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Oral History Programme

an interview with

BOB McALINDEN and EDITH McALINDEN

9 March 1988

*DRYANDRA STATE FOREST*

*MALLET*

Conducted by

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Oral History Officer

Reference Number OH2094

Verbatim Transcript



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TAPE 2. SIDE 2.

Bob McAlinden and Edith McAlinden 09.03.1988  
At their home in NARROGIN

VP Can you talk to me about [inaudible]...[re Bob's understanding of the culture of the aboriginal people with whom he'd worked]

B.McAlinden [inaudible]

VP [inaudible]

B.McAlinden They still believe in the featherfoots, the witch-doctor type thing. Of course the memaris...

VP They're different from the memaris? [inaudible]

B.McAlinden Oh yes. The featherfoot is.... Well he can change himself to lots of different things. Change himself into a crow or [inaudible].

VP Right.

B.McAlinden They believe it.

VP And the memaris?

B.McAlinden The memaris. He's a little hairy fellow, they call him. [laughter] And he can whistle.

VP He can whistle?!

B.McAlinden Whistles. He whistles up dogs to eat and eats soap. They smell to high heavens.

VP They don't like water.

B.McAlinden They don't wash. [laughter]. But ah.....

VP And where were their hide outs, whereabouts would they hide out?

B.McAlinden Oh, they were over near Pumphrey's Bridge. On the hill there [inaudible] the river.

Suppose in the old days there was creeks there that they drink. I don't know. I've never seen them. [inaudible]

The old witch-doctor, he worked marvels. One chap even told me that his father had a little fish taken out of his belly with a drawing of the hands sort of thing. That's about all.

VP During your life have you ever had any occasion to have medicine like that? [inaudible]

B.McAlinden [unclear] Not in your life.

VP Not in your life?

B.McAlinden No. [laughter] I believe some of their herbal medicines are quite alright. I don't know. I never tried them. I think most of them have forgotten them now anyway. [inaudible]

VP Who was Tom Reedy? What did he do?

B.McAlinden Reedy?

VP Reedy.

B.McAlinden He used to strip mallet bark, cut fence posts, go around with a horse and cart and never washed from one year down to the other.

VP Whereabouts did he live, out in Dryandra?

B.McAlinden We don't know where he lived. He just used to come through at stripping time. I think he lived up around Brookton way somewhere.

VP Was he classified as a casual, one of those C-class?

B.McAlinden No. No he was contract. He'd strip the mallet bark. Always had 3 or 4 kangaroo dogs. A couple of lady friends.

VP [inaudible]

B.McAlinden Sometimes half a dozen kids. He was a real old character. I think he's dead now. Some of his off-spring if you could find them would be around.

Edith [inaudible]

B.McAlinden No, there could be some connection. [inaudible] I think he was the most colourful, old Tom. He just used to appear.

VP Was he a good bushman?

B.McAlinden I think so.

Edith He lived entirely out in the bush, didn't he?

B.McAlinden Yeah. He used to get some bread sometimes, otherwise he'd make damper and live off the bush. I think he'd eat anything.

A dark chap we had stripping for us. He used to live off the bobtails and just eat the tails.

VP That's interesting. Did you ever ask why?

B.McAlinden No. [inaudible]... chewing bobtails [inaudible].  
That's all he used to take.

VP [inaudible] [You don't think he was forbidden  
traditionally from taking anything else?]

B.McAlinden I don't know. Well I don't think there was much meat  
on the other parts anyway.

Edith [inaudible].. quite a few characters manned the towers  
[inaudible].

B.McAlinden There was nothing that really sticks in your mind about  
them is there?

Edith Oh no. There [unclear] instances [inaudible].

VP [inaudible] [Edith, how did you come to meet Bob?]

Edith [unclear] Well, we started going steady I suppose when  
I was in the late teens. But we had known each other  
for quite a few years before that and his parents and  
my family all lived in the same, in the district you  
know. We lived at Yornup, and at that stage when I was  
a child we had a school and a store. We used to have  
monthly dances in the old Yornup Hall, and a monthly  
church service. There was a very active tennis club  
there. They used to have their social cricket matches  
and on the sport's day each, I think it was New Year's  
Day, we used to have a sport's meeting there. But now  
there's just a, only a few families left and  
everything's just drifted either to Bridgetown or  
Manjimup. And of course there used to be a mill there,  
a big timber mill at Yornup. Well that eventually went  
out to Donelly River, and when that went of course,  
large population went. The Donelly River's now closed  
too. So that's just a tourist place. But, oh it was a  
very happy little community 9 miles from town, from  
Bridgetown. Manjimup was just a very, very small spot  
when I was a child and it's a big town now. As a  
child, Manjimup was much smaller than what Bridgetown  
is now, you know. But I [unclear], we had good times,  
bad times [laughter].

