



ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

INTERVIEWEE: Christine Ellis [and Ross Ellis]

INTERVIEWER: Richard Raxworthy

DATE: 03/02/01

PLACE: ?

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **RR:** This is a Commercial Oral Histories of Central Sydney, talking about Andy Ellis, tailor, and I'm talking to Mrs Ellis. I'll ask you again, I'm afraid, to spell your full name.

CE: C-H-R-I-S-T-I-N-E, E-L-L-I-S.

RR: Got a middle name?

CE: Yes, *****.

RR: What year were you born?

CE: 1949.

RR: And whereabouts?

CE: In New Zealand.

RR: Whereabouts in New Zealand?

CE: Central Waikato, ***** is the name of the town.

RR: And you grew up there?

CE: Yes, I did.

RR: School there?

CE: Yes.

RR: And where did you first go to work?

CE: In ***** itself, working in the post office as a telephonist and – what do they call it?) – teleprinter operator

RR: And what led you – you came to Australia eventually?

CE: Yes, I did.

RR: When?

CE: 1970, and I met Ross in 1970.

RR: Did you get married straight away or what?

1.18 CE: No, we didn't get married until 1974.

RR: So, when did you first become aware of the business of Andy Ellis?

CE: In 1970, just after I met Ross.

RR: And what was it like then?

CE: It was just remarkable, yes; it was very busy and there was Ross and his dad and his Uncle Wally were the main people that I met at that time.

RR: So, what did they all do in the business?

CE: Ross was doing a lot of the cutting and Wally just seemed to do a lot of the - - -

RR:

2.00 CE: - - - everything, yes. And dad did a lot of the fittings and yes, cutting as well with Ross.

RR: Was he involved in promotion at that period of time?

CE: He probably was but I wasn't exactly aware of a lot of what was going on at that time.

RR: Rodney Jacobs [staff member] had left at that stage, had he?

CE: No. Rodney was still there, so I did meet Rodney then, yes. Sorry.

RR: Now, what was he like?

CE: Very good at selecting, you know, shirts and ties and putting things together and – just sorry, I've really got to think – he used to have a glass cabinet that he put the bow ties and the frilly – what do they call those? - - -

RR: Dress shirts.

CE: - - - yes, the dress shirts in and he used to order, I think, shirts and ties and belts at that stage.

RR: And what was Andy Ellis like?

3.08 CE: A really nice person. I liked him – yes, he was good, yes.

RR: Was he flamboyant?

CE: No, not really flamboyant - very much a gentleman, very, very much a gentleman. Always dressed beautifully from the day I met him; even in the hottest weather he would wear, you know, very immaculate suits and always looked very cool and always very smart.

RR: Well, does that go with the power boat racing?

CE: Probably not, no. He probably had two sides to that coin but I think he – even when he was power boat racing he always looked, you know, the gentleman.

3.50 RE: No, that wouldn't be – when he was in the power boat racing - - -

CE: When he was younger I probably didn't know him.

RE: - - - he used to use a rope to hold his trousers up when he was there. He used to mainly wear white overalls

CE: Yes, yes.

RR: Did he teach you to water ski?

CE: No, I didn't – I was never taught to water ski.

RE: Maybe because you didn't particularly want to do that, yes.

CE: No, more than that he wouldn't, yes, yes.

RR: And when did you first come to work in the shop?

CE: I worked with Ross after his father died and supported Ross through the first twelve months of his being alone in the shop.

RE: Mm.

RR: What was the shop like then?

4.36 CE: By then slowed down somewhat in the suit department. They were still making riding coats. The business had slowed down considerably, I think, because of transport alterations; not so many people going past that end of town by then. There were changes in the economy and changes in styles of riding coats and a big influx of ready-made things from overseas, I think, that people were probably trying. So, at that stage things were slowing down considerably.

RR: Had the People's Palace [nearby budget hotel] been pulled down at that stage?

RE: Yes

CE: Yes, it had and the Meriton was actually built, yes, or in the process of being built.

