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Full transcript of an interview with

KEVIN CAHILL

on 15 January 1997

by Rob Linn

Recording available on CD

NOTES TO THE TRANSCRIPT

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RURAL HISTORY PROJECT.
Interview with Kevin Cahill at Nangeenan, Western Australia, on 15th January, 1997.
Interviewer: Rob Linn.

Kevin, if we could start at your beginning. Where and when were you born?

KC: Well, I was born in the Merredin Hospital on 6th January, 1934, as a twin. I have a twin sister who has spent her lifetime as a Nun in the convent.

That's Noreen, is it?

KC: Yes, that Noreen, yes.

Now your parents were Margaret and Vincent Cahill?

KC: That's right.

Having spoken to your mother I know that.

KC: That's right. *(Laughter)*

Well, Kevin, what would your earliest memories of this place be?

KC: Well, unfortunately and fortunately, I suppose. Fortunately, I'm old enough to just remember the horse teams but never worked one. I can, as a lad, remember walking home behind a team as they were taken out of a machine, on a couple of occasions, back to the stables. I have memories of our horses being sold, and delivered to the rail head and transferred to Perth where they were bought by the Midland Rail Company to be used in the railway yards at Midland for coal shunting, and these sorts of jobs. And as I said, I'm young enough, or old enough, to have carted bagged wheat, which probably healthwise I am regretting now.

I've also done that.

KC: *(Laughter)* And consequently - it's been interesting in that I first went to school in Nangeenan here, which was only a matter of walking three-quarters of a mile to a mile to school, which we used to do daily. And then of course in the War period the Nangeenan school was closed due to a shortage of school teachers.

Well, what actually happened, when the older male teachers were called up in the Services, the Education Department had a lot of trainee female teachers, so a lot of these young lasses came to the country with only twelve months of training. We actually had two of them here at Nangeenan. And the first one was not a bad sort of a teacher.

And the second one I think had left the college in a bit of a rush because I can remember a few of us as she would be putting sums on the board we would call out the answers to her or correct her mistakes.

But anyway, what happened, the Nangeenan school was closed in 1942 or 3, and my father and a neighbour, a Mr Albert Snell, they decided that they would look at instituting a school bus run, and as a result of that they set up the first school bus run in the Merredin area, that was to be managed and operated by the Merredin Shire Council, or the Merredin Road Board as it was then known.

And I guess, you know, you can chuckle about these things now but when you think back to the attitude of parents at the time in that they had worked out a route of approximately 35 mile around here to take us children into school, and some parents were against it happening because they didn't want their children to fraternize with so-called, I suppose, hobos from another district. *(Laughter in voice)*

Others were concerned about their health. There was trouble over which way the school bus could run because, as you could imagine, that if it started from one particular point, those children would get on the bus at, say, half past six/quarter to seven of a morning, and then if it went the same way - no, if it went the reverse way, those people would be late getting off at night. So to start with it was going the same way all the time. So if you were first on, you were first off. And there was trouble about that. So for a period they changed it the other way. It was first on, last off. And ultimately, it was ultimately resolved.

But there was another thing that was interesting as far as the bus was concerned because a Mr Murray Little was the Director of Education at the time, and when Dad and Albert Snell went down to pick up this bus, which

really was a 1941 or 2 Ford (I think it was) truck with a box built on the back of it - Dad and Albert Snell had input into the design of what was going on the back, and I believe it was the first school bus in Western Australia with glass windows. Prior to that, the one or two school buses that were operating, and there was only very few of them - I know one was at Toodyay *(Kevin spells this name Toodjay)* - they had canvas blinds in them. Toodyay is down near Northam. Northam's 60 mile from Perth, and Toodyay is one of the oldest settled towns in the community - in the State actually.
And of course with these blinds in the summertime, the dust and the heat and one thing and another, I believe it was pretty unbearable inside the bus. Anyway, they built this one with sliding glass windows. Another point of controversy was which way the seats should be in the bus, and it came out with seats along the side walls and a back-to-back one down the middle.
Anyway, when the final hand-over of the bus took place and the Directors of Education went to Sydney and Andersons in Perth where the bodywork was done, when they saw the glass windows I believe they weren't going to let it out of the premises, from a safety point of view. Anyway, I believe Dad and Albert Snell appealed to him, you know, to
consider the plight of the children, in the winter and the summer. If it wasn't the cold it would be the dust. And turn a blind eye to this one and at least, you know, let it go out and let it run and monitor it and see what happens. And that's what happened.
I know the night Dad came home with it from Perth here, we wouldn't let him have his tea till we had a ride in the school bus. *(Laughter)* And we went for a run up the road for about a mile and a half to a crossroad and came back. And we were tickled pink because, for us, the school had been closed at that time about eighteen months to two years and we'd been riding bikes into Merredin.

