

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS BRANCH



Photographer and date unknown

INTERVIEWEE:	Ralph Suters
INTERVIEWER:	Lyn Barrett
DATE OF INTERVIEW:	17 September 2020
PLACE OF INTERVIEW:	Bowral
LENGTH OF INTERVIEW:	30 minutes
RESTRICTIONS ON USE:	nil
QUOTATIONS:	EXTRACTS FROM THE INTERVIEWS SHOULD BE VERIFIED AGAINST THE ORIGINAL RECORDING
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:	ALL USES OF THIS INTERVIEW SHOULD ACKNOWLEDGE THE INTERVIEW SUTERS AND THE SOCIETY, AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY, NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION, INTERVIEWED ON 17 SEPTEMBER 2020 BY LYN BARRETT

0:00

Okay, we're rolling now. This is an oral history with Ralph Suters, co-owner of "Bangala" Clarke Street, Bowral, 2576, Ralph will be speaking to me, Lyn Barrett for the Australian Garden History Society as part of a collaboration with the Berrima District Museum. Ralph, do you understand that the Australian Garden History Society, in association with the Berrima District Museum, owns copyright of the interview material, but the disclosure will be subject to any disclosures or restrictions you impose in completing the form of consent?

Yes.

Many thanks, for this being so, we ask your permission to do a transcript of this recording.

Yes.

And we'd like to reassure you that neither the tapes nor the transcripts produced from these recordings will be released without your authority. For the tape, this is the voice of interviewer. And for the tape this is the voice of...

This is the voice of Ralph Suters.

Thank you, Ralph. [The questions and comments recorded by the interviewer] in Ralph's recordings will be in italics. Ralph on behalf of Australian Garden History [Society] and the Berrima District Museum, I'd like to thank you for agreeing to this interview. It's so important that we capture the story of the people who have created Highland's garden history and have protected and saved Highland's housing. Ralph, you're in a special group of people in the Southern Highlands who have made a great contribution to this environment and our landscape. This interview is taking place today, the 17th of September, 2020, at approximately 5.30, 5.30 and this interview is intended to cover Ralph's story, essentially, here in Southern Highlands of New South Wales, Australia. Ralph, we are required to start with some biographical details. So, would you like to start in the beginning by just sharing a little bit of your personal background with us?

"The questions here, where were you born?" I was born, actually, in Fiji. I've got two brothers and sisters. They were born here in Australia. After we left Fiji, when I was very, very young, I went to school in Sydney and the University of New South Wales,

Ralph, you have a love of history. I know that from past experience with you and talking to you. Who would you say have been some of the greatest influences in your life in relationship to history.

I guess, like a lot of people, my father had an interest in history, and especially Australian history, and I guess I'd pick some of it up from there, the explorers, various famous people throughout history, have

been of interest to me, and I guess provided some influence to me, and it was very interesting 15 years ago when we bought this house here in Bowral. I'd had an interest in Antarctic history, and particularly the Australian explorer, Mawson, who was interesting. After we bought this house we found that there was a direct connection between this house and Mawson. So that was an interesting discovery.

I know that you absolutely are enamoured with the Antarctic and have collected interesting glass plates of photographs, and that you...

Yeah, the glass plates, as well as an interest in exploration, I guess it's an interest in the recording of that exploration, and part of that through photography. And one of the most famous Australian photographers is Frank Hurley, who, you know, was on Mawson's expedition to the Antarctic and then on Shackleton's expedition, and was a photographer, a war photographer on the Western Front. And earlier this year, I had the opportunity to purchase some of the original glass plates from the Shackleton expedition to the Antarctic, and they're sitting here at the moment in my library, not quite sure where they're going to go, but that's where they are at the moment, along with a lot of books also on Hurley, on Shackleton, on Mawson, and along with another, a number of other Australian explorers and photographers.

Well, you're a great photographer yourself. You've taken some incredible photos of gardens, yes, and in the Antarctic. Looking at gardens, has there been any particular photographer that, whose gardens you've enjoyed?

Not really. I think you probably over exaggerate a little bit. I think I've most of my photography, I think, is holiday snaps. And the fortunate thing is that we've been able to take some holidays in some wonderful places.

I think you underestimate how special they are, but they're very, very nice. What would you consider would be a very important aspect of your work here, because it has been a labour of love in the restoration of this house and property. I mean, it is a landscape property within Bowral, because you can see it from wherever you are down in town. What would you say was special for you?

