

Don Harrison - on his life in and around Blackburn

Interview 17th October 2006

Interviewers Vicki Jones-Evan and Fred Smith.

F.S. Don, were you born in Australia?

D.H. I was born in the Box Hill Hospital and then moved back with my mother to Blackburn, and lived in Blackburn until about three years ago. (2003)

F.S. What sort of a life did you have in Blackburn?

D.H. As a young person I didn't do anything remarkable. I went to school at Mont Albert Central until grade five.

By that time schools were being zoned and you had to go to the nearest school, which at that stage was Blackburn Primary. I went to Blackburn Primary to grade six and then I went to Box Hill High, which was then Box Hill Boys' High I had five years there. I always walked to school then walked home for lunch and back in the afternoon. At that stage we lived at 90 Whitehorse Road, so it only took about ten minutes to walk to school. After I had two years in year four due to health reasons, I started work in what was the Metropolitan Gas Company. Later, when brown coal was developed, the Metropolitan Gas Company and the Brighton Gas Company amalgamated and the Gas and Fuel Corporation was formed. Two private companies plus the government formed the Gas and Fuel Corporation. They developed the brown coal down in the Yallourn/ Traralgon area.

F.S. Before we move along there, tell us a bit more about your life as a young person.

D.H. There was always enough food on the table. We went to the local Presbyterian Church.

F.S. Did you have siblings?

D.H. I had an older sister. There was just the two of us in the family and we always lived with an aunt who brought up my mother when she came down from the country. Things were tough during the depression times. My father had a grocery business, which went bankrupt in the thirties. Dad went to another grocer as an employee - Lawson Bros in Railway Road, Blackburn. He was there for a while then another firm from Oakleigh opened up a shop on the corner of Gardinia Street and South Parade, and Dad then left Lawson Bros to manage the shop for Norman Bros, or Norman and Sons. He worked there for quite a number of years.

F.S. Did you work in the grocer's shop?

D.H. No I didn't. I would have been too young to do that.

V.JE Do you know where your father's first shop was?

D.H. His first shop was in the building which was next door to what is now the newsagent. There were just two shops there. The newsagent was in one and Dad was in the other. I'm not sure how long he was there. I remember more about Gardinia Street. That (his first shop) was almost more like a grocery shop and grain store. They used to sell wheat, bran and pollard. A lot of people in those days probably had horses and their own chooks. There was vacant land at the back (of the shop) where Dad used to stable his horse and cart, because in the early days they used to go round to customers and collect orders, come back to the shop and make up the order, then deliver it by the horse and cart. At that stage he had three or four employees and himself. There was one man in the shop all the time with Dad, and the other two used to go out and collect the orders and deliver them.

F.S. It would have been a successful sort of business?

D.H. The difficulty was that it was during the depression times and Dad gave too much credit to friends. Once they lost their jobs they couldn't pay, but Dad continued to give credit and went bankrupt. When Dad lost the business my mother then took in sewing. She was a dressmaker by trade and she supplemented the income with sewing. They had tough times!

V.J.E. Your aunt, she was there with you as well.

D.H. It was her home! The aunt was more like a grandmother to us children. We used to call her Nanna. I don't know what her income was but it couldn't have been very much. She was a Franklin She'd married Cabel Franklin and originally they lived on the corner of Franklin Street and Whitehorse Road. There were two brothers, Cabel and Daniel. They were originally on the land I think, and one of them might have done fencing. During his work, Dan had been thrown by a horse and had brain damage or something. He was definitely a bit funny. He lived in a wattle and daub house on the property, which I never ever knew.

F.S. The street was named after the family?

D.H. The original Franklin property went from Whitehorse Road, right back to join up with the properties that came down to Canterbury Road. I don't know what year they came to Blackburn, because they were sheep farmers. They must have had the property before the railway line was built, because that section of the property from Middleborough Road to where the service roads start further up, instead of the government paying them for the land (for the railway) they gave them land on the northern boundary of their property That's why that section of Whitehorse Road is narrower. It doesn't have the service road on each side. Nanna used to always say that our front garden was literally the road. The thought came to me just today that the old property, which was at 80 Whitehorse Road, which had the first hotel, store and post office on it when Blackburn was called Blackburn Creek, must have been originally on the road. In latter days the house was set way back because the land had been given to the property owner in the front. The equivalent land that they took (to build the railway) they added it on to the north boundary.

