AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

TASMANIAN BRANCH

Photographer: Rhonda Hamilton November 2021

Interviewee:	**BOB MAGNUS**
Interviewer:	Jean Elder
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0:00 **[JE] This is an interview with Bob Magnus recorded for the Australian Garden History Society's National Oral History collection. I'll be speaking about his life as an orchardist and pioneering nurseryman specialising in heirloom fruits. The interview is taking place on Monday 8 November 2021 at Woodbridge, Tasmania. The interviewer is Jean Elder and our recorder is Rhonda Hamilton.**

Well Bob perhaps you could give for the record your name, full date of birth to start proceedings.

[BM] Well my true name is Robert Magnus, but from about 12 years old people started to call me Bob and it's been Bob ever since. And I come from a bit of a disjointed family in that – it's a bit hard to say actually, as I'm getting older I keep thinking about this. My father was a successful and rather wealthy businessman in Sydney and he was married, and he caused quite a, um what would you call it?

A ruckus?

Yeah a disturbance, a ruckus, in that when he met my mother who was considerably younger, he ditched very unceremoniously the wife that he was married to and zipped off with my mother. Which in 1940 was very unacceptable I guess. And that was the sort of thing that hung over my sister and my life all our lives, until number one died and he had to pay a lot of alimony in those days.

Anyway that's, that was our beginnings.

So you were born in, whereabouts Bob?

In Queen's, Queen Street Women's Hospital in Sydney. We were both caesarean, my sister and I, and now I look back that was certainly very, um …

Unusual for the times?

No not unusual, but it was very symptomatic in the way that our parents brought us up. I think they wanted, my father was 50 when I was born and my mother was, she was in her – quite a lot younger, and they wanted to have kids quickly. But it didn't work really the way that they hoped it would. And poor Mum had to bear this.

Right. So what actual year were you born? What was your date – and your birthday was yesterday.

Yesterday. The 7th of November 1943, often Melbourne Cup Day – but not this year. (Laughter)

And growing up, how would you describe – what kind of child were you?

Spoilt I would say. I was a spoilt child. We both were, we were both from a wealthy and privileged household and we were spoilt, but in those days children should be seen but not heard. It was, we were spoilt in the parameters if we obeyed everything it worked out okay. For instance we had a very formal household. When I was probably seven or eight, if we wanted to eat, pick up our bones at the table, we had to knock on the

table. Very Victorian. And get permission from Dad so we could put our cutlery down. And on the cobs of corn we had those little things you stick in each end to eat.

And I think my poor mother didn't realise the forced environment that she'd got into, married into, but she managed it very well.

And was there a house and garden in this big, where you grew up?

Well they moved a couple of times. The place they stayed in the longest they did – as Dad got older and he got out of the business he …

Mum, she manipulated him. Happily – that was our life, she manipulated my father always and he became garden crazy. Mum came from a garden family and he started – the garden was incredibly prissy and ordered.

And then he got into cymbidium orchids and he went absolutely bonkers about cymbidiums and spent hours in his little shade house and painted the leaves with milk so they looked shiny. And it became a very, very important part of his life.

4:44 **And did you get involved in that?**

No, no we didn't have any community work at all, not my father and I. No, nothing.

You talked about we. You had a sibling?

A sister, one year younger.

So in this house your father was involved with orchids, and what –

Well as soon as I was 12 they sent me to boarding school which was also seminal in my life because it was such a terrible place. And all those things you're hearing on the radio at the moment about kids and sexuality and all those things in boarding schools – absolutely all those things happened to me.

Uhum.

Yeah, so –

Teachers and the boys, there was this incredible level of – it was so incredibly hypercritical. There was this veneer of honesty and religion on top and underneath there was this cesspool of …

But I mean you can't blame the kids in a way. It was, when all these kids are in puberty and they've got such a lot of testosterone. (Laughs)

So how long was boarding?

I was at school for five, at boarding school – one of the most exclusive ones in Sydney, Newington College.

And then after that what did you study at school? What did that lead you to?

Ah no, I didn't study anything, I just went – I did the Leaving Certificate and then it was understood that I was going in and take up the family business. And after I left school I went and worked in the family business and I hated it, I just hated it so incredibly much. And this rift came with my father.

What was the business?

It was women's clothing.

Okay.

And then he wouldn't sort of let go and so he got me an apprenticeship at Woolworths on the Junior Executive Scheme, and I worked at Woolworths in King's Cross for – I can't remember how long, and I hated that even more. And then he got me another job as an accountant, a junior in a taxi company at North Sydney and I hated that.

That's when I – that came to that point I left home which was incredibly traumatic for the family.

How old were you then?

19 probably.

And where did you go Bob?

I went to Manly to a group of bohemians. (Laughter)

Tell us about that, what did you get interested in then?

There was a coffee lounge in the main street of Manly called the Globe Trotter's Coffee Lounge, that was run by a Jewish immigrant, and it was the place that all the young dropouts met and had coffee and talked about extrasensory things. And I quickly joined that group of people. A few of them were gardeners and I started – one guy took me under his wing and he gave me garden jobs, and I started doing little jobs to make enough money to live, mowing lawns. Plenty of wealthy people around Manly.

7:48 **Do you remember his name?**

Yeah Max Burton.

And he had a garden?

No he was a – he was also iconoclastic man (laughs) and he sort of took me under his wing I guess. He just did, he made a living from being a gardener.

Wow, and that was the start of your interest in gardening.

Yes I suppose you could say that.

And from there?

At the same time I lived in a sort of a share-house with other young people. I got a job in a nursery at Narrabeen outside Sydney, and I

worked there for probably nine months or a year, I can't really remember. I didn't like that much either because there was no overhead watering, we had to stand all day with a hose watering plants. It was very un-creative.

And then I got another job with an old Dutchman – well he wasn't so old, much younger than I am now – at Terry Hills. Marten van Menz, he was one of the Dutch people that were expelled from Indonesia. He had a five acre block at Terry Hills where he grew dahlias. And so I started working with him and fell in love with dahlias.

Dahlias and ducks, yes that's right. And I guess it was there that I really started to have an affection for plants. In the summer he had planted I think three consecutive lots of dahlias: early ones, and mid-season and then late, so he had a long picking period. We'd pick dahlias – I'd get up at five and I was up at Terry Hills by six, and we'd pick until it got too hot. I can still remember that shed just full of dahlias, it was just really incredible.

