



**CITY OF SYDNEY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS**

Interviewee: Ron Ries

Interviewer: Richard Raxworthy

Date: 3/6/2001

Place: ?

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **RR:** **This is Commercial Oral Histories of Central Sydney, the Golf House. I'm talking to Mr Ries. Would you spell your full name, please, for the tape?**

RIES: R-O-N-A-L-D, R-I-E-S.

RR: **At times I've spelt that wrong. R-E-I, yes.**

RIES: Yes, everybody gets it wrong. R-I-E-S, yes.

RR: **Is that a Dutch name?**

RIES: No, it's German, yes.

RR: **And where were you born?**

RIES: In Corowa, New South Wales.

RR: **In what year?**

RIES: In 1928, on the *****.

RR: Now, did you grow up around Corowa?

RIES: No, no. I grew up for the first ten years in a country town called Albury, New South Wales.

RR: You went to school there?

RIES: I went to school there, St Patrick's College, until Year Six, yes. Enjoyed it very much, the first ten years of my life in the country, then we moved to Sydney, yes.

RR: You went to school in Sydney?

RIES: I went to school in Sydney, St Thomas' in Lewisham, and then finished my schooling at St Thomas', yes.

RR: So, what did you do then?

1.39 RIES: I looked for a job at the age of fifteen. Went to what they called the 'Manpower' office in Leichhardt.

RR: When was this?

RIES: That was in 1943, September, 1943 – went to the Manpower office and said I wanted to be an electrician and I wanted an apprenticeship, if I could get it. They told me there was no apprenticeships for electricians available and therefore I should go and get a job at the spinning mills in Camperdown, where they said I could earn up to four pounds per week there as a junior. I was not keen on that idea. They said, "Well, the only other job available is at Consolidated Neon" and they have their little factory and offices in Arundel Street, Glebe, opposite the university. So, I went there with my guardian at the time and I was interviewed by a Mr Chambers. I told him I wanted to be an electrician. He said, "We have no positions for an electrician but I have a job here for you". He said, "I think you'd make a good glass bender" and I said, "What's that?", and he said, "Come out and I'll show you". He took me out there and showed me and I said, "Thank you", and he said, "It will pay thirty shillings a week". He said, "If you were apprenticed", he said, "you'd only get twenty three and sixpence per week", he said, "So, I'm paying you well over the award". I was impressed and it was, like, being the only job available, so I said, "Right, I'll start". So, he started me that following Thursday.

3.37 **RR: So, when you started work there as a glass bender, what did that entail?**

RIES: That entailed - at that time, during the war, there were very little neon signs because of the blackouts. So, the company had just started off with

what they called “cold cathode fluorescent lighting” and that is utilising the tubing in a bigger form as a fluorescent light to replace all the incandescent globes. The glass was made here in Australia because we could no longer get the good glass from Germany and it was all in a bent form as it can out of the furnaces. My job was to straighten all these pieces of glass over a flame and I was doing this day after day, straightening all these lengths of glass before the glass benders would put the electrodes and pump them full of gas and fill them up with fluorescent powder. I eventually – one of my other jobs was called “the blackout boy”. Every sign company had one, and his job was to black out those parts that weren’t illuminated with the fluorescence – and this was another part of my job. I didn’t like it.

4.55 I moved – asked the boss for a transfer to another department, something with a little bit more electrical work in it. He said, “We’ll put you into assembly”. I said, “Thank you very much”. And he put me into assembly and they were impressed with the amount of – with the way I worked, so the installation people thought, “Well, we do a little bit more electrical work outside, installing this lighting”, so could they have Ron Ries with them, working outside, and I accepted that job, working outside and I was travelling ‘round all the different factories, pulling out all the incandescent globes and putting in thousands of feet – in those days – of this fluorescent lighting in all the big woolen mills. And it was a remarkable effect it had on the people who were working twenty four hour shifts in those days - which because we were during the war – and they’d been working under these dreadful little incandescents and all of a sudden we turned the great factories - Bond’s included - into daylight, so they could work in daylight twenty four hours a day.

6.13 And that went on for – until the war ended. And then the war ended and the Dutch people, Philips, produced what today we call the fluorescent light and that was a fraction of the cost of the cold cathode lighting that we’d been manufacturing, so they’ve more or less pushed us out of that industry. Went back into neon - which everybody wanted, to have neon signs - and we were working flat out then. I put the first neon sign up for Consolidated Neon after the war finished and that went down to number 1 York Street for the Red Cross – and that was one of the first neon signs installed after the war. And from then on I spent another few more years – I used to travel around the country in the trucks. We’d be away for four months at a time – sorry, four weeks at a time – and we’d travel about fifteen to sixteen hundred miles and we’d do this about four or five times a year and this went on until I married, married my wife who worked at Consolidated Neon at the time.