Did you enjoy school?

KC: I enjoyed school, yes. In fact I would have liked to have continued at school but that's perhaps another story I'll relate to you a little later.

But riding bikes into Merredin must have been a bit of a push.

KC: Yes. It's ten kilometres, and you know there is a - I'll call it a rise between here and Merredin. I won't say it's a hill but it's a long one, and Mum used to tell us that when she woke us of a morning the first thing we used to say to her was, 'Which way's the wind blowing?' Because invariably we would have an easterly and we would have to ride into it of a morning, and it could be quite fresh in the winter I can tell you. But when the school closed here - there were about ten of us that used to ride into town. And then the second year that we rode into town I used to dink my younger brother who had just started school. So I wasn't very impressed with that.

Do you call it dink over here too, do you?

KC: *(Laughter)* Yes, that's right. And we shared that a little. I used to con the others into giving me a blow now and again.

Well, Kevin, going back to something we talked about earlier. In terms of the settlement of this district you were saying that Nangeenan was actually the first settled part.

KC: Yes, it was. What actually happened - you know, naturally they had been looking to develop farming land east of, say, the Avon Valley, and there were farmers at Kellerberrin and Doodlakine, and my understanding is that this Nangeenan area was settled under an English land grant system and that was based on 160 acre homestead blocks, and I can actually show you a map I have in the office of the 160 acre homestead blocks that form the shape of this Nangeenan agricultural settlement as it was known. Just to the east of Nangeenan number one, which incidentally we do own, is the Merredin Research Station, which was set up in 1910, again to further agriculture in this eastern wheat belt. But I believe the first property settled under this scheme was settled in 1898, which is the adjoining property of Growden brothers, over the road. Growdens are South Australian people. That's where the family came from. But two brothers settled here and started this operation, and that is still in the family today but it's not farmed so traditionally. It's run perhaps as a hobby farm more than anything else, but it is a large farm.
That was another interesting thing, that these people, Growdens who came over from South Australia, not only did they take up part of this Nangeenan settlement allocation but they took up adjoining land as well. And they also

took up - and incidentally the land here through Nangeenan is mainly heavy land. It's the valley floor.

Clay?

KC: Clay, yes. It runs back into light country on the hills around, or the undulating country around.

Well, light here, do you call sandy or -

KC: Yes.

Sandy rubble or -

KC: Sandy rubble and sandy gravel, and patches of deep sand.

No limestone?

KC: No. Very little limestone.

So ironstone rubble.

KC: Ironstone, and then also of course you get into some broken granite outcrops in the deep sand as well.
Well, because they didn't know what was going to be the best land to farm, whether to farm the heavy land or the light land, to cover themselves to a degree they took up 1,000 acre block which is due south of Merredin, approximately I'd say twelve mile from here, and my father tells me that they cleared a bit of land at what they call One Moon, which was this 1,000 acre block. My father tells me that they put a crop in at One Moon and they put a crop in here on the heavy country, and they never cropped One Moon again, in that the light land was a failure. And I can remember that as - One Moon as virtually an uncleared block until the 50's and 60's when trace element fertilizers came along which really transformed the light land. As far as production was concerned.

Was there much of that experimentation done with trace elements here?

KC: Oh, well, no. It was done here but of course it was proved elsewhere and the proof was in the seeding, so to speak, and it just became an accepted thing.

And did your father tell you sort of other stories about the early days at Nangeenan?

KC: Oh, yes. Nangeenan also, because of the rail head, it was a big supplier of chaff to the gold fields for the horses that were working not only in the mines but also Kalgoorlie. Of course it's had race horses and a little core industry of racing there all these years. And see, Growden brothers had a chaff cutter and actually Cahills had a chaff cutter as well. That was my Grandfather, had a chaff cutter here as well. And they used to cut a huge amount of chaff in this area because at the time there was no land developed much east of here, and that was the nearest chaff supply to the goldfields. And if they didn't get it out of the Nangeenan area they got it out of the Avon valley. And so that was a big thing for the farmers of the day, was to cut their hay and stook it, and then have the cutters come in and cut it into chaff, and then it would be railed through to Kalgoorlie.

Were the clearing of the blocks around here time consuming and laborious?

KC: Yes. I understand that it was, because it was all done by hand, and of course a lot of the clearing was done by workers that came through. Would take a contract to clear. And then of course they were also clearing, I believe, under one of the Bank schemes, and that was where the Bank inspectors used to come along and they used to - the land had to be cleared to a depth of so many inches. Apparently if there were roots and those sorts of things visibly on the surface, or they suspected that roots were there, they weren't paid until they cleared it up properly, which was something that used to irk the people that were doing the clearing.

And, Kevin, what type of timber is pretty natural to this area?

