

RON WRIGHT

Ron was born on Annandale Station, about 65 kilometres from Birdsville, in 1918. His stockman father was killed during service with the Australian Light Horse during the First World War, and Ron was raised by his grandparents. He attended school at Winton, Queensland. He came to Canberra in 1937. Ron served in the Second World War, a conflict which claimed the lives of his two brothers. After the war, Ron worked with the Department of Interior as a plant operator, and he was a member of Harry Wark's gang which built Warks Road and the access into Bendora Dam. Later he got a job with the Department of Civil Aviation and when he retired in 1982 he was airport safety officer at Canberra Airport. Ron and Gwenneth married in 1965.



Tape 1 Side A

Work on Warks Road began in 1946-47. The workers stayed in the 1920s Condor Camp forestry hut initially. The road was being developed firstly for forestry and subsequently it assisted the access to Bendora. Ron was around 30 during his time with Wark; Harry Wark was a 'quiet old chap, very nice old man'. The members of the gang got on well together. They stayed in the bush during the week and went home at weekends on the truck sent out by the Department of Interior.

Camp was moved each time the road progressed about 5 or 6 miles. Camps were near water of course. 'We only had tents. The department also supplied beds and blankets. You cooked your tucker outside (because we didn't have a galley in the early stages) and you bathed in the creek — all mod cons!' Later a galley was erected, tent floors were boarded, and there was a wireless. At the last camp on the job (Warks Camp) huts were built.

Ron and another dozer operator built the road down from Bulls Head to Warks Camp. Freddie Archer was another dozer driver with the gang at times. Hughie Beale was in the gang. Occasionally a grader driven by Charlie Russell was with the gang. The main method of road building was that the surveyors would mark trees, then Ron in the dozer would clear c.10 metres either side of that line. Paddy Ryan was the powder monkey, and Phil Robertson sharpened the hand tools in a smithy. Ron tells how Paddy blew a big ash tree 100 feet into the air once while clearing a road route.

Ron and the gang knew the Bulls Head forestry people, like the Collesses, Maxwells, Pokes, and Franklins.

Talking of the road down to Bendora, Ron initially put in a rough track. Surveyors and geologists were working on finding the best dam site. Ranger Tom Gregory [and Louis Margules] had earlier used horses to move the geologists' gear between camps. Ron widened the track so that a jeep could negotiate it, but even a jeep couldn't turn on the corners at first, such was the narrowness and steep grade. This was about 1954-55. The dam site was reached in 1956, on the day the Olympics started in Melbourne. The surveyors were also working on the pipeline route as well as the dam. Ron recalls surveyor Bill Tweedie. There was strong camaraderie between them all.

It was a while before the gang had a truck permanently at the camp, so until then you couldn't leave camp until the truck arrived on Fridays. There was no transmitter for the radio (only a receiver) until they got to Warks Camp. At Warks they also got a fridge at last, and a tin bath. Cuth Kirchner carted wood and water for the camps with a horse and cart until the permanent truck arrived about 1954.

Other jobs done by the gang at the time included widening of Fitzes Hill at Naas.

The 'explosives hut' today located off the Bendora Road is discussed, but while Ron recalls a hut used by the surveyors, the discussion is inconclusive regarding the explosives hut's origins.

Ron's dozer was a D7 and it was new; he recalls 'taking it out of the crate'. Other bulldozers included another D7 and a D8. The dozers did most of the work, then there was blasting by Paddy, and hand work by other gang members. Work continued through the winter, rain rather than snow causing interruptions to progress; at these times the men would stay in camp, playing cards, reading or 'telling a lot of lies'. Other gang names include Amos and Dougie Turner, Billy Johnson and Eric England. Many of the men were married; so their families saw them at weekends.

Ron boarded in the Kingston Guest House initially, then with a Mrs Muir in Forrest. Many of the other men lived in Queanbeyan, some were from Yass. About 7 or 8 were in the gang.