VP Plenty to occupy yourself with.

Edith Oh yes. When you're in the country there's always  
something to do outdoors..

VP Can you talk about the kind of work that you, after you  
were married to Bob? [inaudible]

Edith Well, Bob was working in the mill when we were married.

VP That's in Yornup?

Edith In Yornup, yes. And we lived at Yornup Mill for a short time and then he joined the Department again because he was in the Department for a few years previously. Then we moved out to Yornup Forestry Settlement. I think there were 6 houses there then. They're all gone too now and then when our eldest daughter and Len were..... Len was about 3 and Pat was 4 1/2, we moved up here to Dryandra. We came up in 1954, after the floods. Narrogin was virtually isolated at that stage. We were to have moved up in the beginning of February but because of the floods all the roads were closed and so we came up, we arrived at Dryandra on the 1st March 1954. And I'll always remember it. I thought I'd come to the end of the world. [laughter] I'd left my mother and Bob's family and just had the two children and I was expecting the third and we got out to Dryandra, we came through the forest, through the mallet trees. Never seen timber like that before. [laughter] So different to the sou'west. I really thought I had come to the end of the world. But I love it here now. I mean there's no comparison really between here and the sou'west.

Oh we had good times and bad times out there too. The kiddies all went to school on the school bus of course. That was always a bit of a hassle. They had to leave quite early in the morning and didn't get home till about 20 to 5 in the afternoon each day.

VP Did you have any problems with the children with sickness out in the bush?

Edith We had a few trips to the doctor in a hurry. I was always very grateful and very thankful that there was nothing really dramatic happened to any of them. The worst was Robyn, our youngest daughter bouncing on the bed, came down and cracked her head on the window sill and had to be taken in for stitches. Oh they had all the childish illnesses and things like that but we coped.

VP No big problem.

Edith [laughter] I managed to look after them all and they all survived. [laughter] Miraculously. Oh you always had that feeling in the back of your mind, you were a long way from town and there were times when I'd be there on my own and there wouldn't be anyone else around and you'd always sort of wonder, you know, hope nothing would happen that particular day. But other than that.....

VP Did you get much support from the other women who were living at the settlement at the time?

Edith Oh yes. Well, I've never been one to visit a great deal but we were all friendly. Mrs Currie was a great support. She sort of mothered everybody virtually. She was always there. She was a trained nurse too, which was quite a comfort.

- VP Mmm, would have been.
- Edith Oh yes, we were all friendly but I mean as in all walks of life, you would meet quite a variety of people and women and attitudes to life. [inaudible]
- There'd always be a Christmas party and things like that. I suppose there were a lot of drawbacks but they were happy years. The children... [were very happy]
- VP They would have been very young, growing up in Dryandra [unclear].
- Edith Our eldest daughter was 16 when we left Dryandra which meant Richard was about ssi.... She was 16 and our youngest one was 6 [unclear]. The others were in between.
- We met a lot of interesting people because of course Dryandra was always known for its wildflowers and its wildlife so we had lots of visitors that would come looking for all the numbats and all the wildflowers and that sort of thing. And they'd come in quite often and have a cup of tea. Harry Butler was one of our regular visitors, Vincent Serventy used to call on us.
- I don't think we had any real dramas. One of our neighbour's kiddies fell over in our yard and put the handle bar of her bike through her leg here [thigh] and I think I panicked more about that than I did for my own children with any of their injuries.
- VP That sounds pretty severe doesn't it?
- Edith Yes, it was a nasty looking wound. It wasn't stitched but still it should have been, I think.
- VP Were you doing any fire tower work when you were in Dryandra?
- Edith No, I didn't, no. I used to answer the telephone on the week-ends because we used to get hourly calls. You had to write down, just about forgotten... It'd be 1, all around which meant it was clear. Then there was 1, 2, 3, 4. You've got your different distances for how far the tower could see and we used to write 1 all round, or 1, 2, 3, or whatever it was.
- VP What would 1 all around mean? You can see [unclear]?
- Edith Yes.
- Then you'd get your wind direction and approximate speed and you had to write that down in the tower book every time you got a phone call. That was a regular week-end sort of thing. Had to do that.
- VP But that would have given you a bit of freedom of movement. You could have gone into town or something like that. You didn't have to stay on the settlement.



Edith Err, only if there was someone else around to answer the phone.

VP Oh, I see.

Edith There had to be someone there all the time, when the fire season was on.

VP Right.

Edith There always had to be someone there to answer the phone. And of course if there was a fire, well you had to go and get the men.

VP The bearings.

Edith Get the bearings and all the rest of it.

