



John Mason

Interview Transcript 5 October 2016

Oral History Project

Reliving the past: Stories from our communities

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Transcription: Sue Piper and Simone Taylor



John Mason
State Politics in Dubbo

John talks about his life as a minister in the Methodist Church and the decision to stand for the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales following the death of Dubbo Mayor and Local Member for Dubbo Lesley Hunter Ford in 1959.

This recording created on the 5th October 2016 is part of Macquarie Regional Library's oral history project, "Reliving the past: stories from our community". Each recording contributes to the developing story of the life in the Dubbo area.

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Interviewer (I): Thanks for your time today John. For the benefit of our recording can you please state your full name and year of birth.

Subject (S): (S): Yes, er I was, my full name is John Marsden Mason and I was born in 1928.

[0:00:49] (I): So when did you and your family first arrive in Dubbo?

Well we came here in ... I think ... in the late 1950s, 1960. I came here as the Methodist Minister. I was the Methodist Minister in Newcastle suburbs - some of the very depressed area of Newcastle and the church asked me to come to Dubbo. I didn't know anything about Dubbo (laughs). But they wanted me to come here 'cause there'd been some difficulties and so we came, and we arrived. Bizzi was, - who lives here now - was about three or four, and we had a new baby. Arrived with a new baby. Fancy that. About three months old.

[0:01:43] (I): So how many children did you have at the time?

(S): We had five children.

(I): Wow.

(S): Five children, yes, that wasn't, that's not a classic number. I mean some of the Dubbo families are renowned for fifteen, and I think one had *nineteen*, one famous Dubbo family. So we were well down the scale.

[0:02:01] (I): So you arrived in the ... do you remember the date?

(S): I don't remember the exact date, no. It would've been I think in January, because all Methodist Ministers moved at the same time. We all moved at the same time. So it would've been January, and I think it's probably January 1959, or something like that. Would be the nearest I could guess.

[0:02:24] (I): So when you arrived in Dubbo...

(S): Oh well you've got to remember I'm an old man. (Interviewer laughing)

(I): You're doing well

...and a lot of things like that aren't as clear as they should be.

[0:02:34] (I): That's fine. So when you arrived in Dubbo, what was your first perception of the town?

(S): Oh, well we, I thought it was a great place, and we had a wonderful, we loved, we loved it. Our children all went to school here. Paul and David, the two eldest, had started school, but the rest of them started school here, and they all went on to complete their schooling here in Dubbo, while we lived here in Dubbo, and we as a family loved it. And um, it was a good town. I think the population was only about 6,000 when we arrived, 5 or 6,000. It wasn't a big place, but it was a very friendly place and the country people were very, very good.

Because we had a - the Methodist church had about five or six preaching places out in the country all surrounding Dubbo, so we had quite, got to know quite a lot of the property people.

[0:03:34] (I): So, tell us about your duties as a Methodist Minister in Dubbo?

(S): Well, my duties as a Methodist Minister were, and of course I had another Minister to help me. And he was quite a remarkable man, by the way, he's now 95 in a nursing home. The Reverend Lloyd Glover is his name, and he was the Company Secretary of Brambles, fancy, and at er, fifty, in his fifties, he decided he had a call to the Ministry, fancy, he gave up being the Company Secretary of Brambles, one of our big international companies now. So he's a remarkable man, and a very fine man. So he was here to help me, I couldn't have done it all by myself. And erm, well we conducted services in Dubbo and South Dubbo, in the town, and we also had churches in Brocklehurst and Wongarbon and, oh goodness, all over the place, (laughs), that we used to take - I think we took about five services Sunday, between us.

Also, course in those days, Ministers used to go to the schools and conduct scripture. So we used to go out to the country schools once a month, or something like that, and regularly once a week to all the towns' schools, high schools, it was a very busy life. A very busy life indeed. I was involved in Rotary and other community activities. We had a very active church. We had a very big Youth Group. A very big lot of young people. It was a very big church, it was - - - and they were great days as far as the church was concerned. The church was always packed, we had a great choir, and it was a great church to belong to.

[0:05:23] (I): So, you would've made lots of friends while you were in Dubbo. One of the friends you made was Les Ford...

(S): Yes.

(I): ... who was a local Alderman. Can you tell us about that relationship a little bit?

(S): Yes well, he and his wife Peg, she was erm, she was a Hawke from, from Orange. They had a big orchard in Orange, and she and Les married. They were very active members in my congregation and he was the Mayor. He also was one of our major business men, he had probably the largest one - it was the largest country Holden agency - it was a very big business, and he was a very astute business man, and so we were good friends, and so we were with most of our people though. We had lots of very fine people in our congregation in those days, who were leaders in the community, an Alderman and things like that. I think the Deputy Mayor was also a member of my congregation. Kevan Dunlop¹ who was to follow Les as Mayor, and they were - it was a very busy time.

[0:06:53] (I): So, did they get you interested in the local politics in Dubbo?

(S): Oh, no not really. I wasn't a member of any Party. I've always taken the view that as a Minister one should be free to criticise both sides and pull them both to account, or all of them to account. So I, while I was always interested, in fact I suppose I got a lot of that from my father - particularly social awareness. Erm, I was - he was the Minister at, at Corrimal during the Depression years, I was about three or four, I suppose, and one of the earliest memories I've got which I think is imparted itself upon my life, was the work that he did among the hungry and the poor and the deprived and that, and there were lots of them in those days. It was a very, very tough time.

One little interesting story about that, that might be appropriate in some ways, was that all the Ministers of all the churches gathered together and they made some arrangement, I don't know how, I was too young to know. But they, on Saturday mornings, they used to have a distribution of meat to people who were desperate. I think they had tickets or something that they got to do that, and of course, we as kids we used to go and help wrap up the meat and

¹ Kevan Dunlop was the Mayor of Dubbo from 1965 to 1967, and was Deputy Mayor when Lesley Hunter Ford passed away in 1964. (Daily Liberal, Kevan Remembered as one of city's 'modern-day pioneers,' 31 May 2001, accessed 22-10-2018 at: <https://www.dailyliberal.com.au/story/800322/kevan-remembered-as-one-of-citys-modern-day-pioneers/>)

be part of the deal. I've never seen my father so angry. Never seen him so angry because one man who had six children got an extra lot of meat because of the six children, that's how they worked it. My father was very anxious about that family and about the six children. And I've never seen him so angry because he found out that the man went home and gave the meat to his greyhounds, not to his children, and that's a bit appropriate today isn't it?

