

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NORTHERN NSW BRANCH



Photo by Kim Woods-Rabbidge

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00.00

This is an interview with CAROLYN ROBINSON from Tenterfield, conducted in Armidale. CAROLYN will be speaking with Liz Chappell for the Australian Garden History Society (AGHS), Northern NSW Branch.

Carolyn, I would like to start pretty much at the beginning. I first got to know you as a gardener at Glenrock. Was Glenrock the first garden that you made?

Yes, yes it was. I had dallied a little bit when I worked overseas and I worked in the Kimberley but I really didn't know what I was doing. I put a couple of plants in but that's about it. But even looking back then I was interested. I wanted to beautify where I was living.

So what was your starting point at Glenrock?

Our trees. Because Glenrock was a very, very bare site. Even though the house has been built in 1892 there was a couple of quite large Nicholii's [*Eucalyptus nicholii*], well not very large but, you know, a few metres high. But there was not a tree that was planted dating from that period. There were some big eucalypts just outside at the time, which was outside the garden perimeter. They would have been part of the paddock. But there were certainly no planted trees around the house that dated probably any longer than about 20 to 25 years.

When you differentiate between the garden and the paddock how large was the garden at that point?

Well the garden fence was about 6 or 7 metres to the north of the house and the previous owners had deepened it to the south and to the west so it wasn't that little but initially it wouldn't have been much more than 5 or 6 metres right around the house.

So what did you plant first up with your tree selection?

Some willows on the creek because I could do them from cutting. Other than that, a selection of deciduous trees like *Liquidambars*, pin oaks, claret ash, *Robinia*, over time over the first couple of years as I got to know the species because at the time I needed to know what would be suitable to plant.

What was your source of information for that?

Probably the best source was Cath Horn who was the lady who owned the nursery in Tenterfieldⁱ at the time and she certainly sourced a lot of the trees that I planted in the first couple of years. I didn't even start to plant a garden in the first couple of years. All I did was to plant trees, around the garden, and one the first things that Pete did was, we fenced the gully into the garden area

because it was being heavily eroded by the cattle, not that I ever considered gardening down there but there were no trees along that gully whatsoever and so we just felt it needed that.

Were there books or television programmes that influenced you at that point?

Oh absolutely. Certainly, at that time there weren't too many Australian magazines, there was sort of *House & Garden* and *Home Beautiful* and a couple like that. But I must say they didn't give huge amounts of information. Most of the information I got probably was from overseas authors like Penelope Hobhouse and Rosemary Verey and Vita Sackville-West and so forth and so on. [chuckles]

Was part of that because of the New England climate in Australia is not a large part of Australia's gardening area?

Probably. Except that probably some of Australia's most well-known gardens come from mountain areas don't they, whether they be the Southern Highlands, or the Blue Mountains or the Macedon or ... so there has been quite a gardening tradition in the higher area hasn't there?

Now as the gardening fancy took hold of you where did you source plants? Because you amassed a marvellous collection at Glenrock.

Well a lady called Nola here in Armidale. Gosh what was her name? Nola McCann.

I shall find out Carolyn. ⁱⁱ

She had a nursery down here and she sourced quite a lot of plants for me. but probably from 1993 on I started to collect myself. And I would drive down to the Blue Mountains and down to Melbourne and the Southern Highlands etc. and I started to source that large collection myself.

06.00

Could you tell us some of the plants that you had at that point that were a little unusual and hard to find?

Certainly, quite a lot of *Viburnum* species. Let me think, gosh now you've got me.

Perennials?

Certainly. I didn't probably source as many of the perennials from those journeys. It was mostly shrubby material. The perennials I got from places like Dennis, what's his name, Dennis Norgate. Most of the perennials came through the mail from Tasmania and Victoria.

At what point do you think you developed a vision for Glenrock?

