



## Australian Garden History Society

### Oral History Programme 2002/2004

This interview is one of a series of interviews being conducted throughout Australia with early members of the Australian Garden History Society. The AGHS was formed in 1980 and these interviews will play a crucial part in recording the formation and early days of the Society. The AGHS is funding these interviews. The AGHS acknowledges the support of the State Library Victoria for use of interview equipment.

*This interview of Fairie Nielsen was carried out by Sallyann Dakis at Pigeon Hill, 399 Mount Road, Burnie, Tasmania, in October 2004*

**So Fairie, if you could think back to your early memories of the Garden History Society, can you remember your first exposure? How you were introduced to the idea of the Garden History Society?**

Yes. I was just minding my business here one day, in the middle of the day, and the phone rang and it was Pat Cameron from Mona Vale. And she said, "We're having a meeting here, and Judy Lewis", who lives in Hobart, "Suggested we should have a representative on the North-West Coast and she suggested I ring you. So I'm ringing you here and now to say we're having another meeting in a month, would you give it some consideration and come down to a meeting and see what you think, what you think of us, and you might be interested in joining." So that's what I did. I went down the next month to a meeting, and I was on the Committee before you could say no. Because as you know, all committees are always looking for new members, so that's how I joined. Pat Cameron was of course the Chairman then, of the Garden History in Tasmania, and I was one of her staff. And I enjoyed my time with her very much, she was a very good Chairman.

**Do you recall when this was?**

I just looked it up and I think it was '84 according to my recollections. Winter of '84.

**And the meeting was at Mona Vale?**

Yes, Pat always had the meetings at Mona Vale. She was a most hospitable person at any time, and we had them in the dining room there in great luxury! We always had lunch, we all started at ten o'clock and we had lunch there, and we finished about four with a bit of luck; sometimes a bit later. And if there was anything pressing, because I came the furthest, I'd sometimes stay the night. One or two others might have too, if we had a weekend activity or something like that. And I got to know Pat well, and to admire her organising capabilities and her

charm and all those sort of things. I was her devoted slave, in other words!

**Can you tell me what it was that you were trying to do? What was the Society setting up to do?**

As I understand it, people like Hal Turner and Peter Watts and architects who were interested in the historical side of Tasmania, came over from time to time and were guests in these lovely old homes, and decided they should be documented. And in their travels around, visiting various homes and gardens and things - they were actually doing houses in those days - they discussed amongst each other the benefit of having a Garden History as well. Now I'm not too sure if the Garden History was already established on the mainland, I suspect it was, but Tasmania being a very small state, had quite a lot of almost - not instant, but very close together. And I think we got away, really, to quite a racing start because we did have quite a lot of historical gardens and homes to draw off.

**Had the Society been operating for a while, do you think?**

Yes it had. In the early days, I understand, they'd had one conference here, and they had it in Hobart. I don't know how many they had, it just might be in my archival, I'll have a look for that. They had it in Hobart, and then they came up to Launceston and had three days up there. And they had a marvellous time. I don't know how many, but it was their first experience, and everyone opened their larders and their drink cellars. And they went to some of the gardens up North, and they had a thoroughly nice time of it anyhow and it was a great success. And that was I think, I'm saying, the very first one in Tasmania.

**Were you at that?**

No I wasn't, in fact I'd never heard of them then. So that must have been about '80, if I joined in '84, probably about '80, '81.

**Who else was on the Committee at the time that you recollect, any outstanding people or characters?**

On the Committee when I joined?

**Yes.**

Yes. There was Rod Thirkell-Johnson and there was Geoffrey. The Museum.... Begins with 'Et'. Geoffrey Stillwell was a member. Zoe McKay, Margie Stackhouse, Jenny Provoe. Anne Cripps was on very early, before I got there, and then she left for some reason, probably family reasons, and then she came back later in the form of a secretary. Very, very efficient. Who else? I'm talking about the Tasmanian Committee. Ruth Amos from the East Coast, she was a mine of information. Marvellous woman.

**Do you think that most of the emphasis was about providing information and help and knowledge to people who already had historic gardens? Was it really drawing on members from people in that experience, or do you think it was broadening the interest in garden history?**

I think it was, as I saw it, a completely new thing. And I think even the owners of these historical – of course the historical house and the historical garden sort of went together. Where you had a lovely old house, you generally had a lovely old garden too. I think it alerted members, or their friends perhaps, to what they had and how really valuable it could be. For themselves and for the history of Tasmania generally. I think it was a sort of wake-up call, the beginnings of that society, and people went away thinking, “Yes, such-and-such, that would be an interesting garden, that's an old place.” And I think for the owners it was the first little inkling that there might be some appreciation and some help perhaps. Help in the way – the Garden History brought in speakers, and a lot of them, amongst our own members, were very talented landscapers or historians and things like that. And I think they saw light at the end of the long tunnel, that they might get some advice. They were looking for, I think, advice. As the Society grew, I noticed advice really was there, and we just didn't know where to look for it. And people like – this is in the latter years actually – how the tree surgeons have taken a big part in the restoration of these gardens, because the early plantings were very.... Do I use the word boring? Because you know, a hundred years ago we couldn't get all the lovely trees and shrubs we can get today, so they planted pines by the million. Still do! But too close to the house, and many of the houses and the gardens are very sombre and shady and overcast, and they weren't really lovely conifers. This is in my opinion!