[0:08:31] (I): Yes

(S): I've never forgotten that, I've never forgotten his anger, and his passion, about that and I think it's affected my life right through. I've always been concerned for people who are in trouble and who need help, and um, I guess that's where I got it.



Member for Dubbo John Mason shaking hands with New South Wales Premier Sir Robert Askin in 1977.

[0:08:49] (I): So you obviously loved your role as a Minister for the Methodist Church here in Dubbo...

(S): Mmm, I did, I did.

(I): ...how then did you get into politics?

(S): Well I think the people of the church were very upset that I did (laughs). I think that that was one of the worrying times, I think they were very distressed that I did make the move, but there you are. Um well, Les had only just, not long I think - two years - before this had become the Member for Dubbo after – this was of course a great railway town, Dubbo - well

so was most of the areas were so dependent on the railway line. So we were surrounded. All the seats were held by Labor in those days. Mr Renshaw² was the member for Castlereagh and Mr Nott³ was the member in the Mudgee area and so it went on, and Les was the first really one to break through that, and he won by only about 180 - 160 votes I think. But he won the seat and he was doing a great job for Dubbo.

However, they were in opposition and erm however, it was the annual meeting of the council and he was to be re-elected as Mayor. So he asked, he and Peg asked Meg and myself to have dinner with them. And then we had dinner in the Amaroo. In those days the Amaroo was 'the Hotel'. It was the posh hotel (laughs) and they had a very sort of, very special dining room for that sort of thing, and we had a very nice dinner there, and we went off to the council meeting. Les was re-elected and then the sad thing is that he said, "I've got to drive back to Sydney." That very night he drove after the election, his re-election as Mayor. He drove back to Sydney, got as far as Kurrajong Heights, and had a massive heart attack. I'm guessing he was still just in his 50's, and um, he just died on the roadside, and so, there we were. It was December, December 1964, and it was really, you know, we were all so shattered. I had to conduct the service, the funeral service. It was a very big - the whole of the community was shattered.

[0:11:11] (I): Where was the funeral service held?

(S): Well erm, there was a service held here by the Bishop of Bathurst actually held a community service here, I figured the same time as we were holding his service, was to be held in Manly Methodist church. I don't know quite why, there was some reason why the family wanted that. I think they might've had a place in Manly, where they, where they went, where Les probably stayed while he was in Parliament, and anyway, erm, that's where the service was to be. So all of, I think a special plane was, I think Ansett provided a special plane to take us all - we all flew down - the Councillors, the Aldermen, all the officials of Dubbo were to go. We all flew down in a special plane to Sydney to go to the funeral. It was a very big

² Mr John Brophy Renshaw was the Member of Castlereagh from 1941 to 1980 in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly. (Parliament of New South Wales, Mr John Brophy Renshaw, accessed 22-10-2018 at:

https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/members/Pages/profiles/renshaw_john-brophy.aspx)

³ Mr Leo Mervyn Nott served as the Member for Mudgee from 1953 to 1968, and as the Member for Burrendong from 1971-1973 in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly. (Parliament of New South Wales, Mr Leo Mervyn Nott, accessed 22-10-2018 at: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/members/Pages/member-details.aspx?pk=1746>)

occasion, and of course, oh, all of the, all of the people in Sydney, senior people in business and public service and so on, Parliament, they were all there. Federal and State, it was a massive big occasion. So I had the privilege of conducting that.

Later on of course, when I got into Parliament, the Labor party used to attack me saying, "You only got in here - rode in on Les Ford's funeral," that's what they used to say to me (laughs). Anyway, I don't think it was nearly as bad as it is today, I think the tone of Parliament has changed dramatically since those days. Anyway so that's how I became the member, actually I should say more than that. One of my neighbours, my closest neighbour to - I used to live in Church Street – the parsonage was just in Church Street where Wesley Hall is now, and my neighbour was a leading business man in Dubbo who had a nickname of Snuzzle, Snuzzle Bowen, he was called.⁴

[0:13:16] (I): What was his first name sorry?

(S): Well, I'm trying to remember his first name (laughs). I just know him as - I know him so well as Snuzzle. He used to come and talk to me all the time and he was a character, he owned half of Macquarie Street and ah, but he was a - he was isolated in many ways, an individual who kept to himself. He was very insular and erm, but he was a very interesting man. But he came, and he was the first to come and say, "Look the town's desperate, there's nobody to take Les' place, you're the only person that any of us could think of that could take his, could possibly take his place, and so you've got to stand." So I thought that was a great joke. But I don't know if he organised it, but then I'd have people ringing me up every three or four times a day, I'd get phone calls from leading people in the community saying, "Look, you've got to think about standing for Parliament because there's nobody else." So it went on, until eventually I thought I would have to take it seriously. So I did, and that led to, I don't know how long you want this story to go on. It could go on for a long time...

[0:14:27] (I): No, no - the full story. Please ...

(S): So, you want the full story, so of course I had to. The church protocol was if you were considering any important or serious action in your life, you had to discuss it with the Chairman of the District as they were called then, and that was the Minister at Orange, Rupert

⁴ Snuzzle Bowen's full name was Roy Noel Bowen, he was also known as Neil Bowen.

