

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
NORTHERN NSW BRANCH



Photo by Lynne Walker

Interviewee:	LYNDA SKIPPER
Interviewer:	LIZ CHAPPELL WITH LYNNE WALKER
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00.00.00

Thank you very much for agreeing to this interview Lynda. This is part of the oral history collection for Australia's Garden History Society. We have all three known each other in another sphere. So I would like to start by asking about the very early history of Ollera, going back to the Everett brothers and the first settlement, just an overview here.

Ollera settled in 1838 by John and George Everett and then their third brother came out two years later, Edwin, and he accompanied 'McInnis' the first Hereford bull to come out. They used to go to Sydney in the early days and then later on the Stephens brought equipment up from Morpeth so Morpeth became a very interesting part of Ollera's history. They'd come up on the steamer and then they'd have to come overland, they came up through the Moonbis and then they were looking around, they had letters of introduction in those days to a Dr Bowman at Scone, I think he had a parcel for them and so it went on. And then they had to go further than any other white man who'd taken up land to find the block that they could call, so it expanded out from the south, people taking up land and you had to go further and there was an Aboriginal that took them up towards about where Glenshiels is, Llangothlin I guess about now and said see Ollera, meaning look there's sweet water. So they came down into this valley here and they took up a large piece of land. Then they had to go back down and register it and it was like a mark on a tree here and a tree there, Booralong had already been taken up so they knew the boundary there. So Ollera really spread from Llangothlin pretty well right down towards Tingha, towards Bundarra.

And the name was taken from a local Aboriginal name for the area?

Meaning sweet water, yes. So it was very basic in those days. They had to keep going back to Morpeth and on the way back they'd buy sheep and perhaps a few cattle and then walk them all the way up. We do have all the sulkies and buggies they used to use.

That's just wonderful. Now they were also responsible for the first English trees planted here?

Yes, they were. They bought out a couple of acorns in their pockets. I don't know about elms, I'm yet to work out how elms came, because I don't think, they don't have the acorns, you grow them from a sucker and they are huge. Now the front garden ones, the biggest of the elms and they were planted in about 1840/50, don't know, and then of course we've got the scarlet oak, the English oak, the evergreen, the holm oak. They were all the early trees and then they planted the avenues to the church. Radiata pines too, they planted at some point. They've gone now, we've still got all the others.

Now I understand these are some of the oldest exotic trees in the area and they have been subject to a lot of study by various people over the years, measuring their girth and so forth?

Well I don't know whether other people have but John Everett did when he went back to England and he had a couple of trips back to England and he'd measure it and there is of course in a thesis, it's been printed.

Just for the tape this is Margaret Rodwell's PhD thesis which will be appended to this interview.¹

Yes, but the trees now, the tree surgeons have been up, we've had them trimmed a little bit because I was terribly worried about the weight. They are leaning away from the house so thank goodness, westerly winds, all leaning away. They are 90 metres high, I think its metres not feet. But they are in good order. Now one interesting thing that happened just recently, I'm getting on with the history a bit but I want to talk about one thing, when the last big drought broke in 2019 we had a terrible front of lightning. The big one got struck by lightning, one big branch that's almost the size of a normal elm tree that you see anywhere else and one at the church and we had five eucalypts struck at the same time. The eucalypts went up in smoke and we had to go and put them out because people rang and told us there was a tree on fire. The elms don't burn, because of the moisture in the wood and there was a big one at the Guyra sheep yards the same and they said you won't lose it because they don't burn and we didn't. It blew the top off the one near the church and the worst thing was it put a shard through the hole in the church roof and we had to patch the roof, we had a couple of slate tiles and we got a tree surgeon out with a thing and our builder came out and jumped in his little lift and went up and patched. But that's just an interesting thing. Apparently the elms don't burn.

When was that?

2019.

Just for the record could you describe the church and the elm walk that leads to it, Lynda, because it is quite unique.