KC: All of the heavy land basically is what we call a Salmon and Gimlet country.

That's eucalypt?

KC: Eucalypts, yes. And the Salmons and their offshoots. A bit of white gum on some of the off-type country. They're fairly large trees. And of course the Gimlets are a shiny bark red tree that probably go to about 30/35 feet. Usually quite straight. And they grow in thickets. The whole of the valley floor virtually was covered in that sort of timber.

Is the Sandy area more of a mallee type?

KC: The Sandy is more mallee. And wodgil and tea tree, those shrubby type bushes.

Wodgil I don't know. That's a new one to me.

KC: Oh, well, it's a bushy type tree with a kind of a furry bark on it.
And of course a lot of the clearing was sort of patchwork. Naturally if - they tried to get over it as quick as they can. And I've attempted to piece this together with Dad as to when various blocks and parts of the farm, you know, were cleared, and the majority of this country - this property here - and the majority of this country through here, would have been cleared by the mid 30's, and then there was virtually no clearing done much then until after the War. And then as a youngster, well, as a teenager, I have had the experience of clearing some four to six hundred of acres of properties that we've bought. So I know a little bit about mallee root picking and everything else that goes with it as well. *(Laughter in voice)*

Did you use scrub rollers here at all?

KC: Oh, yes, yes. In fact there still is a wooden scrub roller over in Growden's property on a granite outcrop. That has been there now for 50 years probably, and it hasn't completely deteriorated but it is still there.

So people were using techniques that had been tried out elsewhere. That's what I find interesting.

KC: Oh, yes, yes. Well, the massive amounts of clearing that were done through here of course were in the 50's and 60's with chains and big tractors

and, you know, where you just went through and you bowled over hundreds of acres in a day. And the clearing that we did was chained.

Could you describe to me please, Kevin, sort of the practise of your father in running the properties? You know, what type of stock did he take, what grains? The whole business.

KC: Well, naturally they mainly were growing in those days - they would have grown wheat and oats, particularly from a chaff point of view because oat and chaff was probably the most important one as far as the livestock were concerned. And in the early days, of course, it was all horse teams, and milking cows were the mainstay of every farm, and of course everyone milked cows and made butter, you know, as part of their survival.
But my father tells me that we experienced a couple of lean years and 1980 is the worst drought that we have ever seen, and Dad likened it to the 1914 drought, which he said was the worst one other than 1980 that he'd ever seen. He said the basic difference between the two periods was that in 1914 they were battling to keep their horses alive, which were their tractors, so to speak. Because if they didn't have horses, they couldn't cultivate their land. So he talked about taking the straw off the top of the hay sheds and the horse stables and mixing it with molasses to try and keep their animals alive. And of course they had to keep their milking cows going because that was their butter and their means of survival. And he said of course in 1980, when we had the drought here then, it was so horrendous because of the number of sheep that were around, and not so much cattle of course, and the only horses that were around of course were virtually pets and ponies and that sort of thing. So he said that was the big difference between the two droughts, was the livestock point of view and the two different aspects of livestock.

So, say, in his day when you were a lad he was running a few sheep?

KC: Yes.

Mainly cropping?

KC: Mainly cropping. Sheep didn't come here until the 20's. Very few sheep.

A few dairy cows from what your mother said.

KC: Yes.

You'd get the cream off and maybe make some butter.

KC: Yes. And then they used to sell the cream. You see, having a rail head here it was nothing to see a big line up of cream churns - or cream cans, sorry - on the railway station being picked up by the train on a daily basis. And so they'd be going down there. And they'd be turning off, you know, probably three and four cans of cream a week that would've been going down to Watsons - to Watsonia - to be made into butter. And then retaining the balance for themselves.

Well, when did that balance begin to change, do you think?

KC: In the 40's, yes. By the 40's here, we had almost - if I remember rightly - I went away to college in 1946 and -

That's agricultural college?

KC: No, to Aquinas College. Because, you see, at that time you couldn't go beyond sixth class anywhere in the country other than going to Northam High School, which a huge number of the young people around here did. They went to Northam High School, which was the nearest one, or else they went to Perth to the colleges.

Just before we go on to Aquinas, let's talk a bit more about that educational system. So really it was only a lower school education in the country?

KC: Yes, that's right.

And any child that wanted to go further had to go to Northam.

KC: Had no alternative.

And you said many went. What age did they stay to, Kevin?

KC: Oh, most of them that, say, went to Northam High School, they probably would have done their Junior Certificate, which would've been another - which would have been when they went, but at least two years there, and they would

have left school at 15 or 16, like the rest of us did. Like, I went to college and I left school when I was 15. Came home and got on a harvester and took off my first crop.

And was that your father's wish that you came back?

