

## FRED BYRNE

*Fred was born at Kambah Station in 1927. His father was manager on the property. Fred did correspondence schooling and then had a year at Telopea Park before leaving school at 13. He worked on farms and with forestry, and was a labourer on the raising of the Cotter wall. Further farm work followed, and later he had a job as a security officer which saw him involved for a time with construction of Corin Dam. Fred stayed in the security field until he retired in 1991, but he continues to work, as a school janitor at Lyneham. He married Beryl in 1953 and they had six children. The family lived at Westlake, then O'Connor and finally Evatt. Beryl died in 1996.*



### **Tape 1 Side A**

Fred began work on the Cotter wall project in 1949. His mate Alan Bellchambers was working on the dam and suggested Fred could get a job, so Fred applied to Works and became a labourer. His work was varied, and ranged from clearing the area for the cableway and working on the cableway, to operating jackhammers. He did various other jobs. 'As a labourer, you was anything, and everywhere. Little odd jobs, anything that cropped up, you were expected to do it'. Fred enjoyed working on the dam. The money was good and the experience was different.

There were about 10 to 20 labourers and the foreman was Sandy Grant. Total workforce was about 80, half of whom were migrants. Fred believes that many were from Bonegilla migrant camp, and they went home some weekends to see their families there [see also Harry Rundle interview and Don Campbell letter on this point]. Reuben Kirchner was another mate on the job, also Hilton McAuley (who Fred says was partial to drink but nevertheless was a good worker), and Rex Harris, an Aboriginal and rodeo rider. Many people had nicknames; Fred's was 'Fairway Freddie', and Sandy Grant's

was 'Barrel Guts'. The workforce was very mixed. 'We all worked together. I never seen any trouble in the camp at all, all the time I was there.' Major ethnic groups were Poles, Ukrainians, and the concreting was mainly done by Italians. There didn't seem to be any communication problems. There were no women.

Working conditions were generally 'pretty good'. Pay was good. There was no industrial unrest, though the unions were conscientious about safety matters. Earlier, Fred says three fatalities occurred [see also Rundle summary].

Once a month there was a dance at the Cotter Kiosk, on Sunday night. The migrants were very keen on piano accordions and would play them at the camp at night, sometimes to the local lads' annoyance. Fred believes the migrants brought that instrument to Australia, and he mentions how his father used to play a squeeze box or concertina.

The camp was mostly tents though there were a few huts. There were two men to a tent, there was a board floor, and a wash stand. There was a shower at the camp but most men bathed in the pool near Paddys River. Lighting was electric, supplied by a cable coming from near the Kiosk. There were no married quarters. The dining area was timber walled and with a corrugated iron roof. Caterers may have been Nick and Vera, and Rod and Cynthia at other times. Meals were very good — 'plenty of meat', and vegetables. At weekends everyone went home — 'straight into town and straight to the pub'. The Kingston, Wellington and Canberra were main pubs for dam workers. People took alcohol back to the camp. There was no violence in the camp, though some arguments, especially regarding gambling. Fred got to know a number of the migrants. He was a 'skylarking type of bloke' and would put snakes and lizards in migrants' beds! (The snakes were dead, but not the lizards.)

### **Tape 1 Side B**

Men went to town by cars or in the trucks. Fred had a Chevrolet, and he describes travelling times.

The interview now turns to Fred's experiences at Corin in the 1960s. Machinery at Corin was being sabotaged (sugar in dozers, scrapers etc) so MSS Security was contracted to investigate. Fred worked nights at the site, patrolling. The offender was eventually caught; he apparently was a disgruntled worker.

The roads at the dam were nervewracking, especially as Fred had to drive them at night, and sometimes in snow; they were narrow and steep. Another security officer threw the job in because of the roads.

Fred tells how prostitutes from Sydney came to the Corin camp at weekends. Dressed like a workman so as not to arouse suspicion about his security work, Fred was almost hauled into the queue once by a zealous Polish worker. The man shouted 'Come on mate, come on, oh lovely girl in there, come on', and later 'Really know how to do it'. Fred was married and not interested. The women operated out of their caravans or from spare rooms in the camp.

Fred heard about industrial unrest at the site and says a strike was on once during his visits. He went to Corin for about 4 or 5 months. He mentions the round-the-clock activity at the site, and how he varied his routine so as not to arouse suspicion.

The camp was well appointed, though Fred doesn't think it was necessarily 'for the better'.

Returning to the period of his time at the Cotter, Fred talks of his boxing, and how he trained with Rex Harris at the camp for bouts in Queanbeyan and Canberra. The

interview finishes with a description of how bad the flies were at the Cotter site when you were trying to work, and he mentions again the snakes and the migrants' fears of them.