In those days, in my early days, Whitehorse Road was just a narrow strip of bitumen with gravel on either side. I don't think it even had a line down the centre. I think you just got to one side if you wanted to pass anybody. I remember them getting over on to the gravel and making an awful lot of dust. Also, we used to have the bread and milk and meat delivered, and the businesses used to drive along the area that was gravel, not on the bitumen. Dad would have started his business in about 1923, and would have lost the business in the thirties. I was still going to Mont Albert School when he went bankrupt and that would have still been in the thirties. I think I started at Box Hill High either 1937 or 1938 and Dad was well and truly at Normans by then.

F.S. What were your thoughts about that time? Going into the grocery business?

D.H. No I didn't have any aspirations at all. I was a quiet reserved sort of person and the main thing was to get a job. I put my name down at an insurance company and different places before I left school. My sister worked at the Metropolitan Gas Company and my name was put down there. That was the first job that came up and you took it. In those days it was important to get a secure job if you possibly could and that was what happened. I stayed in that industry for the rest of my working days, which was about forty-two and a half years.

V.JE When did you join them? Was that in the city?

D.H. That was at Prahran, probably in 1942.

F.S. At this stage had you met your wife?

D.H. No. While I was working, they started up a square dance club at the gas company, and we used to meet at the Oddfellows Hall in Latrobe Street. A girl I knew who worked at the gas company was a friend of Betty's and the two of them used to come to square dancing. I just joined that little group because I knew Margaret, Betty's friend, and things just happened.

F.S. Your time with the Metro Gas Co. What was it like?

D.H. In the constitution, because it was partly government owned, any gas company that wanted to be taken over by the government, or the Gas and Fuel, had to be. (?) I don't know the sequence but the Geelong Gas Company came in, then Box Hill and Oakleigh were all joined up, then various country gas companies were all joined into Gas and Fuel until it became a state monopoly.

F.S. You would have seen some tremendous changes. Natural gas.

D.H. It was interesting. By that time I was in the office of the sales department and I was involved with supplying parts that were used to convert coal gas appliances into natural gas appliances.

F.S. Where were you living at this stage?

D.H. We were married in 1958, but by the time we are talking about I would have still at home with my parents. By this time Nanna had died. She always seemed to be old as long as I was alive. Nanna was a widow and went into mourning and always wore black then went into grey. So Dad would have lost his business and Mum was dressmaking and I was still at home. After Betty and I married we started building a house in Williams Road, Blackburn. I had previously bought a block of land in Churinga Avenue, which I sold when the block on the corner of Williams Road became available. We started building before we were actually married. The house was supposed to be finished by the time we came home from our honeymoon, but when we did arrive it didn't even have a roof on, so we lived with Betty's parents for a short time. Then Betty was willing to move so we came back to Blackburn and lived with my parents, because I wanted to see the development of the house and make sure everything was alright with the plans. We went travelling into Gippsland on our honeymoon. My first car was a Singer, then an Austin A 50.

My father had an old 1924 Studebaker which was running at the time of his business collapse. He would never sell it because he had aspirations of getting it on the road again. When I decided I wanted to drive, I went out once or twice in the old Studebaker, which you had to crank up with a handle, so I said to Dad that if I were to put new tyres and a battery in the old car, would he sell it, and strangely enough he said yes. So I was committed then to get the old car on the road. We sold it, and a boy with whom I worked said he thought a Singer was a good substantial car. I think we went somewhere in South Melbourne and bought the car, kept that for a few years, then got bigger one. Mum didn't like going around in the soft top Singer, and also it was a two door car which wasn't terribly convenient, so I bought a sedan, then a station wagon.

F.H. So you still had that link in Blackburn?

D.H. Yes. We sold the original home in Williams Road and built another house further along Williams Road. The first house was 52, then we moved to 63.

F.H. You said Betty was willing to move. Where did she come from?

D.H. From Ivanhoe. She worked at G.J.Coles. She was an optometrist in their head office. She stopped work when we were married and then she went back for a few weeks at a time during dividend periods, just to help them out.

F.H. Any children?

D.H. No we didn't have any children.

F.H. What interests have you had Don?