I stayed there with him for a couple of years, maybe three years I can't really remember, until I decided to go to Europe. And at the same time I was going to the Conservatorium and studying music. (Laughs)

My goodness.

Yeah I told you it's a long and interesting story.

And what inspired you to go to Europe?

Well I could see that nothing was really happening in my life, and the music was really important at that time. I don't know what inspired me, I guess being young and footloose and fancy free.

And also in those days the boats used to come from Europe full of immigrants and then they'd go back to Europe empty. My boat, my trip to Europe, I can still remember it was £112 on the boat. So it was cheap and exciting I guess.

How old were you then roughly?

I must have been 21 suppose.

Off on your adventure.

Yeah, off on my … (Laughs)

11:03 **And when you got to Europe what –**

Oh well then a whole new facet of the story starts.

Well I'd already discovered classical music when I was …

You studied music at a conservatorium?

No. Yes I did, I had private lessons with a flute teacher called Mr McMahon at the Conser[vatorium] – at the Con, yes. But no, I didn't go to the conservatorium as a student, I just had private lessons.

So now we're in Europe and what are you doing in Europe footloose and fancy free?

Well I went ostensibly to study the flute. (Laughs) And I got off the boat in Rome. Was it Naples, Naples or Rome? I think in Rome, I can't really remember. And I headed to Bologna where I had heard there was a good flute teacher, and hitch-hiking with a rucksack … that was quite an adventure. And if I look back now I think of the silliness and the naivety of doing something like that.

And I lobbed into Bologna and went to the Youth Hostel and stayed there and then I went to the Con and they were just breaking up for the summer holidays. (Laughs) I found the old flute teacher in Bologna and I stayed there with him – gee you're testing my memory here – for a while, I can't remember how long. Then I continued my travels. I think I was starting to get itchy feet.

So any visits to gardens, any interest in gardening at this stage in Europe?

I can remember visiting lots of gardens, and especially those Italian gardens that were so incredibly formal. No, I don't think I had formed any feeling about, especially about gardens then.

At that point.

No.

So how long in Europe and when did you get back to Australia?

Oh well that was a whole new story. I went first to Bologna and then I thought well I'll travel. So I went to Florence and stayed there in a youth hostel and kept meeting young people. And travelled further north, and I went to Munich, Munchen, and stayed there and I got a job there. And I also went briefly to the Conservatorium there when the summer holidays were over. But I didn't fancy Germany very much.

I got a job working in a furrier working on ladies fur coats for a while. And that was awful. (Laughs) The man didn't like me and I didn't like him – and autumn was coming and it was going to get quite cold. And I can remember going down into the back of the little market in the middle of Munich and I'd buy my fruit and things for lunch every day then I went back to the factory in the morning and it's dark, and then you get out in the evening and it's dark again. So you're missing the whole –

The whole of the day.

The whole of the light of the day, yeah. So I decided then to hitch-hike south. I travelled by train and hitch-hiking to Athens. And I heard on the grapevine I guess that on the island of Hydra was an ex-patriot Aussie group of dropouts. *My Friend Jack*, [written by Australian journalist George Johnston] can you remember the guy who – yeah, well he was with me. He had lived there and he was the one that started this group of people, and they were all real dropouts.

And so I just lobbed into – caught the ferry over to Hydra and said, "Here I am guys." (Laughs) I didn't say that but at that age you expect the world to be waiting for you. And I stayed there for quite a while, I can't remember how much. But when I arrived there I can still remember I went swimming. Then winter came. The people, I actually met the Australian people that were still living there and they were very, not different but unfriendly and distant and they didn't really want to know me. And I met other people. And got myself a little flat and I stayed there, I can't remember how long.

16:01 **And so what eventually brought you back to Australia?**

Well that's not the end of the story yet.

Oh! (Laughter)

Then from Athens I went, I decided to …

The story was that on the road that if you hitch-hiked through Israel you can stay in a kibbutz free, and you work, and I thought well if it's going to be a nasty winter I'll hitch-hike to Israel and stay in a kibbutz. Which I did, and I hitch-hiked right across, right up to Macedonia to Istanbul and in Istanbul I met other young people. And I hitch-hiked across Turkey and across to Damascus and I met some other young people there. And I can still remember the boys taking me through the red-light district and showing me all the prostitutes sitting in the windows and (laughs) and they …

It was quite a trip, I felt so naïve. You know all the dangers and things I never even thought about or considered. And I finally got through Syria into Jordan, and there was a gate there between Jordan –

Oh no, I met these English people and they said, "Oh gee go to Jordan you can go and see the wife, the King's wife, because she's English and she loves to have (laughs) visitors.

Visitors.

So I went, full of naivety with my rucksack and stuff and we had a very quick visit with the wife of the King of Jordan.

And also those English people, two English guys in a jeep, took me to Petra which was wonderful.

And I sat up in those big caves and played my flute, and the echoes went all around Petra. It was really, really quite amazing.

Magnificent.

Yes fantastic. Anyway after that I went to the Mandelbaum Gate I think it was called. And Mandelbaum in Hebrew is almond tree. And I crossed from there into Israel.

And I met a group of other English guys, in the youth hostel. And there was a place in Jerusalem you could go and say you'd like to stay in a

kibbutz, and they'd say, "Which part of the country would you like to go to?"

There was an American guy escaping from the Vietnam War called Andras and an English guy called Dave and I, and we all decided to go to live at this Rosh HaNikra kibbutz right up on the border with Lebanon. You could, it was a kilometre over the border, so we all went there. And I suppose you could almost say that was the beginning of my horticultural. They had lots and lots of different things there. They had a big avocado plantation, they grew potatoes, they grew maize, they grew melons – lots of melons, and they had a big dairy. And I just loved bananas, yes. (Laughter)

So you started, you got some training and help as you were learning about horticulture on the kibbutz?

I was just working there, but because I showed a big interest they showed an interest in me. And there was talk at the kibbutz that maybe I could stay there forever and become a kibbutznik which I didn't fancy.

