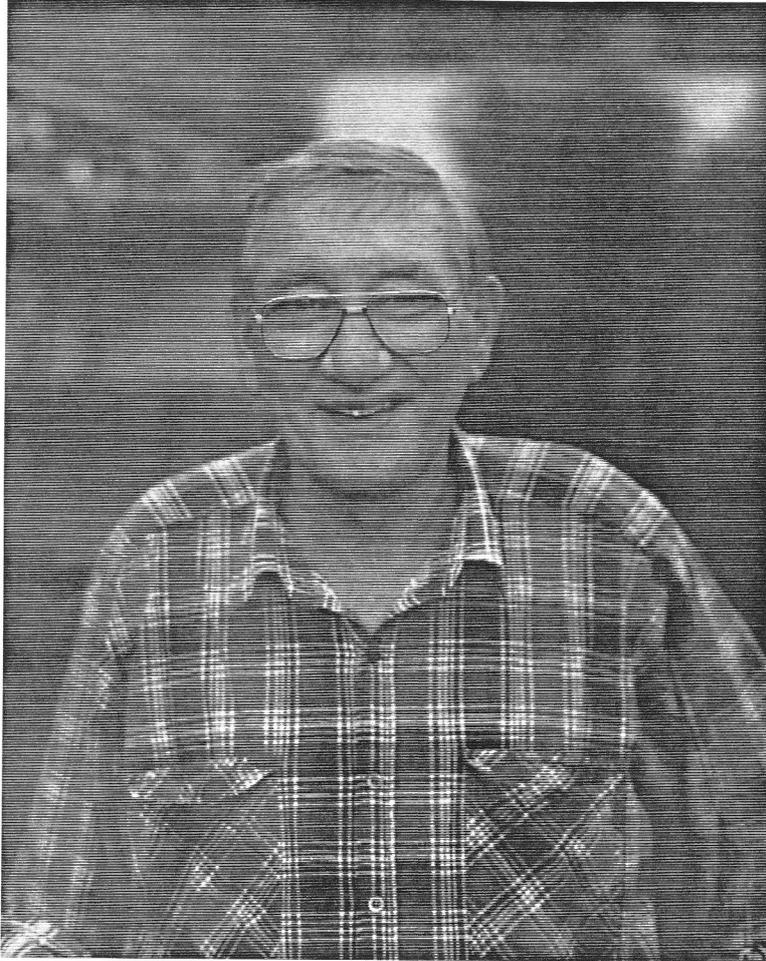


## TOM PEARSON

*Tom was born in 1936 in London and he came to Australia aged 25. He has been a plumber all his working life. On arriving in Canberra he worked on the John Curtin School of Medical Research extensions, as well as other jobs. Tom was a plumber during construction of the camp at Corin Dam. He has worked on the south coast and in Queensland. He married for the first time, he and wife Maris having a son and a daughter (the son was killed in an accident in 1984). Tom married for the second time in 1987; his second wife, Helen, died in 1997. Tom has step-children as well.*



### **Tape 1 Side A**

Tom arrived in Australia in 1961, having got on a ship literally days after deciding to migrate. Arriving in Sydney he didn't know where he was. German-born plumber Carl Gross suggested they both come to Canberra where there was work. Tom said 'where's Canberra', to which Carl answered 'I don't really know either'. They flew down. Tom's reaction was 'my God, what have I done. There's nothing here'. he got work and lived for a time at Hillside Hostel. Tom describes in some detail his subsequent living arrangements and experiences.

Tom worked for the company H.L.Bartlett who plumbed various buildings in Canberra but got into financial difficulties with The Mint. So Tom left and went into partnership with Phil Birch. That didn't work out and Tom then joined Canberra Plumbing (not the same company of that name today), and the company got the job of plumbing the construction camp at Corin Dam. Other workmates from the company who went to Corin included Harry Curtis and a Scotsman named John.

Corin was in its infancy, and the access road built by Legge was still fairly rough. The camp erected by World Wide Camps consisted of aluminium buildings resembling railway carriages, with rooms off a corridor. Then barracks were brought from Geehi by Thiess, buildings with rooms either side of a central corridor. Cottages for married staff followed later.

Harry Curtis had served in the Spanish Civil War and in the artillery in the Second World War. He learned Spanish off the local people when a prisoner during the civil war, and at Corin he organised Spanish labourers, speaking in their language.

After Tom started at the camp, the tunnellers arrived and began driving the diversion tunnel for the dam. As Tom mentions at a later point, you could feel everything shaking in the camp when blasting was underway in the tunnel. He left Corin after the tunnel was completed and when the embankment work was starting.

Tom and the others plumbed the Thiess section of the camp (which Tom calls Thiess village), putting in septic tanks etc. The camp water supply came from a small dam on Kangaroo Creek and the water was pumped up to a tank above the camp. Once when looking for platypus near the dam on the creek, Tom got lost.

Another job was the roofing of the site office and the workshops on the dam site. The ambulance was also housed down that way, and the first aid man was an elderly chap unkindly called by the workers Dr Death.

