

AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY BERNARD O'NEIL WITH MR DON NICOLSON OF LINDEN PARK, SOUTH AUSTRALIA, ON THE 2ND OF NOVEMBER 2005 IN REGARDS TO THE HISTORY OF THE ANIMAL AND PLANT CONTROL COMMISSION.

[Square brackets include comments and corrections provided by Mr Nicolson in May 2007]

Tape 1, Side A

[0:25] Don is currently the Chairman of the Dog Fence Board in South Australia. Don, thanks very much for agreeing to be involved in the project, and because the Commission has some connection with the dog fence and the dingo control and so on, we're going to look at some of that story and your own story, and tie it into the Commission's history. So thanks very much for agreeing to be part of this. Perhaps if we could start with just a little bit of your personal background to give us some context about Mr Don Nicolson.

I was born in Port Augusta in 1930. Do you want the actual month? It was the last day of 1930.

I was born in Port Augusta and lived on Roopena and Middleback Station – Roopena Station would be for the best part of the rest of my life [45 years]. Educated in Whyalla and boarding school in Adelaide (Scotch College) and then Roseworthy Agricultural College. Returned home to the property in 1952. Became a little bit interested in the politics of the pastoral industry: not too sure when, but the shearers' strike and that early part of the business. It was a bit of a problem getting sheep shorn. My father broke ranks because he said, 'Everybody else shears in the spring and we're shearing in March. We're going to have to shear these sheep – end of story'. We engaged the people privately. We didn't use a contractor, so it wasn't quite the fuss. Became involved in the Stockowners Association and became a member of that in the early '50s. Then by progression ... They always had a Vermin Districts Association meeting at the Race Week meeting of the Stockowners Association. This particular [VDA] meeting all the pastoralists were [present] ... There was a pretty large membership, might be [up to] 100-odd [members] at the time, of the Vermin Districts Association. The princely sum of £1 a year or something it was to be a member ... A secretary from Adelaide used to come up and tell us they caught so many dingoes in each district, the big map on the wall ... Not that I was all that interested in it because the dingoes were probably not [a problem for us] – the last dingo report in our country was 1930, so I'd never seen a dingo in my life on the property until many, many years later [when we caught a dingo, a very old dog, in the chook yard: no danger to sheep].

Right.

The Vermin Districts Association was an association which looked after all the Vermin Districts – some 54 or 64 of them [64], I'm not too sure of the number but that is available. The Vermin Districts: can I say a little bit more about them?

Perhaps if we backtrack a little bit on a couple of the things you've said and then we'll pick up on it again, because I think it is of interest and relevance to the story. You mentioned you came down to Scotch College as a boarder: what were you studying at school? What was the intention for you to come down?

I boarded away from [home] from Grade 1. I boarded in Whyalla, some of my secondary education was at the Whyalla Technical High School, and I went to college in Adelaide purely

to 'broaden one's outlook' I think is the word and get a good education. I went to Roseworthy afterwards to look at the agricultural side of things. But that's left over from the early days. My father did the same thing: he went to Roseworthy too.

So was there an expectation, Don, that you would follow in his footsteps on the property?

Yes. I'd always thought I would. That was the expected thing. But I was fortunate enough to be able to do that. A lot of people didn't.

You went on to Roseworthy College?

Yes, Roseworthy.

For a diploma?

I just did, yes, a Diploma of Agriculture. I'm not sure that everything I learned at Roseworthy was [relevant] ... Where I am is purely pastoral, and the course was not aligned to that part of the industry at the time then, but it is more so now. They do a natural resource type [course]: a lot of the students, we interview them on our property now, anyway. But that's a different type of thing altogether because it's now run by the Adelaide University, so it's quite a different course to what I would have done.

I suppose as a lad boarding you're going back to the property on holiday time and so on, so you got some practical knowledge of ...?

Yes, yes. We used to sneak home for shearing and all those sorts of things, yes. When I first went home we were still using horses, and there was a lot of labour. There's one photograph somewhere there's 14 of us [leaving] home on horseback one morning. That's almost unheard of nowadays, but that would have been in the very early '50s. A lot of people. Now there's [two full-time and some casual labour and motorbikes] doing the same thing.

Were you from a big family?

I've got one other brother [Andrew] and two sisters. My other brother, he's involved in the property as well, the family property.

[7:15] Could you tell me a little bit about that property? You mentioned the name before ...

The original property was Roopena Station, bought by my grandfather ...

How is that spelt, Don?

R-O-O-P-E-N-A. Despite what they are, it's a name made up by my grandfather, (laughs) it doesn't matter what all the books say. When they bought the place it was called 'Part-Pandurra', which was part of the property next door, so he changed the name to 'Roopena', simply because they came from Franklin Harbour or Cowell and they weren't used to seeing red kangaroos, and when they arrived there there were [many] red kangaroos on an open plain, and hence the Roopena, that's how the name evolved, despite what they say in some of the books. (laughs) The property was bought in 1919. Some 288½ miles² (747 km²) at the time.

That slowly expanded by adding property, smaller leases next door. The Middleback lease came pretty early [1920], 45 miles² (117 km²); the Tregalana lease [1949], the Nonowie lease [1934] and Mount Laura [1934], and finished up with a total area of about 640 miles² (1658 km²), which we subsequently then subdivided within the family in the 1970s. My brother and I still – and our sons – operate the Roopena–Middleback part.

So the subdivision ...

That was a family thing because my father had a couple of brothers and that was a family subdivision, within the larger property.

But each member of the family owns their lease.

Yes. We retained the [Roopena and Middleback] portion, or most of the Roopena portion: there were some adjustments of boundaries and those sorts of things. We subsequently bought the lease next door of Katunga, which was added to the ... Operated at a separate level: that's operated as one organisation, but we still own the two leases, put it that way.

What do you run on the property?

Sheep, merino sheep for wool. No cattle at all. It's not ... We don't think it is really suitable for cattle. It's heavy, bluebush, saltbush country, and it produces good wool, it doesn't produce too many fat sheep or fat cattle. You can fatten cattle once in 10 or 15 years – unless you've got fat cattle you haven't got anything. But it produces good, clean wool. Yes.

That gives us a little bit of the farming/pastoral type of side of your ...

Yes, it's a pastoral, it's a purely pastoral property. I suppose in the 1970s, '60s, late '60s, early '70s my brother had come home too and we started agitating and suggesting that there should be more research into the use and maintenance of the arid zone, which didn't go down too well with some of the older members of the pastoral industry. We agitated for a long time and eventually the Department of Agriculture did appoint two ecologists, I suppose, pastoral land ecologists to the Department of Ag. Brendan Lay was one of them, who is now a member of the Pastoral Board. During all this time we were involved with Bob Lange who was interested in the arid zone, but we started agitating and eventually we finished up with the Adelaide University research station on the property, so we've got a long-time interest in the use and maintenance of the arid zone ... The Adelaide University have got their research station there. Roseworthy take their students up there every year ... so there is somewhere for them to learn a little bit about the ecology in the arid zone. Most of the officers on the Pastoral Board are students that have actually been through that thing. They're all over Australia everywhere now.

Who runs that research station, Don?

Adelaide University it is. [A board of management, with brother Andrew as chairman, with staff from Roseworthy College and Botany Department at Adelaide University.]

So it's through the university, not through Roseworthy or a Department ...?

Roseworthy operate a program there and the Botany Department of the Adelaide University also operate a botany-type thing there, too.

But it's based on your land.

Yes, based on it, really. They've got a centre there where they ... [It has been vested in the university, and the 2 ha is called the Middleback Research Centre.]

And so they lease the area?

They actually use our shearers' quarters [for living and our paddocks for their activities].

But do they lease that area and the facilities, or ...?

No, no, no. They just use our lease.

Just use it, OK.

There are photographs there taken all over the place. There's more photographs taken on our place than any other place in Australia!

I suppose having agitated for it you have to support it in some way!

