

INTERVIEW WITH JULIE GROVES
19 June 2000
Updated 15/01/10. Timecode from tapes 41_BC_SP
Topics in Bold

I = Interviewer

R = Respondent

This is camera tape 41, we're in the middle of DAT tape 15, the ABS is now 36.38 and we're with Julie Groves. This is the fourth video tape and the second DAT tape. It's 19 June 2000, Trish FitzSimons on sound and Julie Hornsby on camera.

So Julie, we're talking about Women for Power and you talked about going on the shire council. How are the two things connected? Why did you want to be on the shire council?

R **Inter-Generation**

17:01:22:06 Ummm I suppose governments these days ummm or, in particular, Federal government, you sort of hear that communities have to drive changes. We know government's responsible for infrastructure ummm and, to me, it had to come through from the local council and it had to come through from a woman's point of view, perspective. Like the men, I don't think, or they appreciate what the women ummm live without but it's more sort of like, it just all tied in with rearing our family, our quality of life ummm, our health. Our children's education is suffering and, yeah, I just wanted ... it just ... the power seemed to be behind a lot of things and our children were getting left behind. Our children don't ... they want to come back but they don't think they'll find partners that will, and a generational thing like they're just sort of starting to leave school now and there's sort of a wave of them coming on one after the other. And those children are realising what life is like to have 24 hours of power and then, I suppose, the other things that Women for Power, I don't know, we've sort of picked up along the way, and they were things that could be dealt with locally, I suppose, or even the contacts that you get through local government. I didn't know anything about local government but, yeah, it was just perceived that there might have been things that we could do and I suppose it just went on from there.

I So give me a list of the issues, just like a list of the issues that Women for Power is taking on at the moment.

R 17:03:19:10 Well, our children's education ummm because in an electronic age the kids are being left further and further behind ummm and that, like sort of the use of the, well people don't even think about it. But children in Year 1 on distance education this year

started reading by telephone with their teacher. There's perceived to be a reading problem, like sort of actually in teaching it. And that's okay. They have to use hands-free telephones and Telstra couldn't see why the school principal was jumping up and down when he received a batch in 1999 because they all needed 240-volt power to operate. I know what it was like. My daughter, last year I watched her try to juggle the telephone and a book. It's bad enough yourself but then they'd sort of be looking for particular words. They'd drop the phone, they'd drop the book, they'd lose the page and that, so definitely needed a hands-free telephone for Year 1. But nobody, things come up and they've got no idea. Telstra said, you know, nobody in Australia lives without power. Ummm then the internet one come up, that was sort of, comes in Year 4-7 have a computer supplied by the school for a term. We sort of pay ummm for the ribbons and stuff that are used but we pay for internet connection and what we use on the internet for that one term. So that's okay but we need to run a generator to use that computer for those children to access it and there was one girl who's ummm handicapped and the family had bought a solar set up to run, to keep the batteries charged for her electric typewriter that she needed – she was a secondary student – and the School of the Air radio and her tape recorder is an important part of it to listen to tapes and tape stuff to send into your teacher. Anyway, the computer come along. It would run the computer but it wouldn't run the printer so that student was saving stuff to tape. The tape was being sent to the school in Longreach. They only have a weekly mail service. So it could be three weeks to a month ... the teacher would print it out in Longreach and send it back, so the stuff that that child put in today, she would have to wait another three weeks or a month to actually see it printed out.

I So all of these are issues that in some way relate to electricity but are there other issues that Women for Power are taking on? You mentioned last night about the containers in which your food got sent to you from Longreach.

R **Women/Work/Electricity**

17:06:09:23 Yeah, that was another thing with the changes in the health laws. Our local supermarket where most of us get our cold stuff from, including the local service station stores and hotel, the woman that's in charge of country orders said that once these regulations come in, she will not be packing our food into either our own eskies which we send up or polystyrene boxes, foam boxes, and I said, 'Well, what do we do?' and she said, 'You will have to drive to town and collect your own' which is a two-hour drive from Longreach. It's sort of two-and-a-half, three hours for some of the women. And I said

