

## **Clem Jones Oral History Project**

**Interviewee: John Duncan**

**Interviewer: Lindsay Marshall**

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**Recording venue: Clem Jones House 63 Wellington Road East Brisbane 4169**

**Duration: 36 mins**

LM: Okay. This is an interview for Clem Jones Oral History Project, conducted by myself, Lindsay Marshall. It's with John Duncan, and the interview's taking place on Wednesday, the 14th March at Clem Jones House at East Brisbane. John, thanks very much for talking and being involved in the project.

JD: Oh, it's a pleasure.

LM: Just going back to your early days, before you started working for the [Brisbane City] Council, where did you grow up and where did you go to school?

JD: Right. I lived at Norman Park with my parents, until I married. School, I went to, we moved into Brisbane from NSW after the war, and my brother and I went to Nudgee Junior College, Nudgee Junior out at Indooroopilly. It was a boarding school because you couldn't get a house. We were there for two years, and then we bought a house at Norman Park. I then moved to St Lawrence's. My brother and I both went to St Lawrence's.

LM: That's St Lawrence's College at South Brisbane.

JD: South Brisbane, yeah. And then I did scholarship there and being a good Christian boy, in the days when Catholics and Protestants... My father was a Protestant, but that didn't make any difference. My mother was a Catholic. The days they weren't on the best of terms. Anyway, we left St Lawrence's, about six of us, to go to Industrial High School in the city, because of the fact we all wanted to do engineering in there. There was no trade training or anything at all at St Lawrence's. It was purely academic, to go to university to do university degrees, basically if you went any higher than grade 12 as it is today.

Anyway, I went to Industrial High School. I went as high as junior. I didn't go any further than that, because I really didn't know what I wanted to do in life. At Industrial High School, you had the situation, when you're ready for your junior exams, they tell you what they thought you were suited for from the two years' experience, etc. They said that I'd make a good tradesman, and recommended fitting and turning. So, when I left school, I applied to the Council for a job as an apprentice fitter and turner, which I managed to achieve, and I did the five-year trade in one year at Eagle Farm Workshops.

During that time, it's interesting because of why I'm here, during that time, because I was studying a Diploma in Engineering at night, the Engineer in charge there was an ex-Navy man who did engineering after the war. I was in the drawing office and he came in one day and I said: "You know, Brisbane will never get sewerred". I made some comment like that. That's right. He said, "Oh, look, all you need is to get someone in, that's got the get-up and go and the will and the drive, and Brisbane will be sewerred." Because I've always thought of that, and then, of course, Clem got in. Clem had the will and the drive and the desire to do what he did.

LM: Prophetic words. Yeah.

JD: Now, the thing that amazed me. He sewerred Sandgate on higher purchase. Now, that just wasn't heard of. 6% flat. 6%. Anyway, that's the sewerage pumping station and so forth had all done it on higher purchase, but of course, looking back now, it was a very smart move.

LM: So, how did that work? Who actually stumped up the money? Was it all totally borrowed?

LM: For that particular...

JD: For that particular, well I'm not sure. I wasn't involved in that in those days, but Clem organised and that's I believe why it went anyway. Now, maybe that's just a story that's been told over the years.

LM: But if it's the way it was done, it was sort of an innovative approach for its time.

JD: And I'm pretty sure that Sandgate was sewerred on higher purchase, but just how it was organised, I don't know...

LM: Your taking up of a technical trade, did you move into that field because I know you've told me your father worked on RAAF planes during the war, were you sort of predisposed to...

JD: No, that was purely the fact, at the end of my junior year, they told me I'd be suited to be a fitter and turner. That's the only reason I took it on. I had no... I didn't want to go into an office.

LM: And what year would this be? Would this be the late 40s, early 50s?

JD: No, 1954 I did junior.

LM: 1954. Okay.

JD: That was when I finished high school. No, '53, and I started my apprenticeship down at Eagle Farm Workshops in 1954.

LM: Were jobs like, I know you didn't want an office job, but were they around to be had? Or, were the jobs scarce at this time?

JD: No. It was..there was plenty of work. The fact that I applied for an apprenticeship, I don't know how to put this, but a lot of my mates that I went through Industrial High School because it was the only industrial school had trades throughout the Council, different branches, transport and so forth. But I've copped it over the years because my uncle was chairman of what used to be the CML. It's like the Liberal Party, but it used to be called Community Liberal...

