

ROM KATAUSKAS

Romanas (Rom) Katauskas was born in Lithuania in 1936. He and his family came to Australia in 1949 as Displaced Persons. Rom's father, on the two-year contract that applied to all DP migrants, worked in Canberra while the family lived initially at Bathurst before moving to Canberra; Rom attended Bathurst High School then Canberra High School. He studied engineering at the University of Sydney and graduated in 1959, and as he had a cadetship with the Department of Works he was employed by Works at the end of his studies. He commenced on Bendora Dam in December 1959 and worked on the dam until being injured in 1961. Later, Rom was a more senior departmental engineer at Corin Dam, and he was involved with Googong Dam. He married Grazina in 1967 and they had three children. Rom worked as an engineer until retiring from ACTEW (which had incorporated former Works water and sewerage functions) in 1994.



Tape 1 Side A

The family went from Lithuania to Germany in 1944. In 1949 there were 'no job prospects...Germany was pretty well devastated'. The family chose Australia over the United States because the Australian authorities processed migrants' applications faster. It was a good decision.

Rom got his Bendora job through Dug Tonissen, the department's project engineer at the dam. Dug (real names Claude Anthony) was easy going and informal. He mixed well and took part in all social activities 'whatever they were, in the camp, which were fairly limited. At night people tended to go to the wet canteen for a few drinks, and maybe games of cards or darts'. Dug was very capable as an engineer.

Rom's work included looking after the concrete test lab at the site, monitoring the test results. The tests were for strength and slump. The slump tests ensured that there was not too much water in the mix. Concrete was tested before it was poured on the dam; only a few batches had to be stopped. A Works supervisor was also in the batching plant. Later it is mentioned that some aggregate in the mix was 6 inch. It tended to segregate when concrete was poured and men had to throw it back in to the concrete. Large aggregate helped reduce shrinkage of concrete. Low cement concrete was used for this reason also and to reduce heat during curing.

Works staff included 3 engineers, 6 supervisors and a few technical staff; about 12 in total. They were accommodated in the salaries block, with a room each; there was a lounge and a kitchenette in the block. 'Fairly basic but comfortable enough.' The site office was for Works only; Clementsons had their own closer to the dam.

The walkways on the wall could be frightening to negotiate. 'Especially as the wall got fairly high up and the double arch was curving over backwards. It looked very precarious if you're not used to it. Visitors who came out, some of the senior engineers, were very frightened to go out along those walkways.'

Rom does not know the origin of the materials for the concrete. Water of course came from the river. There was a reservoir up on the hill above the site which may have supplied both the construction area and the camp.

He is sure there would have been concern not to pollute the river, but can't recall specific measures. Rom vaguely remembers Works staff having health checks in Canberra, probably a blood test. As for dams' environmental impact, he says awareness of this was not very high then.

There was snow on the range at Bulls Head in the winter and sometimes it fell on site. It didn't last for long at the dam and never held up work. There was more snow at Bendora than later at Corin.

Rom considers that Clementsons did a good job on the dam. 'It seemed to go fairly well.' The department's role was to ensure that the job met required specifications. Rom got on well with Clementsons' John Muir, but refers to the relationship between department and contractor: 'there are always contractual differences I suppose. You have to maintain your firm side and your point of view as to what you want and sort these problems out. There are always disagreements. If everything goes too smoothly maybe you're not doing your job'. The relationship between Works and Clementsons was fairly good.

Bendora's workforce numbered 100 to 150, about half at least of whom were migrants. There were some Norwegians, and also Spanish. Only one woman was employed, in Clementson's site office as a clerk.

Rom suffered a cracked pelvis when he was hit by the concrete bucket. The bucket slipped on the cableway and pinned him against the excavation for the right abutment. It was a bumpy ride in the ambulance to Canberra. Rom was in hospital for 9 weeks. He was not affected long term by the accident and says it was 'not of great significance'. Another accident at the dam was when a contractor's superintendent was hit by a tree being felled in the reservoir; he survived.

Asked about industrial unrest and the food dispute reported in the press, Rom recalls the matter vaguely but says disputes did not last long. It was not a troubled site.

The Department looked after Works staff fairly well, given the times.

