

**AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY  
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**John Viska**



Photographer: Patsy Vizents, 11 October, 2018

INTERVIEWEE:

**MR JOHN VISKA**

INTERVIEWER:

PATSY VIZENTS

DATE OF INTERVIEW:

11 OCTOBER 2018

PLACE OF INTERVIEW:

AT HIS HOME

148 CHELMSFORD ROAD

NORTH PERTH, WA, 6006

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW:

57 MINUTES 15 SECONDS.

RESTRICTIONS ON USE:

NIL

TRANSCRIBER:

PATSY VIZENTS

QUOTATIONS:

EXTRACTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS SHOULD  
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

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ACKNOWLEDGE THE INTERVIEWEE AND  
THE SOCIETY:

## **SUMMARY**

John Viska is the current Chairman of the WA branch of the Australian Garden History Society and has held the position three times. He has been involved with the Society since the early 1980s when groups of interested gardeners and landscape architects formed a loose group of interested people who visited gardens. He, alongside Oline Richards, was part of the organising group who established the WA branch of the AGHS in November, 1988. John was the first Chairman of the WA branch. The oral history discusses the formation of the WA branch of the AGHS and the work carried out by the branch in connection with the national body.

His background of Greek and Albanian heritage through both sets of grandparents, introduced John to plants and gardening but he talks of how he found his own particular interests through collecting and observing seeds growing and exchanging plants with others who shared the same passion.

His working life has been as a teacher but he managed, through working in the Kings Park education section, to turn his skills in teaching the primary curriculum to eventually teaching horticulture and history of gardening, especially in a WA context. This valuable background has been shared as part of his involvement with the Garden History Society.

## **Note to the Reader**

Readers should bear in mind that this document is a sympathetic transcript of the spoken word of the audio interview. It is not verbatim and reflects an informal conversational style inherent in such oral records. The Australian Garden History Society (AGHS) are NOT responsible for the factual correctness of this document nor for the views contained within.

Readers should also be aware that some parts of this transcript may have been edited and as such may include additional material, at the request of the interviewee, in the form of footnotes and/or endnotes.

The written word can never convey the full meaning of the spoken word and may, as a consequence, lead to misinterpretation of the original recording. It is recommended that readers listen to the sound recording if available whilst reading the transcript, at least in part, or for critical sections.

An interview log has been produced and it is recommended that the reader use this log to identify particular information they may wish to research.

## LOG OF INTERVIEW

0:00 – 5:00	John introduces his parents and their early life in North Perth. John's father was a tailor, working in North Perth and the city.	Athena Viska (Panos), Michaelides, Keith Stronich, Mr Torre.
5:00 – 10:00	John talks a little about his grandparents and where they lived as a family. John's family moved to the newly developed suburb of Floreat Park and John described his early schooling years in that area.	
10:00 – 15:00	In 1966, John was taken on by the City of Perth in a training program to do with parks and gardens, horticulture however he decided to repeat failed English and other subjects to gain a Leaving Certificate at Leederville TAFE and was accepted into Teacher Training College in 1967 after successfully achieving his Leaving Certificate. He was eventually sent to Esperance PS	
15:00 – 20:00	John described his involvement with horticulture during his teacher training years. He described the early years of living in Floreat Park and establishment of the garden in 1953. The private garden is described. He also described how his grandfathers both grew vegetables but that his parents were not gardeners.	Newman's Nursery
20:00 – 25:00	John describes his early love of plants and growing things and the adhoc nature of him acquiring his horticultural knowledge, especially through reading and chatting to neighbours. He joined The Gould League and attended nature study camps.	Your Garden Magazine, The Gould League
25:00 – 30:00	The opportunity arose to apply for the position of seconded teacher with Kings Park Botanic Garden. He ran the Kings Park Education Centre from 1980 – 1984. He describes the programs he ran and coordinated. But he was required to return to Primary School teaching. He applied for a position teaching horticulture at Bentley TAFE	
30:00 – 35:00	Eventually John joined Bentley TAFE, completing a Diploma in Horticulture and stayed with TAFE for 25 years. He discusses coming across the Australian Garden History Society journal while at Kings Park and joined it. He describes the interest in forming a WA branch after a talk by John Sales, National Trust in England's garden advisor in around 1986	Oline Richards, John Sales, Lord McAlpine
35:00 – 40:00	A meeting was called on 15 November, 1988 to form a WA branch of the AGHS. John was elected Chairman, and the first committee meeting was held at John's home early the following year. He points out that 2018 marks 30 years since the formation of the branch.	Oline (Richards), Ann Willox, Tessa Watson, Carolyn Grant
40:00 – 45:00	John describes why it was an opportune time to form a branch of the society, the interest in history and gardens was evident. The branch developed an event program, based on the work previously done by Oline Richards, The Garden Study, 1979 housed with the National Trust and attracted a	Oline Richards, Unalla

	fair membership	
45:00 – 50:00	Events are described, including weekends away in the country but John also explains the difficulty in working up such a program. He explained the way that garden clubs attracted some of the membership from AGHS however there is a core of interested people that are very much involved with the history side of gardening. John described the dedication involved in running conferences (three run by WA since formation) and how difficult it can be. A short discussion on the value of technology and some of the pitfalls of the same thing, as far as attracting new membership to the Society.	
50:00 – 55:00	John describes his interest in gardening, how he is a plantsman and an observer. He also ventures into the change of garden lovers approach to gardens in contemporary times, and how he would like to be involved in horticultural education with short courses, especially with volunteers who are seeking more information to assist them in their work for larger properties or community gardens.	
55:00 – 57.15	He continues to discuss the pros and cons of the lack of education now in basic gardening techniques and how AGHS could assist in providing short courses, in conjunction with other bodies to achieve good outcomes for horticulture in Perth.	

