

## INTERVIEW WITH PAM WATSON

4 September 2000

Timecode refers to tape 72\_BC\_SP

### Topics in Bold

TF = Trish PW = Pam Watson JH = Julie Hornsey

**TF So this is Beta Cam Tape No. 72. It's DAT Tape 27. It's the 4<sup>th</sup> of September 2000. Trish FitzSimons recording. Julie Hornsey on camera and we're interviewing Pam Watson in her home in Toowong in Brisbane for the Channels of History project. 72\_BC\_SP**

TF OK, now I've got a line here .....

JH Your feet.

TF My feet? I'm not moving my feet at all.

PW Oh but you're on the line. Does that ah make a difference?

TF Oh perhaps that's what's –

JH No, I think it's just general body movement when Pam moves and –

TF But tell me where and when you were born and what your name was when you born.

PW 01:01:04:15 I was born in Brisbane and I was Pamela Lukin.

TF And - .... just excuse me. What am I doing?

Where does that – what's the origin of that name 'Lukin'?

PW Um I believe it's Norman but I'm not really certain, um –

TF So how long have the Lukin's been in Australia.

PW **Pioneers**

01:01:57:04 A long time really. My, my ah oh I've forgotten which great, great it is but he was one of the first, the first settlers into West Australia and he took up Aboriginal land of course, so in my book, I'm really writing about the class to which my father's family belonged.

TF On the back of your book there's some comment like um, um I've forgotten the exact words –

PW Yes.

TF You know what –

PW 01:02:25:24 That I'm descended from ah the implication is that I'm descended from those pastoral pioneers that I'm writing about. But that's

untrue. That wasn't my fault. That's the ah publishers' fault because I gave them the correct version.

TF So that was marketing, marketing .....

PW Yes, which I didn't like actually.

TF So what was your link then to, I want you to tell me about Gresley Lukin but I want you –

PW Oh.

TF To use the word.

PW Right.

TF How, how you were linked, weren't you, to a, to an early –

PW **Gresley Lukin**

01:02:59:10 Yes. In fact um the first of my father's family were pastoralists but then they went into their professions and my great great great uncle owned, owned and was editor of a magazine, or a journal rather, called 'The Queenslander'.

TF And did he own land in the Channel country? .....

PW 01:03:22:08 Well, yes I think he did. Um but I didn't know it at the time. I found a map which had ah a claim from him on that area but it was in the Northern Territory, and you know, I didn't realise it was going to be important or significant so I just lost track of it.

TF And what was, what was he known for um you know, you told us that he, that he edited 'The Queenslander'.

PW Mmm. Mmm.

TF But actually –

PW Yeah.

TF Where, where does Gresley Lukin enter the history book.

PW **Gresley Lukin**

01:03:54:02 Well as far as known in my family, we knew nothing about him except that he was rather unsound, without it being spelt out. But in fact um he wrote a series of articles over a three month period, editorials, or let me correct me that. He was responsible for a series of editorials being written in 'The Queenslander' over a three month period which talked about um white brutality to Aboriginal people and he talked about it, this being so bad it would shame us before the whole Empire. And his aim was to bring what was

happening to the intention of every Church-going family in Brisbane. Ah and it caused an outcry, it got about 18 letters in, some in protest, some approving. He was finally forced off the ah off 'The Queenslander' and he fled to New Zealand.

TF So if you say you grew up in a house where he was considered unsound, give me some timbre, some sense of the atmosphere of the household you grew up in.

PW **History**

01:05:09:12 Deeply conservative, but always with this split in that um my mother's family came early too and they were ah convicts so they were Irish Catholics and my father's family were Protestant and quite wealthy Anglo-Saxons. So I think that's how I really got interested in the sort of alternate and equally valid stories of histories. You know, the – it existed in my own household with its sort of, the need to tread fairly carefully as to what kind of statements you made in front of aunts and uncles and things like that.

