybe it was better for them at Wisemans to get them from here rather than from Sydney.

Where did you go to school?

Lou: We went to school in a subsidised school built right near the house where I grew up. I couldn't miss a day! It was down here where Gray's is, on the point there - just down the road here a couple of miles. We were reared there. There were other kids used to come and board there who went to the school as well.

Used to come and board there?

Lou: Yes. They stopped there with my Mum and went to school.

And did they go home for weekends, or did they board there for a whole term?

Lou: The Baileys stopped there all the time till the holidays come, but the McMullens used to go home. They lived at Dairy Arm. Then when they grew up a bit more they started to ride it each day.

How many would have been at the school?

Lou: About 15 or 16 at one stage.

And when you say subsidised, was it subsidised by the government?

Lou: Yes. They paid so much, and Mum and Dad had to pay so much in as well.

But were your Mum and Dad given any help with boarding all these kids?

Lou: No. They looked after them.

Gee! That was a bit rough!

Lou: (laughs) Oh well, that was back in those days. Of course that's a long while ago - about 1930. I

think I started school in 1928 - I was six year old. I left when I was fourteen - and couldn't wait to get out!

And one teacher, I presume. Did you have the same teacher for long?

Lou: No. They kept changing. They'd stay for a year or two, then go again. They lived there too.

Must have been quite a little community there, was it?

Lou: It was! Everybody had to do their bit of work though, just the same.

The kids that boarded there as well?

Lou: Yes. They had to do the washing up, housework, and one thing and another.

And how long ago was it that you came over the mountain to live here, Delma?

Delma: Thirty-five years ago.

And was that a big wrench? Did you feel like you were moving a long way away?

Delma: Oh no. If you're brought up on a farm its the same everywhere, I think.

And when electricity came and made a lot of household chores like cooking and washing easier, were you glad to see it come?

Delma: Oh yes. It was marvellous. But I still think the old wood stove was a better cooker - especially for cakes and things.

Lou: The power only came through ...what? - about sixty five wasn't it?

Delma: Mid sixties anyway. I just can't think exactly when. But what you haven't got you never miss, sort of thing. That's how it was before we got the power.

Mmm. Yet some of the women I spoke to in the Yarralong Valley seemed to be just as happy without it, which surprised me. I had just assumed that they would've been thrilled to bits.

Delma: Especially years ago when they had the big families. They had no washing machines in those days. It must've been hard.

So how did you wash before the power came?

Delma: We had a fuel copper. And all the clothes used to come up white as snow.

Were you pumping water from the creek?

Delma: No. We had tank water. *(Pause)*.

Lou: They used to have cattle sales at Wollombi every month.

Was that where the yards are now?

Lou: Yes. They used to drive the cattle from Mangrove, and old Tom Preston used to come from Ourimbah with cattle. I see him go down there with nine hundred head of cattle one time.

Christ! That must have been a sight! How many blokes did it take to drive them?

Lou: Only two or three. Once you got them on the road they were right. They'd collect cattle from all the way through as they went ...St Albans - they'd bring a lot of cattle out. There were no trucks then. They used to drive them everywhere.

So with that many people all gathering at Wollombi - that must have been a bit of a social event, was it?

Lou: It was. Everybody'd turn up for the sale.

And where did they stay? In tents?

Lou: Most would go back home that night.

What? On a horse?

Lou: Yes.

But to Ourimbah,, say?

Lou: Oh no. Tom would come back from there and maybe stay at McKays' one day and go on over the next day. Sometimes he'd stay at Wollombi and if there were cattle to take back he'd drive them back

So it wasn't as though there were hundreds of fellers there...

Lou: Oh no.

And where was the pub in Wollombi in those days?

Lou: Where the tavern is now. It was a two story place, and in the 1949 floods they could walk out off the balcony and step into the boats! There was a shop just on the top side - up the road, and the water was just over the counter in the shop. That pub got burnt down and they rebuilt there, and it's only a single story place now.

And they were able to yard 900 head at one time?

Lou: Oh, they'd sell some and then let them out in the paddock, then yard the next lot up, and so on.

And did people bring stock down from the north of Wollombi as well?

Lou: Yes, they used to come from the Singleton area ...or Maitland. They'd drive the cattle on from Wollombi through to Maitland and Singleton - draft them up as they went. They were all marked with tar. They had different marks on them so they knew which was which. Sometimes the sales would go on that late they were striking matches to see what they were buying, some of them. Especially in the wintertime. *(Pause).*

Delma: Charlie was a funny fellow, wasn't he?

Lou: Oh yes. Always a laugh.

Who was this? Charlie who?

Lou: Charlie McKay, the auctioneer. He owned Will O' Win up there... well, they call it Will O' Win now - it had no name on it when he had it, it was just McKay's. Of course it's all cut up in blocks now, and sold.

If there were saleyards at Wollombi, why would he have driven his pigs all the way to Wyong? People from Yarramalong remember tales of him driving them through the Valley.

Lou: That was before the saleyards were there. No, it was in the real early days that they used to drive the pigs over. I don't remember that - it was before my time.

And did McKay buy his part of Murray's Run off Murray? Or were there others that owned it in between?