**My name is Patsy Vizents, I am a member of the Australian Garden History Society and I am conducting an oral history with John Viska, the current Chair of the Australian Garden History Society in his home in North Perth. Today is Thursday, 11<sup>th</sup> October, 2018. The interview will mainly focus on the formation of the WA Branch but will include some background on John's life.**

**Can we commence by you presenting your full name, the year and place of your birth?**

My name, John Viska. I was born on the 26<sup>th</sup> of November, 1948 at Subiaco Hospital.

**The names of your parents?**

My mother, Athena Viska, but her maiden name was Athena Panos, which was not her correct birth name. Her maiden name was officially Athena Pitsikus. My father migrated to Western Australia at the age of 16. His birth name was Stavros Viska but he was known as Steve Viska.

**Both of them are from overseas. Was your mother born here?**

My mother was actually born here because her Greek migrant parents arrived, her father in 1899 in Albany and then moved up to the goldfields almost within 12 months. Her mother arrived about 1905. Her mother's maiden name was Michaelides. My mother was born in 1921 at 99 Lake Street, Perth. So she was actually an Australian citizen of Greek heritage. So as a consequence, my mother did not have an accent because she was born in Lake Street and went to Highgate Primary School.

**So, what was your father's occupation?**

My father when he arrived at 16, was apprenticed to become a tailor. He was apprenticed to a man called Keith Stronich, who was a tailor and after he had finished his apprenticeship, he then worked for a man; Torre in Lake Street, and that was his first job. Once he had finished his indenture extended that, he set himself up in the business by about 1938/39 as a tailor in Central Arcade, Perth.

**That's interesting, there were many tailors in town.**

It was the period when people bought a suit sorry, had a suit made. There was no "off the rack", it was what we would call today, bespoke. In those days, everyone had a suit, at least one good suit.

**So, you said, your mother was living in Lake Street, your father was working for somebody in Lake Street, is that where they were living?**

So, my mother living at 99 Lake Street and my father working at Mr Torre the Tailor up towards Roe Street, my mother, she and her older sister, when they walked into town and walked passed and saw my father working. It was just, well the windows there . . . . and so, it was like, well he's nice looking, so that was the beginning of a relationship. They ended up getting married in 1945 all because, there he was, working in the tailor shop and he would have been about 18 or 19 at that stage.

**So, he wasn't born in '21, your Mum was older?**

Dad was born in 1920 in Albania in a place called Korca (*pronounced Kortcha PV*) which was just a little regional town east of Tirana, the capital, probably half way, closer to the Greek part of the Balkan Peninsular.

**Alright, so where did you live as a child?**

We lived in Oxford Street, on the corner of Harrogate and Oxford Street, Leederville which is now called Oxford Close because of the Freeway and other parts, it's now become isolated. We lived in a weatherboard house that was owned by my Albanian Grandfather, who was a greengrocer. We lived next door to my Grandparents. I was four going on five when my parents shifted to the established suburb of Floreat Park. That was 1953.

5:00

**So where did you go to school?**

As a consequence in that year, I was five turning six, I was enrolled in Floreat Park Primary School, which like most, it was the post-war baby boom and it was so big that the number of children that turned up that year, we were in what they called a commandeered staff room, as a classroom because there were so many children.

**And there wouldn't be that many schools between Perth and Floreat, there's West Leederville . . .**

That's right, the only other school was Jollimont and Wembley and I, having a late birthday; 26<sup>th</sup> November remained five for virtually the whole year of my first year at primary school.

**OK, so schooling and then high school?**

1960 was my last year of at Floreat Park Primary School, grade seven and after that, we all went off to high school. There was Modern School or a private school. Modern School was where most of the people I went . . . with, Modern School was where they went to. Now, we had a choice of private schools and in 1961, that was my first year of high school, Hale School had opened at Wembley Downs. They had shifted from West Perth and that building was built about 1925 and they there in 1960 they closed and because of the endowment lands that they had out at Wembley Downs, they built a brand new school. Which meant that people from Floreat Park had the opportunity to send their sons to a private boy's school. And they did take the opportunity and not only that, people from Scarborough, people who would normally would not have sent their children in to West Perth. My older brother had gone to Hale School in West Perth because other people that he was with also had been enrolled there. So I was the second son, by the way so it was like, well we have sent the first so you have the same opportunity. In that period, 1960 economically, it was quite a stable time. My father as a tailor, had enough work to be able to send two boys to a private school.

