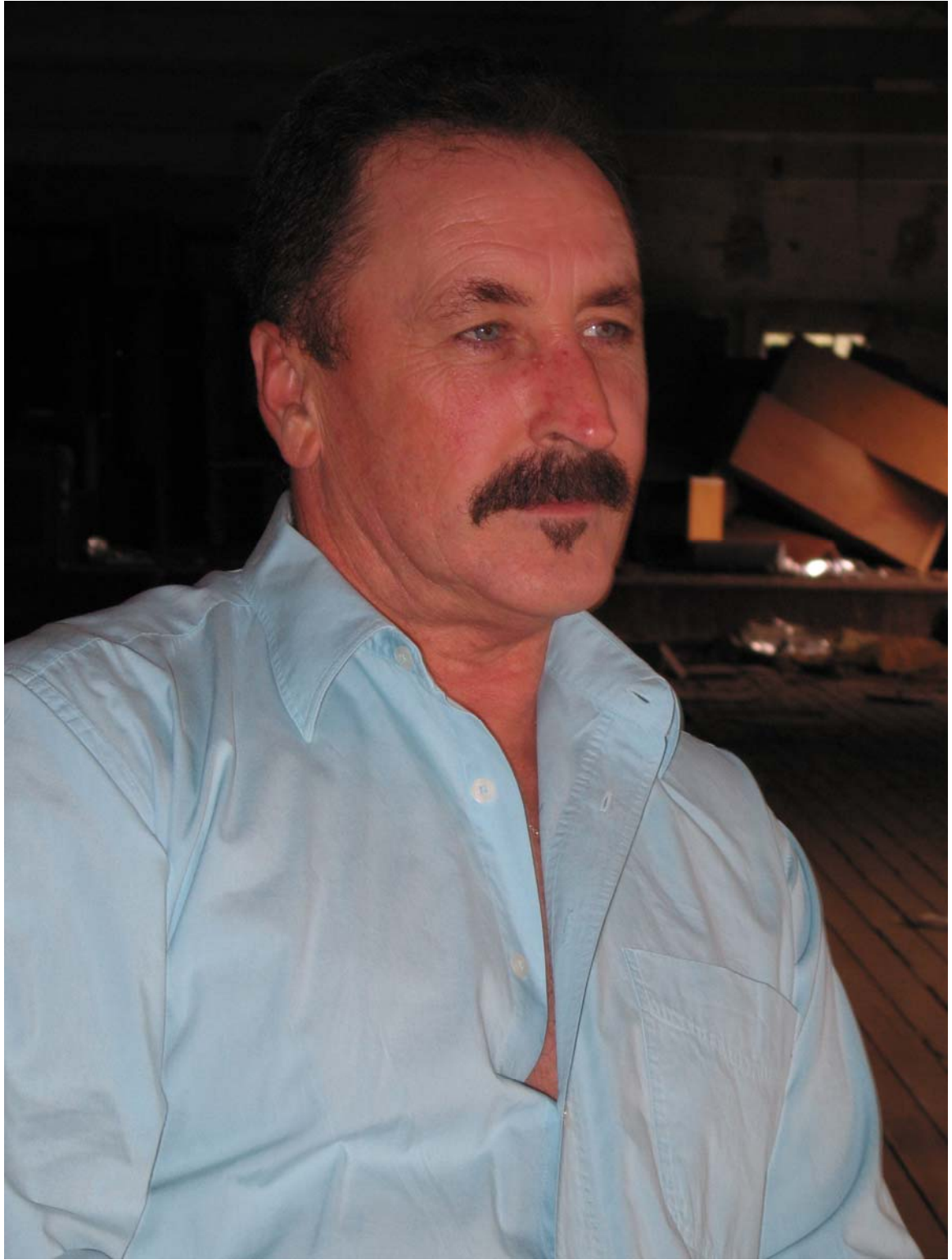


ORAL HISTORY FILE NO. 06 – VINCENT (VINCE) McMULLAN

Vincent McMullen came as a 7½ year old from Dumbarton in Scotland to Fairbridge in February 1961. He came to Australia as part of a later Fairbridge 'Family' scheme, with his mother and father, four brothers and two sisters and spent a total of 4 ½ years at Fairbridge.