Lou: No. Murray only owned what old grandfather Sternbeck had.

And access was in from the Letter A ?

Lou: The first road came in down to what is now called Burralong Valley, and another road came round the other way from St Alban's. There was no road right through here at first. They just surveyed it and gave us a right-of-way through at one stage.

When would that have been? Before your time?

Lou: Oh yes. Well before my time. Probably when Murray had it first. He took up two 1280 acre blocks. It was two mile one way, four mile another way, and one mile another.

Gee, it must have been something to pick out parcels of land as big as that! And there's nothing left of Murray's presence around here now? – apart from the name, of course.

Lou: No. Not that I know of. *(Pause)*.

There wouldn't have been many cars around when you were kids would there?

Lou: No. Not many. Grandfather bought his first car in 1927 I think it was - something like that. He was seventy four or five when he got his licence. I think Sternbecks had a car before that, and Thompsons down the way here. And McKays - they had a '23 Dodge. They were the only cars that were around here then that I can remember. It was mainly horses. We felt we were made if they let us drive the horse and sulky!

And those horse-drawn vehicles are no longer around?

Lou: No. They're all gone. We haven't got any of ours.

I suppose they're collectors items.

Lou: Would be, by now.

And you don't use horses any more?

Lou: I've got the horses there. I ride the horse at times with the cattle and that, but not much. Not like I used to.

They were big acreages - a lot of territory to cover. Did you have to fence it all?

Lou: It has been fenced, over the years.

That must have been a hell of a job.

Delma: All the boundaries had to be fenced.

And it's still fenced and maintained?

Lou: Yes. Most of it. If it wasn't the stock'd be on the neighbour's place and everywhere.

And it was all beef cattle. This is not sheep country, is It?

Lou: No. We did have sheep years ago but the dingoes got in and started killing them so we got rid of them. There were a few dingoes about, those days.

But you don't see any now?

Lou: No.

And did you go off and supplement your larder by shooting pigeons, brush turkeys...

Lou: No.

I thought everybody did then.

Delma: A lot of people did in those days.

Lou: Yeah, a lot did. There used to be a lot of people would come out here rabbiting at one time, from Cessnock.

Were rabbits a problem?

Lou: They were, years ago.

But the myxo fixed 'em?

Lou: Yeah. There were a lot of rabbits here at one time. We used to do a bit of rabbiting in the wintertime, and sell the carcasses and that.

And did I read somewhere that some people reckon that the rabbit burrows and wombat burrows in the creek banks make the erosion worse in floods?

Lou: That's what they reckon, some of them, but I don't know whether that's right or not. It'd help, I suppose. Not many rabbits about now, though. You might see the odd one now and again.

And would they be myxo free, these days?

Lou: Oh... I don't think so. It's still around. They could still get it. Though there's not too many about so I suppose it doesn't spread a lot now. *(Pause)*.

Delma: The creek used to be different to what it is now.

Lou: Yes. The '49 flood started to wash it out. It used to be just a little creek up through here, with waterholes. It's a bit different now to what it was. '

What? It was grassed right up to the edge of the bank?

Lou: Yes. Like it still is up the top end, about where Sternbeck's are there.

And there was a succession of floods after '49?

Lou: Yeah, '49, '52... I can't remember the exact years now, but they kept going anyhow - on and on.

So by this you must be pretty used to the floods - you know it's going to flood again and...

Lou: Oh yes. You can't do much about it.

So when the floods come you just wait it out?

Lou: Yes. But it's usually only a matter of a day or two before you can get out again.

And no trouble with bushfire - apart from the recent emergency at the beginning of this year.. ?

Lou: No, we've never had any trouble with fires around here. We used to burn every year or two. The worst thing now is the restrictions they've got on it all. You can't burn it when it wants burning. I reckon the bush needs burning around Christmas time, but they won't give you a permit to burn then. If you burn it too early, the grass gets too old and the cattle won't eat it. And if you wait till the restrictions go off and then you burn it, then you've got nothing for the winter. We depend on the bush here for the winter feed. But you can't tell these fire fellers that. You've got to get rid of the rubbish and the undergrowth.

And when you used to burn every year or two, did you burn the lot, or bits?

Lou: Oh, bits. You only burn what will burn. You might burn that side this year and this side next year.

There's parts of the bush that'll never burn - only in the middle of summer. It doesn't dry out round the shady sides and that and down in the gullies, and you can't burn it. If people kept things clean around their houses they wouldn't have no worry now, even. I don't know, with the Councils and that you can't cut a tree down, you can't do this and you can't do that.

And what about the creek before it got all sandy, did it have fish in it?

Lou: Oh, when we were kids we might have caught a few fish - mainly perch. But not now.

So what did you do as a kid when you weren't helping around the farm. Did you have any time to yourself to get up to mischief?

Lou: Not much. There was always something to do.

Delma: I used to go to dances and things.

Lou: I never went to any dances till I was about twenty. You had to ride a horse or a pushbike to get there.

What about churches? There's Laguna...

Lou: There were two churches at Laguna - the Catholic and the Anglican, and two at Wollombi...

And did most people go to church when you were a kid?

Lou: Oh a good many of them went to church. I never went much.

So your family wasn't particularly religious?