KC: Yes, it was really. It wasn't mine because I'd got a bit rapt. I was a reasonable student and I wouldn't have minded going on to University and being a veterinary officer.

But your Dad was very much farm oriented?

KC: But he was farm oriented and I was a source of labour. And I was keen on the farm. There's no two ways about it. So, you see, I left school in early December 1949 and came home and got on our self-propelled header and took that crop off, and by '99 I would have done fifty harvests, and I think it might be my last. *(Laughter)* I'm aiming to -

Don't tell me you're planning retirement already?

KC: *(Laughter)* Thank God it's only two years away.

Kevin, another thing before we go on. Earlier you were speaking about the school bus, and you were talking about some people maybe thought people from another place were hobos. Were there quite distinct differences between these local communities?

KC: Well, I think they were but it was more so much a barrier of distance than anything else, and the social activity here in the Nangeenan Hall tended to break this down to a degree. But of course that was where a lot of these people had met and married and then they'd sort of gone back into their shells, so to speak, a little bit when their families came along and they were raising families. Some of them also, of course, had their children on correspondence and they were very reluctant to take them off correspondence. Of course to go into school in town was a little bit of an unknown to them. And I can think of one or two families that - well, probably was at least half a dozen families that held out, that weren't going to participate in the school bus run, and they had to

be coerced into because they virtually had to achieve such a specified number before the Education Department would subsidise it.
But incidentally, since you've mentioned the school buses again, as I said, the Nangeenan one was the first one, and over the years then it expanded and then the High School came into being in Merredin in 1957, and by that time, or around that period, there were ten school buses operating by the Merredin Shire, bringing students in from everywhere around to all of the schools that were in Merredin. And it's rather ironical that I'm one of the few around that rode on the first one, and just for the hell of it I had a ride on one of the last ones, too. *(Laughter)* So I certainly do know the story of the school buses reasonably well.

So they're still going now?

KC: Yes. They still have school buses but they're privately run now. The Shire bowed out of it, probably about seven or eight years ago now. And so they're privately run.

Coming back to the farm again, you also mentioned that in the 1914 drought your father was mixing the thatch off the barns with molasses. Now, that made me think about the type of buildings on the farms. I actually saw some driving through, of the thatched type.

KC: Yes.

In disrepair, of course, but were they predominant through the area at the time?

KC: Yes, yes. Practically every farm consisted of wooden constructed sheds, whether they be a cow shed or a hay shed or just stables. And basically the poles were a forked stick. You know, ten or twelve foot out of the ground with the cross rails on and then a thatch of straw on top of that. There were very few wooden, say, saw mill type structures around, although here in this district it's a little bit unique in that Growden brothers, over the road, they had some magnificent sawn timbered sheds on that property. Magnificent for the day. And here, there's one behind us over the shed, that's been there since 1927. That was built by a chap who's only recently died in Merredin, a chap named Tom Richardson. Richardson Hardware still operates in Merredin but Tom he

was intrigued - several times he's been back in recent years to look at this shed that was sawn timber constructed in 1927. Galvanised iron.

Galvanised iron and sawn timber?

KC: Yes, yes.

So that the cladding was iron?

KC: Yes.

And Growden's the same?

KC: And Growden's the same, yes. Yes, we have got, on this property, we have two of those sorts of sheds. One here and one - incidentally it's on a block of Growden's that we bought. 1,000 acres that's on the same side of the highway. And over on Growden's place now they still have two of those sheds left. One, believe it or not, they lost it in a willy-willy. Just totally disintegrated the shed. We found pieces of it up to two mile away. And the other one they, in a rash moment when the partnership was split, they sold one. And that was a chaff shed. And that one was all Oregon timber. And they've got one still.

The timber would have been railed in?

KC: Yes, yes. They still have one of those Oregon constructed sheds still standing today.

Well, what time would your father's yearly routine have begun to change into sort of the modern era, do you think?

KC: I would say 1938. And the reason that I say that was he had one of the first <u>modern</u> *(said with emphasis)* rubber tyred tractors in the area. Growden's, over the road, had purchased two modern tractors. Two RD4 Caterpillars. And Dad wasn't rapt on the tracks idea so he bought this <u>huge</u> 28 horsepower rubber tyred McDonald diesel powered tractor.

Diesel?

KC: Yes. And I can remember the day that it came here, and I think probably it somewhat tendered to heighten his mechanical approach to things after that.