00.06.15

Oh right, do you want to go right back to when a few of the early things, I think we'd better go back because this is important. The interesting thing was, now the original road to Inverell actually is not where it is now. It came down, just past at the end of the elm avenue going down there near the cricket field. It crossed over the creek in front of the Ollera house where it was quite level there and they could get across. Otherwise it's a bit slippery. And went across towards Stratton and then onto Inverell somehow, I don't know that end. So when they settled here the Ollera house faced the main road so the house is built facing north and you entered from that road.

Now is that part of the house that we're in now?

No, from that door front, this was an addition from here through the dining room and then the billiard room.

But part of the house as it stands now is part of the original Everett house?

Oh no, we had two slab houses, one slab house and then they built another one in the 1880s and then the brick one, that little bit, 1903, and then the billiard room wing through here is 1912.

Thank you for that.

So they entered the garden through up towards the garden fence, it's not far, and the fence that's there, the metal fence came out from Bidderstone [in Wiltshire, England] as ballast in the sailing ship. I think they got tired of painting it and so have we. It's still standing but it's rusty and getting a bit frail.

It's a magnificent fence. Could you describe it for the tape?

Oh, it's about a metre and a half I suppose with double gates and another small gate beside it. It's quite ornate and we did paint it for Sally's wedding in white again but now it's gone straight back to rust. I don't know, leave it to the next generation now. But anyway so you went through those gates and then the garden is divided up by quite a large driveway which they don't encourage anymore but we find it wonderful and we'd never do away with it, but it was for the horse and buggy days. Ollera does not have the normal round circular driveway so the horses could drop their passengers off, continue round and up to the sheds etc. Ollera's got double gates everywhere and what we call our teahouse now was where they would drive through with doors at the other end and that's where they'd drop off the sulkies, we've got several, they've all got different names, and then the horses would continue on. So that is why it has been divided so much because we didn't have a circular driveway. So when we came it was just dirt and then an Aboriginal called Dave Williams who worked here and was living here in the shearers quarters, he collected the stones and then we put the stones all around the drive, or he did with a bit of our help which really then gave us something to work from.

So could you tell us what was in the garden when you and Bill came and which year that was?

00.10.00

Well we moved to Ollera in 1984, we worked on Ollera and we lived in the cottage over the hill at the back of Ollera. And then when Uncle Tom had passed away and Nan Everett had moved to Armidale we moved here.

Now just for the record your late husband Bill was a nephew of Mrs Everett so he is still a connection to the original settlers through the Everett's?

Well by marriage. We're not blood relations.

Right, so sorry I did ask what the garden was like. Mature trees would of course have been here?

They were there when we arrived. You can see by these photos. That's the church gate over here.

Lynda I can see but for the people listening we have to use words for it.

Oh well they had the big oaks there around the garden, they got really old, there was one, a weeping willow, a pussy willow, it's planted in the stump of a big acacia that was struck by lightning and it was hollow the tree surgeon said plant something in it. So that was planted, the pussy willow. A lot of the trees were getting really old. Mrs Everett was not a gardener, she was very much a lady, she bought lots of things and put them in pots where it was easy for people to water them. That was her garden skills. Also the garden was much sunnier then because they loved dahlias, they had a lot of dahlias and vegie gardens and supplied vegies to all the people living in the various cottages.

Now I'm taking you back a bit because even in the earlier days there was a big vegetable garden I understand?

Well they did plant vegetables, in the letters, the last ones Margaret did she talked a lot about what was growing in their garden, how they suddenly grew a potato and this and that and they were quite excited about it. But by the time we came, over towards the tennis court, there was a quite big garden, we didn't need it quite so big just for the family. Bill used to be the vegie gardener before we came here but I think there was so much work for him to do, he was tired and I think I concentrated more on other plants.

So when you came here in 1984 did you and Bill have prior garden experience? Did you grow up in a gardening family?