Lou: Old grandfather used to go fairly often. None of the rest of them, though.

Delma: Les and Flo Sternbeck go to church every time it's on.

Where? Up here at Laguna?

Delma: Yes. Never miss. Always have.

Was there much in the way of social activities amongst the people from here and up towards Wollombi?

Lou: No. Not here.

You didn't all get together and play cricket, or football... ?

Lou: No.

Well what was it that brought you all together? Was it going to the sales... ?

Lou: Mainly the sales. Some of them around Watagan and those places used to play cricket - the Lynches, and Crumps. But no one from Murrays Run ever went to play cricket I don't think. See, in Murray's Run there were only the McKays, the Sternbecks, and us. There were only three families back in those days.

I see. Did you ever get together like at Christmas?

Lou: No. Everybody had their Christmas at home.

And how many kids were in your family as you grew up ?

Lou: Four brothers and a sister.

Did they all have big families?

Lou: No. What'd Ivy have? I think she had five.

Delma: Yes Ivy had five. Hal had three. Lem two, Hersel two, and Chris had four - and we had one. One girl.

And would that be reasonably unusual to have just the one?

Delma: I don't know. I was married ten years before I had her so I was lucky. But she's very precious to us.

You mentioned Lem and Hersel. These are unusual names. What's Lem short for? Lemuel ?

Delma: Lemington.

Is there any story to those names, or did your parents just fancy them?

Lou: Well I don't know. They must have got them from somewhere.

Delma: Lem lived at Wyoming - he had two girls. Chris is at Point Clare - he had four girls. Ivy's at Blaxland's Arm - she had two girls and three boys... she married Len Andrews.

Talking to them down at Yarramalong I found that hardly anybody was called by their right name. They all had nicknames. Is that the case here, too?

Delma: Well, Lou is a nickname. His name is Lindsay.

How'd you get Lou?

Lou: I don't know. As long as I can remember it's always been Lou. I don't know how it came about.

Did your other brothers marry people from locally?

Lou: Well Lem's wife came from Yarramalong. Hal's wife came from St Albans, and Hersel's wife came from Bellbird. And Chris' wife came from Muswellbrook.

Delma: And Ivy's husband came from Mangrove.

Yes. I suppose there must have been a limitation just in terms of travel in those days. Did you get around to places like Mangrove and St Alban's much? Was there much call to leave home?

Lou: Oh we used to go to St Albans to dances after I got the car and my licence and that. We used to go all round the place - to Yarramalong, Wyong Creek, Kulnura, Mangrove Mountain. I've been round to all the dances everywhere.

Delma: Talking about Lou's brothers and sisters, Hal used to dairy. He had a dairy down where Roes live now. And Lem had a dairy, up here at Burralong Valley. Chris worked in the clothing factory for Airds for a long while, then he got a milk run. Hersel stayed on the farm and reared cattle.

And Lou, were you the only one in the family that went into the bush and did some timbergetting ?

Lou: Yes. I did a few years in the bush.

Would you say that timbergetting was a major industry in this part of the world?

Lou: It wasn't as big as it was in Yarramalong. The Watagans were a fair timber place, but not here. There were only two mills in the district - one at Millfield and one at Cedar Creek.

Does that name suggest that there was red cedar growing there once?

Lou: No. No cedar much, here. Here it's mainly stringybark and ironbark. Not even much bluegum over this side. Not like at Yarramalong. There's a lot of bluegum over there, and there's a fair bit when you go out to the Watagans.

There's some beautiful white cedars at the saleyards at Wollombi. Would they have been there for a long time ?

Lou: Oh some haven't been there too long. They grow pretty quick you know.

And when you were cutting timber in the bush, what was it being used for?

Lou: Most of what we were cutting at that stage was going to build huts for the army.

This was through the war? (Yes). And were you Manpowered to do that? Was it considered an essential industry?

Lou: Yes. Being for the army.

And that'd be before chainsaws?

Lou: Oh yes. No chainsaws then.

And it was hauled by bullocks?

Lou: Yes. Out as far as the roads. They'd load it on the truck then.

And stuff from here would go up to Sweetman's mill?

Lou: To Sweetman's or... there were the two mills then - Sweetman's and Craft's. And there was another one in Cessnock - Turner's.

Delma: The roads have changed a bit since those days, haven't they?

Lou: Oh yes. The old gravel roads we had were pretty rough at times.

Did they have corduroy roads in the boggy bits?

Lou: No. Not here. Not that I can remember. I can remember them round Wyong Creek and that. They were really rough to ride on in a sulky! *(Pause)*. ..Mother was 96 when she died. Grandfather was 93.

A family of long livers, eh? What do you remember your grandparents doing when they were quite old? Did they just sit around, or...

Lou: That's all. Though old grandfather used to poke around with the cattle up until he got too old. He used to walk all about then. He walked two or three mile the day he died.

Delma: Lou's mother's mind was good even till the day she died. Gosh her memory was good! She was a fantastic lady. How she worked all those years! Hard work, too. But it didn't do her any harm.

And the Nichols property at Blaxland's Arm. That was in behind where Carl Hoipo is now, wasn't it

Lou: It started where Lenny Andrews is living. That was part of it. And the Nichols land was up the back.