well, like the women with kerosene refrigeration and if you're not running your generator all the time, you can't keep food for a month. It'd all go off. And she said well, under the regulations, whenever she's brought it up, the people that are running the workshops, they just don't, they just said nobody lives without electricity. So the hardships that that is going to create for women out here, like even, or families, the women in town, it's going to affect all of us because the mailman, like the fellow doing our run sometimes does it in a four-wheel-drive station wagon, other times, which doubles as his wife's school bus run. Other times it's just in an open Toyota, he's not going to be able to afford to put on a little cold room. Like one day, the day I questioned him about it, he said all he had on was, the only cold stuff he had was four bottles of milk for me with the whole run. So, you know, sort of they have to set up for the worst case scenario like how much they'd have. You'd have to keep your frozen stuff separate to your cold stuff. We can't even get eggs or bread at the moment. They come out just packed in a carton but they're going to have to be kept at a certain temperature and the woman at the supermarket just told me she'd be liable. If anything happened, we could sue her, not the firm or anything else, and it just seems like the world's gone mad, and yeah and just the stress and strain, like healthwise, on women. Like we don't have ... we're working outside, helping out as well as inside and then I suppose ummm sort of the stresses are more, and if you can't get a decent night's sleep in summer or ummm you've got children that are asthmatic ... the lady next door, she can't start the generator. They sort of come, moved in new, new family came to this district which is really rare for people to move in with a family, and she couldn't start the generator. When her husband was away she used to have to pick her child up and race him downstairs to the car and plug the nebuliser into the car. It didn't matter if it was summer or winter, what the temperature, and that was how she coped with his asthma attacks. There's another woman who has to do the same if her husband's away a bit. If she's there with little kids and none of the older ones are home, kids get terrified when they're left alone in the dark because you've got to run a hundred metres or more to start a generator ummm so you've got a child having an asthma attack, you're not game enough to leave them so they carry them out and put them in a car, and that can't be good for that child's health or stress levels for that mother. So, yeah, it's sort of just all picking up and the other thing different mums have raised is the opportunity of doing teleworking. Ummm one particular mother raised that issue. She had worked in a solicitor's office and would have liked to have continued it on and the opportunity wasn't there. She'd have to have the generator running to actually be able to drive, to power the computer to do the work.

Another mother, she was completing her university degree externally and she had a little baby as well but she said ummm she just, like to use the internet to access her lecturers or whatever, she said she was just left that far behind by having to rely on a mail service because she had to have a generator to drive the computer. She also had her husband's grandmother living with them, a woman in her eighties, and had no power and they found nine snakes in this house. Ummm it was in a sort of a four-month period. One fellow had, a friend had come out to do the electrical work or plumbing or something and was in a dark storeroom. The generator wasn't on for a light, got bitten by a king brown snake and they had to send a helicopter from Longreach – I think the road was out – to pick him up. He survived that but she said, you know, she gets up to tend her baby at night or this grandmother, and they're walking round the house, she uses a candle or a torch or something, so you know sort of it also comes in for our aged care as well, so you know, that's just some of the issues. There's probably some I don't know of. 17:11:16:10

I When you're talking ... one of the reasons why I like Women for Power as a title is, of course, it's double meaning. I get the sense that electricity is partly almost symbolic of women's needs being listened to and certainly this campaign has taken you into the shire council where you would obviously be dealing with lots more issues than electricity. Is there a way that Women for Power represents a new voice for women or something like that?

R 17:11:48:08 I never thought of it like that. We went into it, was just yeah literally for the power ummm but, yeah, I suppose that is coming across because ummm there are other hardships but unless we raise awareness of how hard it is, nobody knows so nobody can do things but I suppose we've also picked up issues, I suppose, the internet and that, or telephone access, and there has been, yeah, other points. That food one, for instance. The health inspector, we share him with other shires and he attended the last council meeting. Ummm other councillors weren't aware what was coming up and I just raised it with him. I'd raised it with our local Federal member and our local state member but I just wanted to know where we should be directing our concerns because, you know, it's really easy to sweep us under the carpet and, you know, there's only a few people there and if they can't get their food, well you know, nobody's going to care sort of thing. And, yeah, so that was one means of bringing a problem that I've perceived was going to affect our local community. And that man did say it was an issue and he was going to pick it up and run with it as a submission. So, yeah, there's instances ummm of raising things like that.

I You refer to this being a small community. How many people are there actually in the Barcoo Shire?

R 17:13:33:02 Oh a few years ago the statistics were 462 but yeah, I'm not sure, sort of like when you work it out roughly with the workers on the larger places and you know, like you virtually know who's on each of the properties and got a rough idea of how many are sort of actually living there. So, yeah, that's ... could be a few less if anything but ...

I So you've put your submissions to the Coalition, to the Labor state government, to the Federal Coalition government. Have you had any actual, if I say success I'm using the term loosely, but do you feel you're getting somewhere with this campaign?

