

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY

NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS BRANCH NSW



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0.00

[MT] This is Myfanwy Thompson speaking to Peter Holmes on the Paul Sorenson designed garden at Mereworth in the Southern Highlands.

Peter, in what year were you born?

1935.

And where?

Guildford, New South Wales.

Did you grow up there?

No, my early days were at Wallacia, out of Penrith.

Was that a rural background?

In those days it was, yes.

What did your dad do?

He was a chef. He worked in a guest-house there until the War broke out, when he moved us up to Portland where the grandparents were. We stayed there for about 12 months, then we moved to Leura. That's where we grew up then, mostly in Leura.

How old would you have been when you went to Leura?

About five.

Was it a good place to grow up?

It was great! Yes. We loved Leura.

What was it like, in those days?

Well, everybody knew everybody, not like it is today. Today you walk down the street and nobody knows anybody. In those days, as soon as you put a foot wrong your parents knew about it! [laughs]. No. It was great. Good people.

Were you an only child?

No, I had a brother and a sister. I was the oldest, my sister's the youngest.

The school that you went to, what was that like?

I went to the Catholic school at Katoomba. Then from there up to St Bernard's College, the De LaSalle Brothers. But that's closed.

Really?

Yeah. There's Mt St Mary's, St Canisius, St Bernard's; I forget what they call it now, but there was another one down by the scenic railway. They've all closed down.

Was your father still a chef up in Leura?

Well, the War broke our family up. When he come home from War he couldn't settle down. So, he wandered around the countryside and we were brought up by my mum.

Yes, sadly it's not an unusual story.

No. He come and went, but he just couldn't settle down.

How did that make *you* feel – because you were the 'man of the family' in that case, weren't you?

Well, we didn't really notice it because we never knew him. Because I was only five when we went to Leura, and he was called up and he went in the Air Force. He come home on leave once, I think it was, in the War years.

How did your mum manage?

She seemed to manage all right. We all had our chores to do, to get in and help.

What chores did you have to do?

Mainly the wood, and the coal, that sort of stuff in those days, you know.

Did you have any particular interest in going on the land yourself, when you were growing up?

No. Not on the land – but I always liked the *Bush*. Because on weekends we were never at home, we were always out in the Bush.

Where did you go round Leura?

Minnnehaha Falls, what they call The Junction; it was nothing to walk down Bridal Vale, and up the Joint Stairway and home again. Something different all the time. Yeah.

So, you'd have got a knowledge of local plants?

Not really, no. I had no interest in gardening then. I didn't know what I was wanting to do. Getting into gardening was a bit of a conspiracy, I think! [laughs].

Explain that one.

Mr Sorensen did a garden called 'Cherry Dell' and the owners had access through our block of land. Their name was Becker, and they were kid's garment manufacturers, they were Germans. I was working for Bill Bewley, I'd left school then, and he had a Nursery at Wentworth Falls. He wasn't in the big time, but he was big enough. He just couldn't really support two – my brother had come and worked for him, so the two of us were there.

What sort of period are we talking about?

About 1953. He couldn't support the two of us, so he said if we ever found a job – take it. In those days all boys were a little bit wild and Mum, being the only person at home, she found it a bit hard.

This Mrs Becker, they knew Old Paul, so she went down and had a talk to him and *that's* how we come to be with Old Paul!

I still think it was a conspiracy, because he more or less took me and my brother under his wing and became a father role model for us.

Really!

Yes. He was great.

Can you remember the first time you met him?

Only just vaguely. He had a funny set up at home. The house – you just walked in off the street onto his verandah. He had a table and chairs there, and we sat around and he talked to us. We didn't know whether we had a job or not, 'til he said, 'Right, you start Monday'. That was Sunday, so we didn't give Bill any notice. And that's how it started.

5.10

When I left school I thought I'd like to do building so I'd got a traineeship with a chap at Wentworth Falls. Our job was out round Nyngan and Gulargambone and out round those places, building soldier settlement homes, and I'd got the likings for the land. But he went bust, and so I thought I'd like to go into the Air Force and carry on the trade in there. So, I filled out my application and everything, and I was just waiting on references.

In the meantime I had to get a job, so this is how I ended up at Bewley's. I was only there a short while when I thought, 'Geez, this is alright – I like this.' So I didn't worry about sending me application in, and that's how I started out on the land. But while I was out at Gulargambone I loved the country, and that's where I would like to have been, finished up. And here I am.