TF So as a child then, what were your visions of your future Pam? Would you have been surprised aged 10 say?

PW **Gender Relations**

01:05:54:15 Look women didn't really have a future in those days, did they? I remember I wanted to write poetry. I wrote a lot of poetry and saying to my mother that I wanted to be a poet and she said that I'd got the whole thing wrong. That, you know, women didn't do those things. You, it was what sort of man you married, so I could say I wanted to marry a poet and support a poet, but not be anything. So I, I was really very confused about being an adult or what I wanted.

TF So how did that translate through into early adult, adulthood. I'd like you to just kind of trace, I mean did you for instance finish school? You know, like what you ..... ..

PW 01:06:42:06 No. I finished sub-senior. I wanted to finish but my mother wanted me ah to leave. I guess you know, I was intended to be the trophy child. You know, to be extremely popular with young men and make a successfully marriage though. You know, the best provider you could stomach was sort of what was inferred. You might ..... cut that out. Ahh –

TF Yes we might, because it'll be unusable anyway.

PW Oh, I'm sorry.

TF No, no problem.

PW Um so where were we?

TF So –

PW 01:07:18:10 But eventually I did pharmacy and I had no interest in doing that at all but my family's point of view was ah that if I did something extremely practical like that, then I wouldn't be a burden on my brothers if I failed to marry, so um so I did it. It took me ages to get through but –

TF Was it a university course?

PW 01:07:42:08 No it was at the Tech College in those days and you had an apprenticeship as well.

TF And, and so then um indeed you weren't a burden on your brothers.

PW No. No. And I continued doing – I mean it served as a sort of milk cow pharmacy. I only stopped about 10 years ago doing a little bit of it but I always found it terribly boring and –

TF So in fact along travel into your life, it certainly hasn't been um hasn't been poetry but it has been writing.

PW Yes.

TF Can you fill in, how was it that you, that you came to Anthropology?

PW 01:08:21:18 Look I think that's the um the end of a lot of things that happened to me as an adult. For one thing, when I married, I worked for the UN for ah several years. I worked as a guide for the ah ah, at Headquarters, you know? You know, they have guides of all different nationalities. And I was the Australian one and that, it was just started then so it was very fresh and exciting. Um –

TF Paid work?

PW **Race Relations**

01:08:52:08 Oh absolutely, yes. And you had classes before you started to bring you up to date on the issues and you had to have read 'The New York Times' practically cover to cover. It was a very intellectually um demanding sort of job and in a way, I got a terrific education there that I hadn't had before. But again, that made me interested in, you know, different stories, different approaches to the same fact I suppose. Um and then I was in America during the Civil Rights movement and that made a terrific impression

on me. I mean I used to tell my in-laws how we Australians, nothing like that had ever happened in our lives, our native people. We always treated them well and they simply faded away. And I, you know I'm embarrassed when I think of that, that now, but we were all brought up to think things like that. That's what we learnt in school and which went on being taught for decades after me. Um so where I am I at? So that made me ah all those sort of experiences made me much more interested in other cultures. And then I was back in Australia in 1962 and there was a terrific exhibit of Aboriginal bark art from the Northern Territory in Myers. Um, and it was just mind-blowing. There were huge bark paintings, you know? Six feet and more most of them. And I've, I've always been interested in art and that's when I first, I bought my first um Aboriginal paintings really. Um, what else? I guess we, Bob and I, my husband, we used to spend a lot of time at Sotherby's. Particularly at um anything to do with um material cultural you know, Persian rugs, sort of artifacts. All that kind of thing. So we'd go almost every Sunday and just look. We could never afford to buy so – 01:10:59:00

TF But while your husband was alive, you were doing this UN work. Was he the fundamental breadwinner?

PW 01:11:05:06 Yes. In fact, I only worked for the UN two or three years. I've forgotten quite what it was because they weren't let you work any longer than that. They felt you'd lost your freshness. So you had to go. So then I had children and I didn't work once I had children.

