

CITY OF SYDNEY

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

INTERVIEWEE: Ross Ellis 2

INTERVIEWER: Richard Raxworthy.

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PLACE: Andy Ellis Tailors?

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **RR:** This is Commercial Oral Histories of Central Sydney, tape 15, talking again to Ross Ellis, re Andy Ellis, tailor. Now, we already recorded tape 4, on which we have Ross' details and the spelling of his name and also his date of birth and all that sort of thing. So, I'll ask you first, Ross, about your father's start in business. Where was he born, where did he come from and how did he get to being a tailor?

RE: Well, he was born in Ballina and how he came to be a tailor I couldn't exactly say that but he originally was – I think he worked in a grocery shop initially, when he was about seventeen, but he'd done odd sort of jobs before that, driving a horse and cart, delivering coal, I think, when he was only about twelve or thirteen. And then he started in doing some tailoring work for a place called Adelstein's, I think it was called then, and he developed on then until he went into his own business, which was in Oxford Street in Paddington, above the shop of Adelstein's. And he worked there for quite a few years – that was, you know, before I was born – and he got work from the Army during the war, making the Army outfits and eventually opened up the shop down in Pitt Street in about 1954, yes.

1.57 **RR:** Was that shop going before?

RE: Yes, it was. I think it was a shirt shop before that and I think it had been going there for quite a few years as well; quite a long while, actually – and that was apparently where he met Rodney, Rodney Jacobs and he's worked with Dad in the selling of the – the mercery side of it. Dad handled all the tailoring and Rodney handled all the sale of shirts and all the other things that they went into and the business just boomed sort of thing from there when they started making the zoot suits for the bodgies and the widgees.

RR: Where did they make them?

2.49 RE: They were made above the shop in the – we had - well, we had three rooms above the shop in those days with the workrooms in them. And everyone seen the suits he made – a lot of the stars started to come in then and like people like Johnny O'Keefe and Col Joye; nearly all of the rock 'n' roll stars in those days got a suit there at some time or another. And then he started advertising on TV and he dressed Tommy Tycho band and the Sydney Tonight Show and I think the compere - that was Keith Walsh - and they had all the advertising at the end of the show, saying, "Dressed", they were all "Dressed by Andy Ellis" and that just developed the business from there. They had all sorts of radio advertising too - and I just can't remember the name of the DJs but I think most of the popular ones at that time he used for advertising.

4.14 **RR: You showed me a photograph of an old car - - -**

RE: Oh, yes.

RR: - - - which I believe was 'Gelignite' Jack Murray's with 'Andy Ellis' on the side.

RE: Yes, it had advertising on the side of that. I think that was either the first or second Redex trial that was on; it went all around Australia with his name on it.

RE: You mentioned "zoot suits" first.

RE: Yes.

RR: And then bodgie suits. What's the difference?

RE: Well, I think that was just the term that the people who wore that kind of outfit got in Sydney. I don't know how it actually developed, that name. I think the zoot suit came from America and why they were named "bodgies" and "widgees" I can't recall.

RR: In England it was "teddy boys".

RE: Yes, teddy boys, that was the one, yes, yes. It'd be interesting to find out how that term came about, actually, yes. It's probably written down in one of these books somewhere but yes, have to look that up.

5.20 RR: **And once they'd been measured up, all the various people measured up, how many fittings did you get?**

RE: We - it depended on how difficult you were to fit; you'd either be one or two fittings. Like, you'd be measured and then you'd have to come back for a fitting and if it required a second one, well, you'd get a second one from there. But the people – what was unique about that is he made whatever people asked him to do: we didn't have any set thing that they had; you could design the suit yourself and Dad would make whatever you asked - and he made suits out of hessian for one fella, apparently, just out of hessian bags. And then a lot of the rock 'n' roll stars had those Lurex glitter suits which were really difficult to make but Dad would just make whatever anyone wanted, however hard it was to do.

RR: **You've got a photograph there of a band, three of them, and one of them's got very wide glitter cuffs.**

6.34 RE: Yes, that's right. Well, that's what I say – whatever anyone said – they could just say, "Look, I want a two inch wide cuff" or a half inch wide cuff, special pockets. There were suits he made with different coloured arms in them to the body - and then he made Slim Dusty suits as well, which had all the different coloured yokes on them, fancy embroidery on them with Southern Crosses and feather tacks on the edges of the pockets and yokes in the back of different colour to the main body of the coat. But he'd just do anything anyone asked and he had the flare of design and he just could seem to cut anything that anyone asked.

RR: **Did he do all the cutting?**

7.29 RE: Not all of it but he did a lot of the cutting. We did have, you know, - well, that's where I worked, in the factory: I started off as a trimmer, which was cutting the linings and the insides of the coats and the trousers - and there were two other cutters as well as Dad. But the factory in the heydays there had about twenty, twenty five people working in it. I think – I forget – Dad did have a record of what the most suits they made in one week, where I think it's something around about, 'round the nearly two hundred suits made just in one week. That was a really big week, though. It wasn't anywhere near like that normally.