In beautiful rural NSW.

Yes! Well, we started this garden ['Mereworth'] in 1964. That's when I first started to come here, I come here and did all the wind-breaks. Then all these hedges, they were all overgrown, so we cut all them back to shape them up.

So the house was already built?

No, no.

So how exactly was the property designed, at that time?

Very, very rough! You can't quite see it from this window now— but that house was the original homestead, and it was right here - where we're sitting now would have been the verandah. They moved the homestead from here, because this was where they wanted the Main House. They got it out in the paddock, then it rained and it was stuck out in the middle of the paddock for six months, because it was bogged. It was six months before they got it in the position its in now.
[The Manager's House].

Well, we will come back to this particular garden. Let's just continue with how you first met Mr Sorensen.

You don't mind me calling him Old Paul, do you?

I was going to comment on that – it's interesting that you call him Old Paul. Why?

'Cos to us he always *was* Old Paul. Even before we started there, it was Old Paul.

He was balding early - do you think it's because he's always looked older than he was?

Well, to us he always *was* old – there used to stories going around Leura just how old he was – but we found out later, he was a lot younger than what we thought when we first got to know him.

10.33

What sort of work were you expected to do when you *first* joined the nursery he had?

Well, maintenance and working on gardens.

So he had two parts to the business, he had the Nursery, which would have been a retail nursery?

That's right.

And then he had the design commissions?

Yes, and their *maintenance* work also.

After working with Bewley, me brother and myself were a bit cocky and that, and bragged to old Paul how we could graft. He thought, 'these young whippersnappers, they don't know what it's all about'.

So anyway, they were building a big new glasshouse when we started, so we finished the glasshouse, and he said to us, 'Righto boys', he says, 'there's the glasshouse, you do your grafting. The nursery's there, you take whatever you want

out of the Nursery, put it in the glasshouse and away you go.' And he says, 'It's all up to you.'

So away we went, my brother [Barry] was 16 and I was 18 at that stage. We filled the glasshouse up with all graftable plants from around the Nursery, and I don't know whether it was just a good year, or what, but everything we touched grew!

So when we'd started grafting Old Paul said to us, 'For every plant you grow I'll give you threepence.' And that was good money in them days, and, like I say, everything grew. But we didn't get our 3d a plant, he bought us a watch each. [laughs].

What did you think of that deal?

Oh, it was great! We were quite happy with that. And that gave us our leg in then. *He* knew that we knew what we were doing. So I become his propagator, and I used to spend three months of the year propagating and grafting for him. In the meantime National Service called me brother up, and he went in the Nashos, and when he come out he couldn't settle back up in Katoomba again, so he moved back to Sydney. So they said *I* was the propagator, otherwise both of us would have done it. So, I had three months in the Nursery, that was propagating time, and any wet days we also worked in the Nursery, otherwise I was out doing maintenance. I didn't work on a lot of *big* gardens with him, though.

Did you work on 'Everglades'¹ at all? Probably the best known of his work.

Yes, I did a bit. 'Everglades' is Paul. To me, walking in 'Everglades' is like coming here ['Mereworth']. That aura about it – gives you that feeling of – just, *peace*.

So what philosophy did Mr Sorensen have, that you can walk into a place and say, this just epitomizes what he did and what he felt?

I don't see that. His philosophy, to me, was, 'Be kind to your fellow man', and 'Look after your fellow man'. And that's what's stuck with me all through me life.

Working with him, well, he had a bit of a story around about how *hard* he was. He was a hard boss – of course he was – but nothing like the stories you heard. Like I said, he took me brother and myself under his wing, and he coaxed us on. We used to often sit and talk of a night, and – no – he was great.

How many other people were working with you when you were doing the propagating at the nursery?

I did it all on me own. Did all his spruces, cedars, maples, all that sort of stuff.

So they'd be the exotic species that he enjoyed?

¹ Privately built for the Van de Velde family, at Leura, the property was landscaped by Sorensen over many years from 1932 on. He was retained for restoration work when it became a National Trust property in 1962.

Yeah. He used to get plants from overseas and bring them into the country and Australia'd fumigate them, and that was the finish of them then! He very rarely – if he got *one* to grow out of his imports he was lucky – fumigation killed them off. They had such stringent fumigating laws that nothing survived.