Guy Walker, a wonderful man. So, I went down and saw him, he was a friend of mine. We'd been together, he was next door to me. He talked me into coming to, he was the one that organised me to come to Dubbo, and before that, he'd been at Bowral, and I was at Goulburn. He organised me to go to Newcastle (laughs) when he went to Maitland. So we were pretty close. And I was expecting him to say to me, "John, you can't do this, you know, they love you too much at Dubbo, you're having too good a Ministry there, everybody says that to me." And I was expecting all that sort of thing, you see. And I was really shocked when he said to me, "Perhaps you ought to think seriously about this, God may be calling you to a different Ministry." I was shattered. I was expecting him to say, "No, we can't do without you." Oh I was really shattered, I came home very subdued because I was really knocked about thinking they don't want me. And anyway, we did as he asked me to do, we, we thought and prayed about it, and I decided that okay, I would stand. So, that caused great problems.

Firstly, my church were terribly upset, because they didn't want me to go. At least, they made it very clear that they didn't want me to go (laughs). Anyway, erm, I went, but the church law in those days was that... erm, you couldn't do that if one side said I'd stand, and was preselected, I got a letter from the - a week later, after I was preselected - I got a letter from the President of the Church in Australia saying I had seven days to retire or they would cease to recognise me as a Minister (sighs). Gosh, can you imagine how I felt then, and erm, we didn't know whether there was going to be a by-election, 'cause it was December, and they were three year terms in those days. They were three year terms, but you couldn't be guaranteed it would go three years or what. Didn't know if there was going to be a by-election, and here was I with five children, and of course I had to leave the house in seven days.

[0:17:17] (I): The house you were living in was part of the Methodist Church?

(S): Yes, it was the parsonage, where the Minister lived. I had to get out of that within seven days. I had no income, so I had to live on my superannuation. They paid me out my superannuation that I'd paid. And you can imagine the state I was in, I didn't know, we had nowhere to live. Anyway, Peg Ford was too distressed by the death, she couldn't stay in Dubbo. She said, "I can't stay here, I've got to go. Come and stay in my house." So, that's what she did, and 'cause she'd gone, she'd left, and she said, "Come and stay here." Which we did.

And later on when I won, she graciously, on very good terms, sold us the house. So we had a very happy time in that house.

[0:18:11] (I): Where was that house located?

(S): It was in Cobra Street, in Cobra Street, opposite the park up at Cobra Street, 'cause Dubbo didn't go very much further than that then in those days. Went up to the old RAAF...

(I) Base...

(S): The old RAAF used to have big storage places there, that was the edge of Dubbo in those days (laughs). A bit different today.

[0:18:37] (I): A little bit bigger (laughs)

(S): So that's where we were. And I couldn't have survived if it hadn't've been for the public. One of the things for instance, one of our lovely men, I won't mention his - I'd like to mention his name but I won't. He's a good friend, he couldn't help be anything else but a good friend, wasn't a member of my church or anything, just a great guy. He arrived on the doorstep and said, "There's a car out the front." He said, "We've got two cars and my wife and I have decided you can have one of them for the length of the election and we'll make some arrangement about the petrol, for you to have that."

I mean I couldn't have survived without that sort of thing, and people kept bringing food, and my family of course, my parents were marvellous, and really sustained us, and so, somehow or other we survived. Now of course the Government decided not to have a by-election. They didn't tell us that, kept us in suspense and it wasn't until May that the election took place.

[0:19:41] (I): And you won your seat?

(S): And I won the seat. By about the same amount of votes as Les did by the way, 'cause the Country Party as it was then stood very - they thought they were going to win the seat, and but erm, I won, by I think about a 100 - by about the same as Les 160-180 votes something like that, very close. However, I must say that I've ended up as the years went on, I ended up

with a very big majority, one of the biggest in the state. So, I was very happy with the support I had right across the electorate.⁵

[0:20:14] (I): That's wonderful. So you've had a pretty interesting career serving as a State Member. Very early on you were part of the process for Dubbo becoming a city. How were you involved in that?

(S): Well, in a very small way, in that I was the local member. But we'd passed legislation, new legislation about, about cities, amongst other - a lot of other changes were made about local government and so on. And up until that time to be a city you had to have a cathedral, so places that were about the same size as Dubbo, or smaller probably in some cases, like Armidale, Grafton, Goulburn - places like that which had a cathedral – Maitland, and there's a lot of them have cathedrals, Catholic or Anglican, they could claim the name of a city.

But the new legislation laid down new qualifications. So I thought, "I think Dubbo's going to qualify with this," so I took that to Kevan Dunlop, who was the Mayor, and said, "You ought to have a look at this and see what you think about it." And the council had to do the application and so on, they had to do all the work. I just drew their attention to it, that was all, and I was the local member, of course that was my duty to do that. So we were the first to be proclaimed under the new legislation, so it was quite an occasion. It made it, it had state significance really, it was a big affair. It was a very big affair.

[0:21:51] (I): Do you remember any of the other qualifications that Dubbo had to meet to become a city?

(S): Oh I think they were financial - their financial status, I think the population, the ratepayers, number of ratepayers, I can't tell you those now, but there were quite a few regulations to have to meet, mainly on the administration, the staff and the finances. Really it was - it had to be a very stable, and under Les Ford of course, it had a great start and things like that, he was great Mayor.

[0:22:27] (I): So the Proclamation Ceremony happened on the 12th September 1966...

⁵ John Mason was elected Member for Dubbo in May 1965, and held office until 1981. He was also Minister for Lands and Forests 1976-1976, Deputy Leader of the Opposition 1976-1978, Leader of the Opposition 1978-1981. (John Mason, Parliament of NSW accessed 14-05-2018 at: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/members/Pages/member-details.aspx?pk=1881>)

(S): Yes.

(I): ...Were you part of the ceremony?

(S): Oh yes, yes, yes, I'm there as the local member of course. I think the official, the official doings were done by the Governor, at that time, Sir Roden Cutler VC, who'd lost a leg in a battle for which he got the VC, he was a very brave and courageous soldier. And the Minister for Local Government Pat Morton who was a great man was there, and other officials from the government, and it was a big occasion, and I think the photos of the, the photos of it showed the dais with all the people on it. I've been looking at those photos and trying to recognise some of the people who were there, and er, course all the Aldermen were there, and so on, but it, it was a very big, and very important occasion. Mmm Fifty years ago that was...