Anyway after quite a while there this news came to the kibbutz, gossip, that this group of Swiss girls called something for International Living. There was 15 or so young Swiss girls coming to the kibbutz to learn what it's like to live in a kibbutz. And Anna Maria was one of them. (Laughter) So all these girls appeared, some of them got shacked up very quickly with Israeli guys. And Anna Maria loved working with bananas and sometimes I was in the bananas a bit, and we –

So there it began.

And there it began, exactly.

Yes. So the kibbutz era was important in terms of starting –

Seminally. Totally. Yeah in terms of –

Both in terms of ending up marrying Anna Maria –

Having an interest in horticulture and finding the love of my life.

So anyway after Anna Maria and all the Swiss girls went – we only sort of had a chat and a little kiss on virtually the last night. (Laughter and talking) The second last night I think the guy I was sharing my room with went off and Anna Maria and I sat and talked, and we had a little cuddle I think and a kiss.

Then two days later she left and went to Switzerland. And I was pretty struck (laughs) and after that I decided to follow her to Switzerland. And I suppose we wrote each other letters. I can't remember what time of the year it was but it must have been early summer, I got the boat across to Greece from Hydra and got the train and hitch-hiked up to Switzerland. I got out of the train in the village next to where Anna Maria lived and started walking across the fields and asking people where to go, and I always got funny looks because no-one could speak English.

Oh how romantic.

It was very romantic, extremely romantic. And her parents happened to be away on holidays, I think they were on the Adriatic having a little beach holiday.

Anna Maria was in the school house up on, way up in the forest. And her sister rang up and said, "Hey there's this Australian guy here." Anna Maria jumped in her VW so fast and raced down and grabbed me and took me up to her school house – which you couldn't find anything more beautiful and romantic. This old school house, quite large, all made with shingles. And the side of the walls were made with shingles as well as the roof.

22:51 **Probably several hundred years old.**

Yeah quite, yeah.

Wow. So then that started – what work did you do then when you were in Switzerland? What happened?

I just turned up and I think what happened was I stayed there for a while and then word came out that the teachers – the parents of the kids said, 'We can't have you, the teacher with a man, living with a man in the school house." So Anna Maria had to …

Is that the story, or I went to England before or after? Anyway it doesn't really matter.

(Laughter and Anna Maria, Bob's wife, speaks in the background regarding Bob working on a farm during the autumn, being asked to marry him, everyone being unhappy about that and her moving to Australia, Bob returns to England and she wrote to him 'please don't come back')

Okay I can take back over now. And when I got this letter of course, what would I do when I get a 'don't come back' letter?

Of course, you go back.

I jumped on the next train. And in England I went and visited this guy called Dave who was in the kibbutz and I stayed with him, and I managed to get a job for a little while in St Mary Cray, it's an outer suburb of London. It was a factory where they made toasters and electrical gear. All the rest of the guys that worked there were from the West Indies, these big tall black guys and it was – oh it was really quite interesting. And Dave's father happened to be the first clarinettists in the London Symphony Orchestra, we didn't really cross paths but it was interesting to be there.

So anyway when I got the 'don't come back' letter from Anna Maria I retired from my work which was also in autumn, and that was even worse in England to go into that factory in the morning and it was pitch black and come out in the evening and it was really dark again. Very, very depressing.

We'd better move on a bit now to get back to Australia. I know it's fascinating, but I want to hear now about – so you and Anna Maria had arrived together a bit and then came back to Australia together?

Yes we did. No we had a very romantic –

(*Anna Maria speaks in the background about Bob's idea of growing avocado trees in Australia because in those days there was only one orchard in New South Wales that had avocados).*

Wow.

26:57 **So that's how the kibbutz really influenced then.**

Yes, ah ha.

So you didn't come back to grow avocados?

Well when I got back there, and they knew they'd lost me and I wasn't with that Israeli girl anymore, they weren't very friendly. And I didn't stay for very long but …

(*Anna Maria speaks in the background about Bob telling his parents that he was going to get married to a Swiss girl and would be coming to Australia, and that healed the rift between the parents. They came over for the wedding*).

I went and picked them up in Napoli and then we travelled by train up to Switzerland. We had a very romantic wedding with a Presbyterian minister I think, and he could speak …

He was a divorced Presbyterian minister and that's why they expelled him from England or from Scotland. And he held the service in this tiny little church right up very high in a place called Lauenen. Yes, and he could do it in German and in English.

(Laughter)

And then you started your life in Australia?

Yes. We stayed for a while longer in Switzerland, I can't remember how long.

So how old were you by the time you got back to Australia?

How old was I, 24 and you were?

(*Anna Maria reminds Bob he was 23 and she was 22).*

We were babes in the woods.

We might just have a pause there for a minute.

Okay.

Actually I'll have to just say it's going to be too hard for our transcriber, I love hearing your chatter, but (laughs) …

(Pause in recording)

(New recording commences)

29:15 **This is the continuation of Bob Magnus interview.**

Now Bob you've talked about, and that was so exciting hearing about the wedding in Switzerland, and then you and Anna Maria came back to Australia. So where did you settle when you first came back?

Because we'd so-called patched up the rift with my parents – they lived in Castlecrag in Sydney, and we stayed with them one or two nights, and then my father really just realised straight away that that wasn't going to work and his space was being threatened.

And so essentially he'd heard – my father was a great newspaper reader and he always liked looking at real estate, about the avocado plantation, which was just two acres of avocados for sale at the back of Mullumbimby. I mean it was wonderful that they bought it for us, but it was expedient for him to get me and Anna Maria off his hands. So we all drove up to Byron Bay together, or to Bangalow, and we went and looked at this property. And essentially they bought it for us for $24,000 it was in those days, which was …

Roughly what year was that? Mid-sixties was it?

No that was in 1980.

Right okay. 1980?

No, couldn't have been '67

'67 right, yes so it would be a bit earlier because you came to Tassie in '80.

It was '67.

Right. And how long were you there growing avocados and other things?

Well because I knew a little bit about avocados I thought it was absolutely wonderful, but the little patch of avocados was right on the edge of the rainforest and we had these, what they call fruit spotting bugs. A little bug like a harlequin bug that stung the fruits. And if the fruits were small they abscessed and fell off and if they were bigger it left a wound on the fruit.

