



ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

INTERVIEWEE: Robin Landis

INTERVIEWER: Richard Raxworthy

DATE: 30 May 2001

PLACE:?

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **RR:** Talking to Mr Rob – now, would you spell your full name, please?

RL: R-O-B-I-N, Landis, L-A-N-D-I-S.

RR: Right. Known as Rob or Robbie?

RL: Rob.

RR: Rob. And what year were you born?

RL: 1952.

RE: Where?

RL: In Sydney. In Sydney.

RR: Right.

RL: Yes.

RR: And whereabouts in Sydney?

RL: The - - -

RR: Where were your parents living at that time?

RL: Royal Women's Hospital at Paddington, I think.

RR: No, where the parents were living.

RL: Parents were in Sydney at well. Yes, we were at Dover Heights and then later lived in Bellevue Hill for twenty three years.

RR: And where did you go to school?

RL: At Cranbrook, right from kindergarten right through to high school; left in 1970.

RR: And how did you come to know about the Golf House?

RL: Well, my father started the business.

RR: When?

RL: He started in the late 1940s. I was one of four sons, the second son. The – my elder brother became a solicitor: he always wanted to do law, so it sort of fell in my lot to come and work with Dad in the shop and even while I was at school I used to go and work in the shop during school holidays, sweeping the floor, and then after a short overseas holiday I came back and that became my career choice. So, I started doing – I worked for a couple of golf factories, initially Carnegie Clark at Botany, where they used to make golf clubs from scratch, just from a solid rod of steel; we just produced golf clubs, irons and woods - so, I worked in that factory. Then I moved on to PGF at Alexandria and I worked in the swing weight laboratory, learning the other side of the business and also in the repair department.

1.53 So, you could say I had a pretty thorough background in golf equipment but unfortunately I wasn't a very keen player. I knew the golf clubs inside and out but I didn't actually play golf as a sport. Then after that I started working with Dad full time in the shop and was there for fifteen years.

RR: Now, what do you know about the building?

RL: O.K, the building was built in 1895 in its present position opposite Hay Street. It had, I guess with the rumblings of the trains, a corner of the building at one stage was coming away and there was this huge reinforcing bar up in the corner that had to pull the building back into place and that's probably still there today. Out the back of the

shop there were several rooms and we used to – not in my lifetime but very early on in the piece they used to rent those rooms out to Chinese families who lived upstairs and it's really – I guess some people might say it's a bit seedy out the back there but it's just – there was an oven and there's toilets out the back and two storey rooms which we later used for storerooms.

3.23 The shop was quite a large shop and one side of it was taken over by my uncle Harry who used it as Harry Landis Music. People would know - anybody who's a muso would certainly remember Harry Landis and he – when he moved up to Park Street we took over his side of the shop. They continued to use the window space but we used it for storage and then later on we had a hole cut between the two shops, the two double shops, and we then took over the whole shop. I remember quite distinctly because I had to stay one Saturday with this workman who went through with this jackhammer and it took him four hours of solid drilling to drill through at least three foot of wall before he could make a hole. So, it took about six hours to make the entrance between the two shops.

RR: What was the shape of the shop in the first place? Because they [archival records?] talk about converting it from an arcade shop and then there were four shops in the first place. So, exactly what did it look like?

4.40 RL: Well, I would have said more of a square or rectangular shape. Of course, we were on that little corner – Blackburn Lane went up the side, which was a very narrow lane but it went back quite a long way and there were other businesses behind us but we always had the whole premises. It's only after Harry moved up to Park Street that we then took over his side of the shop and it became virtually a double shop as it is today. We did have on the roof, though, at the back stairs a driving range where we put nets all around and people could go upstairs and try out their golf clubs. The main history of the Golf House, of course, is the sign and that's where everybody in Sydney knows the famous sign which went up in the early sixties. It won the Outdoor Advertising Association Award of Australia in 1964 and that was our famous landmark.

RR: Do you know when the sign was put up there?