The time you started working with him was sort of a 'second flush' in terms of his career. I did read that at 'Everglades' Mr Sorensen had some 60 assistants working with him. Apparently, he didn't really look at plans, as such, it was very much a 'hands on' personal direction as to what people should be doing. What was that like as a worker?

Well. That was before my time, in the Depression years, all that went on. But when you say about 60 people, I quite believe that, because when you talk to any of the old locals up there, our age and above, they all worked for Old Paul. [laughs].

I think nearly all Leura worked for him at one stage. But he was a very hard man in them days, apparently.

He mellowed by the time we got there – but he was still hard to work for. 'Everglades' would have been a wonderful place to work on, to see it being built.

Have you done maintenance work in Everglades?

Yes, I've done extra plantings, tree surgery, and all that sort of stuff.

I read, that it wasn't that Mr Sorensen didn't like native vegetation, it was just that at the time when he first started, in the 1920s and '30s, native nurseries didn't really exist so he couldn't get the stock in the first place.

That's right.

Which is another reason for his using whatever he could of the features already on site. Like the rocks and special trees - he would incorporate those natural features.

That's right. Yeah. I can't say that I ever saw a native in the Nursery. It was all European cold climate plants. Rhododendrons was the main thing up there. Beautiful show of rhododendrons and maples.

Did he specialize in cold climate gardens then, because that would be Blue Mountains and Southern Highlands?

Yeah, and Sydney. He did quite a bit in North Sydney. Mr T A Field owned a property in the Pymble area on the North Shore, then the Bank of NSW bought it off him and turned it into a training college for managers². We worked there. Proctor's, in the same area, they were related to the Fields. Then old Mrs Field, when she built a new home in that area he worked on that one.

There's a lot of referral, isn't there; you get one job and they refer you to someone else. Very much a personal reference.

Yes. That's how this come about, at 'Mereworth'. I don't know who it was, but someone said Mrs Oxley would like to see you, they're building down at Berrima. So that's how this all started, just through word of mouth.

I believe there was thought of building a second nursery here, in Berrima.

That's right, down at the old Rectory. He had two boys over in England, doing a horticulture course over there. They were to come back and start off in Berrima. But with War breaking out and the boys joining up in the RAF over there – they didn't come home.

That was so sad.

Yes. It was pretty hard on him right up to the day he died.

20.20

Did he have a large family?

He had three boys. There's Ib, I worked with him. I didn't know Neville and Derrick the other two. But Ib, I worked with him all the time whenever we were out somewhere.

Was he like his father?

Very similar, yeah. Built like a bull! [laughs] Big strong sort of bloke. Yeah. He was a good guy, too, but unfortunately this cancer bit caught up with him.

A sad family story, isn't it?

Yeah, it is a bit.

Working with Mr Sorensen so closely, do you think you learnt anything which has changed your own approach to what a garden should be?

No – not really, because all I've ever known, really, is 'Mereworth'. I haven't had a lot to do with other gardens.

Whatever's in 'Mereworth' that's my life – that's what's become my life.

So, let's talk about 'Mereworth'. How did you get the job in the first place?

Like I say, we started down here in '64.

Did Mr Sorensen send you down here?

Yeah, I used to live with the [Property] Manager in the old homestead. We did the windbreaks and the hedges and all that – that was the first job to get down.

Did Mr Sorensen come down and show you what he wanted?

Oh yes – but he just *told* me. I was with him for nearly 8 years by then, when we started here. We did all the windbreaks then we had a bit of a lull. I come back in 1966, and that's when life for me started here.

I used to say to the Manager at the time, John Nicholas, 'When the gardening job comes up, I *want* it'. John used to talk to Mr Oxley about it, and Mr Oxley would say, 'No. Peter is Paul's man.' So he wouldn't take me away from Old Paul.

It's funny how things, life, changes. I just happened to be sitting down with John looking through the paper, and there's a job advertised for a Ranger. I said to John, 'Oh, there's a good job here I might apply for.' Next thing I know, John comes up to me and says, 'The garden job's yours if you want it'. 'Cos he'd got on the phone straight away to Mr Oxley and said, 'Peter is thinking about changing jobs'. So. That's how it all come about. Might have been a bit of conspiracy there, too. [laughs].

Bit of fate, too, I would think.

