



Les and Flo Sternbeck

What relation are you to the original Sternbeck who first bought land around here?

Les: Well my great grandfather lived in the old place next door here.

Flo: His great great grandfather lived up this gully here beside the house.

Does that gully have a name?

Lou: We used to call it George's Gully, after him.. But later we came to call it the Pig Run, because we used to run the pigs up there in the winter. We used to grow pie melons and that for them.

Is a pie melon like a grammar?

Flo: Like a watermelon only not eatable - only for jams and that.

And the cattle eat them? Or was it the pigs?

Flo: It was the pigs, though cattle will eat them too.

Les: We used to have it fenced in up there and grew them for the pigs. We used to leave the big pigs, the sows and that up there in the wintertime. They'd live on them.

What happened after that?

Flo: Then his grandfather came here. We don't know for sure whether he built the house next door, but as far as we can ascertain, that was built in about 1856.

Les: It wouldn't have been built by grandfather then. He shifted to Millfield in 1902 and my father took over this place.

Flo: See, great grandfather may have built this.

And did the first Sternbeck buy the land direct from Murray ?

Les: Oh I don't know about that. On the old maps there's a lot of different other people had portions of the place over the years.

Flo: Murray came through here in 1822.

And then when did McKay come into it?

Les: He was my uncle - my mother and his wife were sisters. They were Goldsmiths. Goldsmiths lived up Will O' Win. My grandparents were Goldsmiths. I think they shifted to Wyong later on.

And was it McKay that owned most of what is now the Bucketty subdivision, or was that Sternbecks?

Les: Bucketty No 1 was McKay's. Bucketty No 2 was mine. 1300 acres.

Where is the boundary between No 1 and No 2?

Les: Do you know where the Bucketty Arm gate is on George Downes Drive, this side - the Wyong side - of the St Alban's turn-off? The last hill you come down before you come along the level, when you come from Bucketty. In that hollow there there's a gate. Our property started just this side of that gate. The other way, towards Wollombi, was taken up by McKays years ago and then they sold it to Lem Nichols. And it was Lem Nichols who sold it to be developed.

And what about what's now called Burrealong Valley?

Les: That was Lem Nichols' property. Then John Murray and Graham Whiting bought it off Lem...

Murray was no relation, I presume?

Les: No. No relation. They ran cattle on it first, before they started the motor bikes. Then Bucketty started to develop about that time. Then John Cameron bought into Murray's share and they started the motor bike track.

And when Bucketty developed, everybody up there complained about it?

Les: Yes. The bike track was there for ten years. The Bucketty people complained about it and the Council decided to let them develop it into small acreages so that they'd close the bike track.

And how do you feel about the fact that the bike track's gone?

Flo: Well I think it's a shame, to be honest, because it was a real family thing. You know, little kids would be there riding their trikes and bigger ones riding their bikes...

Les: It was booked out every school holidays - people used to come from all over the state, even from Perth... Queensland.

I suppose it would have been a lot more profitable than cattle, would it?

Les: Oh yes, it would have been.

Flo: In the school holidays they had their training schools. Top bikeriders would come to train the young kids, and they'd have two or three sessions through the school holidays. They had to do exercises and all before they could ride their bikes - it was a very well-run thing. They never interfered with us - we very seldom heard the bikes here, only if you had a strong wind blowing from that way.

Les: Our son Dennis started to work for them when he left school, and he was still working for them when they closed. They bought a dozer and he learnt to drive the dozer, and he did all the tracks. He's got the dozer here himself now - they gave him that. He even used to man the place when they couldn't be

there for a few weekends.

Flo: I think it was a crying shame when they closed it. It was so much a family affair.

I suppose there's nowhere else for people to do that sort of thing now, either.

Les: They used to have something over at Jilliby, but I don't know whether it's there now or not - I doubt it. They did have times when they had a little bit of trouble down there, but you have that everywhere.

Flo: Bucketty complained that it was too noisy...

Les: They took up a petition to have it closed.

Flo: We were out there for four hours at a meeting one day in the school holidays. We were right up the gully there where the stockyards are and they had the big track in that paddock there and we never heard a bike.

So do you think the sound must have carried upwards more, or what?

Flo: I don't think they ever heard the sound.

You think they just didn't like it?

Flo: Yes. There were a couple of times that a couple of the bikes from Hungry Creek rode out into the bush around their property, and I think that's what probably started them. But that was a rare occasion. *(Pause).*

How did you meet up with Flo, Les?

Flo: I worked down at Lem Nichols'.

And what were you doing down there?

Flo: Oh anything - housekeeping, milking, all those sort of things. I taught their two girls correspondence lessons for a time.

And where were you from originally?

Flo: Bulga. But to go back a bit - my father worked at Dairy Arm for two years, and I went to school at Laguna for those two years. I'd met Les at dances at Wollombi in that time. Our family went back to Bulga to live, and I used to come out here to Ivy Nichols' for holidays - you know, two or three weeks at a time. She was living down here where Grays are now, where old Uncle Jimmy Sternbeck used to live in the old original house. Then I came to work for Lem. I was there for two years or more. Les used to take the cream every night to Laguna House...

Les: I used to have to take the cream down there three times a week and bring the bread and mail. The cream would go to Hexham, in those days.

Flo: I'd meet him on the way back and collect the bread and we would stand and talk. Then I started going with him for the ride, and things went on from there. And that's where we virtually met up, down here at Lem's, and started going to dances together and so forth.

When are we talking about now?

Flo: Well, we were married in 1948.

Les: Forty six years.

And never a cross word, I suppose?

Flo: Oh yes! *(Laughs)* Not desperate cross words though, but a few arguments, you know. Life wouldn't go on without them.

Where did you get married, Flo?

Flo: Singleton.

Would you like to describe that to me?

Flo: All Saints Church in Singleton was where we were married. We had our reception at a little restaurant in there. I was dressed from Keith Dagg's hotel, which was the Albion Hotel then. I used to work there when I was 18, in between our times out here - it was 1937 when Dad first come out here to work at Dairy Arm. We lived in tents for those two years, but we were comfortable.

And at the restaurant did you have the cake and the speeches, and all that?

Flo: Oh yes, but not that many speeches. It was really only just a family affair - Mum and Dad couldn't have afforded a big one, as they were never well off.

And how were you placed for accommodation, as newlyweds?

Flo: Oh we went through to Muswellbrook the first night, then we went to Tamworth.

This was your honeymoon, then? And you came back to live here, in this place, did you?

Les: Yes. In this place.

You must feel a strong connection with it.

Flo: Oh yes. I wouldn't leave. They'll take me out in a box. *(Pause)*.

Les: The first car I ever had was a 10hp Austin. A single seater with a dickie seat at the back.

Yeah? As a kid I always wanted one of those. I used to love the idea of riding in the dickie seat.

Flo: Alan McKay up here, he used to go to dances with us, and he'd ride in the dickie seat. Coming home at night in the wintertime he used to close down the lid as far as he could, and put his shoe up in the crack to hold it open to give him some air, and that's how he'd come home!

You've mentioned dances a few times, was there much in the way of dances and other entertainment when you were both younger?

Flo: We used to have dances once a month - sometimes every fortnight. Housie and euchre parties were also held in the hall to raise money for the school. We also had dinners - 100 people for a hot meal. Everyone cooked something and we took it to the hall in a crock pot or whatever to keep it hot.

Were these run by the various Hall Committees?

Flo: Yes. Mainly committees from the churches or the school or the hall... In earlier days Les used to ride his horse to Wollombi to go to the dances.

How long would it have taken you to get to Wollombi by horse ?

Les: Oh, I suppose about two - two and a half hours.

You must've been keen to get to the dance! Is he a good dancer, Flo?

Flo: Oh yes.

So you both cut a bit of a figure, eh?

Flo: *(Laughing)* Oh, not a great one, but...

Les: But still and all, we enjoyed ourselves.

Flo: And that's the main thing.

And was there much interaction with the other people round about? Did you have parties and things like that?

Les: Oh yes. We used to go to the different places in those days and have parties.

Flo: We had one here - the first one I can remember, really. It was for Les' birthday. We had a great long table in that other room there then - Lola's got it now - it went almost right the length of that room. I think we had about fifty to the party. Charlie McKay was away at a cattle sale and he'd come home, and I remember I gave him a beer in a long tall glass I had at the time. I can remember as plain as anything him telling me how it was the longest beer he's ever had. We often used to go up to his place for parties, too.

And where did you get the booze for the parties? Did that come from the pub at Wollombi?

Les: We never used to have a lot of booze. There was only wine, those days.

No beer, eh?

Les: Oh we used to buy some beer sometimes. But you couldn't get beer from the pub in Wollombi as they only had a wine licence. My uncle, Tom Harris, used to have the licence of the Wollombi pub. It was transferred to Paxton, and the pub was closed. This pub wasn't where the present one is, it was a bit farther along towards the Yango turn.

So there was a period when there was no pub at all, then ?

Les: Yes, no pub at all until the two-storey one was built - not until recent years, when they got the bottle licence, then the tap...draught licence.

How long ago would it have been? The sixties?

Les: I just forget when the beer started. Mel Jurd owned it when it got the bottle licence, as far as I can remember. (Pause).

I was surprised to read somewhere how relatively recently it was that they sealed George Downes Drive. I wonder was there any connection between the increased traffic on the new road and the bottle licence at the pub at Wollombi ?

Les: Oh there might have been I suppose... It used to be a two storey weatherboard place then, but it was burnt down.

A lot of things have burnt down over the years, haven't they? You read Eddie Stinson's history of Wyong and it sometimes seems as if fire...

Flo: Well in this case I think Mel was a little bit the worse for wear, and he filled the kerosene fridge and spilt the kerosene.

Oh I see. That's how I lost the first cabin I built. A kero fridge went berserk and burned it to the ground. (Pause)... When you were both at your peak, you were running cattle and pigs here, did you say?

Les: And dairied. We dairied right up to '68.

And how would your average day go, in those days?

Les: It started round four o'clock in the morning, and went through till after dark.

And did it ever get you down? Did you ever feel that it was a terrible grind?

Les: Oh, that's just the way life was, I suppose, those days.

Would you have your breakfast when you got up at four, or do something else first?

Les: I used to have a cup of tea when I got up. I used to have to go out and muster the cows first, and bring 'em in.

But to have a cup of tea - would that mean stoking up the fuel stove?

Les: We had a little Primus we'd use.

And what about you, Flo ? Were you sleeping in while he was doing this or did you have to get up too?

Flo: Well after we were married I used to go with him to the yard of a morning. And Josie, his brother's wife used to come of an afternoon. Sometimes we were all there.

I took Lola to the bails in a pram for years - till she was five. You'd be going off at half past five, six in the morning - something like that.

That must have taken big chunks out of your day.

Flo: Well, it was one day, one job. If you washed, that was your day. If you wanted to iron, that was your day. To cook was a day. I used to go to the bails for a couple of hours in the morning before I came home and got the kids ready for school. I took the children to school for twelve years - twelve miles there and twelve miles back twice a day. That's 48 miles a day.

That's a lot, isn't it? And how did you wash? In a fuel copper?