But of course they put their machines behind it that they used to pull with their horses. Their scarifiers, and their combines, and the old harvesters.
And he used to drive the harvester. After the first couple of years he developed what he called extension steering so that he could drive the harvester without anyone on the tractor. Where they just used to clamp the universal joint onto the steering wheel and then have a long rod extending back onto the harvester with the steering wheel on, and then ropes on the clutches to pull it one way or the other. And that was the way they harvested.
But then something that's a little bit unique in this district is that there were five Sunshine McKay - or HB McKay - self propelled headers that came into Western Australia, and it's rather ironical that three of the five finished up here in the Nangeenan - not in Nangeenan but within this area. One was purchased by Dad, second-hand. The next door neighbour, Mr Ron Whitehead, he had a secondhand one that he'd purchased from
somewhere or other, and then Jimmy Wanless, a farmer at Muntadgin, he had
- *(tape finished)*

SIDE B

Please go on, Kevin, about these headers.

KC: Well, as I said, I thought it was rather unique that three of the five should finish up in this area here. And they were 12 foot cut, whereas everything else the biggest was 8. I think there might have been some 10's, but they were 12 foot cuts, self-propelled. They had a Fordson six cylinder motor on them that drove through a pinion to give ground drive, and you used to sit there alongside the motor with the manifold right at your left knee, and the radiator boiling away in front of you, and the dust and the straw and the rubbish coming off the front of it. Well, it wasn't heaven but at least it got the crop off. *(Laughter in voice)*
But we, believe it or not, through a mechanical aptitude I suppose, we operated that machine until 1960. But we had modernised it in that I had spotted, through the Power Farming Journal, a farmer in South Australia who had converted his to rubber drive - well, say to a drive through a differential by

putting an axle underneath it. So I wrote to this gentleman and got some further information from him and convinced Dad that that was what we should do. So we took the gear box off it and had the lower shaft and the gear box extended, and we drove from there down to a transfer case off a Ford 4 x 4 Blitz wagon that we'd purchased for the specific reason. And also the back axle off that truck. We'd chopped it off at the diff and had extended it 4 foot to get it outside the frame of the header.

So that type of practise of innovation was pretty common?

KC: Well, it had to be because machinery was, after the War, was as scarce as hen's teeth. You had to place an order and wait maybe 12 months/2 years to get any later type equipment that was being produced because - and there was very little being produced after the War anyway.

Kevin, you also said, you know, your father thought up the concept of a wheat auger.

KC: Yes.

And also a mini-elevator, and it just seemed that there was this inventive, innovative thing going on all the time.

KC: Oh, yes. Well, it was because - I think part of this was that people wanted to ease their work load to a degree by turning to mechanical means and there were no workshops around to do any of this.
As a matter of fact there's a story in itself in that a fellow named Lloyd Bassula, he started a workshop in Merredin, and just before he did start this - no, it was after he started it actually - that was using, you know, oxy-acetylene plants which was the wonder tool of the era at the time, and bearing in mind that if you didn't weld something prior to that you either bolted it or you rivetted it. But when Dad conceived the idea of this bulk wheat in about 1945 or 46, he gave this Lloyd Bassula the plan of a wheat bin, which was probably one of the first square or rectangular shaped wheat bins with a veed bottom in it, and a door on the side to let the grain out. Because we had one of the earliest trucks in the area - it was a 1938 Commer Centaur, which we still have. I've kept it as a - well, it's a vintage sort of truck at the moment. Actually it'll still go. Mechanically it'll still go. But that's still here, and that would have come on the

place probably about '41 or '42. And the neighbours over the road had a truck and Rebartsons up the road had an old International. And they were the first lot of trucks that we used to cart wheat to the bulk system that was developed by CBH in about '38 or '39, or something like that.

So you had a bulk system that early here?

KC: Yes, yes. Even though it meant shovelling the wheat out of the bin and that sort of thing.

I was going to say, were you carting bags?

KC: We carted bags. Oh, yes. We used to cart bags as well but when this bulk bin was built about '45, you see that was when we went away from the bags. But prior to that I carted plenty of bagged wheat.

So in all the things you're telling me, Kevin, there's this, particularly after the Second World War, there's a change in routine.

KC: Yes.

It's very much geared to, on one hand, invention, on the other hand mechanisation, and I guess over the succeeding years it just kept moving?

KC: It did. It just kept moving. Well, what I was going to say to you was that when Lloyd Bassula built this bin and elevator for Dad, as a result of some things that Dad said Lloyd did wrong, he bought his first oxy-acetylene plant to fix it himself.

Right.

KC: And that came here in - I think it was about '46 or '47 that he got this first oxy-acetylene plant, and consequently when I left school as a Junior Farmer member - the Junior Farmer organisation came into being here in the end of the 40's, early 50's - I did a correspondence course in oxy-acetylene welding so that I could use this piece of equipment, and we went on to do quite a few other things after that. Invented a couple of other things after that.

So that young farmer group was connected - what to the Department of Agriculture?