5.46 RL: In the early sixties, I think, is about the – I don't know the exact date.

RR: There were two building applications re signs that I found [in local government records]: one was 1961 and it referred to a “vertical sign” and the other one in 1966 which refers to a “sky sign”.

RL: In terms of the sign, “sky sign” would probably be more appropriate. Of course, Claude Neon would have those records, if that was

possible, because they used to keep all the drawings. In later years I worked for Claude Neon for four and a half years, so there's a bit of a link there.

RR: Originally it wasn't Claude Neon that put it up there. The sky sign application was Consolidated Neon.

RL: Consolidated Neon which - - -

RR: And there was one before that, which was Neon - - -

RL: Neon Signs Australia.

RR: - - - Australia, yes.

RL: Yes, that's right. They were all subsidiaries of Claude Neon, as they are today.

RR: Do you think they will have drawings out there and all that sort of thing?

RL: Yes.

RR: You see, now the problem is they've got no factory any more.

RL: No, but they did have archives and - - -

RR: Where were they, by the way?

6.55 RL: The – when I worked with Claude Neon they were at 60 O'Riordan Street. I think they've moved from - - -

RR: Yes, they've moved now.

RL: - - - they've moved from there now.

RR: Number 1 Rosebery Avenue.

RL: O.K, but I'm pretty sure that they would keep all their archives, because I used to go back and look for drawings of old premises a long way back. So, I'm sure the history would be there.

RR: Now, as far as the running of the shop, you worked first with your father and then later did you run it yourself? What about when he died?

RL: O.K. Dad passed away a couple of years ago but, yes, I – in fact the day after I finished my Higher School Certificate I was working in the shop. So, I started from the ground up and I took over the management of the shop. Back in those days we were open

Saturday mornings as well, nine to twelve and it was a five and a half day a week job.

RR: Did the clientele change over the years that you were working there?

7.53 RL: Not only the clientele but also the type of products that we sold. When I first started certainly golf was number one. Fishing was very big; we were one of the few places in Sydney that – because we had a second-hand dealer's licence - that we actually traded in second hand fishing equipment. Also tennis and squash and our other sidelines were lawn bowls, which was very, very popular, again because of the second hand aspect, and we had other interesting little sidelines like snooker and pool cues and also binoculars and field glasses and we sold a lot of binoculars and we used to trade in and change them over and we had people coming back year after year after year, buying and selling equipment.

RR: Well, originally it was a pawnshop, wasn't it?

RL: That's right. My grandfather – it was called Railway Loan Office and that's how the - - -

RR: What was your grandfather's name?

RL: Harry. His name was also Harry – and that's how the shop became divided, because my father went to war. He was based in New Guinea but when he came back he took over the running of the shop but he didn't want to be involved in the pawn side of the business - that's P-A-W-N side of the business, but Harry was at that stage taking over all the agencies for music. Dad decided to branch into sporting equipment and that's how they split, but yes, the original premises was a pawnshop. I've got a very interesting photograph taken opposite, from the archway opposite, that shows it as Railway Loan Office and probably taken in the twenties or thirties, I think.

RR: Could I copy that some time?

9.40 RL: Yes, I'll have to have a look for that for you. It's in archives, like everything else.

RR: Thank you. In your archives, yes.

RL: Yes.

RR: And other things I'm looking for is old letterheads and things like that or advertising material from when it was The Golf House.

RL: I've also got a whole file on golf photos – yes, I'll dig those out for you. We had a lot in our showroom upstairs; we had a lot of black and white photos of the famous American professionals, Nicklaus and Palmer and it shows Jack Nicklaus as a twenty year old, you know, winning tournaments, etcetera, and I treasure those today because I then, many years later met Jack Nicklaus at a function – and we were selling shirts branded with the Golden Bear – and I didn't wash my hand for at least six weeks afterwards. Yes, he's a famous man.

RR: Did he ever come into The Golf House?