Yeah. Then, Old Paul, he knew long before I gave my notice that I was coming here, because Mr Oxley had written to Old Paul and said he was sorry to hear I was going to leave, and that I'd be coming down here to work. There's a letter around here somewhere, Mr Oxley still has it, that Old Paul wrote back to him that he couldn't be more pleased to see Peter going into one of his gardens to look after it.

What a generous thing to say – that must have pleased you?

Yeah, well, that was what was in the *letter*, but that's not how it worked out in the end.

So it was not a happy parting?

No, not really. But we still kept in touch. If he was ever in the area he always called in and we'd wander around and have a bit of a talk. He'd say you should do this and that, and that needs doing, you know. He still kept his hand on it – then he had his accident [car accident, 1981) and we didn't see him down here after that. He used to bring maples down for me to graft for him, load up his truck and bring them down.

So you never really stopped working for him! [both laugh].

Well, that only happened a couple of times.

It must have been a loss to him, but also, as you said, a satisfaction in that if you *were* going it would be to maintain a garden that he designed – and that link was an important thing.

That's right. But anybody that worked for Old Paul always ended up doing well, because he just taught you *how* to work, what work was all about. I'll always remember, once, Ib and myself were doing a job and we were putting paths in a Bush house. It was coming up dark, we were leveling, doing the formwork for these

paths, and Ib said to me, 'How is it, is it level?'. And I says, 'Near enough's good enough', I couldn't really see it. The next thing I got grabbed by the ears and I was lifted up onto my feet. And it was Old Paul. And he said, 'Near enough's *not* good enough. I want it *good* enough.' And that stuck with me all through me life – so anything I do now has to be done right.

It sounds as if he didn't demand more of other people than he did of himself, in terms of work and work ethic.

No. No. The only thing is, when we were moving trees – whoever it was, either Brian or myself, we always tried to get the opposite corner to Old Paul, because you didn't only have to lift the tree you had to lift *him* as well! Because, in those days there was no backhoes or anything like that, the lifting was all done manually with hessian bags and all this sort of stuff. There'd be four of us and we'd all have a corner, and you were just about ready to lift, and this hand would come and plonk on your shoulder. It was Old Paul, he'd take his purchase off *you* – so whenever there was a tree to be lifted Brian and myself would try to grab the opposite corners! [laughs]. We didn't want to be either side of him! Even though he was getting on in years, he was a very strong man, yeah. Very, very strong.

Like I say, if you worked for him, you knew *how* to work. If there was a mountain to be moved he'd give you a pick and shovel and wheelbarrow, and say, 'away you go'. And that's what you did. We moved a lot of soil round that nursery, just with wheelbarrows.

What about *this* garden – how large is it?

I suppose the garden's about 5 acres, counting the driveway.

But just going back to Old Paul, if you don't mind.

Of course.

Just to show you the type of person he was. If you did the right thing by him, he looked after you. He treated everybody *equal*.

After I got married, there was a house come up for sale at the back of the Nursery. He said to me, 'You want to buy that place'. 'Cos it was great, a block of land went with it. So I applied to the bank, and the bank said, 'No, you've got no security'. So Old Paul says to me, 'Right, I'll go up and talk to this bank manager'. So up he went and the bank manager said, 'He's got no security, we can't give him a loan'. So Old Paul says, 'If you don't give him a loan, I'll change my bank.' So I don't know whether he did or not – but it was *Old Paul* financed us on our house.

And not only us, others, he did it with Brian too. So that's the type of person he was. I suppose he did have your pay packet before you got it and your rent or your payment was gone before you got your pay! But if you were ever in any trouble, you know, financial wise, he was the first person to come to the fore and help you out. No, that's one thing I can always look up to him for, for what he did for us.

That's a life-changing decision, isn't it, to support you at a time

like that? Who knows what you might have done if you'd not been settled and happy in that house.

That's right, yeah. He was good like that.

30.26

Back to 'Mereworth'. When does the garden look its best?

In October. We've just come out of the winter, the stark period, as I call it. The Avenue – it's magnificent. It's mainly golden elms, white cherries, [Mt Fuji], and Golden Ash in the background. Then its flanked on the western side by Cyprus [Cupressus torulosa] as a windbreak.

