

ANDREW ALLEN'S ORAL INTERVIEW WITH BOB ETCHELLS AT H J DALEY LIBRARY ON 9 APRIL 2015

AA When were you born?

BE 19 March 1941 at Ashfield.

AA What were your parents' names?

BE My father was Clive Andrew Etchells and my mother's name was Edna Alice Etchells.

AA Your father had a nickname didn't he?

BE He had a few nicknames. His main one was Oke. He was also called Todd. Within the Etchells family they always had nicknames that seemed to have no relationship to the actual person or their original name. It's quite interesting actually some of them.

AA Do you know how he got Oke?

BE He most probably didn't know either. It's just one of those things that sort of spring up as you grow. I used to have the nickname of Etch when I was at school and from Etch some people thought of Itch and some people used to call me Scratch. So nicknames are quite an interesting topic in itself.

AA How many were there in the family?

BE Just the three of us, I was an only child. Plus the dog of course, there was always a dog.

AA The family goes right back to the early days of this area doesn't it?

BE Yes. Charles Etchells came out from Stockwell in the UK. He was a carpenter/cabinet maker. It seems he came out here on his own and he married out here. They moved around in the area supposedly, this is where hearsay starts to creep into it, they lived in Appin in that old stone cottage that is just down the road from the Hotel on the left hand side going out. I have also been told that they lived in Emily Cottage in Campbelltown at some stage. They ultimately had a house built at No 19 Queen Street which is I suppose just about opposite Officeworks where they are building the new flats.

It was somewhere down there, just south of where Clintons Motors was. I have photographs of it. I have never seen the full collection of photos that Council has got. So I don't know if there are things that I can supply or some that I can get copies of. Over the years photos have been swapped backwards and

forwards and I haven't seen the complete series, only those that are on the website. I know that on the National Archives there are photographs that originated from Campbelltown Council. I think they are on the Campbelltown Council site as well.

AA So that was your great grandfather. Your grandfather was Harry. Where was he born do you know?

5 mins

BE It would have been local, but I'm not sure where. That is one of the things that I am currently working through trying to get the bits and pieces together. Some of the family were married at St Mary's Cathedral which is strange as they were Protestants. I gather that in those days that wasn't unusual. They just used to get married in a church that they could get access to.

AA Was he the one who moved to East Minto?

BE Yes. I think there were four in the family from Charles the great grandfather. There was Harry, Frank, Elizabeth or Bessie as she was called and there was another one that I can't recall. When you start to check back you run into a few different names which gets quite confusing unless you are working on it all the time.

They have always worked in the area. I've been told that when Harry was young he was a butcher's boy. He used to take meat supplies out to the navvies that worked on the water race. He started there as far as I can make out and then like a lot of them in those days they tended to move around and get work where they could. He spent some time in the southern part of Queensland and also northern New South Wales in the New England and on the coast.

The story goes that he was one of the people that were involved in cutting all the trees down around Byron Bay. They had a very interesting technique. Because it was rainforest and there were a lot of vines, they would cut the smaller trees down part way through and then they would pick a big tree and they would cut that all the way through. The bigger tree would fall and pull all the trees down. They would then clean them up and slide them down to the coast and then ship them out on boats.

Then he moved back into the area. He worked up on the water race himself. He was bitten by a black snake up there. He hopped onto his horse and rode home, went to bed for two or three days, got up and went back to work. He was a little bit tougher than we are these days.

AA Did you know him?

BE Oh yes, he died in about 1989 I think it was. He was living in East Minto or Minto Heights as it was called then. He lived in the old cottage which is no longer because I recently got approval to take it down for safety reasons. All it taught me was admiration for my grandfather. The size of the rough cut bush timbers that they put into that house was incredible. That's where he died. I was told that he used to sleep on the front veranda, never in the house. It was a two bedroom house; there was a bedroom and a living room. His housekeeper had the bedroom and he used to sleep out on the veranda.

10 mins

Recently before the house was demolished my cousin who is older than me came to look at the house one more time. He was reliving memories and said he used to sleep out on the veranda with my grandfather when he came to visit.

AA Was that in all seasons, winter as well?

BE Oh yes.

AA It must have been emotional having to knock it down.

BE It was. At first when I started the exercise I thought that I am doing the right thing, it was a safety issue. Getting involved I started to feel guilty; I was taking out family history. Anyway it is gone now.

AA Did your grandfather have many more stories like the snake story?