TF So then still, it's a big, it's a big shift to the, the mature-aged student. What –

PW Ah –

TF What, what shifted?

PW 01:11:30:20 I suppose it's sort of a vacancy in the heart I suppose. Um Bob died and we came back to Brisbane mainly because he was in a wheelchair and I thought I could manage better in Brisbane. But I was terribly reluctant to come back and I think you can never go back in a way. You know, you don't fit into the family dynamics and people don't appreciate the changes that have occurred in your personality and in your beliefs. And um Bob died soon after we got here and um I was just as a loose end. I didn't know what to do with myself. Um I joined an environmental movement and there was no-one in it but biologists I think. That was 1970 you know and there, there clearly

wasn't a place for amateurs there. Um and because I, I'd had all those experiences, I was really interested in, in ah looking at the background of how people got to be the way they are. Their culture. And I was interested too to looking at the background of ah art in that sort of context.

01:12:46:08

TF So how –

PW So it was really quite a logical, it wasn't ah sort of, as arbitrary as it sounds.

TF So was going to university then, it wasn't about having an economic base to support your children?

PW Oh no. No. I, I was doing quite a bit of pharmacy and um reluctantly, I was forced into that but ah so no.

TF So is –

PW And I also had a small income from Bob's estate and ah –

TF So at what point do you think you began to question the statements you would have made in America about you know, everything having been lovely on the Australian frontier?

PW 01:13:29:20 Um I think more or less as soon as I said them I sort of began to have second thoughts about it. Ah and then when I got back, there was um things were changing in, in the interests of historians. You know, there were a number of people who were writing like ah Roley and um Henry um Henry Reynolds and ah Raymond Evans and Kay Saunders a bit later. So there was an enormous amount of material coming out and I started to read that and was very struck with it. And at that time I came across Gresley Lukin's name everywhere which stunned me because I'd never heard of him really, except I'd called my daughter Gresley. I thought it was a great name. And I had a brother called Gresley but ah –

TF I'm ..... this is a kind of a side bar but I'm fascinated in that. If he – but, but if he was the reviled relative, the reviled rad relative, how then was this line of Gresley –

PW **History**

01:14:32:10 Well he wasn't reviled. He was just never referred to and when I asked, people would be vague and sort of imply that he was unsound. I mean I wondered if he was gay to be honest. Um so he certainly wasn't reviled. Just you know, in a way I think a lot more was known about the cruelty to

Aboriginals in the 1880s than was known in the 1980s. That sort of a veil had been drawn over it all about the 1900s. Um and I think my family didn't really know what he'd done, Gresley Lukin.

TF But somehow that was – I mean I wonder is Gresley Lukin – is Gresley in fact, is it like a Norman name? I mean does it go back hundreds of –

PW 01:15:21:14 I've no idea. I believe it belonged to a woman, it was the surname of a woman who married into the family and there've been Gresleys now and then. I mean it's not one of those important traditions in the family. It just happened. For me what happened was my American sister, sisters-in-law, said to me don't handicap your daughter by giving her a non-American name. So they gave me this list of suitable names which were Beth-Allen - Beth-Ellen and Mary-Joe and I wasn't really game to quarrel with them but I said it was a family tradition and I was going to call her Gresley. And that sort of shut them up. So, I think it probably lots of decisions like that.

TF And what was it you think that, 'cause you continued through university on to Honors. What um what kept you at university –

PW Going.

TF And, and how did you come – I mean Honors in, as I tell my students regularly, Honors is the point at which you start to give your –

PW Yes.

TF Your degree a kind of a specific complexion.

PW Yes. Yes.

TF What lead you to your Honors, Honors topic? Your dissertation topic.