And so when the tree surgeons came in about, say, twenty years ago - or it might have been earlier but to my knowledge twenty years ago - they were able to prune these trees with great skill so that we kept the historical trees but in better shape. So we didn't destroy them, which is very easy to do. And is very tempting to do actually, because I've heard many of these owners say, “Oh that wretched tree, every time it blows a bough falls on the roof and shatters the tiles, and I can't see out of the dining room window, and I wish I could cut the tree down.” And someone would say, “Oh no, it's a hundred years old, don't cut it down.” So they were in a no-win situation. But when the tree surgeons came in, I think they've done an enormous lot. I must say they're costly, but I really think they're fantastic what they've done, particularly to those old piney type trees. Conifer type, early conifers. Because they're really quite ordinary.

**Getting back to the Committee, at what stage did Pat retire and you become the President?**

Now you ask me! I'm guessing, but I could – actually I should have looked that up. I was the President for ten years. So I would say.... '84, '85, '86. Probably '87. '87-'88. We had a meeting at Mona Vale and Pat had said earlier that she was going to vacate the Chair. And I don't blame her two hoots, because in those days we did everything longhand and she did an awful lot of writing. We all wrote in longhand, you know, with copies here and copies there, and not everyone could read each others' writing. The Headquarters was then in Bowral, where Tim North ran the office, and we had copious instructions from him. And it was a big job and Pat did it very well.

**So who was the Secretary at that time?**

Tim North was the Secretary, and he lived in Bowral, and he was probably the instigator for the Australian Garden History, I imagine.

**So you didn't have a state Secretary?**

Yes, we had a state one, and when I joined it was Zoe Mackay. From Stables, yes, Richmond.

**Campaigna.**

Campaigna, yes.

**I'm sorry, Cambridge.**

Cambridge, yes. Zoe was the Secretary and then we had.... [pause] I've made a blank there, sorry.

**And so Pat resigned and you were the lucky chosen one?**

We had a weekend at Mona Vale, at least we had a thing on Sunday where we showed films and stuff, and on Saturday we had a plant stall. And I was out at the plant stall, and Zoe came out and said, “Pat wants you in the dining room”. I said,

“Will I leave the plant stall?” and she said, “Yes”. And as soon as I came in she said, “You're the new Chairman.” And I said I couldn't possibly, couldn't possibly be a Chairman! A unanimous vote. I think I'm making that up, but a vote at any rate. So... I really felt sorry for Pat, because she'd done such - and no one else was willing, so of course muggins got the job! And then in the articles it says that the President shall have a tenure of three years and then be re-elected, but after nine years she must go, you know, to give someone else a chance. And of course as everybody knows, it's not a - any of those positions are not what you'd call highly sought after! So I stayed one more year while I, being the President, had to find my next - someone who I could con into doing it. Which I did. Took me a whole year, that's why I was there for ten years not nine.

### **Did you enjoy it, Fairie?**

Yes I did. And like everything else, you get the hang of it after a while. The first year is a very learning sort of process, but I did. As I went on, I did a lot of traveling and a lot of personal contacts, and because I went to boarding school in Launceston, a lot of them were not only personal friends but friends. And Tasmania is a small place. Yes, and you get better and better at it. You hone your skills a bit, and you think, oh yes, I could do this, they can do that, or we'll do this and we'll do that. You do, you get better and better. And as you get more familiar with it and skilled at it you enjoy it more. It was at the time that we were having terrible strife keeping afloat, and the National Committee asked Tasmania if they could do a garden tour. It was, I think, the first garden tour we'd ever done, and of course muggins again said she thought she could do it. And when I see how sophisticated the garden tours have got today! Anyhow, I still think it was probably the best one we ever had, because we had such fun on it and nobody minded and everyone rallied around and did their very best. And I still get letters from people saying, 'When are you going to do another tour because that one you did ten, twenty' - no not twenty - 'Twelve years ago was the best one we've ever been on?' You know, because it was... Tasmania's easy do a tour, because it's small and it's intimate, and everybody knows everyone. Easy to do.

### **So was that 1991? The tour?**

Well, I think so. I honestly can't remember. It's a question of looking it up too, sorry. I should have made a note of that.

### **So why was the Society in such a desperate state?**

Very complicated. Tim North had a journal that he published out of Bowral, I think it was called