R **Women for Power**

17:14:15:18 Ummm I don't know, the Labor government say they'll only supply RAP. Coalition government say RAP's a waste of money, they'll only look at grid. So we're not getting anywhere there, I suppose. Federally, ummm they've listened to us but power is a state issue. To us, I suppose it might be naïve. I can't see why, or we can't see why the three levels of government plus private enterprise can't work together. Ummm if solar power is the way to go, build a solar power station in, say, Jundah and then run power lines out. Like, surely in the year, over the years sort of great steps are being made in the development of power lines, and run them out, and because it's a small community over a small distance ummm then in years to come, the things that are learnt out here, it wouldn't cost much to upgrade it and experiment with it and then that could transfer over into larger areas. Another aspect is there's a gas line passes ummm just below Windorah – you would have gone across it on the morning train – ummm and why can't, instead of transferring the gas to the south-east corner or Gladstone, it even goes up, that line, particular line, goes up to power the Mt Isa Power Station, why can't they build a power station out here close to where the gas actually comes from and then, like if it was in Windorah you could go back to the south-east. You could come back up into sort of the Capricorn region out to Rocky or otherwise you can feed it up through Mt Isa to the northern areas. You know, sort of ... you don't, it's all clean, you don't have to worry about sort of people living around it and the power station, it might be simplistic but it's sort of right away from you know sort of development in the towns and that, and it's putting stuff, like primary production, everything goes. We export our sheep, our cattle, our wool. It all goes to the east coast ummm, south-east corner mainly, but it all goes out of here to be value-added

and it creates a little bit of employment here but it creates employment in our cities. So therefore that must go into sort of their, oh I can't think of the word, what they call it ummm ...

I Infrastructure?

R **Women for Power/Women/Land**

17:17:01:17 Yeah, like their ... it sort of creates jobs and that adds to the jobs in those areas, whereas we're left with nothing. Like the infrastructure's not coming back out into the bush and it's not just ... our kids are all going, our youth are our main export as well, so they go to the more populated areas after employment opportunities. Like they just seem to be raping our country, they're raping our resources, the oil and the gas and that are all going out here and governments aren't putting things back into these areas and I just, well we just can't see why. You know, we're not asking for anything that nobody else has had, we're just you know tossing around ideas to ...

I I have a family of four. We don't have air-conditioning. We've got a swimming pool and I'm bad at leaving lights on. We pay about \$800 a year for electricity. Do you expect to get electricity here at the same rate that I would pay for it in the city?

R 17:18:04:00 Ummm it doesn't matter where you live in Queensland, it's eleven cents a kilowatt hour for domestic power. That's ... in Jundah it costs forty cents a kilowatt hour to produce the power, or Jundah and Windorah, and the government, somebody, electricity authority, they pick up on that of 29-30 cents difference in the cost of generation. My brother-in-law is next door and he pays eleven cents a kilowatt hour for his power which roughly works out at about \$4.50 a day. \$4.00 to \$4.50. I just can't see why we are being discriminated against, like solar power costs \$2.20 a kilowatt hour to produce and we are asked, under the scheme we are asked to own the system. We either lease it from the supplier or we buy it outright. We have to negotiate the servicing and the maintenance of that system. They need upgrading each seven years. Nobody else in Queensland, once you have power connected to your house, even if you live on a rural property, once that power's connected, if that needs upgrading that is an expense for the government and once you pay your initial connection cost, all you pay for then is the electricity that you use, so I can't see why sort of just a very few of us are going to be

asked to live with a system that nobody else is asked to and, yeah, just the huge cost involved.

I And if you got power, Julie, would that be the end of Women for Power and it would be the end of politics for you, or do you think that you've started on a bit of a ... 'odyssey' is the first word that comes to my mind, but to improve life out here?

R **Women for Power**

17:20:21:00 No, I think I would continue on. Ummm sort of just to take forward the women's feelings ummm sort of our letters, we keep getting told, speak for themselves. Ummm it's not just power that comes through those letters, it's to me a lot of other issues as well. Ummm Women for Power, I suppose, is a group. That was why we come together but I think we've also learnt that as a group, if we speak out, ummm you know sort of people don't understand how we live out here and unless we take the time to explain that, ummm and explain our difficulties, and then nobody, you can't say they don't care, ummm because a lot of time it's just ignorance. They don't know ahh so we've sort of taken, Women for Power have more or less been a voice for the women and it's just the other things you sort of pick up, like that Telstra enquiry. Like probably none of us, might have only been one or two that might have filled in the form. I don't know how many did but that was something we picked up on and sort of distributed within our community and encouraged, actively encouraged people to reply to it. So, no I don't think it's just power and as you've met a lot of people also, you might have to travel to Longreach to meet with different ones. Like this afternoon there's a Commonwealth Health, there's a couple of women coming to Longreach. Well, they're sort of trying to get people like that out into these areas to get a bit of an understanding of how women have to live and I think that's a great step forward and I think if we can meet with those people, Women for Power is itself, if we, when, when we get our power, as a group, you know sort of we might fade, but I think the emphasis that brought us together ummm we realise we can make a difference and I think, yeah, the name might change but women will continue on. 17:22:36:16*

So Julie, traditionally I think it's true that rural organisations like the Farmers' Federation and so on have been males, do you think that there's a way in which women needed to get together, I mean that women needed to get together to have a political organisation, partly because the existing organisations weren't taking this kind of issue that affected women up?

