

ACT Heritage Library Manuscript Collection

Interview with Gordon Smith - Timed Summary

GORDON SMITH -TOPICS	TIMELINE (END)
Introduction - born in Melbourne - father electrical engineer with Department of Works – parents from Scotland – father transferred to Sydney then to Canberra 1935 approx – he went to Telopea Park School – then to Canberra High School (first class) – started apprenticeship with Canberra with Canberra Electric Supply (Department of Interior) -	3:12
Whistle on Power Station went off at 5 minutes to 5 PM which was signal to stop work and start getting cleaned up ready to knock off at 5 PM – also mentions whistle at 7:30 AM – ride to work and mentions landmarks along way	4:57
First 12 months – 1942 transferred to Power Station section run by radio engineer run by Mack Fallow – in charge of emergency bushfire council radio network and electricity meters – describes location of work area -	7:35
Other areas of training – lifts – shifted work area to back of power station – asked to go back to electronic section – spent rest of his apprenticeship there – actually made radios there – in-house designed radio telephone sets for bushfire and electricity authority – ways in which they could assemble components – all “valve” based circuits – wound own coils – built everything from basic materials because all factory made units were allocated to the war effort -	10:55
Describes power station alternators – good technical details – how he synchronised the Kingston power generation with the NSW network feed – In 1942 Norm McKee was one operator who threw the switch to connect the two grids	16:33
One alternator dedicated to Belconnen Transmitting Station – quite a big load – very powerful – keying morse was very tricky load – he listened to the morse code on the BTH machine – gives example of the sound the machine made in step with morse code – assumes the code was always encrypted	18:51

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Dedicated lines to Parliament House and Cotter Pumping Station – pumping station was always activated in off-peak times – after generating stopped at the Power House talks of buying NSW grid and Snowy Scheme power and charging regime -	23:26
Did not have much to do with the boiler room – very dirty room – very fine dusty coal – did not associate with the boiler attendants – apprentices would often take coal to heat the workshop even though the Superintendent (Tom Trevillian) would try to make sure coal was not used they would manage to sneak past him – toasted sandwiches on the braziers	28:28
Talks of using power station condensate for “distilled” water for batteries for the lead-acid batteries for the radios -	29:40
Electricity switch yards in Queanbeyan and Yass -	31:54
Alternator hall was very clean and suited radio team – alternators were noisy -	32:29
Power station whistle – 7:30 and 8:00 AM – 12 noon – 12:42 PM – then 5:00 PM – first steam powered – then later compressed air – beautiful old clock was synchronised with Mt Stromlo time	34:31
Superannuation became available in 1945 – 46 – took leave without pay to work at radio work in Sydney – attended AWA night school at night – qualified to work on commercial radio stations or shipping – came back to Canberra to work in old section	36:59
Tom Trevillian – George Saint – previous superintendents – got on with George but could be tricky with some dobbling in of dubious practices being done -	
Talks of shifts – possibly only one person on night shift – during day there was many more – cleaning staff – mechanical engineers – electrical person in switch room – perhaps a dozen altogether	41:01
No accidents while working there – but knew of accident with Al Farrer in switchyard – also fortnight before he started a fitter “Mr Melesh” was electrocuted at the Belconnen Naval Transmitting Station sub-station – his son Jack Melesh taught at the tech college where Gordon Smith did his apprenticeship – description of the accident retold – very sobering lesson for young apprentice	43:51
Tea making as an apprentice – put Epsom salts in billy – but foreman came out that morning – drank tea – and Smith was sent to work on aerodrome lights as punishment	45:54
Industrial unrest? – union rep was Dave Lamont – never any strike – not very visible compared to Sydney	48:49
Social aspects – not as apprentice – example of pay scales given – did form a social club – big ‘do’ at Christmas time – all took holidays at same time – was called on to help form a social club – films nights at Manuka Swimming pool – bowling nights – all for Kingston Power station staff -	52:02
Status in community – fairly ordinary industrial site – except that most of Canberra started and stopped by the whistle – importance during the war – shut down of the power station	58:55



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was “gradual” in that control of the system, switching, etc was still being done from the station – no regrets	
X-ray machine at old weatherboard Canberra Hospital – had to maintain it – 11 KV feed – difficulty in getting accurate exposure times	61:46



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