7.41 We - I courted her, we married and we married in 1953 and then I decided that being an installer wasn’t – something should be better if I was going to do something responsible. So, I asked – went and saw the big boss who I hadn’t seen for about ten years and I said, “Could I have another job, please, sir?”, and he said, “What can you do?” I said, “I’ve been doing installations”, I said, “for the last ten years”, I said, “and I want something

better than that. I'm married now". "Righto", he said, "leave it with me", and a week later my factory foreman – factory manager – called me up and said, "You're going to be transferred onto the survey department. Site – Sign and Site Survey Department". He said, "You'll be looking after that from now on", and I said, "Thank you very much", and I took that job on.

RR: What did that entail?

RIES: That entailed going onto all the buildings. If a sales rep sold a sign, it was my job to go out and see that the sign would fit in that position, that everything was – the building was strong enough to take it, even including all the larger sky signs, which some of them were up to a hundred feet long by thirty five feet high.

RR: Can you think of some of those?

9.04 **RIES:** Yes. The Taubman's sky sign at – on the Canada House at George Street at Central. That was ninety five feet long, thirty five feet high, and in those days had eighteen hundred feet of neon tubing and about eighty four high voltage transformers to control it. It used to read 'Taubman's' - spell out 'Taubman's' - and then paints would come on and then all the colours of the spectrum would come across. There were ninety five transformers controlling the colours of the spectrum and going right across they were fifteen feet high - for the ninety five feet they would run right across the sign. That was one large sign. The other one was Philips at Kings Cross, which was also ninety feet long by thirty five feet high, which was the council regulation height in those days. And that was one with – it had sixteen hundred globes, coloured globes in it, and they all used to alternate in colour and go across in a curtain effect and then go up in a curtain effect and each letter would individually come on.

10.30 Oh, there were numerous signs, I s'pose. The next – the best one was a sign we put on top of Railway House at Wynyard - the 'Green House' as it used to be called in those days; I don't know what colour it is now – but that was about eighty feet long by thirty feet high and that was for Pan Am – not original but originally it finished up with Pan Am Airways. And it used to have the interchangeable letters - what they called "neon tube overlays" - where the messages would change from to 'Hong Kong', 'Pan Pacific' or wherever the flights were going and they would all flash on. They faced across Sydney Harbour Bridge, which was the ideal site in those days, everybody coming in of a night time. That was one of them.

11.27 That's – as a matter of fact, I nearly left this world on that particular site. A friend of mine, a workmate - same age as myself - we were working out on the wings of the structure which were just about over the top of York Street and they were about a hundred and twenty feet above the ground, working on a plank, a builder's plank behind the structure and we had nothing in front of us, nothing behind us except these glass and the wind came and - and we both were leaning into the wind to compensate so that we could still work and the wind dropped and we both

threw our arms around and both fortunately didn't grab the other, and we nearly finished up in the bottom of York Street. We took the afternoon off to gather ourselves to get enough nerve up to go up the next morning. But we did and – but that was pretty risky business; we didn't have all the safety factors on construction that they have now.

RR: What about the Golf House sign?

RIES: The Golf House site was – I surveyed that building for the sign at the time.

RR: What year do you think that was?

12.38 RIES: I thought that – I thought it was in the late fifties. I didn't think it was long after we moved out plant from Glebe and Pyrmont to our big factory at Gladesville and I thought it was just after we moved there. We moved there in 1955, April 1955, and I thought it was about three years later that we installed the sign. But that could be wrong – I'm going purely on my memory; I have no way of checking records. But my job at the time was to go down and survey the site to see how big the structure could be, measure the building to sort of see that the council regulations conformed. I think from those days it had to be forty feet high before we could have a fifteen foot high sign on it - that's the limit the council would allow you to go.

RR: Was it already designed when you went down there to survey the sign? Was it designed?

RIES: No. In the first instance, the sales rep would indicate that the site was available and my job was to go down and have a look at the building and see if it was strong enough – see if it was strong enough and all the regulations could be abided by and then I would report that back to management and they would say, "All right. We'll proceed now with the sign. We can have the sign whatever length it is – forty feet long by fifteen feet high and the structure will be sound, the building will be sound". So, therefore they'd say, "Well, we'll work out now how much it would cost to put the sign on the building", and the Art Department can now proceed with designing a sign to conform to the measurements that I would give them, that would conform with what the council would require.

RR: Do you remember who was in the art department at that time?