Well my mother was a keen gardener, yes she always gardened, loved her garden. And where we built we didn't have anything, well it was a very small garden because we didn't have very much water over there. And Mrs Skipper was a keen gardener, she had a lovely garden, Dudley Vale, where Bill grew up. So we're both keen and when we came we really did have to get Ollera economically viable, it had been let go a little. I think when they didn't have children they didn't know what they would ever do so they weren't working towards the future of the property or for family really. So everything, fencing, dams, water, you name it, stock, it wasn't all that good. So since we moved to Ollera we've done nothing but clean, straighten up, learn about the property, read all the documents that we kept finding, it's taken years. And now our son Tom has taken over and he's got the capital and the stock pastures running smoothly. We were really 70 years behind the most progressive properties, a generation really.

Leading you back to the garden records and you have shown me on previous visits you have seed orders and plant orders going back a long, long time.

Yes but offhand I can't remember without finding them but they're certainly recorded. But when we came here, because it really hadn't been landscaped, it just grew from whatever. There was a lot of cotoneaster and plants that were readily available at the time and those that spread. There was a lot of bamboo, tree of heaven, lots of plants that you really didn't want in a modern garden. So we had to simplify it. There was very little water, we had to put a pressure pump on so we had to improve the water system and I think we just, trailer loads of cuttings were just taken out and straightened up so we could mow, that was an extra thing, as the lawnmowers got bigger the little beds were a pain so we just had to change. And we used hoses to mark them out so we could turn comfortably without having to go too much backwards and forwards. Now looking out the kitchen window is a prime example of what it was like. The chook yards were here because this was the back of the house, as I was saying earlier. The northern side is now almost the back of our house because everything now works around this front side so we had to change this area here to make it from the back side to the front of house where people then drove down past that door there. So we had to move the clothes line, the chook yards, there was a little shed there that was falling over where they housed the little blue [vintage] car etc. So we sort of just took our time, just got the tractor with forks, ripped out all the bamboo but I've always tried to keep a lot of the genetics. The palms for instance, they were growing in the middle of nowhere, in the lawn, and they were a nuisance for mowing so we kept the progeny, little fellows and put them and now we've got little areas of palm trees, more together instead of just one there and one there which we think has made a difference. Now Ollera is a very frosty garden, we are close to the creek on the western side of Guyra so it's known to be a very frosty area, we don't get the mist and low cloud that Guyra get. So I've lost a lot of things that I would have loved to have planted but the frost didn't like them very much.

Lynne: Lynda, sorry can I ask a question? From what you've just said it's really unusual to have any palms at all here so what are they?

Well I don't know where they came from but we've just got them. They seed everywhere and sometimes I've just got to have a day and dig them, pull them out.

It was a 1930s thing, around us in Armidale almost every one of those timber cottages has a palm and yes they do seed.

Yes, they do.

LW: Do you know where they're from?

No, I don't know where they're from.

So the design of the garden as we see it now is basically your effort Lynda? And the stonework?

Yes, all the stonework we've added, except the fountain area. That was there. From the photos, well the bamboo was coming up here on the southern side of it. The big yew trees, they'd got really old and were falling over. There was a prunus which got really old. There were massive day lilies but they never flowered so we cleaned all that out and started again.

Where did you get your inspiration from?

Well I just think the visual idea, I think went to a few garden things and they said always look from your window out, just don't design your garden from outside, come inside and look out because it's very easy to plant, which I have done, trees in the wrong spot. But we needed to be able to mow and clean it up for snakes and things like that. It was just a tangled mess so we just cleaned it out and then we looked to see what we'd kept and decided what we could plant to go ahead again.

I will just take you back to the little church because that and the outbuildings are such a feature of Ollera. Can you tell me how old the church is?

Yes, 1876, the bricks were made on Ollera by a George Vickery, he was a brickie. The pattern of the bricks, the way they laid them, it's a double brick wall and it's colonial bond pattern.

Yes, they have header bricks every second brick.

Yes and it has buttresses that keep the walls straight. Now the Horbury Hunt club has made several visits here many, many years ago. I think it was a Professor Robertson.

Because the church was designed by Horbury Hunt who also designed the Armidale Anglican Cathedral.