This interview was recorded in Vincent's home in Sydney on February 6,

2006.



HILL: Is it Vince or Vincent?

McMULLAN: Vince.

HILL: Vince, what do you recall about your circumstances before Fairbridge and the decision for you to come to Fairbridge?

McMULLAN: I'm Vince. I remember in 1959/60, my parents were talking about emigrating to Australia and of course, that meant nothing to me, they may as well have jumped to the moon or whatever, but then there was talking of the things that were involved in coming to Australia – the ship crews, the schools in the country, much like America, you'd get a horse and meet all these cowboys, and they'd be snakes and this that and the other, anyway, once the plan was sort of solidified more, the talking was much more concentrated on what we were going to do and how we were going to get new clothes to come to Australia. I remember my Father was an alcoholic, so the money was wasted a lot on his addiction, so what furniture we had was all hire-purchase, and that was sold off to buy us clothes and one thing and another. I remember that we had to be you know, fully scanned by the doctor and the medical team from the Immigration Department . . .

HILL: When you say 'we', how many of you?

McMULLAN: Well, there was five, there was four brothers and two little sisters, Carol being the youngest, she was six months old at the time in 1961 . . .

HILL: And she didn't go to Fairbridge.

McMULLAN: Oh, no no. She was too young. She stayed with her parents.

HILL: But the other five did?

McMULLAN: No, unfortunately not. Tom, the eldest brother, he was about fourteen I think maybe, for what reason I don't know, but he missed getting to Fairbridge. But anyway, we come out, it was agreed, that after seeing the doctor in vaccination – I was terrified by that because in those days the vaccination was a scribe of a round circle and in with a powder [unclear] you know, and I found that rather horrific you know – I was the only one of the family that cried through the vaccination. But after that, we'd settled down and the furniture was sold us off, and that was to buy us . . .

HILL: Tell us a bit about your circumstances before the decision of Fairbridge, though.

McMULLAN: Oh yeah. Well that was rather, I was seven and a half years old and we had an alcoholic background, we lived in abject poverty really and that was probably the norm for a lot of people in those eras, especially the, well the alcoholic families . . .

HILL: And where was this?

McMULLAN: In Dumbarton in Scotland, you know, sixteen miles out of Glasgow. But the house was fine, it was a Housing Commission, but looking back now, the major root of all the problems was the alcohol. You know, the Father was capable of earning enough money and providing for us but it was never brought forth. You know, and consequently we suffered for it, all of us – emotionally, we were, my Mother was brutalised by him when he was drunk and he's black-out stages, he'd get to a drunk stage where they black out and don't realise what they're doing. And we all walked on broken glass you know, total fear, he ruled with an iron fist – 'you do this, or I'll batter you rotten'. And I was just full of fear. You know my brothers were full of fear and we went to school, I think I was there for a couple of years, and they were tremendous, the great relief of getting to school was amazing. This was something sensible, something where you didn't have to fear, even though there was a lot of anxiety, and you'd get a hot meal at the school. And that was rather tremendous. The fact that you could get a hot meal at school during the day, normally you'd just get a sandwich or whatever was left of the stew, at night. And, of course, the Mother now was saying that the reason that we came to Australia was the thought of us getting a better life. A better chance; maybe he'd stop drinking. And, of course . . .

HILL: And the plan was, you'd come out under Fairbridge, and they would follow you out?

McMULLAN: No, we were coming out together at that stage.

HILL: Under the Fairbridge Scheme? Because they changed it, didn't they?

McMULLAN: Yeah, well the Fairbridge Scheme was a secondary thing because we were going to emigrate anyway, and the chance to go to three places – either to England, South Africa and Canada.

HILL: Canada - Australia you mean?