There's only one thing that goes against it all – the trees up there should be twice the size that they are now, but it's not topsoil. It sits on a bauxite band and the trees just won't go into the bauxite, so they sit stunted – well, / call them stunted, 'they should be twice the size they are. But it's very hard conditions up there, that's all.

But coming into Spring, the soft foliage on the Elms, and the white flowers of the cherries, very soft foliage on the Ash – it's just a picture. The green – with the lawn just starting to come into its own. It's the place where I want to end up.

Have you chosen your Elm yet?

No, no. I just want to be spread out.

Mulched down the drive.

Fertiliser, yeah, yeah. That's where I'd like to finish up.

Is that your favourite part of the garden?

Yeah, that's the top spot.

I was quite intrigued by the little island in the swimming pool. It did have a cedar, at one time, which must have been a feature?

Oh yes. [laughs]. It started off a native, actually, the plant was here when the pool was designed. I don't know what the plant was because I was never into natives. But it had a blue flower on it.

And that's how the island come to be there, because Mrs Oxley didn't want this plant out – so it stayed until over the years it died, and we planted a golden cedar.

Was that Paul's suggestion?

Yes. In those days, to grow anything big, it was grown in dunny cans. There was part of the Nursery that used to get a bit windblown and this cedar got blown over in the wind many years before and it grew as a bonsai. That's what it looked like, bonsai. Then it was planted on the island with conifer ground covers round it. Then after coming out of the dunny can it decided to straighten up - and it straightened up and

up, [laughs] it was *huge* in the end. It just got too big. There was some pruning done while I was away on holidays and when I come back the thing was almost cut in half – so it just didn't suit; it had to come out. The present shrub's life is short too, by the looks of it, starting to die back.

So what will you replace it with?

Don't know yet. [laughs]. We planted a large selection of ground covers and what survived – survived. There's only one left today, it was too hot for them. It gets terribly hot through the summer months, there's no breeze through the courtyards.

Now you make those decisions yourself, about what is replaced?

Yes. Oh, Mr Oxley's daughter, Amber, I confer with her a lot of times.

When I come back after my break I virtually had the run of the place and did what I wanted to do. I spoke to Mr Oxley about the rhododendrons, because Mrs Oxley loved rhododendrons, and the bed we'd planted up three times before, and this was the fourth time. I should have listened to my better judgment about going ahead with rhododendrons again, because we've just had no luck with them.

Is it the soil again?

It comes down to a fungal problem. I mean I've never sprayed rhododendrons in my life, but here that's all I seem to do. That's in the *last* planting, because we were never ever able to work out what the problem was. We thought it was excreting from the plants above it – it gets covered in grubs – sometimes it's just like rain, it is. It's sappy stuff. That's what I was putting it down too, and I think Mr Oxley is thinking the same way as well. I was only speaking to him about it the other day, 'cos I want to go ahead and change the whole set-up now, because the rhododendrons we planted two years ago – well, they've had it. I'll just gradually dig them out one by one, so the bed becomes vacant again.

What are your thoughts on replacing them?

Well, I've got to talk to the nurserymen about that and see what's available.

I was out of the garden for twelve years, I think it was. I started here in 1968, that's when we moved the family down here. Then I worked for about twelve years in the garden, and I started to get a hemmed in feeling. I needed to spread my wings a bit. Then John Nicholas, who was still managing at the time, he left. When he left they decided I'd take on the manager's job, because I'd learnt enough from John to do stock work, and all that, and it was just a matter of looking after the property.

So, the whole 1500 acres became the garden, that's how I looked at it. We employed several gardeners over a period of time to look after it, but, I don't know, they just didn't do what I'd do to look after it. Then I got crook and had to leave.

Then the greatest thrill I ever got, was getting the phone call from Mr Oxley asking me if I had any spare time to come up and fix his irrigation system. 'Cos the irrigation

system in the garden, I'm the only one who knows anything about it now, 'cos the rest of them have passed on moved out of the area.

And you're not *telling* anyone else, presumably. [both laugh].

Well, Ken, the new manager, he's learning. I've got show *somebody*, I won't be around for ever and a day. Ken's good, he's learning well. [laughs].

Was the system put in in the 1960s then?

Yes, put in by Deveson Jahn, they worked out of Parramatta. Old Sid Deveson, he lives out towards Robertson, at Burrawang. Sid, he's still alive, and he's got all the old parts and all that for the system. But we're changing all that, going more plastic instead of the brass fittings.