Tape 1 Side B

Rom lived at the camp during the week because there was no transport home; he went home at weekends. You were isolated from family and friends, but the camp was 'like a small village' so you didn't feel alone. The only special benefit was a small meal allowance.

Works staff ate in the same room as Clementson's staff; Clementson's workers ate in another room. The separate dining room for the staff may have been a status thing, perhaps also a chance for the staff to be apart from their workers and vice versa. Food wasn't flash and was, as in most camps, 'adequate volume wise, and eatable most of the time'.

Referring again to the barracks for Works, Rom says they had a room each, and basic furniture of a bed and dressing table and maybe a mirror. The kitchenette had a fridge but wasn't used much. There was a strip radiator in the rooms.

Alcohol played a big role, because socially there was so little to do. Cards, darts and reading were main activities. The bar was in the same building was the dining room. Prostitution occurred, as in most all male construction camps where there's a lot of money and nowhere to spend it. One of the rooms in the camp was used. Visits by prostitutes were fairly random, not regular. Management 'turned a blind eye'.

Transport to Canberra for the Works people was in Land Rovers. Sometimes Rom was picked up by Dug in his black VW as they both lived at Yarralumla. The route was via Bulls Head and Piccadilly Circus.

The discussion now turns to Rom's time at Corin. He was there as soon as the contract was let to Thiess. The road was in but may not have been fully sealed at that stage.

Rom supervised the grouting of the diversion tunnel, ie the work on the grout curtain where the dam foundation met the tunnel. He then supervised all the blanket and curtain grouting for the dam foundations as a whole. Blanket grouting was via a series of shallow holes (25 feet deep) beneath the clay core and the downstream filters in order to waterproof the area beneath them. The curtain grouting went much deeper (175 feet) in order to cut off water passage from upstream to downstream.

Then there was the foundation treatment. This included excavation of seams or faults and filling with concrete, slush grouting of finer surface cracks, concreting steep walls to provide better slopes for compaction of the clay core, and treatment of irregular corners with gunnite or small aggregate concrete.

Rom also supervised the spillway construction. This is briefly described.

There is a lot of activity going on during a major project, but it is not all happening at once, the spillway for example was later. There is progression in the works. The site is a noisy one with heavy machinery, drilling, etc.

Rom does not think there were many river pollution prevention measures. There were settling ponds, however.

He had some contact with Thiess' project manager Peter Charlton. Peter was of solid build, 'fairly gregarious at times, fairly firm when he wanted to be. I guess a capable construction engineer'. Leslie Thiess himself did visit. He was prominent in the industry then and became moreso with subdivision work in Canberra.

Again there were many migrants at Corin. Whether language problems existed, Rom doesn't know because the protocol was for Works to liaise with Thiess' staff, not with workers directly.

There were about 12 Works staff at Corin. Rom was next in line under Graeme Kelleher the resident engineer [also interviewed]. There was probably an official opening of the dam, though Rom is unsure if he went or not.

Rom had very little contact with NCDC on site as Commission staff did not visit very often. NCDC left the job to Works as Works was the supervising authority. There was some consultation in Canberra.

Tape 2 Side A

The relationship between Works and Thiess was a successful one, as was the job. But, as said in relation to Bendora, there are always some problems in all big jobs. There was a need to separate the official and social communication. Once off site and in the mess Works staff didn't socialise with Thiess people all that much. They would meet in the dining room and maybe have a drink sometimes. The dining arrangements were the same as at Bendora. Rom felt the accommodation was not so different to Bendora, and was 'basic barrack accommodation', though there was airconditioning and a TV in the lounge of the barracks. Alcohol and cards were again prominent.

Rom married during the job and only got home on Saturdays to have Sunday at home. Occasionally he got a lift into town with one of the clerks during the week. It was regrettable that he and his wife were apart but there was no choice.

Asked about his memories of the Cotter valley projects, Rom concludes: 'I think I was very pleased to be involved in major projects like that...It doesn't happen too often in anyone's lifetime...They are there like monuments. You go out there and say "I played a part in that"'. Of the valley he says 'pleasant surroundings, scenery was good, the air was fresh. Except the disadvantage of being away from family and friends, but I didn't mind that'.