I started to develop it - well funnily enough it started to develop not in Australia but when Pete and I went travelling overseas. And in 1992 we spent 5 or 6 months in Europe and England, doing heaps of gardens both on the continent and in Britain and we were staying with friends on Bornholm Island which is in the Baltic and our friend had a lovely – she was English, married to a Dane – and she had a lovely interest in gardening and she would pot plants and take them down to the market. And that's when I started to imagine I could do similarly and so you know the inspiration actually - I can't say was particularly home grown - it came from our travels. And so I came back and by the end of '93 I had opened my nursery. [laughs]

Which went in step with the expansion of Glenrock Garden

Absolutely and it was nearly all perennials because they were relatively easy for me to propagate I was doing them by division. I hadn't at that point, didn't have a propagating sort of misting bottom heat system which I managed later on and then I started to do more of the rarer shrubs as well. And so yes it developed hand in hand. The nursery came first, propagating my own plants, being able to have that material to use in the garden beds and I suppose that also I started to read more and more about design, would look at design when I was visiting gardens overseas. It's something that sort of developed in tandem. I can't say I sat down and I did never, ever sit down and draw design for Glenrock. It did grow a bit like Topsy.

When did you first open it to the public?

In 19', I think it was the end of '97.

Could you paint a word picture of what it was like then?

Yes, I started ... It really was around the house and the terraces to the water. And that's as far as I had gone at that point. I had just finished building the stonewall on the western side down the slope on the western side of the terraces. I had started the first stonewalls in '95 so it took 2 or 3 winters to get to that point with the walls. But at that stage I hadn't really considered going further.

10.35

What were some of the challenges you had struck by that time with your climate and the site?

Probably frost was one of the most significant ones. That really determined the kind of plants that I ended up specialising in. There was a frost hollow so most Australian natives and a lot of otherwise really drought tolerant plants were excluded. The other thing was the soil. it was pretty poorly drained. I didn't have a huge amount of topsoil so all the garden beds – in the first instance I lost a lot from water logging when we had a decent rain event. So I had to

build all the beds up. So they were the two most significant problems I had to combat with the site. Was frost and drainage. Water, I always had a reasonable water supply at Glenrock so that wasn't a huge problem.

How much was the garden at that point? You started I think with just a few metres from the house.

I would have thought at that point it would have been maybe 2 acres.

Did you have garden help at that point?

Well not, well I had just started to have it towards the end of, probably towards the end of '96 I started to have some garden help. Because I also started to, I was also doing the nursery and I was starting a little bit helping people outside.

Yes. Now that garden advice of your activity has grown a lot. How did it start off?

People would come to the garden and they wanted to buy plants and I would ask them if they knew what they wanted and where they wanted to put the plants and a heck of a lot of people hadn't even, they'd just on impulse decided they wanted to come and visit the nursery and not even really consider where they were going to put them. And people started to say well could you come and have a look at the garden please. And in many cases I was really glad I did because if they were trying to describe a site that they wanted to plant they often neglected to say there was a jolly big gum tree in the middle of it. [chuckles]

Which of course would effect the choice of plants that you suggest. Were you doing formal plans at that stage?

No, I don't, not really. It was just on a garden consultation basis. And I will never forget a lady in Deepwater. She would come out and buy a whole lot of plants, take them back and then she would come back and say "oh I have lost so many" and I'm thinking wonder what she's doing. And I said well look – she'd come to buy, she bought quite a significant number of plants and I said "well look I'll come and help you place them". I just wanted to see what she was doing or not doing. Which I did. I placed them and helped her plant them. And I said and now where's your water? And she said oh the ground's moist enough. She hadn't been watering them in. [both sigh] And it was just an indication to me that you just could not assume that people knew what to do.

Now about that time I think you started giving a few talks and lectures with adult education. I'm not sure, was it through TAFE or independent bodies?

No it was never through TAFE. It was mostly like the Diggers Club or the Women's Club at Glen Innes. Places like that. I did quite a few latterly with the Toowoomba garden clubs, I remember going to Uralla. So it was mostly garden

clubs I would think for both onsite at Glenrock and when bus loads came and being asked to talk at their clubs themselves.

15.20

And of course Glenrock was still being developed and extended at that point. Can you describe for us where you went since I think '97 you did the last word picture?