And your brothers left because the dairying folded, and it was too attractive not to sell? Was that it?

Lou: More or less, I think. Hal had a stroke and had to give it up because he couldn't work, and the boys weren't interested in it.

Why do you think the next generation didn't have the same interest to stay on the land like theirparents?

Lou: Well they could get more money doing other things than staying on the farm.

Did you think of it as really hard on the farm ?

Lou: Not really. I didn't. I couldn't live in town - no way.

But you actually enjoyed it?

Lou: Oh yes.

Delma: Lou's sister Ivy is fantastic with decorating cakes and things. They always look lovely.

And did you do that sort of thing yourself?

Delma: I can cook cakes, but I couldn't decorate them the way she does.

Did you do anything in the way of other country crafts?

Delma: I used to do a bit of knitting and things like that.

Do you see much of the other original families that are left in the area these days?

Delma: I ring Ivy up sometimes, and we see each other now and again. Ivy and Lennie usually come out over Christmas. Hersel shifted out to Aberdeen thirteen years ago. He wasn't very well though, and he had a heart attack and died and they sold the Property - his wife lives at Long Jetty now. I think it's a shame that the properties get cut up into blocks - though they call that progress.

Lou: They call it progress. I call it the ruination of the district, myself. *(Pause)*.

Delma: Les and Flo Sternbeck have been here for a long time. They used to dairy and send the cream - him and his brother Tom. They used to collect the mail and the bread and bring it back with them...

So you didn't have a regular mail delivery? It was brought in by your neighbours?

Lou: Well in the early days the mail used to come to Laguna. Then Thompsons had a mail exchange in Dairy Arm - Yallambie it was called. They used to get it from Laguna and we'd have to go over to Thompsons to get it from there - three times a week. Up at Will O'Win they had a telephone exchange there - Kalongbah telephone exchange. But they only had two or three subscribers. McKays had the exchange, and there was Les and Tom Sternbeck and my brother Lem - they were the only ones connected to it.

And you still haven't got the phone on yet?

Lou: No. We've never had a phone on. *(Pause)*. *Could you see yourselves ever moving from Murray's Run?*

Lou: No. Never.

Delma: If Lou got to where he couldn't work he'd die tomorrow. He's always got to be on the go doing something.

What did your average day used to be like - when you were at your peak?

Lou: Well, you'd have to get up early. Five o'clock most days - in the winter too. When we were kids we used to be up before that and Dad would be up at the cow bails with the bloody lantern hanging up, milking the cows - about half past four. We used to have to go out and find the cows in the dark. We'd milk them, then separate the milk for the pigs. Dad used to go off to work then, and we'd have to go to school.

Delma: There were thirty-odd cows they used to milk just for the pigs.

Lou: He did a lot of work, Dad. All these hills around here used to be fairly well cleared years ago. He took all the timber down every winter, for winter grazing.

And then when you came home from school, what would happen?

Lou: We'd go and yard the cows up. We only used to milk once a day. We used to have to go and yard the cows and shut the calves up at night. Then we'd feed the pigs in the evening.

And was it a big meal at dinnertime? Did all those kids get served at once ?

Lou: Oh yes. They had two tables - a big long one and another one, and we'd all be lined up around them.

Was that good fun to have all those kids there, or did you get sick of them?

Lou: No, we never got sick of them. And grandma looked after them - fed them.

So what did you do after dinner, with no television or radio?

Lou: Into bed early, because you'd be up again the next morning.

Didn't play games or anything like that?

Lou: Oh no. Just to bed early and up the next morning.

Seven days a week

Lou: Yeah. That's right.

Delma: (To Lou) They were the good old days, weren't they?

Lou: Well, we thought they were.

(To Delma) *And did you have to do similar things, or did you get off a bit lighter because you were a girl?*

Delma: I didn't have to do what the men did, but I can remember as kids having to get up in the morning to get the cows in too, because we had a dairy. Later on they had the milking machines.

But you had set chores you knew you had to do every day?

Delma: Oh yes.

And were you going to school at Brush Creek then?

Delma: Yes, I went to school at Brush Creek. Then on to Wyong High.

But there was no high school around here for you, Lou?

Lou: No, Cessnock was the nearest, and you didn't have transport in those days.

Did you have boots when you were kids?

Lou: Half the time we didn't.

Didn't you get frostbite or anything in the winter?

Lou: We used to get chillblains sometimes. Mum used to make most of our clothes for us then too. Just about all of them.

Delma: And they killed their own meat and all that, too.

So could you slaughter and butcher a beast yourself, Lou?

Lou: Oh I could, yes. I don't do it now though, but I could. We killed all our own meat and salted it out in the cask.

Is there a time you look back on that was the best?

Lou: No. I never worry about it. I never look back or that sort of thing. Like these fellers who collect all this old stuff - I call it garbage myself. *(Both laugh)*. You can save this and save that, but it's all past as far as I'm concerned, and I don't want to think about that any more. That's gone.

Maybe for people with less direct contact with stuff like that, maybe it has an attraction because it seems to have all that history in it.

Lou: Well I don't worry about that. I say that's gone now - that's finished.