'The Australian Gardener'. And he said he would give us so many pages for the notes from the Garden History, to promote it and to give it a bit of a start. Of course we had no money, although we all paid subs and things. We paid Tim to do this, and he had shares in this - rather complicated business it was - he had shares in this garden magazine and that was his living. And he gave us two pages. Which, after a while, we didn't think was enough. Like everything else! We asked for a bit more, a few more pages and a bit more writing about promoting us, and he said, “Well you'll have to pay for it”, more or less. And we said we hadn't got any money, and so it went on. He said, “Well, I'm finding now that the Garden History isn't strong enough to bring in extra readers for myself.” And he said, “You're not advertising, you're sort of using me.” It was delicately and diplomatically done, but we came to a parting of the ways. And then we decided we would pay a girl, she was also in Bowral, Dianna Forrester. She was an Economics or Business, she had a Business degree in Economics, and she was very highly qualified. Too highly qualified for us. And she did feasibility studies and all sorts of things like this and told us where we were going wrong, which was fairly obvious, but it wasn't bringing any money in. And we really had to get some money by hook or by crook. And Michael Bligh was the Treasurer, who was a delightful person. And he's a landscape gardener from Goulburn. And we got into great strife financially, we just couldn't pay our way, and we were all called upon to rally around and see what we could do. But we got out of it, and that was when Robyn Lewellyn took over the national Treasury, and she really got stuck into us all. She said, “You're not business-like.” She was an accountant, thank God, and “This is what you've got to do”, and, “This is what I want from you”, and, “These are the statements, and I need the statements clearly indicating what you've spent and what you haven't spent, and where you're getting your money from.” She put us, really, on the right track. I don't know how many years she was there for, but I'd say seven. Marvellous woman, absolutely marvellous. When you went to the conferences and the AGMs, Robyn had all the answers and all the figures, and it was just absolute bliss. And we all knew what we had to do. Now we have Elizabeth Walker who looks after us just as well, but Robyn was the one who dragged us out of the worrying sort of mire. Because we had the members, but we just weren't business people, you know. We were just gardeners and ordinary people, and we didn't really know how to run the thing. And we had lots of high profile people like heritage

landscapers and architects and things like that. But because it was all over Australia it was hard to sort of put together, and then when we bought the office down to Melbourne, put Jackie Courmadias in there, that's the best thing we've ever done I think. Had a paid professional secretary. She keeps everyone in touch with everyone, and keeps all the records there. Which is just bliss compared to what it was. We lived on the telephone before that, and you know, how are we going to do this and how are going to do that, but we all survived.

**So it was a fairly large commitment in terms of your time, at the time?**

Yes it was. It really was a very large commitment, because everything was handwritten. I mean there were such things as typewriters, and I happened to have one, and I suppose that was very helpful. Yes, and the ringing up. You rang up at your own expense. Well, no one minds that, but if you're ringing Tim in Bowral twice a day, every day for ten days to get something sorted out, it ran you up a bit. And then there was fares and things, and we all paid our own. No one objected to that in the slightest, not in the slightest. It was something you did for something you believed in and got some enjoyment out of. The way it's run today I think is just so blissfully easy. I'm sure we still have our hiccups, you know, time to time. The conferences are always hard work and always will be, and that's because they're popular and it's because - Tasmania is well off really. But when you go to Melbourne and Sydney, and you have to get four buses loaded by a certain time and out through all the red lights out of Sydney, it's lunch time, so you really don't have very much time to do anything. I remember years ago we discussed that we would try and avoid the two capital cities and go for, like Ballarat, or Bowral is very popular of course. Goulburn we did. Tasmania is easy, really, but the big cities are a nightmare.

**We're sitting at Pigeon Hill, your home at Burnie, which has been on many a garden tour because we're talking about an exemplary garden. You talked about passion and doing things because you loved it, but how did you get to the level of involvement in gardening that you have? What was your inspiration?**

I really don't know, to be honest! I live in the country. I think possibly - when we were children we came from New South Wales, and it was in the Depression and people just didn't have gardens. They just had vegetable gardens and survival gardens. But we stayed a lot with our grandmother at Callain, and she had a huge rambling old garden. And I think, we didn't think

anything about it at the time, that a lot of that rubbed off on us. Because I notice that my three sisters are all keen gardeners. And we often say, "You remember at Culzean? Remember at Culzean? Remember at Culzean?" We had this, or we did that, or she had that. It just sort of rubbed off on us. And when I came to live at Pigeon Hill I thought I'd have a garden, of course, and my husband said to me, "You can't have any of this level land, you can only have the gullies, because anywhere I can take a tractor, I need." The fact that he was an engineer, not a farmer! And I had the gullies, and I just spread my wings along the gullies willy-nilly and continued to do so. But like everything else, everything grows in Tasmania, especially on the North-West Coast. You don't have to be very clever to have a good garden. The thing that really interests me most of all is landscaping, and I don't think we give enough time to - whether it's the TV programmes or whether it's books, it's how to grow plants, how to grow this and how to grow, but not good landscaping. And the few times I've been asked to judge the Burnie Garden Competition, I get myself into all sorts of drama saying, "Well the flowers were good, the paths were neat, you know, everything was honkey-dory, but I thought the landscaping was absolutely ghastly." And that's only my opinion, and who are you to judge. You know, what gives you the right to go into somebody else's garden and say... So you've got to be very careful and very diplomatic, and I've learnt how to be very diplomatic. Get everyone onside! Yes, I think we're not taught, whoever teaches us, and we don't take on board the marriage of the house with the land. And it's all very well for me to say that, because I've got plenty of land and if it doesn't suit me, I just move the fence. But when you're in town and you've got neighbors, especially if they're not gardeners, it's very much more difficult. And I've got myself into all sorts of hot water by saying to people, you know, "Why are you making such a fuss about the cherry blossom on the lawn, I think it looks beautiful." "Oh, it makes such a mess, it comes over from next door." You know, the usual things to happen in town. I consider myself very fortunate not to have those troubles.