And so the Ag department were very interested because it was the only avocado plantation in the area and they suggested that I spray the trees with DDT. Well I mean in those days that's what you did. And the bananas were drenched in Dieldrin, and it was the most terrible thing. Anyway so I followed their advice and I bought this big sprayer and I put on this huge plastic coat and used to spray the trees all the time. And

Anna Maria used to get my clothing that I'd sprayed them with and the chemicals that came out of it were just absolutely terrible.

We decided that this wasn't the life that we had planned, and you're not going to live long if you're going to do those sort of things so we put the place, after I think 18 months or two years – much to my parents' disgust and anger, we decided to sell the place. Which we did. And we doubled our money and sold it to a guy, he was just that newly rich man who wanted to have …

And from there where?

From there we moved to Alstonville which was very close to Lismore and we bought an empty paddock and we built a little house for ourselves. And we started having a nursery and growing avocado trees, initially avocados and then I grew custard apples and a few mangoes and all different things.

And Bob you were totally self-taught at this stage, had you had any formal –

In Israel I worked in the nursery with them a bit growing avocados. Pretty much self-taught I'd say, but it's the best teacher somehow if you love it and you're keen on it. And so I started growing and grafting avocados.

Then this whole wave came and across the valley from us the Pitt Street farmer syndrome started. This astute businessman bought a big area, it was all old dairy farms where the dairies had gone, and he was going to grow avocados and sell blocks off to wealthy, retiring Sydney people.

He wanted people to come and graft these avocados. He managed to get lots of avocado seeds. There were three of us I think and we sat there all day grafting these avocados and I probably grafted 100,000 – you know huge amounts. These guys would bring you – they were in pots and they'd bring you a tree and you'd graft it and put the paper on and give it back to him, and they'd give you another one. And so you sat there all day. It was sort of a piece work I think we were paid, I don't know how much anymore. I think that's where I really became interested and good at grafting, yes.

And you first learnt those skills a bit in the kibbutz in Israel?

Well I think it was a succession, yes.

And then you were travelling all the time at this stage?

No, we had a young family and because Anna Maria's a weaver we managed – the slaughter yards were nearby and any time they got sheep from the tablelands, from Tenterfield.

And if they ever had a black sheep they'd let us know and so we'd run down to the slaughter yards. We built up this flock of coloured sheep which was really fun. I did the spinning and Anna Maria did the weaving, which was really nice.

And you had the three children by then?

Well we had three, all three were born up there. In the Lismore Base hospital I think, or Mullumbimby.

Anyway then Anna Maria was always complaining how hot it was and she broke out in these blisters and heat rash and things, and it was serendipitous I think, we thought we'd come and hire a campervan and come and visit Tasmania. So we did that and we landed in, I think in Launceston, and we picked up a campervan and drove around. And it was this time of the year, the apples were all flowering and it just looked so gorgeous. And Anna Maria said, "Oh isn't this just wonderful here." (Laughs) And it was cheap, I mean the Northern Rivers – prices were exploding and we went from 25,000 to 50,000 and then we sold that for 90,000 or something like that. A lot of money in those days.

And so we came to Tassie and we looked at each other and said, "Gee with that amount of money we'll live like kings." We decided to go back home, to Lismore to Alstonville, and put our place on the market. Which we did.

36:30 **And that was 1980 when you bought –**

It must have been '79, yes.

And what did you buy here?

Well we bought a little place in Ranelagh which we thought would be a good idea to – which was a very bad idea actually – to stay in and look around for the perfect place. So we lived in Ranelagh and the kids went to school at Huonville, the three of them, and we stayed there for …

At first we thought the east coast would be fantastic. But we went over there at the end of summer and it was so incredibly arid and dry and we looked at each other and said we just couldn't live here. So everything sort of gravitated down to the Huon. We looked for a long time. The kids went to school in Huonville and Anna Maria and I'd go for trips looking. You know we'd get *The Mercury* and look at all the ads and places, and every time we found a place that looked good we found that there was something wrong with it.

Every time we came over Woodbridge Hill Anna Maria would say, "Oh this is the view I like" and "This would be lovely". One day the real estate agent from Roberts rang up and said, "Hey I've got this place on Woodbridge Hill." For 20,000 I think it was. Anna Maria got so incredibly excited and we drove over here, and it was exactly the place that she had fancied. And so we didn't even bargain about the price because we were rich mainlanders.

And we bought that, the 25 acres that was next door down the hill and that's where we started – well we built the house. It took us two years, and that's when Anna Maria said, "Oh well …" I mean they grew Democrats and Jonathons and Granny Smiths.

So you arrived after the apple industry had been somewhat demolished.

Just at the time that the tree pull scheme was on, at the end of it. Yeah, and there was only the so-called better orchardists who could survive the tough times. And I mean when you drive round here now and you see all those old pear trees, they didn't pay to tree pull on the pears, so they left their pear trees and they pulled out the apples.

And what got you thinking about saving the old heirloom varieties? How did that come about?

Anna Maria said, "Well where's the Gravensteins" and where were all the apples that she knew in Switzerland. Then we discovered the Grove Research station that had a collection of 800 or 1000 varieties and that were totally neglected, nobody cared about them. And I went in there and asked if I could have access to the collection there and they reluctantly let me in.

I used to go through there, even starting when we still lived in Ranelagh, starting to go and check the trees out and look at, there's a lot of apple literature. And I found out that, not a quarter, maybe a fifth of the trees were mis-named and they were in a fairly bad state. They used to prune them because they wanted the grafting wood, you know they'd cut them right down and they made lots of shoots. So they maintained them, but barely.

And in the time I went there, which was oh probably 12 years, I'd go back every week during the ripening season and corroborate that against the literature. You know if it's ripening in August it's not a Cox's Orange Pippin because they ripen, mature here in March. So I could corroborate the literature and the varieties.

You recorded all this Bob?

Well yeah but I chucked it out, nobody was interested. (Laughs) Well a few people who were interested … I took a lot of people through on my days and I did Adult Ed. courses. And with Adult Ed. we'd have three weeks: we had early varieties, mid-season varieties and late, and I took 15 people through. And they all tasted an apple and we walked to the next one.

So you were educating people about these old varieties.