14.41 RIES: I thought at the time the chap in charge of the Art Department was a man by the name of Gordon Bray. Gordon Bray and there were – the only other one I can – he had about two or three working for him at the time with him in the office and I can't remember who they were. I'd remember their names if somebody prompted me. I did know them all at the time, of course.

RR: The name of Rosalie Hardwick has come up.

RIES: Yes, Rosalie Hardwick. She was working there; a very good artist. Finished up doing very well after leaving us; going on, working with our opposition company. I think from memory she went to Neon Signs of Australasia from us. But Rosalie was a very attractive young lady, very competent - lived in Ryde, not far from where we live here now and quite often I used to give her a lift to work and a lift home, so

RR: Were you aware of who designed that sign, who drew it out, who was the artist?

16.03 RIES: No, I'm not – but it would have been somebody like Rosalie. It wouldn't have been Gordon Bray, who was the chief: he used to just concentrate on drawing up the small signs so that he had more time to supervise the bigger ones.

RR: So, it could be right that Rosalie actually did it?

RIES: I'd say – yes, I'd say it could be right, yes.

RR: There was a couple of articles about her and her work; one was in the Women's Weekly, about designing large signs.

RIES: I didn't see that but I would quite believe it because after she left – oh, actually he poached her from us and - - -

RR: Who was "he"?

RIES: Mac – not McNamara – McNally; a chap by the name of Jack McNally and he started – he went off on his own business. Although, no, I think Jack McNally, he worked for Consolidated Neon and Consolidated Neon started off a branch company called Art Craft and they put Jack McNally in charge of it and Jack McNally took Rosalie from Consolidated Neon and finished up – he got out of Art Craft and he went out on his own as a freelance and he was selling to all the big neon sign companies. But he really sold in a big way. He was a chap who sold all these great, big neon signs. And of course he - - -

RR: Such as -?

17.44 RIES: Oh, very hard – Dunlop. Dunlop at Kings Cross, which was a well known sign that's up behind where the Coca-Cola sign is now.

RR: Was there an animated Coca-Cola sign up there or not?

RIES: No. Well, the first animated Coca-Cola sign was installed – it was made by Consolidated Neon. It was a very small sign on the old buildings where the Hyatt Hotel was finished up but there was a lot of old buildings very similar – looked exactly like they do down at the Golf House – and the buildings were only about two or three storeys. And these – we put a – Consolidated Neon put a sign up there alongside a Penfold's wine sign,

which was installed by Neon Asia, and we put the first Coca-Cola sign at the Kings Cross and that was animated and flashing - and that was also installed by Alf Gribble, one of our employees, who was one of the best riggers in Australia.

RR: I interrupted you, I'm afraid, re the Golf House sign.

RIES: Mm.

RR: You surveyed it?

19.02 **RIES:** I surveyed it, yes. I surveyed it and reported back that the building was substantially strong enough to hold the sign and what size sign could go on that and conform with what the council required. They then – the Sales Department then indicate to the Art Department, “This is the area that we have, certain height, certain length. What sort of a sign can we have there?” And then the Art Department then go into it, (taps table) put their heads together and they dream up these different ideas and then they produce what they call a “blackboard impression”, which is they do the outline of the sign, of all the lettering, the golf man, the – everything else, the golf balls travelling across, they put that on a blackboard and then they do it was a fluorescent spray paint, so that when you look at it it looks just like a sign that you see in the nighttime. And this would be on a blackboard which would probably be about – oh, maybe, say, three feet long by about two feet in height and then would have all the specifications on, what the colours were and the number of tubes.

20.24 And then the Sales Department would then classify it as a skeleton metal letter, double or triple tube, on a structure, on roof, a certain height, forty feet by fifteen, whatever the height was. Then the sales rep would sign that contract – get the contract signed by Jack Landis and they would then bring it back to the factory. Then it was my job – once the job had been sold, it was my job then to go out and survey the building and find out how we can attach our structure. And then we would go back to the drawing office - we had a structural drawing office in the factory – and we would design the structure. We would determine what size the steel should be, we would determine how it was going to be fixed to the building itself and then a proper workshop plan showing the sign on the building would be submitted to the Sydney City Council. I – it was my job to take it down there with the council application, discuss the building and what we were going to do technically on the building with the council inspectors on the fourth floor of Sydney City Council. I think at that time it was either – it was a Mr Williams was the chief inspector for that particular department and his associate was Norm Gorell who finished up with the top job.

22.11 We would say – well, they'd say, “Well, this is the height and this is that – and this, Ron, is what you're going to do and you're not going to make it any higher than what you say you're going to make it”. And I'd say, “No, that's the height it's going to be”. I would have to sign the plans to say

that I had – was responsible for the work that was carried out or about to be carried out and that it was a true application.