BE He used to tell us different things about the pets he had. He had a couple of blue cattle dogs that lived in cut down hollow logs, they were their kennels. He had a few horses and a few cows. I think the most interesting thing and what I have tried to do is to keep what I could find. He used to keep a bit of a rough diary on the tin strips that were used to fill in between the rough timbers of the wall. He would note when a horse or cow died. We've been able to keep some things but not all things unfortunately.

During the war when my father was away, my mother and I used to catch the steam train up to Minto and get off and then walk up to the top of the park and some of the other family would meet there. My grandfather who nickname was Old Harry would come down in his horse and cart and have a picnic with us and then he would go back. Sometimes he would meet us at the railway station in the buggy and take us out to the house and bring us back and other times we used to walk. We used to walk virtually due east of the railway station up over the big hill, down through the paddock, across the creek, up the other side and then along Hansens Road. We didn't do it all the time, but that was how we got to the old house.

AA He had a bit to do with Freres Crossing down the Georges River didn't he?

BE Originally he and his brother Frank had property at Eckersley on the other side of the Georges River which is now army land. In 1910 that land was purchased by the Australian Government to make it an army area. They were moved off it like a lot of other people. They lived out there and he worked in Campbelltown. So every work day he used to walk from Eckersley into Campbelltown, work and then walk back again. I have roughly measured it out on a map and it is about 10kms. That is 10kms through bush not a proper walkway. That was how people got around then. The track that we used to use to visit his house in East Minto was a track used by people who lived further out. They used to use that track as a short cut down to Minto Station.

15 mins

The story goes that my great grandfather Charles lived at Appin and used to work down at Bulli. He either had a horse or used to walk. Everyone departed before I could confirm that one. That was about 40kms. That wasn't every day, from what I can gather he would go down and work during the week and then come home. I would have to say that in those days from what I have read that time wasn't of the essence it is these days. They would do what they had to do when they had to do it. It wasn't that they had to be somewhere at 6 o'clock or whatever. From the family house in Minto they used to walk to Church. They were Congregationalists and their Church was in Campbelltown. So every Sunday afternoon or evening they would walk into Campbelltown to go to Church and then back again.

AA They were pretty fit back then.

BE They had to be. I always say this to people. If you look at photographs from the First World War back and up until the 20s, they were all like string beans. They were in three piece suits, stiff collars and a hat but compared to the people of today they were all very slim people. The saying of trim, taut and terrific is a way of putting it. They used to do a lot of walking and worked physically hard.

I can appreciate that now that I have taken down my grandfather's house. I don't know how he did some of the stuff. I know when my father was a kid he helped him build it. I think dad was about 10 when he did it so he wouldn't have been much help in some of the timber. I don't know if his brother helped or had help from mates. I haven't been able to find out a lot about Frank. I don't know what the ethos was in those days with mates, I suppose it would have been strong; they were all doing it hard. I just live in wonder when you read of the stories of some the early settlers, what they went through and they succeeded in many cases. Some didn't of course.

AA So I guess your father would have gone to school at East Minto.

BE I don't think it was still being used as a school but it was up there until about the 60s I believe when it was burnt down in a bush fire.

AA I did a little article on it and it was burnt in the late 40s.

BE That just shows that my memory isn't as good as I thought it was. I can remember seeing it there. I know the block on Hansens Road where it was. It was on the north corner, there is a house there now. The Minto School prior to the one that is now opposite Minto Mall was up on Campbelltown Road and Ben Lomond Road. That was where the functioning school was before they built the one on Pembroke Road. I can remember seeing that one when we came out on occasion. When that stopped being a school and the new one came I don't know. My children went to the current Minto School, which compared to what it is now was a much smaller school.

20 mins

I was married in 1967 and moved out here in 1969. Hansens Road then was a dirt road so you had to watch when you put out the washing. I don't know what year they finally sealed it. We built our house where it is, because when we first looked at building out here there was no town water. My father had to pay to get the water put on. It didn't continue down Hansens Road. On that part of Hansens Road where I live, when it was under Ingleburn Council before it was amalgamated with Campbelltown Council we had a letter where it states that it should really be called Etchells Road. That was the intention at one stage. We've got that reserve up near where the family house was even though it is spelt incorrectly.

AA Would you remember the old houses that were along Hansens Road?

