

BAMedley Transcript from sound recording

Meadley

INTERVIEW WITH MR. MEADLEY

(by Bruce Harley ± 1972)

MR. MEADLEY: at the beginning of 1929 and I linked up with Gardner at that stage. He had just been appointed as Government Botanist, ^a and had previously been ^a ~~in~~ the Forests Department as ~~their~~ Botanist and it was decided to merge the collections of the Forests Department and the Department of Agriculture; and previously WM Carne had been Botanist and Plant Pathologist, he was joining C.S.I.R.O., consequently Gardner was appointed Government Botanist and subsequently another Plant Pathologist, was appointed - A.H.J. Pitman.

MR. MASLIN: Did Carne have the title as Government Botanist also?

MR. MEADLEY: Yes, his title was Government Botanist and Plant Pathologist, he had a newer role and at that stage the two positions were divided and passed over to individual officers, as I said, Pitman and Gardner. I was, in view of these alterations in the structure it was necessary to bring in additional officers, H.G. Elliott came in as Assistant Plant Pathologist and I virtually came in ultimately when I graduated as Assistant Botanist. At that stage within the Botany Section there were only the two of us, it was the total staff, in fact we were housed in one office, that constituted the office space and the Herbarium and everything. We had possibly four or five cupboards with specimens; I remember two were in the room that we occupied and the rest were in corridors or anywhere that they could be put. This was in the old Municipal Council Buildings in St. George's Terrace where Council House is at the present time.

MR. MASLIN: What year would this have been?

MR. MEADLEY: This would have been round about ... I graduated at the end of 1930 so that I would have taken up my appointment in 1931 so I am speaking now in terms of the early 1930's this situation applied. We stayed there for some number of years then, of course, the pressure of space became pretty significant and we moved up to the Observatory Buildings, I am not quite sure of the year, you could always check that in the files.

The situation up there was quite a deal better; we had a lot more room, we had an opportunity for expansion, we bought more cupboards and spread the collection much more profitably and became much more accessible. Not ideal by any means in terms of modern standards but a big improvement on what it had been before.

In 1934-35 Gardner went to Kew as the first Australian liaison officer at the Royal Botanic Gardens; he was away for a couple of years, and I can recall during that period that I took over ...

MR. MASLIN: You were by yourself?

MR. MEADLEY: Yes I was acting as a Botanist. And I think about that time Mr. Royce became involved in the situation, he could spell this one out much more clearly than I could, but I seem to recall that he came into the field around about that time. Now in terms of collecting trips and terms of general activities, my assessment of Gardner, I don't know whether this is the type of comment you are seeking was that he is a particularly keen taxonomist, a taxonomist who had no basic training, he was mostly self taught, but a man with tremendous ability in this regard; I think it was a little unfortunate that he did not have the greater academic background because he had nothing to lean on in that regard. But he was a very able man; a man who is inclined to be a bit pedantic, not over tolerant of other people's views and I think it would be fair to say that he was a rather acquisitive person, he was the Government Botanist, he was the leading Taxonomist and he was always very anxious to keep these activities within his control: And from that point of view I think this could have been one of the reason why the taxonomic work did not expand a great deal in the 1930's and 1940's because of the tendencies to keep it in a very tight group. He was working very closely at this stage with Dr. Blackall, who was a private collector, and much of Gardner's collection was done along with Blackall. They had a mobile van and they went off on quite extensive collecting trips that could have carried them into even weeks or months. I can recall that Gardner went away on long service leave on one occasion, purely on a collecting trip, he was a most dedicated person in this regard, and of course, he had made copious collections in the Kimberley's long before he was appointed Government Botanist and he went up there on several occasions subsequently on collecting trips. He had traversed almost every point of the State and he was extremely knowledgeable in terms of where species were located and where to go back and find them, and of course, had a tremendous knowledge of spot plant identification. This was a bit of a pitfall at times because I felt because there were a number of occasions when we were continuing to duplicate errors or we were continuing with identification purely because we were making spot identifications ^{errors in} ~~identifications~~ ^{determinations}. I can recall one quite precisely even now, it was gastrolobium which we were calling oxylobioides and it was while Gardner was in Kew a specimen came in as a possible toxic species and, as quite a young officer I was being very careful about identifications particularly when they involved toxic plants. I went back to the keys to work this one out, I identified it as oxylobioides checked up and found we had typed material of oxylobioides, and it was quite a sound determination but it was very different from the plant that we had been consistently been calling oxylobioides, So I ~~xxx~~ sent a specimen over to Gardner in Kew with my comments and in due course he wrote back saying Yes, he was in full agreement and the plant that we had been calling oxylobioides was in fact a distinct species, and I think it was subsequently known as Bennettsianum. But this was the type of thing, and of course, I suppose it happens with every taxonomist, you tend to copy your mistake. But this is, ~~xxx~~ and not being in any way derogatory