RR: And you did that for the Golf House?

RIES: I did that for the Golf House. I did it for all the signs, all roof – all sky signs that were built over a period of about twenty years. Then it would go back to the – we would wait on the city council, they would pass it on to the various department. First it would have to go up to the – first it was the Health and Building and then it would have to go upstairs to the sixth floor – I forget what floor that was – they would give the approval - O.K, we may go ahead with the sign. The colours are not going to conflict with any surrounding areas, traffic lights, things like that. And then it was my job then to sort of supervise the – not so much the – well, yes, supervise the construction, because if it was that time that we think it was, I was the factory manager.

23.38 So, I had to build the sign in the factory - and we built every part of it. First of all, it goes to – after the council approve and everything else is approved - it goes to what we call the “layout room”. Now, the layout room would draw up a full brown paper pattern of that sign in its full size from the small art work. A chap – a man by the name of John Simms, who started with the company in 1937 – keep in mind I think the sign industry – neon sign industry – was only started in 1933 when the gas was discovered by a scientist, a French scientist by the name of Georges Claude. He never bothered patenting it and apparently they're not allowed to patent scientific experiments. So, John Simms would draw up from this tiny little blackboard sketch a full size (taps table) paper pattern for the sheetmetal workers, the glass benders, to bend all their glass. And he would determine how long the tubing must be: the tubing must be no longer than seven feet in a single length of tube because of the current that had to pass from one electrode to the other. If you made it any longer it was working too hard and you'd get variations in your neon colour.

25.11 So, he would draw up all these neon – what we call “neon units”, he'd do a brown paper pattern, would be used by the sheetmetal workers, who would lay it over their sheetmetal and cut it out to whatever size he determined it should be - the same with the outline of the golfer, his golf club and the hole. He would draw up the full sized drawing of the globe path or the ball path across and he would indicate where each globe should be, so that when it comes on in the nighttime it does look like it's a golf ball travelling across in a jerky – so, his responsibility was to do all that and most important – one of the most important – parts of the sign industry.

RR: Now, to try and pin down exactly what year this was – I mean, you say you went out and surveyed the sign?

RIES: Yes.

RR: And you went down to the council?

RIES: Yes.

RR: Now, at that time then you became production manager?

RIES: I would still be the – I would have been the production manager at that time.

RR: At that time?

RIES: Yes, yes.

RR: So, you can't pin down a date for that?

RIES: No, I can't pin it down, no, no.

RR: Now, could you describe the sign and how it was built, the various elements of it – the Golf House sign?

RIES: M'mm.

RR: And could you start by saying, "The Golf House sign was" - - -

RIES: Yes.

RR: - - - consisted of -?

26.39 RIES: The Golf House sign consisted of - the basic structure was a steel structure and that was made out of – from memory about - what we call two-inch, by two-inch by quarter inch angle iron made up in a series of A frames and these A frames were probably about five or six of them across the width of the building and then they were attached to the roof rafters or the internal walls of the structure, of the building itself. Then the, what we call the purlines were placed at the appropriate spacing, their angle irons across the structure to which what we call skeleton metal letters. Each individual letter was individual and made out of skeleton metal, with a metal face, a return from the face to the back of the letter, made as waterproof as possible because there were high voltage cables inside each one of these letters to control the neon tubing on the face. So, you had to have it a certain depth so that when the electrodes of the neon units travelled through the face they were sufficient distance away from the back not to create high voltage arcing. Each letter was attached and spaced according to this original layout ...

28.22 reading - 'The Golf House' - then a man at the end – he was skeletonised in exactly the same manner, with a metal face, a metal return and a metal back, made as waterproof as possible 'cause once again it housed the electronics. The golf club was exactly the same way; it was just made out of metal, with a metal face, metal return and a metal back. The ball path was made out of metal, skeleton metal. It had a metal face, metal return,

metal back. Approximately every hundred millimeters or every four inches was a weatherproof lamp globe, incandescent lamp globe, and they went right across the width of the sign and they had individual wires, low voltage wires, going to each one of these, which in turn went back to a commutator-type animator, as they would call it, and this had, I think, about forty to sixty commutations on it. And as the animator went 'round, much like in a motor car, the little carbon points picked up the power and made the globe – each one come on and the other ones go off as these come on.