Tape 1 Side B

On the Monday trip back into the bush, the men would be picked up in the truck and they'd buy their food at Manuka. Two men slept to a tent in the camp. Some other men worked only for a short time with the gang; they couldn't handle the isolation in the bush, so they left. There was no alcohol in the camp, though the men would drink at weekends; Ron's bar was at the Canberra Services Club in Manuka, of which he was a foundation member.

Ron enjoyed the bush, and the peace. Sometimes he'd stay up there at weekends, using the dozer to make a track into the river for fishing. He appreciated the birds, and seeing the odd brumby. He tells of the 1952 Mt Stromlo bushfire. He talks further of the Bulls Head people, and mention is made of David Shoobridge, Pat Latten and Dave Thomas (Dave drove the forestry bulldozer).

Prior to having a fridge in the camp, meat was kept in a Coolgardie safe. The men bathed in the nearest creek, though there was a bush shower and Cuth would heat water for it in a copper. Ron clarifies that the 'open air' cooking prior to the galley was actually done under a bough shed. Harry Wark had a dog in the camp which he used to take home only at Christmas.

There were no serious accidents in the gang. But one of Colless's timberjinker drivers was killed near Warks Camp, and Ron and Dougie found the body next morning. They had to ride on the camp pushbike to the phone at Condor Camp hut in order to summon help from Uriarra.

Ron didn't marry until 1965. Being in the bush made it a little hard to have a social life in town. After the war he had a girlfriend but religious differences broke up the relationship — the priest delivered Ron an ultimatum, and that was it.

At the end of the interview, Ron recalls how Jock McCallum, the plant boss at the departmental depot in town, (he was 'more like a dad to me') got Ron started in the gang. Men were getting married and leaving the bush life, so Jock asked single Ron if he'd like a job. Milton Moore, first dozer driver in the gang, had left after getting married.

Ron remembers also how he and other gang members worked for a fortnight on the Cotter wall-raising project in 1949. Ron said he had to remove 'the little spillway at the base' of the Cotter wall [the toe wall / part of the stilling basin?] with the dozer. The project had just started and the tent camp at the Cotter had not yet been erected; he lived in huts.

- After the project's recorded interview phase, Ron made the following points during a site visit on 19 January 1998:

- the road between Bulls Head and Warks Camp involved two dozers, Ron working up from Warks Camp, and Stumpy Rowley working down from Bulls Head;
- the first access road down onto the Cotter River from Warks Camp was what is now shown on maps as the southern half of Warks Road and the bottom end of Bendoura Break, arriving at the river at Bushrangers Creek. Ron bulldozed this route so that the geologists could get down to this part of the river, and he built it first because the surveyors had not yet completed the survey of the Bendora Road route, a route which also required substantially more blasting by the roadmakers. Bendora Road was made in due course, and as mentioned earlier in the summary Site C was reached at the time of the Melbourne Olympics in 1956.
- the first huts taken down to the Site C camp were dragged on skids by Ron in his bulldozer. [Some of these would be included in the photo on p.42.]
- Warks Camp consisted of about five huts. The sleeping huts were timber with iron roofs, there was a galley, and there was a tin shed with a tin bath. The huts were backed against the small bank on the side of the levelled area seen at the site today. Water was obtained from a spring nearby by means of sheets of bark placed in the spring acting as a gutter directing the water into a tank which was then brought to the camp. [A similar arrangement was located near what was later Bendora Arboretum in the late 1930s and became known as Andersons Shower.]
- it would seem that the camp from which Tom Gregory and Louis Margules shifted the gear by packhorse may have been the Site D camp, now under the waters of the dam.
- mechanics came out from Canberra weekly to inspect and service the road-making plant. Fuel was brought out fortnightly. Arthur Wilson who was also on the site visit added that he and Bill Tweedie used to take a drum of this fuel for their camp use.