6:00

Well, I guess, like a lot of people say, if you've got an old historic house, you've you never really own it, you're just custodians for a period of time, and as a custodian, you've got a responsibility to look after it. We bought this house when it was nearly 90 years old. It had had an interesting history again, and not an unusual history for an old house. It was a family home, sort of, was built quite well and to a reasonably high quality, but over a number of years, the quality of the house, attention was not given to some things that needed attention. And, at the stage we bought it, it needed a bit of work. We were fortunate enough to be in the position to be able to do that work. And we've restored the house and extended the house a little bit, made it a little bit more modern, but essentially retained a lot of the history of the house. And the next thing behind that is the history of the garden, the development of the garden, and we've done that over time. What's my contribution? I'm a labourer in the garden, and have

been able to do some of the structural work that has been required in the garden. It's really Susan is, is has taken the garden, and the plant and flower aspect of the garden.

[Indistinct words] you've done, also done such an amazing job on this house that you received a council award for restoration of a heritage property.

Yeah, that was interesting. It wasn't something, wasn't the reason we did it, but I think there were a number of tradesmen, there were architects, I think they deserved the recognition. So we, we put in an application for that, or submitted the house for that, that award, and we were fortunate enough to be awarded the, the in recognition of the work that we've done,

The this, this house and this property has quite an amazing history in that when it was first built in 1920, you actually wrote a piece, and I'll get you to tell us a little bit about that.

Well, just now, two years ago, in late October 2018 the [Australian] Garden History Society held their annual conference in Bowral, and the theme of that conference was Gardens in Time of Peace and Conflict. And on the evening before the conference, the Southern Highlands branch of the [Australian] Garden History Society hosted pre conference drinks for the board and invited guests here at our house, "Bangala". And in welcoming the garden history members to our home, we gave a brief history of the house and the garden in the context of that conference theme, and this is part of what I said that night. I said, "Welcome to our home, and welcome to spring in the Southern Highlands. We hope you enjoy this evening and the next few days at the conference. The theme of this year's conference is gardens in time of peace and conflict. It's easy to find places that make the obvious link between war and a memorial garden. Like most Australian towns, Bowral has a war memorial, but there are two other Memorial Gardens only a few 100 meters from here. One is the Remembrance Drive, the living memorial of trees along the old Hume Highway linking Sydney and Canberra and a second one is the more recently planted Cherry Tree Walk with one tree for each of the 526 Australians who lost their life in the Vietnam War. But what I would also like to do is make a direct connection with this house. In a few weeks, we will mark the centenary of the end of the Great War with the outbreak of war in 1914. England called on the Empire to help, and the call was heeded. Australians and New Zealanders particularly remember the contribution by Anzacs at Gallipoli in 1915 and later on the Western Front. One of the many people who lost their life on the Western Front was Lieutenant Guy Davenport. He was a 26 year old solicitor from Darling Point. He was awarded the Military Cross for consistent gallantry and devotion to duty, but he was killed on the 10th of April 1917. Lieutenant Davenport now lies in a cemetery in France about midway between Calais and Paris. He's buried there with 109 other Australians and a total of almost 900 fallen Commonwealth comrades. Shortly after the end of the war Guy Davenport's father, Frank Davenport, also a lawyer, built this house. Perhaps the house and its garden served as a refuge after the loss of their son. Perhaps this was their way of finding peace in a period of conflict. The house has been here for almost 100 years, since the end of the Great War. We bought it just over 10 years ago and undertook extensive repairs to the house. We've also done a lot of work in the garden, although we are now working with just under an acre rather than the original three acres, and I close by asking all the people here tonight to enjoy their visit to the Southern Highlands and their evening in our garden."

12:00

It's a lovely garden. Thank you for that. It's a lovely story too. But I think that this garden is a very peaceful garden, and it always feels to me, so whenever I come out of it, I feel so much more relaxed. It's a great space, and I suspect not so relaxing for you if you're building walls and paths doing the hard yacka, What would be sort of a normal day of maintenance around a property like this?

Most of that now falls to Susan. I think we've done most of the work 10 years on, you suddenly find that something needs to be done.

And I think there's a new wall.

Yeah, I thought, I thought we had all the all the structure in place. But when you, when you, when you think you've finished, there's something else needs to be done.

Do you have to take part in the open days? When you have, Susan has her open days here in the garden. What would be your role? Besides meeting and greeting. I'm sure that you're involved a couple of weeks before.