And you've worked, what, three days a week ever since?

Well, we say two days. After I got the system going, Mr Oxley says, 'What do you think of the garden', and I said it needed a lot of TLC. He says, 'Have you got any spare time?'. And I said, "I can make spare time". [laughs]. 'Cos at that stage we'd moved down to Ulladulla, and I was only sitting around vegetating, and that was no good. I needed to do something.

And this was the greatest thrill and honour that I could have had, to be asked back here again. And I never appreciated it more than I do now.

39.46

It can't be inexpensive to maintain staff, and someone as skilled as you are, to keep up a garden this size. Why do you think Mr Oxley and others, still value this garden, 40 years on.

Why do they value it? I suppose it comes down to it's *their* style of garden – being English as they are. And that's what the garden is, it's an English garden. And being Old Paul's too. I don't know whether the younger generation feels the same way about it.

It sits very happily in this environment, doesn't it?

It does, yes.

Have you been to 'Redlands' and 'Invergowrie', two other major Sorensen designed gardens in the Southern Highlands?

I did go to 'Invergowrie' in my very early days with Old Paul, to do a pruning job. Old Paul says to me, 'What are you like at climbing trees?', and I says, 'Great, no problem at all'. Because as kids you know, you'd be climbing trees all over the place. He said, 'Right, we 've got a job down at Exeter. And I thought where in the blazes is Exeter? So anyway, early one morning off we head. There's Ib and myself and Old Paul. We get down to 'Invergowrie', and I said, 'Geez, where are we?' I had *no* idea where we were. Oh, it was a beautiful garden, I loved it.

Anyway, we had this big Elm to prune. Up I go, up the tree, and all I could do was wrap me legs and arms around it and hang on! [laughs]. Old Paul could see I wasn't at all happy up there so down I come, and do you think I could stop me knees from knocking together?

How tall was it?

It was massive! What we did was, we run a line from the centre point up the top to a certain area outside from the trunk and everything outside that area was cut off.³ There was limbs coming off anything up to fifteen inches in thickness – it was *big*. So that was my taste of tree-pruning. [laughs]. I wasn't as good as what I thought I was. Like, in those days there was no harnesses, no nothing, it was all done climbing like monkeys.

Can you recall any similarities between the two gardens?

Oh yes, in the way it was set out, the style, the type of trees. Yes, it reminded me of 'Everglades' in a lot of ways, only this was on flat ground. I never got down into 'The Dell', but they tell me that was a wonderful spot to get to.

We talked earlier about the fact that Mr Sorensen had favourites in terms of species. Can you name some of the trees that he's used here at 'Mereworth', which are perhaps common to his other gardens.

Mainly the Maples, the Cherries, Elms, Ash.

There seem to be firs and pines for contrast?

We never planted them other than as a windbreak. We used them on the outside to stop the wind, first off. In the earlier days there was three rows planted. But I think in Old Paul's mind, they were to come out earlier.

Well, they're still there, but they're lanky trunks – it's nice to walk through them because I've cleaned them all up and lifted them up so they are just trunks, no limbs or anything. But what it's done is kill the eastern side of the *torulosa*⁴, there's no greenery, it's all been smothered out. So now we do get a bit of wind through because there's only a small bit of foliage on the outside, on the western side. So those are the only conifers planted.

Except, I did the windbreak in the southern side to stop the southerly winds coming through. The pines we had there died and I expanded the garden further out, planted these before the others had finished their time so they were coming up in the meantime. We've got that break now. A lot of the others, conifers, were here, the Cedars, the Deodars, they were all original.

What are some of the features of the garden – for instance the Ha-Ha.

⁴ *Allocasuarina torulosa* - Sheoak

Old Paul used to call it the 'hoo-ha' and that's what we've always known it as, the 'hoo-ha' wall.

Is that because of the fuss it took to make? [laughter].

No, no fuss. It's just the way Old Paul spoke. 'Hoo-ha'. [gutteral sound]. If you were ever driving anywhere, you'd hear 'Ho ho ho'. You'd think, 'Hello, what's going on he's found something'. It might be a patch of thistles over in a paddock. He'd be out and over the fence, out comes the knife and he'd cut himself some thistle heads - milk thistles. They'd go home and into his soup of a night. He'd often say to me, 'You never see a cow with the flu, do you?'. [laughs]. But somebody told me that cows don't eat thistles. Anyway, 'Ho ho ho' – and I think that's how we got the 'Hoo ha' wall.

