

## EAMONN WALDRON

*Eamonn was born in 1932 in County Galway, Ireland. He came to Australia in 1960 and after a brief period with the Canberra Electricity Authority began with the Department of Works. He arrived at Bendora Dam in early 1961 when construction was winding down and he worked there as a tradesman for several years following completion of the dam. He also worked at Corin Dam later in the 1960s following completion of that dam, and had some involvement with the Bendora Gravity Main. Eamonn subsequently continued with the department and then ACTEW until retiring in April 1997. Since an accident in 1976 when he was hit in the neck by a length of water main he has suffered considerable health problems. Eamonn married Marlene in 1968 and they have three sons.*



### **Tape 1 Side A**

Eamonn was working at the government sawmill in Kingston and the work was declining, so he took a transfer to Canberra water supply and in March 1961 was asked to go to Bendora Dam. He stayed at Bendora for three and a half years. As becomes apparent through the interview, for most of this period he was the ganger at the dam in charge of maintenance and other tasks following completion of the dam.

The dam was approaching completion when he arrived. His first job was to construct the log boom to prevent debris being washed over the spillway or into the valve tower once the dam filled. The drums which acted as floats for the mesh net of the boom had to be dragged by him to the spot. The work was all by hand, and the anchoring eye-bolt had to be attached to a boulder on the then dry valley floor by using hammer and tap, and by pouring lead into the seal around the bolt. The boom was well made, later surviving a big flood.

In about 1963 a very big flood occurred; the water was more than a metre over the spillway. 'It was very scary. The dam itself was shaking. There was a lot of fellows there with me, and some of the engineers came out from town, and they were too frightened to walk out onto the dam...The whole thing was vibrating'. Eamonn too was too frightened to walk on it. The current in the reservoir even hindered him moving upstream in one of the two boats there. The dam held up well, only some small chunks of concrete being removed.

Another job was cleaning up the site, particularly a lot of new steel that was left. Clementsons had not done it because they said it was too expensive to remove; Eamonn believes they had financial problems at the time. So Eamonn had to bulldoze it all into a hole by the dam wall. Also, the dam railing had not been completed and this was a danger to the many tourists who visited. He and other workers completed it.

Eamonn oversaw the removal of the camp buildings. Works put them up for sale by tender and most were dismantled by Queanbeyan merchants who sold the materials from their yards. One building removed intact was the map [or plans] hut which went to the Lake George ski club. Eamonn cleaned up the debris left over. This was 1963 or 1964 [probably the latter year]. As is mentioned later in the interview, the two weatherboard houses built by Clementsons were bought by Works. One went to the south coast [the other remains].

A bulldozer used by Eamonn was a D9 and one day he dislodged a rock at the camp and it rolled downhill against a high tension powerpole. A wire broke and fell onto the dozer — luckily for Eamonn it was only the earth wire and he wasn't electrocuted! Eamonn and another workman repaired the line, and mum was the word.

Eamonn and the gang lived in the Works salaries block and used the kitchen there after the main dining room closed down following completion of the dam. The gang consisted of about 8 men. Included were Ernie Winbank, Harry Dart, Lyle Hammond (an Aboriginal man), and for a short time two uni students who were very good workers. Eamonn's boss in Canberra was Mark De Plater, who was a 'great man. He was a walking gentleman'. De Plater's junior was Norm Barwick.

During the time that Eamonn was making the log boom, other workers were dismantling the cableway at the wall. The fitter given the job cut the wrong cable and the main cable crashed down onto the wall. 'There were fellows running for their lives'. One man, a German, was hit, and the cable 'cut the skin from the side of his skull down to to his chin'. The cable was very valuable. There was quite a row about it.

Eamonn also drove a tractor with a blade attached, like a small dozer. In 1962 it had to be transported up the reservoir to enable him and the gang to build a stream gauge above the Bendora waters. A raft was built to float it up. Eamonn complained to the engineer in charge that 12 44-gallon drums would not provide enough buoyancy, but the engineer insisted. Eamonn drove the dozer on, and the whole lot sank. It took several days to raise the dozer and service it. Another 12 drums were added and the raft only just floated with its load, the deck being a couple of feet under the water as the two boats dragged it up the lake. The stream gauge was put in 1.5 miles up from the backed-up waters of the dam, and there was a flying fox installed as well. The excavation work was through rock and very difficult. Reflecting his sense of humour, Eamonn put in signs on the track to the gauge, like 'De Plater Bridge', 'Barwick's Drive' etc.

Coming from Ireland, Eamonn was terrified of snakes. There were heaps around Bendora. Lots of tigers, and also blacks. They were all aggressive, says Eamonn. He and Ernie used to go snake-hunting, and there were several close encounters. 'I killed thousands of them.' Snakes are now protected.

### **Tape 1 Side B**

The weather was 'terrible in the wintertime. Dreadful. We were snowed in at one stage for 2 weeks'. Once during the stream gauge work when Eamonn and the men were going up the dam in the boat, they hit ice at one point and it had to be broken with an axe. They christened the spot 'Siberia Corner'. Summer on the other hand was very pleasant.

Eamonn knew Dug Tonissen before the dam finished and they competed with each other for the fastest time driving back to Canberra. Eamonn's route during his time up there was usually through Bulls Head rather than Warks Road.

Eamonn mentions Works supervisor Tommy Ladd, and hydrologists Jack Edwards and Jack North, and Bill Meggitt.

