

VICTOR HARBOR ORAL HISTORY PROJECT, 'Beside the Seaside'

Interview with John William Crompton on 10th January 2017 at John's home in Back Valley.

Interviewer: Jane Bohnsack

John has spent all of his life at Back Valley; has been a farmer and has had many experiences along that journey with his family and has also had very strong involvement with local government and has received an AM Order of Australia Queen's Birthday Honours Award. Thank you John and thank you for agreeing to be part of this Project.

Perhaps you'd like to tell us a little bit to start the story of John William Crompton.

JWC: Thanks Jane. I think we probably should begin with a bit of family history. My father arrived in Back Valley out of Roseworthy College in 1909 and remained here until he retired to the old Crompton family home of *Stonyfell* where he finally died a little bit older than I am. He wasn't one of the oldest-lived Cromptons who had a bit of an inclination to head for the century.

His grandfather set up a business that involved marketing and exporting the produce of the colony, things like sheepskins; to a certain extent wool; almonds; yacca gum; all the products that the colony was producing. They were also involved with the *Stonyfell* winery in the early days, the olive groves at Burnside and the Bunyip Soap Company that produced Oxy-suds and was quite an important thing in grocery shops at one point.

He married Susan Mary Clark who was the youngest daughter of the Clark family, which like my grandfather found that their health was being affected by the industrial revolution of the Midlands of Britain. They came out to South Australia for the good of their health. Both died relatively young, but they probably lasted longer than if they'd stayed at home. Certainly had a more interesting life if nothing else.

Yes.

JWC: My grandmother's family was notable in that they came from the Sheffield area were a family of professionals, one of my cousins would have been Rowland Hill the bureaucrat who basically invented the postage stamp, so it's said. The family also ran a school called *Hazelwood* which Hazelwood Park in Adelaide is named after.

My oldest aunt, Aunt Emily, who is said, came out to South Australia with her father, my grandfather. Unrequited love was not quite the right word. She became one of the most forthright members of the South Australian community and apparently advised Catherine Helen Spence on political issues regarding women getting the vote and other things.

There were also a couple of cousins who came out as young women to South Australia in 1872, from memory, which was a time when women didn't travel without menfolk along with them so it was all a bit feminist and new in those days. They came out to look at what South Australia was doing in terms of looking after widows and orphans and delinquent children, health issues.

South Australia was doing pretty important stuff in those days. So my father's family came out of that which meant there was a degree of non-conformism and a degree of serving the community and, I guess, enlightenment philosophy attached to them all. So I'm sort of a product of that.

Yes.

JWC: My time at Back Valley began when I was born, actually in Adelaide but I was soon to be an infant in arms in Back Valley. I went to the Back Valley Primary School from age six. They decided I should move on a little so I did six years there, six part years, because my mother died in September 1949 when I was in Year Seven and I got moved, as a result, one term early to the Prince Alfred College Prep School. Then I remained in the boarding-house at PAC through until what then was called Leaving Honours.

Yes.

My time there was particularly interesting and probably educational for me as I had access to three maiden aunts and what I called a maiden uncle at the old *Stonyfell* house where they entertained every Sunday for afternoon tea some of the more intriguing people and denizens of Adelaide. People like the Chief Justice; the list was something I wouldn't have been totally aware of at the time but as an extremely annoying, precocious eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen year old I absorbed a lot of information from those experiences. I really spent more time at Stonyfell at weekends or back here at Back Valley on exeat than I did at PAC.

John, just getting back to when you first started at PAC and you would have been a boarder there, can you remember your time there and how many children would have been boarding? There wouldn't have been very many in those days.

JWC: I don't think we would have thought of ourselves as children at that stage actually, we were just boarders, but anyway I'm not 100% sure of the numbers but I guess there could have been sixty or something like that.

Yes.

JWC: It was, in the Prep it was probably more like fifteen or twenty, probably twenty or so.