The 'Hoo-Ha' was built out of brick. There was only the one wall put in originally, but then the slope from the main house was too severe, so there was another wall put in to break that level, so we have a walking level around the top of the 'Hoo-ha', and the other level where the lawn runs down onto it. That's the view that really makes *this* part of the garden – looking down and across over to the dams on the other side.

There was only the one dam originally, and later on they built the bigger dam which covers seven and a half acres. That is the view looking down through there from the terrace. The only thing that blocks that, is the Irish Elms. They were planted just as a stop gap with the pyramid birch beyond that, round the top of the 'Hoo ha'. Old Paul's view was that the Elm and Birch would act as window frames, so that as you looked around you had a different setting. The Elms were only there as a stop gap and were to come out – but Mr Oxley could never ever come to getting rid of them, so they're still there. We try to keep them 'lifted' so we can get the view *underneath* them. We started originally by taking the top out of them, but the view is actually *under* them not *over* them – you can't get high enough to see over them now! [laughs].

We have talked briefly about the swimming pool, as well, what else have you got? A Cherry Walk?

The Cherry Walk was down the rhododendron bed. Some cherries come up from seed – someone spat a few cherry pips out and seedlings come up. So I thought, well, these 'll be worth hanging onto. When they become high enough we planted them along the path leading down to the Rose bed

50.24

– which is on the southern side to the rhododendron bed, and we used the Cherries as the cover.

But over the years with bird problems, and fungal problems, the Cherries are slowly dying out. The parrots are our biggest problem as far as the cherries are concerned, because they go along and eat all the flowering buds of them during the winter months, and come the Spring you only get a few clusters of flowers on them, its hardly worth having them. And with this going on, its killing the trees, but it's one thing we can't stop, 'cos we like the natives, don't want to get rid of them.

Are there other features like that?

Not really. The Rose Garden is the feature at the end of the rhododendron walk, or what *used* to be the rhododendron walk.

Mrs Oxley loved the roses. The Oxley's would come up on Friday night, and first thing Saturday morning, Mrs Oxley, she'd be out in the Rose Garden, cutting roses, and the Main House *looked* like a rose garden when she'd finished with it. Then the Sunday night, they all had to be packed up and taken to Sydney – so they were used in both homes.

52.15

We were just talking of Mrs Oxley – what was her Christian name?

Amber.

Were their particular varieties of rose Mrs Oxley liked?

It's hard after all these years –the only one I remember is *Apollo*. But she loved white.

Were there other white species?

No, just the one bed of *Apollo*, the others were different colours. The Camellia hedge we have here, that's all white. And the Cherries. Anything that was white, she loved.

Did she have any input into the choice of the larger shrubs – or was that Paul's area?

I think that was between her and Paul, yes. I never come into the conversations like that, I only did as I was told.

You only did all the work!

Yes, that's right. [laughs].

I get the sense that Mr Sorensen was very precise about the location and species of trees and shrubs, but that he didn't mind so much about the smaller infill things.

Well, when we first did the garden, the courtyards, Mrs Sorenson, [Anna] *her* part of the Nursery was ground covers. She had a terrific collection and that's what we planted the courtyards up with. We planted a large selection of them, and what survived – survived. There's only one survived to today, it was too hot for them. It gets terribly hot through the summer months, there's no breeze through the Courtyards.

I had a surveyor's plan, with all the levels, and my job was to move the fruit trees in so they were all planted before the House was built. The trees were all wrapped up

in straw – they looked like scarecrows. The Courtyard was just fruit trees, with ground covers underneath from the Nursery up in Leura.

How many Courtyards are there?

We have it in three sections, that's what I call the Courtyards.

And the paving that links them?

Well it's actually just the driveway, as you come under the carport and finish at the front door here. Out of the original fruit trees all that's left now is the pear and two apples, out of perhaps twelve fruit trees put in there.

Are they hard to move?

Not really – once you know how to do them it's no problem at all. It's just a matter of stopping the transpiration of them after you've moved them. That's why they were wrapped in straw – from ground to tip.

You've talked about doing things when you first started which were really hands on and labour intensive, so has the new equipment which gardeners have available, helped you?

