

Clem Jones Oral History Project

Interviewee: Robyn Galvin

Interviewer: Lindsay Marshall

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Recording venue: 6 Second Ave Burleigh Heads, Gold Coast QLD

Duration: 30 mins 18 secs

LM: This is an interview for the Clem Jones Oral History Project with Robyn Galvin. It's being conducted by myself, Lindsay Marshall, on Friday 3 March 2023, and we're conducting the interview on the balcony of Robyn's unit, overlooking the Pacific Ocean at Burleigh Heads.

RG: Yes.

LM: Robyn, thanks for doing this interview.

RG: Pleasure, Lindsay.

LM: And, I have to say, you've got a... people won't be able to get a picture of this obviously on the audio when they...

RG: No.

LM: ...listen to this, but it's a magnificent...

RG: It is.

LM: ...view you've got here.

RG: It is amazing. We're very fortunate.

LM: And any background noise people can hear is the rolling surf.

RG: Yes.

LM: And a bit of construction maybe nearby, because we are on the Gold Coast after all and they keep on building things here.

RG: Yes.

LM: Everyone wants...

RG: Progression.

LM: ...to come and live here. Robyn, before we get onto where you worked with Clem Jones and for Clem Jones, just going back to your early childhood, you were... you've told me

previously you were born in 1965, and I've never yet met anyone who has actually spent their early days living in a lighthouse. So...

RG: That's correct.

LM: Can you explain how that happened?

RG: Yeah. My father was a lighthouse keeper. So, I have very distant memories of it, but I'm not sure if a reel-to-reel that I'm remembering or different aspects of my memory clicking in. I was young. I was probably around about one and a half when we left, and around about four and a half when we returned. So, spent many years in isolation. We lived on two separate lighthouses, one in Dent Island which is in the Whitsunday Passage right across from Hamilton Island, which is currently used as the Hamilton Island golf course. So, around the other side is the lighthouse and it's still existing. After that post, my dad was posted to Booby Island which is northwest of...

LM: Thursday Island.

RG: ...Thursday Island. Thursday Island. So, this was literally a rock in the middle of the ocean. We used to receive our groceries by LARC [lighter amphibious resupply cargo vessel], which is an amphibious vessel. My dad was a fisherman on the island and operated the lighthouse. We were very, very, very isolated. We were the only family on that island. I believe there was another family on Dent Island when we were there. So, yeah. I, yeah, have very...

LM: That... those...

RG: Sorry?

LM: Those jobs would be automated now for many years.

RG: I believe so, yeah.

LM: Yeah, yeah.

RG: Yep.

LM: And, you've previously told me that it was when you and your sister needed to start school that it became apparent that you needed to come back to Brisbane.

RG: That's right. My sister's 18 months older than me, so we came back to Brisbane for her schooling then.

LM: And what did your parents work at when they came back to Brisbane?

RG: My mum was a TAB agent and she just worked for the TAB. My father then joined the Merchant Navy and he was a shipwright, and he travelled from Gladstone to Weipa on the bauxite ships.

LM: And where did you end up going to school when you were in Brisbane?

RG: I went to primary school at Wondall Heights at Wynnum, and at high school I went to Mount Carmel College also at Wynnum.

LM: And in those days, in the '60s and '70s, when you're about to leave school, what were the opportunities for you as a young woman? Did you have plans to do anything in particular, and were you able to fulfil those plans?

RG: I've always loved cooking and I always thought that I would've been a good chef, but unfortunately due to my family circumstances we were pretty much forced to leave school after completing Year 10, and it was to get a job to help the family with financial concerns. So, my sister when she finished in Grade 10 and then myself the next year, well, I went to work for the old Commercial Bank of Australia, the CBA bank which is not the current CBA [Commonwealth Bank of Australia] bank, and my sister got a job at the Bank of Queensland. And I stayed working for the banking system for 14 years.

LM: And after that, you got married, had children?

RG: After... when I completed 14 years, I had our first daughter. Yeah. Yep.

LM: Yes. Okay. And so, how did you know of, or did you know of Clem Jones at that time, and had you heard about him?

RG: Absolutely. Everyone in Brisbane knew Clem Jones, and myself being from the south side and Clem at Camp Hill, it was... everyone, it felt like everyone knew where Clem lived, you know. As we'd drive past his house, which you really couldn't even see because of the easement, you knew that Clem Jones lived down that easement. Like, you heard rumours about the tram system being lit up by Clem. Don't know if that's true or not. I never, never asked him.