**Now you said that Pat gave you the call and that's how you became involved with the Garden History Society, but surely it was more than that, more than just a friend calling on you?**

I didn't really know Pat. I knew who she was, I'd probably met her at functions from time to time. I just thought it would be something a bit different, actually. I just think it was a bit different, and I am interested in history. I didn't

really know that the Garden History existed. And because I'm a Tasmanian, I'm aware that we've got some lovely old homes. Actually I'm glad I don't live in one, because you are constrained by what the population around you – And I could name half a dozen places and people say, “Oh, I would love to get” - including Pat Cameron - “I would love to get rid of these rotten old Macrocarpa pines or Radiata pines, making the kitchen like a black hole of Calcutta or something.” But of course they're historically interesting. Well, I think to myself, I just hope they get the borer and blow down. But if you go to do something with them, there's always someone in the village or in this Committee that will say, “Great-great-grandfather planted those, you couldn't possibly take them out. And so you can't really do your own thing.

**But you weren't probably alone, in not knowing much about Garden History Society when you joined?**

No, I don't know why we all joined. I think it was just something new, something different. Something different to the usual little garden club that you belong to in your own home town. Wider scope. And the opportunity to hear some of these interesting speakers, and hear what they've got to say. And to join in. And the conferences. You really do meet the most interesting people. Very skilled, very knowledgeable. Not only in gardening, but all sorts of other skills as well. The social side of it is very enlightening. Pleasant. You come home exhilarated and think, “I'd better get on with the weeding!”

**Let's spend a little bit of time talking about your role with the national management Committee, did that become automatic when you became the President?**

No, it doesn't automatically if you're the President, but it's a good idea if the President can see her way clear to going. We had two representatives, and it's very... The representative doesn't really have to be on the state Committee either, she can be just from the floor. But it's very handy if you have one or two from the state Committee, because they bring the news back and they can use it themselves. Whereas if it's someone from the floor, they perhaps don't get around to telling you for a few weeks or something. It's very, very useful. And I found it, when I was the President. I said, “I'll go, if that's ok with you fellows.” And I did, because you could see what the thinking was for the whole of Australia, and you could see where you could help or couldn't help, or what the problems were.

**And what was the thinking at the time that you joined?**

About?

**On the National Management Committee, the thinking. Was that really about where the Society was going to go in terms of the financial crisis that it had?**

Yes it was. And it was looking into the future, and it was looking to whether we would ever be in a position to help, financially, people who have got a nice old garden but it's quite beyond them because it's mostly an engineering feat to drain it or do something expensive. And whether we would ever be in a position to do that. And the decision then, and I think this still holds good, no, we couldn't help private people. But we could concentrate on the National Trust houses, which we do. And we, in Tasmania, only do Runnymede and possibly we did a little bit at Clarendon. But we just don't seem to have the members who can give the time to those gardens. Runnymede, being in Hobart, is quite convenient. Clarendon I used to go and help with. No, but we have always tried every year to put some money aside for something that one of the National Trust houses needed. We re-roofed the Clarendon gardener's cottage, and we did Franklin House rose arbor. Which was a huge job, I thought it was just going to be a couple of planks! And we did the historical walk, we named that in the Botanical Gardens in Hobart. I'm just trying to think of the things we did. And then we gave some to Carrington Mill to pay for a study in landscaping, whoever owned the Mill at the time. So we've done that. And I think the other branches probably do the same. But you really need big lots of money to go and help someone, and they don't always want your help, either. It's their home, and they don't want people coming in and telling them what to do. You know, you have to be very careful that you don't upset people. Yes.

**Now I know there has been a newsletter for a long time in Tasmania, but at the time that you were President, was that the way you were communicating to the state members?**

Yes. We had good newsletters I thought. I enjoyed writing the newsletters, actually. I did the so-called editorial, the first two pages of what we'd been doing, what we hoped to do and all the adventures we'd all been having. That kept us in touch well, I thought. It had the dates of forthcoming events and things like that. Actually I thought that the newsletter was absolutely vital for everyone, and I enjoyed helping put that together. And then we had the national one of course, as well. But the state one kept the members up-to-date with what was happening, and where they were required, and what they could do and what they could bring. Yes, I think

the newsletter is absolutely vital, in most organizations actually. We found it so.

**And how did you recall the national journal when that was launched? What impact did that have, do you think?**

Well, we had various – We had Tim North and we were part of the Garden Journal I think, the Australian Garden Journal. You could buy it on the bookshelves, you know. And we just had two or three pages at the back. Well when we left Tim, Peter Watts very bravely said that he would take on a publication, because we had no money – I seem to be harping on that. We had about five or six pages, and Peter, being an architect and specialized in heritage buildings, it was a bit inclined that way. My personal view, not so much gardening. He did that for a couple of years, and then.... Really and truly, it's a big job putting out the national newsletter of course. It's a historical thing, you've got to dig up all the information and make sure that it's absolutely correct. Well that's easy for Peter, it wasn't for me, I must say! And then we had Trisha Dixon, who was absolute bliss, bliss. Because she wrote like she talks, friendly and lovely, and she kept the historical thing there but she came down to earth a bit and spoke to us like a friend. And she had interesting articles, and she also had the great plus of having an office of her own, and she'd published her own stuff and she'd written books. She was very au fait with the whole thing. She did that for, I think, about five or six years. It's not easy, getting all the information, getting it on time, getting the photographs. And because Trish is such a good photographer too, I loved her newsletters. Then she bowed out, understandably, and we had Nina. Who is of course very historical and just another look at it. She's brought a lot of historical data, like the Chinese gardens in the various towns and things like that, and the history of this, that and the other. I find it very interesting and in keeping with what we're supposed to be doing. It's very easy to get off the line and get away from the historical side, which, if you're not careful, just makes it another garden letter or garden report. So Nina's been good. I don't know how long she can carry on, I don't know!