That's right, yes. I don't have any regrets about it. It's a hell of a good thing that this did happen, because you'll find that when they started all of this new lease assessments and all those sort of things that they have now for pastoral leases, that was all sort of evolved by people who actually worked there and did their thesis [etc.] there – and there's been a thesis on myall trees, there's been a thesis on bluebush and another one on saltbush – there's all these things that students have done there and it gives people a lot more background to the knowledge.

There wouldn't be too many of those sorts of places about though.

No, no, there are not too many of them about, no.

[14:30] Do you have an interest yourself in, not so much research, but the nature of land and understanding the land?

My word, yes. That's what we were interested in. We were interested in the use and maintenance of the land. Let's face it, some of the earlier country was flogged out a long time ago, before people really thought about it. A lot of that was brought about by government policy as well as people not knowing what they were really doing. In the very early days, in the 1850s, pastoral leases were granted and you lost the lease within 12 months if you didn't have 100 sheep per square mile. This is just not on, even now, but that's easy in hindsight. There were government policies and all sorts of things. A lot of it was driven by the land-hungry thing over in the farming country north of Port Augusta and all this sort of thing, Hawker further up, up as far as Farina, for example. There's actually laid out ... 'farina' is the Greek word for 'wheat'. It was going to be a wheat town. Couldn't get any worse than growing wheat at Farina! (laughs) I mean, all those sorts of things. Let's face it: a lot of mistakes were made.

You'll find anywhere where there was permanent water some of the damage was pretty horrendous. But today, much more enlightened people are more interested in the long-term history of the land, the long-term production for the land. That's how it ought to be.

That's interesting it's taken so long for that awareness to come about.

Yes. We dabbled a bit, but it took us two or three years to even get it through the local branch of the Stockowners Association, without getting it through the [Association] in Adelaide.
(laughs)

Just to round out the talk about the property, Don. Whereabouts is it located in relation to Port Augusta?

Northwest of Whyalla and west of Port Augusta. Actually, the original property surrounded Whyalla from coast to coast ...

It's a bit further west, yes.

Between Whyalla and Iron Knob, that area.

So you'd still be within the line of rainfall, Goyder's line of ...?

Outside of Goyder's line of rainfall.

You're outside, are you?

Certainly outside, yes.

OK.

That's about an 8" rainfall. It varied. Close to the coast: 9½ to 10. Around the southern part of the original property up to 7½ at Middleback, 8¼ at Roopena. Our rainfall records are over 100 years old – for Roopena they are, or 'Part-Pandurra' as it was called, we've still got the original rainfall books. But yes – and there's one year missing, for some reason or other. (laughs)

They had some rain? (both laugh)

Yes, yes. But the average rainfall over the 100 years is about 8¼", that's at Roopena, and relatively reliable. We get a mean average of 33 wet days a year, and an average of about ¾" per [month]. I'm talking in inches ... I can convert it, but that's how it was, and so 12 times ¾ is 8", so it's ... But we have more wet days in the winter months than we do in the summer months, but the average rainfall per month is about the same for every month. You go further north they have a lot less winter rain and more of a summer influence in their rain, so we're governed by the southern rainfall more so than the northern rainfall. A few interesting ... You can have a good year on 3½–4" of rain, provided it falls at the right time. But the next year you can have 10" of rain and a lot of it not very effective – you might have 55 wet days or 60 wet days and your average is only going to be 33, so a lot of the rain is completely useless [very small showers]. But they're all sorts of things that nobody can predict that, anyway.

[20:00] Thanks for those insights to the background to what we ... [break] You mentioned before the Stockowners Association: quickly doing the sums, born 1930, back on the property 1950s, so you're a young man coming back from Roseworthy, in your 20s. Your father's still running the property ...

My father was at that time.

... at that stage?

What's that?

Your father was still running the property at that stage?

Yes, that's right: he and his two brothers. That becomes pretty complicated ...

How did you get involved in the Stockowners Association then if your father is the ...?

In those days they used to meet a couple of times a year, and the principal meeting was at Race Week in Port Augusta. Race Week in Port Augusta just after the war, everybody went. Now, nobody goes – few of the pastoralists go. They don't even have the meetings during Race Week now because the Race Week is on a Saturday or a Sunday ...

The Race Day and that's it.

They've got to fit in with the racing code all around Australia. But the thing to do was what people did. But when we were first home that was – if you didn't go to Race Week, you didn't go anywhere. It was a social outlet as well as doing something useful. Of course, the Stockowners Association eventually amalgamated with the United Farmers and Graziers – UGA wasn't it? UG and then UF&S and now it's the South Australian Farmers Federation. Its had two or three changes. But they eventually amalgamated: the two major groups got down to one, which is a good thing too. I was involved for quite a few years on the Wool and Meat Section of the UF&S and the South Australian Farmers Federation, as it later became.

[22:25] I was just interested in how you as a young man would have become involved when your father was the pastoralist. Then, of course, that comes back to that little connection with the Vermin Districts and how you got involved there.

Yes, that's right ... If you look in the minutes there, there's a list of all the people that went every meeting, and there'd always be two or three Nicolsons there, (laughs) nothing surer. But even earlier than that, before my time, my uncles and my father, their names crop up every year or so at the Vermin District thing. Remember we started talking about the Vermin Districts. I suppose that's what we're talking about now.

Yes, that brings us back to ... I was just interested how you got involved in that area, Vermin Districts, perhaps we can hear the earlier period, Don.

Well, the early period, the reason why is that they ... Have you seen this?

This is the Parliamentary Paper of the *Report of the Vermin-Proof Fencing Commission Inquiry, 1893*.

Right. There are copies of this about, not many of them but there are copies. Perhaps I should lend you that one. (laughs) This vermin report was because, let's face it, the dingoes, the rabbits

had increased a huge number and while the rabbits increased in huge numbers the dingo population, it was increasing because the sheep breeders, they kept seeing kangaroo, but when the rabbits arrived there was a major explosion, there's no question about that at all. When you start reading this sort of thing and they talked about ... In the early days they shepherded all the sheep, simply because they didn't have fences anyway. But then the first fences that were built were all plain-wire fences, so the dingoes were not ... They were there, but they weren't causing the problem. But when the rabbits arrived then the dingoes doubled [population exploded], then plain-wire fences became of no value. At the time the government were subsidising netting fences around farming country. The basic [recommendation] in this report was that they were going to extend this netting subsidy to the pastoral industry, and that's the basic thing that came out of that report. It meant then that the Vermin Districts could be formed. There were a few people that started fencing prior to this [report] coming out, but it found that if you put a fence around 100 square mile the cost is so much per square mile; but if you put it around 1000 square mile the cost comes down dramatically per square mile. So these Vermin Districts were formed. The first one was in the northeast – Aroona or something like that – it's mentioned in this book here, anyway. The second one was the Pandurra Vermin District, which was the one that surrounded our property, and that was gazetted in 1896, only two or three years after that [report]. It took about 18 months to build it. If you read this, the Pastoral Lands Commission, it says that the evidence was taken in October and it was going to be finished about a fortnight later. (laughs) But that's the Pastoral Lands Commission, this is 1898.

Thanks, that's just so we know which report we've got on the tape now.

... ... The last Vermin District formed in South Australia was the Mount Young Vermin District. The Mount Young Vermin District was the country south of the Pandurra one and north of the Franklin Harbour one, and there were a whole lot of people in that. And we owned country there], my grandfather, he was the instigator of it, he was the Chairman of the local Pandurra Vermin District; but all these people in between the two were not paying anything and they were getting benefit from two fences on both sides, so that was formed in 1924 or '5. That was the last one [in South Australia].

That's a fair while ago.

Yes. (break)

1924, that last district formed?

Yes. For example, if we look at say the Franklin Harbour Vermin District, the basic history of that was by around 1885 there were something like 40 000 sheep in the Franklin Harbour area or Cowell, Cleve, that area. By 1895 or '8 they were down to 4000. One of the reasons was the rabbits and the dingoes population ... I haven't got it here, but I've got reference to it – they

decided to build the fence, in about 1905 or '6 it was built, they put 150 miles (388 km²) of fence through thick mallee scrub, unsurveyed and all the rest of it, in five months. It went out due west, north of Cowell, out towards Darke Peak and then it turned off and joined onto the Elliston Vermin District, which was probably built four or five years earlier, in 1896 or '7.