RR: And did you get clients or customers from the West End?

5.38 CE: I don't know what that means, I'm sorry.

RR: The West End is a hotel.

CE: Oh, sorry, the hotel. Yes, yes, we did, yes.

RR: And what about the CB Private Hotel, as it used to be over the road? Did you get country people from that?

CE: I think so.

RE: It – you don't really know - - -

CE: really where they came from.

RE: - - - where they come from a lot of times but you do get country people, so they are from all around

CE: Yes, yes. The people that are across the road, too – we had a few people that would be from New Zealand and places like that.

RR: You can tell, can you?

CE: Yes, I can. Countrymen.

RR: You just get them ask you if they've been up for fish and chips.

6.15 CE: Just about, yes.

RR: Do you ever go up to the P&S Fish Café?

CE: Yes, on a couple of occasions I did, yes. Yes, it was always, you know, really nice, the - - -

RE: That was one thing with the children. They used to come in to visit us in the shop with dad and the highlight of their day was always to go up to the P&S and get chips to have with dad down in the shop and they loved that and we still go and get chips from up there and sit in the back of their shop and eat them, as if dad was still there with us. Yes.

RR: And you knew Andy, your father in law, people have spoken about him being good with children too?

7.09 CE: Oh, lovely, yes. There was one time, Ross and I, where he said he'd look after our children and he would look after them while we went out for dinner, so he came and babysat our children for us and off we went to dinner and we were sitting there, enjoying our meal, and next thing I know I get a little tap on the shoulder and he'd taken our children up to the same place and they were sitting near us. So, he had a good sense of humour as well. Yes, he was good.

RR: As a matter of fact, Harry Gatt mentioned that he reckoned he had his first suit as a schoolboy from Andy when he was the place above Edelstein's in Paddington.

CE: Yes, that wouldn't surprise me at all.

RE: Yes, no. Harry told me that story.

CE: Yes, yes.

RE: when he was a small boy

CE: This suit.

RR: You reckon therefore that he is definitely the longest-standing customer?

8.10 CE: Yes.

RE: I'd definitely say that is so, yes. And he's – Harry's a great customer, he's a regular customer and a lovely person to deal with, too.

RR: Were you working there with Ross when the backpackers took over the CB and the West End?

RE: No, I don't think so. That would have just changed - - -

RR: That's happened recently, has it?

RE: - - - very recently, last couple of years that we've been there.

CE: Yes, yes. Probably just after I left, yes.

RR: And any Asian customers come in when you were there?

CE: Yes. We had a few Asian customers coming in then, yes, yes.

RR: And what sort of people came in then?

CE: A variety. A lot of old customers coming back. There was a lot of people – a few people from across the road. It's really difficult – I'm sorry. What sort of customers?

9.20 RE: Most of them - - -

CE: Just generally, you know, gentlemen who just wanted good clothing, I think, and not – O.K, an impression that I got is that there is still a lot of people that are looking for the type of shop that Ross has, rather than a large department store; that was the kind of feeling. We'd get a variety of people. We had one chap, for example - if I'm allowed to say this – he'd won quite a lot of money the night before and he came in, he bought shoes and slacks and shirts and he just seemed thrilled that he could get the whole lot in a small space instead of going from floor to floor, sorting through a great pile of stuff. He was delighted with what he'd got, you know, and the service that he got as well. So.

RR: Yes. There was a lot of gambling around in that area, wasn't there?

10.15 CE: I think so.

RR: Apart from the Mandarin Club there was illegal places like the Goulburn and various others immediately in the area.

CE: Oh, right. I didn't know anything about those, so I think I've led a very protected life somehow. Yes.

RR: Yes, there's a lot in that area.

CE: Lot in that area, are there?

RR: The

CE: Yes, yes, yes, and - - -

RR: And I was a taxi driver for a while. I can name half a dozen places within cooee of that

CE: O.K.