**With the vision of hindsight, do you think the Garden History Society is doing what it set out to do?**

That's a very awkward question and I would say, at this point in time, no. I would say that we were lacking. It's very easy to fall into the trap of just being nice gardens and not really doing what we set out originally to do, was to try and preserve and encourage and maintain some of the old gardens of Australia. And I really don't think we

are doing that. For all sorts of reasons. Sometimes people don't want your help. Sometimes it's too much for us and sometimes it's only one state, for instance. There are a lot of excuses. But to answer your question I'd say no, and I think we just need re-vitalizing a bit. We sort of settled a little bit into the doldrums I feel. Whether that's because I've got old I don't know, but I do feel we're just a little bit in the doldrums. It's very hard to find something interesting and exciting to do, to carry everybody with you, you know. That takes a lot of effort, actually.

**So you think more could be done to preserve existing gardens?**

Well, I think yes. I think that we here in Tasmania would have to concentrate on the National Trust gardens, because really and truly, the people I know, I don't know that they really want us, as a Society, in their gardens. I think they want to feel free. It's a bit like when you live in one of these lovely houses and they say you can't have an iron roof, it's got to be shingles. And it's all very well for somebody else, but shingles cost a lot of money, if you can get them. So they must... And I wouldn't like to be told either, I think, 'This is my garden and I have the right to do what I like.' But I can only think we just have got to plug away, and I think if we just concentrated a bit on the National Trust gardens, of which we seem to have quite a few, we might be showing them the way. But in keeping the Society alive, bringing over speakers or people like Peter Valder and James Broadbent, and those people who are stimulating speakers I think is a good way to keep us going. Whether we just wound down a bit I don't know, to be perfectly honest.

**Do you think we need the Garden History Society now as much as we did then?**

Yes, I think we still need it, but I think we have wakened a lot of people up to what it was there for, and there isn't perhaps quite the need. That and the environmental people, you know, I think we've all had the big wake-up call, 'Now don't destroy it. If you want any help we can perhaps point you in the right direction.' Not necessarily do it, but point you in the right direction or suggest that you might get in contact with certain people. I think there is still a place for it. But I do think that from the very beginning its main purpose achieved what it wanted, to alert people to what they had and if you can help it, please don't destroy it. Because once it's destroyed it's destroyed for all time. So I think it was a great - and as I said in the beginning, the people who had been struggling, some of the old houses I've been in, been really struggling. And they say to you, "What would you do?" You know, "What

would you do?" What would I do? And the very fact that they can talk to someone else, a qualified person like a landscaper or someone who specializes in the restoration of old gardens, I think that – I'm not saying that they have to do it, but it just gives them another open door to consider. So I think it has achieved a lot, but whether we still need it... I think we have to go on a little bit longer, actually.

**If you had to say if there were two or three people that were really pivotal to the Garden History Society achieving what it's achieved, or at least being part of the Society, could you name some of the characters or people who you think were really influential?**

In this state? Well, I think Pat Cameron was a great figurehead for all of us. She was a very nice person to get on with. I think Marie Mills at Panshanger is a fantastic little girl. And she's managed to keep that garden more or less intact, and she's had her problems! Yes, there were quite a lot. I think that Susan, Sue Gillam at Strathmore.

Yes, is one. She's gone in there as a new chum, and realised what she's got and hasn't spoilt it. And of course the Ranniker family, I think are quite unique. I think that people who - like Dr Laker, who went to Culzean. I think that he led the way up in the North, really led the way in what can be done without destroying anything. And the people who are there now, the Finns, I think they're continuing very well actually. Yes. Phillipa Hearst out at Scottsdale, I think she has done a lot for gardening generally and for garden history. She's very involved with the National Trust, so the two tie in together there. I think the Woolmers people have grasped the nettle there. And I haven't been to Killymoon lately, but I think the girl, woman, at Killymoon. Susan Irvine is another. There are quite a few about, there are quite a few about. I must say it's very handy to have a bit of spare cash – of course it is! Because gardening's not – It's not the plants, it's the stonewalling and the drainage and all the boring things that cost money. The plants are the easy bits, because you can of course get them from friends or save up the birthdays or things like that. No, I think those people.... there are more of. The girls on the East Coast who are battling. The Cotton girl, Jill Cotton. And those girls down Swansea way who are battling with these very dry conditions, really, and light soil and sea breezes. They're battling but they're getting there. The battlers are the ones that you admire, because they get eaten out and they get salt winds come in. Yes.