**You went to Hale School, you didn't go to Mod?**

I ended up going to Hale School. So, Hale School, their traditional school was started in 1858, then started out there, a private boys school where everyone else went to Modern School, as the closest school. Otherwise, they would have gone to Guildford Grammar, Wesley and the other private boy's schools but Hale School was literally in the next suburb from Floreat.

**I, in the introduction referred to you as the present Chairman of the Garden History Society. Your employment was influential as to why you became part of the Garden History, so can you just outline, when you left high school, what were your ambitions and where you ended up?**

So, 1965 was called the leaving year, and you had to get English plus five other subjects to get what was called the Leaving Certificate so English was compulsory. I failed Leaving English but got five other subjects so technically, I had not completed

the Leaving Certificate. So you had two options. One was just to take employment or to re-enrol at the school and complete your leaving year again. That was an expensive exercise. I had made enquiries at the end of 1965 with the City of Perth because I was interested in plants; in horticulture. I made enquiries; did they have any horticulture courses? They had just implemented a horticulture training scheme

10:00

probably to replace the old apprenticeship where basically you worked in Hyde Park, at the Council nurseries as an apprentice and eventually you became the Leading Hand a decade on. So they had implemented a program where, in conjunction with the Technical and Further Education system, Kings Park and the City of Perth, they had implemented a new horticulture training scheme. I was taken on by the City of Perth in 1966 at the start of January as one of the three people under this new apprenticeship, they called it a training program. We worked at the City of Perth nurseries and then twice a week we went to what we called Night School, one was to Kings Park; a little shed at the back of Kings Park and then on Thursdays we went to Mount Lawley TAFE to do in effect, science. This was a modified botany course. I think it was somewhere about May because there was this period where you just did it and then you would officially sign the indenture papers I think they were called, which meant you for the next three years, you would be working as an apprentice. I was not particularly inspired, the course was not particularly organised, not well thought out and I had not got my Leaving Certificate, so I thought it didn't turn out to be what I wanted to do.

I had actually found that in that year from Hale School, the leaving class of '65, at least six or possibly seven people had also failed. That was the quality of teaching at a private boy's school. They had all gone to Leederville TAFE to complete or to upgrade. When I heard about it, I used to meet up with them I thought, wait a minute, maybe I should do that. So, as a consequence, I enrolled round about May, into Leederville TAFE. The Education Department had changed the whole system. It became an accumulative thing, so you could then add on the subjects you had not passed rather than re doing the whole lot. I re enrolled and did English and I thought, well OK, I will be there and I re did some of the other subjects. I then applied to go to teacher training and of course, I needed to have the English. So I did that and as a consequence at the end of 1966, I passed my Leaving; the English subject and I was accepted into Teacher's Training College in 1967.

### **That was over at Claremont Teacher Training . . .**

Well, we all mustered in January 1967 at Claremont Campus, we all lined up in alphabetical order and they said, there are two colleges and there is also the possibility of a secondary college being formed. Who would like to stay here at Claremont, who would like to go to Graylands and who was interested in going on to secondary teaching? Three quarters went to the side that was Graylands Teacher's College and a quarter went to Claremont. These lecturers said, no wait a minute, if you want to do secondary, you have to go to Claremont. They then pulled back about to be equal. I went to Graylands Teacher's College because someone who had been to Hale School the year before was already there, so it was someone I knew and I had heard that people at Graylands had a good time. (laughing) It had spirit!

### **So, graduating?**

I did two years, it was the old two year training Teacher Certificate and then we were out. So this year, 2018 celebrates 50 years of me graduating from Graylands

Teacher's College. In 1969, my first teaching appointment was for three weeks in a very small school at the back of Lake Monger called Windara Primary School, sorry, Wandara and then I was transferred to Esperance.

**This was general studies, this was not specifically to do with . . .**

This was just a primary school

**Right. So just let me go back. You had started the apprenticeship, or the traineeship to do with plants because you were really interested in that so were the science subjects something of your interest when you were doing teacher training?**

15:00

There wasn't really any options at all. There wasn't any specialisation at all but I did do the nature study option, the electives, well not electives but you had to do what they called "grounds" to help beautify Graylands grounds which was to say, they had been instituted since the college was established in the 1950s. We had a little nursery there to propagate plants, so I did that. We used to propagate plants and help out with gardening activities. I did the natural history, science ones which had a bit of plant collection and insects and things so I was still in that field of that interest.

**Where did the love of plants or that interest in that side come from because in the face of the new education you were getting through the teacher training, sometimes you would think that would drown out any interest you might have but clearly no?**

OK well there are two things. One was at primary school and I can remember all the little things we did, a component, growing wheat on wet cotton wool. Cutting and slicing beans and carrots and growing them on cotton wool. There was a component already in what was the science part of primary school curriculum. I enjoyed that and I would do it at home so I would, at home, start those things. I liked that observational point from growing things. Also, we had shifted into a brand new house in Floreat Park in 1953. There was no garden at all. The roses were selected by a friend of my father. My father was not a gardener but like everyone else, you just started a garden which was lawn, some garden beds, some rose bushes and the backyards, half of it for vegetables, and everyone did that. That was the landscaping style. By the way, there was virtually no landscape architects as we know today. So, a good friend of my father belonged to the West Australian Rose Society and he selected, what he thought would be good roses for our garden.