RR: **What about the promotions that he went in for?**

8.22 RE: Well, that's right – he did all sorts of promotions in the window. He had some contact with MGM and they used to get the latest blowups

of the latest films that were on and they'd put them in the window. But they'd do all sorts of funny things in the window to attract attention. There was one time when there was a scare of counterfeit ten pound notes, I think they were, so they put a whole lot of ten pound notes in the window and said they'd sell 'em for a dollar – not a - a pound, if anyone wanted them and I think only one person took them up 'cause they thought they were all counterfeit ones – but the whole window was full of ten pound notes. But they did have some problems with people smashing the window at times to get things that were valuable out of it too: I don't know how many times the windows were smashed.

RR: What about the poker machine promotion?

RE: Yes, well, I don't remember that one but, you know, that was when poker machines first came in, I'd imagine, and they took a leaf out of that book and made it all – they had all the money pouring out of it, from what I – I didn't actually see it but this was – I think those sort of things happened just before – while I was still at school.

9.49 **RR: And what about the MGM – exactly what promotions did they do with them?**

RE: Oh, well they started – there was a film called 'Beau Brummel' - so they started a Beau Brummel Club and the people would come in and get a suit made to whatever style they could think up and they had a competition to see who had the best suit and that was all done on the TV – not TV, it was a newsreel in those days, wasn't it? I think they had a 'Guys and Dolls' competition as well; that was another competition they sponsored. But that Beau Brummel Club apparently had, you know, a huge number of people join it because they got special discounts and stuff through being a member of that.

10.46 **RR: Then what about the time when pop stars and men who went out rock 'n' roll dancing no longer wore suits, what did he do then?**

RE: Well, then he changed over to making riding coats.

RR: How did that happen?

RE: Well, there was a really good tailoring customer for the suits and he had a daughter who was an up and coming riding; a really good rider – only a young girl, only six or seven, something like that – and they asked him could he make her a riding coat and Dad designed the coat for her and she went on to become a really champion rider and people saw those coats and it developed from that. We started advertising it a bit as well and then we went into making them as a ready-made coat as well and they've been sold all over Australia in the various saddlery shops and we're still doing that now.

11.56 **RR: What was the design of the coat like?**

RE: Well, it's designed on – they must have had a photo of the old-style English riding coat that they showed to Dad but he designed his own ideas on the same sort of coat and it was a long, quite a long coat but really nicely waisted and shaped, nicely bust shaped and really waisted and flared out over the saddle, over the hips and also over the saddle and draped down over the back of the saddle and that style has changed now - they're all getting really shorter, quite short coats now - but that had a long run of thirty-odd years, running the long coat. I think it'll come back again too, though.

RR: Did he also do jodhpurs and hats?

RE: No. No, we've never done jodhpurs and we did have people that we'd send the velvet to to get hats covered but we didn't have anything to do with actual making them.

RR: And that kept you going for a while?

13.11 RE: Yes. Well, also when the zoot suit style died out they got into a slimmer sort of fitting coat and Dad just kept up with whatever style was fashionable.

RR: Did you do flares?

RE: Yes, he made any – yes, flares. They used to put - - - and before flares they had the real peg-leg bottoms and some people wanted bottoms so small that you had to put zips in them to be able to get them on at all. But and then when the flares come in they put different coloured – like, a pleat up the side of the flare, with a different colour in it. And, as I said, he would make anything that anyone asked.

RR: Did he ever make caftans?

RE: No, not caftans, no, no – not that I know of, yes.

RR: And when that end of town towards Central Station started to change, how did he handle that?

RE: Mainly, mainly through advertising, I think, on the radio was his main thing after the days of the TV advertising. I think the TV advertising got a bit beyond for pricing, you know, where the radio was always good there – and then with the riding coats, they've been advertised in horse magazines, *Horse and Rider*, *Horse and Land*, and *Horse and Horns*; those are the rider, various newspaper advertising as well.

14.58 **RR: What about his private life, his hobbies? Did he use them for advertising purposes?**

RE: Well, it – I s'pose it helped, you know, being known as Andy Ellis but he didn't particularly use it as an advertising thing, I don't think, but he was a champion speedboat racer. He had a boat called *Chickadee* and it held nearly all the course records around Sydney; at Silverwater, Deepwater.

RR: But you've got an advert there for selling the boats?

RE: Oh, yes. Well, that's – he went into making – he made a fiberglass mould of his really fast Chickadee boat and went into manufacturing them himself.

RR: Where?

