A Childhood on Burlong

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My date of birth is 28/3/28. I was born in Northam. My parents were living at Burlong, right on the river-bank. The house is still the last house along Burlong Road on the river-side. The joys of living there as a kid were really good because our playground was the whole of the river. When I say the whole of the river, that is from about Spencer's Brook to the Flour Mill, although we did see some of the river further up like Bernard Park, which during those days was the Sunday social centre of Northam. There's no two ways about that. The band used to play there every Sunday and things like that later on, but the river itself was our playground, from whenever I can remember to the mid 1940's.

We used the river summer and winter. Summer of course was swimming and canoes, we always had our canoes. But it was just a general playground. We'd come home from school and head straight to the river, catching gilgies and perhaps catching a few fish. The wintertime, we were still there. I don't know how many times I've swum that river in full flood getting from one side to the other. Strip off, put your clothes up on your head and paddle yourself across and get dressed and go home to Mum, but no, you weren't on the other side of the river! She didn't used to, apparently, worry about us too much, because we were brought up in the river. I can never ever remember learning to swim. I've always been able to swim. My brothers were all the same. They all were very, very strong swimmers.

But the river has changed. It makes me almost cry to see it now, to what it was. Burlong, the main pool, you were looking at the best part of a kilometre of water, fifty metres wide and between five and six metres deep, water almost drinkable. You could drink it if you wanted to, but there were patches where springs bubbled that you could actually drink the water. As a matter of fact, one of our favourite spots was just on the town side of the new Northam Swimming Pool. If you wanted a drink you swam down there and, as you swam through, you drank. There was a really strong spring in the middle there, bubbling up.

The changes in the river are really dramatic. The last time I was there you could walk down the river. Even in the middle of winter, I think, you could still walk down. The whole pool has just silted over. But it's not only that. The vegetation, the trees on the side of the bank –being fresh water they grew right up to the riverbank and hung over into the water and we could pull in our canoes right under the foliage of the trees. Nobody could see us there at all. It made a good game of 'pirates'. But the changes now, the trees, they just look straggly, dying, they're nowhere near as thick as they used to be and it's just a dead looking place.

The wildlife has definitely changed. The water rats that used to be there, and I'm not talking about the plague rats, these are a furry animal that were hunted for their skins and hunted to extinction, they were very, very prevalent. The possums were everywhere. If you had any sort of a torch at night you could just shine your torch into the branches and there'd be possums everywhere, friendly little animals. And the fish - we had cobblers there about twenty centimetres long at least, freshwater cobbler that we used to eat a lot, go fishing. We weren't the only ones who used to fish down there. A few people would come out from town, set their line, go away, come back and pull a cobbler off the end of it. Gilgies, of course. They were that prevalent, that if you wanted a meal of gilgies, you just went and got

them. You were away for half an hour and came back and cooked them. We had our stays(?) down in the gilgie holes all the time.

The main remembrances of it were more the peacefulness of it, especially when there was no people down there during the week. The whole place was just so serene, so peaceful, with this vast stretch of water and the overhanging trees. Whether you were climbing in the trees, looking down, which we did a lot as kids, or whether you were swimming, looking up at them, it was the same. It just really, really looked good. Mainly gum trees of course, interspersed with a few other varying types.

The pool itself, of course, was the Mecca of the town. It was one of the best playgrounds for the people on Saturday and Sunday, mainly Sunday because most people worked on Saturday during that period. They were working six-day weeks, or at least five and a half-day weeks. Sunday was the day of play. Or Saturday night it started, quite often, the wild parties down there. You think about wild parties nowadays. Well, they're nothing new. From our place you could hear the noise until two and three o'clock in the morning from Burlong.