**And what about in the Society? Who do you recall as being some of the colourful**

**characters that you've come across in your time? Friendships that you've made?**

My personal friendships? Well actually, I love them all! What comes to mind? Zoe Mackay, who was a marvelous secretary, Jenny Provoe, Margie Stackhouse were all great friends. Mary Darcey I've got utmost admiration for. She's a good gardener, she's a good friend, she's got a great sense of humour. I love Mary.

**What about those amongst the Committee, I'm probably thinking about, on the Committee?**

Well Margie and Jenny were on the Committee.

[unclear]

Yes, we didn't have anyone sort of eccentric, if that's what you're thinking of!

**What about nationally, on the National Committee? Who were the really influential ones, you think, who worked on a national level?**

Well I think Alethea Russell did a fantastic job, and I think Jocelyn Mitchell had a rotten job and she did it so well.

**Why was it rotten?**

Because it was so difficult. She was there at the changeover thing, we had no money, and all the information went through her husband, all the writing and notes and email. Lord knows what it cost her. But she kept the thing together, and her husband's office in Melbourne, I think, did all the work. Margaret Darling was a first class Chairman, and she too put an awful lot of personal time and effort and money into the Association. And I don't think the members, quite rightly, didn't know who put in what, but there were some very generous members. Joan Lorne-Smith was just such a lovely person, she was just a lovely person. And Dame Elisabeth. The fun of [Cork?], you know? And Michael Bligh. They were all - he was a dear boy, Michael Bligh. Not a very good Treasurer! I just can't think, I'm caught on the hop here. But they were all... They weren't rockers of the boat, I wouldn't say. I disagreed with one or two on certain points, I wasn't really very keen when we went ahead and gave the money for the companion, you know. That went on and on and on. Richard Aiken did that, and I used to think, "God, what a waste of money." And when it came out, of course, it was invaluable. I have to eat humble pie there. I know Margaret herself backed that to the hilt.

**So there was a sense of unity, a sense of focus amongst the National Committee?**

Oh yes, I think so. I think the National Committee, they changed each year, there was always someone going or coming. No, I think

they all pulled together well. They had their differences of opinion but I never remember any rows. You know, you'd just think, "Well I disagree with Tom, Dick or Harry, that's my personal opinion and you're allowed to have that." No, there was no infighting. I didn't ever notice that, any infighting, I'm glad to say. I keep saying Alethea Russell. She always impressed me as being a very sensible, hard working, broad view of things. I was sorry when her time came and she had to go.

**Now a lot of people have talked to me about that garden tour, it lives on in collective Garden History memories, that garden tour you took of Tasmania, can you recall what it was like, some of the funny times about that? Because it really was a landmark, wasn't it?**

Well of course I got into a great deal of strife because we wanted the money, and Robyn Lewellyn said to me, "Could you, do you think you could take a tour of Tasmania and earn us some money? We need two or three – I'll say three thousand." And she said, "If you could raise five it'd be marvellous." And I thought, "Well..." Anyhow I asked all my friends, and I wrote to them personally, and I said to them, "Dear so-and-so, do you think we could see the garden, and could you, do you think you could do lunch for ten dollars?" Which would seem to be an exorbitant price at the time. "And could you do morning tea for even less?" And some of them said, "Oh yes, we won't charge you, Fairie, at all." And we didn't pay at all, we didn't pay anything to go into the gardens. And then I was so embarrassed – I wanted to give them all a little present, and I didn't want to charge the Committee so I went into the local bookshop and I bought sixteen copies of 'The Man Who Planted Trees'. And three years later I went to the same shop and he said, "You know, some woman came in here some years ago and bought every copy in Tasmania!" Rather than hire the bus from one of the reputable lines, I hired the school bus – oh, I never lived this down – I hired the school bus from Cressy because I knew the bloke. The boy, the young man. And he did the school bus, and he just – Anne Cripps in particular nearly died. She said, "You must be mad, Fairie!" She said, "It'll be full of mintie papers and cigarette butts." "No," I said, "It's a new Mercedes, or fairly new Mercedes, and I've had a look at it. And the thing is, Phil knows where we're going and he knows all the people, you see he runs the school bus and he picks up all their children. So I was a little bit worried. I couldn't get him into uniform, he was, you know, a relaxed dresser. And that was a bitter pill for me. I used him twice, and do you think - ? I asked his father, "Can we get him into uniform?"