29.53

To the ball landing in the hole, which was also a metal box on the other side with a flag sticking out of it and then I think, from memory, that the Golf House sign just flashed itself, just reading, 'The Golf House' on/off as the golfer played the shot across the roof. The tubing – the neon tubing – it was installed on the sign before it left the factory and the riggers had to be very careful to make sure that they didn't break the tubing when they installed the sign. After the sign was completed, the riggers had finished their work, the electrical mechanics in the factory went down and checked out all the electronics and made sure all the high tension cables were correct. And then we used to employ a subcontractor to do the actual electrical connection to the Sydney County Council requirements. They would connect the power and then we would have a switch-on and everybody would go down and make sure everything was spaced out correctly and all the globes were working and then the contract would commence.

RR: Who produced all the electrical equipment?

31.24

RIES: At that time the transformers and capacitors or condensers as we used to use in the sign, that was made by Endurance Electric, which was housed in the same – which was owned by Consolidated Neon. They were also – we were all housed in the same building at Gladesville. The electrical component of the animation was made by a company which made most of the electrical components for all of the sign companies in Australia, Pyrom Pty Limited. A man by the name of Keith Foster - who I knew as a very young man - who worked for a man called Hector McDonald, who worked out of his backyard garage in Concord. Keith worked for him as an apprentice electrical engineer - went to university, very knowledgeable man, very nice man - and he made all the animated signs for the neon signs that you see. Even you would find all these little signs that you see, reading 'Coffee Shop' in the – you'll probably find that Keith Foster from Pyrom – who were over in – last time I heard of them were over in Artarmon. Whether Keith's still going now or not – but his son, Eric, carried on the business or was still in the business when I retired in '93. So, but he was a very, very good – he could work out anything, any animation that you thought would be required on any sign; he did all the engineering on it.

RR: Looking at the significance of that particular site, what do you think were, in the first instance, the technical significance of the site as per

comparison with other sites and then the social and cultural significance of it as the Golf House and as an icon in Sydney?

33.36 RIES: Well, the significance of it is at the moment it is basically the only sky sign site in Sydney that exists. There are no other sites that I know of that exist and have existed in the city for a long time. Maybe you would classify the ABC sign, which is still up in William Street – it is still there and it comes from around about that era – but I think there's just nobody wants to pull that one down now. But I think that's the only significant – it was, at the time, the golf ball was always an achievement by the sign company. You know, we all were competent. Well, there weren't many sign companies around, really. When that was built there was Consolidated Neon - Claude Neon were the number one company; they were the biggest. Then there was Consolidated Neon, Neon Asia – or it used to be 'Neon Signs of Australasia' - and there was one other one, AA Church Signs. Basically, they were the four neon sign companies in Australia. So, we all had tremendous competition amongst one another to try and get up as much animation into a sign. And we did a wonderful job on that, being such a small sign – we only classified, really, that as a small sky sign but to get that animation of that golf ball into the sign was an achievement by the company and by the Art Department.

35.33 RR: **Can you think of any the animated sky signs that were around that were any more difficult than that particular sign?**

RIES: Yes. I think the Taubman's sign at the Canada House.

RR: **Is that Railway Square?**

RIES: Railway Square, yes.

RR: **Yes, I remember that.**

RIES: I think the Taubman's sign was - - -

RR: **It's gone now.**

RIES: It's gone now. I don't know whether any of the other signs are still there now but I think they finished up. The wine signs – Penfold's Wines, they're not really skeleton metal letter signs any more, they're just hoarding signs.

RR: **The Tooheys one, with the brewer raising his glass, was that one of yours?**

RIES: No, that was build by Claude Neon. That was Claude Neon's and that was quite a sign and that was a big - - -

RR: **It wasn't as complicated as the Golf House, though.**

RIES: It wasn't as complicated, no. It was just basically a box with a moving arm on it and there was only – really only one movement on the thing. With the Golf House, there was – to my knowledge, there may be even more – there was forty movements on it.

36.51 The only other sign that was around – could have been around at the time but I'm not sure – was the Philips sign at Kings Cross, which had a hundred and – about a hundred and – no, sorry, sixteen hundred globes, forty watt globes – similar action to what was on the Golf House but going across in a curtain and up in a curtain and down in a curtain and a tremendous amount of maintenance on that sign. But that was what we call a flashing unit, which was probably about fifty, a hundred times bigger than the one on the Golf House. So, that was about the most complicated I think that there really were. The others were pretty simple.

RR: What about the Golf House building - what do you remember about that?

RIES: Well, I remember the Golf House building itself worried me a little bit when I looked at it first up from the street. I thought it was a pretty old building and we might be going to have a bit of trouble, you know, putting a sign on this building. I remember going into the building and I had to – prior to the installation or the accepting of the contract, I think I probably would have had about three or four different visits to the site just to be sure, because you wouldn't want to go ahead and make the sign and then find that you couldn't put it on the building. So, I found it very old, a little bit worried about its – when I first went into it whether it would secure enough or solid enough, you know, to take a – like, that's the first job I must look at, you know, whether the building would be strong enough. Then I determined that the building was strong enough but I thought it was a pretty ordinary looking little old building – inside and outside.