Yes, from then I started to, then I started to go up and down the gully. I had planted trees, I really wanted to do some more perennial plantings and the gully, particularly on the northern side of the gully was very, very cold and was really very suitable for a prairie type planting. So that was the direction I wanted to go and then of course in the early days we had built a little cottage up the eastern end of the garden and it just seemed - and it we did never have to move the fence because it had been fenced out in the beginning so it just seemed the garden ought to connect the cottage. So that's how it went. It really went up and down the watercourse rather than going out into the paddocks.

And what size was this total area that was gardenened?

I don't know exactly, it would have been about 6 acres I suppose.

Yes, that's a formidable amount for one lady to manage, on her own.

Well, I wasn't totally on my own, I did usually have somebody once a week, but certainly no more than that. But I did manage a heck a lot of it on my own.

Now by this point you had developed a great knowledge of gardening in the New England area. Could you share some of those tips with us?

Well probably it's just extrapolating from my own experience. Over time I realised how important soil preparation was and in most places drainage was going to be a problem, either because of clay subsoils or ironstone or trap rock or just shallow topsoils. So ripping the soil was terribly important and the ... in every soil the addition of organic matter of some kind or another. And in all the gardens I have ever done I have always made that a prerequisite for my doing a garden that people would be prepared to prepare the ground adequately. And then I knew that they would be happy with the outcome.

Now you are also a great user of mulch. Can you, you have had a quite a journey I think in deciding different types of mulch.

And I still am. I think more than anything when it comes to large country gardens it's maintenance of the gardens nearly always becomes an issue because most people do not have at their finger tips an endless resource of employees or gardeners and for me mulch was a tool to manage maintenance, weed control, moisture evaporation etc. As much I would have thought it was weed control which was probably the most important thing in a large area. The choice of mulch is never easy. Organic mulches have drawbacks, physically you have

to put them on every single year, they stop moisture or a small amount of rain getting through to the soil. But to my mind it did not negate the importance of weed control really. At Eagles Bluff I have used crushed rock and one of the biggest benefits is you don't have to reapply it every year. And for a big garden that's an enormous amount of labour saving. Though it's not without its problems because rock mulch, because seeds like germinating in them so it's, they're not totally problem free.

Going back to Glenrock, I think in the early days you were using African lovegrass, *Eragrostis*, which is generally considered somewhat of a pest in farm land but it was a very effective mulch, a very long lasting one.

Yes, it was an effective mulch, and the reason I used it was because we had it in our paddocks and we needed to control it, and by cutting it, it meant that at the start of every spring we had fresh green growth which was quite palatable. If we hadn't cut it its non-palatability would have increased every year and it would have been a huge cattle ... would have been a huge problem from a grazing point of view. I mean it was everywhere in the Tenterfield district, it was ubiquitous, so it was something I could use that we had. It wasn't and isn't the best mulch by any amount of means. It can act quite like a thatch but it did its job. It probably, it didn't allow for dynamic gardening in that it didn't allow to the same degree self sown seedlings that are really quite lovely in a naturalistic type garden but it was just one of those tradeoffs I felt I had to make.

21.49

Now the star of the extended garden at Glenrock I think were the prairie borders. Where did the influence for those come from?

I would have thought with Europe, reading about Piet Oudolf's work etc. although I did start with the use of grasses well before I had read about the naturalistic movement in Europe.

I saw their value very early on. I bought my first grasses from the Diggers Club in about 1992 and I divided them at the end of the first year and I put some across onto the water course and for the first five years, for the next five years, they were there and hadn't require any moisture or anything from me. And they were still fine when I did the prairie garden so they had demonstrated their sort of viability in that climate.

Could you summarise how your style of gardening changed over time at Glenrock.

Yes, absolutely. In the beginning because my knowledge was fairly sparse I made the mistake of having mixed borders, I mixed trees, shrubs, perennials and in our rather shallow top soil it meant that once the trees became dominant the perennials and roses, didn't fail, they failed, although there were a couple of things that resulted from that which was quite fascinating. Some of the roses climbed through the top of trees etc. which one would probably not choose to

orchestrate but it was fantastic anyway. So then I had the problem of planting a woodland garden when the trees were already established which is not easy when you've got root packed soils. The other thing, the other big change I started with herbaceous borders that were hedged which when you haven't got a whole battery of gardeners is not an easy thing to maintain over time, especially tall ones. So the naturalistic prairie style gardens were probably much better from that point of view with much lower maintenance, much lower root competition for the perennials so I think the movement into that more naturalistic prairie style was, was a very good thing to do and I have sort of developed and continued that.