[0:23:34] (I): Yes fifty years ago this year

(S): Fifty years ago... it hit me where it counts (laughs) to think that it's fifty years ago (laughs).

[0:23:41] (I): Do you remember any interesting incidents that occurred during the ceremony?

(S): Well I suppose the ball was the interesting thing. I mean the celebration was great and they did it very well. The council did it very well, they really, they planned it well, and it went very well.

[0:23:59] (I): So there was a ball after the...

(S): And there was a ball, it was decided to have a ball...

(I): Yep.

(S): And, the only place we could find that would be adequate for a ball, and I was sort of involved with the council, I was very close to the council, always have been, when I was a member I worked very closely with the council. Mind you, that was important. The only place we could decide that could possibly be big enough, because we thought it would be a very big occasion - there was a big old wool store where the wool bales had been stored by one of the big companies in those days that was so involved in wool. Most of them have all gone now, um, they used to be some places like Goulburn and Dubbo, but those are all closed now. All gone, all that sale of those things is down in Sydney. And, anyway it was there - big space and

it needed a lot of work to clean it up, and the Town Clerk was given the job and task to do that, and it came up very beautifully actually.

It was a great site because the floor was wood and over the centuries (laughs), don't know about centuries, but over the tens of years, the decades of years that the wool had been stored there, the lanolin had soaked down into all the wood. So it was absolutely brilliant for dancing and in fact it was probably a bit too smooth as we discovered, because erm, a great red carpet was laid to a dais that was built for the Governor and official parties to sit at. And the ABC was such of national importance, the ABC was recording all of this, and so the official party came in, we came in. The Governor and the Mayor were leading the way, and we got down the path a good way, and suddenly with the lanolin, the carpet began to move under the Governor and the Mayor. And of course he only had the one leg so his balance was difficult. And it was though it was all in slow motion. Gradually the [Governor] fell and fortunately landed on top of Kevan, who was comfortably covered fortunately, and made a nice soft landing for him. That was a good thing (laughs), we didn't worry about Kevan, we were more worried about the Governor.

[0:26:28] (I): Did he fall too?

(S): Er yes, yes he was underneath. Yes they were both on the ground (laughing) and all on TV. Anyway, we got him up, and got them up, and of course you can imagine the hush that went over the place, and you can hear a pin drop, (laughing) and you can feel the fear in everybody's minds and all scared stiff of what's happened.

Anyway, we got them up onto the dais and I learnt something about the quality of the man then, because he said to me, "John, you gotta get people settled down, get people to come up and introduce them to me." And anyway I think I called out first of all, "Let the music begin." or something. The dancing started, a few people got up and started to dance, and I got people too, and they formed a queue and Meg, my wife, and Nancy Dunlop took over the task with me of introducing people, and of course the whole atmosphere changed. It was a great night, great supper, and it was one of the great nights in Dubbo I think, apart from the difficulty of the Governor falling on top of the Mayor (laughs).

[0:27:35] (I): So the woolshed...

(S): (Laughing) The Government always comes out on top, you see (laughs).

[0:27:42] (I): Definitely (laughs). Was the woolshed the one that was located on Cobbora Road?

(S): Yes, I suppose it was on Erskine Street ...

[0:27:51] (I): Erskine Street yep.

(S): Erskine Street at the Railway crossing ...

(I) Yep.

(S) ... it was right at the railway crossing. I think it's just a vacant piece of land now ...

[0:27:56] (I): It is.

(S): I think it's all gone, I don't know what's happened there. But it's all gone.

[0:28:02] (I): So how do you think Dubbo becoming a city affected Dubbo on a long term basis?

(S): I think it gave it a prestige. It, as I say, it was national, it had national - all the papers and so on, recorded all about it. And I think, I think it helped to give Dubbo a prestige, put them on the map a bit. Course there were a lot of things, the council worked hard at that too, and erm, and I worked hard at it.

One of the things I used to do as a member, all the time I was a member, every year I used to invite a group of Sydney business men, all sorts of varieties. I'd bring them up not only to Dubbo but on a tour of the west. We'd go out through, out some of the back places, outback places, and show them just what the country's like, and Dubbo got a lot of business out of that too. And I think you know, we all, there were lots of - the council worked very hard and still does. I think that's one of the commendable things about the council, it's always been very active in trying to help the growth of Dubbo. Lots of things could help. The zoo of course helped it dramatically. Probably was the next thing that put it on the map, mmm. It still gets us national news doesn't it? The zoo. I was listening to one of the girls from the zoo, one of the girls, one of the curators of the zoo talking this week on national radio about the rhinoceros. You know, we're nationally acclaimed that zoo.

[0:29:40] (I): Mmm, it's really good. So as the State Member for Dubbo, can you tell us a little bit about your, kind of, day-to-day duties?

(S): Well day-to-day duties, well they were very different to today let me tell you. Because it was a different world in so many ways, I suppose. It erm, I think we had the same number of seats, and so probably that was not much different, except that they'd been changed, of course, the seat of Dubbo is a very different one to what I had. I had Parkes, and quite a vast area, but it didn't go to Wellington, but it was a very different electorate. It was Parkes and Dubbo and surrounding areas.

Erm, now, when I became the Member there was no office for instance, I just had to operate out of my house. There was no travelling allowance, so all I got was a gold pass, which enabled me to travel on the train for nothing (laughs). Erm it, as far as - I had no secretary, I had no staff. The only staff I had was an Amanuensis, which is an old fashioned name for a secretary I s'pose, and I shared her with five other members.⁶ So six of us had that one girl. Three of them were for the Labor party, and three of them were for ours. So we were never sure whether we could trust her or what, (laughs) you know, there was always a bit of anxiety about that, even though I think I did trust her. I must say, I did trust her. And she was rostered - so many hours for each of us and we could ring in those hours from here. I could ring her up and talk to her, and dictate mail, which she'd send up to me, post up to me, to sign and send out. She could read mail to me and any messages that came to Parliament House for me.