But each district was building its own fence?

Yes. That's why it was built. That was all done with iron crosses [posts] and netting, because it was through mallee scrub, because it was fire-prone.

The fence they were building wasn't something around each ...

No.

... individual property –

No, no, no. I've got a map here, I'll show you a little bit [later], I'll show you the actual map of that particular Franklin Harbour one and the ... I'll give you the actual description of it too, I'll just get that out of another book for you.

I was just clarifying for my mind there, Don, that the Vermin District was building a fence as well as the pastoralists, the property owners, had their own fences.

These things you got a loan from the government to put the fence up, and you had to pay it back over 20-odd years. In some cases it took a lot longer, but that was the result of that report, that was the principle behind it. A lot of these Vermin Districts were paid for – certainly a lot of them were finished by – not by 1946, a lot of them had paid their money back and they were just there as a name, there were a few that continued on a little bit after that. [A group of pastoralists formed a vermin district and borrowed money to put up the fence.]

Where was the fence in relation to the family property?

To our family property?

Yes.

(laughs) Our ...

It's not a simple answer, I take it.

Not a very simple answer at all. The Vermin District – even within the Pandurra Vermin District there were also boundary fences that were netting fences in between, because the neighbours still couldn't really agree with one another where the thing goes or comes, so a lot of the fences, internal fences, were netted too, as well. The actual fence at home took in a fair bit of the country. There was some country which was on the outside of it which finished up in the Mount Young Vermin District. Outside was instigated afterwards. There's one story told – we bought the property in 1919 and in about 1922 there was ... I won't call it a 'dispute' between us and our neighbour, for example, and the ... I'm not sure really, anyway I'll say it: the fence was put up, anyway, a plain-wire fence, the original one, and there was netted and ...

That's right ... The contractor that got the job, he came to my family and said, 'Now all you lot – we nearly finished the fence, there's only another half a mile to put up, so all you lot get down there and muster all the dingoes north and then we'll put the last bit of fence up'. (laughs)

'Force them up', yes.

[Grandfather] had a dispute with our next-door neighbour. That's the folklore that was passed down to me.

How would they round up the dingoes?

All get out on horseback – plenty of people about, muster north, (laughs) and hunt the dingoes north. That was the story, anyway. The Pycroft family were the people that did the fence there, an old Port Augusta family.

OK.

[32:55] End of Side A, Tape 1
Tape 1, Side B

[0:15] OK, Don. We were talking there about that introduction of the fencing.

My family don't talk about a lot of dogs. We've got photographs of dogs that they caught at home around the homestead and that sort of thing, and my two uncles argued the point over who killed the last dingo in about 1930, anyway, but they were still arguing just before they died as to who actually got the last dingo. (break)

OK, we're back on.

The last dingo that was caught home was about 1975 or something. We had two litters of pups by this damn thing. We had a young lad who was doing correspondence just at home while we were at work, lad about 14 on a motorbike all over the place and took the back door off the house one day: 'Mr Nicolson, there's a big boxer dog out here. Couldn't catch him'. A couple of days later he came, 'No, he's not a boxer dog. He's a dingo'. I offered this kid \$100 to catch the dingo. He tried everything. He sat up at night. We'd had a litter of pups by this thing, all these yellow pups we got rid of. We could track him. He'd come in, and our dogs didn't even bark. He'd feed off our dog nuts as well. This lad, he'd bait a kangaroo and whatnot and he wouldn't go near it: whenever we put strychnine out, there's no way he'd go near it. Set traps around at night. Eventually we caught this thing in the chook house, got the chooks out one night and took it out there. The dog was completely deaf anyway. I got the lad over and we shot the dingo. That's the last one that was caught in our country.

But they would have been few and far between?

Yes, they're few and far in our country. Our next-door neighbour, they had one about the same time. This was a very old dog and whether it was part-tame or not I don't know. One would never know. OK, then, we'll get on to more like the '50s now.

[2:45] You've given us some background. Now we're picking up on the story in the '50s when you do become involved in the Vermin Districts Association.

Yes, we became involved in the Vermin Districts and that was it. In round about 1980 when [Lester Lord], Jack Spiers and Hugh MacLachlan got on to the [Dog Fence] Board – if you look at the history of the Dog Fence Board you'll find that it was the hierarchy, the older members, that were running this thing: the Chairman of the Pastoral Board was also Chairman of the Dog Fence Board. It was a pretty closed thing. They never ... I suppose it's hard to say: they did a pretty good job, but the fences were starting to deteriorate. Anyway, there was a bit of agitation and they came to election – all younger people on the Board. Jack Spiers and Hugh MacLachlan got on the Board, and when they got on the Board things started to move a little bit more. They instigated – or Hugh MacLachlan, particularly – this looking at half the fence every year, the whole Board doing it. Prior to that, the whole Board only did it pretty intermittently. From then on – and that shows up in here ... The actual time, you'd have to look that up.

You're referring to ...

From then on there has been problems with you have collection of rates and that sort of thing, there was a lot of trouble. Originally they used to send out notices for quite small areas, they were sending out lots and lots of notices, and that was all abandoned and a lot of the notices the rates were \$5 and it was costing more than that to collect the money. But then the Act was changed and they charged all the people on the inside of the fence ... outside the pastoral area in the farming country, anything over – was it 10 000? Ten square miles of country, is it? Ten thousand hectares? No, I'm not sure. Whatever the amount was, and if you had 1 acre less you didn't pay it, if you had 1 acre more you paid, and a lot of people didn't – they just grew wheat, they didn't have any sheep: 'Why should I pay?'. All those sorts of things. Then people down the South East were paying and that caused a lot of dissent. People around the Ngarkat Conservation Park reckoned that they were contributing to the northern dog fence, but the northern dog fence wasn't doing anything down there. They didn't have a fence: that was their problem!

But if they didn't have a northern fence they might have dingoes ultimately.

They had dingoes down there and the Ngarkat Conservation Park and ... But that slowly ... That caused a lot of upheavals within the Dog Fence Board itself and it was when I first got on the Board there were several attempts to get rid of the Board altogether and hand it over to somebody else to run or something else like that. But, in every case, it became too hard, the principal reason being it was still a privately-owned fence. The government don't own it: 'if they want to take it over they've got to buy the fence first', and nobody's really putting themselves out to bite on that.

[7:05] When did you become involved?

I took over from John Spiers in about 1990.

Was that your first involvement at that level?

I was actually on the Dog Fence Board, I was a Board member, I took over from Jack Spiers. I found it quite enlightening.

What led to you becoming involved, Don?

I was on the Wool and Meat Section of the South Australian Farmers Federation at the time. Two members of the Board are appointed by the South Australian Farmers Federation. They both have to be ratepayers – one has to be a ratepayer/fence owner, in other words a ratepayer that lives [along] the fence. I was sitting on the Wool and Meat Section and I took over from Jack Spiers, who was also on the Wool and Meat Section. That's how I became involved.

Were you the sort of person to become involved in boards and so on? Was that ...?

Yes. I was involved with the Wool and Meat Section of the thing for quite some years, and I took an interest in that. This dog fence thing used to come up every now and again. We used to get a report from them. John Spiers retired and I got the job. That was at the time when the Chairman of the Board was Bill Edwards, but I never saw ... I saw Bill Edwards at one meeting, and it was at the time that ... Then after that we had Christine Cane, who was appointed by the government. As they say in the book here [*Holding the line* by Leith Yelland], she was appointed to get rid of the Dog Fence Board but she became our best ally in the finish. So Christine Cane, then Basil Kidd, then the rules were changed and instead of the government appointing the chairman, the Board appointed the chairman. That's when Andrew McTaggart became chairman. I took over from Andrew McTaggart whenever it is, according to the book. (laughs)

So you've got about 15 years on the Board.