But the earliest remembrances of Burlong – the Council, now, I'm not sure if it was the Town Council or the Shire, had built changerooms, swimming changerooms on the Spencer's Brook end of the swimming pool, and there were jetties there and the Swimming Club formed up. The Swimming Club was quite strong and I know Percy Oliver swam there. He's a namesake, admittedly, but no relation. He was an Olympic swimmer. That was the class of swimmer that was swimming. The races in particular were very competitive and each race had a maximum of eight swimmers, because that's the number of lanes that were put in. But the lanes would always be full. You might have to have anything up to six sets of swimmers just to compete in the one swimming race. So you'd have finals and semi finals and all the rest of it. That's the seniors, and the juniors were just as heavily competitive. As time went on, I'm not sure what happened, whether the club had an argument with the Council, or the Council had an argument with the Club, or just what happened, but the Club decided to shift further in towards town and build up a completely new changerooms and jetties. Well, our property ran down towards Spencer's Brook quite a long way and on the Spencer's Brook end where it narrowed down onto the river, between the river and the road, was where my parents offered it to the club, a peppercorn lease, just that corner. It was an area a little bit subject to flooding, so it wasn't much good for agriculture. We were heavily into the Swimming Club in any case. So there was concrete change rooms built, which I had a hand in (I was probably about seven or eight at that stage), and about a sixty foot well was dug, a windmill put on top for water for the change rooms and showers. Two jetties were built directly opposite each other and they were exactly 55 yards between them. The Olympic standard I think it was. We put swimming lanes in, and those jetties were right opposite each other, so that's how I know how wide the river was. I know I swam that, I don't know how many times. Every Sunday for years through the summer, I guess, I was involved in swimming racing, various strokes.

There was one major event. Every year they had mile swim. They started at these jetties and swam down to one end of the town, the town end and around the buoy there, down to the Spencer's Brook end, round the buoy there and back to the middle again and the finish line. That was an annual swim. I suppose you'd have thirty to fifty people swimming that race. You can imagine it. People everywhere, of all ages. Still, that was the life at the time. The thing that I decry now is, the use that pool had, how many of our local people spent many happy hours down there through the summer, at least as heavily used, if not more heavily used than the current swimming pool is....The swimming pool is certainly

good but there was more freedom in the river because there was such a large area. If you got sick of the crowd you went further down the river and you had the best part of a kilometre to play around in. Of course this led to some funny things happening. It wasn't unusual to see the courting couples down one end and the old fogies down the other, trying to keep apart. But the river itself, as I said, was the social centre and playground for years and years and years.

The river between Burlong and town... on the town end of Burlong there was a clay bank, which went across, which was the bend for the river. This clay bank used to alter year to year, so that when the river flooded and overflowed it would cut through another channel. They were all existing channels, they had been used before, but they'd silted over, or got vegetation in them and the channel would go a different direction. Each year you had a different set of channels between the two big pools, the main pools at Northam and Burlong. It was always interesting at the tail end of winter or early summer, to track these new channels because they would scour out new pools. It was a great adventure, going down to see how many gilgies were in each pool, or how many fish had got trapped. It was a great fishing place. You'd have a pool, maybe thirty or forty metres long and ten metres wide, and it would be absolutely crawling with Cobbler. So great excitement, chasing those out.

The tea-trees were growing fairly heavily through there, as well as gum trees and other trees. We used to row the canoes all the way down river right into the main pool, down to the Mill. We didn't go much further because it was too much like hard work coming home, because it was all up stream. So we used that river fairly heavily.

Going back towards Spencer's Brook, there were not so many pools. The river was more flat, so that there were no big channels scoured out, or very few. There were odd ones. You'd row a canoe down towards Spencer's Brook, as far as the Spencers Brook Bridge, (the river had to be running to get through). Coming back was easy, always, that way.

When I was about ten or twelve, my parents took on a dairy, a dairy farm, on the property and we were running about eighty cattle. I always had a deep interest in horses and through the years I always had a pony of some sort. So when they got the cattle in, I managed to get the job of rounding the cattle in each evening, because they would be let run, and the river was their feeding ground, right through from what we called Carter's Pool into the town area, but not as far as the mill. The cattle used to run right up to there, and then right down to Spencer's Brook, right down to the bridge. You wouldn't know which way the cattle had gone when you started so sometimes I had to ride the full river to find them. So, of course, you can imagine a thirteen year old kid chasing cattle on a horse down through that area, the games you invent, the things that happen. It was terrific galloping, at full gallop on a good horse down through the river towards Spencer's Brook, jumping logs and jumping the pools, and sometimes we'd land in the middle of them and come down. But I think the horse enjoyed it just about as much as I did. It was a terrific playground.