Flo: Yes, mainly in the copper.

You said you used to bring the bread back, so you didn't make your own bread?

Flo: No. I never baked bread. We used to buy the basics. They'd come to Dairy Arm and we'd have to pick them up from there. The mail came the same way, three times a week. The bread was three times a week too. On those afternoons it took a long time to get home. There were no mailboxes and everyone met you and had a yarn.

In one drought we had I used to stop and fill a 4gallon drum with water from a small spring on the side of the road down at Burralong Valley. This was for baths and washing up and such things. I did it twice a day as the spring would only fill one drum at a time - but I never had to wash clothes in creek water. It rained just in time on the weekend that we were getting to desperation point.

Did you kill your own beasts?

Flo: Yes.

Les: McKays and ourselves. Turn about.

So you ate a lot of corned beef?

Les: Yes. We had no freezers those days.

Did you have a Coolgardie safe sort of thing?

Les: Yes. But we used to corn nearly all the meat.

And grow your own veggies, and fruit?

Les: Mostly, yes. We had a small fruit orchard.

Being up here in the bush right away from anywhere with communications not what they are today, did you and your neighbours help one another with big projects co-operatively, or did you pretty much have to do it all yourselves?

Les: We used to help one another occasionally. If someone wanted help, we'd be there, and if we wanted help McKays would help.

Building something as big as a barn - would that be something that you'd help one another with?

Les: My father used to hire people to build the barns, and the cow stalls. He built new bails and that in the early twenties, and paid people to do it.

They'd have been built out of local timber I suppose?

Les: Yes. Out of local timber.

Did you do any timbergetting in the bush, or did you stay pretty much dairying?

Les: No. I stayed dairying myself.

What made the dairying fold up in '68?

Les: They put the tankers on to come and get the milk. After they put the tankers on we dairied for a couple of years, then we closed it.

Flo: The tankers didn't like carting cream, 'cos the cream was in cans, where the milk they put in the big vats.

And am I right in thinking that you only sent cream because the milk you separated off went to feed the pigs? The pigs and the milk went together in a way?

Les: Yeah. Though we used to rear a few calves, too, on buckets. In the early days we didn't used to sell any calves. We reared the steer calves and the heifer calves and that, and Uncle Jimmy Sternbeck, my great uncle - he used to buy the steer calves off Dad when they were ready to wean, and he'd take 'em and grow 'em into bullocks.

Flo: He owned all of Murray's Run up to where the Nichols' were. Uncle Jimmy owned all that - right from Murrays Run main road right through. Then he split it up between the boys.

Les: Before he died he had it all surveyed. There were five boys, his grandsons - that's the Nichols'. It was round about 800 acres each for the four down the Run here, and there might have been a few selection blocks as well. And then the fifth got the land up Blaxland's Arm. I dunno where Ivy (Andrews) came in. *(Digression)*.

Earlier on we touched on Bucketty Paddocks. Where do they fit into things?

Les: Well in the early days, before my time, one of the Knights owned that. There's three Knights. Old Ike Knight owned it from here to the main road. Then up in the paddock where Dad owned - he had 74 acres up there - Tom Knight I think owned that, and Ben Knight owned Bucketty Paddocks. I don't know how Uncle Jimmy Sternbeck got Bucketty Paddocks - he must've bought it off Knights. Dad leased it off him then. Dad had it leased for, oh... twenty five years, till Uncle Jimmy died and it was left to Hal Nichols, his grandson. Hal took it over from Dad then, and Hal sold it to the Collins' from Kulnura.

Have they got it now?

Les: No. Not now. It was sold to... I think it was Bowen's that bought it.

The bloke who owns all that out towards Mount Yengo?

Les: Yes. I think he bought it. And of course now it's in the catchment area for the dam.

(At this stage Les and Flo's daughter Lola arrives and joins the group).

Les: *(continuing)* Now Billy Knight, who last owned Bucketty Arm here, he had his dairy over at Ravensdale. He had a property out here and he used to run his dry cows on it. He did that for years, till he sold it to Uncle Jimmy Sternbeck. He then had it leased until it was bought in Lem Nichols' name - Uncle Jimmy bought it in Lem's name. Lem took it over, but when he got married he came and lived down here where Buralong Valley is now. The paddock that Dad owned up the top himself, that was left to us - the brother and I, and we sold it to Lem Nichols. That's how he come to get it.

There were a lot of transactions going on, weren't there ?

Les: *(laughs)* Yeah. Graham Whiting owns it now ...all of Bucketty Arm - him and Geoff Pollock between them.

They were the people you said used to have Hungry Creek when it had the motorbikes on it?

Les: Graham did, not Geoff. He came in on Bucketty Arm separately. *(Digression)* ...In the earlier days when we were dairying here, we used to send our cream to Wyong. We'd send it down to Braithwaite's over at Brush Creek on two horses and a wagon - McKay's and ours. It'd get picked up from there.

How many times a week did you have to go over there?

Les: Three times a week in the summertime and twice a week in the winter.

That'd be a good couple of hours trip wouldn't it?

Les: Easily. We used to do it week about. Bill McKay used to do it one week and my brother Dick used to do it the other week. They owned one horse and we owned one horse. Then after that we used to take all our pigs and calves to the railway at Wyong too, to go to Sydney, because there were no markets those days at Maitland or Singleton.

And this was when the great droves of pigs was on, was it?

Les: Well, they used to drive the pigs over in the early days, but I can't remember that. My older brother Dick used to go with them, though. Then they bought the big wagons, with two horses. Uncle Keith Thompson, who lived at Byora, he'd come up here with a load of pigs, and Dad would have a load in his wagon, and they'd go to Wyong together. After that he bought the old Bean truck and Uncle Keith Thompson bought a Diamond-T truck and they still did the same thing, with the trucks.

How many times a year would they take the pigs in?

Les: I couldn't tell you. I suppose it'd depend on how big you kept them.

Flo: It could've been around five or six times a year.

Les: Could've been, yeah. We used to rear the pigs on skim milk and corn, in season.

Flo: And they used to have to back the old Bean truck up the Gap hill up here because the loads were too heavy for it to go up frontwards.

Les: They'd hook a draught horse on the front to help the truck up the hill. And that Gap there used to be terrible rough - all stone. Dad was going up there one day when he didn't have a horse on it, and he didn't have a partition in the middle of the truck to keep the load forward and it shifted to the back and the front of the truck went straight up in the air and he had to swing it across the road to stop going down back-

wards! ‘

That'd give you a fright!

Les: (Chuckles) Yes. After that he put a partition in it! But then they started on the milk from here to Wyong - when he had the Bean truck, twice a day.

But why didn't he still need the separated milk for the pigs?

Les: I don't know. They started on the milk before my brothers Dick and Pat left. Why they started I don't know. Then he bought the Laguna House property in 1928, and two of my brothers went down there. My brother up Blaxland's Arm used to bring his cream up here in the sulky to go to Wyong. When I was about nine or ten years old I got to go with him in the Christmas holidays, to bring the cream up here in the sulky.

It sounds as though your parents had a big family.

Les: There were eleven in the family. Six girls and five boys. My mother died when I was only about five years old.

And where did you come in that lot?

Les: I was the youngest boy, but there were three girls younger than me. There's only two of us left now, the second youngest sister and myself. She lives over at Gosford. We lost the last brother only a week before Christmas. He would have been 85 this month.

Does this explain all those Sternbecks you see all over the maps round here? Was that your brothers spreading out?

Les: Well, my oldest brother lived at Blaxland's Arm, two lived at Laguna House, and Tom and myself were here. Tom and Perce sold out later and retired - shifted to Cessnock. And Dick and Pat sold out Laguna House in '68, and Dick brought another dairy property at Vacy, out from Paterson. He died there and his son carried it on for a while, then he bought a poultry farm at Stroud. He lives there now rearing chickens.

And your sisters married and moved out?

Les: Yes, well, three sisters married three brothers - the Browns.

Sounds like a Howard Keel movie a bit...By the way, back on the pig drives - didn't you say to me that there was some sort of trouble getting the pigs to go over Flat Rock up the top?

Les: Oh yes. Of course Flat Rock now is all filled over with shale and stuff and you don't notice it, but it was bare rock then, right across, and the pigs didn't like walking on it. They had to carry them across sometimes.

Weren't there some Woodburys living up near there somewhere?

Les: Yes. Down below, on the lower side. On the left going out from Murray's Run. They had their humpy built down there.

No remains of it now?

Les: I don't know. I haven't been down there for donkey's years. He only had just a bit of a shack built.

It would have been a bit of a rough old existence there, I imagine.

Flo: It was! I'll say.

Les: They had about five or six kids. They left here - he had a bullock waggon, and a few head of cattle, and a sulky, and they went past here on their way up country somewhere. I don't know what happened to 'em. They were related to my oldest brother's wife. They used to come down here and pinch half of our corned beef at times...

Flo: That was before my time. But I remember they took a cow once!

Les: Yeah. This cow belonged to me. I wasn't very old then. She'd gone missing, and I couldn't find her. After about three weeks I went out to what we used to call the Nineteen Mile, where Miss Dennis is now with the two big cartwheels on the gate on your way out up the mountain there. We used to have a gate there - we owned all that up there. The cow was just inside the gate, with a calf. Soon after that the Woodbury kids come down here to have a look at the milking machine, and wanted to know where we'd got the cow from. Evidently they had it up there and were milking it!

Had they just squatted on that land up there? It didn't belong to anybody did it?

Les: He had it on selection, but it all went back to the Crown though. Woodbury had a lot of selections out there.

Was he part of the Woodbury family from Wyong ?

Les: Yes. (Pause).

Flo: They put the first telephone exchange in up at McKays in 1933.

Up at Will O' Win? They didn't call it that though, did they?

Les: No. Kalongbah it was called. And up until the war, this road here was known as the Wyong road. It was the only way into Wyong, until they built from St Alban's turn-off to Gosford way during the last war.

Did you get the phone on soon after the exchange went in?

Les: Yes. Dad got it on here when the line went through.

Were they those wind-up phones?

Les: Yes. On the wall.

Flo: First it was just Les' father to McKays. Then when Josie and Tom, his brother, and Lem Nichols down here got it on, then we became a party line. There was only the one line to Laguna.

And you'd know if it was for you by the number of rings?

Les: In the first place we had to ring McKays to get a call through the exchange...

Flo: But when we got the party line we rang straight through to Laguna.

No stories about people listening in? (Both laugh).

Flo: Well... plenty did. We'd know someone had been listening in because eventually you'd hear it back.

When did the electricity come through - in the sixties ?

Les: Sixty six.

Did that make a difference to your life?

Flo: Mmm. We got television, we got washing machines and fridges.

Les: We had the 32 volts before that. We generated our own. Lights ...and the washing machine...

Flo: Well we got a washine machine, but Les' family only ever had lights.

Les: But going back further, they had the twelve volt first, then I got the 32 volt. There was a lot around the district put 'em in about the same time - a company named Hall's from Sydney put 'em in - seventeen small batteries all connected together, a big generator and a little motor. It was all cooled from a 44 gallon drum of water. It was very good.