RE: Just as a backyard kind of – he had a fibreglasser who made them for him to his design and they were very strong boats, exceptionally strong, because he really made them that way. But he sold – I think overall he sold around about a thousand of them - and we've been trying to find one, to see if we could buy one ourselves, me and my brother, but we haven't been able to find one that anyone wants to sell yet.

16.22 **RR: What about waterskiing?**

RE: Yes, well that was the other thing – he's taught hundreds and hundreds of people to ski. He used to go in that Bridge to Bridge ski race and he used to have a caravan up on the Hawkesbury River at Cattai Park and he used to teach people to ski from there.

RR: What about the time when everything had died down in that Haymarket area of town and you and your father were working there together?

RE: Yes.

RR: What was that like?

RE: Well, you know, we were – it wasn't anywhere near as busy as it was in the heydays there but we've always had a steady stream of customers, 'cause having been there for forty seven years there's people who come back all the time: you know, they might be a couple of years apart but they keep coming in and popping up all the time - and we've always sold shirts and ties and belts and that's a steady business and nowadays a lot of the work that I get is in alterations as well. But there's still the suit being made and the riding coat - we just make trousers, single trousers and again we'll mainly do anything that

anyone asks in the style but no one seems to want the real way out stuff any more.

18.10 **RR: When did you give up the workroom, the factory?**

RE: I'm not sure exactly what date that would have been but it would have been – we've still got a factory but it's only a small one out in Leichhardt way. There's only four people in it now but it just got – the renting: the rent, really, was what made that all slow down until we decided to just have the one, the shop and get out of the rooms that we had upstairs where the factory was. But that would have been ten or fifteen years ago, I s'pose.

RR: Of course, you and your father worked there on your own there for a while, didn't you?

RE: Yes. Yes, yes. Well, I – probably about five years, I s'pose, we were – well, there was another tailor who worked with us called Warren Campbell; he worked with us as well. But he – Rodney retired ten or fifteen years ago, I s'pose, and Warren retired about seven or eight and Dad and I were there on our own. That would have been only a few years and I've been there on my own for four years since he passed away – well, Chris, my wife, worked with me for about a year because I didn't think – know how to handle being in there on my own after having worked with Dad for so long but luckily I managed to get through it all right.

19.53 And there's always people coming in and saying, "Oh, it's terrific to see the shop still here". Nearly every week there's someone comes in like that and said, "I haven't been in here since I was about twenty and got a suit for my wedding" or a suit for something or other - and that used to hurt the first year or so when Dad passed away but now it gives pleasure to have people come in.

RR: Have you got any stories you can tell about your father, re the business or anything else for that matter?

RE: Oh, nothing that I could think of just offhand. He's always been – my children just absolutely loved him because he was always fantastic to the kids. And my brother, he had a - not a speedboat but he had a lovely outboard boat which we were lucky enough to be able to – my brother was lucky to get after he passed away and we go out in it quite often. We've just been away last weekend down on a trip out on Jervis Bay in it and it's – the children just always loved Dad and they just loved going out in that boat. But just he taught my son to waterski off it but my daughter just missed out on it but she was disappointed that he couldn't have taught her to ski. But my brother, Ray, has taught her off the back of the boat, so it's virtually the same thing.

RR: Did your father waterski himself and did you drive the boat or what?

RE: Yes, he did do a bit of – well, I think he did quite a lot of waterskiing in the early days but he still did a bit as he got on but – and I've driven the boat with him on the back of it.

RR: Now, the photograph you gave me to copy, he's driving the boat and you're at the back, I think.

21.57 RE: Yes, well I used to, you know, be the passenger in the racing quite often, whenever I could. It was a really exciting boat to ride in – and he was an absolutely fantastic driver of the boat; they way he could corner the boat was amazing. He had a fantastic race with a lady called Diane Walker, I think her name was. She had a hydroplane as against Dad - which is just a runabout boat, they called it – and her boat could do nearly twice the speed of Dad's but they had this grudge match and he used to beat her around the corners 'cause she was going that fast she had to go miles out around the buoy before she could turn and he'd get half a lap on her just through going around the turn but she'd come flying down the strait and just – she won by a hundred yards or something after a four lap race - but it was terrific to sit in the back and go around those corners.

23.16 **RR: Now, what about the building? When your father first bought the business, was the building owned by the same people that later on or was it sold?**

RE: No, I think – it was owned by the Australian Workers Union, I think, initially or was when he first went there - and we've always rented it and oh, I s'pose ten or fifteen years ago or maybe a bit more it was sold to – there used to be a barber next door - he bought the building that our shop's in and then the owner of the milk bar further down the street bought the rest of the building and the garage behind. So, they're co-owners in the whole building, yes, now.

RR: They've been trying to redevelop the site?