LM: This was the fire at the Paddington [tram] depot?

RG: The fire at the trams, yep, at the...

LM: It's a great urban myth, isn't it? It's a great... yeah. Yeah.

RG: Yeah. I'm not sure if it's true, but we...

LM: No.

RG: And to this day the tram tracks are still in front of Clem's house, which is a great, I guess nod to Clem.

LM: And you'd heard of Clem, also you've told me previously, from your aunt, your...

RG: My mother's aunty.

LM: Your mother's aunty, yes.

RG: My mother's aunty was a cleaner at the city council hall, and there was a basement level which was the old canteen down there, and I don't... I'm not... I'm pretty sure it was open to the public. And she used to clean at night, and I remember her excitement every time that

Clem strolled through the premises and he might have given her a nod or a bit of a smile or a wink or something, and she was so terribly excited that Clem Jones graced her presence that day. So, he had quite an aura about him, particularly with the ladies.

LM: And how did you actually come to work for him later on?

RG: There was an ad in the local paper. I've got a feeling it was the *Southeast Advertiser*. My son would've been one year old, so that would've been in 2000. And the ad was for a bookkeeper, so it sounded fitting. I was already working as a bookkeeper at a drycleaner, and just a couple of days a week but it really wasn't suiting the purpose. I had two children by then, so I had resented paying for parking which was about how much my weekly income was, so I started looking for a job where I didn't have to pay to park.

LM: And did the advertisement give you any hint of what the, who the person...

RG: No.

LM: ...you'd be working for?

RG: No, not that I can recall.

LM: Okay.

RG: Trevor Bishop conducted the interview, and it was months before I found out that I actually got the job. To be honest, I actually forgot about it. Yeah. It just... I think Clem took such a long time to make up his mind.

LM: And Trevor was in charge of the what's now the Clem Jones Group in those days?

RG: Trevor was the accountant. So, I believe he was retired from [chartered accountants] HLB Mann Judd at that time or... actually, I don't think it was called that, but anyway, he was retired. He was Clem's righthand man, actually, and a wonderful man. Wonderful.

LM: And you scored an interview, though?

RG: Absolutely. Scored the interview, scored the job. I don't know if anyone else applied for it or not, but somehow I got it.

LM: And the interview was with Trevor, not with Clem?

RG: With Trevor. With Trevor. And it was many months before I even... after... it was many months after I got the job, but once I started it was many months 'til I saw Clem, or met Clem.

LM: And who else was in the office at those days? And this is the office that existed under Clem's house at Camp Hill down...

RG: Yes.

LM: ...down that easement that you spoke about earlier.

RG: Down that easement, yeah.

LM: Yeah.

RG: There was a young girl there called Melissa Hilton. She was Clem's admin person, filing, typing, taking notes type lady. She was a young girl, actually. There was another girl there, Melissa. I can't think of her last name. Gibson. Melissa Gibson. She did whatever we were ordered to do. And then there was myself, and I was in charge of the accounting. Which was I think at the time 17 different companies that Clem had constructed and worked his magic with one way or another.

LM: And you've mentioned to me previously that you didn't have a lot of direct contact with Clem in...

RG: No.

LM: ...those early days.

RG: That's right. Clem...

LM: What was behind that?

RG: I believe the lady that worked for Clem in that role wasn't as honest as she could've been, and... anyway, I believe that there was some sort of...

LM: Less than...

RG: ...animosity there.

LM: Less than friendly departure.

RG: Yeah. So, she left for whatever reason, and I then took on the role, and I think Clem sort of resented not me but the position that that lady put the company in and, yeah, he didn't want anything to do with me. It was... Trevor was absolutely the middle man.

LM: Okay. And in terms of the role of, the official title of bookkeeper, what were your day-to-day responsibilities? Basically in terms of interacting with Clem.

RG: Well, no interaction with Clem. But I would be writing out cheques, paying accounts, receiving accounts, doing our banking, balancing books, and then also doing the BAS [business activity statements] and the tax accounting, superannuation, wages for the companies, for all the companies.

LM: And the office itself in terms of its physical conditions and layout, it was under the house on the ground floor at Camp Hill. What was it like?

RG: It was appalling. Appalling conditions. The carpet would've been as old as the house, maybe 50 years old. The chairs were rickety. I had a three-legged chair that I had to balance on because I was not allowed to buy a new chair. I think Trevor ended up getting a dining room chair eventually and bringing it down to me so I could balance. Yeah. It was very ratty conditions.