Our front garden; three sides (John gestures the three sides) all had rose beds and I can still remember all the soil being dug out, the sand sorry. That would have been 1954 and all the organic matter thrown in and then a truck arriving filled with beautiful chocolate loam from the hills. Absolutely superb, and that was layered and filled in to what had been excavated, to about a metre. The rose bushes came in the winter period. They were bare rooted and they would have come from, I'm not too sure but possibly either Newman's or one of those commercial rose nurseries. They were planted and I can remember them being tamped in and watered in. This person helped my father do it, spaced out. They were there until the house was sold in 2006, those initial rose bushes.

**Is the house still in existence?**

It still stands but I do believe all the roses have been pulled out because they were not fashionable anymore because they were coloured. In those days you had a variety, a dozen and they would probably have thrown in a 13<sup>th</sup> one, and the nurseryman sometimes selected, because our friend belonged to the Rose Society, they would have been the ones really recommended and that did well in the Perth



conditions. And as we know, at least three quarters survived. So I observed, I watched and I remembered my father getting little seedling poppies that you bought in little flat trays from either hardware store normally, because they would get it from some of the wholesale nurseries. I remember the poppies being planted along the edge.

### **Sweet peas?**

We didn't ever grow sweet peas but I remember the poppies because of their interesting flower and the smell and they were just put in as edges along the edge of the rose garden. So you had rose bushes and a little edging of annuals and the rest was kept weed free.

### **Did you live at home when you were at teacher training?**

Yes I did, but I just have to go back one step. My Greek Grandfather and Albanian Grandfather both grew vegetables. Their garden was devoted solely to productive gardening and they could never understand, my Albanian Grandfather, why I was growing ornamentals. Even at a birthday party, you had to invite your Grand (father), he would take me into garden and show me how to plant corn. I thought, I want to enjoy my birthday party and here he says, come down here. So this was this whole subsistence . . . like that. They both had experience in Albania and Greece. Did this come through me? I have got two brothers and neither are interested in growing. I was growing things from a young age and succulents were my first plant. Easy to grow, a baked bean tin OK? Terra cotta pots were expensive, we didn't have any, my parents weren't real gardeners and here I was just starting to. When I went off to the fetes, for a penny I could buy a little cheap cactus succulent, so that was my beginnings of me spontaneously wanting to grow my things myself.

20:00

### **So, it's in there?**

Yes it's in there. In grade six, wrote off to Yates, we had projects and they sent me a packet of broad bean seeds and a whole booklet of growing things, I've still got that as a scrap book. So here it was, and I remember growing stocks, and I must have either got a packet of seeds and I just sprinkled them and they all grew and because of the root competition, half just died out but that was something that I wanted to do. No one said this is how you do it, I just put two and two together. So it was always there and whenever I was, I'd be growing plants.

### **What's the transition between teaching primary school and moving to the more serious or horticulture side?**

OK, by the way, we never had essentially, a school garden at Floreat Park. A couple of boys were doing something one day, they were going to make a little garden and were digging over the soil. I said, can I join you? Yeah, and so I can remember we had geraniums with red flowers which would have come from bits from peoples' home, and big sunflowers. But there was no organised school garden at Floreat Park. I enjoyed that so I just joined in, in an adhoc manner. So, at Hale School, because I was streamed into sciences, so I had to do physics and chemistry which I didn't aspire to, didn't enjoy. So, a unit that had a bit of botany and plant based, I wasn't allowed to do because the streaming test said, should be doing this. So, for the whole of high school, I was not involved in anyway but I did all the gardening at home; kept growing things at home, all the time. I saved up every week, money from lunch money and I ended up buying at the end of each month, Your Garden Magazine. It was two shillings. It took me the whole month of just the odd penny, and that was my first

gardening manual. I've still got those and that information, which has not changed, the layout has. So, that was really my first reading about, and I wasn't a reader of fictional things, I liked the science part of it. I'd read it from cover to cover, all the ads, how to grow begonias, how to grow this so, I was introduced to a whole range of ornamental plants very early on, by the time I was in my teenage years. Couldn't afford to buy them but every now and again, I would see something and I would buy a Coleus and there were a lot of plant exchanges as well with people. Just in the neighbourhood, walking around and seeing in and "oh, would you mind if I got one Gerberas?" So, that's how I did it.

Teacher's college, so I was involved in that aspect of it, and with all my classes, we would do some sort of basic things but because I was teaching in the country, it was very hard.