Something like that, yes: 15 or 16 years. I've enjoyed every minute of it, too. In the early days we had a lot of trouble within the South Australian Farmers Federation and that sort of thing. There were all sorts of motions trying to get rid of, abolish, it. Even it was virtually the people in the South East against the people north of the River Murray, that's mostly what it amounted to. But that's how it's happened. The more I've become involved ... We've had studies into the viability of the thing, the economic benefit and all those sorts of things to justify the existence of the fence. Nobody's just going to wind it up, we'll put it that way. So it is ...

[11:00] Compared with the other fences in Australia, it's much more cost-effective. For example, we have a budget of less than \$1 000 000, about \$900 000, half from the sheep industry and the other half from a dollar-for-dollar subsidy from the government. New South Wales fence is government-owned: there's 550 km and they've got a budget of [\$]3 000 000

and some considerable debt, I understand. The Queensland fence is government-owned. That's about 150, no, less than 200 km longer than ours. They've got 23 permanent employees. They own tractors and buildings and you name it, and everybody goes home every night and every weekend. It's a different world up there. A lot of their wages are paid by other departments and all sorts of things: we never really find out exactly what it costs to operate a fence in Queensland.

So there's no one system across ...

No, no one system. The Western Australian barrier fence is different again, that originally was the rabbit-proof fence there and then it was made ... It's now basically a barrier to keep the emus out of the [wheat] country about every 10 years when they ... travel south under drought conditions. But there are moves afoot in Western Australia to convert it, to make it more dog-proof. It's pretty good fence – the bit we've seen, anyway. But they are different. If you look in this vermin [report] they talk about the fence between South Australia and Victoria. I'm not too sure, it doesn't say when it was built, but it was in a bad state of repair in 1893, it was in a bad state of repair. The mind boggles. But that fence, I'm not too sure where it started, but I think it started at Robinvale in Victoria, came across the South Australian border then went south, but it stopped about Wolseley, it didn't go down to the coast. The rabbits didn't come around there because it was put there as a rabbit-proof fence first, same as the Queensland fence. The Queensland–New South Wales border fence was a rabbit fence, they still operate the Moreton Bay Rabbit Board in Queensland, it's a different world up there. But they were put up as netting fences to keep the rabbits out of Queensland to start with.

[14:10] In a sense, there's less of a rabbit problem now in South Australia than it was before.
That's right.

Which leads me to ask, Don, how did you get on on the property? Obviously you got rid of dingoes early on, you mentioned, 1930–31, but what about the rabbit ...?

The rabbit population when I was a kid, you could always catch a rabbit. There was plenty of rabbits about. But there was a huge build-up of rabbits in the late '40s, early '50s. When I first got married, when myxomatosis arrived [1954], you couldn't walk outside for the stink. They were just ... There were literally millions of rabbits dead. We used to poison the things there and all sorts of thing but there was just no hope. But myxomatosis did an extremely good job. Even after myxomatosis, apparently every time the rabbits built up, say up in the northern – outside the fence we're talking about, up towards Birdsville – the rabbits would build up then; the dingoes would build up as well. But then they'd have a big drought or another wave of myxo, the rabbit population would drop rapidly and there was all these starving dingoes coming south. For example, the first [annual] trip I ever went along the dog fence, as a Board member, travelling in the Moolawatana area, up north of Lake Frome, they'd had a baiting trip a week or

10 days before we come along the dog fence, and in 60 miles (96 km) we counted 100 dead dingoes. We saw on the road or from the road. How many other thousands out there, hundreds out there, were killed? That was a wave of dingoes that had come down because it had been extremely dry up north. The population goes up and down due to drought conditions. [When giving a talk on the Dog Fence, one person] asked the question, 'Now that the rabbits have gone with the calicivirus the dingoes will be eating the yellow-footed rock-tail wallabies'. But before rabbits what did they eat? Rock-tail wallabies; I suppose yellow-footed rock-tail wallabies. But you can't say that the dingoes have built up, but ...

I was asking about the rabbits less from the dog fence side of it, more from the pest plant/pest animal side of things. Did you have a problem on your property? I'm thinking about your own family property.

Yes. Let's face it: rabbits were devastating to young trees and that sort of thing. There's no question about that at all. But there's one other thing that's pretty well overlooked too. That's the kangaroo population which has increased. I don't give a tinker's damn what anybody says, but on our place there are a hell of a lot more kangaroos now than when I was a kid. In our particular case we've discovered that kangaroos are worse on young myall trees than sheep. They love them; the sheep don't particularly like it, but kangaroos they chew them right down to the ground, they're as bad as rabbits ... This calicivirus for the rabbits, that's a marvellous thing. If they keep wanting new strains or whatever they need to keep it going, there's no question about that at all. But we found that with the Adelaide University now, we used to fence, you'd get a good year and you'd get germination of myall trees and whatnot, we'd fence them in with rabbit-proof fences round some and sheep-proof fences around others, and recorded them all. But 99% of them die anyway because of the drought. Next dry time whether there's a rabbit-proof fence or a sheep-proof fence or whatever's around it, there's only a very small percentage that survive. That's purely a natural thing anyway. So it's a long-term trend, you've got to be looking at the next 100 years or 200 years to really get a trend, because myall trees are very long-living trees and 4 or 500 years old, 700 years old, the oldest ones. So you don't ... If a population come up every year it wouldn't work.

You mentioned kangaroos as being a problem and we've done rabbits and dingoes, were there other pest animals or pest plants? Did you have a problem with mice or ...?

Plants, yes. The biggest problem we had in my time was horehound. This came here late '50s, early '60s. There were a lot of sheep being exported from South Australia to Western Australia and you couldn't take them over there if they had a horehound seed on them. Horehound, you had to shear them then you had to pluck them off – a hell of a job. We had horehound round waters and swamps and that sort of thing ... We used to have to burn it and all sorts of things, the sheep couldn't walk through it. In the late '60s, early '70s, we started spraying this with Ester 80 in low concentrations: you spray it and it makes it sweeter to eat, and you train the

sheep to eat it. Now we've still got horehound but it's only that high (demonstrates height) and it doesn't ... The sheep keep it down. They teach the young sheep. If they keep it down we don't have the trouble we used to have with it.

So controlled rather than eradicated?

Yes, yes. There's no way in the world you can eradicate it. But horehound's one of those things that was, from my understanding, was hawked around Australia by the shepherds in the early days to make horehound tea for their rheumatism and drench their sheep and all those sorts of things, so you never had a hope. It's a fact: that's as I understand it. I've read that somewhere, 'way back from Whoop-Whoop, that's how a lot of it got spread around.

Easily spread.

Yes. That's probably the major weed. Occasionally you get a bit of Bathurst burr, but you've got to rain at the right time for Bathurst burr. Horehound was probably the worst one we had. There's a little bit of onion weed – that's up and down all the highways, and they grade that backwards and forwards, and nothing eats that either.

[22:30] Did you have contact there, Don, with the Pest Plant Control Boards and so on?

Not really.

Or just do it yourself?

With this horehound thing it was done back in Andrew Brown's day. He was the Department of Agriculture. They're doing a bit more work now on these 'Best prac' things, they're called now, and pastoralists get together and talk about best practice and all that. We had a go at 'Best prac' in the '60s and '70s and we couldn't get many people, interested.

Did you do that formally?

It was done formally. It was the Department of Agriculture at the time. Andrew Brown was the guy. He was a wool and sheep officer with the Department. He had a go, but it didn't really get off the ground. There was one formed up in our area and it didn't really take off. People were reluctant to discuss exactly what they did to how much money they lost, how many lambs they got and how many they didn't get. It's one of those things. Now the younger people in the industry are doing ... some pretty good 'Best prac' groups going. There's two or three of them going that I know of.

[24:00] You mentioned Andrew and the Department of Agriculture: were you involved in the Agricultural Bureau movement?