R 17:23:24:23 The power? Or just the women's issues? Yeah. Ummm yeah, I suppose a few women would go to, that were sort of United Graziers now AgForce, ummm but that has always been men. I think more and more women, because we've become so much involved in the operation and the, not just sort of keeping the books, but these days you have to be a lot more business-wise ummm so, yeah, the women are a lot more involved. And in the old days I don't think you sort of needed, like the man, you sort of didn't need things like ... well I suppose you did in a way, your budgets and stuff, but like your books might go to the accountant at the end of the financial year in a shoe box sort of thing, well the days of that have definitely long gone, or they've definitely gone for GST, but I think most of the women were, a lot of the women were sort of doing the books. But if they can do it in partnership with the husband they're a lot more, or we found here, a lot more aware. I'd be adding up the little things and they come to huge amounts. My husband would add up the big things and sort of sometimes they were both equal. But I think we've sort of got a lot better understanding business-wise. We're not just the little housewife any more. And in the running of the properties, probably the women sort of have instigated changes in the way things are done and that, as well. 17:25:00:09

I Could you give me examples of that?

R 17:25:02:00 Oh well, say the husband, if there was heavy lifting and the husband, like if he was, if he had a worker like they sort of might do it, whereas for the women, you haven't got the strength, and when you're working beside your husband and you sort of see the pressure that they're putting themselves under, so therefore you ensure that, you know, sort of they might take a little bit more time but you get a tractor or you get some other way rather than just relying on busting your guts sort of with brute strength. And I think because the children, I suppose it all comes back to workplace health and safety too, a lot of it's just common sense, like the children are working alongside us so you have to be conscious of how much they do ummm because they'll work themselves sort of, you know, not so much to death but like they will really work, so you've got to be there to call a stop to that. So I think in a way, I don't know whether you sort of temper the work or sort of like the length of the days or something. Like you can't cut it out completely but you just, the woman seems to be a lot more aware, like if the children are working hard, the father might want something done and not really realise that the kids are knocking up because he's still going, whereas Mum's sort of knocking up fast and watching her kids and, yeah, in ways like that ummm. But I think you sort of, women are encouraged to speak out,

probably through the support, not through the support of women ummm, to me they're sort of, I suppose looking through just, for instance, the power, but the other issues that come up, men have given support but the women have really, you know, sort of given ideas and encouraged us all along the line. And women that we don't know from a bar of soap.
17:27:06:20

I Have you encountered male resistance at all? Are there some of the men around who think, 'How come it's the women being politically active when traditionally it's been the men that have done that?'

R **Physical Hardships/Women of Power**

17:27:18:10 No. Oh, well, I haven't heard any different. Most of the men have got right behind us because this issue, it's not you, it's been going on. Jundah's had power for 40 years and that so, you know, people have just been waiting. The power lines have got closer and closer and we've just waited, you know, one day it'll be our turn. And then all of a sudden, you know, we're not doing any more so it's not going to be our turn. Ummm the council have sort of pushed through their channels ummm and, as I said, Women for Power just came out of that one announcement at an afternoon tea and what we can do and, yeah, it sort of, it's rolled on from there. And the men's attitude was, 'It can't do any harm' ummm and the doors, because we're just a group of women who haven't got a clue. We just seem to lurch from one situation to the next. Like there's no planning. None of us have any idea of politics and it's just, you know, people telling us to go here, to go there, forwarding letters on and that, so for the great majority of men, you know, they just say, 'Well if the women can get something done ...' and it has raised an awareness of it along with the other issues that we're picking up. So, yeah, in the main, there's the council as far as council, you know, through the channels that ... I presume they'd have their set channels that they have to go through ummm and that, whereas as a women's group you're not limited to those channels if you can go to, you know, sort of you can go to different governments and like the church has just stepped in and they've sort of got behind us. The Bishop's spoken out for our region. Ummm I'm to meet with him next week so, yeah, just to get groups like that, whereas the council couldn't go to them.

I Do you ever think, 'My mother ...' I mean your mother was in Longreach but do you ever think, 'My grandmother and my husband's mother and other women have done without

these resources. I'm somehow less of a pioneer because I need power'. Does that kind of thought track make any sense to you whatsoever?