### **You eventually ended up at TAFE.**

I was involved with nature study, so, still sciences, plant basics, the botany part. I did that with my primary class, jointed them up to Gould League and one of my Headmasters, Peter Mills at Graylands Primary School, was also interested in it and my name must have been passed because I was invited to take part in the Gould League and become part of the Gould League Club and then I was invited to go down at one of the nature study camps as an observer. Eventually I got more involved with Gould League and at one point I became like, not the president but there was like a junior group, when I say junior, there were 60 – 70 year old members of Gould League but there was a working group, that's probably right. So, at the end of 1979, I was informed that the Kings Park Education Centre seconded teacher was now going back into the class room to seek advancement and the position had become open. If I applied and listed all the ways I had been involved in plants, gardening, natural history science and I was given the position as the Education Officer in Kings Park, running the Kings Park Education Centre. My appointment was from 1980 through to 1984. The initial secondment became five years. So, I was not in a class anymore and I was working with school groups; primary mostly, some secondary and also some teacher training

25:00

### **Did you do tours or things into nurseries?**

So, the part that I was involved with was not the Kings Park propagation side at all. They wouldn't have allowed me to do that. I had to work within the curriculum. Groups that came to Kings Park wanted an introduction, history, what were the main plants growing there. Teachers wanted to know a bit more in depth about it, high school teaches said, look we have a unit that does myrtle, look at this.

### **So, that is really your grounding going into the history of Western Australia.**

So, I was now running a one-man centre; running off all the sheets, designing all the activity sheets. I instigated the first for any Botanic Garden in Australia; a holiday activity program in the Botanic Gardens. It wasn't just sit down and draw a picture. There was a junior, middle and upper school. All the activity sheets were designed for their observation. We ran it very successfully in the Botanic Gardens and each person who participated, they got a little sticker of a wild flower for every activity sheet that they did. So the little folder would have about half a dozen and you know. I was able to employ some teachers and it went from Monday to Friday and I think, the first week of the May holidays and the first week of the August/September holidays. It got kids

into the Botanic Gardens, observing. Once again, I had to design activity sheets; I had to do the admin side of it as well. I upgraded my teaching qualifications, got my Bachelor of Education, and that was early '80s and I thought, that's the end of my . . . I'm not doing a Masters, I'm not doing that. I'm now going to go off and do a formal course in horticulture where, at my own speed and just do it at night school. I went to Bentley TAFE and enrolled. So, I was starting a certificate, what is in effect a trade certificate in horticulture. I was with people who had been working all day long, in horticulture for Councils, nurseries, parks, turf and I was a person, just like them and starting it. I eventually finished it and enrolled to do a diploma and in 1984, my secondment came to an end, which meant, I had to go back from where I came, a primary school; a grade six primary school. And I struggled. I had actually seen in the Education Circular, advertised jobs for TAFE lecturers and I thought, oh every year there were vacancies. Unbeknown to me, that was just a formality, the jobs weren't there. So, I applied for one and I got this thing back saying, thank you very much, but there are no vacancies this year.

Well at the very end of that year, the Commonwealth Government gave extra funding to trades areas to allow girls to go into traditional male trades areas and horticulture was one that had been selected and they were going to fund for a year, an additional lecturer in horticulture to allow Bentley TAFE to take more girls into horticulture. They got enough enrolments to justify an extra lecturer in horticulture. That was an article in the paper and my cousin saw that and she had heard that I had applied for this and had failed. She said, did you see this? So I made contact with the Education Department and said that I had put in an application, but there wasn't a vacancy but I now see, in that way. They said, well, when was it? We will just re submit that for you, to the TAFE section, and I went to an interview and got it. It was only a secondment and they said, you have already been on a secondment for so long, you have to go back to the class. The Superintendent said, look, I'll rearrange that so, I became seconded to lecture in horticulture in TAFE for one year only. When the one year finished, I was still doing my Certificate in Horticulture, so back to the classroom (laughter). So, I did one more year of teaching at Coolbinia Primary School and then started my Diploma in Horticulture and actually took a year's study leave after that one year because I didn't want to be in primary anymore and a proper vacancy was advertised and I applied and got it. So that was the beginning of 25 years in horticultural education. I was one of the few certificated teachers. People were drawn from the trade and their things in horticulture and trade experience, but I was one of the few people who had a Bachelor of Education and at that stage, had done at least 15 years in teaching.

30:00

**You mentioned the Gould League. Were there other societies that you were interested in to do with horticulture?**

Well, I noticed when I was working in Kings Park I picked up the Garden History Society's Journal, which you could buy at newsagents and so, the former journal that was run by Tim and Keva North, it was a bit of a business thing as well. I picked it up one day and a lot of it was plant based but there were some articles to do with garden history and in it was an application form.

**To join the Society?**

Yeah, ah, OK, I like this, so I sent away.

### **So when was this, was this . . . ?**

I was still at Kings Park so it would have had to have to be pre '84. It could have been '83/'84.

### **Because the Garden History Society established itself in 1980?**

Yes. And then I found out that Greg Keiry, a botanist at Kings Park had joined, also by subscription and he happened to be working in Kings Park. He was the Kings Park staff side not the Education Department staff.

### **But there was no branch?**

No. But then I found out, I got a letter back from a lady known as Oline Richards who was a West Australian person who was like the regional coordinator but not officially so. I made contact with her, she was actually a landscape architect, fully trained, very interested in history. We met socially and I said, look, why don't we form a branch. She said, oh you know, she was not an organiser, she didn't want to do that. She said, if you want to do that, you can organise some social functions, so I did. She gave me the list of the West Australian people that belonged to the National Branch, there were already about 10 people. And so, I said, I'll organise something, and I did do and our very first excursion was to Mary Hargraves garden in Kalamunda, a couple of acres garden, just a nice garden. We sent out an invitation to it.