10.34 RL: He didn't, but many other golf professionals would come in and just look for that odd putter. Bruce Crampton, David Graham – especially David Graham, I remember, came in. He bought a ten dollar putter, took it out to the back in the workshop and then belted it with a hammer till it was in the shape that he wanted it. We also had links with a lot of other golf professionals for referrals and lessons and we had many famous celebrities would come in and buy golf equipment. Julie Anthony, Delvene Delaney; those are two that certainly stick out in my memory. Johnny Lockwood was a friend of Dad's and – oh, and Christmas parties; we used to have fantastic Christmas parties in the old days. We'd invite the police from the detective squad and the rubbish collectors: everybody would come to our Christmas parties and we'd have beer and prawn and they would be a bit of a hit and we stayed open for business so that the customers would join in as well – because it was a family business; it was a family business in the true sense of the word and I spent fifteen years of my life there and it was – people enjoyed coming there.

RR: What about the best lines during that time, how did they change?

RL: Best lines?

RR: Best selling lines.

12.05 RL: Well, the business moved, I suppose, from second-hand equipment more to new equipment because of the change in the type of manufacture of golf clubs, being investment cast. When – as soon as they started producing golf clubs from Taiwan the new prices came down so much so that second-hand became expensive and there's so much labour intensive work involved in doing up or refurbishing second-hand golf clubs that the new prices meant that second-hand suddenly wasn't popular any more. We dealt with all the big companies; PGF, Slazengers, late Prosimmon, Wilson – I can't remember them all now. Browning was another company that we did a bit of business with. We didn't do a lot of importing because we left that to the manufacturers. We just concentrated on the mainly Australian brands – also Carnegie Clark was another very popular Australian brand.

RR: Now, it's not clear over the years the ownership of the building.

RL: The building was owned as tenants in common between Harry, my uncle, and my father.

RR: That's Jack?

13.33 RL: Yes, Jack, correct. The – Harry's share passed on to his son, David, and then when we sold the business, Dad sold the building, he sold it to Lindsay Sharp who took on the business and then the name changed – Sharpies Golf House – that would have been around about 1987, '86, I think. Lindsay Sharp so then owned it as tenant in common with David and then I believe David sold his share, so Lindsay owned the whole business after that.

RR: No, but he didn't own the whole building.

RL: Owned the whole building?

RR: No.

RL: O.K.

RR: That was sold onto Richard Spanos.

RL: Ray – O.K, he would have been the chap from next door?

RR: Trivas – I don't know where he's from.

RL: O.K. No, well, I'd lost contact with that – I think you'd have to say that there was so much in my life was – early life – was involved with The Golf House.

RR: But, say, your half, who was that sold to? Lindsay Sharp, was it?

RL: Lindsay Sharp.

RR: I don't know.

RL: Yes.

RR: Now, why wasn't the name also sold to Lindsay Sharp?

14.47 RL: O.K. Dad went into retirement and sold the percentage of the business and I then at that stage took on partners. So, the business changed from being a sole trader to a partnership.

RR: What year was that?

RL: That would have been about 1980.

RR: Right.

RL: O.K, I was – I stayed in that partnership for a further five years but after the partnership dissolved the name was probably – stayed with the partnership or with the partners who I got away from, I guess you could say.

RR: So, the question is now, who owns The Golf House name?

RL: That is a good question.

RR: Because what Lindsay was saying was that your family didn't want to sell it in the first instance and then when they did agree to sell it the price was a bit much for Lindsay.

RL: Well, that would have been out of my hands then because at that stage I – the partnership, as I said, had dissolved. I had no further dealings with the partners who remained. I had a non-compete covenant with them and then moved over to the north side and took over another golf business, called 'The Golfer's Store', which Archie Keen had started and I ran that for a couple of years after that.

16.08 **RR: So, in actual fact it isn't known who owns 'The Golf House' name right now?**

RL: That's quite possible.

RR: Because Lindsay didn't get it.

RL: No, Lindsay didn't get it. It's possible that it was – the name would still remain with my two ex partners.

RR: Who were?