McMULLAN: No. We had a chance to go to Canada. To emigrate.

HILL: So, what were the three options?

McMULLAN: Yeah, there was South Africa, England – there was actually four options – and Canada, and Australia. So we finished up with that. And then through probably the Immigration Department saying well there's a Scheme – and this is where Fairbridge was introduced to us – and it was magnificent because all this you know wild thinking came into play cowboy Jim's lifestyle, ride a horse to school, you know, big wide open plains. And that was a great, to lift us up from the thinking and the fear with the alcoholic family. And, sure enough, I always, I was a great day-dreamer myself, and daydreaming about horses . . .

HILL: But under this Scheme, while you would come out together, your parents wouldn't live at Fairbridge, or did they?

McMULLAN: No, no, no – they went to Cabramatta Hostels, you know, that was understood, that the kids were to go to Fairbridge Farm School – and that was sort of kept rather quiet, you know, about the separation of the kids, we didn't know anything about that – but after a while it was supposed to be that youse would be educated at Fairbridge, we'll got to Cabramatta Hostels, the husband and my Father, he'll go on and get a great job and years later will produce a good living for us all. That didn't eventuate, his alcoholism progressed and got worse, and it wasn't long before we realised that was the case, I think, it was progressing. But the journey to Australia was magnificent you know, the parents sold all the furniture to provide clothes for us, and the clothes was a very important thing to me, with green blazers with yellow lapels and brown shoes . . .

HILL: Did the parents buy those, or Fairbridge?

McMULLAN: No, no, they were bought by the parents through the sale of all the hire-purchase furniture. You know, the washing machine, the piano – sold to the neighbour for five quid you know. Take the boys down and get them a rig-out. So, away we went and felt very flush with all the new gear on and, it's funny because there were families in that very same street wanted to emigrate with us, you know they were very good friends of ours and they were unable – they had TB and spots on the lungs through the coal mines and one thing and another, and they were unable to come you know. So there was a rather big ceremony before we left you know to get onto the buses and then, prior to that, a day or two before we left, I had my First Holy Communion, and that was a rather big ceremony. The teacher said, 'Make sure you come back to my house after church and I'll provide you with a hot breakfast.' And I didn't quite understand that and I missed out on this massive big hot breakfast.

But sure enough, I went back to school and it was a great, momentous feeling you know, saying goodbye to the whole school. I was a shy sort of a fellow and they took me and my teacher, who was a very kindly woman, and that's school's gone by the way, I went back there last year and they've demolished this magnificent old Tudor building. And paraded me through the class saying, 'Vincent McMullan is off to Australia with his family and they're going to a place called Fairbridge Farm School'. So there was questions and yahoos and one thing and another, 'you lucky so and so', and then right through all the older classes and through all the catering staff that I loved and one thing and another, and I remember the old Headmistress, she was as hard as a nail and she had a face like a frog, but she loved me dearly you know I didn't realise but she wished me all the best and give me a little present, a little medal, to take with me. It was the first time I was touched emotionally with something like that, that people give that much regard to you.

And sure enough, I was on an extreme high and I went back to the household where it was absolute chaos and misery again – the Father chasing the drink and the Mother chasing to pack the bags and the last-minute paperwork and the licking of the old labels for the old suitcases and trunks, and sure enough there we were and the whole family was on an extreme high and on the following day we were to leave on the buses down to

London. And one of the finest buses arrived at the front door and my Father, being a bus driver – there was a big brown Albion, two-tone brown Albion, big chrome hub-caps and you really felt like you were on top of the world. When you're living in a pissy old bed from an alcoholic lifestyle, to something like this, you really think you've been speared into space.

So, there we were, all the brother and that, happy as Larry on the old bus and all the neighbours had come down to the street and waved us all off and cheers and greeting and away we went and we got down to the train station at Glasgow and, of course, that took us down to London and then from London the train down to Tilbury Docks.