38.59 **RR: Originally that was four shops. Now, can you imagine how that could have been?**

RIES: No, I can't - I sort of could imagine it being as two shops. I remember – I think even the last time I saw it; it still looked as though it had to have been two shops, two shopfronts, but I couldn't imagine it ever as being four shops. And at that stage when I surveyed it, I think it was only one shop. I think – I'm pretty sure it was only just the one shop. I don't remember any other shop being there.

RR: Do you remember where the door or the doors in the front of the building? Because I tell you why I ask – because it mentions in 1977 that the arcaded entrance was changed to have a shopfront and one door.

RIES: No, I don't remember that but I think it could quite possibly be, because I do remember the building as you described it; as being a shopfront and one door to the one side of the – the railway side of the building, from

memory, but I got a feeling – and if I think back that - yes, there were two shopfronts and you went in between the two of them.

40.20 **RR:** **Well, that would tally if that is the case because - - -**

RIES: So, I think - - -

RR: **- - - because Harry Landis had Harry Landis Music there - - -**

RIES: Yes, yes.

RR: **- - - on one side and the Golf House on the other side.**

RIES: Yes, yep, yep.

RR: **And when Harry Landis moved up to Park Street then they changed it over and it became one shopfront.**

RIES: Yes, I could quite believe that would be. If I take my memory back, I'm pretty sure that's the way it used to be, as with a centre entrance and the entrance that I – I was down there, the last time I was down there probably would have been around '90, 1990. I went down there to just check it over for the maintenance contract and I sort of was surprised that I had to walk to one side of the building and I thought, this is a funny sort of – matter of fact, I looked for the entrance; I had trouble locating the entrance of the building.

RR: **What about the two small shops on the side which go out into the laneway there? Were they open to the – I mean, was there entrances at that time?**

RIES: I don't remember those. I don't - - -

RR: **Did you go up into those shops at all, those little houses or shops?**

RIES: No, I don't think so. I went up onto the top floor in each case but I thought – my memory of it was that it was just the one building and I don't remember seeing the – I don't remember seeing these little shops.

RR: **Do you remember the golf range there, the driving range?**

41.47 **RIES:** Yes, yes, I remember seeing that, yes. But I don't know that that was there - - -

RR: **Where was it?**

RIES: It was on about the first floor, I think, on the first floor up towards the back. I don't think it was on the ground floor, no. Yes.

RR: **Well, they've moved it down now, apparently.**

RIES: Have they? Yes, yes, I thought it was upstairs, yes, yes, yes.

RR: Now, do you remember Jack Landis and could you describe him or anything that you had personal dealings with him?

RIES: Yes, I spoke to Jack a few times during the original survey work and later on when we had problems with leaking roofs and things like that, which is par for the course from neon signs on roofs. Jack was a - as I remember him - was only a short man, not a very large chap as I remember. He had sort of graying hair. Very nice, very pleasant, very pleasant chap. Other than that I didn't know him all that well, other than to say, "Hello, Mr Landis", and "Goodbye, Mr Landis", and "This is what we're going to do, Mr Landis", and, "We'll fix this up". But I found him a very nice person right throughout to deal with.

RR: What about Rob Landis – did you have much dealing with him?

43.11 RIES: Not on the site, no, no, no, not at the site. I didn't know Rob – I knew Rob Landis when he came to work for Claude Neon's as a sales rep because at that stage I was on the same floor, in the same area, actually. I was more or less their consultant and estimator and I only found out by accident that Rob Landis was Jack Landis' son and that, that's how - - -

RR: And so you didn't have anything to do with him when he ran the business himself, when he owned it at one time?

RIES: Not, no, not at all, no, no. No, don't remember him. He may have been there but, no, I don't remember having anything to do with Jack.

RR: What about Lindsay Sharp?

RIES: No, no, I don't. I don't think I even met Lindsay Sharp at any stage, no.

RR: Do you remember the circumstances of the changing of the sign to 'Sharpie's Golf House', from 'The Golf House'?

RIES: Yes, I do remember that because I was involved in the estimating of the cost of the change from 'The Golf House' to 'Sharpie's'. Once again, I more or less had to determine if we changed it and we changed the area of the signs on the structure, how we would go about – if it was going to interfere with the structure of the sign at all. So, once again, I would have had to go down. I could have met - but I generally went down there with sales reps at the time and they just took me through and showed me what they required. And I remember having to estimate the cost of taking 'The' off the sign and putting 'Sharpie's' in there and then getting the rest of the sign – was it in a good enough condition, you know, to continue on with the contract with Sharpie's.