And being an only child did you enjoy the company of all the other boarders?

JWC: No, once an only child, an only child, you enjoy your own company, Jane.

That's fair enough, yes. OK.

JWC: I certainly made some friends there, a couple of lifelong friends as one does. That friendship tended to involve *Stonyfell* as well because we'd take the tram from Dequetteville Terrace. No, I think we actually had to walk up to the mess at the bottom of Kensington Road to catch the tram. Caught the tram up to the terminus and walked up to Stonyfell. Then we'd continue to walk, up around the quarry, half way to Mount Lofty. We ranged over all sorts of countryside as you could in those days.

Yes, certainly a lot of changes have happened in that area of Adelaide and the foothills.

JWC: The Stonyfell suburb, which much to my aunts' annoyance was called Stonyfell without anybody asking them was actually the Clifton Golf Course. In those days it was, in spring, covered in native orchids and had bitumen greens. Now it's covered in very expensive houses.

Yes, quite a bit different.

JWC: Yes.

I believe you learnt a German language at university?

JWC: At school I did languages as you did back then; Latin, French but I didn't do German, so much later, in the seventies I think, I did a year at the Language Lab at Adelaide University and you would almost certainly remember Councillor Packeisen. He was quite convinced my German was the worst he'd ever heard! Big vocabulary but nothing else.

You finished school at PAC and then came back to Back Valley to the farm?

JWC: Yes.

Took over or worked with your father until he retired or did that happen after you met and married Penny?

JWC: No, I was basically working back on the farm soon after leaving school. I did spend the final summer holidays with a school friend in Western Australia which in itself was an interesting experience because they were migrants from South Australia. He was a builder and they were just in the process of setting up something there. They were living in a caravan in the satellite town of Medina in the sand country there in temperatures up to 45 to 50 degrees. It was all right being young but his wife, who was a sufferer of rheumatoid arthritis, she managed but it wasn't a very happy time for her I don't think.

So back on the property you had sheep, cattle?

JWC: Yes in those days it was a mixed arrangement. We had two dairies operating then both of which had been set up in the relatively early days of dairying. Originally it had been hand-milking in the early 1920s but it was a little more sophisticated than that. But sheep as well and a few beef cattle although they were separate to the dairy.

Yes but they were the main thing. These days do you still do any milking here on the property?

JWC: No we've ceased supplying milk now as of last July but we still have the remains of milking herd and we've had horses since the three used tramway horses came down with my father from Roseworthy.

Oh OK.

JWC: Actually when I first started work here we were, one of the jobs was building the fence on the Range Road which, for a while had been fenceless. One of my jobs was to cut and drag strainer posts and posts out of the scrub with a draught horse. I had to go in front and I had to trust the draught horse was not going to tread on me in the process. We got on quite well actually.

That's good but that's how things were done many years ago.

JWC: They were. At that time also, he actually arrived the year before I did, we had an employee whose name was Andrew Golley who had come from Wedge Island with the local Littlely family. He had been born on the island I gather and was an extraordinary man who had all the knowledge that a person of the century before last would have had. Like how to make a rope, how to make a boat, all those very practical things. He remained on the property for again, till he died basically.

Oh. Another involvement I think you had was your involvement with Rural Youth?

JWC: Yes. An early branch of Rural Youth was down in Victor Harbor which gave me my first taste of community politics.

Yes.

JWC: I did have one interesting experience out of that I was lucky to have had and worthwhile doing. I was the local winner of the relevant Australian Broadcasting Commission Competition for Rural Youth and ended up being interviewed by Sir Charles Moses at the Sydney Easter Show.

That would have been a bit of an experience.

JWC: It was.

Did you enjoy it?

JWC: Oh Kings Cross was something else!

I don't think that was what they had in mind!

JWC: That's where they put us up.

Did they?

JWC: A temperance hotel at Kings Cross. Right around the corner from the Fire Station and Chung King's Chinese Café.