LM: The CMO?

JD: Yeah. CMO. Sorry. CMO.

LM: Citizens' Municipal Organisation.

JD: That's right. Yes. Now, he was dad's half-brother and he was the chairman of the CMO.

LM: What was his name?

JD: Horace Williams.

LM: And that was effectively the Anti-Labour Party at the municipal level?

JD: Yes, that's right. Yeah. That's the same as the Liberals today.

LM: That's right.

JD: Anyway, he was very good friends with Tom Gaffney, who was the deputy chief engineer and manager. Whether that's why I got the job at Eagle Farm with Danny O'Keefe, who was a good Catholic bloke, I don't know. You just don't know how things work.

LM: Maybe it's best not to ask.

JD: Yeah. But anyway, that's where I started.

LM: Okay, and what was the filtering process to get in. Did you have to interview panel or something like that?

JD: I had to meet the engineer in charge, that's Tom Gaffney. He was the deputy chief then. He was the head of the panel and there was three other interview people. There was about, I don't know, 70, 80, 100 people interviewed on the day. But I think I was lucky that I happened to know the motive there, the engineer in charge, been a good Catholic boy if you know what I mean.

LM: So, what was it like working for the City Council, particularly in that field?

JD: Oh wonderful. I've loved my job the whole of my career. It's been challenging. It's been interesting. People took an interest in us. When I got down there, the first thing the engineer in charge said: "Are you going to do the Diploma in Engineering?" Oh yeah. I didn't know what the Diploma in Engineering was. All I do is a trade, you see. But the number of engineers that went through from tradespeople in those days was unbelievable. Well, at my school, of course, it was five years night school, and it took me eight to get there, but I got there eventually.

LM: So, the Council had a fairly big role to play in training tradespeople?

JD: Yes, very much so. Now, the training that the Council Water Supply and Sewerage did, I can talk on that more than anything else. We were building a system that would last 100 years, and everything was done to the maximum that we could afford, well the Council could afford. All the engineers, most of them ex-Second World War people, all from various sections, all had that same drive to make the Council a wonderful place for the future. Anyway, that's all fallen by the way because the money we were spending was far too expensive. You just can't build a gold...

LM: But the needs still there for infrastructure to last, isn't it?

JD: Yeah, yeah, yeah. What we built and did in the 40 years that I was involved in the Council, 42 years actually I was involved in the Council, was wonderful.

LM: And by the early 60s, you're working out of the Coorparoo depot of the Council, the Water, Supply, and Sewerage section, and what was your job title there, and what were your responsibilities?

JD: Well, originally, again this is how the Council planned things, or our branch did, there was a job on the noticeboard for two technical officers. No, professional assistants, they called us in those days. It didn't mean anything to me and it didn't mean anything to anyone else. We're both doing the diploma. And then the engineer in charge of electricity, the mechanical and electrical engineer, came down and saw Danny O'Keefe. I heard all about this later. He said: "We want to train two professional assistants for the future superintendent's role in the Water Supply, one north, one south."

Because the superintendents were both due to retire at the same time. They just didn't want the system to fall over, but they didn't want people that just did plumbing and then through their sharp minds and all the rest of it, worked their way up.

They wanted to have the engineer type people, with study and all the rest. So, whatever work was involved, we understood what had to be done. Whereas if you have a plumber who's pretty skilful, he wouldn't understand the engineering side of why you have large anchor blocks and why you do this and why you do that.

So, we were both told to apply for the job. So we did. One year out of my apprenticeship, I was a professional assistant, earning more money than my father was getting. So now worries about training and so forth. I was in training then for about four or five years, and then the superintendents on both north and south retired, the assistant superintendent moved up and I was appointed to Coorparoo Depot as assistant superintendent.

LM: So, at that time, Clem Jones is Lord Mayor?

JD: I'm not sure. His alderman's office was in the same grounds as we were in. I just can't remember now as to when Clem actually became Lord Mayor.

LM: And that's Coorparoo, back at what used to be the Myer...?

JD: Yeah, yeah.

LM: Near the bowling green.

JD: There was a Water, Supply and Sewerage depot, a Work Department depot, that's roads and electricity. They were all in that big block opposite Myers. It's all units and stuff now, shops.