The canoes... I don't know how many canoes are at the bottom of that river. I mean you could go through three in a day, or yet a canoe could last us three months. You wouldn't know. It depends what we were doing. If we were having a fight of some description, playing pirates or just having an argument, there was no buoyancy in the canoes. All they were was a sheet of iron off a building, and you'd plug up the nail holes with a bit of bitumen or whatever you could find, pull the ends together and bend them over, and plug the holes up there. Spread the middle out, and you had your canoe, with the ripples of the iron still in it and everything. It would depend how long the sheet of iron was how long the canoe was. So you might have a six-foot canoe, or you might have a twelve-foot

canoe. You just didn't know until you got the sheet of iron. But when we had a fight, of course, the was just no buoyancy in them, and they only wanted a bit of a tip and the canoe filled with water, and you just lost it, in eighteen feet of water. So, swim ashore, head for the nearest building and .... We had a few that we could "utilise" that we weren't supposed to. But we did. Bend yourself up another sheet of iron and go back and have another war. So how many canoes would be at the bottom of that river would be anybody's guess.

There were other problems in the river. It was a good suicide spot. I don't know how many people suicided down there by tying a weight around them, a concrete weight or a metal weight, and just jumping off a log or something. Unfortunately, being the people who played in the river, it was not unusual to find a body. There would be one or two a year were dragged out of there. We didn't find them all, but as kids we found quite a few.

There were other deaths down there from drownings, the normal ones where you have a river. There were a lot of alcohol related drownings. On Saturday night they'd go down, head for the water, pretty pie-eyed and it was not unusual to have someone die.

The accidental injuries were pretty high. I remember, I attended the West Northam State School, the old state school by the old West Northam Railway Station, where Peters are now situated. That used to be the old school ground, where the Peters buildings are, and they used to run right through to the Railway Institute west of that. Our school decided to do swimming lessons, and I'm talking about the 1940s now. Everybody thinks it's modern to take a child in to swimming lessons, but way back then teachers decided, or the P&C or whoever, decided to do this and, of course, Burlong was the place. I can remember one chap diving in there one day, in the old Burlong, that's the west-end of the pool. He dived in and didn't come up again, except a row of bubbles. The teacher who, luckily, could swim very, very well, dived in and pulled him out. He had staked the centre of his head on a fallen limb that had broken off and submerged. It had just pierced his head. Well, Laurie is still alive, or he was last I heard, although he's pretty long in the tooth like the rest of us, but with a steel plate in his head now. He was very, very fortunate to come out of that one. But there were others who were not so fortunate, the ones that couldn't swim properly and did drown. It wasn't rough like the ocean, but water always has its dangers, always.

We were fortunate in that our swimming capacity was so strong, we could overcome this problem. But a lot of the town kids couldn't swim so well. Some of them couldn't swim at all, actually. It was rather humourous as a matter of fact. When we first started swimming lessons, great excitement, I was in about Year 1 at school. I might even have been in Year 2, I don't know, but very, very young. Of course, I was put in with the non-swimmers. Naturally. I mean who else would think of a kid this age being able to swim. My eldest brother was the only one who got anywhere near the advanced class. At any rate, we went down there and, of course 'this is how you swim', and all the various ways of learning how to swim. We were on a bit of a sand bar that was forming even at that time, on the western end of the pool. Every time no-one was looking I'd swim out and come back again. Finally the teacher got sick of me and put me up in the next class, and that teacher got sick of me and put me up in the next class. It finished up that I went for my Bronze medallion in the first year. You're not supposed to get the Bronze under twelve or fourteen. But I had my Bronze when I was six or seven. I've still got it. But this is the class of swimming we were doing, the capabilities of us, simply because the pool was there. Such a terrific playground and such a terrific place.

Other problems moved, in of course. War broke out. The Northam Army Camp was situated immediately above the pool and, naturally, they used it. Pre-war, before the war had