Yeah well, it was pretty exciting. But there was a collection there that nobody cared about except me, which was absolutely wonderful.

And then you took, you were allowed to take cuttings and start planting?

Yes they let me take cuttings.

And that's how you started.

They were very generous, they were wonderful. Actually the first guy that ran the research station was an Englishman, he wasn't friendly at all, and then they got this Serb called Predo Jotik and he looked after the research station. That's when Fuji were just becoming popular for their

brief fruiting time. And Predo was very expansive and let me come and go virtually as I pleased, which was lovely.

So the property, you took the cuttings and grafted them, got your own trees going on the –

No well I didn't have to in those days, I could just go there and get grafting wood.

Oh right.

Then after, oh I'm sorry the time thing's all messed up. We heard on the grapevine that the apple industry in Tasmania was in such a bad state they were going to close the research station. And it came to pass.

I think that was 2010 or thereabouts that it closed.

Yes probably. You maybe know more than I do. Anyway we decided that out of those thousand odd varieties we were going to take the ones that we knew were good and the best ones. At that time I was getting out of the – oh it was probably a bit before 2010, anyway – so I decided to graft our own collection. Which I did out on the farm down there, we took about 400 varieties out of there that were the cream as we thought and started our own.

And it came to pass that they closed the research station and leased it out to someone else, and all these different things happened there and everything collapsed. We at least had –

Some of them.

The best, what we thought were the best and the true ones for ourselves.

It's quite a remarkable story really isn't it?

Yes. And now it's come so far. And I decided to retire from the business and my son-in-law and Nik, the two that were going to take over the apples. And they didn't get along well together at all and it looked like it was going collapse. And then Steve, my son-in-law that lives here, he let Nik take over the apple business. And I was just the senior citizen.

(Laughter) I still do a lot, I grafted quite a few thousand for Nik this year and every year I keep my hand in. I've been giving grafting courses, so now it's …

44:15 **Going back to when you were first setting up the 25 acres, so they were planted with the trees from the Grove Nursery?**

We bought the rootstocks and we put two trees of each variety in. If we had time I'd show you. So we've got quite a big collection now, I put them on very dwarfing rootstocks and we cut them down to about this high every year, and then they make all this growth which we use for scion material to graft more.

The technique of using the dwarf stock, was that your idea?

On one of our trips through Europe, in France we always went and looked at apple and pear varieties. This is diverting a little bit, but the wisdom of the story that goes with the collapse of the Tasmanian apple industry was that England was getting all the apples from France and there was no market any more for Tasmanian apples. Well people at the Ag. Department said, "That's not the way the story was." The story was that the Tasmanian orchardists were so, I don't know what the word would be, not dumb but –

Was it rigid?

Rigid yes, set in their ways that they wouldn't accept the new way of growing apples on these clonal stocks, dwarf stocks, they still grew their own on seedling rootstocks. And the quality of the apples wasn't so good, and it took them a lot longer to come into bearing.

The Tasmanian industry was killing itself in relation to the rest of the world, and the ones that survived – and the Ag Department introduced all these dwarfing rootstocks. There's quite an incredible range, it's quite a history unto itself of these rootstocks, a new industry was virtually born growing your trees on these clonal rootstocks.

Great. That really fills out the story. With your 25 acres did you see changes in the climate over that period of time since you've been growing apples here?

Well despite what we hear daily about climate change. We had a couple of years where it was very dry winters and didn't fill up the dams. But no, I'd say we've been very blessed here: we had that thunderstorm the other night and very heavy rain which we're not accustomed to here, but no I would say that the climate is …

Been relatively stable in this area.

Yes. Some years we had snow quite often and other years we've just had a few flakes. But I'd say the climate has been fairly stable here.

And so you described, Bob, that your children have been deeply involved in gardening and in one way or another with the business.

Well they all went to university. Nik became a doctor because always in his life he wanted to go to Antarctica and he became a doctor and went to Antarctica – and was very disappointed because the only thing that went wrong in Antarctica was everybody drank too much. (Laughs) And Lisa, she went to university and became a graphic artist. Dan, the eldest one, he also went to university and studied Design in Wood.

Then they all wanted to come back and take over, well they were always interested in the garden but they didn't fancy making a living out of it. And they happily all picked up and ran with it and loved it, and found out that going to university complemented …

Brought skills to the garden.

You've been described as a veteran stall holder at Salamanca Market, when did that start?

When we first got here in 1980 you could turn up at Salamanca any day and there were empty – it used to finish at Montpelier Retreat. And we decided to grow flowers for the market. Anna Maria is a flower lover and we had little plants in pots. And I put apple trees in pots – that was a terrible mistake because nobody here buys apple trees in pots. And so we'd go up to the market on a Saturday morning and sell what we had, our produce.

And that could be flowers, apples, fruit and vegies? Anything.

Anything that we could produce at that stage, yes.

And you did that every week?

Well it started off very erratically and then, again on the grapevine, we heard that the market was a success and they were going to – if you had a stall you could make it your own. And we made the decision that well we'd have our own stall. It wasn't run by the council then it was run by the Salamanca Market Stallholders Association. And we got our own stall, then we were committed to going there every week.

And that's when the flower business became much more important and I grew the flowers. On Friday Anna Maria and another lady helped her and we made bunches, and we'd put our produce, mostly flowers, into the van and took them to the market. And I did it for 28 years. (Laughter) It was a good lifestyle. Now Lisa our daughter took over the stall, she's running it.

Yes, family tradition.

Coming back to when you had the orchard and you were growing the fruit trees, was that mail order? How did you sell them?

Yes it was mostly mail order.

And you've employed a lot of people to do that?

No I did it all myself. It was quite humble compared to what Nik's doing today. Put an ad in *Your Garden* magazine and things like that.

No catalogues.

Yeah I had a little catalogue. Send two 33 cent stamps I think they used to pay for a catalogue. (Laughs) That's before computer times, and of course now it's all done on the internet which is quite a big thing.

And was the garden open to the public right from the beginning?

No it wasn't. Can you remember Tony May – he was the man that ran the Botanic Gardens, the manager of the Hobart Botanic Gardens – and he sadly committed suicide. It must have been him and the owner of Westlands – Tony someone [Vanderstay] – they were the ones that went around and checked the gardens to see if they were suitable in those

days. They came and looked at our garden and they included us in the Open Garden Scheme, and so we were in that for quite a while.