BE It is surprising the number of buildings that were along Hansens Road that had disappeared and along Ben Lomond Road. There weren't a lot of houses, only a smattering right along to Georges River Road. Over the years it has gradually been built out. Occasionally we would catch a bus from Minto Railway Station up to the corner of Ben Lomond Road and Hansens Road and then we would walk. It used to go up to Georges River Road and turn around and go back to Minto Railway Station where there would be no one on Minto Railway Station.

25 mins

Even when we first came out here and my wife and I were working, we used to catch the bus down to the station in the morning and we were two of three people on the bus. There could have been more people later on, but when we were catching the train to go to work, there were only three of us. It has grown over the years.

AA There would have been a level crossing there then.

BE Yes, I don't know when that went, but I was glad when it did. Sometimes you would get caught at the level crossing depending on the trains coming each way, you could be held up for three trains, waiting for it to clear. Getting rid of level crossings is definitely progress. When I used to work down at Yennora in the 60s, Guildford and Merrylands still had level crossings.

AA We had a crossing up here until the 1990s.

BE I think the Ingleburn one was still there after the Minto crossing.

AA What made you come out here to live, was it a family connection?

BE It was. The block of land that we have is the corner block of my grandfather's original 90 acres. He died and it was left to my uncle and my father. My uncle took the northern half and my father took the southern half. We built on the southern half. What we didn't know until we looked at my grandfather's will was that there was no property mentioned. What he did was he gave the land to my father and his brother back in 1936. I suppose it was a tax dodge or something like that. I didn't know and I don't think that my mother knew.

We know that it caused a bit of anxiety in the family because when my grandfather died he left different things to his daughters and of course there was no mention of the land. They never asked us directly but there was a bit of angst between the sisters and my father about the land. My grandfather did give the family house on Townson Avenue to one of my aunties who at that stage was single. She married later on. The rest of them were married so I suppose he worked on the principle that the man looks after the woman, so if you are married it is your husband's responsibility to keep the woman in money or whatever.

30 mins

AA Is the house still there and what was it like?

BE No. It was what I would call a rambling house. I suppose like a lot of structures in the early days started off as a basic house and then as the kids came along or whatever then enlarged the house. This house had a two room frontage and then two rooms deep to start with and then there were other rooms were built on down the back where I suppose the kids had their bedrooms. I used to visit when my aunty was there. She sold it to the Council and the Council dispatched it. You can't keep every old house, you have to be selective. I don't think there was anything really worthwhile keeping about it. It was most probably like another 100 old houses around Campbelltown. I don't know how many are left.

AA It must have been close to the old Campbellfield's homestead. It was on Townson or Guernsey. Do you know the one I mean, the old Redfern's home.

BE It was up the southern end compared to where Redfern's home was. In between that, another arm of the family, the Nichols, had a property. That is another story in itself. Elizabeth Etchells married a Nichol and they didn't have any children. For whatever reason, one of my father's brothers went to live with them and he never returned. He ended up becoming a Nichol.

AA Was that the old place on Pembroke Road? Do you remember that?

BE Only just.

AA I've seen photos of it; it had some beautiful old stonework there.

BE So there is a family wandering around that should have been Etchells that are no longer. That's the way it went. I think my grandmother who had seven children was a sickly type of woman and she was the second wife of my grandfather. His first wife was the one who lived out at Eckersley with him. She died, I think from memory from blood poisoning, septicaemia. She was brought in from the back of Eckersley on the back of a cart to get medical help but she ultimately died. It is quite interesting, because we have sort of kept in touch with that part of the family. Before I even had approval to knock down the old home I got in touch with them to come out and have a look at it. Some of them hadn't seen it, so they were quite appreciative of that.

35 mins

AA Have you been out to Eckersley to have a look at where your grandfather lived?

BE Yes, I have got some photos. It was out near the army airfield. I can't think of the name of it, I think it starts with "M" where the spotting tower was. The army used to have an observation tower. It was out near there, down a little side creek which from memory I think was called Garden Creek. There are rocks there where the house was. About 70 metres down from the house is a rock pool and that is supposedly is where she got the water from and did the washing.

Down near that rock pool is a clump of bamboo and as of the last time that I was out there, about 15 years ago the bamboo was still growing. But it is army land so I guess every now and then I guess the bamboo gets pulverised. The army isn't as active out there now as they used to be. I think they have moved all their big guns up to Singleton or wherever else. We certainly don't hear the big guns like we used to a few years ago. You could stand out on the point at the edge of the river there and hear the shells whistling by. That's how close you are to the army range from the river there. I have been out there and I have got it marked on the map and have photos.