to Gardner's capacity to identify plants, as I say he did a tremendous amount of collection. In fact at times I often wondered if his collecting wasn't outstripping his taxonomic work. We would have large collections at the Herbarium which were only partially sorted out and partially mounted, this was due to lack of staff. I of course wasn't associated with the work in Gardner's later days of activities but I often wondered whether all these specimens were ultimately sorted out before he retired. He also had an unfortunate habit, as I saw it, of working most diligently on a genus until it reached almost the final stage and he was a perfectionist and he would say "Well I must go back to the original habitat of one or two species, collect some more material before I finalise this" and then he would move on to another genus and maybe come back to the original one six months or twelve months later and then he would feel that it would be necessary to start from the beginning again, and as a result of this, my assessment was he didn't complete nearly enough work in terms of the effort he put in.

MR. MASLIN: Can you site any ^{EXAMPLES.} ~~samples~~ of this?

MR. MEADLEY: Yes. I can recall he worked on eremophilas for a very extended period and then set them aside. He worked on several genera in the Chenopodiaceae including, if I remember correctly atriplex & Kochia and set them aside, he also worked on acacias very extensively with much the same story. He'd run into a few minor problems and I would often debate with him this idealism because I tried to make the point that any taxonomic worker after a period of time becomes outmoded by subsequent work and this is no real reason for withholding publication, particularly when the material was in such an advanced stage of preparation.

MR. MASLIN: Did he accept that fact at all?

MR. MEADLEY: I would think in part that he would but he seemed to rather like switching and I think this might have been part of his philosophy to - it was very very difficult - as you know, the amount of work that he published was relatively limited for the amount of work that he covered. He published quite a lot of new species, he'd get around to this in due course, because that seemed to be more straight forward, that would be fairly descriptive and he did a lot of publication in the Royal Society Journal. He could finalise that and that would be out of the way, but where it came to relating - say he was doing a monograph on a particular genus, and he was running into trouble with the odd species, he would put it aside.

MR. MASLIN: There is a lot more work in that.

MR. MEADLEY: He was tremendously active in the Poison Plant field too although he was a taxonomist he had a keen interest in the poison plants and did a tremendous amount of work with H.W. Bennett in this field as you know and they did publish one or two excellent works. On the other hand he wasn't an agriculturalist this, of course, lead to some problems because in those times the Botany Branch was supposedly an agriculturalist Branch as well as a taxonomic Branch and it was responsible for the seed testing work, it was responsible for weed control and to a certain extent plant introduction and some pasture work. This was a field in which Charles Gardner wasn't greatly interested and consequently in due course it was found necessary to split the activities and to ~~px~~ retain the Botany Branch for basically taxonomic ecological work, and create another branch which was the Weed Control and Seed certification Branch to handle the agricultural aspects.

MR. MASLIN: When did you leave the Botany Branch?

MR. MEADLEY: ~~This is~~ It could have been around about 1950 (check in files) when the new Branch was formed and the division of activities took place.

MR. MASLIN: Do you know the reasons why Gardner left the Forests Department?

MR. MEADLEY: I felt that it meant promotion for him, a more senior position and there had been quite a deal of debate at that stage as to the desirability of having several collections. There was one at the Forests Department, one at the Department of Agriculture ^{one at the Museum} and ~~at~~ to a lesser extent one at the university and these were building up as separate mini herbaria and the desirability of having them consolidated of course was discussed and I think that manifest that this should take place. Forests and Agriculture agreed quite readily, ~~University~~ ~~xxxx~~ I think up to a point University too, but initially from memory the museum was reluctant, but ultimately all ^{far as I} the collections have now become largely merged as ~~they say~~ ^{know}.

MR. MASLIN: Who would have been in charge of the museum collections at this time?