KC: No, to the Education Department. It actually came about through a person named George Young, and also he was assisted by a fellow called Alec Ball in the south west of the State, but George had started calf clubs at the schools down in the country, and then he conceived the idea of expanding it and he was commissioned to do this under the auspices of the Education Department. And so, there was a huge growth in what was called Junior Farmer Clubs across Western Australia, and in fact it would have reached its peak by the 60's. And we here in Merredin, we had a very, very strong club in Merredin and we were part of the North Eastern Districts Council of Junior Farmers, which consisted of 14 clubs in neighbouring towns from around this area.

Well, did local adult farmers also have organisations that they could share ideas?

KC: No, not really. Other than, say, the Farmers Union. That probably was the only group that they had, and that consisted of small groups in every location, so to speak. And I guess that was a means of sharing a few ideas. But the Junior Farmers, I think if you can reflect, or as I can reflect through Western Australia today, there are a huge number of leading people from parliamentarians down to leading people in organisations who owe a lot of their skills - debating skills - and their forthrightness to the period of time that they spent in Junior Farmers. In fact I can go anywhere in Western Australia from Northampton in the north of the State to Esperance in the south and cross peoples path who I would have met in Junior Farmers. But then that's partly due to the fact that I was State President as well I suppose. And then I won a trip to America in 1957 as an exchangee, and I did travel the State talking about my experiences as an exchangee.
But I feel a real sadness for the youngsters, and I've got it with my sons, in that they've never had the opportunity of participating in an organisation like this because it is almost - it's gone downhill in the last 10 or 15 years, partly through mismanagement and partly through the competition in communities of mobility, and I'd say basketball and other sporting activities. And I think the

lack of the initiative of young people to want to learn those sort of things. And then also bearing in mind today, of course, that you've got the agricultural colleges across the State and the agricultural classes in the high schools that cover a certain amount of that agriculture that we all learnt through Junior Farmers.

I was going to ask you about that mobility question later but you've brought it up now. I guess in your early days the only transport was the family vehicle and you didn't do a lot in that. There was the train but you were pretty much in a community.

KC: That's right. Our only transport in the early days was walk, pay sixpence to go to town on the train, or you shared.

When you say town, Merredin?

KC: Yes, Merredin. Or you shared. And when I say you shared, you got a lift, because there were those in the community that either had access to father's truck or might have had access to the family car, and where we got around to dances and to Junior Farmer meetings and to other areas of the district, you know, it'd be not uncommon for, say, us members of the Junior Farmer Club to be going to what we call an achievement day at Mukinbudin, which is you know 50 mile away, and we'd all pile on the back of a truck. You know, 15 or 20 of us, and away we'd go. And you'd get home all hours of the night and day. That was how we got around. And I think that was part of social fabric of the day and created a lot of spirit amongst people. Everyone shared. If you wanted to go somewhere, well, you'd ring until you found someone that was going that way and you could get a lift.

I guess over the last 15 years/20 years that's just gone right out the window.

KC: Totally disappeared, yes. Totally disappeared. Yes, that's right.

Now if young people want to go to Northam, to Perth, they just go.

KC: Get in a car and go. That's right. And you see today, well, you'll see it today, kids showing up at high school in vehicles. That was unheard of in our day.

Kevin, you mentioned the trip you made to the States. Was that pivotal for you? Important?

KC: Yes, it was. I would say that it was quite a turning point as far as I was concerned because in America I worked and lived on family farms. I have an entirely different appreciation of the American people to what, for arguments sake, my brother has, who later went on a Rotary Exchange, and as such he didn't mix with the basic farming people like I did. He mixed with the business people in communities and so forth and so on, and probably mixed with the people in another social group. And he had an entirely different opinion to what I did. Whereas I did everything in America from leaving some monuments behind where I constructed drop gates on a cattle race in Montana. Not in Montana, in - oh, forgot the State. *(Laughter in voice)* Oh, crikey mo, we were in - I was in Colorado and I went up to - in Wyoming it was. Dick Salzer's place. I've got drop gates with my name written on - welded on - on a race up there, and I mounted a gas fired engine on a chassis for him to pump water for irrigation. Oh, that was at Dick - another - I don't know. The first chap I went to. Gee, isn't my memory getting bad? But you know, that was the sort of input that I had. And I talked to kids in high schools and mixed in local communities and went on hay rides. Although I did go - I had a week in Chicago, and went through some of the manufacturing plants there. Meat works. And then three or four days in Washington. And a couple of days in New York.

It was very positive for you?

KC: Oh, yes.

Well, what did you bring back, do you think?