R Gender Relations: Younger Generation

17:29:34:14 Yeah, it did when I first come down here 20 years ago, but not now. Ummm I think with uh TV, ummm people have got and I suppose sort of radio, women are ummm listening more. They realise that there's other things that they'd like to do. But I think the thing that, the crux of the whole lot behind our group is our children ummm children in town, our own children. My 17-year-old son said to me at Easter last year when we talked about you know, what he'd want to do when he finished Senior, whether he would not actually come back here to live but whether he would go on the land. And he said, 'Mum,' he said, 'even if we had the money to go on the land,' he said, 'we'd probably have to go elsewhere to find a partner'. These kids have obviously talked about it amongst themselves. They'd have to go elsewhere to find a partner. He said, 'We couldn't come home to work as the place wouldn't run two families' so they'd sort of more or less have to raise their children and work elsewhere and then come back and if they came back, he said if the wife didn't ... he said women wouldn't live like this. He said, 'People don't have to live like this any more'. He said, 'You women are all special,' and he said, 'If we can't find a husband or wife,' he said, 'that'll put up with it and they come back to this, we could lose our partner. We could lose our family'. And if they'd gone into debt to buy the place, we could lose the place. And they said they'd have nothing. And just there's an awareness, I suppose, more and more ... we haven't, well we have been in touch with it here, of youth suicide. Ummm we're really conscious of that and we've never spoken about it amongst ourselves but to me I'd hate to have my, or any of our children, put in the situation that they felt they were helpless and there was only one way out. 17:31:44:06

I So do you worry that your kids, and other people's kids around you, wouldn't want to come back here? Why, for instance, wouldn't your son be marrying the daughter of the family next door who would have grown up with similar hardships? Just for example.

R 17:31:59:20 Ummm one reason because of the boys outnumber the girls so sort of that ratio is more heavily in favour of males. Ummm but then they've grown up together so much I suppose they think of each other as good mates, sort of brother-sister rather than, I don't doubt the boy/girl thing could come into it but it's more sort of familiarity breeds

contempt sort of thing. But no, I just don't think it's there. And plus all our children have to leave the shire to do secondary school, whether they go to the hostel in Longreach, they're at boarding schools, Charters Towers, Rockhampton, Brisbane, Toowoomba. So they're sort of all spread out in different directions ummm and they've seen the way other people live, sort of it's just electronic community, and they realise, to them, I suppose they realise more than me how much the world relies on electricity today. And they just perceive it if they haven't got it, then they haven't got a standard of living and they can't compete, I think more importantly, in today's world. Ummm you just get left further and further behind and the kids ... as I said, I think the kids realise that more than we do as parents.

I Do you expect that one of your children will inherit this place?

R **Inheritance**

17:33:32:10 No. No. Ummm it wouldn't support two families ummm and the other children involved, there are sort of four children in the family, and the girls are just as important as the boys, so they would need to have a fair share and the place just wouldn't support one child purchasing it. That child would never be out of debt. Ummm it's just, it's a sad fact but I think that happens in a lot of families today. Some families pass, one child gets everything and the others miss out, and no, our children ... they're fully aware of it. They don't like it. I've got a daughter that would dearly love to come home to ... one boy has, I think, just wiped it completely from his mind because they've always been aware of that fact. Ummm but, yeah, you have to be realistic and prepare them for it. If something happened and they could stay here, I'd dearly love it to happen but ...

I So your kids have to find their own future for themselves not on this land? How about for you? Where do you reckon Julie Groves will be 30 years from now?

R 17:34:51:20 Ummm yeah, good question. I don't think we could live here but, then again, there's people next door in their seventies still operating the property. I'd hate to think that I was still here ummm and we couldn't operate it effectively and things were going backwards. I think it's something that has to be decided ummm as a couple. When I first come here I thought if anything happened to my husband I would never be able to run the property and different ones say well the women would be able to do it. Ummm these days with one of the children you probably could but 30 years from now, I couldn't see myself retiring to the city. Ummm if I still had family in Longreach, perhaps there, it's

sort of ... this is my home but I suppose the home of your childhood, it's sort of, you know the friends that you made and just that familiar surroundings but, yeah, I might go there but I can't envisage going any further. It's terrific country out here.

I Might there be a big political career for you? Do you think about being a member of parliament, for instance?

R 17:36:19:00No. No way in the world. No. Just the things that we've sort of seen and the channels that you have to go through and ummm yeah, no, political wise I'm quite happy with where I am. I wouldn't go ... teacher to that person. 17:36:33:04 End

END OF INTERVIEW