You remember it vividly, obviously.

JWC: We ate at the café fairly regularly.

Now just following on from the Rural Youth and part of your family, you have two sons and two daughters and it was during the marriage you were saying earlier, of one of your daughters your neighbour, Tim Warwick, approached you about perhaps becoming involved with Local Government. Would you like to expand a little on that, John?

JWC: Yes, I think it was a relatively weak moment and unfair to put to somebody when his daughter is being married and late at night and all that sort of thing. I did tell Tim that I would consider it but I didn't feel strongly drawn towards it but in the end gave way and said, "OK." The plan being that I would be elected and do a couple of terms which in those days was two year terms and then get on with life but it's not quite how things worked out.

Yes. Just going back in my memory, is that the time when we had wards or had we already gone over to?

JWC: That's a question I'm not sure I can answer. It was certainly when I had been inveigled into standing for the Mayoral position that was definitely elected at large.

Yes. I think at the time we must have already been as a whole of Council.

JWC: Yes I think it probably was. I'm not sure that didn't change when Encounter Bay and Victor amalgamated.

I can remember when I was in Local Government first we had wards.

JWC: Yes.

And I can remember Rosemary Warwick used to be...

JWC: Yes that's right.

An elected member for the Back Valley ward.

JWC: No, I don't think I was elected for the Back Valley ward.

No, so maybe that.

JWC: The whole area.

Yes, the whole area.

JWC: Yes,

The whole area councillor. I think you were a councillor for two years and then in 1992 stood for the position of Mayor, a position you held for ten years.

JWC: Yes.

How did you enjoy that experience?

JWC: Well, the curate's egg is a fairly good example, but some parts were definitely not all that flash but that's the way of the world, particularly of local government but probably any political area where you're serving a widely disparate community with a whole lot of different needs and desires, understandings of process and all of those things.

Did you feel you witnessed a number of changes in local government in that period of time that you were involved with it?

JWC: No the ratepayers always stayed the same. Probably the most interesting thing about my local government experience was that Robert Barry, then District Clerk, did take a fairly considerable effort to brief me and give me a fuller understanding of what local government was about. It's something that was very useful to me for the ensuing eight years I was there after Robert very sensibly resigned and went to do something else.

Yes, yes, yes. Then we had several CEOs before things settled down.

JWC: They finally did settle down, there's no doubt life was a little bit easier and less complicated.

Yes. During that period of your involvement John you were involved with the Southern and Hills Area Local Government Association?

JWC: Yes.

And with that was the Natural Resource Area; I believe you chaired that committee for a number of years?

JWC: Yes, that was the time when the State Government was trying to transition the old and the relatively effective Animal and Plant Control Boards to something that was a little more amalgamated. That did achieve some things that were valuable and helpful but like most political actions, not everything is totally how they hoped it might work out in the long run.

The Adelaide Hills Area programs, Mt Lofty Ranges Catchment Programs, were to some extent groundbreakers in Australia. There was a lot of learning as you went along. At the moment I believe that National Resource Management has slipped backwards a bit, partly through lack of funding, but partly through the cost of the process blowing out. You can do things more simply than a bureaucracy demands sometimes.

Yes, you're right there. Now what about the Regional Development Board? That was also a part of that involvement.

JWC: That was another part of a government looking for ways in which they can get advice from local government and communities as well as arguably having somebody to blame at times as well. Regional Development Boards did achieve some things but usually a lot of talk and not a huge amount of result at the end unfortunately.

Another aspect of your involvement in local government was our involvement here with exchange with Japan. Perhaps you'd like to expand on that story?

JWC: That had its origins in the relationship that South Australia had and has with Okayama Prefecture in south western Japan. I think that might have been something that was set up under John Bannon; I'm not sure of the timing. Sister/State relationships...

That's right.