KC: I think I brought back probably a more inquisitive outlook, and I think I brought back the feel in that you needed to share, and I spread my experiences around the State. For arguments sake, I remember talking - at that time I left the farm because I had another brother home here and it probably wasn't big enough, and I joined Elders as a stockman, based in Northam. I lived and worked there for about 18 months, and at the time I was

State President of Junior Farmers and I was able to travel the State after work or weekends and talk to Junior Farmer Clubs across the State.
And I can remember in Pingelly talking there about intensive piggeries that I was on. One was a piggery that was owned by a group of businessmen. Veterinarian and doctors who'd invested in this. And they had 40 sow unit where it was an all in, all out situation. They would farrow them. Sows down in batches of 40, and they were selling weaners like we do day old chicks. The farmers around would get their calves like you used to get them from the chicken producers here. You'd see there the batches of slips that would be available, or weaners that would be available, and the crosses that would be available, and they could just - they'd say alright then I'll ring up and I'll have 30 of these or 20 of those, and that. And you know, we're talking 1957 for that sort of thing.

So is that when you brought back the idea of keeping pigs here?

KC: Well, not here on this farm but I spoke about this set up and showed slides of it one night in a place called Pingelly, and a couple of years later there, a young farmer - junior farmer - Graham Hill, he went on exchange to England and came back and set up the first intensive piggery in Western Australia.

Right.

KC: And so I think that was a positive. I must have given him some food for thought. And he won this trip and researched it and, as I said, came back and set up the first one in Western Australia.

The thing you've struck me with, Kevin, is this, you know, the power of something like Junior Farmers is that it's sparking ideas everywhere.

KC: Yes, that's right.

It's also keeping the rural people together, if you like.

KC: Yes. Well, it did, and it was a huge - actually at one stage it got dubbed a marriage bureau because it meant a mixing. When we used to go to our achievement days and debating nights and that sort of thing, we were mixing

cross communities and consequently there were a lot of people that met as a result of Junior Farmers that probably may not have met at all. And it just filled a need in the passage of time.

Now, Kevin, one other thing I want to talk with you about is how you actually marketed your products off the farm over time. Did you always go through Merredin as such, or -

KC: Well, no, not really. Our products over the years have always been wheat, which has gone to - until the standard gauge line went through in 1969 we had a wheat bin here at Nangeenan, so we always used to cart our wheat to Nangeenan. And at that time, when the narrow gauge line was here of course, we had a rail link there with rail yards, so we used to sell sheep or cattle - because we ran a few cattle here after I came back from the States - we ran a few cattle, and we used to load them there. Or we would cart them direct ourselves if we sold them, say, in Midland - in the city, in Perth. Or we would sell to the local butcher. We used to sell fat lambs at one period to the local butcher.
But apart from that I think we are fortunate in that with Merredin being a major centre only 10 kilometres away. We've always had the beauty of service, as far as parts and workshops etc are concerned. And I know that's been a big plus as far as the farm is concerned. Although, you know, we've always been pretty independent. If it came to overhauling a motor, well, we would pull the head off it ourselves, and if the valves needed machining we'd take them into a workshop in town and have the valves machined and then buy the head gaskets etc and come back and put it together ourselves. Always done those sorts of jobs.

As far as foodstuffs and provisions go, Merredin's the centre?

KC: Yes. Merredin is the centre for that, yes.
But there is another thing that I must mention from an invention point of view, and that probably has been something that's transformed the handling of livestock world-wide, in that we went through a period of rapid farm expansion here in the late 50's, early 60's, and by the time the mid 1960's came around we were mating in excess of 4,000 ewes -

Can I just stop you there. You mean you were buying more land or clearing more land?

KC: No, we bought more land. I've got two brothers. Dennis, who's the youngest. Ten years younger than I am. And Brian, who's five years younger than me, or thereabouts. For us to stay farming, and still have Dad and Mum involved in the partnership, we had to expand, and Dad - I didn't mention this and maybe Mum hadn't - that Dad's original land holding here was 1300 acres. And then in 1951 when one of the Growden brothers died, they thought they weren't going to have a probate problem, so they sold 1,000 acre block on the north side of Great Eastern Highway, which adjoined us, and we bought that 1,000 acres. Now, that was the first land to change hands after the War, and so it became a bit of a test as far as values etc was concerned and we paid a whole £6, or $12, an acre for it. And that was a cleared 1,000 acre block.

Was that big dough at the time?

KC: It was. Very big money. Five trees on it, two paddocks, mud brick house. One of these builder built timber sheds on it, which is still there today. I think it's 90 x 30, or something like that. And a concrete building that the prisoners of war built during the War as a cow shed. Totally cleared with -

Italian POW's?