RR: At one stage Thommo's [famous illegal two-up school] was even down that way.

CE: Yes.

RE: Were they?

RR: Yes.

CE: Yes. But the customers were a variety. They weren't – not – a few young, very young people came in – they'd be looking for suits, etcetera, for formals but I think they – it probably wasn't quite what they wanted to – they probably wanted something that they felt was a little more trendy, even though Ross could have made them whatever they wanted.

11.19 RE: Yes, they wanted something in the week sort of thing.

CE: Yes, as well, very quickly - they want sort of more ready-made; they were after something really fast and ...

RR: I notice Ross keeps a jacket in the window there that looks as if it came straight out of the sixties.

CE: Yes.

RE: Yes.

CE: Yes.

RE: Well, we like to have something in the window to attract people's attention.

CE: Attracts people, yes.

RE: You get some funny comments about it.

CE: Yes, you do.

RE: Some people say, "Oh, isn't that fantastic?", while others say they wouldn't be seen dead in it but it makes them look in the window and perhaps see something - - -

CE: Yes.

RE: - - - that they might like

CE: Or they come in because they're interested, yes, yes.

RE: Our window is our best salesman, really.

CE: Mm.

RE: We've always had good windows.

12.05: CE: Yes. That was one of the things that I enjoyed doing when I was working with Ross and would like to have the time to do again, because I think window shopping used to be a thing of the seventies. You know, it's a bit of a shame we can no longer do it.

RE: Well, the new shops now; they don't really have windows any more.

CE: No.

RE: They're virtually straight directly into the shop, aren't they?

CE: Yes. Just a thought.

RR: Well, amongst the businesses I remember – one of the businesses we're doing in this project is Cornelius Furs. You used to look straight down into the shop; they used to have fur coats along the top.

CE: That's right.

RR: And you used to look straight down into the salon, as they said - not the shop, the salon.

RE: Yes, that's right, yes, yes.

CE: I bought my one and only leather coat from Cornelius Furs, I think, in 1970 and I was absolutely delighted with it. Yes, and it – are they still there, are they?

RR: No.

CE: No. I didn't think so.

RR: The people who bought them out closed down last year.

13.01 CE: That's a shame but I guess there's so much anti-fur and stuff like that that - - -

RR: And the Cornelius family, Stella and Max, sold out in 1978 before all that started.

CE: Right.

RR: But there's the window – you go up the road there to P&S Fish Shop and he's got fish in the window.

CE: Mm.

RE: That's right.

CE: It's all relative.

RR: And the Comic Kingdom, they've got comics in the window.

RE: Yes, yes.

CE: Yes.

RR: So, there's still windows around the place.

RE: Yes, yes.

CE: Yes.

RE: Oh, yes, but they're older sort 'o' shops, aren't they or they - - -

CE: Yes.

RR: Well, that's why we're recording this, all the stories.

RE: Yes, that's right.

CE: Yes, yes, yes.

RR: Well, what else will I ask you? What about Andy's – I mean, did he work up in the shop right up to the time he died?

CE: Yes, he did, you know, and - - -

RE: Within three weeks of - - -

CE: - - - his death.

RE: - - - his death or four or five weeks.

CE: And he became ill over the Easter break and was admitted to the Royal North Shore Hospital and died in May, end of May. And energetic and his sister used to come in as well and she was ninety when she died and Aunt Pearl was just an amazing lady and she just – even in her nineties she came into the shop when we were in there in the Christmas and had a cuppa tea with us.

14.39 RE: She actually worked for dad in the early days as a – on the clerical side of it as well. Pearl Podmore her name was, yes. And she was a terrific person that she even - she'd always come in and - say I was sick or dad was sick, you could just ring her up and she'd come in and just mind the shop, really. She was lovely with customers but as she got older she didn't like to actually sell them anything but she always talked to 'em if I was busy and just keep them occupied until I could get around to serving them. But she was a lovely person too.

RR: And your uncle used to work in the shop as well?