Yes and many buildings in Sydney, lots. He [Professor Robertson] came out, he was very interested, he thought the walls were leaning out which often they did because of the weight of the pitched roof, the walls leaned out. And a lot of churches you'll see have steel rods going through with steel plates on the end with bolts so they bolt them in to hold the walls in. But we've got buttresses and apparently when they measured them all, he brought a whole boot up of full of pens and paper etc. They measured everything up and they said we were pretty good and he gave us \$2,000 to apply for a heritage grant so we did repairs to the little bell tower, improved the gutters and downpipes and things like that. So that was really very welcome.

00.20.56

And between the house and the church is a lovely row of elms.

Yes, and they took a caning in that drought we talked about, the 2019 drought and we had to spend a lot of money getting a tree surgeon in and you can still see the pile of rubbish up there because there was a lot of dead wood. But we rectified them, we spent a considerable amount of money, but they're looking healthy again now.

So obviously over the years you've had to have a lot of tree specialists in to maintain these trees? Have you lost many through natural causes?

Yes, now, lightning strikes, we've lost several from lightning strikes. Now when we came there were very few conifers, a couple of big radiatas and I couldn't work out why there weren't any small conifers in the garden because in the winter it looked bare because they didn't have as much shrubbery as I've got now. I went a bit mad and I've bought lots and planted them etc etc and in the drought they all died. So I think that is a lesson that we are on trap soil, sorry not trap, ironstone. It's hard and the big oaks I think and elms, their roots can cut through and break through the sub-clay because there is moisture under there. If we dig a hole with a post hole digger it will fill up with water as we know from the cemetery when we've dug holes up there.

Just for the record can you describe the cemetery here at Ollera station as well because that's very historic?

Yes, well it started in 1843, might be 1845, will have to check that. Yes the first guy that was buried there and it has grown, we have now over 400. It's a private cemetery. You can only be buried there if you are a direct descendant. I think that was a decision made by Uncle Tom and the Guyra Council at the time which is probably a relief because it has grown considerably. And there are some very historic graves up there. There are a couple of Battle of Waterloo veterans, Edward Hill who was very involved here at Ollera and at Tenterden, his grandfather was the Poet Laureate who wrote Goldilocks and the Three Bears. He's buried there and I actually have a self portrait of him, it's hanging up in the next room if you want to look.

And of course all of the Everett descendants are there too?

Not many, no. The only Everetts that are there – John and George Everett, the original two, they went back to England, they're buried in England – Edwin remained a bachelor and he is buried there. So Uncle Tom, they didn't have children so their wives are buried there so the Skippers have ended up being in there and David Curtis who was Uncle Tom's nephew, his sister's, he chose to be buried at Ollera. The others didn't.

And of course that's part of a bigger village as well. You have the buggy shed, an historic shearing shed, a lot of slab buildings.

Yes, well you see when I took out the original the people buried up there such as the blacksmith's shop which we still have, a slab out building which we renovated and it's still got the original bellows and we've got some little posters

there, linking a few of the people that are historically important in the Ollera cemetery that really were, well it was a village so you had a store, a blacksmiths shop etc. Now there's the family that had the first white baby, the Huttons, they're buried up there. And people who have worked at Ollera over the years, many years. Ashman was the blacksmith, Farrell took the big wool wagons to Morpeth, Grafton and Port Macquarie, he's buried there. The rider who had the pub at Wandsworth, he's there. So it was a village, they had schools, they had 27 shepherds, so there were little slab cottages built all around Ollera because I think it was 89 square miles or something.

Once again it's in the record here.

So there were lots of people involved.

00.26.37

So it's a tremendous responsibility having the custody of this heritage.

Well we took it seriously because he had left it to Bill and we were extremely grateful. If he hadn't left it to Bill I don't know quite what we would have done because his family eventually sold the family place and Bill had a brother.

So taking care of buildings is one thing but taking care of garden features is another because they can be very, very ephemeral.