And after coming from a family that big, did you two have a big family too?

Flo: No. There was only three of us - two girls and a boy. Our son Dennis and his wife and two daughters live in the house next door. Him and another chap do a lot of contract fencing. He also puts some of his time in at the Tavern. Brenda, our other daughter, is licensee of the Tavern. Brenda and Shirley and Dennis have got the company.

(To Lola) *Can you see yourself ever leaving the area ?*

Lola: No. After I left school I went and worked in Cessnock and Gosford for a while, but then I came back. I wouldn't like to leave now. *(Pause)*.

(To Les and Flo) *You talked about the work that you had to do with the cows earlier. Apart from the cows and milking, what else filled your average day?*

Les: There was the farm work to do. My brother used to do most of the farm work and I used to do most of the looking after the cattle.

What about the veggie garden? Was that woman's work or man's?

Les: Oh, we looked after that. Most of the garden and the crops.

The blokes did?

Les: Yes. And we'd have silage to make for the winter and that. At certain times of the year - usually January or February for the silage - when the sorghum was ripe, we'd have to cut it and cart it in between milkings, and put it through the chaff cutter into the silage.

And this'd go into a trench, and then what?

Les: We used to have to put it in the trench, and when we got it full we used to cover it over with earth, and leave it there for the winter time. In the winter we'd open the ends up, and take it out so much at a time, and feed it to the cows in stalls.

It stayed there, preserved, in that way, did it?

Les: You could leave it there for years if you wanted to. It'd keep.

You think it'd go like compost, wouldn't you, and start to break down.

Les: Well, there's a lot of it going on again now with big dairies and that, and they say they get better production by using the silage. My brothers used to put in a lot of silage, too - see, they were on the milk then, and they had to keep their milk quotas up to carry on or they'd have their quotas cut by the factories.

And you grew your own sorghum. I suppose the river flats were good for that.

Les: Yes. We used to have a lot of paddocks ploughed up.

And after the '49 floods and the later ones, when all the sand came down, could you still grow crops like that?

Les: Some of them, yeah. But we didn't get damaged here all that much by the '49 flood. It was more up the head of the creek, round Will O' Win. We got a lot of debris, though. We didn't have a fence standing. Over the paddock here there was about nine different fences, all in one heap!

Could you re-use any of it?

Les: We used some of it, but the timber and debris that came down and caught on those fences we carted up to the bails, and we had enough wood there for over twelve months of firewood. Other than that, it didn't hurt the land all that much here. But it tore it out up at the head. Bill McKay had an orchard up there, and the posts were four foot out of the ground, and the sand buried the posts.

So that would have pretty well buggered all that, then ?

Les: Yeah. 'Course it's all grassed over now. They don't cultivate it up there now.

But even if they did, would it be too sandy to grow good crops?

Les: Well, it grows good pasture now, if they keep it clean, because before '49 there wasn't a lot of kikuyu... it's all kikuyu now, and kikuyu builds up the soil.

So it's all regenerated, then?

Les: It's all kikuyu plus a lot of bracken fern up there now. You know... some look after it, others don't worry.

And then further down the river the floods did more damage, did they?

Les: Oh yes. In fact the damage to the bottom end started with the 1927 flood. Easter it was. Right at the bottom end at that time there was a lot of rabbit burrows in the sandy banks that helped the flood tear it out. And in floods after that, it'd just keep coming and coming up, till it got to down here where Burrelong Valley is.

Flo: And the wombats burrow into the banks. They still do it, it's still a problem.

Les: Of course there's not so many rabbits here now but it was a rabbit plague in those years.

And have the efforts to stabilise the banks been successful? Has it made much of a difference?

Flo: Not a lot. They did a bit down here at Burrelong Valley, but I don't know whether it's going to hold or not.

Les: Some years after the '49 flood they did a lot of work up round Will O' Win there. They put the willows in where the banks had broken away, then they drove big steel posts in with a piledriver and put heavy chainwire around them, then when the floods came the stuff used to throw in behind that and build it up, and it worked up there.

And I suppose that process isn't finished yet. Floods still to come will keep building it up, I presume.

Les: Yeah. Keep building it up. The willows are still growing. But down here they tried rock on the banks. They wanted to put a quarry in down at Will O' Win but nobody would allow them to. So they came to me and went up this gully here where my great grandfather used to live, and they put a quarry in there, and for three months they drew rock from there to put down here in Burrelong Valley on the banks in Lou Nichols' property. That sort of stabilised it for a long time.

You're not talking about the quarry that's half way up the Gap hill, are you?

Les: No, No. That's a shale quarry up there. I own that too. No this one was up this gully at the back here about three quarters of a mile. They used to blow it out in big chunks.

Is it still seen as a problem - the bank erosion?

Les: Yes. But they haven't got many men working on it now, the Water Resources. It's sort of a five year plan now, round different districts - unless it's something urgent (*Pause*).

I don't know whether Lou Nichols would have mentioned this when you were talking to him, but his grandfather used to supply Wisemans Ferry with the cattle for the butchery in those early days. He used to send eight head a month. He used to bring 'em up here to the top end of the Run, to a little paddock there where the two new homes is built now where they have it all mowed. He'd put 'em in there overnight, and either myself or my brother Tom used to go with him up Bucketty Arm, over into Mangrove - driving them. They used to be fat - you could nearly sleep on their backs - beautiful cattle. Ab Douglas used to take 'em on from there. I don't know whether he took 'em all the way to Wisemans or whether he met somebody else.

Yes, Lou did mention that. Were they still in good condition by the time they got to the other end?

Les: They were beautiful cattle. Durham cattle they were.

Flo: I was going to tell you about the school that used to be down here at the top of Knight's Hill where that cattle ramp is. There used to be around 100 kids used to go to school there in the old days. They used to come from Dairy Arm, and Knight's - all those ones who used to live round about in those days. It closed in 1896, that school, then they had one up here that was a subsidised school.

Was that the one that Lou Nichols' mother used to board kids at?

Les: No. They had a school down there later, too - a subsidised school.

So there was a subsidised school up here and another one down there?

Les: Yes. This one was here first.

And how many kids would have gone to that one?

Les: Oh well ...at one stage there was about 16 going to this one. It was only one room.

And when they say "subsidised school", that means that the government subsidised it to some extent...

Les: My father and Uncle Jack McKay got the school built. They owned it, as it was on our land, and the government paid so much for the teacher, and then the parents had to pay so much.

So education wasn't free then - you had to find a few bob.

Les: The government used to pay so much - I just don't know how much.

And when did that subsidy business cut out?

Les: Well, all my brothers and sisters went to school here.

And it went up to the end of primary school?

Les: There was no high school.

So it took you to about thirteen or so?

Les: Yes. I was about fourteen when I left school. There was ever only two teachers in this school in the whole time it was there.

And all your school days were spent there, eh? Did you like school?

Les: Oh, I didn't like it very much. I used to have to milk twenty cows by hand before I went to school -

we didn't have the machines then - then I'd have to come home in the afternoon and do it again.

And did you like school, Flo?

Flo: Oh yes. I did. I wasn't too bad at school, so I didn't mind it. I did most of mine at Milbrodale. It wasn't subsidised - it was a government school.

So there were schools that were fully provided, but if you were remote enough you had to work it out for yourselves with the subsidised business?

Les: When Lem Nichols and Hal Nichols started school they started here, and they billeted here through the week. Then they got the subsidised school down there at their place. Then there was another one up at Thompson's up here at Dairy Arm.

Gee, that seems a lot. But I supposed they had big families in those days...

Flo: There's two of the Knight's children buried below the road down there at that ramp - that wooden cattle grid.

What, they're buried under there?

Flo: No. Down below the road there.

What happened?

Flo: I don't really know. They were only young - probably only about two or three year old.

Les: I'd say they were Ike Knight's children - he lived above the road there. My father told me they were buried there.

But there's nothing there now to mark the graves?

Les: No.

And would that have been common - to bury people on the property? Or did most people get buried up in the cemetery?

Flo: Most people were buried in cemeteries, though there's one grave with a headstone going in to Cessnock. Les' brother told him that Maloney was buried across from Dennis', but apparently that's not right. Maloney built this little bridge down here. *(Pause)*.

Do you know of much evidence of the aborigines being here before our lot came?

Les: There's markings in the cave here, and up the other gully there's hands in a cave, on the rock. I didn't know those markings were in that cave. We used to have our pigs in there and I used to go round and feed them, but I never knew they were there until someone from the bike track came up here and saw them. There's some up Will O' Win way, and a lot of markings down Burralong Valley. Up there on that big rock behind here there are places chiselled out to catch water. A lot of them now are filled up with dirt, you know, but there used to be a lot of them. It was probably the aborigines that done that. Makes you wonder what things must have happened on this land, going back a long time. It'd probably have some stories to tell.

Flo: What we used to have was swaggies.

Was this during The Depression?

Les: Well, we used to have 'em then, too. I remember in the Depression days they were getting the dole - I just forget how many of 'em it was now - about four or five of them, I think, walked from Wyong and back again to get the dole.

What, not regularly?

Les: No. They only did it the once, I think. They camped here overnight.

Lou mentioned hawkers.

Flo: Yes, there used to be a couple of them. Old Rama Khan and Joseph.

Les: He usen't to come up here very much, old Charlie Rama Khan - he lived at the head of Mangrove. He was married in Laguna church. Another thing about Charlie was that he used to go digging holes in the Bucketty area looking for gold. Trouble was, he'd leave the holes open! Dad had Bucketty paddocks leased at the time, and he went out there one day and Charlie had this huge hole dug in the paddock, and Dad told him he had to fill it back in again - and Charlie came at him with a saucepan!... He did fill it back in again though, eventually. *(Pause)*.

Flo: ... When I used to visit Ivy and them down here, and her and Lennie Andrews were courting, her mother always used to come and sit the lantern between them at night time. It's something that's stuck in my mind - you could just see her coming in every night with this lantern! As soon as it got dark - they sat by the fire and started talking.

Les: The bloke that built most of the bails in the district, Sid Jurd - he was reared at Yango. He built every set of bails, I think, in the district. He built ours in 1925, and the McKays' when the milking machines came in. He did a lot of fencing for Uncle Jimmy Sternbeck too - mortice and rail fences mostly. He wasn't married, and they had a schoolteacher there living with them, and Pearl Nichols - Ivy's mother - used to do the same to them whenever they got together! *(i.e. putting the lantern between them)*. But he did a lot of the fences and the buildings around this district. He got married and went to Maitland, and he built homes there afterwards. He'd be dead now, of course.

And a lot of it's still standing?

Les: Yes, a lot of it is. The old bails over there are nearly blowing down now, though. He used to go into the bush and cut the timber to build the sheds and bails and all that. It wasn't delivered to you all ready cut to length.

Flo: I noticed in the book you did about Yarramalong that they talked about the brothers not being known by their right names. None of Les' brothers was called by their right names-either.

Give us a run-down.

Les: Perce was called by his right name.

Flo: Oh yes, he was.

Les: My brother Dick's real name was Cecil Harris; my brother Pat was Henry John; and Tom was Lawrence Roy... and mine was Leslie Albert. I was called Joe, but the schoolteacher put a stop to it, which is how I got my proper name back.