D.H. I always enjoyed gardening, and as long as I can remember I was always involved with some sort of craft, because when we were growing up we obviously didn't have television and we didn't even have radio to begin with. My mother was always interested in various crafts and in a lot of cases I would sit up at the table and help her. During the war we used to make camouflage nets, and then the first thing I did on my own was rug making. Using special rug wool, they would be hooked on to a canvas. I was always interested in some sort of craft or other. I eventually got into lace making and I was involved with the handcraft cottage in the Botanic Gardens. I also used to belong to a group that made hand made paper, and that continued until a few years ago when I moved to Forest Hill, and then I didn't seem to have the time. I've still got the interest and the friendships that I made there.

F.H. Were you ever called up for national service?

D.H. I was called up but I was classed as physically unfit.

V.JE I remember you saying that the Matheson's were part of your church.

D.H. Yes. Captain and Mrs Matheson belonged to the church. In the early days there were a lot of orchards. I can remember my father talking about the various orchard families that they used to serve. There were lots of orchards and paddocks in Blackburn back then.

F.S. What do you know of the history of the Williams land?

D.H. I don't know when Johnny Williams bought that land. It was all subdivided before I knew anything about it. Each Williams sibling had an acre of land given to them but there were only three of those allotments still intact in my memory and Williams Road was just a dirt track that used to wind around the gum trees.

F.H. Have you ever travelled?

D.H. Yes. We used to travel quite a bit around Australia. In 1966 we did a trip up through the centre and across the Kimberley's and down the west coast. On that trip we met an American lady with whom we corresponded regularly. In 1975 we did our first overseas trip and went to America for a month to visit Shirley. We had a little time in Vancouver and down to Yosemite National Park and then went to Denver where Shirley lived about sixty miles north. We weren't particularly interested in America, but one of Betty's nephews had married a Canadian girl and we visited them, and another American friend we met on one of our trips lived in Seattle and we visited her. We realised then that there was a lot of interest in America so we went over later and stayed for eight weeks and in that time travelled through national parks and different places and enjoyed that very much. In 1977 we went to Europe and 1984, and again in '91 and '92 and '96. We enjoyed our travelling very much. I had retired and taken my entitlement as a lump sum, and having no family we decided to spend up.

F.H. What are you involved with these days?

D.H. I'm involved with a day care centre for elderly people over at the Blackburn Uniting Church. I go over there every Thursday just to help with craftwork and serve meals. It's volunteer work there and at Strathdon, where I am now a resident. I belong to a group there which does gardening and various odd jobs, and I spend half a day a month at the kiosk, which is run by volunteers, and make waste paper baskets. I do that while I'm in the nursing home with my wife as there is no communication with her. I cannot sit still for an hour doing nothing so I do the baskets and they sell those at the kiosk.

V. JE. Can we have the names of your family?

D.H. My Mum's name was Celia Humphries. She originally came down from Chiltern. Her father died and the older children were farmed out to aunts. Grandmother Johnson kept the two younger children. Nanna then brought up Mum as her own daughter. When Grandmother Johnson remarried, she wanted to take the children back, but Nanna wouldn't let my mother go back. She kept her with her and then Mum always stayed with Nanna. I think Mum first worked at the Mutual Store, which was an old department store in Flinders Street on the corner of Degraeves Street, She worked in the dressmaking section. I think they made their own suits to sell in the shop. At some stage Mum left and worked as a cashier in a butchers shop in Mont Albert, which just happened to be next door to the grocery shop that my father worked at. They married in 1922 and Nanna impressed on Mum that it was her duty to stay with her because she was a widow. So instead of Mum and Dad buying their own home they moved in with Nanna and Dad bought the business, which subsequently folded. When Mum first came to Blackburn she would have been in the old Franklin homestead on the corner of Franklin Street and Whitehorse Road, then Nana must have built a house on the east corner of Williams Road and Franklin Street. She built another house, our last family home, at 90 Whitehorse Road. Mum and Dad stayed there until about 1960 when they built a flat onto our house at 52 Williams Road. Mum died first then Dad, and we rented their flat for a while. By this time the old lady at 61 Williams Road who had the vacant land at number 63, died, and we brought that block of land. Betty had her stroke in 1997 and I stayed on in the house until I moved into an independent living unit at Strathdon.