LM: And you've also mentioned the possums used to get in.

RG: Possums in the roof. Possum pee in the light fittings. You could see the traces of the urine through the lights when you turn them on. Rat droppings everywhere. It was... I don't say third world, but it wasn't pleasant.

LM: It was basic.

RG: Basic.

LM: Very basic by...

RG: Very basic.

LM: ...the sounds of it. Now, you also mentioned that Clem was... obviously from that, he didn't like spending a lot of money on...

RG: No.

LM: ...things that he didn't think were essential. Is that the way he operated?

RG: I think he thought he could put the money to better use. He could feed a kid for the price of a chair. Yeah. So, I don't say I disagree with his philosophy, but I think there are certain comforts that would've been appreciated.

LM: Yes. And that sort of brings me to the point, a lot of people have mentioned that he was very, you know, not necessarily in a negative way, he was very careful with money that he had, but he had a lot of money, but a lot of it went to, not to himself. Like, it wasn't as if...

RG: No. No, no, no. No.

LM: He wasn't sort of cutting corners or...

RG: No. He was... there was no... he was not showy.

LM: No.

RG: The cars that Clem drove were... wow. They were knocked around, just old Hyundais that I think he got given actually as a sponsorship for something or other, or... I'm pretty sure that the cars he drove, there wasn't a panel on any of the cars that wasn't dented. He was very unassuming. Yeah. Yeah, very unassuming.

LM: It's interesting the way you put that before that, like, a new chair might help fund a school breakfast for...

RG: That's right. Yeah.

LM: ...kids for so many weeks or something.

RG: Yeah.

LM: So, that's the way he thought.

RG: That's the way he thought. Yeah. Like, I could buy a chair, or I could feed a kid.

LM: Yes.

RG: Yeah.

LM: And the... as I understand it, he had his office upstairs and the general office was downstairs?

RG: That's right. There was an internal staircase, but I was never allowed for those first three months to go up there. It used to directly connect with Melissa Hilton's office. And he used to buzz when he wanted one of the staff to go up, and sometimes you'd hear him yell down, but yeah, he'd buzz, and he'd hold his finger on the phone, like just that continual buzzzzzzzz, you know. It didn't matter if you were in the toilet or getting a cup of tea or in another part of the office, that finger would not be released.

LM: And upstairs was, as I understand it, staff-wise was, was sort of the domain of Wendy Stuart, was that right?

RG: Yep. Wendy...

LM: What was Wendy's role?

RG: Wendy, chief gossip. That was probably the main role. But absolutely delightful. She used to run after Clem. He used to... he had a very wicked sense of humour. He'd only want three Jatz with avocado on them for his morning tea, and if Wendy gave him four, you know, he'd think that that's waste. So, Wendy would be his housekeeper I guess, cleaner, washer-upper, she'd prepare his lunch for him, make him a good substantial lunch. She'd just look after him. Make his bed, do the washing, make sure that he was cared for.

LM: I guess to put it in context, this would have been after Sylvia his wife died in 1999, so...

RG: That's right.

LM: ...he was...

RG: I think Wendy was there when Sylvia died, though.

LM: Yes, that's right. But when you were there it was after... yes.

RG: After Sylvia died.

LM: Yeah. So, he was...

RG: Yeah.

LM: He was, and I'm just sort of interpreting this or guessing here a little bit, but I guess he was sort of an older man sort of rattling around in a house by himself at that stage, wasn't he, when everyone left from the office.

RG: I actually think he was quite lonely, and he liked... he loved Wendy being there, and certainly once he got to know me and Ros... Ros was also upstairs at that stage helping Wendy.

LM: Ros Pressick?

RG: Ros Pressick. I'm not sure what they did together, but anyway, he absolutely adored Ros. I think he liked to have... I think Dell Townsend used to call it "his harem of girls".

LM: Yes.

RG: And, yeah, he really enjoyed the company of us all.

LM: And you mentioned his attitude to not splurging on things or not wasting money. Was that evident upstairs in Wendy's domain too?

RG: Yes. He used to absolutely monitor what Wendy spent her money on, and he used to think that if he gave her too much money she'd go and buy a coffee cup, and he didn't need another coffee cup, there's nothing wrong with the broken one that he uses. So, very minimalistic, Clem was, with his goods and chattels. Yes.

LM: And you mentioned sort of the standoffish approach he took to you. When did that thaw?

RG: I'd say about three months in. And I really don't know how I was given the okay to go upstairs and get him to sign cheques. I think he could see that I was different to the other lady that was there, and I don't... I've never met her, so I don't mean physically, I mean just a different person. And he could...