And when I was at Parliament I also had those same hours that I could go and actually talk, dictate to her, and work with her. So it was very limited, very limited. We had no allowances as I said. Our accommodation was actually, for country members, was actually in the Parliament. So, erm, course when I became a Member was - when after many years, I think twenty years or something, was the first Liberal government for a long period of time - it had always been a Labor government. And all country members had a room, but the Opposition always got the bad rooms, where we had to double up with another country member, and the government blokes always got the good rooms. So, of course it switched over, and they all got the bad rooms, and I was fortunate enough to get a very nice room overlooking the Domain in Sydney. But the room consisted of two big wardrobes, one of which was a bed.

⁶ Definition of Amanuensis 'a person employed to write what another dictates or to copy what has been written by another; secretary.'

When you went to go to bed, you undid the wardrobe and you pulled your bed down out of the wardrobe (laughs). You've seen those on the movies probably.

[0:33:04] (I): Yes

(S): So, that was a bit of fun, well, I don't know about fun, but that's how we survived. The Labor blokes were all in two, so they had two desks put together, and one had one bed on one side, one cupboard on the other, and that's how they had to share their rooms so they were very – they were very uncomfortable, whereas I was very comfortable.

[0:33:28] (I): And it was common for country members to share, did they always share with people of the same party?

You always shared in pairs, but government ones always had a room to ourselves, but the opposition always had to (laughs) share (laughs). That's just how it falls.

[0:33:47] (I): Yep.

(S): The city members of course, only had one big room, that they, a big, very big room where they were all in together, which was pretty tough going. They had no privacy really. No privacy.

[0:33:59] (I): So did the parties ever get mingled sharing rooms and things like that? Sharing office space?

(S): No, no, no, no they never shared rooms, but of course in those days we had - all of our meals were shared. Our breakfast for instance was there. However, they - I know I was one who tried hard to break it down. I'd try and sometimes go and sit with another group of people, but never welcome. It was never really was appreciated - I did try it, but it was never appreciated - even the Country Party never appreciated when I'd go and sit with them. 'Cause I don't think they liked me very much at all, as a Liberal. Well, most of the big major towns at that time were held by Liberals. Wagga, and Albury, were Liberal members too, and we were a bit ostracised because we were country members (laughs).

[0:34:53] (I): How long did you usually spend in Sydney?

(S): Well Parliament sat for set days, um, I don't know, now you're pressing me now with my old memory. I suppose I only ever really went in those early days, in my beginnings, in my first term in Parliament. I guess I only really went when Parliament was sitting, or if there was

some special occasion, if there was some special function that was on. I think for instance, you know - there were things happening, like the Bicentenary. When was that - 19 - no that was 1977 wasn't it ... no that's later, erm, that was a big occasion, when we celebrated the landing of Captain Cook.⁷

I suppose I was privileged that while I was at Parliament a lot of those big things happened like that. The Opera House being opened, and the Eastern Suburbs railway, and lots of big things we did, that were accomplished. Westmead Hospital, was a very big thing to happen in Sydney in those days. But um, so if there was something like that, or if I was invited to speak at some Branch, or something. Most of my time, I suppose - the majority of my time would've been spent in Dubbo I should think, or travelling round to other electorates to speak to meetings or something.

But basically I was Dubbo oriented, and looking after my electorate - course I had to travel to Parkes, and all around about, Yeoval, Cumnock, and these sort of places, I visited them all, and spent time in them all, as much as I could. Parkes was a very big part of my electorate, and needed a lot of attention. So, I needed to have most of my time here, particularly in those early days as I establishing myself, and getting to know everybody and everything. So, erm, there you are. So I couldn't tell you how long Parliament sat for - probably about the same time as it does now.

[0:37:10] (I): So travelling must have been quite tiring?

(S): Tiring - it was a terrible thing. I was a bit fortunate in some ways because one of the big fights in the election that we won, but mind you we only won it by one seat which is a bit interesting with the Federal Parliament at the moment. That first in 1965, it was, we won by one seat, and so people like me, got a lot of attention from the Government because they wanted to hold onto that one seat. We were the sort of place that made the difference. Les had won it and I held onto it, and so, we were seen as very important to getting them into Government.

⁷ The Bicentenary was celebrated in 1988, marking the occasion of the arrival of the First Fleet at Sydney Cove on the 26 January 1788. It was not related to Captains Cooks discovery of Australia in 1770. (Australia's Bicentenary, National Museum Australia, accessed 09-11-2018 at: <http://www.nma.gov.au>)

One of the big things was Reg Ansett. People may remember Reg Ansett, he was responsible for domestic airlines, really, in Australia. The other alternative, in those days, was Transair-, Trans, TAA, Trans Australian Airways which was government owned. And a smaller company called East West Airlines, which was a country owned thing. So the Country Party backed East West Airlines and Reg Ansett was backed by the Liberal Party.

Now, Reg said that if we won Dubbo and got Government, erm, and Dubbo was essential for that, he would build a workshop here in Dubbo. So, when we won, of course he was as good as his word and he built down near the airport.⁸ He built this engine overhaul workshop, and it was a very important thing for Dubbo, it was one of the things that gave Dubbo growth and prestige, with somebody like Ansett having their workshop here. Um, and - he was very kind to me. When he knew that I was travelling up and down on the train he said, "Oh look, I'll organise for you to have free passage for twenty five trips or something." I didn't get every trip but I think it was twenty five trips or something he gave me.

One of the things we were able to convince the Government later on, not in that first term but later on - when I got a bit more influential, I was able to convince the Government that it was one of those country members, we were all in it together, that we ought to have airline passes to so many. So we used to have so many, I think, I can't remember, it might have been twenty five again. We got twenty five trips for the plane. Otherwise we - I went on the Dubbo Mail [train]. And I travelled many times on the Dubbo Mail, which left Sydney about 9 o'clock at night, got here about half past six in the morning.

[0:40:02] (I): And the Dubbo Mail was a train?