JWC: between the two and I was invited as a local government person to a reception in Adelaide that involved a significant number of people. I think there were probably a hundred and twenty, hundred and fifty people, of both Japanese and Australian origin, from all sorts of business, walks of life, professions and one of the young Japanese women that were there, quite accidentally found that I was a dairyfarmer. She's the daughter of dairyfarmers in a place called the Yatsuka Village in the Hiruzen region in northern Okayama.

She apparently went back and told people back home that she'd met somebody here who was involved with local government and dairyfarming and the consequence of that was that I was invited to the opening of the new building that was housing the Dairy College for the two regions. Both the mainland Honshu side and the Shigoku side on the other side of the inland sea.

They also had an annual fun run there in amongst the farmland of the Hiruzen Plateau. I organised Robert Brokenshire and his Jersey-breeding father-in-law and took John Whellams, a local farm adviser. I found myself arranging it. I didn't really mean to do that but it happened.

The Director of TAFE was interested because they were interested in an exchange with the dairy college. TAFE had a dairy teacher I suppose is the right word and he came along as well. First time he'd been out of Australia which was a bit of an experience for Tony (Sutherland). We found ourselves in a beautiful rural region of western Japan; somewhat untouched by our

European faces. In fact the first time we were there I saw only one European face in nearly a fortnight.

Anyway we had an extraordinary experience there. They were extraordinarily hospitable; we stayed in houses. One issue for me from the community point of view was that I've always been a bit cautious about Sister City relationships because they were inclined to become junkets for everybody concerned and I felt that I/we had a responsibility to pay our way to some extent and in fact it was very one-sided because Japan's Federal government at that time was supporting the opening up of Japanese people to other social ways and skills. They paid for everything. What we paid for was our air fares and the Council paid for a few gifts and maybe a bit of office work, basically. It wasn't a hugely expensive thing for the community I believe.

Probably it got a bit more so afterward as we started going the other way but that trip allowed the exchange of young dairyfarmers, with South Australia and vice versa and also managed to involve the Japanese with, of all things, the Encounter celebrations. I think that those who were there and noticed could not be otherwise surprised by the juxtaposition of the local Ngarrindjeri people, the Japanese, the French and the Australians. Yes it was quite a fruitful thing. Unfortunately Japan ran into financial difficulties and the exchange still occurs but not on the level that it once did.

No. I think these days Investigator College still does an exchange student.

JWC: Not necessarily with Yatsuka Village but certainly with Japan. I believe it was a fruitful experience for quite a lot of the young people who got a chance to go along and either be part of the school exchange or run in the Fun-run or whatever.

Yes, quite an exciting time really and certainly broadened information to a lot of people in our community, those that were involved and had the opportunity.

JWC: Hopefully they did and as we discussed earlier at the end of the Encounter weekend, my wife and I, possibly rather foolishly, decided we should do something a bit personal for some of the people who'd been able to come and join in the celebrations. Of those was the Mayor and his wife of the Borough of Douglas on the Isle of Man. The connection there is a horse-drawn tram that's run by the Council there. Deane Michelmore and Betty-ann had made contact with them and the Mayor and his wife came out at their own expense, bringing with them I was told by one of the Councillors at the time who was a jeweller, his mayoral chain was worth \$40,000 which worried me slightly about security. Anyway the barbecue involved a couple of Councillors. I remember the young Councillor Schubert helped considerably with the barbecue.

We had Mayor Nagatsuna and his wife and I think there might have been a few other of the Japanese guests there as well. As I said, the Borough of Douglas lot, Captain Huc of the French Frigate, Vendemiaire, and his senior officers. Most of whom flew helicopters. And yes, it was a very interesting and convivial evening.

Actually it would have been a really good experience for them to be in Victor Harbor and come out here to Back Valley to see the rural area of Victor Harbor particularly Back Valley and just experience the beauty and the openness and what we have to offer.

JWC: Yes.

I'm sure that had very lasting memories for them as well.