PW **Pituri**

01:16:34:06 Um I became aware that Aboriginal people in the ah central area of Australia had a very lengthy trade route in a drug they called Pituri and that this drug was actually investigated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by at least three European groups. They were scientists from Paris, from London and somewhere in Belgium I think. And yet I'd never heard about it and it seemed to have altogether faded from knowledge. Ah so that intrigued me immensely. The ah the department, the head of the department was very much a um believed culture was the fundamental – he was a – what's the word? Not a cultural extremist. There's a word – I can't think of – 01:17:26:18

TF Cultural determinist?

PW Yes. Yes. Yes. That's right. So he -

TF Careful with your mike.

PW 01:17:31:20 He told me that um drugs have no influence on behaviour at all other than what your culture says they do. And that if you stagger round or fall over or pass out after drinking, it's not because of the alcohol. It's because of the – what your culture tells you you would do. So they wouldn't let me do it as an Honors subject so I dropped out for a year and um researched it myself and got another ah ah anthropology journal to publish it. Not a refereed one so it wasn't a very good publication. And then they let me do Honors in it, but even then I had terrific trauma and ah and eventually it was published as an Oceania a monograph, which is like, in anthropology, a bit like winning a Nobel prize or something so –

TF And how did that um pituri, how did that topic bring you to the Channel Country?

PW **Pituri**

01:18:30:02 Ah that easily because um it, it ah flowed through the Channel Country. You know, it's, it ah arose on the Georgina River and it went up to Cape York in trade and right down to Lake Eyre. From Lake Eyre, tribes used to come up and um and gather, or help – participate in the ceremonies is a better word – um, so to get information about it, I had to read all the explorers' journals um because they all wrote about it. For example Burke and Wills ah had some pituri and ah ah Wills had had medical training and he wrote it up as like two stiff nobblers of whisky and ah so – and a lot of the early pioneers used it. Um Durack seized some and ah used it himself I think when he couldn't get tobacco and ah Kidman, the cattle king, seized the control of the trade, the um, sorry um – he seized control of the trade and used it to pay employees and in that way it got to the younger men. In traditional days it was only the older men that had the privileges of using it.

TF And were there Aboriginal informants that you were able to draw on in that pituri ..... ?

PW 01:19:58:08 No. I used it, it was all from libraries and um because I understood that the trade had ceased, ah when the pastoralists moved in, so my reports were all based on ah early explorers and early pastoralists. And once I started doing that, I became very aware of how much white information there



was that was being um not being admitted is ah I suppose the best way of putting it. Ah –

TF Let's just – So Pam I'll just ask you that question again. Did you have Aboriginal informants in doing your work on pituri?

PW **History/Isabel Tarrago**

01:21:06:20 No. I didn't. In my ah I sort of assumed that all the Aboriginal people from that area had vanished um and I knew the trade had been completely interrupted by pastoralists. And I think I said somewhere that ah the Aboriginal people there have vanished. And I mean that's a typical mistake of students and I was terribly embarrassed some time later when a lady called Isabel Tarrago, who's a traditional owner of those areas, appeared and said very nicely 'Hey, I'm here' and she was, she was very nice. She's become quite a friend ever since. 01:21:47:16

TF She – it's interesting. She didn't remember that conversation.

PW Didn't she? Well she obviously didn't bear me any ill will for that.

TF No. When I asked her about where she met you, it was just in relation to you hearing about her mother and wanting to talk to Topsy than the –

PW Oh no. It was – became, she came to reprimand me. And then um I was tutoring a bit and she was in my class and ah we talked a bit more then about things.

TF Going back to that choice of topic as the student of a cultural determinist, it must have offended your pharmaceutical soul.

PW Oh terribly. Terribly. Yes.

TF So, one of the things when I talk to my students about doing Honors, I say to them you know, potentially this is, this is where the sheep get sorted from the goats –

PW Mmm.

TF In terms of an academic career. Did you ever – how old were you when you did your Honors thesis and, and were you thinking in career terms academically?