Well I'm not quite like that. I really enjoy using old tools that my father gave me that he in turn got from his Dad. To me they've got a special feeling to them that new ones don't have somehow.

Lou: Well of course lots of things were made to last back in those days. Not now though. *(Pause)*.

How'd you get on for doctors and medical care?

Lou: What? Years ago? Nobody ever got sick!

How about farm accidents and the like, though?

Lou: Well... I don't know what they did. There were no doctors around. You had to go to Cessnock.

And did the women go to Cessnock to the hospital to give birth or did they have their kids at home?

Lou: No. They went to Cessnock from round these parts, mostly. Dr Bloomfield and Dr Street were the main two doctors in Cessnock in those years.

You wouldn't have got to Cessnock very often, would you? I suppose that was the nearest big town?

Lou: It was, yes. No, we didn't get in there very often. When we did go we generally had to go on the milk lorry - or the cream lorry as it was then. You'd walk down the two or three mile from where we lived to catch the lorry in the morning, go to town, and you had to be ready to come back with it in the evening. I did that till I was old enough to get a car. I was about twenty when I bought the first car - a '26 Chev. I paid twenty six pound for it.

I suppose you had to learn to be a mechanic so you could look after it out here?

Lou: Well there wasn't much to go wrong with those old cars. Now if anything goes wrong you do need a mechanic to fix it. But then if anything went wrong it was usually only spark plugs or points or something - you could generally get going again. I taught a few people to drive on the Chev. To get your licence then was different to today. They just used to run you down the street and back and they'd give you your licence. Mind you there weren't as many cars on the roads those days.

Did people get onto cars real quick after they came out?

Lou: No, not real quick. Just gradually. Different ones got them. Some of the older people got them, but the young ones weren't allowed to drive them!

And chainsaws. I suppose you were out of the timber before they came out, were you?

Lou: Yeah, I was out of it by then, but I got a saw - they made a big difference. Even though those early Danarms were too heavy almost to carry round in the bush, it was still a lot easier than using the axe.

But you still enjoy swinging the axe at the woodchops?

Lou: Yes, yes - at the chops.

What is it that you like about woodchopping exactly?

Lou: Oh... you get around to seeing a lot of your old mates and friends that you don't see other times, and to have a yarn to them.

Is that where you would have made a lot of your mates? On the chopping circuit?

Lou: A lot of them, yes. But if I couldn't chop I wouldn't go.

Not even to see the blokes again?

I dunno. If I couldn't chop I wouldn't bother going. I'd stop home. But it's a good sport. You don't get much in the way of arguments with anyone.

And it's pretty much on the level, is it? Does much money change hands? Do they bet on it much?

Lou: Not a real lot these days.

And they used to?

Lou: They used to bet a fair bit one time. Some of them used to run dead but they made out they didn't.

They used to run dead to try to get their handicap down, is that right?

Lou: Yes. If the handicapper didn't think they were doing it right he could penalise them.

How could he tell? Just from his knowledge of their form?

Lou: He'd know what they'd been cutting. You get a good cutter and he's getting beat, and then he turns around and wins the championship, then you know there's something going on!

And in earlier times, what did people do for booze? Did they ever make their own or anything like that?

Lou: No, we never made our own.

Given that it's bit of a legend how resourceful people are in the bush, I would have thought that some...

Lou: We mostly had our drinks when we went to the sale. We'd have a few beers - about once a month. But wine it was then. At Wollombi you couldn't get beer then. Those days it was only wine shops.

Is that because beer was hard to transport, or...

Lou: No, it was the licence. They only had a wine licence there then. There was a wine shop at Laguna and a wine shop at Wollombi, and they didn't have a beer licence at all. Not for years.

So you wouldn't have grog in the house for your own use? Only when you went out?

Lou: No, we never had anything in the house.

Did people get really stuck into it at the sales and write themselves off'?

Lou: No, not a lot. Just the odd one, but not very often though.'

Would you have had booze at the dances?

Lou: Occasionally you might get a bottle. But that was it, as a rule.

Well I suppose it depends how you look at things as to whether we've seen any progress in that regard, doesn't it?

Delma: Things have changed. Years ago they used to have dances everywhere, but there's hardly a dance

on now.

Who used to organise the dances?

Delma: Whoever was running the Hall. The Hall Committee mainly. But it's so different now. It's a shame for the young ones, I think.

And everybody went to the dances? Did they take kids?

Delma: Oh yes, everybody would go - the whole family.

And what was the music? Piano and drums?

Delma: They had an orchestra.

Lou: They'd get an orchestra out from town or something.

Delma: Usually around three piece. Then it got a bit dearer and it got down to two.

Lou: They'd have the piano there, and they'd bring out the drums and the violin or whatever...

Delma: Or a piano accordion or something like that. *(Pause)*.

I understand that all around here and out to Mount Yengo and that was a very important aboriginal area before we whitefellers came here. Are there any stories in the family about contact with aboriginals here in the early days?

Lou: No. Not that I know of. I don't ever remember anyone talking about them.

Yet when the first settlers moved in they must have been around.

Lou: Oh they'd have to be.

Yet it's as though they never were. Is there much physical evidence of them in Murray's Run? Any caves...?