LM: In terms of your competence at...

RG: Yeah. Yeah.

LM: ...the job and that sort of stuff.

RG: And I think he could see that I was genuine. And I also think he could see the potential in me that once he realised that I could do more than what he was giving me, he absolutely opened his office to me. And I'm going to go on a edge here and say he opened his heart to me as well. And he loved me coming up every afternoon and going through all his shares with him every day. Every day just, you know, around about one o'clock up I'd trundle, and I'd have to get two A3 pieces of foolscap paper and sticky tape them down the middle, and I would have big, massive spreadsheet of all his shares, and we used to go through them line by line every day. So, I'd have to update it before I'd go up, and what the market had done, how much he'd made or lost that day, when the shares were going to go ex-dividend, calculate how much dividend would be paid on what date, the gross yield of the share, the cost purchase, the cost current price. It was very, very, very involved. And line by line, every share, every day.

LM: And this was for... you mentioned 17 different companies. Is there... was that for each of those or they were...

RG: No. The shares weren't in 17 different companies, the shares were in Clem Jones Queensland.

LM: Right.

RG: A few in [Clem Jones] proprietary limited, and then he had a few scattered around the place.

LM: Right.

RG: A couple in Sylvia's name as well.

LM: Okay. Righty-o. Yeah.

RG: Yeah. He liked to spread the wealth, which actually spread the tax.

LM: Yes. Okay.

RG: Minimalising on the tax.

LM: Yes. Yes. And did you... in doing that, did you learn a lot out of...

RG: Unbelievable. I didn't even know what I didn't know. And, yeah, it gave me confidence, and Clem would tell me, Robyn, I think you should buy X share, you know, and hang onto it and I'll tell you when to sell it. So, yeah, certainly I didn't have the finances Clem did by millions but, yeah, I dabbled in the share market a little and made a little and, yeah. I think he valued... I think he valued what I brought to the job.

LM: Yes. And did you and he sort of make... did you have input into his decisions at that stage? Like what you said about shares?

RG: Goodness me, no-one could have input into Clem's decisions.

LM: No? Okay. It was all his work?

RG: Absolutely.

LM: Yep.

RG: I might have made him aware of, you know, "Maybe we shouldn't be selling that one today, Mr Jones, it's going ex-dividend tomorrow", and he'd go, "Oh yes, yes". But did I have input? No, not really. Like, Clem did what Clem wanted regardless of the advice of the stockbrokers.

LM: Yes. Okay.

RG: And to his detriment, actually.

LM: On occasions?

RG: More than occasions. He certainly didn't like... someone... I can't... it might have been that fellow that died, Ken Talbot? Is that the one that died?

LM: Yes. The mining magnate? Yes.

RG: He didn't like something he said or did to him, and he decided not to buy those shares, and then he bought Watpac shares when he really shouldn't be buying Watpac shares because the stockbroker didn't tell him that they were releasing more, so to get back at them he bought them all.

LM: Okay.

RG: Yeah. So, yeah, he was, yeah, a little bit, could be a little narky.

LM: But still very, well, by the sounds of it, extremely hands on.

RG: More than anyone ever.

LM: Yeah.

RG: Like, today the portfolio is still there at a tiny fraction of what it was previously, but as far as I know no-one in direct control of the business other than the stock market managers make decisions on it.

LM: Yes. So, there's no-one sort of doing that daily...

RG: No.

LM: ...trawl of the holdings and that sort of stuff. No.

RG: Not at all. Yeah.

LM: So, the 758 Old Cleveland Road where the office was, it seems to me to be extremely sort of unique work environment, and there were other calls on staff at the time. There were fixtures like the annual Christmas party at...

RG: Yes

LM: ...the end of the year, obviously.

RG: Yes.

LM: Which from my understanding from the people I've spoken to was a mixture of a thank you from Clem for work people did for him during the year but also a bit of a recruiting exercise for people he might want to do something for him the following, in the coming year.

RG: Yeah.

LM: And that's not a... I don't say that in a negative way.

RG: No, no, no, no, no. Not at all. Clem was always on the lookout for whose hand he was shaking to not only thank them but to take from that hand. And again, not in a negative way. It was a little I'll scratch my back, you'll scratch... you'll scratch mine, I'll scratch yours. But again, not negative. But I think everyone knew that they had a role in going to that Christmas party. There was no... yeah.

LM: It wasn't just a relaxing social event.