LM: And Clem had a reputation as being pretty hands-on as Lord Mayor. What was the Council staff's view of him?

JD: A hard man. I've heard other terminology, but they all respected him. Not scared of him, but they knew he was the boss. You daren't do anything wrong. I had a situation, with my daughter's 12th birthday. This will give you an idea of what Clem's like. Anyway, living at Camp Hill, I have 800 square metres. Big block of land. I was on duty, as assistant superintendent I had a vehicle to go home and so forth, because we were always on duty at night and you never knew when you were getting called out and so forth.

Anyway, I was getting the yard all ready, clean for this party in the weekend, and I backed the Council car out onto the road. It must have been the week before. And no shirt, just a pair of shorts, because I was working around the yard and so forth. Clem must have gone past. I wasn't aware of this, you see.

On Monday morning, I got a call to report to the chief engineer and manager. Seen driving a Council vehicle without a shirt on and what the hell are you doing, that sort of thing. Gee this is lovely. So, I went to the chief engineer and manager and told him the story. He said: "Well, the Lord Mayor actually put the complaint in." We laughed about it after when I got the note. Yes, I don't know. It was just one of those things, spur of the moment just backed the car out. I couldn't see anything wrong with that, and Clem couldn't either after when he got the story.

LM: When he knew the circumstances, yeah. And what was your first official encounter with him as Lord Mayor?

JD: Right. As far as personal contact with him, I was out in the field and radios in those days, not mobile phones. I got a radio call from the office to say: "Come into the Depot immediately. The Lord Mayor wants to speak to you about a water service." So, okay, I came in and got onto the Lord Mayor and: "It's John Duncan here, Lord Mayor." He said: "John, you got to lay a water service to Vulture Street to the Cricket Ground." I said: "Yes, yes. It's all drawn up and planned." I said: "We're just working on the overtime now to see when it's able to be done." You had to be very careful. You can't just shut water off to the industries, particularly around Vulture Street and all the rest of it.

Anyway, the situation arose and he said: "Right. I want you to put two teams on it. Start half-past-four this afternoon and I want it finished by tomorrow morning." Now, this was around the time that he was curator of the wicket at Woolloongabba....

LM: The Gabba.

JD: I think he must have wanted more water and he wanted it now, and all the rest of it, so he could make sure these wickets were right for the big match.

LM: And how long was your timeframe for the project for that?

JD: Well, we did it in the same time. But the difference is, there was more overtime down, so the cost would have been higher. Thinking about it, I honestly believe that wouldn't have worried Clem. He wanted water and if it cost more than that, well that was just the way it went, being Lord Mayor and all those things. Anyway, everything went well. I really..thought, well I'll check this out and about two or three months later, still hadn't connected it to it. So, he must have had enough water anyway. But it was just that he's the type of person that what he was doing had to be done right and what he wanted, he got it done so to make it work right. That's the drive that this man had.

LM: So, it's a fairly hands-on approach by the Lord Mayor.

JD: Oh, yeah. As I say, I'll never meet another man in my life like him, that's for sure.

LM: And you had another encounter outside, sort of, wearing your Brisbane City Council hat, involving your son. What was that about?

JD: That's right. My son, he went to a Special School at Mount Gravatt. He was classified as a slow learner, and they had this section at Mount Gravatt State School, where they looked after maybe 20 special needs people. Anyway, everything kept going very okay, and they had, I'm not sure now, it was six months I think, they did a six-month stint and then. It might have even been 12 months. And then they took them out, took their names and put them into work experience when the opportunity arose.

LM: How old would he be then?

JD: He'd been about 16, I'd say. Anyway... No, he was 15 when he started work at Clem Jones Centre. That's right. I got a call from the CES [Commonwealth Employment Service], we'll call them, the employment people. As superintendent, they were enquiring as to whether I was happy with the service we were getting from this particular branch of their organisation. I said: "Oh, yes, yes." I said: "I'm quite happy. I have no complaints." That's right. He said: "That's good. I'm here because, I'm asking these questions because we've had complaints and I just want to make sure things aren't as bad as they are, or worse than are sort of thing."

LM: This was complaints about people not getting jobs for their kids?