RL: Bob Wilson and Gordon Lee, civil engineers.

RR: And yourself?

RL: And myself, yes, yes. But then, as I said, I dissolved the partnership so the name would have been retained by them.

RR: Why not by you?

RL: Because I was the retiring partner.

RR: So, did the partnership sell to Lindsay?

RL: No, the partnership did not sell to Lindsay. The partnership ceased trading.

RR: So, who sold to Lindsay Sharp?

RL: The lease had expired with the building, so there was no more, 'The Golf House', once the lease had expired. The lease was not renewed and then Lindsay started from scratch.

RR: Well, he thought he bought it off somebody.

17.19 RL: He bought – he bought - - -

RR: The business?

RL: - - - the business, that's right.

RR: Yes, from the partnership, was it? No?

RL: No, the partnership had finished. He bought some stock. Certainly, he bought that stock that was there and continued trading but he had to change the business name.

RR: So, your partners still own the business name but Sharpies Golf House, that's been sold on, of course. So, you're just talking about them – and you sold your half of the building to - - -

RL: Lindsay Sharp.

RR: Lindsay Sharp, right.

RL: That's right. Yes, you have to remember - - -

RR: But you didn't sell the business to Lindsay Sharp? He just started another one, is that it?

RL: Yes.

RR: You sold the stock to him.

RL: Same premises – that's right. He just took over the stock, changed the name from 'The Golf House' to 'Sharpies Golf House' and continued trading. You have to remember that I left in 1985. I haven't seen – as in most partnerships – I've had no further contact with them since 1985 and I haven't seen them since.

RR: What about the sign? That was only leased, was it?

18.23 RL: Yes, it's my understanding – I mean, certainly while I was there we had what was termed a "rental and maintenance contract" with

Claude Neon. So, ownership of the sign was officially or legally with Claude Neon; we rented it from them and they maintained it. When Lindsay was there I thought that because it had been there so long that Lindsay actually bought it off them; he didn't renew the lease and he owned it.

RR: He still thinks that.

RL: Well, that is my understanding, because that's what Dad had told me. So, I thought he owned it and then when I read in the paper a few months ago about what's been happening now, that Ray Drummond - who's the current proprietor - had said that he was leasing the sign off Claude Neon with a rental maintenance contract again - so, I was fairly surprised at that because I thought we had a - or Lindsay had bought it.

RR: Yes, I see what you mean.

RL: And I guess if Ray had bought the business he then obviously took the sign over with it but if he says he's renting it from them, then - - -

RR: No. No, no, he says he had a maintenance contract.

RL: Maintenance contract. O.K, you could take a separate maintenance contract with Claude Neon, a separate maintenance contract, even though you might own the sign. So, that's possible.

RR: Yes, well, we'll leave that to the lawyers.

19.44 RL: Yes, I think that's probably very wise.

RR: Now, is there anything else I should ask you? When your father and your uncle owned the building, they actually rented those side houses to the Chinese, did they?

RL: That was probably even before their time. I'd say it was probably - goes back to when my grandfather owned the building, yes.

RR: They're tiny, those rooms up there.

RL: They are, yes. Have you been in there?

RR: Yes.

RL: Yes, and you can see the wallpaper on the wall and - when we cleaned it out there was some fantastic historical documents that I sort of again kept as much as that wasn't destroyed - but we always used to say, "There's a few ghosts up there". I never saw any myself.

RR: Ray was suggesting that it might have been that since the steps were so worn on the back house - - -

RL: Yes.

RR: - - - that it in fact might have been a brothel?

20.51 **RL:** No, the brothel was next door – not that I - - -

RR: It still is, apparently.

RL: - - - not that I ever saw it.

RR: Well, it seems to be. Well, shall we put it this way – there is a barred gate over the entrance next door, yes.

RL: Yes. It was always, I guess, forbidden territory back when I was a kid. I never certainly went into the milk bar.