Mm, by about that point I think it seemed to me you had developed a recognisable palate of plants that you used. You could walk into a garden somewhere and we could see that Carolyn had had a hand there. Could you describe that selection to us?

I would think well certainly as far as the grasses are concerned, the *Miscanthus* species, the *Panicum* species, the *Calamagrostis* species, *Pennisetums*. I would have thought as far as perennials are concerned you've got *Petrovskia*, the *Sedums*, the *Achilleas* – although I mean at Glenrock because I had rabbits the *Achilleas* were precluded. So now that I've got fencing with no rabbits, the *Achilleas*, *Tradescantia* ... *Echinacea*.

And signature shrubs?

Signature shrubs, probably the smoke bush *Cotinus*, *Cornus*, the *Viburnums*, *Deutzias*, *Philadelphus*. Trees, I do love purple foliage, *Berberis*, I couldn't be without *Berberis*, they're so tough. And I do love purple foliage in Australia.

27.02

Now about that time too I think you were starting to be noticed more broadly. Tricia Dixon wrote about your garden and it appeared in a few other books?

Yes it has appeared I think in most of the major Australian garden magazines over time.

And was it year 2000 you were voted on *Better Homes & Gardens* television program as the?

2005, 2006

Right, right could you tell us about that for the tape?

Well that, that was fairly exciting. It was *Better Homes & Gardens* had decided to do an Australian-wide garden of the year, viewer selection so they had selected, well in fact I think *Better Homes & Gardens* had gone to the Open Garden Scheme at the time and asked them for a list of gardens for them to use on the program and I think they, the Open Garden Scheme had given them

a selection across Australia wide and they had knocked it back to about 20. which they decided to go and film and then they put 2 per programme for 10 weeks or something like that and it was a viewers' vote and Glenrock came out on at the end. [laughter]

As the favourite.

As the favourite, yes. [laughter]

Now what did that mean to your gardening business?

Well I don't know whether it ... its hard to know whether or not it actually, I can't recall it being a huge influx of requests for designing or anything because of that but it may well have.

About this time I think you started developing the garden at Eagle's Bluff?

A bit later than that, I think about 2009.

Right, could you explain to us why you wanted to start afresh and build a new garden?

[laughs] I guess it's the creating that is so exciting and at Glenrock I could not create anymore, it was already too big for one person. And I still had so many other ideas that I would like to implement and try and Pete and I had thought of buying some more land, just as an investment and so we were looking in fact we had even gone down to Tasmania to look at a change, for some land down there and came back and realised that we didn't really want to go all the way down there and we just happened to look into the real estate window on our return in 2008 and there was an advert for a rural property on 2 kms frontage of the Bluff River and we went down and had a look and we'd decided within a week.

So from a gardening point of view what was it that attracted you to that property?

From a gardening point of view what attracted me was that there was – and farming – and also from a property point of view was – we really enjoyed the river, it was a really pretty little river. Around Glenrock was getting broken up into small lots so it was becoming much more suburban and we wanted to be further out of town. That was really quite a big one. I could see, it was granite country. I didn't want to be gardening on trap rock. The main part of the garden in fact was sited to the south of that site which appealed because most of Glenrock's gardens faced upwards to the north which made it hot and dry in summer. The soil was well drained. There was no love grass. [both laugh] but both of us really liked the site and it's, it's been a lovely development for both of us actually. But I think it's because, it's partly because I had gardened as far I could garden or create at Glenrock.

So what were the essential differences in the garden you created at Eagle's Bluff?

I would have thought the biggest difference was the dominance of the landscape at Eagle's Bluff, whereas at Glenrock it was just a fairly rolling rural scene, so I felt at Glenrock that we really had to produce our own, beauty really, that the garden itself would be the dominant feature in the landscape whereas at Eagle's Bluff it was never going to be. It was only ever going to be an adjunct to it and so that, I, it was a very different design from that point of view.