No, because we were outside of that sort of thing. The Department of Ag., until they appointed Brendan Lay (and Martin Wilcox was the other bloke) ... Brendan Lay, he did his PhD when he did his Bachelor of Ag. Science thing on a work [done] by Fred **Jessup** – this was in the pastoral area. He reworked that and he went back to the same places that Fred **Jessup** did, and

that was the basis of him eventually getting on the Pastoral Board, because of that work. Martin Wilcox, he's working for the Primary Industry Department in New South Wales somewhere now. Quite a few of the people that I know that are officers there, they were Adelaide Botany students that did a lot of the work at home. She's on the Pastoral Board now – Carolyn Ireland – she did her thesis on myall trees. There's bluebush girl, she's in Western Australia, working for the Department of Ag. over there. There's Martin Andrews, he did a lot of the ... (door opens; break in recording)

[25:40] OK, Don, we just had a little pause there. During that pause you mentioned the people who still maintain their own fence.

I've got to go a little bit before that, I've got to go back to the stage where ... In the last few years the number of people working in the pastoral industry has become less and less, and people have got strapped for money and all those sorts of things. Under the old Act, under the Act the owner was responsible for the fence and he was paid a subsidy to do it. You never really knew whether he spent all his money on the fence or he went for a holiday on it. That's how it was. It was getting to the stage in places, some of the old fencing, it was impossible for the landowner to really do it. Because we'd been operating this local board system out on the Far West Coast, which has worked extremely well for many, many years ... Of course, when you live out round the other side of Ceduna those people are different to everywhere else, too: they co-operate with one another and if there's something gone wrong they'll go out and fix it. But, any rate, we eventually had a meeting in Port Augusta of a lot of the interested people. We got two or three of these guys from the West Coast came, and it was decided then that we'd try this system with the local boards. That meant the local boards – we've got the Frome one, the Marree and the Central Board, there's two in the Central Board – they actually take over the [maintenance] of the fence. The landowner still retains the ownership of the fence, but they take over the maintenance of the fence so it becomes responsible for the local board, and the local board appoints a contractor. The contractor, he doesn't get paid unless he does the job, it's as simple as that. Whereas before you dished the money out and material and all that sort of thing, and sometimes it was used wisely, sometimes it wasn't. Now we have complete control of it. At the time, on the Far West side, the MacLachlan family, they've got enough fence to employ a bloke full-time anyway. They're all members of the [Dog Fence] Board and all the rest of it, have been over the years, and they've got pretty good fencing. They opted to retain their own bit and maintain that themselves, and the only other person was – well, there were two: McBrides had a little bit in between the two MacLachlan fences (laughs) out there, Lake Everard and Wilgena, about 40 or 50-odd miles (80 km) belonged to the McBride family and the rest is MacLachlan. As it is now, that's all operated privately. The only other person was John McEntee. He's got about 30 miles (48 km) of fence or something. He opted to do it himself. But he's still got the option of going to the Board if necessary. By doing this through

the board system we know exactly where the money's being spent and we can direct it a lot easier in the parts of the fence that [need it] ... The local boards put in a budget every year to the main board and we dish the money out, and we have a lot more control over the actual fencing.

Do you inspect these three property fences outside ...?

Yes. Yes, we inspect them just the same as all the others. Usually when we inspect the privately-owned ones, that person will come with us, or the manager or whoever's looking after it actually comes along his section of the fence with us so we can talk about it. The condition of the fence in the years I've been on it has improved immensely. The first year I went along there we ran out of yellow tapes tying it on the holes. But that doesn't happen any more. The description of the fence, too, it's different: we've got 550-odd kilometres of electric fencing now, it's almost a quarter of it. It's still cheaper in some places to repost an old netting fence too, so we're doing quite a bit of that at the present time. We've got a new realignment going up in the Northern Flinders, cutting out some pretty rough country. With the new electric fence we'll call expressions of interest and tenders for it. They don't close until the middle of this month or something. The actual fence, we have complete control over it now, pretty well. We can direct the money where it's mostly needed. We've got a supervisor and he's along the fence at all sorts of times. [He doesn't necessarily] tell the people he's coming. He goes all parts and places. So the actual fence is going pretty well.

[32:00] Now, the animal and plant pest control, our brief is to trap and control the dingoes in the near vicinity of the fence. Since I've been on the Board and in Basil Kidd's time, we [started] buffer zone baiting, which is virtually done by the Animal Plant Pest Control people, but some of our contractors that work along the fence do it for them, get paid to do it because it's in their interest and in our interest too. [Michael Balharry] our manager's up ... I don't know whether he went last week or not because of the wet up there; he was going up there – because Peter Bird was away on holiday, on leave – to, What do you call it?, inject the meat for the baits for the outside baiting. Our manager's doing it, so we co-operate pretty well with them. If we've got to pay somebody from the Animal Plant Pest Control to do it the cost goes up. It's a hell of a lot cheaper for us to send our bloke up to do it than ... (laughs) They charge us mileage and all sorts of blooming things, whereas our bloke doesn't. He can do something else while he's there as well, look at the fence. There is a fair bit of co-operation there, particularly with that. Peter Bird, he was involved in some of the ...

[33:45] **End of Side B, Tape 1**
Tape 2, Side A

[0:15] Don, it would be worthwhile just to explore some of those comments you were making at the end of the previous tape there about the relationship between the Dog Fence Board and the Animal

and Plant Control Commission, and then perhaps we can also lead in then to the natural resource management area and that relationship.

We co-operate and assist with the buffer zone baiting and that sort of thing. That works quite well. The other thing, Peter Bird, he had quite a lot of input into the electric fence business. He's got a paper out. You've probably seen that, have you? We had a go with the fencing. In the 1970s they had the wombat fencing over on the Far West Coast, and wombats – read that thing there – there's a whole bit on the wombat electric fencing out there and they almost eliminated the wombat problem with just a very simple electric fence that high (indicates height [30 cm, four wires]). [Under the Dog Fence Act one member is nominated by the APCC; this member must also be a ratepayer.]

A foot or so high, and electric.

Yes. We've got three principal types of electric fencing. There were two ... I describe them as the 'Brian Lock fence', which is – the original fence was put up by a design from Victoria, there's a bloke called Piesse, I think his name was – the original one was a plain, 5-wire fence, but it really wasn't adequate, it wasn't good, and the Dog Fence Board, a bit before my time, they started on these cells outside [the fence] up at Moulorina and they put seven wires up; and then they put what we call the 'Brian Lock fences', which is electric fence above there and has got netting from about 18" up, down and out on the ground. We call it a composite fence – it works extremely well in undulating ground. John Cook, the 'John Cook fence' is a vertical electric fence with a sloping electric fence on the side of it. That was John Cook's version of it, so I refer to it as the John Cook fence. The latest one that we've been putting up, the last one we put up has been a 10-wire, vertical fence. The last one we put up there were no steel posts in it at all; all wood (pine posts) and maxi-droppers for spacers because some the ground rots off iron droppers as quick as it rots off netting. That's a vertical fence, but the ground has to be relatively flat for that and not too much drift in it and all sorts of things. We vary the fences to the type of terrain we go over. Peter Bird did some work outside the fence. He had an electric fence around a water, that's ?? Nap ?? Bore which you've read about. But their cells, the Moulorina cells, they lost very, very few sheep. They had sheep in these things all the time and they practically lost no sheep at all until we finished using them ... But the electric fence, we've got it pretty well refined now. It was designed in such a way that even if a kangaroo does tangle the top three wires he doesn't put the fence out, because of the design, and all the wires are insulated at every end, so if he ... If the top three wires came to be tangled together, it'd not put the fence out.

That's solar-powered?

That's all solar-powered, yes. In some cases we use a wind generator [as well], particularly on the West Coast where we get a lot more cloud close to the coast, and we've got these little wind generators that assist. They work at night, when there's a wind blowing at night, and the solar

power doesn't. They're quite sophisticated little windmills because when the solar panel is putting in power it automatically shuts the windmill off, and when the cloud goes over the panel the wind generator will start, so they're quite sophisticated little windmills.

That underlies a point, Don, that the common perception is there is a fence, and a fence is a fence.
A fence is a fence.

The way you're describing it there are several different types of electric fences, the other fences and so on.