PW **Pituri**

01:22:52:22 No. I never thought of anthropology in career terms at all. I had an allow – um I had an income from my husband's estate and I did pharmacy part-time and I really couldn't give a stuff about what the

department thought. Um well that's exaggerating a bit, so I didn't care whether I had a career in it at all but it's always been – I think I'm really very concerned with intellectual questions and I went on with it because I wanted to validate what I thought and establish it as a fact. And it seemed to me very important because it was a, a clear example of the way Aboriginal people manipulated their land. I mean their knowledge, their practical knowledge of chemistry when they were exploiting that plant was considerable. So, that's the – I think anthropologists always focus on the spiritual links between people and the land and perhaps rightly so but I was also interested in this way they were manipulating the plant, artificially reproducing it. Raising the, the percentage of the active ingredient – all those kind of things.

01:24:09:08

TF One of the things I found fascinating in your thesis was about um you know, typically anthropologists say that it's food that leads to agriculture –

PW Yes.

TF That leads to bigger populations.

PW Yes.

TF That wasn't your conclusions, well –

PW 01:24:25:04 No. No. My in – I did it in 1980. Um my conclusions were probably a bit simplistic. I mean um I think it's not a question so much of food of production as to how you start to ah intensively control one plant and the theory then of course was that that sort of control was based on food plants but since then, the idea's come up that um there were social reasons. Maybe you ah need more of a particular plant to feed um to host a big ceremony or it's an industrial plant like twine or um or a drug plant.

TF And does pituri, I mean I know that Isabel for instance um has inherited traditional responsibility for pituri I think via her father's mother but –

PW Right.

TF But were women much involved in that pituri trade?

PW **Pituri**

01:25:30:04 Well there are two stories. There's the story – ah the earliest stories all have it as a sacred duty belonging to older men. They had a special way of um um drying it out, you know. Usually sort of ah traditional societies dry things in the sun but how they dried pituri was a secret that – the

temperatures used were a secret and the – you weren't allowed even pick the pituri until you had some grey in your hair and only the older men processed it. And really only older men used it. Not the women, and not the young men. Now the latest stories, like um from Alice Duncan-Kemp, she's got the women ah producing it and they're sun-drying it and so I think a lot of the, by the time she became aware of it, I think a lot of the traditional knowledge had vanished and women were doing part of it. But it's quite, it's quite interesting from a point of drug control really because ah, ah you know, we're inclined to think that, that so-called primitive people ah controlled drugs by some kind of ritual and magic but you've got, in, when you look at pituri, it's control over processes, control over distributors ah see, you know um monopolised knowledge. All the kind of things you see in much more modern societies and I think that's true of all of those traditional societies that used drugs.

TF OK. And you continued this combination of pharmacy and anthropology to a PhD didn't you?

PW Yes.

TF Do you want to talk about what led to that decision?

PW 01:27:24:00 Well in fact that, despite all the trouble I had doing it, um, the pituri was a great success and it became an Oceania monograph, I got a scholarship ah and I thought I'd follow that train of thought through ah you know, that um the drug – I have to sidetrack. One of the things that was fascinating about the pituri is that there were ah the trade in it, which is hugely um fairly ritualistic, was more in fact like market economics. Um you saw um the in – there was this intensified control of the plant um so all round I formed this idea that ah probably drug use does change social and economic habits so I wanted to look at that in my PhD. 01:28:18:12

TF And what did you, how did you do that?

PW Ah what did I do? Well um I really looked at the history, the human history of drug use and it really goes back enormously far. I think the first example is in a Neanderthal burial about 50,000 BC, so um and then I also did a sort of fieldwork component by looking at beetle nut in Papua New Guinea and I sort of took up there um questions I'd worked out from the pituri thing.

01:28:54:18

TF So you completed your PhD. So you're in fact Dr Pamela, Pamela Lukin-Watson.

PW Mmm hmm.

TF You never followed that through into like an academic position and we've talked about –

PW No.