broken out, the Army Camp was there, and the Tenth Light Horse Brigade was there, although the main building was still in town and there's action going on on that currently. But the camp area was the Northam Army Camp. They were a terrific sight actually, these troops, with their cocked hats with the feather sticking out of it, and breeches and leggings and the works. The area between the river and the army camp was quite a flat area, between the bottom of the hill, the Army Camp and the river, it's the river flat, and it was a great area to gallop horses on, a thousand, a couple of thousand acres of it. I can still remember seeing a full-blown Cavalry charge. It's something unusual for Australia. But in practice, they had the eighteen pound guns, with six horses in three sets of pairs pulling the gun, with the caisson with the gun on the back of that again, (the caisson, of course, carries the ammunition, the box), with men hanging on it, trying to sit on it, bouncing across. The whole thing was in the air just as much as it was on the ground half the time, in full gallop. But each pair of horses had a rider. He rode the left hand-horse and guided the right-hand horse. So you had three men up front. I just don't know how many men formed the whole team. I've tried to work this out. There seemed to be men hanging off everywhere. And, of course, they'd gallop madly for a hundred metres, two hundred metres. All of a sudden they'd come to a squealing stop, and the whole thing would run a 180-degree turn, a U-turn. The gun would be pointing in the right direction, then, to fire. Some of the men would disconnect that, and there'd be men getting off horses – there seemed to be men going everywhere. I know one took the horses away. He'd unhitch the whole lot and then they'd fire maybe two or three rounds. Then they'd hitch up and off they'd go again for another hundred metres. But in the meantime quite often, depending on the exercise, the cavalry... and a full-blown cavalry charge is really something to look at, where you've got a hundred, maybe two hundred horses with screaming men – and they *were* screaming. This is part of the deal. The more noise, the better. Sabres out, and the sabre, of course is not a small weapon, it's five or six feet of naked sword, waving them round their heads and going down to the charge position. You'd see these galloping along, in line abreast, maybe three lines of them all heading the same direction. But when you mixed the cavalry charge with the guns, which happened quite often, you had what looked like a real mix-up and yet it was all organised. The cavalry would charge so far and then stop, and then the guns would go through the cavalry and stop and fire and so it would go on. They'd work their way right across this bit of country. There's actually a hill, it belongs to Wildings, it's on Tom Wilding's property and Wildings, of course, are at Mokine, but this hill was absolutely denuded of vegetation where the rounds were hitting. There was just pockmarks, or shell holes, through that period of time, pre-war and during the war. I don't know what Old Tom thought of it, but he suffered it. That hill was, again, one of our hunting grounds, because these eighteen pound shells were full of lead balls, a bit smaller than a marble. Of course, we all had gings, 'shanghais' people call them. The difference between a ging and a shanghai is simply that a shanghai has two strips of rubber with a 'y' fork, a stick with a fork in it and two pieces of rubber coming back to a pouch, whereas a ging was just a single piece of rubber. You held it over your thumb, pulled it back and let go – and got your thumb out of the way before the ball hit it! We used to have gings. They were easier to make and a lot easier to use. And a lot more accurate, believe it or not. These lead balls were absolutely ideal for shooting rabbits. So we used to go over there and fill our pockets with lead, twice a week sometimes. So it was a good hunting ground there too.

But as the war progressed the Army trained their horses in the river. A lot of people said at that time that they were going to ruin the river, but I don't think they did, personally. I think the river would clear itself each year from that problem, a group of men and a group of horses using it. But as the war progressed, of course, the different elements came in – the Light-Horse went off, and they finished up in tanks, actually, the Tenth Light-Horse is now an Armoured Division. But the troops themselves, they used the river just to swim in, for

end, and a few in between, coming in at the sides, and when they were running they were really muddy. So this was bringing the hills down into the flats, of course.

Another thing that I've noted is actually Eric Fox's farm, which was then the old people's farm. Eric was a cousin. His mother was my mother's sister and there was a lot of interaction between the families, of course. We used to walk between the two, mainly. Sometimes we'd take the horse and buggy and sometimes by vehicle (Dad had a truck fairly early in life). If Mum came over with us, we'd take the buggy. It was a definite thing at the time that a woman didn't do the manual work. Well, they used to do the manual work, very, very hard work, but they were put on a pedestal more than they are now. So if you went out on a Sunday you took the buggy if Mum came. If Mum didn't come, you walked. It was just the difference. But going up the escarpment between Burlong and the Fox's, I can remember oat crops, halfway up the hill, higher than my head at the time. I wasn't so high perhaps, but you're still looking at 1.2 – 1.5 metre high oat crops, and really lush, thick crops. Now you wouldn't put a crop in there, you couldn't put a crop in, because it's rock, just clean rock. So all that top soil has come down the river, and it's only one little corner of the state, one little corner of the whole river system. And when you think how far that river goes back beyond Beverley and out the other side, and multiply that by that one little patch, that's a lot of water.

To give you an idea of the quantity of silt that's there, you look at a kilometre of river, fifty metres wide and, say, five metres deep, and put that into cubic metres, and you can see how much dirt is there, because that's how deep that river is full of silt now.