(S): A train yes, the Dubbo Mail was a train. It used to go to Bourke, but the patronage from Dubbo to Bourke was so low, that eventually they decided to stop that. That was, oh I think somewhere about, I can't remember when it was stopped. It was, hadn't been going to Bourke for quite a while, the passenger train. However, it's interesting of course to read of the trains they were, you know, they were the life line of the people in the country in those days. Erm I

⁸ An Ansett engine overhaul workshop was opened in Dubbo in April 1968 (Daily Liberal, 23 April 1968 p.1)

think they - I was reading the other day that and, erm, some of the history of that and it was, I think, the railway station was the first building in Narromine. Now that's interesting isn't it?

[0:40:49] (I): It is.

The first building in Narromine was the railway station. It was there before anything else, isn't that fascinating. So we've grown on the railway line. So, that was the only way we had really, for average people to go on their holidays. The railway people who - the railways were the biggest employer of Dubbo, by the way, in those days, we're talking about - and the railway people got a pass every year to go. They were the only ones who - you'd be surprised the number of people in Dubbo in those days who had never been to Sydney. I would say half the population of Dubbo had never been to Sydney.

[0:41:29] (I): Because of the distance and the expense?

(S): Yes. You know, to drive to Sydney was well, not everyone had cars in those days. We weren't an as affluent a society as we are now.

[0:41:42] (I): So it must have been quite special to be flying up to Sydney with Ansett, although these days they might have considered that slightly inappropriate (laughs).

(S): Yes, I think I would have had to declare it today, I would have had to declare it. We didn't have to declare anything like they do now, in those days, that's all happened since. It was a different world.

[0:42:04] (I): So, how do you think then technology has changed ... or technology did change during your time as a State Member?

(S): Oh dramatically, dramatically, erm, communications just improved so much, I mean, it was just amazing - telephones and everything, television - everything's just so changed, dramatically. I mean television was just coming into its own, when I was, in the 1960's, we were just starting to really have one nearly in every home that was starting to happen in those days. It was to change everything, really. It was, erm, we were more dependent upon newspapers for news and information. The Daily Liberal was a very big issue in Dubbo in those days. The Parkes Advocate was also - was a very, it was the Parkes Champion I think it was

called.⁹ The Parkes Champion. It was a very influential paper, and I had to look after them very much as a member of your staff knows.

Erm, yes, and of course, transport changed so dramatically. One of the things for good or bad that we did when we came into Government was - one of the issues we fought the - fought the election on was that, up until we came into Government there had been a very heavy tax on road transport. There were very few trucks on the road. Nearly everything was carried on the railways. Petrol, cattle, sheep, freight, all freight was coming, was on the [rail]. The freight between here and Sydney was very heavy. And the reason, one of the reasons for that was that there was a very heavy tax on road transport, so there were very few big, there were no big transport companies much, they were just starting to evolve. And you saw very few semi-trailers, or anything like that - everything went by rail.

Now, when that tax was lifted, well of course, road transport just took off. So roads had to be improved. The roads weren't marvellous up until then. I mean, gosh I can remember even up until late in my time in government I had to work terribly hard to get the roads over to the coast bitumised. The Golden Highway for instance, didn't come until after my time. It was a dirt road for most of the way - gravel and terrible, took you a whole day to go over to Newcastle, took a whole day to come to Newcastle, if you went over that way. The only way you could come from Newcastle was to come up through the Blue Mountains. Fancy from Newcastle to the Blue Mountains, that's how we came to Dubbo when we moved here. We wouldn't have thought of coming up that other way. It was a goat track.

Erm and one of the very big difficulties I had as a Member was - getting towards the end of my time - was convincing the Shire Council, as it was, Timbregongie was Narromine, and Talbragar Shire was here. Phil Beddoes was the Shire Clerk and he was a ruler without question. He was a very strong man, and I had terrible time convincing him that the council had to organise with the other councils over in the Coolah, and that way, to build a bridge across the, at Uarbry - that was the big problem that the Talbragar River - doesn't look anything much there, when you just go over when it's not raining (laughs).¹⁰ But that's where

⁹ The Parkes Champion Post

¹⁰ Uarbry is a small village located on the Golden Highway between Dunedoo and Merriwa.

the Talbragar River starts, and at Uarbry it used to flood, and it was - the disaster area. And to build a big causeway around, and to build that bridge, oh gosh, that was one of the big achievements, which really started getting that road a bit usable. It was a terrible road. Um, so again that's all part of the growth of the place. Now we've got the Golden Highway, and it's such a blessing to have that road.

[0:46:35] (I): You mentioned when we spoke previously that one of your big achievements was to get the [Dubbo Base] hospital renovated and modernised...

(S): Oh yes.

(I): ...Can you tell us a little bit about that?

(S) Well, the hospital was pretty down at heels and the same man was the Chairman, Phil Beddoes, was the Chairman of the Board at that time, and they'd done a good job I s'pose over the years. But they were old and tired and the - we didn't have the Health Department like we have today, it was a very broken up organisation, and part of it was the Hospitals Commission, which was really mainly funded by the lotteries in NSW. And they ruled the roost as far as hospitals were concerned, and there was a great division between the Hospitals Commission and the Hospital Board at Dubbo. They didn't get on. They didn't like one another, and erm - one of the things I'd said I'd try to get done when I was standing for the election, was to do something about the hospital. And so the Minister for Health was Harry Jago who became a good friend of mine and, erm, he said, "Well, I've spoken to the Health Commission and they say they won't do anything while that Board's there."¹¹ So he said, "The only way we're going to get anything done is to dismiss the Board, are you up to that?" He said, "There will be a lot of repercussions if we do that. You'll have to cop it." So I said, "Well if it means us getting some proper health facilities here and to help reach out to the district," because ... most of the other little places had small hospitals, that couldn't really do very much there, they needed a base where they could come to.