He said, "I can't, see what you can do." Anyhow, he was always on time. What he'd do, he'd bring the children into Launceston, the first one we did out of Launceston, he'd bring them into Launceston and then he'd be around at the hotel at half past eight. We'd all climb aboard. And we had fun! It's much better these days where you get scripts and things, but I had to do it as we went along. And I remember we went to Culzean, and I said to Phil, "Just drive around the block which takes in the Village Green and the church." And I said, "That's the church where my cousin -" who was on this trip - "Was married. Go around again would you Phil, I haven't quite finished the story". And how the [Baserveers?] said they were teetotallers, but they made so many homemade wines and liqueurs, by far more... Little things like that. And how the local – all the local history of Westbury, which I know quite well. So we had to go around the block about four times until I finished the story! That was when Dr Lake was there, and we had lunch in the garden. Of course it was a beautiful garden. And we went all over the place, and Sally Darling was on the trip and she said at the end, "Fairie, I don't know where you get all these girls from, they're all blonde and beautiful." We'd go to Esk Farm and we've have morning tea and there'd be three there, and then they'd all rush around to Prue Green's and help her do lunch, and then they'd rush somewhere else, to Michael McWilliams'. That day, when she wrote in her resume, whatever she said, "And Fairie and her golden girls, who appeared everywhere we went." I wrote them all and said, "Don't ever change the colour of your hair, you're known as Fairie's Golden Girls." But I don't know, we... Yes, we had fun. Because I did it the best I could without – I hadn't been on all that many tours myself. And someone said to me, "Fairie, would there be any chance - ?" Of course I made the mistake of saying that Evandale and Longford were full of antique shops. "Would there be any chance of stopping at one?" "Certainly not, we're due at Winton for morning tea." So unbeknowst to me they approached Phil and they said to Phil, "Could you be in here by eight o'clock? If we all got up early, could you, and then Fairie won't lose the half hour and we could just stop at one of the antique shops." And Phil said, "Well, I'll see what she says." "Really Phil, I know what antique shops are like, they'll get in there and we'll never get them out." And that's just what happened. I said, "Everyone back on the bus in three quarters of an hour, if not we'll just drive off because it's not fair to our hostess." In a very bossy way. So they got in there, and out rushed Bruce Rosenberg and said, "I've just bought a



gentleman's chair." I said, "I hope you're not going to bring that on the bus." And then Nicoli Simpson rushed out and she said,

"Fairie, come and have a look at this bed would you." I said, "Don't tell me you've bought a bed." And she said, "Oh yes, I think it's mahogany", and I said, "Turn it upside down to see if there are any borers in it." And of course Michael McWilliams was there on his own and he... Of course by the time – everyone paid with travelers cheques, which takes a little bit more time, and then we had to get it from... How would we get it from Brambles, and how would we get it from Melbourne to Sydney, and Sydney to Bowral or Hay or Lord knows where, and that took time. And then someone bought a twelve piece dinner set. I thought they might run in and buy an egg spoon or something, but no such luck. Well, we were hours late, they were hours late. And while we were waiting, Phil, who was the driver, said to me, "There's another antique shop down there." "Shh, don't let them hear that." So I went and had a look, and the first thing I saw was one of those Campbell flower troughs, just what I wanted. And I said, "Don't you dare tell anyone!" and I put it in the boot. Anyhow, what was the other funny thing that happened on that trip? We did, we had an awful lot of fun, because they were all... We went to Symmons Plains, now there's a girl I really – she's a great gardener and so hospitable. Beautiful garden, yes. We got there and – how are we going? She rang up that night just as I was going to bed and said, "That was the nicest group of people that I've ever had here, Fairie, I'm just ringing to tell you." I was at school with her, she was a little girl and I was a big girl. And so I got on the bus and I said, "Now Shirley Youl has just rung, and she said you were the nicest group that she's ever had. Now don't let that go to your heads!" And then we were sitting somewhere having morning tea, and a lady came over and she said, "Fairie, would there be any chance of going to the Design Centre?" And I said, "No, I cannot alter this schedule." And she said, "Well, when we come back into Launceston tonight would it be open?" I said, "It's the long weekend, it's Friday night, I would imagine they'd shut at five o'clock and I doubt if we'd be back before half past five at the very earliest." And she said, "Oh.", and I said, "If you want to ring them up" - she had a mobile phone - "And see what they say, you do it. But I can't guarantee that we're going to be back there by half past five." So she came over and said, "The girl knows you, at the Design Centre." I said, "Does she?" and she said, "Yes, her name's Margaret." I said, "Oh, Margie Saddler, of course, she's at the Design Centre. Have you got her on the phone?" "Yes." I said, "Margie, look,

I've got all these people, we won't be back until half past five," and she said "I'll stay open." I said, "Oh no, you're going home." She lives at Boat Harbour, you know, she's one of the Saddlers. "You're going home tonight." And she said, "I can go in the morning." And I said, "Margie, you can't." She said, "I will, because it will be good business." And I said, "I hope it is." Anyhow, into the Design Centre we went, and they were there until about half past seven, and what they didn't buy was nobody's business. And she rang up the next day and she said, "I made more money, more money in that one, or one and a half, or two hours than I have done in the whole week." And she said, "Any time Fairie, any time you've got to come in..." And I said to them, "This little girl, I've known her since she was a baby, she's bringing up two children on her own." I told them the story, she married the Greek, you know, etc, etc. I told them all the story and the history when we were driving along on the bus. And that's what I think made the trip, all the little bits and pieces. And I said, "She's absolutely beautiful this girl, now I expect everyone to buy something!" We got on the bus with parcels... We got out at about eight o'clock! But that's what you can do in a small place, you know. And I went to her – she's remarried, and I went to her party about two months ago and we had a lovely time. What else happened on that trip? Phil was so obliging, you see, he wasn't tied down to - like the Tiger Line bus, you know, has to be back at base at six thirty. Understandably, and that man goes off duty and somebody else... But Phil just went along as I said, and they acknowledged how nice it was, you know, having someone who was one of them. And of course he was a Rotarian, and when we'd go into Esk Farm – What's the boy's name? Stuart. "How are you Phil, how did the meeting go last night?" Friendly. Very like Trish Dixon's tours and that's why I love them. Because she had all these Monaro people the other day, we had a ball! I've got nothing to do with that.