Yes. If you read this report on the vermin fence, even in the 1890s they were arguing the point over whether kangaroos jumped over fences or dingoes jumped over fences and all that sort of thing. But our experience is that dingoes don't jump. It's like your pup: you've got to teach him to jump up on your lap or jump up on the back of the ute. A sheepdog, they don't [jump]. Kangaroos don't jump unless you chase them either. If they come to a fence naturally, browsing along, they put their head under the bottom wire and push through. They probably cause more havoc to the fence than anything else, particularly an old netting fence. That's what they tend to do. They put their head down, that's the first ... If they come to a plain-wire fence they'll always go under the bottom wire, just a plain-wire sheep fence. Kangaroos only really jump when you chase them, [and] jump over a fence.

Depending on the size they can jump a fair way.

You'd have to get the actual height of the fences, but the fences we're recommending now are not particularly high, about so high (demonstrates). You can make the thing twice as high, but this way the kangaroo being chased by a kangaroo shooter he'll jump over it without damaging the thing or getting hooked up in it. If you make it too high you'll have more trouble with it ... You've got to remember a fence is only a barrier and it's only as good as the next hole in it. People say, 'You've got to have a netting fence' and all the rest of it. It's only as good as the next hole in it. [If] a kangaroo or a camel or some other ... or a cow or something can put his head through it, it's a ...

[8:05] That underlines the point about the ongoing maintenance. You've got to go out and you've got to look at ... you've got to have someone look at these fences all the time.

Yes. We're conscious of the ongoing maintenance of all these fences. But the fences that have been put up in ... The original fences, the early fences, had rabbit netting on the bottom. MacLachlan designed it. He advocated this in Queensland, the 4" mesh, which they no longer make, but rabbits, lizards and all those sort of things can pass backwards and forwards through it, so it's no barrier to the native, generally the native animal, except for kangaroos and there's just as many inside as outside anyway – there's plenty of them, anyway. That's the other interesting thing about the New South Wales fence: they still maintain it as a rabbit-proof fence

and there are just as many rabbits on either side of the fence and it must cost a hell of a lot, that's all I can say.

[9:15] To come back to a few moments ago when we were talking there, that relationship with the Commission and the Board. How does that work? I'm aware that the Dog Fence Board, for example, sit in the same building as the Commission ...

Yes, they sit in the same building. It's the Animal and Plant Pest Control, they've got control of the dingoes inside and outside of the fence. Our principal job is to maintain the fence and to control the dingoes in the near vicinity of the fence, that's what the original Act said. So virtually we're only 20 m from the fence and that's it. Any other dingoes is an Animal and Plant Pest Control or Vertebrate Pest or whatever it is Control. But it's in our interest to make sure there's not too many dingoes on the outside pressuring the fence. It was our Board, the Dog Fence Board, that instigated this buffer zone baiting, so we like to have an input into that because it's in our interests. The principle is up to 25 miles or 35 km outside the fence we strategically bait the waters. We don't go out and chuck millions of ??? out of aeroplanes or anything like that. You don't need a lot of bait. You need quite a bit, but you don't need the amount if you're going to chuck it out of an aeroplane. You actually go around to a water and you bait around there if the dingoes are there. The cattle people out there, they are becoming increasingly conscious of the fact that if they control the dingoes a bit they improve their calving percentages. It has been known that in some places, perhaps in Oodnadatta and that sort of area, where they've got rid of the dingoes to that extent that they're complaining about the kangaroos now. They can't have everything! The kangaroo [problem] outside the fence. That's another story.

It's in everyone's interest to have proper control, tight control and so on.

Yes.

[11:45] I'll play the devil's advocate.

Yes, righto.

Why doesn't the government take over the Board?

The principal reason for that is it's a privately-owned fence. It's owned by the landowner that adjoins the fence. He may have divested the maintenance into the local Board but he still owns the fence. It's still part of his property. When he sells the property he sells the fence. The government, if they were to take it over, would have to take over the complete control of it. They would have to buy the fence. I don't know – 10, 20, [\$]30 million – I don't know what the cost of the fence is, but it's a lot of money.

Would it make it any easier, though? If there was one ...?

I don't think it would. Our experience is that – and looking at what's happening in other States – the cost of maintenance of fences in other States that are government-owned are a hell of a lot

more than the fence in South Australia. Our fence mightn't look pretty but it's just as effective as theirs ...

I don't think the cosmetics matter so much when you're sitting in Adelaide versus 900 ks north.

Yes. Some of the fence is over 100 years old, some of the original ... Out on the West Coast there's original fence there that's at least 100 years old. Top of Muteroo, some of that would be way back about 100 years. What's the fence that John McEntee's got there? Some of that fence was originally a rabbit-proof fence before they made it ... It was a vermin fence before it was a dog fence, we'll put it that way, so it was a rabbit-proof fence.

[13:50] To continue the theme of the devil's advocate. We now have this Natural Resource Management Council, the NRM Council. What's happened in the past few years with the Dog Fence Board and the NRM development? You're standing alone from them still.

You've probably got to talk to Michael [Balharry] more about that, but to [my] knowledge I don't think they've really thought or decided what's going to happen to us. We're talking about something that's different to everything else that the NRM are managing: we're talking about a privately-owned fence, and that's one of those things that they perhaps ought to leave alone anyway, it'll happen, it's running pretty well like it is, but if they start distracting us from other areas I'm not sure that that would help the dog fence at all. The Animal and Plant Pest Control, they had some input into it but it's only in latter years that that's happened because of the Dingo Control Fund that was administered by them. We still pay that. For example, on our property, I pay \$45 a year to the Dingo Control Fund but \$1000 to the Dog Fence. But every property out in the pastoral area is paying to the Dingo Control [even outside the Dog Fence] – only pastoral areas, too – so it's everybody from outside local government up to the Queensland–Northern Territory border that's actually paying into that. It's not a lot of money, it's only 40 or \$50 000 [\$35 000] a year from memory, and that's supposed to pay for all the baiting. I understand they've still got some money in it. (laughs) But I'm not sure, our role under the NRM, I'm not too sure ... We had the Minister on the fence 18 months ago, not that we actually discussed that, but we certainly made him aware of what the fence was doing and he had a hell of a lot better appreciation of it since, and he's ... We'll survive, but just in what form ... I wouldn't like to see any major changes in the management of the [fence] now: it's a fairly small Board, there perhaps might have to be some slight relaxation of the (pause) – no, perhaps I shouldn't say that. Every member of the Board, [including] the Animal and Plant, [except for] the government representative has to be a ratepayer and that may limit the expertise slightly, but even the Animal and Plant Pest Control person has to be a ratepayer. Whether that is a little bit too restrictive I don't know. There's always been pressure afoot to have 50% women on all these boards. We've had a go and we haven't even got a ratepayer that's remotely interested, a lady ratepayer who's remotely interested in being a member of the Board!

So you haven't been able to achieve that goal.

We haven't been able to achieve that goal. We've had a go over the years, but ... As a matter of fact, when ... There's going to be a change in the Board soon, and we have got one fence owner ratepayer that's prepared to stand on the Board but she's not prepared to go and look at the fence. It's a very difficult thing and I'm not sure ... I don't want to waken up too many things from that, but I'm not sure what the NRM people can do for us. The thing is now we're staffed by some pretty dedicated people and the members of the Board are pretty well dedicated too. I see them on the trip every time.

[19:35] Who does the Board report to?

Direct to the Minister.

Direct to the Minister.

The actual Act says that we have to report direct to the Minister. I'm not sure – is it Roger ...? I don't know who it is.

John Hill?

John Hill's the Minister, but I mean Roger Wickes. It's not Roger Wickes any more – we don't report to him. He was the bloke between us and the Minister. But if worst comes to worst, under the Act – and I haven't read the new Act yet, whether they've taken it out – but under the old Act we could report direct to the Minister. We usually do it via the bloke further down, but if worst comes to worst we can go direct to the Minister. Unless they've changed that under the new Act, which I haven't seen yet. (laughs) [Took several years to be approved.]

We'll find out in due course.