But it didn't happen with girls, though?

Flo: No, it didn't seem to. *(Pointing to Lola)* She got called after a racehorse. *(Laughs)* My grandfather had a racehorse called Lola, and I always liked that racehorse, so she got Lola! *(Digression)*.

Les: Talking about the Yarramalong people, I've known Reggie Bradley since he was that high - 'cos I knew the family and they used to come out here to the McKays. And Keith Fernance - him and his brother Toby came out here and bought logs off us when they had the bullock teams in the early days. And when Charlie Lauff was only a young feller, him and his father used to come out here shooting the wallabies, and the ducks, and the pigeons and that. They used to come out here and camp.

And old Freddy Carson, in the early days he used to get timber off Dad out here where it's all developed now. The Dixon brothers used to cut the timber here and draw it to Bowen's Pinch. They had a place made there where they used to roll the logs on. They used to have two waggons and a Caterpillar, and the track went up the back to what we used to call the Oakey Ridge then, and they'd go round to where there used to be a high, rocky place. They used to take the Caterpillar up on the top and winch the logs up over those rocks. You'd hear them going at eight o'clock, nine o'clock at night - going out to Bowen's Pinch to unload. The Dixons used to do about a load a day. They had a big White truck and the other Dixon brother would come up to Bowen's Pinch and roll 'em on the White and take them down to the Carson mill at Yarramalong.

I was up Ravensdale one day with my brother-in-law, Hector Brown. Hector had an old Ford truck and we went up Ravensdale to Gabe Bailey's with a truckload of oranges, and up there you could see the sleepers going right up the hill where Carson had built that sort of tramway to bring the logs down.

So there was quite a bit of contact between here and Yarramalong?

Les: Oh yes... Dad was coming home from there one night from taking the cream over when the truck stopped on Bowen's Pinch and began to slip back. There was a big tree near the bottom on the edge of the road that stopped it going over, and he had to walk home!

I heard that Dan Bailey went over there when he was a baby, when he was about two years old.

Les: Yes, I think it was a Jurd's car. I just can't remember his Christian name, but this Jurd's wife and Danny's mother were sisters - they were Chapmans. He used to live over at Wyong Creek at that time, and they were going through to St Alban's. They went over the cutting and down into the gully. They never got seriously hurt, so they were lucky.

Getting back to dancing, did you go to dances at Yarramalong as well?

Les: I used to go to dances at Wyong Creek a little bit. I have been to Yarramalong, but not very much. I used to go to Greentrees' over there. See, Ethel Greentree was a McKay, and I used to go over to their place and stop when I was young - go to the dances and that. That was when Reggie and Ossie Bradley and Eric Carson and them all used to go.

Lola: Wasn't there a story to those oranges you mentioned before, about bringing them up the hill?

Les: Oh yeah. *(Laughs)* We had that big a load on we couldn't get up Bowen's Pinch, and we had to carry some of the cases up the hill ourselves! That was before the deviation is where it is now, and it was very steep. It wasn't that long - not as long as The Gap up here, but it used to be rough and stony.

Is there really a gap where it's called The Gap?

Les: It's that steep part up past the quarry. It's tarred now.

Flo: But it was a lot steeper than it is now.

Les: They used to have two stone causeways across it, and you had to slow up at these crossings going up, and that made a big difference going up in a truck with a big load. They had the causeways made of flagstones, to let the water go.

Les: 1963 it was. How I remember, it was the year my father died and my schoolteacher died the same year - only a few weeks apart. It was in May, and the whole area was in flood. There was a helicopter coming from Brisbane to Ingleburn. He came to Singleton and landed, but he couldn't get through to Sydney to tell them that he'd landed, so he had to take off again. He followed the valley up here, but the clouds were too low, and he'd have to go up into the clouds to get over the ridges. Anyway, he got up here as far as Will O' Win, and he was going to land up there only he couldn't see anybody about, so he came

down here up the back on top of this flat rock here, and landed on the point.

When he landed it absolutely teemed, and he had eight minutes to get through to Sydney to tell them that he'd landed. He had to ring Wollombi, but somebody was on the line, and we had to tell 'em to get off so he could get through to Sydney. Anyway, he did, and he stopped here overnight. The next morning it was clear, and he was off over the mountain and away he went. But he was lost, in a way, because when he saw the tarred road out here at Bucketty, he thought it was the Putty Road, but we got the map out and sorted him out. He was on his own.

Flo: We made a great joke of it because we were getting low on bread and one thing and another because the flood had been up for three or four days. We told him we thought he was coming here specially to bring us some bread, but all he turned out to be was another mouth to feed! *(Pause)*.

Les: A few years ago we took some cattle out to a property at Martindale on agistment. O'Hara's owned it then - Charlie O'Hara and Percy O'Hara - there was two properties. Charlie's used to be a dairy but he'd closed it down and there was nothing on it. We took our cattle out there for about thirteen weeks because there was a drought on here. I drove a hundred head, and it took us five days. There was another young chap with me, a nephew. He had the horse and cart and I was on the horse.

And it paid you to do that rather than bring feed in, did it?

Les: Oh yes. We lost three with bloat, though. But once they were up there, boy, didn't they fatten!

Did you enjoy doing that? Was it a good experience?

Les: Oh yes. I liked it. But the young feller used to go to sleep on the cart. Of a morning he'd start off, and in no time he'd be asleep, and the cart would wander all through the cattle before he'd wake up! I was talking to somebody the other day out at Gresford, and this feller's got a farm at Gresford now, and they say he still goes to sleep on the tractor! They said that one day they were filling this big concrete silo, and he was in there tramping the feed. Then they didn't hear anything from him, and they didn't know he'd gone to sleep in there, and he was nearly buried with the feed when they put more in! *(Digression)*.

...In the seventies we were quarantined here for ten months with suspected Queensland tick - here and Will O'Win. What happened was, a chap by the name of Braithwaite out of Sydney leased land from **the** Forestry down here, and he brought out about 150 head of cattle there and thought they would stop there. Bill Fotheringham owned Will O'Win then, and these cattle used to come down to him, and to me. Now Braithwaite used to get grass cleanings from a property up Lismore way, and he brought a load down for Bill Fotheringham, and Bill spread it all over his property - he used my spreader. Then the next thing I knew a feller from the Dept of Agriculture pulled up out the front and said we were going to be quarantined because the load of grass had come off a tick-affected area up near Lismore. That was about July, and we had three choices of what to do: we could leave the cattle on the property and spray them every fortnight for ten months; or we could spray 'em and put 'em out on agistment - which there wasn't any of around at the time; or we could sell them. Well, I didn't think I could be sure of getting every beast every fortnight through the winter, and if you didn't get every beast you had to start over again - so we sold them. And we were quarantined for ten months, still.

So even though the cattle had gone the property stayed under quarantine?

Les: That's right. They had a chap camped here for ten months from Lismore - over in the shed over there. He was a pretty strict feller, too.

They must have been pretty frightened about it, then.

Les: They were. After that, everything had to be sprayed. If I took a tractor from here down to Buralong

Valley I had to have my tractor sprayed before I went off the property. I used to spray my horse every week, 'cos I used to ride about to different places.

Anyhow, my brother was after the proceeds from the sale of the cattle, because he wanted to retire. He wanted to sell all the property, but I didn't want to sell out, so I had to buy his half out, and also buy the cattle back myself. So I had to sell the back country to buy his half out - the 1300 acres that's now Bucketty. That's how I came to sell it.

So I bought cattle during the ten months and left them on peoples' places - you know, they helped me out - till the quarantine time was up. Then, just when I got the cattle back, the price of cattle went flop over night! They were worth nothing. So I got a job on the Council with the Red Scheme then for six months, doing causeways round Yango and that.

Then after that, a solicitor from Hornsby bought the property down here called *Byora*, and he wanted somebody to work on it for him. My brother used to work on the properties of new people who were coming in - to look after them for people who knew nothing about cattle and that. The solicitor's name was Bill Noyce, and I went to work for him. Dennis and I both went down there. Dennis was then about to leave school, and Bill Noyce offered us both a job for as many days as we could work through the week. He used to go away for three months at a time, and I was there to look after his property. After ten years he gave me a Christmas envelope and said I shouldn't open it till Christmas dinner. I waited till then, and as I was opening it Lola was reading it over my shoulder. She grabbed it out of my hand - it was a trip to Tasmania for the two of us for a fortnight, all expenses paid!

We'd never been in a plane before, but we took the trip. It was about the middle of March. That's the first trip that we really had, and it was pretty good. Then we went to South Australia with a church trip for a fortnight a few years after. But it was a good trip over Tasmania. We met a couple who used to come to Burrell Valley nearly every weekend. Another chap was a bank manager from Cessnock.

He must've appreciated what you did for him, then.

Les: I worked for him for another seven years after that, then I had to have an operation. I said to him that I couldn't do what I used to and that he'd have to get somebody else.

Do you still see him?

Les: Oh Yes. He still owns *Byora*. He was a good man. The money was there and he was a good man to work for. I learnt a lot from him and he learnt a lot from me. I took the grandchildren down there to see the plane when he was having it aerial super'd at Christmas time.

So he's got space to take off and land?

Les: Oh yes. He had that made before I went to work for him. They put twenty ton of super on there in two hours and forty minutes. He's got two lots of fences on steel posts that he has to pull up when the plane's landing, and then when it's done they put the fence back in.

Is Byora one of the historic places?

Flo: That was the one that Milson settled in in 1822.

It's not still the original house is it?

Les: The kitchen part is.

Flo: They used to be below the road, then they shifted. They built the other big house and they pulled the kitchen down and built it up on the top side.

Les: The building that he shifted was of stone. The other house that's alongside it was built afterwards -

my uncle used to own that. It was a big property, and a developer bought it and it was all cut up. Bill Noyce bought the homestead section where they had the sheds and the house. Of course the house was in bad repair, but they had a river frontage and 270 acres. George Oldham bought above it where there was nothing on it, and he had to build a home, he had to build sheds.

When I first started to work for Bill he only had two paddocks, one below and one on the top side of the road. When I finished he had fourteen. I used to work the ground up. For a few years I grew melons, then I'd work it up for pasture. I sowed I don't know how many acres of kikuyu and clover and that - even the top of the mountain. I started clearing that, and I sowed it with grass. And he can now put his cattle on the top of the mountain at the back of the house there, which is about half the property, and he could leave 'em there all the winter, 'cos it's beautiful feed. There's two big dams up there for water. Yet the feller from the Department of Agriculture came out here to the Field Day recently and someone was talking about burning the kangaroo grass, and he said not to burn the hills, and not to super the hills.

Weren't the hills a lot less wooded in the past? Didn't they keep them more cleared for winter feed than they are today?

Les: Yes. All this place was cleared. When I was dairying you could see the top of the mountain - all cleared, right up the sides. In those days Dad used to hire boys to clear the scrub for the winter - they used to get about a pound a day and their keep. We never used to poison it then. Now they can, and it doesn't regrow, but then it used to re-shoot from the stump.

And that was to provide feed that you couldn't get from other sources?