In the garden here, it hasn't helped me at all! [laughs]. It's just too confined, you can't get that sort of machinery in - it's all still done by hand.

When we replanted the rhododendrons, all that bed was retrenched again. That was something Old Paul was always good at doing, trenching. That's a big job to do, but it's got to be done. So we retrenched it all thinking that we're right this time, the rhododendrons will grow – but still, the fungal problem.

So would you consider replacing them also and having another go in another part of the garden?

Not here, no.

It's actually the whole lie of the land that you think is a problem?

Yes. I don't know about this area for them, really, because when we originally did it, on the original soil, we had problems – we moved all these rhododendrons down from the Nursery and they come down in a PanTech truck, covered up – and they were big trees! And slowly they just died from the top back.

Must have been very frustrating for you.

Yes, it was. Sir Cecil Hoskins ['Invergowrie'], was out near Mt Broughton, and he had rhododendrons growing out there. I think his gardener's name was Jack. So I went out to see him. And he had *his* in built-up beds, with bush sand. They were all in a bush-house set up, all under cover.

So we tried to apply this, not with a bush-house but building the bed up with bush sand, but we still had the same problems coming back. They had problems over there too, but they did get them to grow.

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I suppose it had a bit of protection overhead with the bush-house, shade-house.

Have you tried anything else that you've actually had to give up on? Perhaps part of the original design?

No. Everything here is still original except for the fruit trees. I've just planted up another orchard, down by the veggie garden near the dam. That's another part of my job, is to grow vegetables for the property.

Does the property still run stock?

Oh yes. About 1200 ewes and about 40 head of cattle. It's mainly fat lambs that comes off. I'd love to be in it now – with the price lambs are getting today. Before when you got \$24 we thought we were doing well, but now, \$124. It would have made life a lot easier!

I suppose they have their ups and downs, too.

Yes. Like everything in agriculture, wool's good one year, lambs down, wool's down, lambs up.

Are you pleased you stuck to gardening rather than farming?

I enjoy everything I've done, it's all been a challenge. Like I say, the garden become too confined for me, and by taking on the Manager's job that really opened up horizons and gave me a lot to do – more work, but after working for Old Paul, work was what it was all about! They were good years, I enjoyed them. In the end, it just got the better of me and I had to give it away.

In terms of the garden, gradually there have had to be compromises along the line. We talked about the rhododendrons, in the next 10 or 20 years, how do you see the garden going?

There's some species will survive, but like I mentioned before, the Cherries, I think, they'll be on their way out. The Elms and the Ash and the Oaks they'll all survive, but a limited time for the Cherries.

Will you replant?

I think you'd find it a battle to get them to grow, because you can't rip the soil any more, because of the irrigation system and the roots of the other trees. And that's

what you need to do so you can get the roots down and get going. Unfortunately, the Cherries, I think, will be lost.

In, say, another 20 years, do you think there will still be the interest in maintaining an original Sorensen-designed garden?

I don't think the design will change – but then who knows what will happen. Hopefully the Oxleys will still have it, but who knows. It's too far in the future.

Thank you, Peter. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Just to summarise the whole interview. They say things come in threes.

First, I was fortunate enough to start my life with Old Paul, who took on the fatherly aspect for me. Then my marriage to Rosemary. She's a great mother, brought up four kids, Jeff, Lisa, Kym and Mark. If it wasn't for her – well, she was the one did the upbringing with the kids, because with Old Paul, we worked away so much that I never was with my family much.

That's part of the reason why I come to Berrima, because I knew that if I could get the gardening job we could be all together. My young bloke, he never knew me when I used to get home at night. We'd leave early in the morning to go to work in Sydney, or I'd be down here. Then when I went home, if I went near him, he'd scream. So, it wasn't much of a life working like that, and then working down here, or if not here, I was grafting in the nursery – that went on for two and half years.

So it was up to Rosemary, she did the upbringing of the kids, my time was involved with my work. That was the second thing in life.

And the third thing that come about was me coming to 'Mereworth', and 'Mereworth' has been my life ever since, 34 years ago. It was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. I just don't know how to put this.

I'd just like to thank the Oxleys for giving me the privilege of working down here for them. She was a wonderful woman, and he was a great boss. You couldn't have wished for anything better, to work for them, and in the surroundings as it is.

So, *thank you*

Interview ends: 1 hour 08 minutes 06 seconds