Well that was my domain. I was very much involved in the garden. Bill would dig a hole for me, he'd go to a nursery and say we must have one of those and I'd say well why don't we continue that same avenue up there but he liked claret ash or something so we had to buy it, he was a bit impetuous. So I think I've had probably, whether people like what I've done is another story but it had to be something that I could maintain without the help that we used to have. I've become very mindful of water over the years because that drought taught me a lesson and just as we get older it has to be manageable.

Now you mentioned that your contribution has largely been in understory, in small shrubs. Can you describe some of the most successful for us? I can see from here several camellias.

Yes, actually I didn't plant them, they were here but they also had a lot of hydrangeas in this picture which I don't seem to be able to grow. But I can't see the camellias so I don't know when they changed that. Yes, I've planted quite a lot of the weepier ones, I got a horizontal elm that I bought from the Guyra nursery at the time. I had no idea what it would look like but to me it's a wonderful feature. I have never seen one before. There was an old hothouse there, there's a little bit of wall there, we kept the foundation and it's now grown right over that so it forms a whole little shade there, it's like a big umbrella really. And then beside it there's a weeping elm going near the church gate and in this acacia stump there's a weeping mulberry which is very, very pretty in Autumn, it's bright, bright yellow. And then I planted, there's maples and they seed so we've moved a lot of maples around. Now just having a bit of fun, I clip them

to make them in shape and keep them small and not get too big. That's my latest little thing I'm working on. We've also clipped a lot of box, English box, shrubs I guess you would call them. They looked like plum puddings when we came, boring, just plum puddings. And there's one there that I went off to someone's funeral and when I came back, a gardener who was helping me with it, a nurseryman, he discovered that all the lower branches had rooted into the ground so he left those so we've got a little circle around and he cleared a couple of stems and then we've allowed the topiaries to grow out of it. Actually, it is all one shrub which is quite interesting. And then I did that with another couple elsewhere because they are just very dark dense plants and by opening them up and having a little bit of fun with some shape it gives the garden a bit of a natural feature. I haven't got that many statues. It's more a garden just of different plants. I love everything anyone gives me and I have to find a home for it, most of them survive. A big sasanqua died, I don't know why, and now I've got a creeper growing up in it out the window and it's just growing up along the branches. So I don't know what's going to happen when it gets to the end, we'll worry about that when happens.

And there's a delightful woodland walk too as you go down. Could you describe that for us?

Yes you can walk down between, there's a couple of little paths, going to the church there's a small path that heads down and that was heading towards the vegie garden they had. And there's a wisteria walk which we had to put new posts in. But because we're frosty I've only ever seen it flower twice and when it does it was absolutely unbelievable. The frost always gets it, right at the wrong time.

So the wisteria was planted before you and Bill came here?

Yes, very much so and then from there we did change the fence line there a bit and I've got a little sort of, it is a bit like a little area there that I'm just letting go natural to make it easier. You had funny little areas that we just decided to plant, it was annoying for lawn mowing so we just planted that out with different things.

A lot of hellebores as I remember in that area?

00.32.05

Yes, under the crab apple, the *Malus ioensis*, under the big oaks I've got lots and lots of hellebores. They do extremely well and they, you see I have very few weeds, I do use a product to spray around the fence so grass seeds are not encouraged to get in and I do spray around, I don't do digging, I very rarely dig. I think if you get onto the weeds before they spread they don't spread. And I've got ground covers. So I think I've had it in mind all along that whoever followed from me, they may not be gardeners, would not want the work and so I have planted shrubs and a lot of ground covers which are not a lot of work. There are some areas that I actually don't even touch, don't even water, they just do their own thing and I try and put a bit of autumn colour. I do the mowing

myself so when I mow I often think that area wants colour, wants something, a tree, a shrub. And I think I do a lot of planning in that respect so I like to enjoy my mowing. So going up to the church outside there are a lot of pin oaks going up there, there were liquidambar, the first one we got came from my mother's garden as a gift for her, she was Tasmanian and it was given to her. She brought it up from Tasmania and it had little ones grow and I tacked those off and struck them.