JWC: Yes, yes. You will also remember Michel Rocard an ex-French Prime Minister who was involved in the equivalent in France of the Royal Geographical Society who had involved themselves in a big way with the Encounter celebrations and he and his girlfriend then at the time, visited us. The year before the event I think was political; I think there were elections happening in France at the wrong moment. I well remember his girlfriend, Sylvie Pelissier I think it was from memory, looking at the sea from Petrel Cove from the saddle of the Bluff and just saying, "This is just the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Yes.

JWC: We also raised earlier and we were talking the connection with Rocard. My family, my grandfather's business had dealt with an area in France called Mazamet. They had a fell-mongering business where they sold sheepskins to them and I mentioned this in my welcome to Rocard when we gave him morning tea at the Bluff. He told me that through his scouting connections in France he knew the Castagne family that our family had dealt with in Mazamet. Then (name indistinct) was rather extraordinary.

Absolutely. Just shows you what a small world we live in. That connection really comes to the fore when you're talking with somebody and you're not expecting a real connection to be there.

JWC: That's right.

Just absolutely amazing.

JWC: I think there's another one worth mentioning which is a little bit the same only in some ways worse. An anecdote from our first trip to Japan: we, my wife and I, took John Whellams with us on a railway tour of that end of the island up to Tottori and the Izumo Taisha down in the end to the coast of the Inland Sea and the Bullet Train. It was a wonderful experience but when we got back to Okayama City we needed something to eat and went to one of the restaurants near the railway station. Most of them were reasonably basic on the outside but nice on the inside. We sat down with a young Japanese woman and an older Japanese man at a table near-by – only other ones in the restaurant. Eventually she was obviously taking an interest in us and eventually she asked, "Are you from Australia?"

We said, "Yes, yes we come from Victor Harbor."

At this moment her face completely lit up, "Ah Victor Harbor, Hotel Crown, Christmas 1993! I mean New Year's Eve 1993." Kissy, kissy, kissy! (laughter).

How do you walk into that?

Oh goodness!

JWC: I mean that seems quite extraordinary.

Absolutely amazing! So she obviously had some very good memories of that evening.

JWC: This actually moved on. When we went back to Japan we got in, we remained in touch with her, for a while. She was about to get married and she actually came to South Australia for their honeymoon, as some of them were doing at that point. We made contact again with her boss as her boss was the older Japanese there. He was the manager of the Okayama City

Railway Station and basically a policeman actually. He entertained us again the following year only rather more lavishly this second time. Yes, interesting connections were made.

I think a couple of points I need to include with the interview and that is that the Reserve at the corner of Tabernacle Road and Nicolas Baudin Drive in Encounter Bay is named after yourself and they call it the John W Crompton Junior Reserve. This specifically means you. There had been some confusion in some of the research that I did that it was named after your father but it actually is after yourself.

JWC: My father was John William Crompton and he had an uncle who was in England who was John William Crompton. We had a bit of a thing about JWC.

A very popular name in your family.

Another point we need to register is that you were awarded the Order of Australia in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2005 for Service to Local Government and Community, particularly through the Victor Harbor Council and the Southern Hills Local Government Area. Speaking about this earlier John, you mentioned that some other members of that Award in your family. You might like to just expand on some of the research that you've done.

JWC: Another Crompton received a Queen's Birthday Award in the middle of last year. He actually lives and works in Sydney but he's the grandson of one of my first cousins. Launce was one of the first members of the family to live here for a while with my father. Aged about fourteen or fifteen, yeah that would be about it. He was regarded as a weakly child and wasn't expected to live long but he made it to one hundred and three so something must have worked.

His grandson was awarded an Order of Australia last year. That prompted me to do a bit of research of the Honours' data and I came up with, and this again from memory. I think there were something like seven descendants of my Grandmother and Grandfather have received either a British Order like a Order of the British Empire, CBE or whichever or an Australian honour. I wonder if that might be a bit of a record.