Old Mr Price, old Franky as we call him, he was probably one of the best towermen that had ever been, I think because he'd be able to give you the direction and position of a fire to within a few miles. He was really very, very good. Apart from the time he was drunk [laughter]. That caused a few hassles because there'd be times when he just couldn't climb the tower you know, and somebody else would have to go and man it.

VP Did you find alcohol generally was quite a problem? [inaudible]

Edith Well, a lot of the casual workers that came and went out there were inclined to like their wee drop. I think a lot were a sort of itinerant workers, probably had trouble holding jobs. It never worried us. Never been a'gin it... but never over-indulged too much. It could create problems, I suppose. Not to worry that's out there. There were a few families where it was a problem.

VP Yes.

Edith One family in particular I know, they had, oh, you know, it really was their life, and the children were a bit neglected and so on. They didn't stay very long but you always feel very concerned for the children in that sort of situation. I often wondered how they grew up. What happened to them in the end? [laughter] [inaudible]

I suppose one of the biggest drawbacks was the lack of.... Well we had a power plant but we had limited electricity and that was probably one of the biggest drawbacks. Men took it in turns weekly to start the motor for the powerplant and that would usually be about 4 o'clock in the winter time because the afternoons would be dark and 5 other times when they knocked off at 5, they'd start the engine and it was supposed to go off at about 10 at night. When it was your turn to be on, you inevitably weren't ready to go to bed at 10 o'clock or else you were so tired by 8 o'clock, you wished it was 10 o'clock.

We were only allowed.... we were only able to use an iron and the lights really. Anything heavier took too much power out of the engine so it would stop. If it was your turn to be doing the lights for that week, you'd have to trundle up to the office and start it again [laughter]. That was a bit of a hassle.

VP What would your routine have been during the day, when [unclear] the kids were still small?

Edith Get them up and get them off onto the school bus, the ones that were going. Bob often had to have a crib in those days so I cut him lunches. I don't know - My days were always full. You had to wash in the copper [inaudible]. Wait for the copper to boil and then put the next lot of washing in - nappies or whatever and we didn't have hot water which meant that in winter time you'd light the copper in the afternoon for the bathroom at night so that you had the hot water. Oh, kept pretty busy [laughter] [unclear] doing those sort of things.

VP [unclear] cooking too for the family?

Edith Oh yes, woodstove.

VP What sort of things did you cook?

Edith Oh, I think pretty normal family things.

VP What was that? [inaudible]

Edith I suppose, a baked dinner, then cold meat, then we would have stews and casseroles and lots of soup in the winter. Boiled pudding, dumplings, rice puddings.

VP And potatoes?

Edith Oh yes, yes. Goodness me - Couldn't have filled them up without potatoes [laughter]. Made cakes and biscuits for their lunches and things like that.

VP About getting stores [inaudible]?

Edith We got stores once a week. There was a store truck went in Friday afternoon.

[inaudible - large section of tape with interference]

Edith Once upon a time [inaudible].. I've always felt that you had summer and winter, autumn and spring were just passed over virtually. They didn't sort of, they weren't there for long. You just had your summer and winter, now [unclear] the summers are quite different to what they used to be. Didn't get any summer this year, did we until January? [inaudible]

VP The winters as I remember them [inaudible].

Edith Well, they are certainly mild as far as rainfall is concerned. That's a real tragedy I think the way our rainfall has fallen off. Its quite frightening when you stop to think about it [unclear]. There is such a draw on the ground water, isn't there now with the population such as it is, but the rainfall doesn't get any more.

[pause]

VP You know of any incidents while you were living out at Dryandra that stick in your mind? Even very small ones. [inaudible]

Edith Oh, had a couple of scares with snakes. I was always lucky there was always somebody around to dispose of them for me. [laughter] I often wondered if I actually came face to face with one when I was on my own, whether I would be able to dispose of it or not, but...

Bob very nearly walked on one in the woodheap one day. He sort of wandered out and the magpies were up in the tree sort of creating, making a bit of a fuss. He looked up at them and thought "Now what are they looking at?" He just looked down and there was old Joe Blake heading across the woodheap.

VP Joe Blake?

Edith Yes. [laughter] Joe Blake - snake.

We had one in the laundry one day. Another one under the house. We had a little black dog. He used to be our warning signal. Barked furiously if there was a snake or goanna around.

Oh lots of things happened I s'ppose. Got a great fright one day. There was a terrific kafuffle outside and rustling and scratching in the leaves. Looked outside to see our grey cat chasing a big race-horse goanna up the tree. There they were sort of on one limb. [laughter] [unclear]

VP Both of them?

Edith Yes, I think I managed to get the cat away in the end. The goanna took off.

VP They can be really big, can't they those race-horse goannas?

Edith This one was about 3 foot long and the cat wasn't too frightened of him.