TF That a little bit. What do you think um are the, the positive and negative sides of being essentially an academic in the usual sense of the term without being an academic in the industrial senses of the term? You know, without being on like the payroll of an institution.

PW Oh –

TF How has that been for you?

PW **History**

01:29:28:02 It's hard to say. Um I thought there were tremendous pressures on you as a student to um to concentrate on the topics that were in favour at the time and I didn't want to put up with that. Ah and I suppose also, there were few jobs. I was already in my 50s um lecturing is hard work. I didn't want to do it. I could, I, I had quite a lot of papers published on um ah what I had done, particularly in the fields of um controls over drug use and what, what they were like in various societies.

TF It was interesting, I only realised the other day when I was looking closely at your book, that I don't think there's anywhere the magic words kind of Doctor or PhD. Like you –

PW No.

TF So I'm, I'm just interested to kind of tease that out a bit. Like was that choice or was that you know –

PW Why didn't I make more of my status?

TF Mmm.

PW Ahh –

TF Spoken by one who has no PhD.

PW **History**

01:30:45:14 Yes I suppose there was a lot of complicated things. Um, first of all I was very keen to write a book that would be read by ordinary people you know, because so many um so many books written by academics are not

readily readable. For example, a good example is that brilliant book *'The Way We Civilize'* and yet nobody in the street is going to read that. It requires too much concentration et cetera. So I didn't want to write that sort of thing. Um I wanted to, if anything, um I don't know. I can't answer. I know certainly when I came to do that blurb at the back which the author does, I did, I did put in things like I had a – I was a PhD and I'd published extensively in the field of ethno ah pharmacology and the publisher was horrified. He said that was terribly boring and couldn't I make myself more interesting. And um that's how come there was that mess about my – who I was descended from and things like that. 01:32:00:04

TF So it's a, it's a – that –

PW So he didn't, the publisher didn't want that sort of book I suppose that's part of it.

TF To use a kind of a hugely over – overly worked academic term, you know that term 'liminal'?

PW Yes. Yes.

TF Do you see yourself in some ways as like being in a liminal position to an institution like the university or is a – or have universities fundamentally been kind of irrelevant since you completed your PhD?

PW I think that, I think that um the fact that I didn't get along with the head of the department because we had this disagreement ah made it fairly unpleasant going down there. Ah and they have become, you know, quite irrelevant to me.

TF So let's –

PW 01:32:48:08 See I mean I've always had this other income and ah and, anthropology's got a whole tradition of getting along badly with mature women with independent incomes.

TF You, you're saying that UQ had had mature aged students who were women of independent means before?

PW Um no I mean anthropology as a whole. I'm thinking of Daisy Bates and Olive Pink and ah there've been a whole succession of them ah –

TF Oh that's interesting.

PW Oh yes. And I think there's an anthropologist written a book on the subject. I can't remember the name of it.

TF Now *'Frontier Lands and Pioneer Legends'* to - in most kind of um the most obvious disciplinary category to put it in and would be kind of History, do you want to talk about what, what caused you to um to write your latest work? And I'd like you to work the title of the book into your answer.

PW **History**

01:33:50:00 Right. Um *'Frontier Lands and Pioneer History'*, um *'Frontier Lands and Pioneer Legends'* – um I've heard people describe it as History but I really thought it was very typically anthropology in the sense that one of the, there are differences between the two disciplines in that history takes the etic point of view. The outsiders point of view of what happened, where anthropology takes the etic point of view – the inside view of what happened. So what I was looking at in those five um biographies ah was how the pastoralists themselves saw what happened, so I think that's a very anthropological rather than historical slant. It's um also anthropologists usually do small scale exotic societies I admit and this wasn't one of those, but there's been a movement in the profession in the last couple of decades to do anthropology at home so um I fit into that category I think. 01:35:02:20

TF Now what –

JH Trish I need to change tapes.