Les: Yes. You see, when we put the machines in in 1925 we were milking 110 cows.

Would that have been considered a pretty big dairy in those days?

Les: It was one of the biggest dairies in the district at that time.

Do you miss all that?

Les: Oh... what I mean, I like cattle. We had the Illawarra cattle when we dairied then - the red ones. We used to buy all our bulls from studs mainly down the south coast - some from Singleton, from Heuston Brothers. But mainly down round Kiama, from George Gray, or Dudgeons' or Richards'. They were the leading stud people down there then.

You'd go that far afield to get them because of the quality?

Les: Yes. Dad used to go down there in 1928. Old George Gray was the founder of AIS cattle. I went down there in 1956 - I drove my car to Kiama. My brother Dick went with me, and another friend, Ken Thompson from Dairy Arm. The three of us went down and Dick and I bought five bulls for our dairies - here, at Laguna House, and at Blaxland's Arm. And Ken bought one, but he was an Ayrshire man.

You just preferred different breeds, did you?

Les: Yes. The AIS were good cattle. They weren't as rich in butterfat as the Jersey or the Guernsey, but they were good milk producers.

You said they were red?

Les: Yeah. Red and white. Or you can get the roan - but mainly red.

What are the black and white ones, then?

Flo: They're Friesians.

And they're not suitable for round here?

Les: Oh they used to have them down the dairies here in later years. The Crumps had them. There's one dairy left now - Lynch's up Watagan - they've still got the Friesians.

Did the sort of land you had dictate what breed of cattle you'd run? Or was it just a preference?

Flo: Preference.

Les: McKays had the Jerseys, and so did the Braithwaites. They used to take their cattle to the Sydney Show. Old Ted Braithwaite was one of the Directors on the butter factory at Wyong. He lived there alongside the butter factory in later years. He was on the Council, too. *(Digression)*.

Just in passing, I notice that "Watagans" is spelt sometimes with one "T" and sometimes with two.

Flo: It's always been spelt with two in my time. But in the early days it was spelt with one apparently. You see, it's only in the last few years that they've called this Murray's Run Road. Before, it was just known as Murray's Run.

Mmm. A bit like saying Martin Place Plaza, isn't it?

Les: When Dad had the phone put on in the thirties, it was put on as Wyong Road... But it's happened with other places as well - like at Blaxland's Arm, they've added Road to it as well.

Flo: And the same with Dairy Arm - they've added Road to that, too. It was never known as that. To me, it's right out of keeping to add the word Road. *(Digression - then the conversation gets around to floods)*.

I know floods can cause damage, but are they sometimes a bit of an adventure when they come or do you just hate 'em ?

Flo: Well, they can be adventures, too.

Les: After the '49 flood our creek got filled up with sand right down here to the big waterhole. After that, every flood we got threw the sand up on to the banks, and gouged the creek out again. Down here at the waterhole, before that happened, whenever we got a drought you'd have a straight-down drop. Horses and cattle would get in there and you'd have a job to get them out. But after the sand threw up on the banks it stopped that bogging and it consolidated and grassed over and we've never had a beast get in that can't get out since.

Is it still a deep hole?

Les: Yes.

Did you swim in the creek when you were kids?

Les: I never used to swim. I hate water.

What about you, Lola ? Did you swim much?

Lola: Oh not a lot. We used to muck around down where Dad had a crossing, where it was shallow.

Les: Dennis used to swim in some of the creeks. We used to be pulling melons down at Laguna and there was a deep hole - it's probably filled up with sand now - but we used to knock off for dinner and him and young Colin Thompson, who was the same age, they used to go down and dive in to cool off in the summertime.

Flo: Yes, we get cut off here when it floods. You can't get out either way.

Les: In the '49 flood, we put our cows up on that mountain up the road there the night before. The next morning we couldn't get up there to get them, or the next morning either. My cousin was here, and the next day we got on our horses and got up on the ridge at the back of the house and went out to *The Letter*

A, came back down the road, and swam the cows through the creek. We had to ride all the way back, because it was still too deep for us to come through.

Could the cows go where you couldn't go on horseback?

Les: One cow got a floating log on her back and landed over the other side of the creek, but the others all got over.

How many cows would have been involved?

Les: I just forget now. It could have been seventy or eighty.

Flo: The flood had washed the fences away. They were gone.

Les: But we didn't lose any cattle in that flood because they were all on the mountain. On the Thursday night I had to take the cream down to Laguna, and I had the old draught mare over in the paddock at the front. It was just on dark and I had to go over and get her out because it was pouring with rain before I went. I got her out without thinking, but it wasn't much good taking the cream down because it was still there the next morning and it stayed there for a week! They couldn't get out down there from Wollombi, either.

And what's the longest you've been flooded in?

Les: That would've been the longest one. That was over a week.

Normally you say it's only two or three days?

Flo: Yes.

Les: Then, in the 1927 flood, when Dad used to take the cream over to Yarramalong, there were a lot of slips down the mountain after that, and I think he was the first one to go through in the truck.

Flo: Up at Will O' Win was probably the biggest slip - as far as blocking roads goes, anyway. It did go in a bit down the road here at the cutting this side of Lou's house, but the one up here at Will O' Win took them a couple of days to clear. Some of the McKays - Bill and Charlie, were up there helping...

And this was before bulldozers when you had to clean all this up?

Les: Oh yes. And a lot of the time in the early days we had to maintain the roads ourselves. I remember down at the swamp here, Bill and Charlie McKay came down with a hammer and drill and we drilled the rock to blow it out. We used to draw the rock down to the swamp with a slide to make wheel tracks so we could get through. And down the Boggy Arm Flat there I used to put the truck in low gear and it used to go sideways right through it. Nearly everybody else you'd have to pull 'em through or they'd get stuck in the mud. See, in those early days Council never brought in any material - they dug it out of the bank. Whatever was there they'd put on the road. If you got a shower of rain... (*shrugs*).

Flo: When I used to take the kids to school you'd be axle-deep through that flat the other side of Lou's house. You got in the wheel tracks and you couldn't get out.

Les: New cars wouldn't get through it these days - they're too low.

Flo: It used to be harum-scarum days taking kids to school then. If I'd met anybody coming the other way, you know... Luckily there weren't many cars on the road in those days.

Les: Right down there at the bottom end of the Run there at Roe's, from Fernance's Creek right up round there, there was only the two wheel tracks and you'd get into them and you had to follow 'em where they went.

How did you get on with medical emergencies in those days? Where was your nearest doctor?

Les: Cessnock. In the early days they had a doctor at Wollombi - in my father's time it was Dr Bapty. But if you had an accident or broke a leg or something you had to go into Cessnock. I went in there when I was nine years old. There was no public hospital in Cessnock then - only a little private hospital. That's what?...seventy years ago. I was operated on there for a hernia. But first I was in there for that, then I went in again for an abscessed tooth that had sunk right through into the bone. That was on Christmas Day, and I went in on Boxing Day to the dentist and they put me under chloroform and they pulled it and scraped it all out. I came back home but it didn't heal well, so they put me into hospital for a week while they had to scrape the bone some more. They thought they'd have to take bone away later on, but as luck had it they didn't.

It was three weeks after that I went back in for the hernia operation. They wouldn't allow you out of bed for twenty one days then, so I was in for three weeks. It's a bit different now! I was in hospital about three or four years ago. I was supposed to be in for three days, but I ended up being in for ten because I bled. My own doctor had given me tablets for arthritis, and they thin the blood. The doctor operating on me didn't know, and I was pretty bad there for a while.

Well, I suppose it could have been fatal. So you'd only go to the doctor's, or to the hospital if there was some real emergency. So for day to day illnesses and such would you medicate everyone, Flo?

Flo: That's right. You'd give 'em whatever you could find.

My mum was a good one for the old kero and sugar for sore throats. Did you use that?

Flo: Yes. And the anti-phlogistin on the chest for 'flu.

Did you use any traditional remedies, or was it all stuff from the chemist?

Flo: Well, I'm a great believer in metho and salt. You rub it on your chest and arms and that if you get a chill. I had a brother when we were living down here who had a temperature of 104. We took him to Singleton and the doctor said there was nothing wrong with him. Dad was talking to an Auntie up the street, and she told him to get some metho and some salt and she'd come round. She came round and rubbed his arms and his chest and his back with metho and salt, and in two hours he was as right as rain.

Really!

Flo: Yes. I've used it for heaps of things - if you get a bad knee at all... and it's good for laryngitis. You soak an old stocking in it and twist it round your throat.

Yes? You didn't ever use any plants or stuff like that?

Flo: Oh no - though years ago I used to make the aloe vera ointment.

You don't do that any more?

Flo: No. I haven't made any for years.

D'you reckon it worked?

Flo: Oh yes, it was good. Like for bruises - it could draw bruises out, and it was a good healer. I forget now all that went into it, but castor oil was one of the ingredients. I still have the recipe somewhere.

Lola: Didn't you have an accident when a bull put its horn through your foot, Dad?

Les: Oh yes. I was down at Lem Nichols' helping him mark calves. Lem used to be one of these fellers who used to rush and do things, you know. There was a calf there about eight or ten months old and it had little stumpy horns. I had riding boots on because I used to break horses in and I was breaking one in at

the time. Josie's father was down there with me at the time - Jim Bowman. Anyhow, I was on the end of this calf that Lem had marked, and he come around with ear markers and grabbed the calf hard by the ear. The calf threw its head about and the little hom went right through my boot and right through my foot.

Ouch! But aren't there about a million bones there?

Les: It went right through my foot at the back of the toes there. I had to go to the doctor then and get tetanus needles and all that. I had a bad foot for a while.

Mmm. I'll bet you were limping for a while.

Les: I had a poisoned leg once. It came on me all of a sudden. I had a pair of tan boots and they rubbed a raw patch on my ankle, then that healed over. Tom and Josie and I were going to a dance that night, and I'd felt a tightness in the muscle of my leg earlier that day - I'd been working all day, - and they tossed up whether to go to the dance at Kulnura or the one at Wollombi. Turns out we went to Wollombi. But by the time we got there I couldn't walk! It came up that quick! Anyhow, I decided I'd stop at the Laguna wine shop where my sister lived, and go in the bus to Cessnock next morning to the doctor.

I stopped at Cessnock for a week. I had to keep my leg out straight - I couldn't bend it or anything, and my sister used to put hot foment on it. After I'd been back home about a week I had to go into Laguna again to get the bus to go back to the doctor to make sure it was OK, but the bus broke down. They got it going, and this side of Wollombi it broke down again. Harold Sternbeck doubled me down to Greg Andrews' at Mulla Villa on a pushbike, and I didn't get to the doctor till the next day. The doctor said that it was only the hot foment that my sister kept on it that saved him having to open it up. It was about five weeks before I could go back over to the milking yards, and I had to ride a horse over even then.

And that wine shop at Laguna - has that been there a long while?

Les: Oh yes. Years and years. My sister used to have it. They lived there for... what? - she was married in 1937 and they sold it in the early seventies. They had the Post Office, the wine shop, and the bowser - besides the farm. He had a big farm - but it's all split up now, of course. And they had the blacksmith's shop there, too. It was on this side of the wine shop towards the school. That was the old kitchen. They used to have dances in there too. Many a time.