There's another interesting thing happened. I don't know what year it was but it was one particular year there was a drought. Anyway, up in the wheatbelt, especially around Koorda and through that area, water had always been a problem (still is, actually, although they've overcome a lot of it). Stock water was almost non-existent, so the W.A. Government got the Railways to transport water, and they pulled it out of the pool, for stock. Where the old Burlong ford is, on the Railway property itself, there were three or four peppercorn trees, planted by some industrious person in years gone by. Camped under that was the pumping crew with a petrol motor and they had a pump. The train would come out from West Northam, in the old marshalling yards that were there, and they'd fill all these tanks up with water. I don't know how many gallons, but it was a whole train-load of water. They ended up taking out half a dozen of those trains every living day, all filled up with water. In the early part of that summer, the river lowered and you could see that. Just diving off the jetties, you had to dive that much further. Probably another twenty or thirty centimetres we had to dive down. That was how much the river lowered. But it was lowered to that point, and they kept pumping, and it stayed at that level. This got a few people curious. Of course, a year or so later we were fully aware of it. We realised that where we were drinking water, there was a spring. This one main spring, just downstream from the Burlong jetty, during that period you could actually feel the water bubbling up, it was that strong. I know that saved the farmers that year. I can't remember if it happened in other years or not. But that one main year I can remember. I know I wasn't very old and I was star-struck by these men. One of them, he was probably pulling my leg, but he said that he was using explosives and he blew his tummy up. He had a big hole in his tummy with a bandage around it. I was always fascinated with this story. He probably didn't. Kids will believe anything, but that remained very strong in my memory - and these train-loads of water.

There was a chap by the name of Fletcher, I can't remember his first name. He worked for the Council and he lived opposite where the Council buildings are – Brabiston

House, he lived alongside that. There were three houses there, all belonging to the council, and the workers used them. This Mr Fletcher, he was the only person I ever heard say it, but he maintained that if they cut the clay bank down to a certain height at the town end of the pool, so that the water ran out through that, this spring would keep the town pool running, year in, year out. Nobody ever listened to him and I don't know if it would still work or not, but that was one of his theories. I'm convinced, looking back and knowing how strong the spring was, and watching those train-loads of water go out, I don't know just how much water would run through but it would be enough to have a trickle over the weir all the year round. Which would keep that town pool clear.

A bit earlier on, Bernard Park was probably the social centre of the town, during the summer period at any rate. Families would take a picnic lunch or a picnic tea down there. The whole park, then, ran from the Council Office down through to the end of where it is now. But the park where the new centre is, was just a bit of lawn with a few trees. Bernard Park itself, which is the existing Bernard Park was highly maintained by the Council. The rostrum, or pergola, was in the middle there. The Band played there. That was a Town Band, backed by the Council, a brass band. They played there regularly every Sunday afternoon. It was quite a pleasant spot to be, under the trees, with everybody, kids running everywhere, parents socialising, the band playing. You can imagine the scene. Can you imagine yachts? There were actually yachts, a Yacht Club and everything that went with it on that river, in that section of the river. There was a Sea Scouts building there and the Sea Scouts had their little section, a little building with their boats and a few other bits and pieces. It's difficult to imagine this happening. You look at the Swan River and Matilda Bay and think, gee, that's a beautiful sight. Well that was Northam at that time. You'd have twenty, thirty yachts out there, only small stuff admittedly, but two, maybe three people in them. It was really a sight, and this was your Sunday afternoon. It's gone. It's just lost, because the river just won't wear it. It just can't. It's just disappeared altogether.

Whether it can ever be brought back again or not, I don't know. I always tell the story of how a camel came into being... a committee wanted a new horse, and that's what they designed. That's what the river is facing. You have committees, which are very, very good, and I don't want to knock committees, but it's happened in the past, and I think everyone is just starting to realise what the experts and committees have done to the river. Trying to train it, and trying to do this and trying to do that... they ruined it all. What the next committee is going to do is... frightening actually. I've got some ideas on it perhaps, but not being an engineering type completely. But one of the things I would like to see is flood-gates on the weir to scour the river every year. It will cause problems further down, but I think these could be handled with correct engineering. I think the same thing could almost apply to Burlong. It might take ten, might take twenty years, to scour that river properly again, but I believe it can be done.

