

**INTERVIEW WITH ISABEL TARRAGO & SHIRLEY FINN**

**3 September 2000**

**Timecode refers to tape 66\_BC\_SP**

**Topics in Bold**

TF = Trish

IT = Isabel

SF = Shirley

- TF Can you tell me the different stations that your mother worked on?
- SF She started at Lake Nash, Barkly. Yeah, Lake Nash. Barkly. I think she went to ...
- IT Linda Downs.
- SF Linda ... it would have been Linda?
- IT No, you've got to do the circuit.
- SF What we should have done is yeah. No, we should have started at Monkira.
- TF Do you want to start again?
- IT Yes, start again.
- SF We'll start again.
- IT She was only, yeah, Monkira.
- SF That's after ...
- TF What was the range of properties? Tell me the range of properties that your mother worked on.
- SF 00:16:01:06 Lake Nash, Barkly, ummm Carandotta. There was quite a range. I don't know whether she went to Roxborough at all.
- IT I think she did.
- SF But the main stations would be Lake Nash and Barkly were the main ones.
- IT Monkira.
- SF No, she went to Monkira after she married Dad.

IT But she was working there because in the book that she was doing the ummm peddling the ...

SF Oh, she was looking after the ummm station manager's kids as well as doing the peddle wireless.

IT That's where she was there. And she did go to Roxborough because Roxborough is where Dad actually had his first big mustering camp with old Granddad Joe.

SF Yeah.

IT Okay, and the buggy. And old Mary. Walkabout Mary.

SF Mmmm.

IT 00:17:01:16 Yes so Roxborough was the first big camp that our father was head stockman.

TF And if you were overall to talk about the role of Aboriginal people in the pastoral industry, as you know it from your parents and your family, how would you define it? What role did Aboriginal people have in the pastoral industry?

IT **Pastoral Industry/ Aboriginal Contributions/ History**

00:17:24:08 Well, the Aboriginal people had in the pastoral industry, they knew where they were going. They knew the country, whereas the ummm ... they virtually made the stations today. Ummm there was three big camps on Glen Ormiston station. Our father was the head stockman there and he had a lot of ... and there would have been about ten to twelve ringers in each camp when the cattle, when they were mustering cattle for the beef industry and trucking them away. But I feel that the Aboriginal people, past and present, they don't get ... they haven't got that recognition. Nobody gives them that recognition of what they did back in those days. It was hard. You know, now they've got helicopters and motor bikes, where they had the old horses, mustering horses and that, hobbling 'em out and ummm a lot of those

Aboriginals couldn't read or write. Ummm our mother and father both couldn't read or write and ummm it was said some years back, the only reason that he couldn't get a manager's job was because he couldn't read or write. He could only sign his name. 00:19:07:10

TF So when you think back to, say, those three mustering camps at Glen Ormiston, and you said there were ten ringers, what year would you be talking about and what balance of white and black workers would there have been then?

IT Mostly Aboriginals, eh?

SF Yeah, a few jackaroos.

IT Very few jackaroos. You could name the non-indigenous ones on your hand. All the rest were all Aboriginal from Boulia, Dajarra ...

SF All family-based.

IT All family-based, yeah.

SF Because language was spoken in the camps.

TF What year are we talking here? What sort of period?

IT Back in the fifties. Yeah, fifties, sixties.

TF So it sounds like in that northern bit of the Channel Country Aboriginal people were working in great numbers in the pastoral industry when further down they'd been pushed out earlier.

IT Mmmm.

TF Do you think that's true?

IT 00:20:14:00 Yeah, because Dad also was ummm asked to go down to Marion Downs when he had finished Glen Ormiston muster, or go across to Linda Downs. You know, that's across the back of Glen Ormiston. Or Croghan's Peak. Or Carlo. So the numbers ummm that our father had, and

there was a comment made recently by Uncle Cliffie Donohue, who's now retired from Boulia. Ummm he actually said to me, he said, 'Isabel,' he said, 'we were having a drink a couple of months back,' and he said, 'and I asked the group who would have been the best cattleman in the Channel Country, out this way,' and they said, 'With no doubt, it was Snap'. Because he said, 'You know, he could drive 15,000 head of cattle during the night and not lose one'. He had this marvellous way of getting his stock ummm to the ... and he'd drive all night and rest the cattle all day. So he had a very, I'd say, traditional way of dealing with ummm with the stock as well, and this is stock that had never been driven before.

TF When you say 'traditional way', you mean Aboriginal traditional way?

IT 00:21:46:00 Yeah, I think ... I think it is an Aboriginal traditional way. I think it's a way of looking after ummm you know, the animals, of which you're caring for, because he was very strict with us – Shirley could probably tell you more – because he wouldn't let me ride. I was not allowed, and I used to always get cranky with Shirley because she was always allowed to have a horse and go riding and I could only hold it, and lead it. And my father said, 'Well, you're just not equipped' because I was so thin and so frail, he said I wasn't equipped to manage it. And yet Shirley was always allowed. I mean, she was not much thinner or fatter than me but she was taught to deal with the stock and maybe she can answer that. Because he was very strict with all the camps.