One occasion when the first aid man was called upon was when the following occurred. 'There was an incident when we were doing Thiess village, where a couple of guys got into another bloke with a couple of claw hammers. And he had holes in his head like 2-bob bits, all over. I saw him coming down the hill and he had blood all over him.' Tom believes the brutal attack was caused by ethnic or political tensions among the migrants involved. The man may have suffered permanent brain damage.

A wet canteen opened at the camp, run by Millers Hotels. 'Of course anywhere where there's alcohol, and a little bit of friction that normally would be passed off, with alcohol invariably there are fights.' Tom saw several fights. Raised in a rough area and a boxer, Tom steered clear of trouble. But you had to fend for yourself.

Tom worked later (some years after completion of the dam) on the brick ranger's cottage at Corin. Before that house was erected, the first ranger lived in the Corin camp, reading weather instruments and doing other work.

### **Tape 1 Side B**

When Tom was working at the camp the powerline was being connected. There were no blackouts in his experience. The telephone was a radio-phone and could only be used at certain times. Tom knew of no TV at the camp at that time.

Asked about the mountain environment, Tom responds: 'When I first went there, before they pulled all the trees out of the dam up to the waterline, it was really pristine. It was beautiful. And going down where the river was you could see fish darting around, the water was crystal clear. And if you had a light fall of snow you would see animal tracks in the morning. There was big mobs of wallabies. Heaps of wombats. Really beautiful'. Tom regrets the destruction caused by the dam but, he says, that's progress and people need water. Dams often silt up and are a short term measure, he says.

Talking of the weather at Corin, Tom tells of cold and snow, and how he found a 14 inch spanner buried in the snow. He kept it. It may have fallen off a Euclid truck.

Tom experienced some floods at Point Hut Crossing when travelling between Canberra and the dam. One time he was with Harry Curtis who was driving and Curtis drove through the flooding river, the water up to the windows of the ute. Only a heavy load of ceramic drainage fittings in the back kept the vehicle from being swept away.

Another time when Tom and Harry were in the vehicle, the brakes failed. An attempt to put heating oil in the brake cylinder didn't work, as one of the hoses was broken. Harry insisted on driving down to Canberra, and while going down the Corin Road the sight of another vehicle coming onto the road caused him some panic. The ute then broke down. A passing truck gave them a tow, Tom in the truck and Harry in the ute. The ute's wipers weren't working without the engine, and the windscreen filled with mud, as did Harry's face when he poked his head out of the window to see where he was going!

Recalling other interesting characters at the dam, Tom mentions jockey Georgie Price who was of course small and had a difficult time labouring. Tom says Georgie wore his riding boots when on the worksite. Another person was 'Phone Tapper No.2', who with Phone Tapper No.1 had been involved in a tapping incident, at Tidbinbilla Tracking Station, one of them trying to blackmail a woman. The police were alerted by the woman. Also mentioned by Tom was a man who was a dead ringer for the Frankenstein's Monster-like character Herman Munster of the Munsters TV show of the 1960s. 'He looked like the guy, without make-up...The only person who could have loved him was his mother.'

The workforce had some desperadoes. 'A fair percentage were running away from something. The law or a wife or whatever.' It was much easier then to assume a false name.

Tom estimates that 95% of the Corin workforce were migrants (and almost as many were on sites around Canberra itself). Main groups were Italians, Yugoslavs, Spanish, Germans, and a few Swiss. There was a smattering of Australian-born, and people from Britain. Language meant that the groups largely stuck to themselves.

Catering at the camp was by Poon Bros, a firm owned by Chinese. They were on the Snowy too. Poon Bros also ran a general store at Corin. The food was pretty good. About the only upset occurred when a 4wd arrived carrying *both* a leaking drum of diesel *and* sides of lamb.

There was no great industrial unrest during Tom's time. Union feeling, he says, was not great, though there was strong demarcation. Pay was good, especially as you could work long hours.

Tom normally came home at weekends, but one time worked over and on the Sunday morning he went into the communal shower block only to find a naked woman showering. She was a prostitute who, says Tom, 'had just come off night shift'. There were a few prostitutes at the camp, working from caravans or in men's rooms. The only female in the dam workforce was a woman at the site office.

Gambling in card games was a big social feature of life at Corin. Sometimes these games resulted in thefts and fights. Tom says a full-time police presence occurred [see Peter McDonald interview; Peter says he was never full-time at Corin].

Tom's absence at the dam during the week did not cause difficulties for his marriage. If the job requires you to be away, and you are making money, then you do it.

The workforce was a mix of ages. The man known as Dr Death was elderly and small and got pushed around as he exerted no authority. Corin was 'like a prison' in that you

had to put up a bit of front (even if it was bluff) in order to avoid being walked over. 'I met a few nice guys up there, and I met a few nasty bastards too.'

Tom's memories of Corin are special to him. He has made 'many pilgrimages' there with his children. He is proud to have worked on the dam. He also worked on Scrivener Dam in Canberra.