There weren't many specialists here - I think there was only one resident specialist when I came here, Todd Meurer. Who was a nice man, the rest used to come up occasionally from Sydney I think, occasionally. We were virtually without specialists. Anyway, I took the

¹¹ Arnold Henry Jago (1913-1997) was Minister for Health from 1965-1973 (Parliament of New South Wales at: https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/members/Pages/profiles/jago_arnold-henry.aspx)

challenge I said, "If we can get it, yes." So he said, "Well think about who we are going to appoint to the new Board." So I gave a lot of thought and care to that and I nominated a very fine group of men who were very well received. This was really what saved me from a lot of the angst was they were such good people. Ron Rich, who was an accountant, a very fine man. Jim Pascoe, who was a country farmer, very highly regarded by his peers. Erm, people who were in the Labor Party, like Norm Cox, who in those days was just a young Alderman on the coming up, was later to become a very fine Mayor.¹² I appointed him and people like that. They were all leading citizens. One of the chemists, who was a great member, turned out to be one of the really great members of the new Board. Erm, and - I lived next door to him and I can't remember his name now isn't that terrible, and I know it so well. Isn't it funny how you know names so well and when you get to my age they just won't come to you. But he was great - I'll get it in a minute, no I can't get it, but anyway, we appointed this new Board, and they really, they were accepted.

However, the night that they were dismissed, the *Dubbo Dispatch* came out with a blazing headline 'The Night of The Long Knives' and they castigated me and Harry Jago, and called us everything under the sun, you know, what a disgrace this was, that these fine men who'd served the community - which they had done, I mean there you are.¹³

However, whether they deserved it or not I don't know, it had to be done to get something. So Harry was as good as his word, the architects were fit to planning and before the end of the term of Parliament work had begun to change and build. And of course that's just gone on, and I think we can be very proud of our hospital, it's a massive place. I go up there now and you can get lost there very easily. Interesting thing is, they've kept the old part, which puzzles me. I was hoping they would pull the whole lot down and start anew. But there you are, we are still using that old place, and it's still fulfilling its function, but all the new buildings and of course we've got this school for GPs and for dentists and, oh I mean Dubbo's, and we've

¹² Phil Beddoes lost his seat as Chairman of the Dubbo Base Hospital Board in a secret ballot held on 20 Sept 1965. He was replaced by Mr Rex Cowlisshaw. (Dubbo Liberal, 21 Sept 1965 p.1)

¹³ 'Night of the Long Knives' was the title of a Daily Liberal article referring to Alderman Eddie Meek losing his position as Deputy Mayor. (Dubbo Liberal, 17 September 1976 p.1)

got so many specialists now who call Dubbo home, and who give great service out to all the region.

It started off - the next thing that happened I suppose is that Harry reorganised the whole department, set up the modern Department of Health. I mean, this happened to so many of the departments that had to all be changed. And erm, part of that was to appoint a Regional Health Office. The one the Trade Unions of Australia, I can't remember which one of the Unions, anyway, built in Church Street, Oliver House, our first multistorey building, but it was empty, couldn't get any tenants, and so one of the things we did, we put the Department of Health in there.¹⁴

And the public servant who was appointed as the Director of Health in the west, he was a remarkably fine man, and he did a wonderful job, but I think that's part of the - he's to be given a lot of the credit for the way our health system has grown into the very caring service it is. We've even got the Flying Doctor here now in Dubbo. It's a great health centre Dubbo, a great health centre, and every second building as you walk around town, seems to have doctors and specialists in it. So there you are - a great hospital.

[0:53:02] (I): It's really doing well and new renovations happening now...

(S): Yes, it just goes on, and it all started on the 'Night of the Long Knives'.

(I): ...How many board members got dismissed on that night?

(S): The whole lot, the whole lot.

[0:53:17] (I): How many were there in total? You can't remember?

(S): No, I can't remember that. I did ask Jim Pascoe the other day. I met Jim Pascoe and I asked him, could he remind me of the names of all the new members that we appointed. I can't even remember them now. He did tell me the names of a lot of them. One of them was one of the leading solicitors in the town, and so on. They were all fine people, who were wonderfully accepted, and who did a wonderful job, they really dedicated themselves. Keith Logan was the chemist. Keith Logan, I've got him. He was in Macquarie Street, just across, not far down here, Macquarie Street. Had a very good chemist shop, and he became a very

¹⁴ 'Oliver House' built by the Australian Workers Union opened on the 26 July 1969 (Dubbo Liberal, 29 Jul 1969 p.2)

prominent member of the Board, with people like Ron Rich. I think Ron later became the Chairman of the Board. I think Rex Cowlisshaw, who was another grazier, - a rural man, became the first Chairman I think, but I'm battling to get their names. And the old Board, I was pleased to forget (laughs).

[0:54:22] (I): Fair enough.

(S): Except for Mr Beddoes, whom I can remember was the Chairman, and probably part of the problem.

[0:54:32] (I): Do you have any other highlights during your political career that you might want to mention?

(S): Well, the Dubbo Zoo of course, is one of the things that I'm very delighted that I was the right person in the right place I guess. One of the things I was a member of the Taronga Zoo Board. This was before I became a Minister of course. This is just in my early days, ah, because I'd always been interested in that. One of the things that we started here in Dubbo, with one of the new specialists that came, David Hamill, he was a lovely man. He was one of the first specialists who came to Dubbo. He and I, I took him into, we started an environmental group, and we started a group here in Dubbo, and it is still going strong, with concerns about our environment and our country and ... all of our things that we need to preserve.¹⁵

And so I was a member of the - that's a long story to tell you, I was a member of Taronga Park Zoo Board. And we were in trouble at the zoo in Sydney, the Taronga Zoo, and we got a specialist to come. The Minister for Health [Lands] was Tom Lewis and this Dubbo and rural NSW owe a very great deal to Tom he was a very great Minister for Lands.¹⁶ He was the Minister for Lands for about ten years, and he did a remarkable job, and one of the things he was really interested in was the Zoo. We talked it over with him and he decided, he gave us authority to call, and we had a big report done, and we reorganised the whole of the Taronga Zoo, and it came out of the doldrums and it's become a world-renowned zoo.