SF **Education**

00:22:44:06 Yeah, we couldn't go into the camps because, well ummm certain times we'd go, when we came home from holidays, because we all ... both of us went to boarding school. We both went to St Anne's in ... I went first. At six years old I was sent to ummm Black Heath College in Charters Towers and ummm then both Isabel and I went to St Anne's in Townsville, and we'd only come home at Christmas time, because you had the May holidays and the August holidays, and you'd only have two to three weeks, and we wouldn't come home so we'd come home at Christmas time and ah we'd go out and visit Dad in the mustering camps ummm and we'd only see

our father once like at Christmas when he came in after all the mustering and that. And I used to look after the horses when he'd have them at the station. Feed them for him.

TF So going back a bit, because this is going to connect to Granny Brown and I want to fill in that story. What kind of stories did your mother tell you of her relationships with white women as a child? What was the range of ways that she was treated?

IT 00:24:02:14 Our mother was very grateful. Ahhh, she never had a mean streak in her body because it was from those station managers' wives that she was taught how to work. For a person growing up, didn't go to school, and couldn't read or write, ummm she knew how to work. And I think she was grateful for that.

TF I want you to tell me how did she get to know, because the woman in that photo you came to call Granny Brown. How did that relationship between your mother and Granny Brown develop?

IT 00:24:51:10 I think Granny Brown was on old Glen Ormiston, on Meetukka.

SF No, she was on Roxborough.

IT Was she?

SF Mmmm. Old Dave.

IT Davey Brown.

SF Dave and Nell, they were both on Roxborough.

IT And then went down to Glen Ormiston.

SF And then ... actually I don't know where they went then. But then Bill Robbins come. I think it was just that when ...

IT She met up with them when she was very young.

- SF     **Romance**
- Yeah, ahhh Dad went across and ah I think it was that ummm Dave and Nell Brown was on Roxborough and I think our father met them first. And then, I think, no she might have been working at Roxborough at the time too.
- IT     Yeah, she was.
- SF     Yes, because I think that's where Mum and Dad met first.
- IT     Yes. Through the keyholes of the pantry door.
- SF     Yes, they did meet at Roxborough.
- IT     Yeah, they did.
- SF     00:25:56:20   Because old Granddad Brown and Grandma Brown were there managing at the time and from there I think that relationship grew ummm even though Dad was still under the Act ummm she followed him then, he was brumby shooting and he was shooting brumbies all over the stations, all over the Channel Country.
- IT     **White Women/Black Kids**
- And I think the partnership of those two women, Granny Brown actually took over and reared Mum up as a young girl and consequently all, Aunty Marg and Aunty Tup, they're all the daughters of the Brown ... they had a big family.
- SF     Yes.
- IT     00:26:44:10   And I believe that Grandma Brown saw no colour or anything and she just said, 'Well, Topsy, you're one of ours'. And everywhere, when we were in boarding school, we used to go and stay with the ...
- SF     Mr and Mrs Brown in Charters Towers there.
- IT     Yeah. And Aunty Tup and ummm you know, we became as a family and I think she had a big influence on Mum. And she actually taught her how to

cook and do a lot of things and we've always been friends and we've always classed her as our grandmother.

TF Do you think that kind of close relationship between black and white was unusual or was there a lot of that?

IT **Race Relations/ Women**

No, a lot of it, because you know when you're women in the bush, colour didn't come into it. I don't think so.

SF No, I don't think ...

IT 00:27:44:02 And ummm I believe that the companionship and the friendship and I believe ... in some of my tapes that I ... I'm still trying to write this book on my parents, on my Mum. Haven't done it yet, but ... all the tapes that I interviewed, non-indigenous women, and Pat Fennell was actually on Roxborough a long time and Mark Fennell, and I said to Pat, I said, 'You know, what do you really think about Mum and how did you get to know her?' and she said to me, 'Isabel, when I was a young girl and I first married Pat,' her husband, 'and he brought me out in the desert here with a brand new baby, brand ...', you know. She said, 'When I saw your mother, your mother just said, "Give me the baby, you go an rest",' and this was in the desert. She said, 'I'll never ever forget your mother,' she said, 'because I was ...'. She was exhausted with just having this new baby in the desert, driving miles, no air-conditioning, nothing, and yet here was an Aboriginal woman at the end of the road ummm taking care, and I think this was the whole thing. There was that caring and nurturing that women do very well.

TF Yet it wasn't all so pretty, was it? There was at least one woman that ... I seem to remember in that mining magazine article, there was at least one woman that treated your mother badly as well before she ...?