RG: No.

LM: No. And to some extent, he always seems to me to be, and you mentioned there that each individual, he seemed to be a man with a plan for that person if he saw a role for them to help...

RG: Yeah. Yeah. You certainly weren't invited unless, you're right, it was a thank you or what can you do for me.

LM: Yes. Yes.

RG: Yeah. And not in a nasty way.

LM: No. And again, not in a personal way either.

RG: No. No.

LM: It was always about...

RG: No, no.

LM: ...some charity or some cause or...

RG: And Clem knew... like, you know, he'd be always on the lookout to help you, you know, okay, I know someone that knows someone. And Clem always knew someone that knew someone. And that might not be for his benefit, that might be for yours. So, no-one there was under any illusion that...

LM: No. No. I know Graham Andrews, the former mayor of Charleville, said he was in awe of Clem's black book with his contacts.

RG: Yeah.

LM: You know, he could... throw a name at him, he could find a way to get to that person.

RG: Absolutely. Yeah.

LM: And what about the Crackerjack Carnival? Did you get involved in that at all?

RG: Not as much as the Christmas party. Certainly went to some of the dinners on the Thursday night, I think they called them Crackerjack Ball.

LM: Ball. Yeah.

RG: Went to that. And Clem was an extraordinary person inasmuch as myself and my husband and the staff would sit at his table, even though he could have been sitting with the Premier or the Deputy Premier, or all these dignitaries. Clem always, always treated his staff with as much respect as he treated everyone, and that was a great lesson to learn in life, and it's very grounding.

LM: Yeah.

RG: Yeah.

LM: And the other fixture on his calendar was the weekly tennis matches at Camp Hill.

RG: Wednesday afternoons.

LM: Wednesday afternoons, yeah.

RG: Yeah.

LM: And they were...

RG: Chicken sandwiches. Yep.

LM: Again, that was a bit of a routine, and it was... again, it was a bit of relaxation but also a bit of networking?

RG: Yes. Yes. He was very particular about who was invited, because it was invite only. Although there were standing people that could come or not, judges or magistrates and builders and all types of walks of life people. And I believe it was an honour to play there. Yeah. And he enjoyed it.

LM: Yeah. You've told me previously that you had this word about Clem to sum him up would be fairness, and you mentioned that about the Crackerjack Carnival, the staff...

RG: Yeah, absolutely.

LM: ...sitting at the table and that sort of thing.

RG: Yeah. He...

LM: Is that a great characterisation of him, to be fair?

RG: Yeah. I think fairness sums him up. Generous to a point. But then, there is that point. And loyal. Very, very, very loyal.

LM: So, he...

RG: Once you... sorry, I beg your pardon. Once you earned his respect... and I do think it was earned, there was no respect given. Once you earned his respect, you kept it. Yep.

LM: And he had your back, sort of...

RG: He had your back. Yeah.

LM: Okay. So, it must have been a big, emotional hit when he died in 2007 for everyone at that sort of closeknit office.

RG: It was... it was awful. It was awful. Not unexpected. Like, the deterioration of Clem through the months prior was sort of one day to the next. And I don't know that he... well, I don't know. He wasn't making great decisions at that time, he was doing things a little bit not rational, saying things... and it was his mind that was deteriorating. However, it was terrible when he died, and I believe that Trevor leading the charge Ros, and myself, put together the funeral. Mostly Trevor. And, yeah, it was very sad.

LM: It was a big event in City Hall.

RG: It was massive. Yeah.

LM: Yes.

RG: Yeah. And, like, I mean, I'm not saying it was just the three of us. There was help coming from every which way, but I think that the three of us were the steering ship in that, but Trevor was the captain.

LM: And a fitting tribute by all accounts.

RG: Very much so. Very much so. I thought it was lovely. I thought it was a lovely funeral.

LM: Yeah. And just looking back now, just to summarise and to round up, you've spoken of Clem's positives and some of his negatives. We've all got those, we've all got positives and negatives.

RG: For sure.

LM: And your work with him, would you... despite some of the negatives, would you do it all again?

RG: In a heartbeat, Lindsay. Yeah. I've never learnt anything, so much as I have learnt from Clem. Yeah. He was an extraordinary man in extraordinary times, and I can't say I agreed with him a lot, but I kept that to myself because I knew to do that. But yeah, I think it was a trip, and it was a wonderful trip.

LM: Okay.

RG: Yeah.

LM: Okay. Look, thanks very much for doing the interview.

RG: You're welcome.

LM: Thank you.