JD: That's correct. Yeah. No, no. Just people saying that the service that they were getting, for all work, was not satisfactory, and that's why he was out there, to try and sort out whether it...

LM: Whether you were happy?

JD: Yeah, yeah. Anyway, I said: "Well, look. Now, that you've rung up, look, my lad's just finished out at the Special School at Mount Gravatt and all his mates who live out Mount Gravatt, they've all got work experience jobs, and I'm just wondering whether maybe, he's the only one that's from the group and just no one's taking any notice of him." He said: "I'm pleased you raise that." Anyways, that was alright. So, that was the Tuesday and, on the Friday, I got a call from my good wife to say, we had to meet the Lord Mayor at his house on the following Monday about a work experience job for six months. Well, as I say, my lad, he can do things, but he just was a bit slow and a bit nervous. Nervous type fella. Big fella, big man.

LM: This is Murray?

JD: Murray, yeah Murray. Anyway, we went down and interviewed and everything. "Oh, Murray, that's good," he said, "We'll start you. Yes, yes. Six months. We'll give it to him." So, he went and about three or four days later, we got a call from Clem to say that "we've got a problem". What was happening, Clare had dropped him off down at the centre and Murray would go and hide in the stormwater drain because he was very nervous and scared and all the rest of it. Clem's running around looking for him and driving around in his vehicle, and I thought: "Oh, gee. He won't last five minutes now." Anyway, so we went and saw Clem, and Clem said: "Don't worry about it. That's what this whole centre's about." He said: "It's to keep kids off the street, to stop them from

committing suicide, to give them a purpose in life." I'd never ever dreamed of Clem Jones being like that.

LM: There's another side to him.

JD: Another side to him, yeah.

LM: And he was talking about what's now called the Clem Jones Centre.

JD: The Clem Jones Sport Centre.

LM: At Carina.

JD: Yeah. Clem Jones Sport Centre at Carina. Anyway, he said: "Look, don't worry about it. I just wanted to let you know there is this problem." Then he said: "Look, we'll overcome it. He'll be right." Well, Murray was there for 30 years. So, he overcame it and it was all, and so forth. But that's Clem. That's how he was. If he could help, he would. He could go crook, but if he could help, he would.

LM: And that whole centre, not only just in terms of, like your Murray's experience getting work experience there, but the whole direction of the centre was to help keep kids off the street and get them involved in sport and that sort of stuff.

JD: It's unique in Australia. Clem wrote the charter for it. Smart man. We only have one gambling organisation. That's the Carina Leagues Club there and they share the money between the 23 clubs you know, as required. If people approach them for money, each year they have their bursaries and all the rest of it. So, there's no fighting amongst the clubs. They're all fed by the Leagues Club and it's wonderful. A wonderful organisation.

LM: That experience got you deeper involved in the...

JD: Oh, no, no. It was purely through Clem. When I got involved, there was Rowly Cowan, Mick Foley, and Clem Jones. They were the three major.... they were the three people that started the Camp Hill Carina Welfare Association to set up the Clem Jones Sports Centre. Now, those three, less Clem because he had other involvement, but whenever Clem could, weekends and that, he'd do the wickets and so forth.

Anyway, Clem and the three of them set up, started clearing the grounds. It was an old dump. And they're getting people into it, different companies would offer their services and machinery, and Clem would drive all the buses and the dozers and all the rest of it. He could drive anything. He had no trouble. Anyway, that's how it went and then Clem said: "You know, we're looking after Murray. You'll have to help us down here." And I said: "Oh, yes. By all means." So, the next 25 years or so, every weekend, doing things in the workshops, making things and doing things in the Crackerjack Carnival and all that. I don't know.

LM: People will say, it's difficult to say no to him. People have said that.

JD: Oh, you couldn't. You wouldn't say no to him, because he was doing such a wonderful job. You could say no in my role as the Council. If I felt he was overstepping the mark, I could say: "Oh, look, my Lord Mayor. I don't think I'm able to do that. That's out of my charter. I'll fix it up." And then someone would ring up and say: "Yes, that's okay. The Lord Mayor wants it done. That's that." But

you couldn't say no to him though, and I loved it. It was a challenging, very challenging. One of the things that really gave me the opportunity was getting to know Clem as a human being rather than the Lord Mayor and the tyrant sort of business.