KC: Yes, with scheme water on. Scheme water - that's the Kalgoorlie pipeline. Comes out the front here, and that's a big asset as far as farming was concerned, particularly back in those days.
Anyway, as I said, that was bought for £12 an acre *(previously Kevin had said £6, or $12)*. And then one of the things that I saw in America was the use of advisors in '57, where they had these people that I think were filling the role of educating farmers that'd been away at the War and had come back to the land, and of course educating into how to survive in a far more competitive farming environment than what we had here at that point in time.
And I was very keen on - I reckoned we could use a farm advisor here. So along with another person from Doodlakine I was involved in setting up a farm management advisory service here in 1961. And ultimately, well, I was

Secretary of the group, and we finished up employing a young person from New Zealand.
What had happened in - when I left the farm after I came back from America in '57, Dad had said, 'Oh, well, you know, if I can buy an adjoining land if it comes up, we'll see about buying it if you'll come back'. I'd only been in Northam about 18 months with Elders, and he came to me and said, 'There's two adjoining farms coming up. We might be able to do something with them. You know, will you come back?' So I decided that I would, and we purchased one at auction for £9-8s an acre, and leased the other one. The bloke wouldn't sell it so we leased it for three years, and then purchased it for £12 an acre.
And then when this advisor came on the scene and we started to look at the state that we were at financially, it seemed that we still perhaps should consider expanding, ultimately for the three of us to set up farms here. So we purchased another property - another adjoining property. I've got to get my years right. Get them in focus. No, 1961 we purchased a property about a mile south of us. That was partly cleared, for £10 an acre, and that was partly because of the fact that it wasn't on the scheme, it didn't have anything much in the way of buildings on it, and as I said, it had in the vicinity of 400 acres that wasn't cleared on it.
And then in 1965 we bought a neighbour out again on an adjoining property and we paid £18 an acre for that. And then in '69 we paid - we bought another property. '69 was a lean year and that was a bit of a financial pinch but we got by. And come 1969 we had 8,500 acres by then, and about 3,000 acres of crop, and there were 4,500 ewes on the place. And lamb marking was one hell of a problem because with so many sheep it meant yarding them in temporary facilities in the corner of the paddock and catching these lambs, and we just said, 'There's got to be a better way of doing this. Maybe we should look at building some portable sheep yards'.
So the three of us came home one night at the conclusion of the tailing for the year, we sat down on the workshop floor with a piece of chalk and drew our ideas. And our ideas were to take a sheep race and mount it on wheels, and to that race to attach folding panels that would become the basis of the main structure of the yard, and then to increase the holding capacity of the yard we would roll out coils of arc mesh, which were 100 foot long and 3 foot tall.
So we set to, and we built this portable sheep yard for the following lamb tailing period, and then we went to the paddock with it and set it up, and it was in a

small paddock up in the top here of about 120 acres, and we actually had the yard set up before the bloke had got the sheep to us. It revolutionised sheep handling. And then ultimately we patented those sheep yards. They were the first portable sheep yards in the world. And we then set about having them manufactured and we licensed ARC Engineering, which was an Australia-wide -

Yes, I know. ARC Weld Mesh Ltd.

0.**KC:** That's right. And really what happened was, at the time there was a fellow named Peter Dixon who was a salesman for Cyclones, and Cyclones were a major builder of these metal sheds that you see around farming properties. And we put the idea to Peter, because at the time we had just built a new shearing shed here and pretty friendly with him. He said, 'But you've used ARC mesh as the panels on your raceway, and you've used ARC mesh as the rolls to keep your sheep in, I think you ought to approach ARC. Whereas', he said, 'you know, Cyclone basically build in pipe and use a rail construction'.
So we went to ARC, and a fellow named Fred Franks, he - ARC was smart enough - he was the engineer there I think, or one of the principals anyway. He was smart enough to see the potential. So the challenge was if we got it patented they would be interested in manufacturing it. So we gave them a licence then to manufacture it for the life of the patent, which they did, and they manufactured it across Australia, through all of their capital city plants. So, you know, we didn't have to market it. It was marketed for us.

So you took royalties?

KC: So we took royalties then for the 17 year life of the patent. Towards the end of that period, and actually whilst it was in the patent rights, ARC protected us - or protected themselves - in that they wouldn't let any other manufacturers encroach on the patent. Several tried to, and they took these manufacturing plants to court. I know there was - one was in Melbourne, and there was a spat with Cyclones here who tried to infringe on it, through another builder in another country town. And towards the end of the life of the patent a chap named McDougall Well Meants in Cuballing, he started to manufacture them down at Cuballing, and he knew at the time that we wouldn't compete with him

- wouldn't try and stamp him out because the patent was running out and it wouldn't be worth the - we had no means of extending the patent and it wouldn't be worthwhile doing. So consequently, now the patent's expired, of course, it's open slather. And you'll see them built everywhere and they're built around the world now.

So that certainly revolutionised handling.

KC: Well, they were the first - it was the first sheep yards taken to the paddock to handle livestock.

Well, just let's leave it there for a minute.