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Fares Please! Retired Transport Workers' Oral History Project

Interview with Ross Kite Biographical Notes and Timed Summary

Background

Ross was born in Young, New South Wales, in 1939 where his family were dairy farmers. While he was growing up he had ongoing contact with Canberra through his uncle who was a shearing contractor in the Canberra area. From the age of 11 Ross visited Canberra frequently and helped his uncle out in the sheds. In 1959, when the dairy farming business was not doing well, Ross's father got a job in Canberra with Parks and Gardens and the family moved to Canberra.

Ross attended a small bush school and then Christian Brothers College in Young. He left school at 14 and started a plumbing apprenticeship. After six months he went shearing and continued to do this until 1959-60 when he got a job driving a front end loader with Jennings builders in Canberra. Ross married in 1961 and as he was working for private enterprise it was some time before he could get a government house. By the late 1960s when he and Gwen had a young family, there was less work in the building industry in Canberra and Ross put his name down at Transport to work as a bus driver.

Ross's name came up for an interview with Transport in 1970. From that year he worked as a bus driver from Kingston, Woden, Ainslie and Belconnen depots. His shift mate for many years was Dick Walters. He worked on school runs and, for a number of years, as a 'spare'. A severe injury as a result of a driver failing to give way at a give-way sign, forced Ross's early retirement in 1985.

The interview with Ross provides clear details of the work of a bus driver during the 1970s and 80s. It records the expansion of transport services through the opening of new depots and additions to the bus fleet, as well as the provision of amenities for a growing workforce. It also provides a lively picture of the



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work culture of ACT Transport/ACTION over the period, including the relationship between fellow workers and management practices. In addition, Ross's account of his experience of injury gives insight into the issues of this experience for workers in industries such as Transport.

The interview was conducted at Ross's home in McKellar.

There are some minor changes in sound level in the recording.

Interview Summary

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| Track 1 (CD 1) | 0:23:14 |
| 0:00:00 | Introduction. Early years in Young district. Shearing around Canberra early 1950s; properties and property owners; David Campbell. |
| 0:05:01 | Rouseabouting and shearing after leaving school in 1954; historic property of Dunlop. Family decision to move to Canberra in 1959; father's work for Parks and Gardens. Opportunities for work in Canberra in 1950s for people from surrounding region. Work with Jennings in Canberra and ongoing contact with Young. |
| 0:09:19 | Access to housing in Canberra 1950s and '60s; family's accommodation in Hoddle Gardens Ainslie and then government house in Bonney Street Ainslie next door to Jack Wilkinson (Transport employee). First date with future wife. Marriage November 1961. Accommodation while waiting for government house. Jack Wilkinson's support in getting government house and encouragement to join Transport. Son's illness late 1960s. |
| 0:15:12 | Name selected from Transport waiting list 1970. Previous work as front end loader driver for Jennings; construction of government houses; irony of workers who built these houses for private enterprise not having access to government housing; work conditions and wages. |
| 0:19:52 | Memories of paymaster at Jennings and other German workers. Slow-down of building boom at end of 1960s. Advantages of work for Transport. |
| 0:23:14 | END |
| Track 2 (CD1) | 0:28:10 |
| 0:00:00 | How employment at Transport came about; role of Jack Wilkinson. Jack's wife, Jean (nee Tagnello) and her work as a bus conductor in Canberra during the Second World War. Employment interview with Gwynn Williams. Reasons for joining Transport. |
| 0:04:50 | First day at Transport. Training for bus driver's licence with Ron Butler and test for licence with Bill Winkle. First work on bus wash and fuelling. |
| 0:09:57 | Work on Parks and Gardens trucks at Hackett depot. Training course on bus routes and coping with passengers. First work after passing course on holiday relief and Saturday |

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| | morning detail. First shift Civic to airport; passengers. |
| 0:15:29 | Relationship with passengers. Shift system. Becoming shift mates with Dick Walters and picking shifts from new Woden Depot. Shift details. Involvement in driving additional buses (known as green buses) from Sydney. |
| 0:19:57 | Driving green bus in Canberra. Shift allowances and rates of pay. Issue of pay rates during early 1970s. Benefits gained through union activity at this time now lost. Conditions today; seniority as single remaining important condition. Woden depot opening. |
| 0:24:52 | Stories of collecting green buses from Sydney. Establishment of hot mess at Kingston depot as result of seeing one in Sydney when collecting buses. Further development of canteen facilities at Belconnen. |
| 0:28:10 | END |
| Track 3 (CD1) | 0:13:17 |
| 0:00:00 | Stories of driving school buses; the Labor bus; dealing with pranks. |
| 0:05:00 | Story of break-in at depot and toe print. Re-opening of Ainslie Depot and getting shift there; work environment and atmosphere at Ainslie. Card playing at depots. Opening Belconnen depot. Decision to work as Spare; what sparing involved including breakdowns. |
| 0:10:37 | Sparing. Discussion of what a shift involves. |
| 0:13:17 | END |
| Track 4 (CD2) | 0:38:26 |
| 0:00:00 | Working at Belconnen as spare; story of breakdown. Stories of playing practical jokes on fellow workers. |
| 0:05:29 | Work environment and relationship between workers. Accident while driving bus resulting in spinal injury. |
| 0:10:00 | Attempts to return to work. further investigation of injury. Retired 1985. Compensation issues. Ongoing impact of injury. |
| 0:15:00 | Missing work and adjustment to not working. Work relationships. Story of role as witness to accident at bus stop. Changes in work atmosphere with 38-hour week in mid 1980s. |
| 0:20:00 | Changing management practices including long term to short term shifts, lack of spares leading to missed runs when breakdowns occur. Recent poor press blaming drivers for poor management. Changes in bus driving conditions and regulations ; heating; power steering, issues of playing radio. Changes in uniform and provision of clothing. |
| 0:25:30 | Different nationalities in Transport workforce. Age limits on employment in Transport. Women as bus drivers – first entry in 1970s. What makes a good bus driver and recent emphasis on qualifications. |
| 0:29:45 | Managing school children; smoking and other aspects of ‘working in with the kids’. Reflection on changes in Transport generally. Issue of ACTION’s attempt to make a profit. |



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| 0:33:48 | Overall reflections on working for Transport – best work in life. Supervisors including John Anderson and Depot Master George Newport. Kingston depot stories of work conditions and the 'old shed'. What remains at Kingston depot.. |
| 0:38:26 | END |



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