### **Sorry, is this in 1984?**

No, it's post that, it's a little bit later. It would have to be about '86 I think. So, we sent out and about a dozen people came along to see Mary's garden. That was our first "social". Oline had appointed me as the social organiser. So there was still no official body. I said to her, how do we form a branch, an actual Western Australian branch? She said, you just call for a public meeting and whoever comes along, someone just stands up and says I would formally like to put forward to form a Garden History branch. So, we called a public meeting, which was November the 15<sup>th</sup>, 1988. Now, just prior to that, John Sales a garden advisor to the National Trust in England, he had been brought out to Australia because of our bi-centenary and visited every state. So, someone, it could have been Dame Elisabeth Murdoch had funded that, underwritten it, and he stayed at each state, put up by someone. He arrived in Western Australia as the first leg and he was put up at Bishop's House, because Lord McAlpine owned it at that stage. We hosted him, he came to this very room. I got all the people I knew that belonged to it (AGHS PV) and they came to visit. We had a couple of social functions in that way, and then he went off to the eastern states and after that I thought it was time to actually form and that's when I called a public meeting, in conjunction with Oline because she was still the correspondent, the person in . . .

35:00

### **So, she was communicating with the national body?**

Yeah, and she had representation, she was the Western Australian representative on the national body but I don't know whether she . . . they may have flown her there, or whether she did it by telephone link up? We called this meeting, based upon the strength of John Sales coming here.

### **Where was the meeting?**

Because I was at that stage working at Bentley TAFE, I asked if we could use the lecture theatre. So, in 1988 I was actually at Bentley TAFE and that was no problem

at all. We advertised it and those people turned up. We had quite a few apologies because, Oline had sent out, to all the people on the mailing list. So we had the apologies and the people who actually turned up and signed.

**Well, I can see, just in the apologies, you've got John and Ray Oldham and Margaret Fieldman, very major individuals within the heritage industry. So, it must have galvanised peoples' interest in gardens and in heritage.**

Yes, when John Sales was here, he gave a slide talk at the Alexander Library. I think, I don't know, quite a few people came to that in different fields like, the parks and recreation, we advertised it like that, so that was also . . . . He talked about the gardens of the National Trust and the restorations so, based upon all of that, there was some interest. So, these people, we communicated with them afterwards. Now, Bentley TAFE was not the easiest place to find the lecture theatre, at all! Even though I did my best, some people turned up after the meeting. It took them an hour to find the right room. Anyway, no minutes were taken at that meeting by the way. It was just an informal meeting where someone just got up and proposed and that's what we did. I was elected the Chairman, then a friend of my, Ann Willox, who couldn't come to the meeting but she said look, I'm happy to help with secretarial things, so, she got nominated the Secretary. And then we formed a small committee. That was the beginning, in 1988 of the Garden History Society as a formal branch of the Garden History Society. We decided to call it the West Australian Branch, as opposed to Western Australian. So, we decided on the name. The very first committee meeting was held early the following year, in this room here, and then we planned our program.

That was the beginning, so 30 years ago, virtually 30 years ago, in this very room The Garden History Society's first committee meeting was held and we have survived.

**Have you been the Chairman for that time?**

I was elected the first Chairman and then after whatever period it was, then I decided to step down. I think you could go two lots of three years which was six years, and by special application, I think they would extend it for another three years. So, I said no – six years. So, I stood down and Tessa Watson, who was on the committee then took the reins for one year and by that stage, we were asked if we would have our very first, what do you call it?

**National Conference?**

National Conference. That was 1998. So, the writing was on the wall, so, I stepped back into the breach again, otherwise . . . so, I became "it" in time to organise the first conference. Then, I was that for a while and then I said it was time to step down. And then Carolyn Grant, who was a committee member then took on the role as the Chairperson, then in about 2012, she decided to step down, just in time for the next conference. There was a conference in between, by the way. I was the Chair then, was I? Yes. Anyway, so I've been three times. So, we had Tessa Watson as a Chair for a very short period of time and then Carolyn Grant and then she stepped down after a good period and then I picked it up, once again just in time for the third conference.

40:00

**OK, can you explain the fundamentals of forming, why was it formed? Why have a Society?**

Well, the journal was out, you could still buy the journal on the news stand in the initial time like that. There were people who were interested in history, so some were gardeners; horticulturists, but other people were just interested in the historical side. So we found that people were interested in that and when we sent out, what's your interest? A lot of people said they were interested in the history side. Like "are you interested in what subjects", and they just liked that historical side, also as well as visiting gardens as well; gardens with a bit of age on it. Now, running side by side was the Open Garden Scheme, probably just after we had formed. So, there was that avenue for visiting gardens for the sake of visiting gardens but there was a group of people who were interested in the history; the historic aspect of it as well.