Yes. I'm sure it sounds as though it probably is.

JWC: You never know!

Yes. Another little bit about John Crompton. Your other interests outside of all this other information we've been talking about and that's your interest in diving and skiing and snow skiing.

JCW: As far as I'm aware I was one of the first if not certainly the first local to use a mask and snorkel and or flippers in Encounter Bay which would have happened at the end of 1949 or the beginning of the summer of 1949 – 50. A friend of mine's father was the head of the Simpson Companies at that time and he was one of the chief people that we knew that actually did things like **fly to America!**

When he dropped off in Hawaii or one of the other stops, he picked up a Fijian goggles they were called which were double Perspex basically and a snorkel. I don't know whether we had flippers initially or not. As soon as I saw what the world looked like underwater through goggles I was totally hooked.

We went through a lot of early days stuff like we had in the end, a couple of tanks and some very primitive SCUBA gear. The only material we had to tell us how long we were supposed to stay where was all in Italian which was OK because it had numbers. We spent a lot of time diving at Encounter Bay and beyond that I got a few other people involved in diving where I was a contemporary like Scoresby Shepherd who made a major academic career out of diving.

Missed out by being bitten by any big sharks, in fact we very rarely saw anything of those – we were careful; we really were very careful. At the time we were really under way diving there was a significant number of divers died from hyper-ventilating, passing out under water and drowning. That didn't last long because people worked out what was wrong with it. It was interesting times.

The skiing, you can blame local chemist, Glen Goldsack although I had for some weird reason been wanting to try skiing, get into the snow country since a very, very, very young age; as far back as I can remember. Glen took me and a friend to Falls Creek in the winter of 1967 and again I was hooked. We were able to, mainly through Glen who was a member of the Bogong Ski Club, to do things pretty cheaply which we certainly did do. We had some very happy times. Finally we did head off to New Zealand a couple of times because skiing in Australia became a bit expensive and not so reliable. There were some good times there as well.

Lovely. John are there any other things that you'd like to include or tell us about?

JWC: Possibly one of the things that shaped my interests and what I did in local government to some extent was that one of my father's old friends was Professor John Cleland who had a **very** wide interest in things out there in the bush and underwater and everywhere else. He was actually a South Australian pathologist and one of the things he did was do a university handbook on identification of South Australian fungi.

That all influenced me to take a fairly deep interest in not only fungi and grasses but you name it, particularly in our local terrestrial orchids of which we have a wide range. I'm a bit frustrated these days that the taxonomists changed most of their names so the botanical names I once knew no longer apply.

I think another interest that you had was poetry.

JWC: Yes.

I don't think that was mentioned earlier.

JWC: Yes that may have been a bit inherent for some reason. I had taken an interest in trying to create something out of something great into something small, I guess is the best way of putting it and I did spend a bit of time with one of Adelaide's poetry workshops that nurtured a few people who could really call themselves poets.

I have had pieces published in a couple of strange places. Even something I wrote for the people of Yatsuka Village which was translated by our interpreter into Japanese, read out at the last event that they held there. It was actually celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of their local government body which was another big party. The Japanese like parties.

They certainly do. Anything else John? Any little things you've thought of as we've gone along this journey?

JWC: Well you can see some of the results of taking an interest in gardening around you at the moment.

I can. It's absolutely beautiful out here and with the peacocks walking.

JWC: They've managed to shut up for most of this interview which has been very good.

Yes, they're just beautiful, absolutely beautiful.

JWC: They can be a nuisance. My late father-in-law was Professor of Botany at Adelaide University so there was a bit of a follow-on from John Cleland and so on. There's a tree through to your left that is one of the earlier plants of the Dawn Redwood, the metasequoia, that appeared in South Australia. It's done fairly well, it's probably a bit out of place compared to the rain forest in the back of southern China but it's done alright.

Thank you John. I really appreciate your time, telling your story and thank you!

JWC: Thank you!