RE: Yes, and Uncle Wally, yes.

CE: Yes.

RE: Yes, he was a terrific person too. He was a champion weightlifter in his early days, apparently. So, they've all been top - - -

CE: People just - - -

RE: - - - quite famous in their own sort of different fields, yes.

15.47 **RR: Is there anything else I should ask you, do you think, that I haven't?**

CE: There's probably many things we could tell you about Andy and the shop.

RR: Stories?

CE: Yes, stories and things but they're really difficult to think of just offhand.

RE: Yes, you should have went at work to think of things.

CE: There's quite a few things. Rodney may have told you the story of – that we didn't know about until he – oh, there is something I can tell you. One of the things that I know about Andy that impressed me greatly was hanging in his shop from the day I met them was a copy of what's called the Desiderata and I read it and I thought, "What a wonderful – what wonderful words they were", and I believe that if he

lived by any code is was probably by that one, by what was written in the Desiderata. So, that's - - -

RE: They read the Desiderata out at his funeral because he was always so impressed by that and how he did seem to live by the words of that. It's a lovely piece - but what was the other one you were going to say about Rodney before?

17.01 CE: Oh, the story about the girl who lost her wages and - - -

RE: Oh, yes yes.

CE: - - - he gave her, like, you know, his wage packet, his own wages - and just, you know, lots of things that he's done for, you know, each of us when we were younger and, you know, getting a house and stuff like that. He gave us some help and, yes, with your cars when you were growing up.

RE: Yes.

CE: And I sort of would like to dispute here too the fact that Harry Gatt is the oldest customer. It depends upon his age because Ross has actually still got a suit that was made for him when he was two years old.

RR: Well, I think it's touch and go there because Harry's the same age as me.

CE: O.K, so – and there you go. Harry probably wins too.

RR: Yes, but he was sixteen, you see.

CE: O.K.

RE: Yes, it's hard to say, yes. Harry paid for his too. I probably didn't when I was two years old.

CE: Well, there you go.

RE: So, you win, Harry.

CE: Yes. And there's just lots of things about Ross's dad that, you know, he was just a really, really nice. He was lovely with our kids and they used to love going in there and they certainly loved the boat. I went out a few times on the boat.

18.28 **RR: Were you ever out in a race?**

CE: No, never. No, no. Oh, no. I would have been sitting on the bank if I'd been there. No. Ross has embarked in that.

RR: Yes. Rodney was saying that - same as Ross - that he used to start to turn before they reached the buoy.

CE: Yes.

RR: And it was quite hairy, going around that buoy.

CE: Going 'round that buoy, yes. Yes.

RE: Just talking about the boating – another person that we didn't mention was dad's other brother; his name was Murray.

CE: Murray Ellis.

RE: He was the mechanic in the family. He used to do all the tuning of the boat and work on the motors, along with, you know, dad but he was the – dad was never a mechanic but he learned - he could do anything if he put his mind to it – but Murray was the one who got the boat going to really fast.

RR: What engine did he have in it?

RE: The one that he got all the records with was a Chevy engine.

19.35 **RR: He's got a whole list on the advertising sheet there about the Chickadee. It's available with all different motors in it. They've even included that you can have a Rolls Royce engine.**

RE: Yes. Yes, well, one of the motors that they did put into the boat it was a Rolls Royce Merlin. That was - - -

RR: Too big, surely?

RE: This would – it took up the whole back of the boat. - - -

RR: It would have taken the – yes.

RE: Yes, yes. Well, it did. It was really an incredible motor to hear it go and oh, magnificent sound. But they couldn't – it was that powerful that it used to shear the connection to the propeller off and they very seldom got it to go very far before they lost all power 'cause the propeller wouldn't turn, you know. Oh but it was a beautiful sight to see and hear.

RR: Is there anything else you can think of?

20.37 CE: No, not really. He was just a really nice person that we missed.

RR: All right. Well, we'll say thank you very much, Mrs Ellis.

Interview ends