Lou: Not that I know of. There's one up the road there, but that's the only one I know. *(Pause)*.

Delma: The old hawkers used to come around, selling things. The Indians...

What do you mean? Indians from India?

Delma: Yes.

Lou: They'd come round with a bit of stuff to sell in a cart. Clothes... all sorts of things. There was an old feller used to come down home - Glubb they used to call him. He had two horses and a wagon. He'd have a few clothes, saucepans, some pots and pans... We'd buy stuff off him at times.

Delma: He used to never like pigs.

Lou: Yeah. Pigs were their Devil. Wouldn't go near a pig.

I wonder why Indians, though?

Delma: Well they used to say they were Indians.

And they camped as they went?

Lou: Yes. In the wagon.

Just on their own? No one with them?

Lou: Yes. Driving around. Have a day or two here, a day or two there. Sell a bit of stuff.

Delma: Poor devils. *(Pause)*. They've all gone now, I think.

Lou: They were the best curry cookers you ever seen - and Johnny cakes.

Would they sell them to you?

Lou: No. They only cooked them to eat themselves.

But you got to try them?

Lou: Oh yeah - they'd give you a taste. He was a funny old feller, Glubb. He used to hold out his finger and say: "Same as white man. Blood's the same colour. Only the skin's black."

Mmm. Well, I suppose he might've encountered a bit of prejudice in his day, eh?

Lou: Might've done, in his time. But that's what he used to tell us. "Blood the same colour. Only skin black". *(Digression)*.

Delma: Lou's mother was Pearl Sternbeck. She married Frank Nichols. He came from Bishop's Bridge.

Lou: He did a lot of work on the railways - fencing the railway lines through to Tamworth, when he was young. He wasn't a bad old bush carpenter either - putting a shed or anything up with round timber. He could handle that all right. Two-rail fences - mortising the posts and adzing the rails. Not too many can do it nowadays.

There must be a skill in using those little mortising adzes. Did you build any that way?

Lou: Oh yes. I've got the old mortising axe there, and I still use it occasionally, but I only do it for myself now. The last two-rail fence I put up is just outside there, and that's not very long ago. *(Digression)*.

Delma: Years ago, getting the children to school took up a lot of time. Flo Sternbeck used to run them to Laguna. I forget exactly how long she did it for. Twelve years I think it was, but it might've been more. Every morning and afternoon.

You said that in the early times when grandfather Sternbeck was here there used to be squatters all around the district.

Lou: That's right. There used to be one house over here - the Moore's lived there. There was one further down - the Barnes' lived there...

What year would we be talking now?

Lou: I don't remember them. Dad told us about them. There used to be another one along past the orchard there, and another one further on. I don't know who lived in them. There was another one - Luke McCabe - lived up further. Then round the other way - going round towards Fernance's way, there was Dempsey's, then Charlie Knight's ...But I don't know who the others were - they're only the ones I've heard them talk about.

They would have built rough huts rather than houses, would they?

Lou: Yes. Bark humpies and things. There was one up the road there near the bike track that they used to call The Bark Humpy. But this was years and years ago - well before my time. I'd say it was probably before Murray took it up, and they had to shift out when he took it up. They'd just come in and squat there.

There must've been a lot of that went on, eh?

Lou: Yes. Especially in the early times. They'd just come and set up a bit of a hut and... I suppose they did a bit of work to keep them going, but I don't know what else they might've done.

Delma: You find pieces of old crockery where they'd been.

Lou: Yes, when you're ploughing you're likely to plough up a piece of an old plate or something... I think they told me one time that there used to be about thirty different families around here. *'DigressionJ.*

There was one thing I meant to say when we were talking about grandfather selling the cattle - he used to sell a lot of bullocks to the bullockies over at Yarramalong. There was Perrys, the Fernances, Beavans, Stackmans...they all used to come here and buy bullocks off him. I think Harry Beavan had a team at one stage that were all the one brand that he'd bought off grandfather here.

A matched set.

Lou: Yes - all one brand - all "CGS", Chris Sternbeck's brand. (The "C" was facing backwards in the brand). He bought them as steers and reared them up here. They always came here to get their bullocks.

And was this considered more as grazing and livestock country than down in Yarramalong?

Lou: Oh yes, I think so. This was more farming country.

I was talking to someone through the week about white beech and sassafras being used by the early settlers. Would you be able to describe what they look like growing?

Lou: I don't know what a white beech is but I've cut sassafras over in Dairy Arm. Its mainly a softwood, a brushwood.

Does it grow very big?

Lou: It will grow to a fair-sized tree, some of them. It's sort of yellow when you cut it. I've cut rosewood over there in Dairy Arm too. It was a big tree - a sort of a eucalypt, a real red/pinky looking timber when you cut it.

I suppose doing timbergetting yourself you'd get to know the different species, would you?

Lou: Oh most of them that grow around these parts. It's mainly blue gum, ironbark and that sort of stuff around here - a bit of box, spotted gum, grey gum ...tallowwood.

There are several types of ironbark aren't there ? What sort grows around here? Is it the red, or the grey... ?