Flo: Old Mrs Woodbury used to play the piano accordion.

Les: He did all the blacksmithing - shoeing... any sort of work... dray wheels. He built a new dray for us from scratch in that blacksmith's shop.

I see that Wylie Cottage is up for sale again.

Flo: That was originally old Henry Brown's - going way back.

Les: Stan's grandfather lived there years ago. That was the Post Office in the early days. Then when he died the Post Office shifted over to the wine shop, where the sister had it. She had the telephone exchange there and everything. She'd answer the phone 24 hours a day. She knew that if it rung in the night time it'd be urgent. When they sold out and other people came there it was only from nine o'clock to six o'clock. They wouldn't open any other hours.

Flo: When my brother died my sister-in-law couldn't get through to me to tell me till nine o'clock the next morning. I used to think: "I hope it comes home to you one day" - and it did. Some time afterwards, their son I think it was ... or husband, got hurt by a 'dozer out at Bucketty and they couldn't ring up because it was out of hours.

You mentioned Kulnura before. Did you have much to do with Kulnura?

Les: We mainly only used to go to the dances, though we used to buy all our groceries from out there at

one stage - when the shop that's there was a Co-Op. We had shares in it.

Yes, that was still going when I moved up here in '78. It closed as a Co-Op some years after, and became a general store when John Thomas bought it out.

Les: We used to go out to the dances nearly every month, so we knew some of the people out there. They were held in the hall that's still there now. Ray Gibson was the MC in those days. He's still out there living on the mountain... *(Pause)*.

...We talked about rabbits earlier. In the wintertime, to bring more money in, my brother Pat used to go trapping rabbits. He trapped all up round Will O' Win here, and down the Run. This was when they were a problem. The milk lorry would have more boxes of rabbits on it going to Cessnock in the morning than it had milk.

Were they to eat, or just skins?

Flo: Carcasses.

Les: They used to skin them - carcass them - and old Toby Kemp had a big store in Cessnock and he used to buy them - boxes and boxes of them.

And what did he do with them?

Les: Sold 'em to eat. I used to go round with Pat of a night sometimes when he was around here, taking the rabbits out of the traps and resetting them and that. Then you'd have to go around them again in the morning. And when you get about eight or nine rabbits on your back they'd start to weigh. They used to sell the skins in Sydney. It was a good income then. But that's when they were very thick here - you wouldn't make anything out of it these days.

What other wild life do you get around here? Wallabies?

Les: There's plenty of wallabies now. You can go outside here and you'll see them. There's lots more now than there used to be.

Why do you think that is?

Flo: Because it's all developed out the back.

Les: And also years ago the shooters used to come. Old Paddy Clifton from Ourimbah, and Bill Lauff and Charlie - they all had the beagles, and they'd come out here hunting wallabies. People from Cessnock used to come out here, and to Bucketty and that - the Waters' from up Ravensdale, they used to come out too. If I was riding out in the bush after cattle in those days I'd be lucky if I saw a pair of wallabies, you know, but now I could just go up the gully there and I'd see about forty!

That many, eh? Are they those dark swamp wallabies ?

Les: The grey ones and the black ones - not the swampies. Wallaroos.

Lola: Black male and grey female.

Les: Some days you might go over here and see ten or a dozen, and you go down to the ramp and you'll see eleven or twelve on the top side of the hill every day.

Do you think there's a danger of them becoming a problem?

Les: Well I said not very long ago that they will be a problem if they're not thinned out. They come down on the flats of a night, and with all these vehicles that come along now, well - you hit a wallaby, they do some damage. One hit my car coming along here about twelve months ago. It was in Lou's pasture and I

didn't see it. He came up through the ferns and hit the side of the wheel. I pulled up but he was gone. But they will be a problem - there's too many of them.

Has anybody ever eaten them?

Flo: I have.

What do they taste like?

Flo: From what I can remember, no different. Dad and them used to do it, but they used to mainly mince it. But we used to eat kangaroo a lot when we were only young.

This is when you were at Milbrodale was it?

Flo: Yeah. We were poor, you know. Kangaroo tail soup was beautiful.

Did you eat any other things, like pigeons for pigeon pie or anything like that?

Flo: Oh I suppose we had parrot pie and that, but I don't remember too much about that. Never ate a wombat, though.

I wonder does anybody.

Flo: Oh yes! One Easter we had a dance on the Easter Saturday night and we had poultry for prizes for the raffle - dressed ducks. Anyhow, the woman who won the ducks said at the time that it would save her having wombat for lunch the next day. And she wasn't joking! She had this real old dry voice, and I can remember it as plain as anything. She's the only one that I really know of, though.

But you used to get plenty of greens and fruit in your diet, did you?

Flo: Yes, we had plenty. Dad used to market garden when we first went to Bulga.

And I suppose there weren't any coalmines and that up there then ? Was that a pretty part of the world before they dug it all up?

Flo: Warkworth and up that way was quite nice. Before we came out here to Laguna to live, when they used to have the dole, Dad always had to do a day's work on the road to collect his dole. It'd be a good idea if they did that now.

Les: My grandfather owned the coal rights to three mines down at Millfield, which were working mines in those days. He had the royalty from the coal. When they closed the mines R.W.Miller still leased the land from Dad, so he still had some income from the lease money, but no more coal royalties. After that the property passed on down through the family. Then old Wran took the whole lot off us.

What? Just like that?

Les: We never got a penny for it. They took the lease money and everything. They said we never really owned it. We never got any compensation or anything. But in the early days it was a good income for my grandfather and my father. In fact I found old documents here after Dad died saying that he'd loaned R.W.Miller money to start the mines! (*Digression*).

Lola: You haven't talked about breaking in horses, Dad.

Les: I used to breed ponies here, and break 'em in. I used to sell some of them - in fact I sold one to Keith Fernance once when he was here getting timber. Actually, I didn't start that one myself - I'd sent it over to Greentrees at Wyong Creek and they spoiled it because they were working in the bush all the week and only had the weekends to work on it. So I brought it home at the beginning of the wintertime and put it in the stable every night, put the saddle on it every morning to go for the cows, and in no time I had it going

well and I could let it out into the paddock and be able to go and catch it, you know. Then I turned it out for a spell, rode it, and put a set of shoes on it, and sold it to Keith. A gelding it was. For six pound ten.

You can still remember, eh? And when did you stop doing that?

Les: Oh, I don't know, now.. (To Flo) I broke a few in after I was married, didn't I? No, it must've been before. I sold a couple to Preston over at Ourimbah. One that he had was a beautiful horse that he had for years. And I sold one to Arthur Andrews down here - I broke it in, and then young George Bowman wanted one. I had a full brother to the one I sold to Arthur, and George was going to break it in. He married Reg Cody's daughter, and he took it down to Wollombi to Reg's. Reg had it in the yard, feeding it through the week, and had it going beautiful. Anyway, this morning, George got on it and Reg said that he thought he'd better lead it for a while till it settled down. George reckoned he'd be alright, though. Next thing, the horse wheels around, goes straight down the road to the gate, and straight up the mountain at full gallop. George couldn't stop him. He come back down again, and hit a fence, and George went flying over, got knocked unconscious and ended up in hospital. The horse was no good after that, and he was sold for dog meat. A beautiful pony - but just not broken in the right way. When I used to break them in I used to be on them every day. I used to tether them on the tether chain - I'd ride 'em for a few hours every day.

The stallion I had was a blood horse out of a little pony we had I used to take him down to Laguna House and people used to bring their mares up there. At one time my brothers took him down there for three weeks to save me being there all the time, and I said to them that they'd have to ride him often. Of course they never rode him, and I went down and led him home. I threw the saddle on him in front of the house here and I hopped on him. Well, he ducked, and he swung round and he threw me!

Dad used to have a mare years ago that he'd use to pull the sulky, and he used to race her. She was a pretty good mare - Old Jeannie they used to call her. We bred back from that mare, and years later I broke in a brown mare out of her, and I had her for years. I had her when I was in the VDC. (*Volunteer Defence Corps*). One day I rode her from here to Cessnock - 35 mile - to a parade there. Then back to Laguna House on the Sunday and I came home here early Monday morning. Tuesday I rode her to Wyong, did something with cattle on the Wednesday and rode her back home here again on the Thursday. She was a good mare, that.

And do you still have horses, Les?

Les: The old mare's up the paddock now, retired. But I haven't ridden since I had my last hernia operation. I had trouble getting on, with my arthritis, and even more trouble to get off! Once I got on I was alright, but I gave it away in the finish.

In the old pan of the house next door here are there any interesting construction details? Were there any unsquared poles in it?

Les: The only round timbers in it are the big split posts used for stumps underneath it. All the rest is sawn timber - sawn slabs.

Flo: Yes. They'd be home-sawn.

Hand-sawn with a crosscut saw?

Les: I think so.

Did you have much trouble with white ants in these old timber buildings?

Les: Oh yes, the white ants have been in it over the years, but they haven't destroyed it. We had it treated some years ago and they haven't been a problem since.

Did they have ant caps on all the stumps?

Les: I think most of them have got them on.

But they haven't been the bane of your life or anything like that, eh?

Les: Oh no. No.

You were talking of Lem Nichols selling to the motor bike people. Where did the name Burrealong Valley come from?

Flo: The new people who bought it thought that one up.

So it's got no historical significance?

Flo: No. When the bikes were there it was known as Hungry Creek.

Did they make that one up, too?

Les: I think it was from some American name.

And is it the same with Will O' Win - they just make up the names?

Les: Yes. That was never known as Will O' Win until McKays sold out and Bill Fotheringham bought it.

How long ago would that have been? '

Les: Oh... the late sixties.

I think Jack McKay wouldn't mind if he could have it back in the family today.

Flo: Yes. Charlie's family never wanted it, and Bill never married. But they wish they had it now, too.

Earlier you mentioned the old original house of Uncle Jimmy Sternbeck . Is that still standing?

Flo: No. That was further down the Run. It was pulled down. The school that was there - Lou Nichols pulled that down and built his first house out of it. That little old house that's next to his new one was built out of that school.

Les: And Hal's house was built mostly out of the old house on Nichols'. It had started to fall down so Hal shifted it and built his house with most of it. That's the first house on the Run that Roes own now. They've built on to it and done it all up - it's a big place now.

... Down where Dennis' is now there was an acre of government ground. Nothing was ever done with it. It just sat there. Never had a school on it. In 1984 the government decided they were going to sell it. The surveyors were here for three days trying to get a line on it, and when they finally surveyed it, the line went right through the middle of Dennis' house and right through the middle of a big shed! And that house had been there for sixty years!

Anyhow, the dispute with the government over this bit of land it went on and on till 1990. They sent a Valuer up and he said it was worth fifteen thousand. Then they came back to seven and a half. It ended up we got it for five thousand. After six years.

Flo: We've got a copy of the deed where in 1890 Queen Victoria bought that acre off James Sternbeck for ten pounds. I don't know what she was going to use it for.

They wouldn't have had in mind to put a school there at one time perhaps?