IT 00:29:20:10 Yes. Yes, that was ummm I think that was at Coorabulka when Mum was flogged with a ... because she kept running away to the

camp. Every station had an Aboriginal camp, basically, because that's where they were born and that's their home, and I think – I'm not quite sure ...

SF Barkly.

IT Barkly.

SF Barkly or Lake Nash it was, one of those stations.

IT She was flogged with a thorn tree.

SF I don't know what you'd call it – Parkinsinia it was ...

IT Yeah.

SF Yeah, with thorns anyway. She used to ummm ...

IT Run away.

SF **Race Relations/Women Working/ Domestics**

00:29:58:00 ... run away and ahhh as a little girl ummm Mum didn't know, you know, anything and she wanted to go and play with the children but wasn't allowed to. She was being cared for and had to do the housework for these white managers and that and then when they'd go away to the races and that, they'd lock her in the pantry and get, ummm whether it be the ummm cowboy or whoever does the cleaning, to feed her through a little pigeonhole. And, yes. But ...

IT That didn't sour ...

SF That didn't sour her, didn't say a bad thing about anybody.

TF It's interesting, isn't it, like those two stories, and I'm not disbelieving either for one minute. They're two sides of the same coin. How do you resolve that kind of contradiction, if you like?

IT 00:30:54:18 Well you can see the difference, I think, Trish, you know just looking, analysing it from my perspective now, that station manager



obviously just didn't ... because Mum could pass for, really, a very fair person, you know, and obviously that station manager really didn't want her to mix with the real blackfellas and learn the language and be a blackfella and that's something you can't do. I mean, you've got to come to terms ... and I think Mum did come to terms with it but she didn't hate that woman. I mean, she eventually moved on to another place and ummm but she had enough experience in her from Grandma Brown and I think ... I don't know if that came after or before. I think it was before, actually, so you know, after Grandma Brown's absolutely ummm affection, ummm you do let those nasty things go by. I mean, and Mum used to show us the marks on her back where the thorns were. She was flogged.

SF 00:32:05:00 And she used to tell us, too, that ummm she used to go away and ride Shetland ponies as a little girl. There were six of them one day on one of the ummm Shetland ponies and ummm she was on the back and when she fell off, she had that big mark between her throat and sort of middle part where he kicked her, and that was all bruised and that. 'Course, and Mum could sit down and laugh about those things then, you know, to say she wasn't no angel, she was just a little girl growing up.

TF One of the things about race relations, after being out in the Channel Country for three or four weeks, finally struck me, and I'm interested what you make of this. It seemed to me that from what people were telling me out there, that certainly from the white perspective – and I don't know how this relates to Murriss, being not racist out there was associated with just not seeing colour, almost not noticing somebody was Aboriginal. Whereas it seems to me that in the city, reconciliation agendas or non-racism is more associated with recognising and respecting differences. Can you make any sense of that?

IT **Race Relations/ Reconciliation**

00:33:35:10 Yeah well, reconciliation, I mean, that's one of the things, I mean, you just look at the photo with my Mum and Granny Brown. I mean, that's reconciliation, that it's ... Well, it wasn't fashionable, you know, you didn't have to go up and say, 'You're my friend,' and you know, 'I'm black

and you're white,' and 'what have we got to bond?' I mean, there wasn't a need for that because that bonding was already there. And the bonding is through our kids and it doesn't matter what colour you are, you know, out in the bush the kids get together anyway. They didn't see a difference and nor did the men in the camps. They were there to do a job. They were there to be mates with each other. They had to get a job done. The women have to be in the stations on their own, so they have to come together. It's not an issue and that is very true, Trish, I think. When we were growing up, we didn't know, well I know, as the youngest of the family, there wasn't any racist connotation and I still say that, that reconciliation's a fashionable process now because we have to really work at something. Things aren't going right for us. Ummm and that is a political process. So when you're living in the bush and you're driving miles ahhh you know to do things or go in and get some things for the station and things like that, it's not a big deal because (a) we all drive the car, (b) we all mustered, we all ate the same food, we all, you know, that's towards my time, but even before that the old traditional people and the camps, they had to come to terms. But they didn't like coming in to eat ...

00:35:23:22

SF No.

IT ... in with the others. I mean, sometimes when you get us together, we'd like to stay on our own, but there are ... What are you ...?

SF **Gender Relations/Race Relations/Alcohol**

00:35:34:00 Yeah, you've got like, on Glen Ormiston station there was only three women. That was our mother, Isabel and myself, and ummm you had three camps, all men. Then you had the big Aboriginal camp which was right down the back, walking distance, and you had the old ladies that ... old Mary and Mary that used to do uhhhh come up and help our mother do the housework. But other than that, everybody was one big happy family. There was no alcohol on the station back in those days. The only time they had the alcohol there is at Christmas and once that was over, there was no alcohol on Glen Ormiston station whatsoever.

00:36:28:14