Is it possible to describe it?

Eagle's Bluff?

Yes

I guess it's very much more informal. I've followed the contours. I've been lucky to be able to, I've still been able to use stone as the main landscaping feature both with stairs and stone walls to give me change of level. The garden beds are much larger and deeper, much more, probably informally sweeping with big generous curves... and I've tried to plant with the landscape in mind.

Did that influence your choice of colours as well with those rolling blue hills in the background?

No but it certainly, it influenced the curves, the curve, the curves of the bed, the curve of the pool, the pond in front of the house and the curve of those beds do mirror to some degree the curve of the mountains. The plantings were probably influenced largely by either enhancing or not blocking or blocking views. [both laugh]

35.25

Now initially you were reluctant to open Eagle's Bluff. Was it designed more as a private garden for you and Peter?

Yes, yes, yes and funnily enough its one of the things that probably instigated our move from Glenrock, having the garden open all the time. It was, it was, something I found quite stressful.

Because paradoxically I think it's Eagle's Bluff that has brought you so much more national attention.

Yes.

Can you tell us about - and I do apologise for not having done my homework and having these dates to hand - but the State Library of NSW had an exhibition that you were a part of.

Yes, that was the planting design, what was it called...

I can look that up.

Yes, gosh it's escaped me. *Planting Dreams Exhibition*.
[<https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/exhibitions/planting-dreams-shaping-australian-gardens>]

Right, and that was 2014?

I think it was '16 wasn't it? Yes I think it was '16.

Now you were displayed there along with some of the best known names in Australian gardening and garden design. Could you reel off some of those for us for the tape?

[laughs]

[both laugh]

That's very unfair isn't it? I should have done that.

This is, now I've had a mental blank. I will have, we'll have to list them later on.ⁱⁱⁱ

No, I should have done my homework.

No, absolutely.

But it was a splendid display.

Yes, yes, it was, but it was mostly New South Wales. And it was designers and also their own gardens and I think it was, it was probably the change in design and planting design may well have had something to do with it. Glenrock was very much, I started from scratch and the paradigm that I followed at that point was the English one and with time and knowledge and my knowledge of plants etc. I started to develop my own style which of course I have implemented it at Eagle's Bluff so I can probably understand why that has occurred at Eagle's Bluff because it's not a repetition of something you see everywhere, probably. I don't know.

38.44

And also in Claire Takacs's book last year, year before?

Yes

Which was called? Help me, I haven't got it.

Australian Dreamscapes.^{iv}

Yes that's right I knew it had dreams in it.

Yes. [laughs]

Eagle's Bluff featured very prominently there. Could you tell us a little bit more about the experience of working with Claire and that book?

Yes, it was a lovely experience. Claire found out about me I think from the *Planthunter* ^v and she rang me and asked whether she could come up to Eagle's Bluff to have a look. She was seeking out gardens, gardeners that were planting in a sort of free form naturalistic type style for her forthcoming book *Australian Dreamscapes*. She had already published a book called *Dreamscapes* which had done that on a world basis. And ah she came up to Eagle's Bluff twice, luckily it wasn't the last year [laughs] otherwise there wouldn't have been photos so she came up at the end of December 17 and March 18 and she was lovely to work with. she stayed with us both times and she was very, very fleet on her feet [chuckles] because she did most of her filming in an hour, just after dawn and an hour before dusk. It was an incredibly constricted time frame. And she seems to shoot most of her photographs into the sun.

Yes, that contre-jour or whatever they call it.

Yes

Which from a photography point of view used to be a no, no.

Yes, I know, a real challenge.

Yes, absolutely. But for gardens it can be

Splendid, especially with ornamental grasses.

Yes, now you have designed a great number of gardens around the New England. Could you hazard a guess at how many?

Ah gosh, wow, I don't know, 20 or 30, probably more. I mean some, a lot of the gardens, there haven't been so many that I've done from right scratch and I've been involved in the whole process. I've helped people do bits and bobs and get them started etc. and it's only over the last decade that I've started to do larger ones from scratch. And but even over the last decade you realise how ephemeral gardens are because with drought and changing ownership and people becoming unwell you just realise how gardens are not timeless by any amount of means.