**But you've been just about to every conference and lots of tours, do people still talk about that tour to you?**

Yes they do, the ones who were on it, and occasionally they say, "Fairie will you do it again," and I say, "No, I'm too old now to do those tours." And they've got more sophisticated.

**And did you raise the money?**

We raised seven thousand. And Robyn Lewellyn said to me, "How did you do it?" And I said, "I paid for practically everything myself." And she said, "You did?" and I said, "I wanted it to be a success, it's the first time it's been done." And that again, the last day lunch we had, we came

up the highway and we had lunch at Mona Vale, and didn't have to tell Pat anything, you know, it was a lovely lunch in the garden. And she said, we'd walked around the garden, and she said, "Would you like to have a look in the Chapel?" And we went into the Chapel and sat down in the pews and she was telling us about the Chapel and how her daughter had been married there and they'd just had a Christening, and she said, "I don't suppose anybody can play?" And somebody said that they can, and they played a hymn like 'Abide With Me' or something like that but a bit more rollicking tune, and we all sang it. And it was lovely, it was just a lovely finish. She played it, and then she said, "Join in." It was like, you know, 'Did Thou See It?' or something like that. We had all those little extras that made it always sort of funny, fun. I enjoyed it. And when we got to Michael McWilliams' for the last drink – They didn't do it then, and I said when I was doing what do you call it, the expenses, I said that I would like to, on the last night at the last garden, to have just a little bit of grog or something and a few savouries, to thank all the garden owners that we could get there, and to say from our point of view, thank you for coming and I hope you liked it, and to thank the garden owners as a mass. So we decided to have it at Michael McWilliams'. Katrina, my daughter, was working in the wine department for David, so I said, "Look, we've got no glasses, we've got no grog." And Prue Green and Jo Johnston and a few others said, "We'll make a few quick savouries", and we walked around that garden in the evening. February, just beautiful. And then I stood on a box and said – oh, and Stuart came, and Prue Green's husband came, and they said, "We wouldn't miss it for worlds, we wouldn't miss it for worlds!" It was just a fun thing. And after that I notice we've got very sophisticated, and we have proper drinks and proper champagne and proper glasses, you know. It was like a sort of five day picnic, a six day picnic or something. That was the best time I've had. Yes, you can get too sophisticated. I didn't have any notes or anything, I just had to ad lib as I went along. Well that's alright when you can ad lib, but when you get, you know, a little bit more difficult... Were you going to turn that off? Because I was just going to tell you the funny story about when we had the Brits and – I don't think this is for publication.

#### **Yes, can I record it?**

Anne Cripps, some years ago the British Garden History wrote to the Australian and said, "We would like to bring our members out to look at the Colonial gardens of more or less Eastern Australia." New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania. And Anne Cripps was doing it, and

she said, "Would you come with me because I'm fairly new to this." And I said yes, and we had them in. It was spring, rather clement weather, and they were very nice people. Very intelligent, very cluey, very interested in the convict settlements, and we really had to be on top of it. Anne had done the spade work and all the written work, she'd done a very good job indeed. And I said to Mary Darcy, "We're going to be" - we asked if we could go there, and I said, "We're going to get to you at three o'clock, we have to be at the Allport Gallery at five and if we're late we'll never get in there again. Do you think we could have a quick cup of tea on your verandah, you know, just the pot and perhaps a scone if you can manage or a sandwich?" She said, "Yes, certainly Fairie." We got there and it was cold and misty and she said, "Look I hope it's not – I've set it in the dining room." And she had the dining room and the sitting room with the fire, and the beautiful flowers. And she had, on the dining table, afternoon tea set. With three or four sorts of sugar, three or four sorts of milk, tea in teapots, coffee in pots, proper cups and saucers. And of course the most beautiful afternoon tea, she's a marvellous cook. And I was standing next to one British woman, and she said, "Oh, you Colonials really live quite well, don't you?" And I said, "Oh, do you think so?", indicating that we always had afternoon tea like that and not in the kitchen in a mug! And they were very - every now and again we'd have this Colonial bit. Then on the last night I must have had too much to drink or something and I said, "You know, we are really quite proud to be Colonial, I'm particularly glad to be a Colonial. When you think we're only two hundred years old." And thinking of this afternoon tea, you know, I really think she thought we'd have it in a billy on the back... Oh dear, I was careful what I said there, but anyhow I thought it was quite funny. But that was a more staid tour, you know, they really asked all sorts of questions and you had to rush home and get out your books at night and think, "Gosh, I couldn't answer that." When was Port Arthur abandoned or settled or whatever it is. We had a certain amount of data but not everything. Anyhow, Anne was disappointed, they were going to come again last year, the Americans weren't they, I think she was doing a tour for Americans, but it crashed out last time. Those overseas tours, I've never done one. I think they're really hard work.

#### **Thank you Fairie**

That was really just a gossip and a chat.

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