Les: Well, there was a school half a mile down the road that closed in 1896. (*Digression*).

At one stage you mentioned your father selling timber to Carson's mill. Did sales of timber make up much of people's income in those days?

Les: Not a lot compared to today, but it might have amounted to a bit in those days, 'cos they sold a fair bit of timber then. You got paid the royalty.

It wouldn't be easy to check on how much they took would it? Did it work on trust?

Les: Yes. Just on trust. They'd say they took so many feet.

Flo: The money from timber was just supplementary. You wouldn't depend on it. (*Digression*).

Did the War affect you much in terms of your daily life? Did people you knew go away and not come back?

Flo: I was still at Bulga then, and there wasn't a lot of people went from Bulga to the war.

Les: Not many from this area either, but there was from over Yarramalong, Wyong and over that way.

Given how self-sufficient you were with food, I suppose rationing wouldn't have affected you as much as it would city people..?

Flo: You had your own coupons for petrol and that sort of stuff.

The church has obviously been a sort of foundation stone in the area, and through your lives. Did the church play a big role in the community in general in past times? Were most people churchgoers?

Les: In those days most people were, but it's dropped off a lot lately.

Has it been the focus of your social lives for the pair of you?

Flo: It's been one of the things. That and Wollombi Hall dances and the Progress Association - that sort of thing.

Les: (*Referring to a book about the history of the Parish of Wollombi*) Professor Elkin, (*Prof A P Elkin, the anthropologist*) who wrote this - he was our Rector here for three years when he was a young man. He had a horse and sulky, and I remember him driving from Wollombi up to here. He used to visit the private school.

Flo: They used to have church regularly over here in this part of this house, when Les' grandfather was here - before the Laguna Church was built. There was a regular service - every three months I think it was.

On a different topic - I realise that I'm confused about Knight's Arm and Bucketty Arm. Are they the same thing ?

Les: They're the same.

Flo: The new people named it Knight's Arm.

Les: Knights used to live up there years and years ago. They owned it all, but we always called it Bucketty Arm. I don't know whether it was Dad or grandfather who bought it, but we used to own 74 acres up the back of it that we used to put cattle on. We had it for years and years. There is another Knight's Arm over in Yango...

Just to confuse things, eh ? Earlier you said that your mum died when you were five. Who reared you - who played your mother's role?

Les: My older sisters and my cousin, who was in fact our schoolteacher.

Flo: The cousin lived with Les' father till they both died. She stayed with him all his life then. (*Digression*).

Les: Dennis and I went to a Housie party in Wollombi one night and while we were there it rained like billyo. When we came to come home we couldn't get hack because the water was too high, so we had to go hack to the green house down here at Buralong Valley for the weekend, which was not being used at the time. We had to scratch for food, and we stopped there till Monday morning. There was a big 1200 David Brown tractor down there at the time so Dennis got on it and we drove back home through the flood on the tractor.

When it floods does the water rush so fast that you couldn't swim across it?

Flo: Oh yes. No way.

Les: Another day we were out at Boree. My brother-in-law used to have 100 acres of melons out there and we were there pulling melons. We had a shower or two out there, but when we got to Laguna on the way home Flo had rung to say that we couldn't get back. We'd only had showers out at Boree but they had four inches of rain here that day. To get home I had to drive out to *The Letter A*, leave the car there, and walk home down the back ridge. You see, you go up this ridge here at the back of the house and it'll take you right up to Sternbeck Road.

(At this stage Flo brought out photocopies of the documents dealing with the grants of land that were first taken up by Andrew Murray in the early 1800s).

Flo: Maria Roe, who lent me these documents, has an old feed shed on her property that was built in 1820 and it's still there. And the shed that they've had repaired that is now the car shed still has original posts.

So much for white ants!

Les: Halfway down the Run where Hersel's house used to be - Pearson's own it now - there was an old slab kitchen out on its own with a roof and that on it. I've been told that that's the old original one that Chris Stembeck used to live in.

That's your great grandfather?

Les: Yes. When Hersel got it there was no other house there, just a few stumps and the kitchen standing by itself. Hersel's house is the Greentree house from over at Wyong Creek. They pulled it to pieces and rebuilt it there. My sister married one of the Greentrees - old Sol's son. I'd been in the house over at Wyong Creek as a young feller when old Sol was still alive.

So it must have been cheaper to re-use timber from an old house than start with new stuff.

Les: Looks like it, 'cos there was a lot of it done. (*Digression*). ... Jack and Tommy Bradley came over to here to work for my father when they were young, pulling out tussocks.

Were tussocks a problem?

Les: Oh yes. They still are. They're no good for cattle or anything. Those days we used to dig them out, but now we slash them. It keeps them down but you've got to keep at it. The cutty tussocks I'm talking about - they're the biggest problem. I read in *The Land* that people spray 'em with Round Up then after a while they burn 'em, and then turn it over with a chisel plough and sow pasture on them. The other one that's a problem is the bracken fern. You've got to keep slashing it too.

Bracken's not introduced is it? It's a native, isn't it?

Les: Yes. It's always been here. It'll take over if you don't do something about it. I've seen it round here

in patches where it's up past the horse's belly when you ride through it. But through continuous slashing we've killed a lot of it out. But you don't slash and burn, because if you burn it it'll come up as thick as ever. Better to slash it and leave it and let it rot.

Do you think these flats were a bit cleared when the first settlers came, or would the forest have come right down to the creek?

Les: I'd say it was probably heavily timbered right down to the creek.

Gee! It would've been a lot of work to clear all that. Especially before bulldozers.

Les: But they grumble now because we cleared it!

Do they? Why?

Flo: Oh these greenies don't like you cutting down trees.

It certainly looks picturesque when it's mainly cleared.

Les: Some reckon that it's through cutting down the trees that the creek banks eroded. But the erosion started down the bottom end of the valley and it was started by the rabbits - this is when I was a kid. The damage to the creek kept on coming up the valley, getting further up as we had more floods. We had meetings with the Land Conservation people to see if there was anything they could do to stop it coming any further, and they said they couldn't do anything about it.

When the bike track was down here, John Cameron got permission from the Water Conservation people to put a weir in - like a stone crossing. Dennis put it in with the big dozer when he was still sort of learning to drive it. He picked up whatever rocks the dozer could carry and dropped them in this waterhole to make a crossing, and it stopped there until in a flood the bank broke away above it, further up. When it did, in 1990, it ran round the crossing and made a new course for the creek around it.

On this property here, right down to this side of Burrealong Valley, it's never had one dollar spent on it by the Water Conservation for soil erosion. It's still the same as it was when I was a kid, and we grew very few trees. My father pulled out all the logs and things that had built up in the creek and cut 'em up with a crosscut saw. He pulled them out with horses and cleared the creek out. I don't know if that made any difference.

Down at Burrealong Valley there, when it washed out it exposed all this timber down underneath that had been buried for years.

I wonder what sort of nick the timber was in?

Flo: It looked good.

Les: There's big logs in the waterhole down here that are still there. When the drought was on we used to walk out on them to get the water. Logs'll stop in that creek and stay solid. It preserves them when they're all wet - they swell. Anyway, I don't think the clearing had much to do with the erosion. Not round here anyway.

That's you in that picture there on the wall is it Les? How long ago would that have been taken?

Les: That one of me up there with the draught horse? That was in the '88 Bicentenary Celebrations.

Oh yes, with the slide. Did you make the slide?

Les: No. A chap down at Wollombi did. I used to make them. It's only the fork of a tree. I used to use it for carting the milk to the pigs. I used to lay the drum down and cut a hole in the middle of it at the top so you could put a dipper in.

You don't see many draught horses around these days. Did you use them much?

Les: No, not now. I used to years ago, of course.

They were common?

Les: Oh yes. Before tractors come in.

What were they? Clydesdales?

Les: Oh we didn't have many Clydesdales - though there were one or two. But ours were mostly the Australian Draught, which is what the one in the photo is. He came from out at Putty - I didn't own him. His owner sold him after that there and got eleven hundred dollars for him, which is a good price. But he was a good horse - strong, and a good puller and everything. Lola's got a few Clydesdales at her place now.

Lola: Most of them have got a very good temperament.

I realise that I don't know much about the various horsedrawn vehicles that were used in those days. I think I know what a sulky is, but not much beyond that and a dray.

Les: Well, a dray had no springs. A spring cart had springs under it - lighter than a dray but not as light as a sulky. Most of the four wheel waggons had springs, but some of them had a turnstile sort of thing on the front. We had a heavy wagon here that they used to take the pigs and calves to Wyong in with two horses, then we had the light one with wheels like sulky wheels that we used to take the cream over to Braithwaites.

Who would have made these vehicles. Would you have bought them from Cessnock, or Sydney, or... ?

Les: The last dray we had my brother-in-law made when he was the blacksmith at Laguna. He made a complete new dray for us - did the fellies and all on the wheels and everything.

That'd be a big item in those days wouldn't it?

Flo: Be like buying a car today.

Did most people have a dray and a sulky?

Les: Yes, on the farms they did.

But not much else?

Les: No. Though we had the wagon to take the pigs and calves until we got the truck.

What about horsemanship and that? Were there any rodeos or race meetings?

Les: I didn't have much time for that sort of thing, but I did do a bit of flag racing or bending races.

What sort of races were they?

Les: Well they generally have four 44-gallon drums and four posts with flags on, and you've got to race up and get your flag and bring it back and put it in the drum, till you've done the four and the first one home's the winner. In the bending race you have the pegs up and you go in and out... Then there was the rescue race. You had to gallop up to the other end where a chap is waiting, and he has to jump up behind you and you gallop back home. I remember once I won my heat at Wollombi over opposite the Tavern. There was a chap there from Singleton called Andrews, and he had a big bay horse and used to win all these rescue races at shows and that, you know. So because I'd won my heat I had to race him. The ground was very very wet. I picked up my pickup man OK, but this feller Andrews still just beat me. My pickup bloke - you didn't even need to stop galloping - he'd just grab the saddle and jump straight on

behind you. That was Neville Perry from over Brush Creek.

Was he related to Mick Perry?

Les: Mick's son.

And these races'd take place at picnics and events like that would they?

Les: Yes. Picnics - at Laguna and Wollombi.

Did that happen often ?

Les: No, it wasn't all that often... One time my brother-in-law was working here for a time. We were training two horses across the creek here, and one day when we were practising he pulled the horse, and pulled the horse down and got his leg broken.

Flo: I suppose they might have had them twice a year or so. We used to have the school picnics once a year - the kids would have their day off school and everybody would turn out and you'd have lunch and mostly tea.

I suppose you couldn't afford too many holidays with all the farmwork that had to be done. ^y

Flo: Well somebody always had to come home early to milk. Even on those school picnic days Les and Tom always had to come home to milk, while we women stopped on till the day was finished. (*Digression*).

Les: Dad's first car was a six cylinder Buick - about a 1917 Model or so. He had that until he bought a Nash in 1928. My brother-in-law rigged up the motor from the Ford to drive the chaffcutter and also to drive a circular saw for sawing up wood.

Did he have the motor out of the car or did he drive off the back axle?