And then Anna Maria and I were asked if we'd be selectors for the Open Garden Scheme. We used to go and look at other people's gardens. We even went to look at one at Tea Tree once, it was The Marshes. What's it called?

Broadmarsh? No.

So we had a few years of going and looking at other people's gardens which was very fascinating. But we enjoyed having the garden open, and I think the most we ever had was something like 900 or 1000 people there. And we had a great time but in the end you sort of started dreading it, it became a bit too big and so it came to a natural end I think.

Then after that we got involved with Peter and Karen at ['Wychwood'] Mole Creek. They had an open garden and so we used to go up there and do apple tastings in their garden, and that was great fun. That also lasted for maybe four or five years until it also came somehow to a natural end. I think Karen had some sort of sickness and they sold it to somebody else.

I've been involved in the garden …

The garden world –

In lots of different ways.

You have. And can you tell us about the Magnus Summer Surprise, your famous apple?

Yes. Well it's a very interesting story too, I'm sorry. (Laughs) On my way to the research station at Grove I passed this big apple tree in a garden, and over the years I looked at it. It had purple leaves and when it flowered it had chartreuse, pink flowers. It was quite an exceptional tree. And I sort of didn't take much notice. The fruits were quite a nice size, and one day I stopped and I picked a couple up off the ground. They were all falling on the ground, riddled with codling moth. And tasted one and it was quite a nice apple.

I took grafting wood off it, hung over the fence and I helped myself. I started to sell it as Huonville Crab and I sold thousands of Huonville Crab trees and they're all over Australia now. And I even saw recently when I was looking through red apples on the internet that it's already in England and in America. I don't know how it's got there so quickly, and they're talking about it compared to other red apples.

Which, the Magnus Summer Surprise or the Huonville Crab?

No, Huonville Crab. And then I started making – we've got a press that we imported and we made our own juice. One year we were pressing a lot of Huonville Crabs of our own, I thought I'll just spread the seeds out on the ground. And I put them in a little spot and I covered them up with

some nice mulch, and that spring they came up like veritable hairs on a pig's back or whatever.

I thought this is amazing and I started to think that if I could cross the Huonville Crab with a worthwhile tree, another variety, I'd have a red fleshed apple. That was probably the best part of 20 years ago I started that, probably a bit more.

And you created Magnus Summer Surprise.

Well I've created probably a hundred.

But this is probably the most well-known isn't it?

Well that's the one that – we've patented all these different varieties and there are more coming on line. That was the first one. Some of them were just not worth having, they were little and shrivelled …

It didn't work.

It didn't work. But that was a good one.

And what's the process of patenting?

Well there's a guy at Dodge's Ferry, he's the man that will patent the apple. He patents all sorts of – if you get a new seedling in your garden, a new rhododendron, he registers it. How can I say, he's the one that does the dirty work for farmers because we don't know all about those things. He patents that variety and he takes them to the patent office to ascertain that it is an individual variety and it's not something else, and then you get the rights to that apple. But that's happening all the time, yeah.

And you did that with about a hundred?

No, no, no.

Or you only got patent on a couple.

With five I think I've decided that it was worth running with I suppose is the right word. So this is the first one. He's got two more at the moment. One of them has got very unusual flesh in that it's got white and red stripes in the flesh. Yes it's very unusual. And I've got another one, it's the biggest one, instead of being like that this one is a regular sized apple that we call Pinky. (Laughter)

57:15 Which makes me come to some of the names. There's most amazing names of apples aren't there over the years? The French names.

Yes, we've got the one Cemetery in the Country, Cimietre du pays. And of course everybody knows about Mrs Peasgood's Nonsuch, but there's quite a few apples called Nonsuch. You've got a list there have you?

Oh just a few that I like, that my father grew and I grew up with. But they were the old fashioned ones, Gravenstein and the Five Crown and things like that.

Yeah, well Gravenstein is supposed to be a Danish apple. And the grav – you know what the grav is, he's the prince or the duke and the stein, it refers to, it's not a stone, it's a precious stone. So it's supposed to be a very positive way of saying this apple is the 'joy of the prince' or the … Yeah the names, the stories. But a lot have got boring names too. (Laughter)

Oh – Goldsmith, because I thought I'd quite like to try that, the cross between a Granny Smith and the Golden Delicious.

Yes, well we managed to get that from the research station when it had closed down. It's a nice apple but it doesn't really …

It's not one or the other?

No it's neither one or the other.

Okay, betwixt and between.

Yeah, and I don't know where it's come from, I've got no history of it.

Coming back, I just wanted to pick up on the experience you had at Lismore with the sprays and the chemicals and you came down to the orchards here. Have you had to use sprays at all much on your apples?

No. We made it a point never to because we weren't selling our fruit – I mean the imperative orchardists – do you know how the orchard thing works? The imperative is perfect appearing fruit. You'll find that in a typical orchard even though the fruit is sprayed probably the first-class fruit, maybe if you're lucky, is 30%. And then you've got all the rest goes to 'Mercury' or whatever for juice.

It's terrible really but it's only on appearances, so if an apple has got the slightest little mark or a branch rub or an insect it's immediately down-graded. And so it's very hard to make a living out of being an orchardist because the market is so demanding. And it's not even the consumers, it's the people in the markets – you know all fancy fruit and perfect fruit.

How did you deal with codling moth?

Don't have it here, we don't have it because we started this orchard – there's plenty of codling moth in Woodbridge, but a couple of kilometres up the hill. Do you know the story of codling moth? They're very bad flyers. They're a funny little moth and their wings are just sort of deformed and they can't, they don't move. Unless you bring an apple up here and leave it on the ground in our orchard it's very likely they'll just keep their whole cycle going in that orchard.

Only in that orchard.

Yeah.

And partly the temperature, you've got colder temperatures here do you think? Anything to do with up the hill?

No, no, no. Codling moth is very happy in England and in north Germany. (Laughter) It has adapted to the apple, where apples grow codling moth will live. No, it's got nothing to do with that.

The rotten apples with the codling moth fall onto the ground, the codling moth pupates and then it climbs up as a little caterpillar up the tree into the immature fruit, the moth, and lays the eggs into the fruit. And then the caterpillars hatch out of the fruit and that's how the cycle goes.