RR: Did it take much to do the actual 'Sharpie's' change?

45.11 RIES: The – no, it wouldn't have taken a great deal of – it would have cost a fair bit of money. I'd have to go back on memory now and say how much a sign like that would cost but probably at the time they changed 'Sharpie's' over, maybe three, four thousand dollars or something like that, yes. Yes, that probably cost, you know - but I'd only be going on memory but it's not – neon signs are not a cheap item. You know, they're expensive and that's why they're fading away now because people are finding that the expense of – they can't afford to maintain them any longer, you know. Yes, and this is the biggest problem, in maintaining a sign. When we built a sign, when we built a neon sign, we had to build it to be efficient for at least twenty years because we lease the signs over a five year period. If we could another five year period at the end of that contract, we were doing very well. If we get another five year contract on top of that, we were doing exceedingly well. So, we built the signs originally to last twenty years at least, before we started worrying about whether they're going to start to deteriorate.

46.43 So, this one had gone well past its use-by date and when we estimated for 'Sharpie's' to be changed over I also recommended that there was a certain – fair amount of maintenance work on the metalwork had to be done on the sign, you know, to keep it going for the period of five years which Sharpie had signed up for in the first place. Yes, so that was it. So, yes, it had to have work done on it.

RR: Now, what about the business? I mean, Consolidated Neon, for instance, was a subsidiary of W.R. Carpenter, wasn't it?

RIES: That's right, yes, yes. And so was Claude Neon, yep.

RR: Now, the journal that they used to put out? Do you remember what that was? Was it called 'The Carpenter' or 'W.R. Carpenter Journal'?

RIES: Yes. I – no, I don't think I remember that. I don't remember seeing very much of that. I probably wouldn't get it – I probably wasn't high enough up in the - - -

RR: Well, I believe one set still exists and there is also a story about Rosalie Hardwick in there.

RIES: Is there?

RR: Yes.

47.59 RIES: Yes. Was – did W.R. Carpenter put that out?

RR: Yes.

RIES: Oh, yes, I remember that, yes. That was coming – that came out during the Claude Neon - - -

RR: What was the journal actually called?

RIES: I thought it was called 'Carpenter News', yes. Yes, I think it was called 'Carpenter News'. Of course, Claude Neon used to turn out a journal of their own at one stage and that – because they were very, very big.

RR: What was their journal called?

RIES: Oh, I can't think now. 'Bright Lights', or something like that. 'Neon Lights' or something like that, yes. Yes, I can't think of that one now - because, see, all these journals stopped back in the early '80s, I think.

RR: And do you remember either of those two journals having a description of the Golf House sign in it or when they got the award? You remember there was an award?

49.14 RIES: Yes, yes, there was award and, yes, I remember that. They got an award for it. And what was that called? I can't think, oh. But I remember them getting the awards and I remember seeing the awards; like, they were little Logies sort of thing.

RR: I think the award was actually by one of the – I think it was called the 'Outside' – any rate, there was an association.

RIES: Yes, 'Outdoor' - - -

RR: 'Outdoor Advertising Association'?

RIES: - - - 'Advertising Association', you're quite right. Yes, that was it. 'Outdoor Advertising Association'.

RR: Did they put out a journal?

RIES: Not that I know of, no.

RR: But they gave awards periodically.

RIES: They gave awards every twelve months, yes. Yes, and it was considered quite an honour to win one of these awards. As I said, there was tremendous competition between the neon sign companies.

RR: I might be able to pin the date down for that, because somebody told me that that award – they got it in 1964, which would mean it was before 1966, if you get what I mean.

50.52 RIES: Yes, yes. Yes, that could be. You know, as I said, I'm still amazed that we're still talking about '66 and not earlier. But if you can get to speak to

this Alf Gribble from Gribble and Brown, he will know when he installed that sign. He was working for me at the time, not as a subcontractor, I'm pretty sure.

RR: And his son is still there for sure, is he?

RIES: No, I don't know. Well, yes, his son should be still there because I'd say his son is now the Gribble, yes. John, I think his name was.

RR: The other thing that might help us. I said, and there's a building approval in 1961, which there was, for a vertical sign. Now, do you remember that vertical sign outside the Golf House?

52.01 RIES: Yes, I do, yes, yes. Yes, I do, but I wouldn't imagine that vertical sign – of course, it was quite common in those days for them to have a sign on the roof and a vertical sign on the front of the building as well.

RR: But you mentioned that you pulled that down.

RIES: Yes, we pulled the Neon Asia one down.

RR: Which was a vertical sign?