MR. MEADLEY: Dr. Battye had overall control and I wouldn't be too sure who would have been advising him or who in fact would have been looking after the collection. I think this was one of the arguments why the collection should be taken over by this consolidated arrangement, because it was fairly inert at the museum, I don't think it had been worked on.

MR. MASLIN: And why was it decided that the Agricultural Department should be the central Herbarium?

MR. MEADLEY: Well this came about as ~~a matter of~~ policy decision as a result of discussions between Forests and Agriculture, I suppose it could have been just as reasonable at that such to create a separate entity altogether to create a State Herbarium, but Departments were relatively small then; and presumably it is much easier to set up a structure within the framework of a department already existing, and there was a tendency in other States for the Herbaria to be associated, or at least in some states with the Department of Agriculture. I think possibly too an important factor was at that time the ~~the~~ Department had a Botanist and a Plant Pathologist, Carne, and the Department had this useful collection - I couldn't relate it in size to the collections of other instrumentalities, but it was probably the largest.

MR. MASLIN: What year are we talking about now?

MR. MEADLEY: We are talking about somewhere around about 1930.

MR. MASLIN: This is just before you came?

MR. MEADLEY: Yes. This was the changeover period. This was when Gardner moved from Forests, he was employed by Forests at that stage looking after their collection, he came over to Agriculture, brought the Forests collection with him, and consolidated the two.

MR. MASLIN: Do you know if he had any dealings with actually having the liaison officer system created at all, or is it just fortunate that he was the first one selected to be instrumental at all in it ?

MEADLEY: He was always keenly interested in Kew, of course, he was an Englishman. He corresponded quite extensively with Kew over the years. He would have certainly been an advocate of the creation of a liaison officer. I am not quite clear in my own mind whether he was one of the promoters he could well have been and it might be possible to back over the files, I don't whether they have been destroyed; it was sort of an ad hoc system of selection then because ~~there~~ it wasn't formalised ~~they way~~ in the way that it has been in more recent years through standing committee and the Australian Agricultural Council and the person nominated was selected on quite an ad hoc basis. Gardner at that time was a single man, very keen to go, very appropriate person to send and the initial

MR. MASLIN: You mentioned that he was a self educated man, do you think this coloured his outlook at all in respect to any of his attitudes towards anything?

MR. MEADLEY: In my assessment yes. He had a slight reaction to folks who were trained professionally, or at least I sensed he did. and he placed a lot of things on learning by practical experience and some of his ~~conclusions~~ conclusions, some of ecological attitudes ~~xxxx~~, I think, prove that he strongly ~~questioned~~ ^{questioned} in this regard. He was inclined to draw conclusions that in my ~~opinion~~ ^{assessment} were not ~~satisfying~~ based on sound premises.

~~MR. MASLIN:~~ I don't know whether this is quite the material you are wanting.

MR. MASLIN: Yes it's fine.

MR. MEADLEY: It's almost personal material and I think it would have to be worded rather carefully ; but it is my assessment and I could be quite wrong in this regard.

MR. MASLIN: What I am trying to do is build up a picture as far as possible of Gardner and his professional side of things, to a certain degree. I don't want to pry.

MR. MEADLEY: Just getting around to personalities, I found that although I disagreed with him on quite a few technical points I found him a tremendous fellow and a wonderful friend, he was a jolly fine chap, very hospitable man and also he was an excellent artist, I don't know whether you have seen any of his paintings, but I would class him as being a very good artist and of course a very good line draughtsman too, his drawings are outstand^{ing}? Again, of course, as I saw it he spent a tremendous amount of time on his line drawings which I thought could have been more profitably spent on strictly taxonomic work, but against that of course, it was necessary to have these drawings and if he hadn't done them who would, so that you have just got to balance these up. This I think detracted from the speed which he undertook his work.

MR. MASLIN: Did you know Blackall at all?