RE: Yes. Yes, they've had quite a few goes at redeveloping it but nothing's come of it as yet – and I think it's got some sort of heritage listing on the façade of the building as well, which is probably causin' problems as well – and there's the real big high-rise behind it now, so there's probably a limit on how high they can go as well.

RR: Now, what about the future for you, for the shop?

24.37 RE: Well, the future, you know, is – I just keep on going as I am but the GST seems to have affected business quite a bit; you know, there's been quite a marked drop off in things now. But I just – I'm doing quite well in the sales of shirts and trousers and also a lot of alteration

work's coming through now and I still get the – as I say – the people coming in who want a suit or trousers.

RR: Do you get any of the Asian clients who are around the area?

RE: Yes, quite a few of those, yes – not a huge number but they – I do get them but I have a bit of trouble with some of the smaller ones because the people who supply my stuff don't go down to small enough in the stuff they make but other than that I do quite well from them.

RR: And what about show business clients? Do you still have a few of those?

RE: No. Mainly the only one who's remained loyal to us forever has been Slim Dusty and he's always getting something made – and he's, you know, one of the nicest persons you could ever meet and a pleasure to do business with. But no, most of the show people now don't seem to wear suits like they did in those days. And we just went to the AC/DC concert and the only one who wears a suit there is Angus Young but it's a schoolboy suit.

26.28 **RR: Do you make schoolboy suits?**

RE: No, no. It's our - - - we're a bit too expensive for someone to have a school suit made.

RR: Did you used to get much work via the big shops around the place? I mean, for instance, Rodney Jacobs went and worked for Mark Foy's and Myers.

RE: Yes, what? Do you mean did we get business from them? No, we've never done any business with them but apparently when Dad was first in the workroom we used to make suits for a lot of country tailors. Like, they'd send the measurements down from their shops in the country and Dad would make the suit up for them – because I remember Wally; that was Dad's brother – he handled all the wrapping and deliveries and all that kind of stuff and he was always ducking up to the railway to send off a parcel to some country town with a suit in it.

RR: Did they have special wrapping, special packaging?

RE: No, no. In those days, I remember I used to help him wrap the parcels up and they used to just have to wet that sticky-tape – yes, that was even before the durex tape and that came in – it was a hell of a job wrapping parcels then, yes. But they did have special cardboard boxes made that just fitted a suit nicely, to put them in and they were what the suits were put into in the shop as well.

28.07 **RR: And what about accessories in the shop, like tie clips and things like that?**

RE: Yes, well that – yes, we've done everything that you could think of in that sort of thing. As I said, Rodney handled most of that side of it but we used to sell – when cufflinks and tie bars were very popular, you know, hundreds of them a week. But all that sort of thing seems to have – well, people are sort of coming back, asking for that sort of thing lately, the tie bars and cufflinks but they're not available in smaller quantities like I'd be able to sell them. I'd generally say they have to find that in a jewellery store.

RR: Rodney mentioned dealings with the bank on a few occasions, when they were surprised about your turnover. Do you have any dealings with the bank?

RE: Well, I didn't in the early days. I mean, I handle all that sort of now but I'd imagine they would have been surprised at a small shop like that having the turnover that it did have.

RR: Rodney was saying that the jeans people, Amco, when they first came in - - -

RE: Oh, yes.

RR: - - - he ordered a large amount whereas David Jones had only ordered a few.

29.28 RE: That's right. Well, apparently Amco virtually got their biggest boost from what was bought by our shop when they started off 'cause they'd only just made them initially from home, like in the garage. And that was another phase in the business, when jeans became a very popular thing, 'cause we used to get the Levi jeans as well from America which were – and they'd – just as soon as you got them in they'd sell straight out but you could only get – couldn't get that many at a time 'cause they came over direct from America, yes.

RR: Rodney mentioned Whitmont shirts as well.

RE: Oh, yes. Well, all – virtually every brand of shirt that you could think of we've sold in the shop that – Paramount was another one. Oh, there's just that many of them now I just can't remember their names.

RR: But he was talking about ordering fifty dozen.

RE: Yes

RR: And that's an incredible, that he could sell that many in a little shop like that.

30.37 RE: Yes, that's right, yes. Oh, well, that – the shop used – I'd say, I just don't know what size the shop would be but it's, what? - about thirty foot by twenty foot or something like that, isn't it? – and it used to be actually packed from wall to wall with people in there at times, yes. Not – that was just on a few occasions, when it was a really special – there must have been some special promotion on or something or other.

RR: And when did that start to ease off?

RE: Oh, I'd say around about the, you know, middle sixties, I s'pose about – something like that I s'pose, yes, with the real big days off it, yes.

RR: Well, I haven't got any more questions. Can you think of anything further that you want to say?

RE: No, I think you've pretty well covered most of what I can think of.

31.37 **RR: All right. Well, I'll say thank you very much, Mr Ross Ellis.**

Interview ends