RIES: That was a vertical sign, yes.

RR: Yes. Well, that was the one in 1961 because the application - - -

RIES: Yes.

RR: - - - was from Neon Signs Australasia.

RIES: That's the one, yes. And '61 – it's sort of coming together now because, as I said, all contracts in those days were five years; there was no other contract by any sign company.

RR: So, if it was pulled down then in '66 - - -

RIES: It's quite possible it was built in '61. '61, yes, pulled - - -

RR: Yes, that one was in '61, pulled down and the other one built in '66.

RIES: Yes, and there was – in those days there was no way of getting out of the contract. They either pay them out or they left it there until the contract expired.

RR: Well, that's the two build dates for the building applications?

53.14 RIES: That's, yes, the way it would appear, yes. So, it would appear that the Golf House was built as late as '66, yes. And it generally wasn't too long after – once you got council approval – it took you a long time to get

council approval – and it generally wasn't too long. I would say probably about three months after we got council approval the sign was installed.

RR: Now, is there anything else I should ask you?

RIES: No, I don't think so. I think that sort of covers everything. A lot happened between that, of course, and the time I retired after fifty years' service with the company.

RR: Is there any other sign that you worked on which you think is more outstanding than the Golf House sign?

RIES: Oh, oh, gosh, yes. As I said – I think I have already mentioned - - -

RR: The Taubman's one.

RIES: The Taubman's. The Philips sign at Kings Cross. Well, the Coca-Cola, of course, Kings Cross: that'd be the number one sign, you know, that was ever built in Australia.

RR: So, what's so special about that?

RIES: Its animation, its size, its colour, you know, its cost – astronomical cost to build and maintain. One of my biggest jobs ever was to estimate how much that Coca-Cola cost. I was – I had to estimate how much that sign cost up there and it run into hundreds of thousands of dollars. So - - -

RR: Can you remember what the Golf House sign cost?

55.28 RIES: No, I can – and once again I thought that when I had to check the original costing, the original costing, which we kept – when we came up for the renewal or the changeover to Sharpie's - I thought that that structure cost was six hundred and forty pounds but it could have been six hundred and forty dollars, but that was just for the installation of the sign itself, the structure and the labour that went into it.

RR: Not the building of the sign?

RIES: Not the building of the sign. The building of the sign probably would have been about the same amount. So, I would – if it was pounds I'd say – which it probably was, and I've still got a funny feeling – it - - -

RR: That's something that we could check, you see, because it changed over to dollars in '62, didn't it, or was it '64?

RIES: No, I thought it was '64 – I think it was '64.

RR: '64.

RIES: Yes, yes.

RR: Well, if it was dollars it was after that.

RIES: Yes, yes. I don't think we would have built it for sixty four dollars, though in - - -

RR: No, six hundred and forty.

RIES: - - - in 1964. Yes, six hundred and forty dollars.

RR: Twice. Once for installation and what have you and once for the building.

56.53 **RIES:** Yes. I don't think it would have cost that – it would have cost more than that, yes, yes. So, that's a bit of a nuisance, that. The missing link – I would find – if you could check these points with Gribble and Brennan and Pyrom, Keith Foster at Pyrom.

RR: How do you spell that?

RIES: P-Y-R-O-M.

RR: And they're still going as well, are they?

RIES: They should be. I could check the phone number but I would say they're still going because they had a wonderful business.

RR: All right.

RIES: And they would – to my knowledge – they would be still maintaining the flashing unit. They would still be looking after it, so they would have a good record of it.

RR: It's turned off currently.

RIES: Is it really? Yes, yes.

RR: Well, the contract ran out, apparently, and this is what the argument's about.

57.57 **RIES:** Well, I would say now – I don't know – I saw it mentioned in the paper a figure of six hundred to maintain - six hundred a month to maintain it - and I think that's ridiculous. It would cost a whole lot more money than that to maintain that sign on today's market. You know, I would say there'd probably be maybe about eighty units - neon units on that sign - as a rough estimate and to replace one of those units today would probably cost you about two hundred dollars. To replace even one of the globes, which are going out all the time and there's a lot of maintenance there, could almost be a week's call. You could be up for, say, a hundred dollars a week to maintain the globes in today's market.

RR: How many globes are up there?

RIES: I'd say somewhere around about forty four or forty eight globes but you wouldn't – not a hundred dollars each but any one of these globes are likely to go out. You either replace the whole lot every three months because of the action involved of the flashing causes the elements to jump and the elements collapse. They'd only last about a third of the time a normal globe would last.

RR: Well, we're just about running out of this tape. Thank you very much, Mr Ron Ries.

59.34 **RIES:** You're welcome.

Interview ends