**We do the advocacy for conservation of historic gardens is very prominent in, underlying the current AGHS, so, was there discussions about that at the time?**

Well, in 1979, Oline Richards, as part of I think, a whole national thing, went on a tour and remember, 1979 was when we celebrated our sesquicentenary. Also, with the national Government there was a lot of interest in heritage as well. And so, she travelled through the state, calling little public meetings, seeing what gardens of a historical basis still existed. And so, little public meetings in regional places and she talked to appropriate people and built up a whole list of properties that had historical values but also had the gardens or the remnants of the gardens.

**So, large rural properties as well as domestic ones in towns?**

Yes, so she wrote up a document, which still exists, The National Trust still has a copy of it, and this was The Garden Study, 1979 in a landscape format. So, it enumerated the gardens – Albany and the bigger regional places, and the names and if they needed work, if they still existed, if they needed documenting. So that was the first stage. A huge project and the funding at that stage, was National Trust as well as the Commonwealth Government. I think she started it but I think it fizzled out because of one thing or another, the effort that had to go into it was huge; visiting everyone of them, documenting, photographs. So, the initial document came out with what existed and what work needed to be done, what state was it in, could it be revived . . .

**So, did you use that documentation in event planning?**

Yes, and so, one of our early ones, I looked at the ones that were in Peppermint Grove and I organised a garden tour and we went round and looked at those that she had identified as still with original elements. Osborne Hotel had just been sold and the garden had just disappeared so the buildings, most of them had been raised to the ground I think. Anyway, so it was the tail end of the death knell of some of those. Unalla, which featured in our (exhibition) was totally in its mature state, still with the tennis court, still with other features there. Now of course subdivided, all the mature elements chain-sawn to the ground. So that next phase, what was proposed and which needs money to do and a qualified person never really took off. We tried to get the University interested; Landscape Architecture had just started there.

**So, that is the advocacy idea. So you as the Chairman would approach . . .**

Yep, yep. For students to take on as projects, we have never ever had any help from them at all. They'd only be interested because of the people running it in you know, the bigger names. The person who designed Canberra, forgotten his name now.

**Burley Griffin.**

Yeah, Burley Griffin. So the head of the Department was only interested in the effect that Burley Griffin had on Western Australian garden planning. So, they have never ever, over the years, I tried, Carolyn tried, all the time. Never ever once had a telephone call from a student saying, look I've got a research project, could you recommend a garden that needs documenting.

**It sounds like we have got to get into that John.**

Yes.

45:00

**So, there were events and certainly there was conservation . . .**

And we organised events and the events were garden visits, we organised weekends away, we went to Bridgetown, we had a weekend in Busselton/Bunbury, we went up to Toodyay, we had day trips to York, all seeing those things. People enjoyed it. A huge amount of effort because a reccy first of all, a description of those and even some of the plants to look at. Myself and the committee, which was good, but you can only sustain that for so long. And as I said, the Open Garden Scheme then started as well. So that was starting to be a bit of competition. So if people just wanted to go and see a garden for the sake of seeing a garden, would just turn up at Open Gardens. So, you started to see other elements coming in and drawing away from us, membership. People would join up for a year with us and think oh, I'd rather just go and have a look at gardens and didn't want to be involved so much. And that is probably the whole of our memberships nationally, now competes with so many of those other things that draw away, from the Mediterranean Garden, to the Cottage Garden Clubs all of those.

**Heritage Roses?**

Yeah, yeah.

**You mentioned three conferences.**

Three national conferences; 1998, 2005 and 2014. About on a seven year cycle I think, seven or eight year cycle.

**So, we are half way into the cycle, it's coming John, it's coming!**

I'll be too old by then,

**No you wont (laughter). That's a huge work load isn't it, but in true . . . in my experience, the journal was the reason for getting involved with the organisation.**

That's through the advertising, that's how I got to know about it.

**And the reading, the wonderful articles, they are so varied and the conferences were, the ones that I've been to, very, very stimulating so I really support the strength of the Society.**

Well, it's only being through having a small, dedicated committee that they eventually get worn out, burnt out.

**That's why you only have six years or something like that.**

That's right. Well I'm coming to the end of my cycle and when you think, we have had now, two major exhibitions; Historic Gardens of Perth and the Western Suburbs. We have had three conferences. Carolyn organised a Tree Forum. We tried to organise a few little workshops but the numbers weren't there so we cancelled. We were going to

have one in Araluen; restoring their gardens. We had another little workshop called Restoring Gardens. It all takes time and effort and people move on and people die as well. Also, out there with the general public now, when history was a bit thing, we have a whole new generation of people who haven't got enough time to belong to a community group anymore, a society, and they see things differently. We've got technology now where you can access so many things now so why be involved in a group? They have all drawn away from when we first formed the Society, 30 years ago.

**I'm surprised at that sort of comment really because, I'm not disputing it but with the increase in technology, the increase in information that I get from Twitter or FaceBook, I'm very interested to do with horticulture. So, maybe we need some training in how best to access that.**

Or maybe, as you said before, make it FaceBook and all those things as the major way that we expose, so it's a whole new level of technology and younger people who are adept at that and are using that as the way of exciting people once again. Because in those days it was basically reading journals and the journal was only in black and white, there was no colour. So, you had to be pretty well enthused to join it.