MR. MEADLEY: Oh yes. Yes I knew Blackall very well. He was a very dedicated medico of course, in fact, in his later years he spent more time botanising than he did undertaking medical work. He was extremely keen. He was in the middle of the preparation of his Flora course when he died very very suddenly, and very sad situation. I can recall he came to see me one day and said :

- MR. MEADLEY: "Well, I won't be here in a few weeks time" and I said why are you going on holidays are you going overseas and he said: "No I have an incurable disease" and within a month he was dead. It was as sudden as that. In that short period he did everything to put his house in order he made provisions in his will for his flora to be continued, in fact, Mrs. Blackall did approach me to find out whether I was prepared to carry on with his flora but at that stage I had moved over to the economic work and firstly I wasn't sure whether I was competent to do it and secondly I didn't have the opportunity to do it. Subsequently it was taken over by Dr. Grieve.
- MR. MASLIN: What sort of provisions were made?
- MR. MEADLEY: Financial provisions.
- MR. MASLIN: How did Blackall become so interested in the Flora? A natural interest do you think?
- MR. MEADLEY: A natural interest - I think that lots of Doctors have an interest in Botany, and it seems to be a linkage I noticed over the years and Blackall in particular had a very keen interest. In fact he bought the mobile caravan that I referred to earlier, that was owned by him, this is the one that he and Gardner spent quite lengthy periods at quite out of the way places
- MR. MASLIN: These would all be on record I presume the trips that Gardner did with Blackall.
- MR. MEADLEY: Oh I think you would pick those up from Gardner's notebooks if they are still available ("Yes, of course.") in the Herbarium, you would find those. It is just possible that you could borrow Blackall's notebooks from the University. I would imagine Prof. Grieve or the Botany Department of the University would still have them.
- MR. MASLIN: Kevin Kenneally is looking after Blackall and that side of things.
- MR. MEADLEY: Yes, but the linkage is there.
- largely coincidental, as I mentioned in the early stages I was doing a certain amount of taxonomic work. I departed from this for two reasons; possibly the first was that I had a greater interest in economic botany and ~~taxonomic~~ agricultural botany and secondly I made the point earlier that it was a little difficult to become involved independently in taxonomic work

MR. MEADLEY: ... at that stage. One found that this was rather difficult, I think you can get my meaning. And consequently, my collecting trips were ~~rather incidental~~ largely coincidental or contingent on visits ~~to~~ to areas for other purposes. I made very few specific collecting trips. e.g. ~~1930x~~ In 1930's while Mr. Gardner was at Kew, in fact, I investigated some stock losses on the Gascoyne and at stage made a collection of plants in the Murchison-Gascoyne area, but that extended only over a couple of weeks. I did make a trip to Esperance in the quite early days with Mr. Fitzharding who was then the Chief Inspector of the New South Wales Bank, odd trips of that nature, but I was never a great collector.

MR. MASLIN: Did you keep field books?

MR. MEADLEY: Yes, but where they are now I just wouldn't know. We are talking about the 1930's. Yes I did keep field books they would have been left with the Herbarium, they could well have been destroyed by now.

MR. MASLIN: And what about recent ~~collections?~~ collecting?

MR. MEADLEY: Collecting would have been restricted to economic species - I haven't collected native species for many many years.

MR. MASLIN: And there are no field books for these?

MR. MEADLEY: No. They would have been just odd specimens I would have noticed in which I might have been interested and they would have been submitted to the Herbarium in the normal way just with the location and the ~~rest~~ relevant information at that stage. But there would be no continuity about this. I have always retained an interest in botany and if I see a plant that I think is significant and I don't know it then I make it my business to ~~xx~~ pass it on to the Herbarium for identification.

MR. MASLIN: These are native plants?

MR. MEADLEY: Well yes, occasionally a native plant, but not very often I am afraid my work seldom takes me into areas now where there would be native plants of great interest, certainly they wouldn't be well known.

MR. MASLIN: One final thing. Gardner and Bennetts, their work how did this originate, come to fruition. Did you have anything to do with it?

MR. MEADLEY: Only indirectly, As I mentioned Gardner always had an interest in toxic plants. He handled the ~~xxxx~~ identification very ably. But had to rely to a large extent in the early on almost ~~xxxx~~ circumstantial evidence, on field evidence, farmer's

MR. MEADLEY: advice as to what had happened and then try to relate the incidence of a suspected species to stock losses on the property. ~~xxxx~~ Subsequently Dr. Bennetts developed ~~xxxx~~ an interest in the toxicology and there was an obvious linkage, the two sides of it were equally important and I think it was most fortunate that Gardner and Bennett who were close friends incidentally, got together and published quite a lot of material as separate and ultimately of course published the poison plants of Western Australia. Prior to that of course, Gardner had also published a book in conjunction with West Australian Newspapers, and the next stage from that was the Poison Plants of Western Australia.