Lou: They call it narrowleaf ironbark here - I think it's the grey. The red ironbark's the broadleaf one, but we only get the narrowleaf around here. I think there might be some red ironbark up on Nev Thompson's. It's got a bigger leaf on it, and a different type of bark too. It's more sort of scaly.

Have you got a favourite timber? I suppose it depends what you might want to use it for...

Lou: No, not really. Mostly ironbark or stringybark for posts and that.

I haven't noticed any white mahogany over here, speaking of fencing timber.

Lou: There's a bit - not a lot.

Does ironbark really blunt tools as fast as some legends say? Is it that hard?

Lou: Oh no. It's not that bad. I reckon grey gum or box is worse than ironbark.

Turpentine's supposed to be a bit gritty and to blunt tools...

Lou: Yes, turp is. It's got a resin in it too that's bad for the saw - the circular saw, they say. There's not a lot of turps around here.

Speaking of turps, was oil of turpentine a traditional remedy when you were little?

Delma: Not in our house it wasn't. The only turps I know is the mineral turps you get from the hardware...

Lou: There was some stuff they called Venus Turpentine. It was a sticky, gooey-looking stuff that you put on to draw splinters and things out. It came in a bottle and you used to put it on a plaster and put that on a splinter that you couldn't get out. You'd leave it on for a few days and out would come the splinter.

Delma: They used to use a lot of poultices then, too.

What sort of stuff went into the poultices? Vinegar and brown paper?

Delma: We used to use bread, and mustard.

Bread? What do you reckon was working in that? The yeast? “

Delma: The yeast I'd say... And if you had a bad cold they'd put a mustard poultice on your chest.

What was that made up from? Keens?

Lou: Yes. I think they just used to get the mustard and mix it up to a paste. But that old bread poultice - if you had a boil or something like that it'd fix it.

Was your general diet quite broad when you were growing up - plenty of veggies, and fruit... ?

Lou: Oh yeah. That was the main thing we used to have years ago. Beef, corned beef and pork, with veggies and fruit.

Delma: But in those days they ate all the fat they could eat and never worried about it. Lou's mother lived till she was in her nineties, and my grandmother was in her nineties, yet today they say that fat'll kill you.

Lou: I still eat the fat.

Delma: He eats anything and everything. He doesn't worry about a diet. But I can't - I have to watch mine. But Lou never worries about it. He says he'll eat what he likes and drink what he likes and die happy.

Lou: That's right. *(laughs)*. *(Pause)*.

Delma: Lou's brother Hersel, he was a great one for breaking in horses wasn't he Lou? When he was young. He used to do them in the district and out of the district. But he had a few broken bones, didn't he? Broken collarbone, ribs, and arm.

Lou: Ah well, that was life. Somebody had to do it

Delma: That's right. But it was a hard job - a dangerous job.

Did the area have a bit of a reputation for breeding good horses as well as good bullocks?

Lou: Oh yes. There were some good horses around. Not a lot, though.

Delma: They used to have what they used to call the Picnic Races, didn't they?

Lou: Yeah. At Yarramalong. And Wollombi.

Delma: Lou said he'll never forget the matched race between one of the Yarramalong horses and one

from Wisemans Ferry. They all thought the one called Kentucky was going to win, so they all put their money on it. But the wife of the feller that was riding Kentucky put all her money on the other horse. The feller riding Kentucky jumped off before the race was finished, and there was his wife with a big bag of money!

Lou: Yeah. The crowd couldn't see them when they went behind the hill, and as soon as they disappeared from sight he jumped off!

Didn't people carry on about that?

Lou: Oh, it was just a bit of an argument. That was at Yarramalong.

Delma: They were fun times then... *(Pause)* ...Things have changed in the district. Once you knew everyone from here to Cessnock and from here to Wyong, but not now.

And it's so much more diverse now. There are people from so many different places, with different occupations and that. Do you find that all that diversity is good? Do you like the differences?

Delma: It really hasn't made a lot of difference to us. We're quiet people who have always kept to ourselves.

Lou: It doesn't worry me.

Do many of the newcomers get involved in local activities, like the church for instance?

Delma: No. Not so many that I know of, though we have had a few. But we're very lucky, we've got good neighbours.

Back in the days of the horse and cart, how did you make your roads then, with a scoop and a dray or something ?

Lou: Yes. They used to go along with the old horse and cart and a bit of stone, and knap a bit of stone in the holes and pack a shovelfull of dirt over it. And they used to plough out and scoop out the water tables.

By "water tables", what do you mean?

Lou: Along the sides, where the water runs down, and the culverts.

Delma: They did a better job in those days than they do now with the water tables.

Did you have to maintain your own roads yourself?

Lou: No. Not as far as I'm aware of. The Council always maintained the roads.

What about your own roads on your property ?

Lou: We didn't have any. Only the track from the road to the house.

With a horse and cart you didn't need much of a road at all then?

Lou: No. Not really. They never worried too much. They just jogged along, though it was a bit rough at times.

Did they always have metal tyres?

Lou: They used to have some sulkies that they used to put rubber tyres on.

Not pump-up jobs though?

Lou: No. They used to have a little rim and they cut the rubber - some of them used old truck tyres that

they used to stretch over the wheels. They'd cut a bit off about an inch wide.