Les: No, he took the motor out and cut the driveshaft and put a pulley on it, then put a post in the ground and bolted the engine on to it. We had that for a long time. We got a Lister engine after that. They were good engines the five, six horsepower Listers. We've still got two of them, but they're not going at the present time. We also had a little Anderson petrol engine that drove the milking machines for a long time before we got the Lister.

Were you mechanically minded?

Les: Well... not really. The chap we bought the milking machine engine from, Charlie Goodman, used to come around every year and pull it down and clean all the pistons and everything.

Was that part of their after-sales service ?

Les: Oh we used to have to pay them to do it. He'd do it between milkings. He'd start after we'd finished in the morning, and he'd have it ready for us for the afternoon milking. You wouldn't get that service today though.

How did you get on for fuel ? Did you have your own big drums of petrol ?

Les: When we were running the cream to Laguna a bloke called Bob Armstrong was the milk and cream carter and he used to stop down at my brother's place at Laguna House overnight. He used to bring our diesel fuel up to there and we'd bring it home from there - in 44s. After I closed the dairy, John Thomas who owns the general store at Kulnura these days used to deliver it down to us in 44s, which he did for years. Then when he gave it up we used to get it from Tad Lammi when he owned the Kulnura garage. Now we get it from a chap in Broke who comes once a month and keeps our storage drums topped up.

What do you consider to be your main big town? Cessnock or Wyong ?

Les: Cessnock is for us now, but Lola and her sister Brenda shop in at Gosford now.

That's not closer, is it?

Lola: Well it's much the same. We're about right in the middle.

Les: But of course in the early days Wollombi was where we shopped, and they delivered the groceries and fowl food up here.

Lola: Dad, in the early days, did all the farms have dairies or was there only a dairy here?

Les: I couldn't be sure about the real early days, but Uncle Jimmy Sternbeck didn't have a dairy, though they milked about fourteen or fifteen cows. There wasn't a dairy until the land was broken up into separate farms and Hal started dairying. Then Lem started, but Hersel and Lou never did.

Lola: I can remember in later years when I'd first started work, the milk truck used to come as far as Uncle Hal's and I used to catch it back to Cessnock.

Flo: And one day Dad rushed you down to get the truck to Cessnock and the flood came up and he nearly didn't get back.

Les: Actually I didn't get back because I got stopped halfway through the flood down at the bridge - the water came half way up the doors of the car and the car stopped. I had to come home and get the tractor. They come up so quick! There was no water when I left there, and I only went down to the end of the Run and back! That's about six miles.

I remember one evening old Billy McMullen and somebody else had bullocks down here at the gully where Dennis is - about quarter of a mile up. They'd just loaded a load of logs onto the truck and the bullock team was still yoked, when down came the rain. As they were coming out of the gully, down went the truck - bogged. So they hooked the bullocks on it, but couldn't get it out. It ended up they had to roll the logs off, pull the truck out, and the next day they reloaded them. They were there till nine o'clock at night trying to get out. Just a few minutes earlier and they would've been out.

I also remember one time when Lola was here and she was about to go, when we got a storm. This gully here came out and you could see the water rolling over and over... like a tidal wave. I had a little Lister engine down there at the waterhole that we used to use for pumping up to the pigsty. Lola and them jumped in the car and took off for Cessnock for work the next day and I went and got the tractor to go down and pull the pump out. Only thing was I forgot the drawbar. I came back to get it, and by then I couldn't get down the road because of the water that had come up, so I had to go around by the bails. I just hooked on to the engine and pulled it straight up onto the road - footvalve and all! The water comes up that quick!

Would you lose much like pumps and that to the floods?

Les: Oh we never lost much. Bill Fotheringham up here had a pump down in the creek and he lost it in a big flood - he never ever got it back. I'd say it was buried when the bank gave way and it went into the waterhole.

Flo: There was another night when Les was getting ready to take the cream to Laguna. The bathroom was round the end of that verandah, and he went round to have a bath this night. It had started to rain heavily, and by the time he came back it was three feet deep over that culvert down there - just while he was having a bath! So he couldn't go nowhere.

Hey, it's sprinkling now. Maybe I should be getting ready to go!

Lola: It depends on the seasons, too. If it's been really wet then it doesn't take much to make a flood, but when it's dry it takes longer unless we get a real sudden heavy storm.

Les: There was a big storm there once at Milbrodale where Flo used to live that brought a big slip down. They got about ten inches in about an hour. The mountain behind the house up there gave way - all the rocks up the top. The milking bails there were above the road and the landslip hit the bails, demolished them, and then split so that it went each side of the house. Hundreds and hundreds of tons of rock. If the bails hadn't been there it'd have gone straight on to hit the house. As it was it took everything in front of it.

I suppose you could still see the scar, could you?

Les: Well you can... and big rocks lying around. And as we said we've had a lot of slips here in the floods, too. I just forget what years it was now. But I remember one time when dad used to take the truck over to Wyong, there were a lot of slips on the mountain and he was the first one to go through them.

You mean on Brush mountain there?

Les: Yes. On Brush mountain. Four or five big slips. You probably wouldn't notice them now 'cos the timber's all grown up again. Going up out of the Run, round about Fraserhill there, there was a big slip came down there years ago - all rocks and that. But its all grown back again now, of course. *(Pause)*... I would like to get rid of this salvinia weed that's here though.

Is that in the creek?

Les: It's everywhere! We sprayed it but it just kept growing. They pumped it out down at Wollombi, but it cost a bloody fortune to do it.

They pumped the whole thing out?

Les: No, they sucked it off the top with a suction pump. Out of the swamp behind the cemetery.

It still looks like it's got plenty of weedy stuff in it though, just driving past.

Flo: I think that'd be mainly smartweed.

What's smartweed?

Flo: It's rubbish and if you put your hands on it and put them near your eyes you'll know why they call it smartweed!

Is it a sedgy sort of plant that grows in the water?

Lola: Not necessarily in water, just wet areas.

Flo: It's got a little reddish flower on top of it.

Les: We used to have a lot of that around here. I started spraying it but three weeks after I sprayed it it was growing again. So we keep slashing it off, and there's not a lot of it around now.

So before tractors, if you wanted to do something like slashing you'd have to use a scythe, would you?

Les: That's right. A scythe.

And before milking machines came in - if you had eighty to a hundred cows to milk, did people get crook wrists, or RSI, or milker's hand or anything?

Les: No.

But you must have been doing this for several hours each day. You'd think it'd get at you in the end,

wouldn't you ?

Les: Not that I heard of. I used to do a lot of it when I was young - milking by hand. If anything it strengthens your wrist.

Is it easy to learn to do?

Flo: Yes, it's easy to learn. I milked for many years. My first job when I left school was milking on a dairy farm for fifteen shillings a week and my keep.

Les: That was probably good pay then.

Flo: I didn't think it was!

Did I ask you whether you did much in the way of country crafts and all that sort of thing?

Flo: Knitting and crochet I do. There's a group of us call ourselves the Laguna Knitting Circle and we go round and visit a different place each month - though not always. We knit knee rugs and jumpers and things like that and we send them down to a Share and Care Home in Sydney.

You didn't get into patchwork or lace or... ?

Flo: Marcia Hoipo from up Blaxland's Arm - she does patchwork. We have done patchwork, but not a lot of it because it's something you virtually have to do in the daytime whereas I do mine in the night.

There's not many hours in the day you leave unused though.?

Flo: No. We usually fill up the hours in a day.

And Les, did the fellers ever get into making saaddles or stockwhips or things like that?

Les: Not around here. I used to shoe my own horses. You used to buy the shoes, or get Stan Brown the blacksmith to make them for you. Sometimes you'd buy them readymade from the shop.

Did you play cards much?

Les: Not now. We used to in the olden days. Sometimes we used to go up to McKays and play cards.

What sort of games would you play?

Les: Mainly euchre.

Flo: Dad and I used to play crib a lot when he used to come out here visiting.

Did you ever tan skins and hides?

Les: Dennis has tanned kangaroo skins, but we never did.

(We look at photos of the 1988 Bicentennial Celebrations).

Was that a good day?

Les: 1970 was the biggest day - we got fifteen thousand people - the celebration of Captain Cook.

Was it like the 1988 celebrations - a parade, and..?

Flo: Oh yes. But they had much more stuff. More people. They had convicts, and blacks, and people dressed up.

While things were really tough in the old days and people were wearing hand-me-downs and making their own clothes and wagga rugs, it never got as basic as in the wild west where people were making clothing

out of animal skins did it?

Flo: No. It never got down to that.

Lola: But you used to wear corn bags for aprons and for cover against the rain.

When you were milking, were the pails made of wood and coopered together like a barrel is, or did you use ordinary bucket-type things?

Les: The milking buckets were just a steel bucket.

(Lola produces several folders of comprehensive family history, genealogies etc. at this point, and we pore over them for quite a time. Included in this material was a handwritten note in pencil on a sheet of writing paper which said. "Just a line to let you know that I have a daughter born on Friday night. We are getting along well and I expect to see you one day soon. It's terrible hot to be in bed. Hoping this will find you all well, from your wife.")

Lola: That's written by Dad's mother. She wrote that when her youngest was born and it was only six weeks after that when she died.

What did she die of?

Les: Pneumonia (*Long digression*).

Les: I got a leaflet from the National Parks people about the little brush-tailed rock wallaby. Apparently there's none about now, or very few. They used to be over here in the gully on the rocks there years and years ago. When we were milking we could always see them out there on the rocks of a morning. Of course they disappeared. What wiped them out I don't know, because they weren't hunted or anything like that. They were quite small - something the size of a pademelon.

Lola: They would have been more susceptible to wild dogs and things like that, probably.

Mmmm. There were problems with wild dogs around the Wollombi some years ago weren't there?

Flo: Dingoes, oh yes.

Were they dingoes or feral dogs?

Flo: Well, crossbred dingoes. We used to have 'em here killing sheep. You'd often see two or three. Three'd be the most - sometimes you might see four. But you don't see them now.

Lola: There's still a few koalas around in the bush.

Did you see many of them when you were younger, Les?

Les: No, I never used to see very many. They used to be scarce. But I can remember my brother Dick bringing a baby one home. He picked it up off the road when he was coming home from taking the cream over to Braithwaites in the wagon.

I saw one on the top road at my place only last week. That's the first one I've seen there though in twelve years. I've noticed that over this side of the watershed you get lots of grey gums, whereas where I am there are none till you get well down into the Yarramalong Valley. And grey gums are a favoured food for them, aren't they?

Les: Well, they eat other than just the grey gums. But up the top of The Gap where Marshalls live now, that's all grey gums along there, and that's where they used to be years ago.

Lola: That's the area where I've seen them mostly.

Les: They've seen them this side of Wollombi at Rileys there on the top side of the road. And down Milson's Arm and Blaxland's Arm. They're still around. We used to get them over the front here years ago - you'd hear them crying.

Flo: They cry like a baby. (*Digression*) ...I think one of the Sternbecks was supposed to have been sent out to Australia for shooting a rabbit.

From what you were saying earlier about the rabbits it sounds like they sent him to exactly the right place!