Yeah, there's a fair amount of preparation done, obviously, sort of, mowing the lawns, just presenting them, and presenting the gardens as best we can, sort of tidying stuff up. Inevitably, there always seems to be 3 or 4 or 5, tons of, of topsoil or mushroom compost gets delivered about a month before an open garden with instructions that it's to be spread out. So, there's a fair amount of work involved in preparation, but the reward is that most of the people that come and visit seem very pleased with what they find here and enjoy the visit. So that's great.

It's been a good partnership. The two of you can work together like that. I suppose I should have asked you a little bit more about the history, because we talked about the Davenports, and then, of course, from the It's Davenports was the Joneses. I'm jumping around a little bit. I should have asked you a bit more about the Jones family, who I believe turned up with some photos, because that was an interest, another interesting story, of a sort of, a lost family finding their feet in a family home.

Yeah, it's again, as I said earlier, the history of the house is not unlike a lot of large homes, I guess, country homes, but also from probably some in inner Sydney that started off, in this particular case, as a Sydney solicitor's country estate, and over time, saw different people living there. You mentioned the Joneses. They moved here in the mid -1940s . An interesting story. Then again, as I said earlier, this connection with Mawson, the Joneses. The people that moved here was actually the widow. She moved here in 1946 after her husband had died. Her husband was a medical practitioner in Campbelltown, and was in practice with Douglas Mawson's brother in Campbelltown. The widow moved down here. She came down with seven children, and those seven children were all under nine. They left here about 20 years later. So they, they were here for an extended period of time in this house. After they left, there was, as best as we can see, there were a number of owners over a

reasonably short period of time, and then in the, probably, the late 1960s the land was subdivided. There were two blocks sold off, just over an acre on one side and just under an acre on the other side, so that we were left here with an acre of land. Those two properties have subsequently been, been developed as medium density properties. So, we're sitting in the middle of medium density development here in our own little enclave. And at one stage, the property was even divided into three flats. So there were different people living in three flats here. And it's interesting so many people that we've spoken to around Bowral remember this place being a bit of a party house at one stage. There's so many people that we know have either lived here or knew someone that lived here in this house. So there's quite a lot of history, I guess, and a lot of recollection of people that have lived in in this house. In the late, in the in the mid- 1990s the house was consolidated, consolidated back into a single family home, and the partitions dividing it into three flats were taken down, though not all of them. And when we came here in 2007, and then did some renovations a couple of years later, some of the work that we did in the renovations uncovered some of the partitions that were still in place. We did some design in one particular stage, and there was a solid wall between two rooms, and we said it would be nice to have a door between those two rooms. We actually took off the masonite boarding that was on that wall, and underneath was the original door from 100 years ago, or 90 years ago. So it was interesting that. That sort of development, we were about to do, the renovations. We'd actually taken all our furniture out of the house, and we had, this was on, a on a Sunday, and we got in the car and had driven up, started to drive back up to Sydney for the, actually, the bulldozers to do some work in the backyard on the following Monday morning. And we got a call from somebody saying, "I used to live in the house. Can I speak to you about the house?" And this was one of the Jones children, and so we turned around, came back down here, and spent the rest of the afternoon getting an extended history of the house and garden, including interesting things like, there's a room down a hallway here. We could never figure out why that room was so small and why the door into the room was so low. And it was explained to us that that was the linen closet, and it has subsequently been turned into an entry into the bedroom, [indistinct word]. But some of that sort of history, and some of the history of the of the garden, some of the history of the, the, there's a small cottage in the backyard, that history. And before the place was subdivided, what is the smaller of the lots adjacent to us, was apparently the orchard and a rose garden, and, and what is the larger lot was, apparently a horse paddock. So, a lot of those stories came out, and was just a very, very fortuitous timing of that request that someone come back and visit the house. Yes.

20:00

And very good of you to turn around, come back and collect all that history, because it's important. Because it does paint the picture of what the Highlands were like last century. And thank you for doing that with, with the garden. I know that you would say it's Susan's creation, but your landscaping, hard landscaping...

and instructions, under instructions...

Do you have a favourite part of the garden?