It's been passed through Parliament only just recently. It's taken about five or six years to get it there. They're waiting for the governor to sign it. The last I heard was they're waiting for the governor to sign the thing.

This is a new Dog ...?

Every few years they go through the thing to modernise the Act or something like that: make it twice as long, I suppose. (laughs)

Yes, bring it up to speed.

But yes, bring it up to date.

There's a new Dog Fence Act?

I don't know if it's called a new Act – but it's just a –

A revised Act?

Peter Allen did a lot of the work on it, the green paper and all that sort of thing. We've principally got everything in it we need. There were a few, when they got to the people that draft these things, they wanted things altered around a little bit. The Dog Fence Board could

conceivably build a fence around the Ngarkat Conservation Park. No, the Dog Fence Board could look after a fence that was built around the Ngarkat Conservation [Park], where before it was only related to the northern dog fence. But under the new Act we would be able to administer that fence. But the point is they've got to build the fence first and then ... We told them that years ago, 'We'll look after a fence if you build it for us. You build it and we'll rate you and we'll look after it for you, but until you do that no, there's no way'. It's the Animal and Plant Pest and the National Park people who control the dingoes there, not us.

Would that apply to other areas of the State? If someone wanted to build a dog fence, that the Board could under the new Act ...?

Yes, I think so. If you had – it could, it could under the new Act, if they wanted it. You could build a dog fence around there. But you'd have to have a good reason for it.

[22:40] You might find your workload goes up a bit.

We might too. We don't envisage anything in the short term. The dingo problems in the Ngarkat Conservation Park are not very great. I strongly suspect that probably half of it's local dogs anyway. (laughs) It depends upon the people operating the national parks: you get some people in national parks who think that the dingoes ought to be there, but under the Act dingoes should be controlled in national parks south of the dog fence, end of story. It depends on who's in charge. We had one chap down there who went to Queensland and after that things improved! (laughs) That's another story.

But getting that balance right is ...

That's right.

... who you listen to and so on.

It's essential to the State that this fence has to be there, for the sheep industry anyway, because if it wasn't the dingoes would come down. There are resident dingo populations inside the fence, we all know that – up on the Gammon Ranges there's some, there's always been dogs along both sides of Lake Torrens: it's historical, they live in the sandy country there, and occasionally we do get problems with them. There was just recently a dog caught just north of Jamestown. That dog was probably come down along the gas pipeline road from up north. We've had dogs in the Hawker area 18 months ago – that wasn't all dingo, but there was a couple of sheepdogs that [were] caught, but they did get a dingo too. But all my lifetime there always seemed to be a cell of dingoes on either the east and west side of Lake Torrens. A lot of those properties are all running cattle now too, which makes a difference.

[25:15] Two related questions there, Don. The first is, does the Board or the Commission – and now NRM – take any responsibility for those dingoes? Do they try and eradicate them, the ones inside ...?

Basically it's the job of the Animal and Plant Pest Control people to control those dingoes that are inside the fence.

But the Board ...?

Our job is to maintain the fence as an effective barrier. We don't like dogs coming through it either because it reflects on our fence. OK, we have a flood, we have a fire – the potential for dingoes to come through is always there, but there are not a lot getting through the fence, put it that way, because there's a hell of a lot more dingoes outside than there is inside, and we don't get very many problems. But they do, they've certainly got dingoes in the Northern Flinders there and Arkaroola-type country: it's impossible to get them out of there. We get trouble with ... They're shooting goats out of helicopters and all the rest of it. You start talking to them, 'Yes, we saw a dingo'. 'Why didn't you shoot it?'. 'We don't have to'. So the potential is there. The Animal and Plant Pest Control are out there shooting the goats; why in hell don't they shoot the odd dingo they see, too? The blokes always say, 'We weren't told to.' So there are ...

Getting it right.

... yes. We don't really have a lot of input. We're not frightened to tell them though. (laughs)

The other question I was going to ask, and before I ask it I think we should just clarify one point because it's come up several times and I meant to ask you earlier: when you talk about 'inside the fence' and 'outside the fence', by 'inside' you're talking about south of the fence?

South of the fence, yes. That's the inside. Outside is north of the fence. (laughs)

Yes, just clarifying.

You've got to have that right, yes.

OK. Talking outside of the fence – a related question to the dingoes inside – has the fence progressively moved northwards or southwards? Obviously there's variations with property boundaries, but ...

Yes. In the '60s there was a whole lot of fencing around north of Coober Pedy, west of Commonwealth Hill and all of that. A lot of new fencing was put up there in the late '50s, early '60s, and there was a fence – they took in another 4000, 4 or 5000 miles² (10 360–12 950 km²) of country, that's in the 1960s. Other than that the fence originally went way out past the head of the [Great Australian] Bight, a long way out further than where it is now, almost, not quite to the border. It went way out there, Nullarbor Station and White Well. They were all inside the fence. The wombats and whatnot were just impossible and there was no water, very little water and not many sheep, and the fence was chopped off at Fowlers Bay. It's a fair way to the other side of Fowlers Bay, but it was chopped off there. The fence did go a long way out there. There've been moves afoot in the 1960s, '50s or something, to fence from further north, up north of Witchelina, across the top end of Millers Creek, there's a bit that comes down north of Roxby Downs, there was the fence straight across. From very early, in about 1916, they talked about fencing from Moolawatana straight across to the New South Wales border, but that never ever got off the ground. It was finally put to rest here about six or seven years ago with a meeting from the two principal landowners outside the fence. One was all for it and the other

one that had most of the fence, he was agin' it because the Board couldn't guarantee to maintain his kangaroo population at a lower level. We just had to back out. That's another story. We did a lot of work on it. We even surveyed it and did all sorts of things. We [would have] put out 150 ks of fence to save another 300 km of pretty old netting fence! (laughs) But it didn't get off the ground.

I was just wondering there if the fence line was moving, does the dingo population react by increasing further south?

No, no, not since 1960. I don't think it'll ever go further north. If anything it may even come ... There have been talks about taking the Marree hump off it – this is before my time, in the '70s – from just north of Leigh Creek straight across there, (laughs) leave that lot outside. Then there was another proposal not all that long ago was to take it across there around about Hawker. I don't know exactly where they were going to go with it, but cut it across there somewhere and leave all that Flinders Ranges country out of it. That didn't get off the ground either. (laughs) I don't know who was behind that. There are all sorts of people that are involved in these sorts of things that want a fence shifted for various reasons.

[31:45] You mentioned before showing the Minister around: do you get any involvement or even interference at the political level from Ministers or governments?

No. Never. He suggested that we ought to have a better gender balance on our Board. We said, 'We try but we can't get anybody, that's it, end of story'. If you want to have gender balance you've probably got to increase the size of the Board, but that's not going to achieve anything.

I was just wondering if there's ...

The cost of operating the Board is not great. The Board members, we get the princely sum of about \$1000 a year to be a Board member, and that's it. We've got to pay all our own expenses out of that, end of story. That's how it's been and ...

Have there been cases of a landholder writing to the Minister or to his local Member? Does anything come to mind in that sense? Rather than coming to the Board.

There is still the Box Flat Vermin District, isn't there? Box Flat Vermin Board? What do they call themselves? Box Flat something or other. Vermin Board? Vermin Board they call themselves. They haven't got ...

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

[0:20] So the Box Flat mob?

The Box Flat Board is still operating. I don't know who's the Secretary. Somebody in the Animal and Plant Pest Control would be the Secretary to it. They actually collect rates, via the Council: the Council apply a rate to the local landowners and they assist the National Parks to employ a dogger to keep the dogs down in the Ngarkat Conservation Park. Our problem, a few

years ago, was when all these guys were paying towards the northern fence and they reckoned they were paying twice. That's something that actually changed when we changed the method of collecting money in the inside country, where we now get money from the Sheep Transaction Levy – you know what that is? That's you pay 20c for every time you sell a sheep and a portion goes for OJD [Ovine Johnes Disease], lice control and all those sorts of things, and a small portion goes to the dog fence, something like 160 or [\$1]70 000 a year. Anybody that sells a sheep he pays to ... Put it that way, that's how we collect our money from the inside country now.