That's amazing.

Well we're very lucky because we chose this place. Everybody else has got codling moth and it's a bugger, terrible.

Now your quince collection. We've heard about this but tell us about it. How many in this quince collection? I only knew about three kinds of quinces but there are lots of quinces.

Well we heard of those because I was in the business, but at Orange Research Station in New South Wales they have the official quince collection for Australia, as Grove had the official apple collection for Australia. And I decided to go to Orange and get them. I rang them up and the lady up there, Elizabeth, said I was very welcome.

I flew to Sydney and hired a car and drove out to Orange and met Elizabeth. She gave me cuttings for all the 15 varieties of quinces and I brought them back.

So there are 15?

Well there's more probably, but that was the actual official – there's plenty of quinces around. Anyway I lost interest in them. (Laughter)

That was a time ago, with the quinces?

Oh yes, that was probably around 1990 I suppose. We've still got them out there.

You've still got them.

Mm, but they're fairly neglected.

Quinces aren't so popular any more are they?

No. And they also get codling moth badly. Codling moth and quinces belong to each other. (Laughs)

More than apples?

Well codling is an apple, but quinces are – and pears too I think get codling moth.

Now you're passionate about teaching people about grafting and espaliering, that's been with you all your life?

I think there's a time in your life when you're very protective about what you know, and you don't want to let other people know about it because

it's giving someone else the commercial advantage that you have. And I think there was a time when I was like that.

And then I decided that it's much better to spread the news. I don't think I consciously thought that, something in my body said, "Well let's do it." So I started giving, and I led courses and I started walking people through the research station and showing people how to graft. There's an incredible misunderstanding about grafting and people think it's so very difficult, which it isn't really as long as you obey these certain rules and laws. And I do get a lot of pleasure out of seeing people –

Learning.

Having success. No, doing their own grafting and then they come back to me. I was in Hobart the other day just in front of the hospital, Argyle and Liverpool Street, and I was stopped at the red light and this guy with a red-head raced over and said, "Bob, my grafts took!" (Laughter) The light went green. And his wife, or this lady with him, she gave me such a funny look. It was very sweet, I mean you get a lot of pleasure out of helping people do that.

I don't charge anything. And if you have about 14 people it's the optimum otherwise you've got to watch they don't cut their fingers and all that sort of stuff.

And I've heard – did you talk about the KNNN espaliering technique? Is that yours or is that one you learnt –

No that's totally mine and it really didn't come to much. It was one goes that way and then one goes that way, one goes that way and the other two: the knee and the nail, the nipple and the nose. (Laughs)

I think it's very memorable though, the technique about how you branch your espaliering.

Also the other trouble with espaliers is –

(Pause in recording)

(New recording commences)

1:05:42 **Continuation of the Bob Magnus interview.**

Now Bob, there was something you were going to tell me about.

What I was going to say was, it needs a lot to be a commensurate orchardist. So that's why it never became a commercial proposition because the fruit wants to go up and the tree wants to go up, and so in the end these bottom branches don't carry any fruit. And people get

sick of trying to grow them and keep them there with the branches that don't give you any fruit. All the fruit ends up on the top wire essentially.

Right. And then with the Ballerina apples, did you ever do the Ballerinas?

No.

What's your view about those?

Well they had a lifetime and now they've more-or-less fizzled out. Yeah they sold quite a few Ballerinas.

The Ballerina existed, as far as I can understand, there was a sport – you know a mutation – on a Jonathon tree somewhere in America I suppose. The branch was like that and this thing went straight up and the perceptive orchardist that had it noted that it had this very fastigiate growing, and they took some graft off it and started to market it as a Ballerina. And also they grew it on a dwarfing stock so you had this little tree, and I guess a bit ballerina-ish.

I must admit the best ones I've ever seen are in the photos. There are quite a few around but they never seem to have been a success in most people's gardens. They produced quite a few different varieties but the fruit never seemed to be of a high standard.

Now we're getting towards the end of the interview, are there other things you want to tell us?

Yes**,** there's very much that I want to tell you. When I got out of the fruit tree business and I left it to my family I did a grafting course a few years ago, two years ago I think. *(Looking for papers)*

(Pause in recording)

(New recording commences)

1:08:15 **Continuation of Bob Magnus interview.**

I was giving a grafting course, it must have been two years ago just downstairs here, and I met this young guy – well he's 40-ish – called Luke who it turned out was starting up a cider orchard just down towards Middleton. He and I seemed to hit it off rather nicely and I went down and visited him a few times.

All of my family are off and doing their own thing and this young man and his wife, and they've got three little kids, seemed the perfect complement to my life in apples. I didn't consciously say I'm going to help him but it sort of worked out. And I've made him interested in growing red apples to make red cider. That's why I thought would you like a little glass? (Laughs)

We might later, thank you. I think I'll definitely have to try red cider. How innovative, great.

This is one that I made actually before I knew Luke, so it's a couple of years old. This year we've grafted about 1000, and you know I told you before we had the Summer Surprise, but we've got other varieties. Well he's got two more varieties down there and we're growing them purely for cider, so they've got red flesh and they're a –

They're a cider apple.

Well they're not cider apples as such but we're making them cider apples. The Huonville Crab by nature is a crab and it's fairly acid, and it's got the right balance to make an acceptable cider so we're running with them. This year we grafted – we had 100 already and we've grafted about another 1000, and he's learnt how to graft and his wife has. I'm running with it and I'm very – they're lovely people and it's a great little business I think.

I was going to ask you, one of the final questions is what kind of legacy you would hope to leave? And I'm hearing you talk about it. That's one part of the legacy.

It's fairly complicated because I'd like to leave my part of their business with my two little granddaughters, the one that wrote this [shows a hand made birthday card]. And the legal part of the thing gets a bit murky when you try and leave the rights to an orchard in someone else's property. But at the moment we're not really worrying about that so much.

No. But the legacy is, in terms of how many people that you've taught about grafting who can run up to you in the car in the middle of a street in Hobart and say, "It's worked."

Yes well that's very nice. I'm very gratified that I have been able to leave something around.

And as you told me earlier there are probably thousands of trees across Tasmania, and over Australia.