We won't get rid of the salt. That stems from problems further upstream, and they're horrendous. The farmers are now facing the salt problem. I fly aircraft, flying over the state, especially this wheatbelt area, tracing some of the river patterns, and the salt just goes nearly up to Leonora. The salt we're getting. So it's something that will take a hundred years to heal, if they ever do. But I still think the river itself can be brought back to *something* of its former glory. I firmly believe that. One of the major things that has got to happen, though, is that those pools have got to scour. Once you scour them and get your water there, your life will come back into it. Being salt water, you won't get your freshwater stuff back in, but there'll be some life will come back to it. What the life will be, I don't know. But there will be wildlife, there will be natural life. More salt-tolerant trees are starting to grow already in

patches, but they will take over. Of course, that always adds to the ecology. What else can be done, I don't know, but they're a few of the thoughts I've had.

We drove past it (Burlong). We didn't drive down to it because the road's blocked off now, there's no entry. I should, I suppose, have just got out and walked down there. But there's talk of them dredging a hole in it. It's not the answer. The Northam Pool was dredged and it's just as bad, if not worse, than it ever was. They've got to block the river off, slow it down, back to what it was before. I galloped that river on a horse. The channels were blocked. That's the only thing you can say about it. They were blocked. The river used to cut new channels each year, because the vegetation and stuff would just block it. A tree would come down, a gum tree would be scoured out from underneath and just drop, and fill the whole channel. So a new channel would be cut. But the water was only slow. We used to notice this with the canoes. To paddle upstream was not a really difficult occupation. We paddled from the Mill to the Spencer's Brook Bridge on not one occasion, but time after time. And I'm talking about as a six-year-old. That was when I first started being able to paddle a canoe upstream by myself, at that age. That shows you the strength of the run of the water. But the water still had a scouring effect on the main pools, where it concentrated. So I think that's got to be brought back somehow.

The River Training Scheme did more damage than you could point a stick at, but I think others have probably told you the same too. It was just one of the mistakes that were made. You can't blame the people for making them. They didn't know and, as I said, a committee can do all sorts of funny things when they get going. But I do firmly believe that the river can be brought back, can be brought back to a point where it can be used socially again. I mean I'd dearly love to see yachts back on that river, I really would. The swans are all very nice, but the swans have always been there.

Not like they are now. When we were young, one of my fondest memories is bringing some swans' eggs (these were Black Swans) home from the river. We were watching the nests. Year by year we were watching the nests and the swans didn't seem to mind us. We'd let them alone, and you could walk past one and get a hiss off them, but that would be about it, and we just left them alone. But when the swans left the nest with their cygnets, which was immediately they came out of the eggs, often they left eggs behind. I remember we brought four or five of these eggs home. At that stage my mother was rearing chickens, as women do, trying to get a few extra coins in the pocket, and she had an incubator, a kerosene flamed incubator. So we put these eggs in the incubator and three of them hatched. So we reared those three black swans. Those same swans, I don't know how many years after, they used to come back and nest. You could go up and put your arms around them. We used to cuddle up to them, but they were really, really friendly. But they're gone. Where have they gone? Why have they gone?

I rode horses, as I said, and horses were part of my hobby during that period and there was two horses I had. One of them was actually a workhorse but I used to muck around with him a fair bit. I'd take him down the river, and we used to do this a lot, I just used to jump on, no bridle or anything else, and we'd gallop down to the pool, because the horses would head that way in any case. We'd go down into the water until the water was just about running across their backs, and then I'd go for a swim. And the horse would just wait there. Not patiently or anything. It would stick its whole head underwater to eat the seaweed. It was a very crisp type of a weed, and that's gone. It's a very slimy weed that's down there now. When you got sick of swimming, you'd just climb on the back of the horse and kicked it in the ribs enough to get it out of the river, and you went home. Life was easy.

These things have gone. That weed must have sustained a lot of the river life. It wasn't everywhere. It was only in selected places. It didn't alter. It was just in those same places year by year. Obviously, it needed a certain amount of nutrient to keep it going. That was a good place to catch the cobblers. They liked it. That's the sort of thing that's got to be brought back. Not that particular weed, because it's a freshwater weed and it won't grow in the salt. But surely there is something that will replace it. It would have to come here naturally, or be imported, I don't know which, but without life everything is dead. You've got to put life back into the water to make it grow again.