Frank had a house down further. You have probably got some of the earlier maps on file at the Council. I have never bothered to count, but there was a

community out there. They had a Post Office. It was called the Coach Road but according to my father a coach most probably never went along there because it never really went right through to connect up with Appin Road or whatever, it was a track.

AA So, did you go over Freres Crossing to get there?

BE That was one way. The road used to originate somewhere in Liverpool and used to run right out to Eckersley, but where exactly it finished I'm not sure. Of course when the army took over, it is now an army road and I am sure in a much better condition now than when it was just a suburban type road or bush track. The families were famous for moonshine or making illicit rum and that was made out in that area where the house was. We have taken photos of where a couple of the stills used to be.

AA Did your grandfather know of or talk about George Frere? Maybe that was a bit before his time.

BE No. I think Frere from what I can understand was a little bit upper class compared to a lot of the others that lived out there.

AA Yes, I get that impression too.

40 mins

BE He obviously set up quite a substantial vineyard out there which ended up being wiped out by phylloxera. My dad knew more of the stories. There should be three tapes at Council. Two were with my father and one with Ruby. Ruby was a daughter from the first marriage, so she was dad's half-sister. Whatever happened there I don't know, but they didn't get on. Talking to her family when they came out to look at the house, she was an old cantankerous person. She would have been a bit like my father, so I can understand why they didn't get on. When Keith Longhurst was going out with dad and a few others looking for Aboriginal sites, they offered to take Ruby out with them. She would go with them but not when my father went with them. I never quite found out what the problem was. Her family didn't know either.

AA Where did William Henry from World War One fit in?

BE He was a son from the first marriage, brother to Ruby. It would seem like Ruby was extremely upset about his being killed, so much so that she went to England and Belgium. On the boat going over she met the guy that she ended up marrying, Jack Matthews. He was a manager of a coconut plantation in the Solomons. I'm not sure where they married, probably here but they lived in the Solomons. They came back and lived in Sydney in Wahroonga. That is where they ended up.

AA Where did you go to school?

BE I was born in Ashfield and my mother and I lived in Ashfield with an aunty and a cousin because her husband was away at the war too. That is how they lived during the Second World War. When my father came back we moved to Eastwood. They rented a house in Rose Street which was the main street of Eastwood and then bought a block of land in Vimiera Road Eastwood. Gynea Road and a lot of other roads in Eastwood are named after battles from the First World War. We lived in Vimiera Road, there was Balacava and Cologne. I went to Eastwood School to start with and then in high school to North Newtown Intermediate Demonstration High School which then got moved to Enmore. So I then went to Enmore High School where I finished my high school.

45 mins

Then I started to work. Ultimately I became a metallurgist. Although if you look at my life I didn't do much in metallurgy. As you do with those sort of things, you start off as one thing and end up as a lot of other things as you go along. I ended up at Comalco at Yennora where I started out being a metallurgist and ended up being in charge of the laboratories there as plus the quality assurance section. That was taken over by Capral which was the old Alcan and then I retired. That's the basis of my working life. When I came out here in 1969 I was working at Comalco.

Most of the time I caught the train in to Yennora. I didn't keep up the family tradition of walking in to the station. Later on I drove. It wasn't a bad place. There was another railway crossing at Yennora. I worked for Comalco/Capral for about 30 years. Before that I had other metallurgic type jobs at various foundries.

AA Were your family happy to move out here?

BE There was only my wife and I at that stage. She worked in town so we used to go down to the railway station together. When we first moved out here she was a little bit concerned that we were out in the bush. She certainly ended up loving it. It has changed over the years.

AA You were prominent in starting up a bush fire brigade in Minto were you?

BE Yes, I wrote a letter to Guy Thomas who was the Mayor; we spoke about it and got the ball rolling. The Minto Heights Bush Fire Brigade which is there now wasn't the first Bush Fire Brigade up there. Originally it was called the East Minto Bush Fire Brigade as that area was called East Minto. There used to be a fire brigade there back in the 50s.

Somewhere in the Council archives, we haven't been quite able to track it down, but the first Minto Heights or East Minto Bush Fire Brigade's book that they used to write everything in, was given to the Council for safe keeping. So it is being kept safe somewhere. Bob Mather who used to be in the Brigade lived at Minto Heights. I think he gave it to Council. Years later he tried to track it down but didn't get very far.