So the liquidambar were planted by you and Bill. They are now 40 years old and magnificent trees. How tall would they be roughly? I'm asking you because I can't guess.

Oh, they're not huge. All these trees you see out the window here we've planted.

And you've been fortunate to live here long enough to see them into maturity.

Yes, I have, except that golden cypress, it was sick looking. Bill was going to cut it out and one of the men said, oh no I think you can leave it and it's grown. It has survived. The other conifer that survived which surprises me, we put them all around the wool shed to hide some of the old sheds and to give us a bit of protection from the south westerly wind, the Leyland cypress, and they have survived the drought and they haven't been watered but they actually did survive which surprises me. We did plant Torulosa going to the cemetery and they've all died, they didn't make it.

00.35.34

Now there's a lot of exotic trees outside the garden here at Ollera too, down across the paddock. Do they date back to the Everett's time?

Yes, the elms, the elms, scrubs as they call them.

Yes.

Yes, a lot of elms and I suppose they have suffered and moved on. I guess in those days they had picnics down by the creek a lot I guess. And we've planted most of the others, Bill and I have planted outside, except for the elms. I think we planted pretty well all the others. We were trying to protect it from the south west wind and a little bit from the summer heat but one big help too we have designed so that sheep can graze all around the house, there's no fence that cuts them off and they keep it short now, for snakes and fire. That's helpful, we don't have to mow outside any longer.

And over the years you have been extremely generous with your garden and sharing it with the public. I think you were one of the first gardens to open in the area with Australia's Open Garden Scheme?

Well I think we were when they first started in New England I think we were, yes. Well there were many others as well but we probably did have our first big opening then.

That would be about 1992?

I don't remember. But we also had bus tours and fund raising. I think we had the vehicles and Paul Moxon brought all the vintage cars here and we had fund raising for the Royal Flying Doctor, we've opened it up for the school along with a few others and bus tours from here and there. The Botanic Gardens in Sydney came, a few from Brisbane, people who were just interested in gardening.

And you had a very successful open weekend just recently I believe.

Yes, well the weather was perfect, that helped. And we hadn't had a frost. I cannot believe, never before in history has it gone so long without a frost I'm sure. And we still haven't had one which is amazing. People came from elsewhere, not the usual ones that have been here before, people that I'd never seen and others that I don't know who they all were. They were extremely well behaved and the money was made to beautify Guyra, put interesting things in the garden in the main street or something. People just came from elsewhere, I have no idea who they all were but they were very respectful and the girls did a wonderful catering job. But I found a few facts: I had to polish up a bit of my history and I was reading through all the letters and I discovered there's a steam engine here at the woolshed and I've always wondered how they got it up the Moonbis for instance. And I was reading and they said well one similar that was going to another property they required 30 bullocks so I presume that's 15 on each side. We've got how many horses and bullocks pulled the wool wagon and we've got photos of that but we didn't have one of that. Because they used to take that engine across the creek somehow with bullocks, I think they hulled wheat, I don't know what they did with it but it has been pulled around apparently. So that was an interesting fact I found. I always find a few extra things. Now we have bought the church back. Uncle Tom vested it to the Anglican church because he didn't know who was going to inherit or get Ollera or be sold or what. In about 1954 I think he vested it to them and it was in their possession. We always maintained it so they didn't do too much, we got our Christmas money but we always maintained it and it's come back to us, I think just after the pandemic, I think it might have been 2022. So it's back in Ollera's ownership again now.

And I think you have had open gardens to benefit the church maintenance too?

Yes, because when we sent the money in for the open garden scheme they always gave a percentage back and we always put that into our church account to keep a little bit of funding because anything else went to the wind.

It's wonderful to see such great preservation of a garden. Is there anything I haven't asked you Lynda that you would like to have included?

I will put links on the tape back to Margaret Rodwell's thesis about the history of Ollera.

End of Interview: 40 minutes and 45 seconds

ⁱ Rodwell, Margaret, [Ollera and its people: A social and cultural history of a New England pastoral station, 1838--1914 | Research UNE](#)