I remember when the '74 flood was on. I don't know whether you were going to mention that at all. When the '74 flood was on, we only had one dam feeding Brisbane in those days, and that was Somerset Dam. Wivenhoe hadn't been built. Anyway, they were concerned with this particular, it was '74 flood, it was a major flood, and they were concerned that the dam was going to overflow. Anyway, they decided, the powers to be up at the dam said look, we've got to open the gates, let water down so it doesn't overflow. Clem, at the time, I didn't know this particular story, but Clem at the time said, no, leave the gates closed. "But my Lord Mayor, if it overflows, you could destroy the dam".

"Leave it closed". Okay, so he just left it, what he believed, was long enough to allow the flooding that had occurred to move down the river without forcing more water into it. Anyway, that was that, and everything worked out well. We had a lot of problems in '74, but the dam didn't overflow and everything was right.

So, while we were at the stage of building the baseball arena, etc at the Clem Jones Sports Centre, where you're got to have the high fencing around so the balls that are hit, when they hit the balls and that, so that they don't go over and hit people in the head and all the rest of it outside the grounds. Clem said to me: "Oh, John. We got to go over to Grange...." That's one of the suburbs in Brisbane. "...to have a look at the baseball courts over there, baseball field over there, so we can just get an idea of what height and size and all the rest of it."

So, anyway, we headed off over there, just Clem and myself, and I said: "Clem, there's something I want to ask you. Look, in the '74 flood, they said they were going to close the dam, and you said, 'No, leave it open'...."

No, no, no. "They wanted to open it, and you said, no, close it. They said it could overflow. It's going to stay shut. Close it and it will stay shut until I tell you otherwise."

Something worded like that. Maybe not like that. Because I've told the story so often, it could be... But the fact of the matter is, it was opposite to what he was advising.

LM: And, it was his decision.

JD: It was his decision. Anyway, I said: "Clem, do you realise what would have happened if that overflowed?" Knowing, being a surveyor, he knew what would happen if it overflowed. Although, I suppose he'd have just said open it up, he would've changed his mind quick if it looks like it was going to go. But he said: "Look John, I'd been walking around, getting around the city and the horror of the flooding and how people were being distressed and worried and losing all their properties, I just couldn't have more water coming down." So, he said: "I took a gamble". I don't know whether you want to put that in, but that's what he said. "I took a gamble" And he said it paid off. It was lucky. It didn't rain. He said: "Maybe I'd open the gates eventually if it had have rained, but at that particular time, I just felt that it was the right thing to do."

LM: And it turned out to be a very controversial decision at the time. It was much debated and you know pored over and analysed...

JD: Well, I'm not sure what happened outside because I was on duty that week and I was too busy trying to keep resident water supply running on the south side and on the north side, because the duty of both north and south that weekend.

LM: But his motivation was to lessen the impact on people.

JD: That's right. That's the whole thing. He could see the agony that people were suffering and so forth and the houses... If more water came down, more people would have suffered like that, and he didn't want that.

LM: And you mentioned there, you got deeply involved in the Camp Hill Carina Welfare Association. And there were other big events that they put on. The big fundraising event, the Crackerjack Carnival. You were involved in that.

JD: The Crackerjack Carnival. We had two advantages with Clem. One, he had a lot of drive, and the other, in his business and his involvement in the community, he had a lot of industry that wanted to help. When he put up this idea of the Crackerjack Carnival, he was able to use his experience and abilities and Lord Mayoral strengths to get business involved and that's why he set up the Crackerjack Carnival. He was able to get sponsors and...

LM: Donations.

JD: ...so it could be run. So, it turned into a major organisation that, I think the last year when it ran, we made \$120,000. You can make that much today with a sports luncheon, but at that particular time, that was a lot of money.

LM: A lot of money. Yeah.

JD: Again, without Clem's abilities and drive and influence and everything else that goes with it, it would never have happened.

LM: And also, being involved with Clem, you were obviously invited every year to his somewhat famous pre-Christmas parties?

JD: Oh, yeah. Yeah, Clem was on both the boards that I was on, and we'd have the Camp Hill Carina Welfare Association have their Christmas party and you'd be involved there, and the Clem Jones Home would have their Christmas party and you'd be involved there. Clem was there, always around and so forth. I don't know. He did the right thing by everybody.