Do you think we will see a gardening tradition where we have enduring gardens the way they do in England that are visited generation after generation?

I would be surprised, purely because of our climate. It is so harsh and it's, it's hard to keep gardens going from decade after decade. I mean you can see that yourself.

Indeed.

And I haven't been back to Glenrock but it will have changed a heck of a lot. The trees will endure but the gardens won't I don't think.

43.40

Could you describe some of your favourites amongst the gardens that you've designed, particularly those where you've had a free hand with the landscape.

Probably, I loved the gardens out at Wiltshire, out at Inverell. I really enjoyed, I enjoyed doing those. I loved working with people like Patsy and Don Sterling at the Bramble Patch and early on one of my, the gardens I enjoyed doing most was the Stanthorpe garden of Wahroonga. Yes, Denis and Roslyn Lincoln then Lynice Thirkell. That was one I enjoyed doing a lot, but partly it's because I was working with the owners, they were actually very actively involved in the gardening process. And I've just found over time that they are the ones that tend to endure more than those that rely on employees or gardeners to do it.

Could you summarise then some of the advice that you would give to gardeners in the New England climate?

Certainly find out exactly what your climate is like. Get local knowledge as far as the plants that are most suitable because even within the New England there are microclimates, some of which are easier to garden on than others. The soil types vary considerably. But always think about water, inclusion of organic matter in your garden beds, and probably get some design advice in the first instance. I wish I had had [chuckles]

Does that extend to actually writing a formal or drawing a formal plan?

Not necessarily, not necessarily, most people find it very difficult if they don't have, if they have a blank slate. The placement of trees, where to put garden beds, where to put particular features, even some people just need some on the ground pointers really because at the end of the day a lot of people just need it to be instrumental in making their own garden. So it's just sometimes pointers can be helpful without having to do full garden plans.

46.20

Now we've spoken very little about Australian native plants, but they certainly have a place in your landscape at Eagle's Bluff.

Very, very much so. It was one of things that I regretted at Glenrock was that the cold prevented me growing very many most Australian native plants. The

soils, the well-drained soils, the well-drained granite soils, the fact that it's hotter and less cold in the winter, although there are significant frosts, means that I have been able to experiment with Australian natives. But by and large I don't, with the exception of a grevillea border, most of my native plants are mixed with exotics. I don't purposefully grow them separately and I think that's probably one of the best ways to grow them. I feel that Australian natives benefit with being grown with other plants that require similar conditions. I think it allows a greater diversity of use of colour foliage, foliage colour, textures and form. I think a lot of people find an exclusively Australian native garden, particularly cold-hardy Australian native plants don't have a huge variation in texture or form. So you get a garden that appears to be visually not particularly interesting. By including other plants from other climates that are similar, for example North American deserts or South African plants or Mediterranean plants you get a much more varied, textural look in the garden. The other thing is that the drought that we have just had has demonstrated that Australian native plants by and large are not significantly more hardy than our tried and tested garden plants that have been around for many, many years. And maybe its because they're short lived anyway, particularly plants like Grevilleas, *Eremophilas*, that towards the end of a decade they are probably pushing their lifespan anyway and the added insult of either frost or drought means they turn up their toes and rely on self seeding to propagate themselves. So it's really a fallacy that they are low maintenance from that point of view. but there are many, many exotic plants that are more drought hardy.

49.01

Where to next for Eagle's Bluff? Is the garden every really finished Carolyn?

Well, I'm getting to the point where I can see the, absolutely the fence is not going out. But there will always be improvements and changes and I can see it developing for a little while yet. I'm still building stone walls for example and I'm definitely, I'm extending or I'm developing my prairie style gardens which I love. They are definitely my favourites. The perennial borders and that's my first love absolutely.

Now is there any gardening ground we haven't covered in this discussion that you would like to share?

I don't think so. We've touched on most things I think.

Well thank you very much Carolyn.

INTERVIEW ENDS: 49 minutes 20 seconds

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