Eamonn greatly enjoyed his time at Bendora. It was away from town, challenging and involved a lot of hand work. He enjoyed being in natural surroundings. Black cockatoos were a thrill. There were no koalas, but lots of platypus, and one once swam into a valve chamber that Eamonn was building, so he rescued it. Owls and gliders were common, and lyrebirds imitated the sounds of axes and crosscut saws that the men were using. He learned quickly about bullants and jack jumpers.

Prior to the departure of the dam workforce, migrants were numerous. Eamonn mentions Irish crane operators, and a lot of Italians and Spaniards. Most of the workers went on to the Snowy. The only woman in the camp during the dam period was the nurse, and she was from County Kerry. Eamonn socialised a bit with the Irish.

There was 'a kind of' official opening for the dam. A luncheon was held in the salaries block and guests came in about 6 vehicles. Eamonn was asked by De Plater to clean up the camp specially.

Lots of kangaroos and wallabies, and also foxes and pigs, drowned in the dam. Eamonn had to increase his boat patrols to twice weekly to deal with them — the carcasses polluted the water and couldn't be tolerated. He had to go ashore and bury them. He figured that the animals drowned because of the steep banks — they couldn't get out of the water.

There was no industrial unrest in Eamonn's time. There had been a lot of accidents on the dam during construction, he says. Eamonn never used a helmet, as they weren't used in Canberra, though they had been used on the dam.

Eamonn was not then married. Some of the gang were, and they rang their wives at night. Once some of the wives and children came out for a day.

Eamonn fished a lot. There were plenty of fish and the biggest he caught was a rainbow trout nearly 4 kilograms, from the dam. He got another almost as big from downstream near the bridge.

His jobs other than those listed above included recording the water level in the dam, taking water samples at one time for chemical analysis, taking an instrument into the tunnel in the dam to measure expansion and contraction of the wall, and reading rain gauges. After he left, the job [or some of it] was taken over by a ranger.

The salaries block was 'quite comfortable', cold in winter but there were bar heaters. Because there were frequent blackouts, there was also a stock of kero lamps and candles. There was one radio for the whole gang. When television came out, Eamonn rented one. The reception was poor (as was that for the radio) but TV was enjoyable.

He also read in his spare time, and the gang had played cards before the TV's arrival. Before the dam was finished the bar in the dining building was good but its closure with the departure of the workers made things gloomy. Eamonn had heard about prostitution during the construction period. Some workers, after sampling the women's offerings, lined up in the queue again for a second go.

### **Tape 2 Side A**

Regarding the Bendora Gravity Main, Eamonn walked the line of the pipe with the surveyor working on the project in the early 1960s. 'Terrible rough going. Snakes everywhere.'

When the gravity main was joined to the rising main behind the Cotter Pumping Station, Eamonn was involved in overseeing the welding operation there.

After completion of the gravity main (by which time Eamonn had moved back to Canberra), workers [engineers presumably, see Fitzgerald and Moore interviews and Sherratt correspondence on this matter] were opening a valve on the main at the Murrumbidgee, to see how quickly the valve could be opened and closed. Air got into the pipe, an air valve about half way along the main failed to close, and water gushed out, washing away the side of the mountain. Eamonn was instructed to head up there from Fyshwick. The main was buckled and undermined, and he struggled to prop it up with sandbags. The concrete cut-off walls had gone too. It caused a 'very big stir' but was 'kept very quiet and very hush'. Nat Harrison, the contractors for the main, were recruited back to do the necessary repairs. Hardly anyone could believe the damage done by the expensive incident.

Eamonn severely injured his neck in 1976. Work was being done on a water main between Aranda and O'Connor reservoirs. He asked the crane operator to lower the pipe an inch, but owing to the angle of the jib the pipe hit Eamonn on the back of the neck, crushing discs. Eamonn was lucky not to be killed. He has had three operations since. The pain is often unbearable.

Eamonn also worked at Corin in 1969-70, following completion of the dam. The dam filled slowly and when it did, bad leaks occurred in the concrete structure of the valve tower. It was winter and snowing, and Eamonn was lowered into the tower in a wetsuit to plug the leaks with quick-drying cement and woolly lead and caulking tools. With icy water spraying on him he worked for months to repair the leaks. Sometimes as he was being lowered into the tower the seat he was on would catch on a flange and he would almost be tipped off. He recalls that Neil Armstrong walked on the moon during the job, and Eamonn saw the event on a TV at the Corin Camp which was still standing. The camp was much better than Bendora.

Concluding, Eamonn feels pride in his association with the dams. It was great to do a job and do it well. He had good mates. His memories of the Cotter valley are good ones.

- After the project's recorded interview phase, Eamonn made the following points during a site visit on 19 January 1998:
  - the toilet block at the Bendora Dam picnic area was part of the camp dining/recreation building and was the toilet used by the kitchen staff. The concrete slab on the ground adjacent is from the dining/recreation building. The small storage shed built onto the toilet block is a recent addition;
  - Eamonn built the stone garden walls around the Works salaries block in the early 1960s, and he also built the stonework around the transformer 'island';
  - Eamonn pointed out the base of the powerpole with the rock against it that he dislodged with the dozer as described in the interview. The powerline has now gone but the base of the pole remains;
  - while living at Bendora Eamonn supplemented his diet with rabbits. Many of these were shot around Bulls Head.