As you say, it's a nice, quiet garden. And there's lots of places you can just go and sit in the garden, which is sort of a character of the garden, to sit in the garden, and having a garden, that, that changes over the year. Changes quite dramatically over the year, both being the number of deciduous trees that are here, the different flowers at different times of year, and the way the sun plays around the property, you know, the winter sun is quite different to the summer sun. So there's so many different places. You can sit here in the garden, or you can just enjoy the garden. In summer, you can always find a nice shady spot, and in winter, you can always find a nice sheltered, sunny spot. And I guess that's sort of one of the characteristics that the, the fauna of the area also enjoys. I mean, we've, we've got, I don't know, I haven't seen them recently, but we've, we've had up to six to eight very healthy blue tongues around the place. The kookaburra is always here. We've got so many parrots, the king parrots, the lorikeets, different sorts of parrots, and of course, the magpies and the crows and honey eaters, the amount of birds; and the bloody cockatoos.

[Laughter and indistinct words]

But it's that's also part of, sort of, it's our house, but so many other...

very healthy garden and environment that the native animals will come into it, even including the echidna.

Yes, we've got a little echidna around the place. I think it's sort of likes what it finds in the garden, and every now and again, we'll come out and find something's been dug up that shouldn't have been dug up, but I'm sure it keeps them happy.

It's a house and a garden that's been shared across many generations, and now with the local wildlife as well. Is there anything, I know that you're very passionate about history, anything about this house that you would hate to see, that you're passionate about, that you'd hate to see changed?

I don't think you can sort of really say that. I think if and, if and when we sell this house, it's somebody else's. As I said, it's, it's sitting in a, it's sitting in a medium density zoning area. It would be more than a little disappointing to see a bulldozer come in and to see, see 15 or 20 apartments built on the site. But...

I mean, there's a magnificent floor in the foyer and made of the two different woods. It's quite unique, isn't it?

Yeah, it's a very special floor, and that was another interesting feature. It's one of the characteristics of the house is the timber floor. It's there's a wide and a narrow timber one is jarrah and one is kauri, I understand, with a dark and a light colour. And that's another interesting characteristic, or another interesting discovery, when we did the renovations, there's one room in in the house, which is now the lounge room that we have. Over the, over time this has been a bedroom and different things, but it's a lounge room that we've got. And now, when we got the house, and when we did the renovations, that room had a carpeted floor. Now we knew from looking underneath the house that it had the same

timber floor that the rest of the house has, this magnificent two toned floor, the thick and the thin and the light and the dark. So we knew that timber was in that room, but we didn't know what the quality was of the timber on the top. And in fact, there's a large fireplace there, and we suspected that, that fire could have escaped, there could be some burnt timber in front of it. And so was with a little trepidation that we took up the carpet to get that return to a timber floor, to discover that it was in perfect condition. And in fact...

just been covered...

just been covered. And in fact, when we did the renovations, the floor had the lightest of sand over it and just had sealant put back on it throughout the whole house. It's still magnificent. 100 years later, yes, it's incredible.

Now this is a probably an inappropriate question for a person who's more historian than a gardener, but if you could be a tree or a plant, what tree or plant would you like to be? And we have all sorts of answers.

Knowledge of trees is beyond my ken.

Is there anything that that you think, oh, that's, I love that plant?

Well, I mean, as I said earlier, the fact that this garden has quite a variety, and it is seasonal, and I think that's, it's quite special in this property, but it is a characteristic of the Highlands that draws a lot of people to the area, and that is that we have four seasons in this area. Here we are late September or mid to late September, and suddenly these trees have all got green leaves on them, which weren't there two weeks ago. We know that in six or seven months time, in April next year, we'll have magnificent autumn colors here. And then, while winter is bare, it's got its own beauty. So it's rather than name any particular tree. Let me just say that the fact that it is a seasonal garden, absolutely.

Susan was saying that one of the joys for her in the garden is walking around the cup of tea in the morning, looking at what's happened overnight, if anything's happened overnight. Do you share that that experience? Or do you prefer just...

Yeah, no, I've got a nice view of her from behind the glass here, enjoying my own cup of tea and reading the paper.

[Laughter]

All right, thank you, Ralph. Is there anything that you'd like to add or discuss for the tape? Because this will go into the Berrima District Museum and Historical Society.

I guess what deserves to be said is a thank you to the Australian Garden History Society and the Berrima District Historical Society for taking on this task of recording the history of the area. I think it is

something that deserves to be done. It's something that should be done and, and thank, thank you and your team and Berrima Historical Society team for making it possible.

Well, I think that this house, and the history that it had, warrants being recorded, and thank you for being wonderful custodians to it. Thanks, Ralph.

Interview ends 28 minutes 31 seconds