I think the whole of the east coast right up to Stanthorpe and Tenterfield, we've sold a lot of apples everywhere.

Overseas as well?

I had a very interesting experience once, these people had a – something in India, I don't know if it was religious or what. Anyway they wanted me to grow apples and they were going to send them to India. I thought well India's certainly not the right climate for apples. In the end they did buy some from me and they sent them to their – I think they were missionaries, I'm not really sure – they sent them to their missionaries in India. And I never heard anything of them again.

But in India we, I didn't tell you that Anna Maria and I had been up to the Himalayas to look at the rhododendrons – which was an amazing

trip. They grow a lot of apples up in the cooler parts of India and in Kashmir, and they produce virtually enough for the whole of India. I suppose lots of Indian people have never even seen an apple, but mango country and bananas.

But up in the hills?

Yeah, a true monsoonal climate. Apples aren't monsoonal at all. Yes I have sent a few overseas. But when I saw the other day on the internet that my apples have already arrived in England and the USA, it's amazing how, you know, a little bit of grafting wood in an envelope and –

Off it goes.

You circumvent the laws and it gets in there, and once it's grafted they're all over the place.

Which is wonderful.

Well it's wonderful, but you could be taking disease that's not wanted. I mean that's how the diseases have – the snails in our garden came from South Africa. Covid arrived here from other places. Nature is virulent isn't it?

It certainly is. Hopefully there are agricultural protection laws coming into some countries –

Oh there's laws everywhere but people circumvent the laws all the time.

Oh you mean it probably appeared in a suitcase, yes.

About 20 years ago this guy at Huonville, at Grove, introduced these apple varieties, in his socks they found out, from New Zealand. I think it might have been one of those Jazz or one of those New Zealand varieties, Gala, and he had it here in Australia before they imported it. And he smuggled it in and they caught him because he was growing it before it wasn't here, if you get my meaning.

Right.

Yeah, people are doing it all time. The laws don't stop people, once you've got a passion about getting something from overseas you'll go for it and get it.

Indeed.

We're too passionate, if we get a passion we don't care about the laws. No, it's true. (Laughter)

Well. I'm just thinking, are there any other areas? I think we've covered a huge frame, I mean it's fascinating.

We haven't covered all our garden visits. (Laughs) That's alright though.

Which, oh your overseas travels?

Yeah we had many, the last 15 years we've been overseas to South America and –

You've brought back ideas from that or just for pleasure really?

Yeah, I mean we went to Java, to Sumatra to look for that giant flower, that was a *Rafflesia*. We found that growing and we've been to Namibia to look for the *Welwitschia* and we've seen the most amazing horticulture. And down to the southern part of Chile to see the *Araucarias*.

We've really done – and it's because I've got a wife who's interested. And the people that come to Anna Maria's studio to look at the weavings, the men stay in the car and read their newspaper and the women come and look. But we manage to have a common interest and we do all those things together, and I think that's been wonderful.

I think this is going to be a very interesting note to finish the interview because it shows your thirst for travel for new ideas, for searching things out.

Well I guess it is true but there's a big element of luck in that red apple I guess, and that's probably the biggest thing.

Luck's a little bit of it, I think a lot of it has been your perseverance and your passion and interest.

Well I've certainly been passionate about things.

Well thank you Bob, that's a wonderful contribution to our oral history.

Good, okay I'm very happy to have done it.

(Pause in recording)

(New recording commences)

1:16:15 **Continuation of the interview with Bob Magnus.**

Now Bob you were talking about going to Virginia in I think it was 1992, one of your early trips. You visited lots of gardens, but you met up with a person doing very similar things to you. Can you tell us about that?

Well first we went to New York. You have to go to New York before you die because all the good things (laughs) … and then we went to Washington DC which is also incredible, and we went to Dumbarton Oaks which is a very famous garden from very wealthy people.

Anyway then we got the train from there down to Virginia to visit Tom Burford who was I guess my equivalent. What he was then I am now. We went there in '92 so it's a long time ago, I was very naïve and beginning then. He propagated these apples in America but very much

in relation to sort of the Johnny Seed American – how can I say it, very nationalistic about how apples are an integral part of American society. And they weren't really interested in English apples or taste of apples, they were more interested in the history of the apples.

If you know about the history of the apples in the States, the original apples were on the east coast. And then they had this incredible huge frost – I think it was some time in the early '40s and it wiped out many, many orchards on the east coast. And that's when the whole of the apple industry moved to Washington state on the west coast and they grew millions and millions. And that coincided with the railway system in America that could transport those apples back over to the east very efficiently. Some of those big orchards had their own railway lines coming into them. (Laughs) You know you can only see that in America.

Anyway Tom Burford was very, extremely personable and their garage was made over to a little bed and breakfast for us, and we stayed with them for a few weeks. And then we hired a car and drove right down through the Appalachians and into Kentucky and did a round circuit and came back up to his place for a few days. And then we came back.

Wonderful.

Via New York.

Were there things that you learnt from him do you think?

Yes, how to sell apples. (Laughter) He had one of those chairs where you go like this and the seats come up and he'd say, "Hello, it's Tom Burford here." (Laughter) I shouldn't say that, but he was a bit of a fraud in that he didn't grow his own apples, he got someone else to grow them. And he sort of pushed the most nationalistic varieties of apples.

So you learnt things.

I learnt things, yes, but not really what you expected. He was a very personable man and we exchanged letters over quite a few years. It was very nice.

Oh that's wonderful.

To drive through Kentucky and see all those old tobacco barns, and to go up into the Appalachians, it was really a great trip.

And you visited the Thomas Jefferson Garden.

Yes it's called Monticello. Thomas Jefferson was an apple freak, a fruit freak. Peaches and apples were his thing. And he had 90 black slaves working for him so he could make it anything he wanted to. They said he had I don't know how many concubines as well – black ladies. (Laughs) You never hear about that in American history.

Yes so he took us there to Thomas Jefferson's Gardens for a day, it wasn't very far away. We had a great time. It got us hooked on travel I think, that first trip, it was so good.

Yes, and you've told us about those other travels.

That's a wonderful story. Thank you, thank you Bob.

Recording ends.

Interview ends: 1 hour 21 minutes