RR: How far back did your grandfather own the building - since it was built or later? See, the trouble is that we've got a Dr Nash in 1901 as the owner of the shops [in local government records], the four shops on Elizabeth Street.

RL: I think my grandfather took the business over from another family. So, he did not – he certainly did not build it. He took the – he took Railway Loan Office over and ran that business.

RR: Well, in 1921 we have 'Estate of Dr Nash'.

RL: I have heard - - -

RR: And the next thing's 1924 we have your father and your uncle's names on any building applications or -

RL: Yes, there could be some confusion between Harry, being my uncle and Harry being my grandfather.

RR: Right, yes.

22.02 **RL:** So, it - - -

RR: But when did your grandfather die?

RL: Mm.

RR: See, because a lot of these were H&J.

RL: Yes, H & J - - -

RR: Landis, yes.

RL: - - - of course is my father and uncle.

RR: Yes, and the first one's in the 1920s, building applications, that is, for renovations and what have you - - -

RL: Mm.

RR: - - - they were all Harry Landis.

RL: Well, that would be – Harry Landis would be my uncle, yes.

RR: It wouldn't be your grandfather?

RL: Sorry, I beg your pardon. My grandfather, I'm sorry, my grandfather. If it was just 'Harry', it would be the grandfather.

RR: And you don't know roughly when he died, what sort of decade or -?

RL: No, I'm sorry. I – my brother's the historian there. I'd have to - - -

RR: Alan?

RL: Alan. I'd have to defer or refer to him. We would have documents: I'm sure if we went looking we'd be able to find sort of the dates for you.

RR: Can you think of anybody at Claude Neon who I might still be able to find – or was at Claude Neon who I still might be able to find who would know about that sign?

RL: I'm trying to remember this man's name - he was a friend of Dad's but he passed on. He was the man who actually sold Dad the sign or talked him into it.

RR: Who designed it?

RL: Claude Neon designed it but this salesman at the time – I just can't remember his name, I'm sorry. I'd have to talk to my brother or look at the records.

RR: Several people have said that your father designed the sign. Do you know if that's true?

23.44 RL: He would have designed it, if you like, in conjunction with this salesman at Claude Neon at the time.

RR: Do you know if the idea is copied from anywhere else or if there is one anywhere else?

RL: Not to my knowledge. No, I think it's unique. I think it's probably one of the landmarks of Sydney.

RR: So, it has cultural and social significance.

RL: And geographical. If people were coming into town, soon as they saw the lights of The Golf House they knew that they had to grab their bag and get ready to get off the train as they were coming into Central [Station] and that's how everybody remembered it. People would often ring up and say, "You've got three globes out", and say, "It's very annoying, you know, the golf ball doesn't continue in a smooth arc. So, please get it fixed".

RR: Is there anything else you think I should ask you, that you want to say?

RL: No, I - you know, obviously have mixed feelings, having spent so long there. I haven't been back to the building for a long time. It holds, certainly, fond memories and also sad memories. There are a lot of people, a lot of names that we worked with - Lew Symonds worked with Dad for a long, long time and then left and opened up Piccadilly Sports Store; he was another character. There was another man who worked for Dad for many years, Ossie Passman. You know, I remember those people very fondly. There's a lot of history - there's a lot of history attached to that building.

25.21 **RR: How many employees did they have there, apart from you?**

RL: We had up to ten employees, including casuals, because we had people working out the back, doing repairs, a couple of secretaries and all the salesmen on the floor.

RR: Upstairs, in one of the rooms next to the main office there is a bar and refrigerator. Was that yours or Lindsay Sharp's?

RL: That was Dad's, so, he probably left it there. But, yes, we would entertain clients and, you know, we're not teetotalers.

RR: All right, well, thank you very much, Mr Rob - now, should I call you Rob or should I - - -

RL: Yes, that's fine.

RR: Rob.

RL: Yes.

RR: Yes, but how would you like it?

RL: Rob's fine.

RR: Rob Landis, right.

RL: Yes.

RR: Thank you very much.

26.09 RL: Thank you.

Interview ends