I'd dearly love to see that whole Burlong area, in particular, brought back to its glory. It's just a dirty mess. Even the river, between the road and the river, I don't know if you've been down there, but it's just a dump, just a mess. The trucks have been pulling sand out of there, I know, and running over it, but oh....It was quite a pleasant spot, with trees growing. You could sit under the shade of a tree or play in the grass, or whatever was there in the middle of summer. You'd get dusty, but you didn't mind that because you could go in the river to wash often. The picnic areas... the people who were sitting round...well, I know people don't have picnics like they used to, but it was more of a family tradition then, because there was no television and radio wasn't so good. Sunday was a time to get out and socialise, and the socialising areas were these places, which happened to be the river in Northam, either Bernard Park or Burlong. There was nowhere else. In the footy season you went to the footy, and in the cricket season, if you were interested in cricket, you went to the cricket, but families don't do this. Families get together and go to these places. Other families are there, so the women would get there and talk about what women talk about, and the men would get there and talk about what men talk about. And the kids would run riot. Nobody worried. It was just a pleasant Sunday afternoon. Monday morning, you were satisfied to go back to school again.

Life has changed, completely and utterly. All my early years were spent in the family situation. We always had other families visiting us, or we were visiting other families, mainly on weekends. There was nothing unusual about twenty, thirty people around the piano. One would be playing and those who could sing would be singing, and all the rest would be making a noise that wasn't anything to be listened to. But this was how you spent your time. It was gatherings of people. Now a gathering of people is a barbecue and grog and everything that goes with it. It's just all lost, the socialising side of it.

When we moved from the old place up into the new place, (which was still an old house), we had a back lawn with a grape-vine growing over it. If we were home, and that was most Sundays, that back lawn would be crowded with people, coming from somewhere or another. If it wasn't rellies it was people from further up the road or in town or wherever. But that was normal. Right up until I got married, at least, that went on. That's another thing that's lost, down through the years.

But that river. It really upsets me to look at it, the way it is now. And yet there are still some good places in it. A friend of ours rows his canoe. He's a lonely sort of a chap and he jumps in his canoe and goes down, and he's interested in photography. He sent us two or three photographs that are really classic. One, in particular, depicts what I've been talking about, this serenity. When you look at it you think, gee, I'd love to be there. It's that sort of photograph. It's incredible. That's how the river should be.

(Asked about "Black Alec" reputed to be the only one ever to touch the bottom of Burlong Pool) ...That's not true. We all did it. We'd go down eighteen feet. You'd have to prove it so you brought mud up. We were probably one of the few, because we were

brought up on the river. Our upper body, our chest area was well and truly developed, lungs and that sort of stuff. But I didn't have much to do with Black Alec, because we were not Town kids. We knew of him. I'd seen him. He was just an old blackfeller, as we used to call them, the Aboriginal folk. He was a very upright citizen, from memory.

But there's one other. I would have loved to have had his history. He used to work for Tom Wilding. He'd be about six foot four tall, fairly thinnish, extremely upright figure, completely vertical, and he'd walk from Tom Wilding's farm at Mokine into Northam, every Saturday and then walk home again. And *stride*, it was something to see. He'd stride out and really get going. I would love to have got his history.

The Aboriginal folk didn't go to Burlong. I have an idea it was taboo. Just why, I don't know. They congregated on the downstream end of town, where the reserve is, the old reserve, round Munro's (*Morby?)* Cottage and through there. And further down towards Toodyay was their area. But I've never heard of any stories, folklore or anything of the Aborigines between Northam and the Spencer's Brook Bridge.

My ancestors owned Muresk. Well, they leased Muresk, they didn't own it. The owner actually lived in England. It was on of those grants, because he kissed the Queen or something. That type of thing. But they cleared Muresk. The 'Oliver Tree' is still standing in the middle of Muresk, a big Peppercorn tree with a plaque on it. My great grandmother, she was a Mead who lived on Springhill Farm, which is as you go towards Spencer's Brook, where the road curves around, just before it goes over the bridge and the Muresk road goes off to the left. There, on the left-hand side of the road is Springhill Estate. The old property is up on the back. So my great grandfather married the girl next door. She's a bit of a legend in this area. If you ever made a bit of an inquiry, you'd find there's quite a bit on her at the Battye Library, and places like that. (Tape ends)...*She was almost killed by a group of Aborigines while riding her horse on the property one day. A spear passed between her leg and the saddle.*

(Black Alec and the Aboriginal from Mr Wilding's place were not afraid of the local taboos, as they were from up North.)