¹⁵ The Dubbo Field Naturalist and Conservation Society was established in 1977 (Dubbo Field Naturalist and Conservation Society, accessed 14-05-2018 at: <http://www.dubbofieldnats.org.au/>)

¹⁶ The Hon. Thomas Lancelot Lewis was Minister for Lands from 1965-1975. He was Premier of New South Wales from 1975-1976, Parliament of New South Wales, The Hon. Thomas Lancelot Lewis (1922-2016) accessed 29-12-2017 at: <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/members/pages/member-details.aspx?pk=1810>)

In the course of his visit, Tom and I had lunch with him or something, and we started talking about things, and he told us about a fascinating new development that was taking place in San Diego [USA] where they were building a new open range zoo on a very big area, and he said, "It's a fascinating new development in zoos." So, Tom said, "We ought to have a look at it." So, the Government sent me over to have a look and see what it was like, and the Board, they sent me over to have a look at this thing. So I was fascinated with it. It was still under construction, much bigger than our area. Erm, course they've got more money and a bigger population everything's bigger- everything's bigger and up to date in Kansas City you know, San Diego. So, I came back and reported, and said, "We ought to think about doing this in NSW." So Tom was very enthusiastic, and the Board was enthusiastic. So then came to finding where we'd do it and would we do it.

First thing was then the Board sent people over to San Diego. Architects and engineers went over there. Those people, and they really did the hard work on working out what they were doing there, you know, as far as what we could do here. And the structure, the type of structure, and so on, which is all new. So, we started the ball rolling. The next big moment, of course, to come was where would it be? Now of course, erm, by this time I think I was the Parliamentary Secretary to the Premier. And so I was having a bit of influence around the place. But actually before it started, I became the Minister for Health and one of the saddest things I think I've ever done in my life, was, I made a wrong decision, as I see it now, but I think it was the right decision at the time. I resigned from the Board because I didn't think it was right for the Board - which was answerable to me, I had the final say as Minister - it was not right for me to be sitting on the Board during all the discussions and then I could go as Minister and change it. I thought that's not fair, they should have the right to be independent of me. So I foolishly resigned.

[0:59:19] (I): Was this the Board for Taronga Western...

This was Taronga Zoo Board yes, and I'm just so sorry that I couldn't have continued 'cause I loved that, I loved it, anyway. So, we had to find a site. So the Lands Department were asked to look for any suitable sites in Australia - in New South Wales. So by this time I had become Minister I think, and so, the District Surveyor here was responsible for a very big area of this part of western NSW. He was involved in this, and there were a number of really good sites.

But the one that he strongly recommended was the old wartime camp, there was an army base out there, and alongside it was an Arboretum which was kept by - a very good Arboretum - that was kept by voluntary work here in Dubbo. And Dubbo was very proud of that Arboretum. It covered a very big area, pretty well the whole - facing the Newell Highway - it ran along facing the Newell Highway, not very deep, but adding that to the old camp site, the army site, gave us a very good piece of land. And so I was in the fortunate position of having to decide where it was to go (laughs).

[1:00:48] (I): Handy.

(S): Yes, except, there was a good site near Parkes and that was a bit of a chill for a bit, but anyway, I decided that it would be here. The Government backed me, and away we went. And um the money - Tom was Premier at this time and he was prepared to put up the money. So Dubbo Zoo was underway, and there we are, it really put Dubbo on the map I think. As I think I said earlier, I was listening the other day, to that girl from the zoo talking on national radio about it, about a worldwide concern about rhinoceros'. So there we are right leading in the world.

[1:01:35] (I): Yeah it's a wonderful zoo....

(S): Yeah

(I): ...and it's a great benefit to Dubbo. So, you worked in politics or was a Member until 1981. Is that correct?

(S): Yes, 1981 I retired. I wasn't beaten - I retired (laughs). I thought I'd done all I could do, I was at the end of my tether, I thought. It was very tough being the Leader of the Opposition is a tremendously hard task. And I'd given myself whole-heartedly to it and it was tough. Neville Wran was the Premier and he was a very good Premier in many ways. He was a tough, hard man to beat and erm, he had great public relations. He did some terrible things that I opposed very, very strongly. He sold off, for instance, roads, areas right across Sydney and all directions that'd been reserved for freeways. Sold them all, sold them all to get the money, and so we've had to go through this terrible torment. You see in the paper all the time now, people complaining because they're going to have to lose their houses and all this, you see. We lost all the reserves that had been kept for years for future development. Those were the sorts of things he did, to get money, and he spent the money to promote his government, and he did

it very well. He did it - he was a very successful Premier, and he was a very hard man to be the Opposition Leader to. I probably shouldn't have stood when I did, but I only stood - I didn't want to stand, I only stood for certain reasons that I won't go into.



John Mason with colleague John Barraclough (Member for Bligh) reading a copy of the Daily Liberal newspaper.

[1:03:14] (I): Fair enough. Do you have any regrets from your time as a Member of Parliament?

(S): I think I said, one of the things I said in my closing speech of Parliament, my final speech of Parliament, when I was retiring, I did express some regrets, I said one things of interest, I said, I didn't think we'd done enough for indigenous people, I spent quite a bit of my speech talking about that, which is interesting, and of course it's - you know, we've had serious problems here in Dubbo over the years. We had some wonderful families who lived here for generations and great members of the community showing how it can be done. But some very bad decisions were made I think, and over the years, and we still have a long way to go. And that's one of the regrets I have that I, when I was Minister and influential in Government, that I didn't do more about that. We were pretty quiet in those years. That's one of the regrets I've got.

As far as Dubbo and that, I don't have any regrets I don't think. As far as my electorate I have no regrets. I really looked after my electorate and its people. I was always available to them and I think that that's, I think that's what a Member should be - first of all is, you've got to care for your people and their situations, and I think I did that to the best of my ability.

(I): Well, that was wonderful John, thank you for your time. Your story will form part of Macquarie Regional Library's Oral History Project. This interview was conducted by Simone Taylor, thank you.