LM: And those events too, were also obviously a chance to, what we call these days, network with people and pick people's brains and recruit them for different jobs.

JD: Well, I think because Clem was so hands-on and everything he was involved in, he was always around, every opportunity. He'd drive around the Lord Mayor's car and all that stuff.

LM: You mentioned there that the Clem Jones Home, the old hostel at Bulimba as it started off many years ago, that was then run by the Aged and Disabled Persons Hostels and Welfare Association, which is the formal name for the Clem Jones Community Partnerships organisation.

JD: That's right.

LM: So, he got you involved in that too?

JD: Yes. Clem said: "John, I want you on the board." So, John went on the board.

LM: And you didn't say no. You can't say no.

JD: I didn't say no. I wouldn't say no. Because everything that he wanted people to do, not only did you want to do to help. Like what he did for me with my lad and all the rest of it. You did it because you knew it was the right thing to do. He made you feel so much part of the community and the organisation, that you just wanted to work for him. Unbelievable.

LM: He seems to have led people into another pathway that they wouldn't have otherwise gone down.

JD: Oh, yeah. I would never have been involved in Clem Jones Home, certainly the other one, but I wouldn't have gone into that. I just thought, no, no. I didn't really know anything about it really. It was Bulimba Hostel and as I got older, I knew friends that went there, as pensioners and so forth, that went there. But once Clem said "John, I need you on the board", well, you went on the board.

LM: And did you have much to do with Clem's wife Sylvia?

JD: Oh, yes. Lovely lady. Only through going to, up to the meetings at the House and all the rest of it. But she took a lot of notice of Murray and Murray thinks the world of her, or thought the world of her. She just made him feel very welcome up at his place. Because he'd have to go up and mow the lawns, up at Clem's, or do some work around the swimming pool or do whatever Clem wanted sort of business. That was part of the deal with everybody. Oh, no, we had a lot to do with Sylvia. She was wonderful.

LM: You have mentioned to me previously, that example of the personal touch that Clem had in terms of when you went on holidays to the UK and Scotland.

JD: Yes. When I retired, my wife and I wanted to go to Great Britain, which we did do, of course. That's what we'd planned to do. My father's people came from Great Britain. My wife's grandmother came across from Ireland. So, we just wanted to go and see where our roots were overseas and so forth. I mentioned to Clem that we're going over to Great Britain and he said: "Oh, when are you going?" Blah, blah, blah, and I told him. He said: "Oh, look. I'll get in touch with Sunny Macdonald. He's the Lord Mayor of... that's his wife, the Lord Mayor of Largs. Well, the Mayor of Largs. The Lord Mayor. "He's got the same role as I've got in Largs." He said: "I stayed there when I went over to see about the Edinburgh Games." And he said: "Largs is directly opposite Edinburgh. I was just backwards and forwards, from Largs to there." And he said: "I'll let Sunny know you're coming to see her." He said: "You can update her with all that's happening here and around our place and around the Centre and all the rest of it."

Anyway, we eventually left to go overseas and we did England and Scotland and coming down to go over to Ireland, we came to Largs, and I said to Clare: "I don't think we should. I just don't feel right about pushing in on seeing Sunny. She wouldn't want to see us."

Clem, he's full of get up and go, "He'll love to see you, etc." I said: "I'll give them a ring". So, I rang her and she said: "Ah, John. John and Clare." She said: "Ah, look, I've been waiting for you the last couple of days." She said: "Come around, come around."

I said: "Oh, deary me. Yes, certainly. Okay." So, I'm so pleased that we did go, because look, it was unbelievable. It was just like going into Clem Jones's home. She accepted us and so forth. Because Clem had said: "Now, get Sunny to show you my bed, where I slept. It overlooks the mouth of the Clyde." I think it is. He said: "Get her to show you." He makes you feel very comfortable.

LM: It was very personal connections he made.

JD: Oh, yeah. Clem was not a father to me, but he was just a wonderful person. The most influential man I've ever met. Loved the man.

LM: Thanks very much for talking to us today, John. Thanks for being involved in the project.

JD: Thank you. That's good. Well, that was easier than I thought. All the things I've spoken to you about, I've sort of been telling people for years.

LM: It's good to get them down for posterity. Thank you again.

[end of recording]