AA I'll have a look in our collection. We have a lot of stuff like that stored away.

50 mins

BE Across the road from I live used to be their shed. It was only a little shed really where they kept their bits and pieces. For a few years before Minto Heights proper started I used to look after what they called the fire hose box which was an offshoot of Ingleburn Town Brigade where they gave us a few tools, hose and stand pipe and a few knapsacks and an old World War Two air raid siren. So if there was a fire in the area, I used to pack the gear into my car and go to where the fire was and my wife used to wind the air raid siren up and let it go so that the people in the area knew there was a fire. I don't where that has gone. I think it was taken back by Ingleburn. It was an old fashioned mechanical winder type alarm system. A few of us ran that for about 4 or 5 years which then became Minto Heights Bush Fire Brigade.

We built the shed and levelled the land and virtually did all the work. We sub contracted some of the work out. Money was given to us to do that. If you look at the design of the Minto Heights shed it is the base design as the other brigades in the area. As they went along and replaced the old tin sheds they became more sophisticated. They built a new shed out at Kentlyn but I haven't had a close look at it. So that is a brief history of Minto Heights Bush Fire Brigade. I would have to say that the approach to fire fighting was a little more relaxed then than it is now. I would also have to say more enjoyable, the people were a lot friendlier then. Different brigades would be at a fire and we would sit around after and have a few beers and a yarn and go home. It is a little more regimented now than it was.

AA A question I often ask when I do interviews is, do you remember any interesting characters or personalities from the early days.

BE I used to know the Hansens. Everyone called her Aggie which wasn't her real name. I remember going up there and called her Aggie. She told me that wasn't her real name and then she told me what her real name was. She had a brother who lived with her but I can't remember his name. Across the road another brother lived with his wife and family. That house is still there, but the Hansen house known as Hansen's Cottage is no longer there. What has been kept was the old milk/butter churn building which was only a very small building. That was all that was requested to be kept when they knocked the building down.

55 mins

When you read the story on that it is the same. Because we built houses in wood, the white ants are not very particular what they eat. Whether it is a house or an old tree stump they get into it. That house had a lot of damage like my grandfather's did. Although I must say that the timbers that were used in my grandfather's house, some of them looked like they were cut yesterday. There was not a mark on them. The nails were rusty but the timber was in top shape.

The only other people that we used to know lived in Ben Lomond Road. There was a little old lady who lived there with her daughter. Sometimes we would meet her on the bus or we would pick her up if we saw her. Her and her daughter would go down to the Minto pub. Her daughter is still around. My wife sees her around occasionally in Campbelltown.

There was another character lived along Hansens Road down from us. He was called Jock. He worked at Liverpool RSL; he was the Public Relations guy. If a returned serviceman had a problem, he would do the liaising with whoever was responsible. He was a guy who fought in the First and Second World Wars. He must have been injured because he had a stiff leg. We used to give him a lift in the car. The problem was getting him out of the car when we reached his destination. He lived further north down the road on the creek side from where we lived.

There weren't a lot of people that lived in the area when we came out. We had the first modern built house and then a few started to follow. What you see today is a lot of large houses.

AA My final question is what do you do with your time today?

BE One of my interests is looking after the place which is frustrating at the best of times not having enough rain. I am interested in photography especially wildlife photography.

AA I suppose you would enough of that around you.

BE Yes and no. I don't know what the reason is, in the last six months I haven't seen a lot of wildlife around. Normally there is. I entered a few photographs in a photographic competition about six months ago. I didn't get anything, but that wasn't the point. The point was taking good photographs and allowing other people to see them.

60 mins

We have had some interesting wildlife around. We have rabbits now unfortunately. Recently because of the blossoms on the trees we have had flying foxes or fruit bats whatever you want to call them. There's sugar gliders

around, snakes from time to time, possums occasionally. My wife saw an echidna about six weeks ago crossing the road. There are supposed to be wombats, but I have never seen wombats. I have seen koalas. There is a wallaby that lives on the property that we see from time to time going in the opposite direction. Fortunately not as many dogs around or if they are they are being contained. Years ago we used to have trouble with dogs, people would get livestock taken. There doesn't seem to be a lot of foxes either.

So, yes photography is my main interest. Simple life, simple person!!

AA Thank you for talking to me today.