**I guess we are coming up to the end of what has been a really interesting discussion. Your own garden to me seems like a paradise, so how do you feel about, you know, you have your own space and you go looking at others, constantly feeding your interests I imagine.**

50:00

Well, I'm a collector and a plants person. Most of my friends are interested in a whole variety of plants and how they utilise them and employ them in their garden scheme. And so we like to talk plants so I enjoy a garden with lots of interest in it.

Even as a child, when we used to go somewhere I'd get bored with what was happening and I'd walk around and always find if there was a little green house, I would go in there, observing the plants. I was always excited by that, with gardens. So when I go to a garden that is based on minimalist layouts and it's just multiples of that I'm very bored straight away. I still like to discover and see as many plants as possible (laughter).

So, when it comes to what people possibly want in a garden is very different to what people wanted from a garden. They want a garden as an outdoor living space, something to add value to their property, something that has low maintenance, something that can be kept neat and tidy and that has generated a whole new, different style of gardening today. The use of plants! The reduced number of plant species, all of that has produced a modern look but many times, with meaningless features in a garden. Just because it's fashionable, it's been seen on a house and garden lifestyle program. So, that technology has really steered what people see. When my parents shifted in to a garden suburb in the 1950s, essentially what they wanted, what everyone wanted, some nice colourful flowering roses, grass that the kids could play on, it was a quarter acre block, the back section, if you wanted productive vegetables. Look at it today, it's just so different.

**In terms of education for people, say in Perth, are there horticultural courses available for those who are interested?**

At the TAFE level, to do a three year course to get a Certificate. I think they do run short courses for people who want to learn to propagate, people who want to . . .



## Prune?

Yep, in that way. I think it still pulls the numbers. There used to be a wave of people who capitalised on the cottage garden, which is now passed, and there was a, more a social fun thing, without having to really extend yourself as much. There are private providers now that also provide little short courses as well. If you go looking for it, there's probably still things you really want to do.

**See, I think we could be attracting those private things into the context of history and, you know, the expansion of their knowledge of the place, of the locality.**

Well, I have mentioned this to the National Trust, the last two CEOs and it's never gone anywhere, that a collaboration between the Garden History Society, a TAFE college and the National Trust, where collectively, they do a course for those who are interested in the heritage side of horticulture and gardening, where you learn how to read a landscape plan, how to prune a mature tree or a shrub, how to propagate old fashioned plants, how do you identify a plant, how do you get information using TROVE on aspects of old gardens? That would be something that a short course within a couple of weeks, that you would end up with a little certificate that is garden studies that are heritage based. It's never happened. The National Trust have said, oh you must talk to the Board about this, that sounds wonderful. TAFE says, OK well, we will get one of our regulars to do that course who doesn't have an interest in heritage, they might be good at horticulture. And it's only us, or me that keeps trying to push this thing, this could be unique for the whole of Australia, no one does a course like that. And your group of volunteers come out and say, look, I've done a course with heritage values or even the Heritage Council to be a partner in it as well. From the educational point of view, that's what we need, that is what is lacking that capitalises on that interest area.

**Yes, it's very much community engagement.**

55:00

And I even believe too, you know with the National Trust, they have volunteers that go and help, and a lot of it is show and tell but you know, they unleash these people and in the end, the garden is tidied up. I've heard a few tales, you tackle the biggest rose bush because you want to make a thing but that rose bush tea rose that needs minimum pruning. And so that link between your volunteers and the end result of a good old-fashioned talk or lecture on why you don't need to prune it back to a vase shape with three main stems or why the one hundred year old fruit tree doesn't need to be severely pruned back because it has probably gone beyond its productive life and now you are really starting to do damage because it's "a one size fits all" or this is how we do it. There's a special case when you are working as you do with heritage buildings. You employ people who have got those skills. But the gardens! It's like, tidy up, make it neat, get rid of the weeds just as an adjunct to the old building. So, we still haven't got to that point of committing heritage bodies, that it is just as important to use people who have got some skills there as well.

**I think there is going to be a lot of connection between us and the Heritage Council in the future, they are doing a lot more. Anyway, this is for the future. Thank you very, very much. Let's draw it to a close, very good to speak to you.**

My philosophies, and I've mentioned that at TAFE and all they saw was dollar signs and they said, well use John because he is down on his hours, he can get that course up. You know, that's how they saw it. But wait a minute, we need to put some money into a little pilot group or do something and pull in these people in that way and tap into the expertise. I've volunteered my time and I've got to the time and thought no,

you do this and then you give it to someone because they need to get extra dollars and it just becomes too big and really, what it should be achieving. Where it's, you know, pie in the sky or something like that, but it would be nice to have someone say, I've done a special course, it ran for three months, and in it we did, how to you know, botanical plant names . . . It can bring a lot of aspects in it and I'm sure those who are volunteers, who are weeding every month who are going to Woodbridge are saying, I'd like to know more about that. So that's it.

**Well, thank you.**

*Interview concludes 57 minutes 15 seconds*