You'd think they'd come off...

Lou: No. They never came off. They had a little groove in the rim and they used to sit in that.

And did that make a difference to the ride?

Lou: Not much. Didn't make as much noise on the road, that was all.

In those days ploughing was done with a single mouldboard plough, is that right?

Lou: That's right.

So I imagine it'd take a long while to do a whole field, one furrow at a time?

Lou: Oh she'd take a fair while.

Delma: The poor old horses'd be tired by the end of the day.

Were there ever any competitions, like ploughing the straightest line or anything? Or didn't that matter?

Lou: No it didn't matter. Not on the farm. As long you got it ploughed and got your crop in - that was the main thing.

I suppose you could take the furrow a lot closer to the fence than you can with modern machinery?

Lou: Yes. You could get close to the fence with the horse.

Are you still growing the same sort of crops for feed as you grew then, or have they changed?

Lou: Oh no. The same. It's much the same as it was years ago as far as the crops go.

And in the winter, your cattle would get their feed up on the hills?

Lou: That's right.

Do you not have to keep the hills cleared up as far as you used to before because you bring some feed in now, or because you're not running as many cattle, or what?

Lou: Oh no. We've still got to keep them pretty clean to get the grass to grow.

I was under the impression that they used to be cleaned up higher still. Is this not so?

Lou: Oh a lot of them were. Yeah. Down the road here used to be cleared right over the top of the mountain.

What? With baldy tops on them?

Lou: Yeah. Every year it'd be bushed. But it's all grown back again now. (*Digression*). ...Something we haven't mentioned yet is the bike track. It used to be here for about ten years down where Burrealong Valley is now. It was known as Hungry Creek. I think the pollution and the noise got too much, and people complained, and in the end they had to close it down. Trouble was they didn't stay on the bike track. They'd be down here after wood and things, and we'd have to chase them away.

So they were a bit of a nuisance?

Lou: They were.

Is it better with the Burrealong development there instead?

Lou: It's a lot better for us, anyway. You'd get the noise and the dust when the bikes were there. You get two or three hundred bikes there going all day roaring round the place...

It must have been a terrible realisation what was happening when it started up.

Lou: Oh it was. But they couldn't keep them up there. They wouldn't stop there. They'd be down here, up and down the road, all over the hills...

And was it mainly the Bucketty people up the top that complained?

Lou: Yes. I think they got the noise up there pretty bad.

The owners of Hungry Creek must've made a few bob out of it when it was at its height.

Lou: I guess they did OK when it was running but then they could have had to spend a bit when it was subdivided to Burrealalong Valley.

How big was the bike track all up?

Lou: About 800 acres.

To change the subject completely... what about dogs? Did people always have cattle dogs, or what?

Lou: Mostly old blue dogs.

Not too many kelpies?

Lou: Not in those days - it was usually the blueys.

And cats?

Lou: There'd always be an old cat or two hanging around the sheds and that, to keep the mice and rats and that down.

Delma: I think every farm had a cat.

And other things like geese, and chooks and ducks?

Lou: Had all them. Yeah.

What'd you do? Sell them?

Lou: You'd eat some, you'd sell some. We had turkeys as well. We had everything.

It must have been possible to go for days or even weeks without actually spending any money, was it? You could live entirely off what you had around.

Lou: Yes. It didn't cost much to live, in those days.

Delma: They certainly were the good old days, though. (*Digression*).

We had our first bad frost the other week. Would a bad frost like that knock your kikuyu over for the winter?

Lou: Oh, no, you need a few heavy frosts on it to kill it. It'll gradually go off as you go through winter. It's not much good then till the springtime.

Is that when you burn it to give it a kick off again?

Lou: Yes. You slash it and burn it then if you can and come springtime she'll shoot up good.

When did kikuyu come out? It comes from Africa doesn't it?

Lou: Yes. I don't know when.

Is it the pasture grass of choice around here?

Lou: We've not had it here all that long. Over Yarramalong way they've had it there for many years.

Is that because you had good native grasses on the hills for pasture?

Lou: Oh probably, I'd say. I don't really know. They brought some kikuyu runners here and we put them in but they didn't grow at all. It finished up I got seed, and sowed that to get it going here.

Is it a pain to keep it all slashed down there, or do the cattle keep it down?

Lou: Oh they do, but we slash it from time to time.

I suppose you learnt all these farm practices as you grew up as a kid. By the time you were in your late teens you'd pretty well know it all...

Lou: You knew all about it, yes.

And did your parents, especially your father, expect a lot of you from a very young age?

Lou: Oh yes, we had to do our work! There was plenty of work to do.

So from the moment you were able to work you were more or less treated like an adult - in a way you didn't have all that much childhood. ^r

Lou: That's right.

Would you rather have stayed on the farm and worked through the day rather than go to school?

Lou: Yes! School was a waste of time to me.

A lot of people seem to feel that way about it. What did you feel about school, Delma?

Delma: I always liked school. But we still had to do our work round the farm.

What do you think'll happen to here in the future?

Lou: Probably be sold.

No grand schemes for it?

Lou: No. When I go I don't care what becomes of it. It won't worry me when I'm gone.

Delma: It just depends who Robyn marries, I think.