I was wondering, because you talk about Box Hill [Flat], whether any of those people would be writing to the local Member saying, 'We have an issue with this. What are you going to do about it?'.

We did. I'm quite sure this (laughs) – but this is something you'll probably ... thing, (laughs) but they did. Who's the blooming bloke? Peter Lewis was the Member. Peter Lewis can be a bit abrasive as well (laughs), as you'll understand. He was the local Member, and there was a fair bit of friction there on that particular subject. Even before that they were writing to Minister Lenehan, Susan Lenehan in those days, which caused some concern. That was just before I got on the Board or about the time, there was still a little bit of that going on. (laughs)

I was just wondering in that situation, the Minister or the politician or whoever would refer it to the Board, or ...?

Not ... Yes, we were always aware of these things going on, but nothing ever really came of them. We appreciated these guys had a problem: they reckoned they were paying twice. That's how we ... That's one of the reasons why we went onto this Board system and we changed the method of collecting the money. There [were] all sorts of schemes. One was a bounty on wool and all that sort of thing. That would have worked but, unfortunately it's unconstitutional because you've got to get all the States to agree to that because it's a taxation thing and you can't do that. But it would have been a simple way of doing it but this Sheep Transaction Levy, which is not compulsory either, you can opt out of it, but it means that if you have OJD or lice and you want anything for that you don't get any.

No compensation and no help.

No, no, no. There are an odd person or two that have opted out. By law we can still send them a rate notice, too. That really puts the cat among the pigeons! (laughs) But it is possible.

So it's in your interest to be in.

Yes, it's in their interest to be in. But if they opt out, we notify the people and we ...

One of the interesting comments you made about the Box Hill ...

Box Flat.

[4:45] ... Box Flat, sorry – I keep saying 'Box Hill', that's Victoria – and the Conservation Park. You mentioned a dogger.

Yes.

I would have imagined doggers were a bit of a lost art.

Perhaps they are, but there are people that are ... Some bloke in Western Australia that's trying to start a school teaching the art of catching dogs. There are a few people about that still know how to do it.

When you say they 'know how to do it', are they still active, would you say?

Well ...

There's this one you mentioned.

One of our members of the Board, he likes nothing better than to set a dog trap. He knows how to do it and how to go about it and all that sort of thing. Some of our contractors along the fence, they all bait. Some use traps, some don't. You can't really enforce it. Steel-jaw traps are banned everywhere, except in the close vicinity of the dog fence or set by the Dog Fence Board or their employees, but they must have strychnine on the jaws of the trap. Some people, for those reasons, don't like using it. There is an exemption for steel-jaw traps. There are moves afoot to have rubber jaws and all sorts of things.

Do they get paid a levy or a bonus for catching?

No. In the earlier days there was a whole lot of ... There used to be bounties and all those sorts of things. They have been abandoned for a good many years. For example, the Far West Board, the association of the three Boards over there, they actually pay the [contractor] \$5 a scalp. One month he nearly caught 60 dogs. OK. Normally they catch about 60 a year, but there was an influx of dogs from out on the Nullarbor. There was a crash in the rabbit population or something and the dogs have come in, so he was catching a lot of dogs. They carry rifles with them and all that sort of thing. But generally speaking no, there is no bounties payable.

There's no formal arrangement.

No. The Far West Board, they find it in their interest to pay the bloke an extra little bit over and above his thing to actually do it.

It's his contract.

Yes. None of the other Boards do it, only the Far West Board. The three Far West Boards or the Far West Association do it.

The use of strychnine – probably you'd have to have a permit or be regulated or something.

You've got to be registered and all those sorts of things to use strychnine. They've been trying to get rid of strychnine even in this vermin [report] in 1893, they were trying to get rid of it then. The story was 'When you come up with something that's equally effective, we'll do it'. OK, we've got 1080 now, that's pretty good, but ...

Do they use 1080 for a dingo?

Yes. We use 1080s on all the baiting we do outside the fence, it's all done by 1080 baits.

I imagined for rabbits and so on, yes. I didn't know if it would be strong enough for dingoes!

Yes. The amount you use to kill a dog is about a 50th or 60th less than a human being. You've got to have 60 times as much for a human being, so it's fairly good in that sense. You'd have to eat 100 baits or 50 baits to get enough to kill or to upset a person. With strychnine it's a different story – it's the same amount.

[9:20] We've ranged a fair way today. Probably an appropriate time to just ask if you have any reflections about your experience on the Board and in chairing the Board ...

No ...

Any particular highlights or lowlights that come to mind?

The only thing would be the business about Peter Lewis and Box Flat. They stirred things along a bit there. I don't know that that should be something recorded in the official – I don't think it should be recorded for history, but you probably ought to interview somebody from the Box Flat people. I don't know who. Michael [Balharry] will know who the Secretary is: it will be somebody in the Animal and Plant Pest Control who's the Secretary.

We'll find out.

That's part of the deal. ... It's more to do with the Animal and Plant Pest people than us because they haven't got a fence. We're always slightly interested in it because we're interested in getting their money, but ...

As long as you maintain that ...

All I could say is that the standard of the fence, in the 15-odd years or whatever it is I've been on the fence, has improved immensely. This is due principally to the only two managers we've had – Brian Lock and Michael Balharry – and our two supervisors – John Cook and Bill Sando. The dedication of these guys has been really something. I can't go back any further than those at all. I do know some of the people that were involved, but I didn't have any real first-hand dealings with them – perhaps Shane O'Connor, but he was only on it for a very short period anyway. Prior to that I go way back in Whoop-Whoop when the local vermin people used to go round the camels in the '30s and '40s because they used to leave the camels at home, on our place, at the end of two years. Bill McEvoy and Bill Rogers – Bill Rogers actually worked, he was the assistant: he worked for us and he spent four years on the fence inspecting, then he worked for us another 30 years after that. So I have some interest in it from way back.

The standard of the fence has improved. We're getting better at it all the time. Better materials we're using. Electric fencing – we've adopted it here. The other States are not very keen on it ... New South Wales haven't got any; Western Australia, they've got a small portion now, an

experimental portion;. Queensland, they've got a small section that's been there quite a while but it's a pretty inferior fence, I've seen it. (laughs) Although they don't get any dingoes through it, I don't think, there are a lot better fences about than that one.

Other than that, I'll give you a couple of these references, too: the Franklin Harbour one, for example, I'll give you that one and I'll show you this map of the Vermin Districts. I've only got the one from the west side, I haven't got anything from up the northeast, but they would be available somewhere.

I'll check it out.

This goes to show when each one was gazetted. I haven't had time yet, but I intend to go in and have a look. I know the exact date that it was gazetted. If you do that you'll find the list of people that were members of the Board, which we should have in our archives but we haven't done it yet, but it is possible to do it. You've only got to go and have a look at the *Government Gazette* on the 28th of May 1896 this fence was gazetted and there would have been a Board appointed then. That would be all interesting history to even us, even on my own property, but for the whole thing.

I'll be keen to see how you get on with that. You mentioned your property. Perhaps it's a good point to round out the session, just to very briefly – your connection with Roopena, the property.

I'm now retired.

You're now living in ... You've retired in suburbia.

Retired and living in Adelaide with a son living on the property, with a son and nephew there.

My brother lives in Adelaide as well. We still get up there a little bit in the busy times, the shearing times and that sort of thing.

But are they running it and you own it, or have you ...?

They run it.

Do you own it still?

I've got a share in it, I'll put it that way. It's a family company and that is far too convoluted, far too complicated for anybody!

I hope I wasn't being inquisitive in probing like that, but ...

That's a family company – my brother and I and my son and his son and a few wives. It's a family company, that's a very different thing.

But I thought it would be useful, just to round it out, and also, Don, to say thanks very much for contributing, and because we've finished on a family note of course this will form part of the family memoir in due course when we get the transcript to you. But thanks very much for contributing to the project, Don, that's excellent. Thanks.

[16:00] End of interview.