Well, that was an adventure on its own. My Mum left the bag with all the tickets in a café in London and we felt 'my God' and the screams and the roar of the Scottish accent – and it was back off the bus, or we actually got the leg on the train and we realised that Mum had left the bag full of the tickets back in the café. So it was all panic and halt and my Mother and my elder brother ran back and fortunately she retrieved the bag and that was great, so we got back on the train and London Station was magnificent in them days – the big Flying Scotsman there and the steam and you know the big auditorium and the big Atrium, smoke-stained and tried to be clean – it had a great atmosphere about you. You know, big stations. You really felt you were on a tremendous journey. And all this period, this anxiety, this anticipation was building up and sure enough the train pulled into Tilbury Docks and there it was – the SS Orion, with its funnel steaming away, and this gigantic, I'd never before seen something as big as this in my life. I was seven and a half years old.

We get off the train and it was all questions and the old girl saying 'Shut up!' and 'grab this and grab that' and 'get all the bags' and 'don't forget nothing' and we managed to get one of those gigantic big trolleys they used to have on the platforms, and get all the old cases there, I think one of them burst open. Burst open with all the rags in it and managed to pack all that together and there was a big trunk and four of five suitcases. And away we went over to the Arrivals at the P & O. I can remember I couldn't see the ship in its entirety looking out through these windows, and my brother, Gordon who's very close to us, was so full of this excitement about getting on this ship, and it was a six-week cruise mind you, and I have been on cruises in later years and never qualified for the same standard of this P & O that I got on. But sure enough we got to the stage where we were getting onto the ship and then, finally, we were allowed to get on the gangplank so that the five boys and the wee girls and my Mother and Father up we goes and then we took a full vista of this whole magnificent ship. And it was one of the early model cruise ships, which had a tan on light mushroom with white strips on it – a magnificent looking ship. I don't think it was very old in those days and there were sister ships, the 'Orsay' and ships like that. In later years, the boys and I took a great interest in the sailing ships, the SS this and SS that. And we got on board there and it was first class from the moment we stepped on . . .

HILL: What were the cabin arrangements for the family?

McMULLAN: We were all split up because it was such a big family – Gordon and I went to a cabin in C Deck I think and that was tremendous – away from the parents, away from the older brothers. The family was pretty all split up within the corridors of the ship itself. And the parents with the two younger sisters, Carol and Bernadette.

HILL: Did they have a four-berth cabin?

McMULLAN: Probably, yeah. I was in a four-berth cabin, so obviously, yeah. I wouldn't say they had family suites but four-berth cabins. And it was magnificent furniture, mahogany this and pine and treated woods and high varnish . . .

HILL: What do you remember of the journey out in the boat?

McMULLAN: Oh everything. From the moment we got on that ship there, it was just tremendous. The first thing was the introduction, I think it was about midday we got on board, somewhere around there, then we sailed that afternoon. And it was just leaving, that was a tremendous ceremony, leaving you know, the streamers and the band was playing and it was a magnificent sunny day, beautiful. It was all so ceremonious . . .

HILL: What date was this?

McMULLAN: February somewhere, so six weeks after . . .

HILL: February 1961 . . .

McMULLAN: Yeah, February '61. And sure enough, enjoying the moment of all that – the ceremony and the boat leaving – we were invited down to have dinner down in the course in the dining room, it was magnificent. Something I'd never laid eyes on – surreal. I couldn't believe it. I went on to be a Chef later on because of that. I was supposed to be at school on board and I finished up getting a little white jacket, lapels and badges and silver buttons, so I was down in the galleys dressing tables. But that first encounter with the waiters . . .

HILL: The Suez was open wasn't it?

McMULLAN: Yes, through the Suez Canal.

HILL: When you got to Australia, can you remember arriving in Sydney?

McMULLAN: Oh yes. I remember arriving in Western Australia, coming through the Equator, the heat change and everything was very warm and thank God we had a big swimming pool on board and we took full advantage of that - but yeah, King Neptune's parties on the deck, and the pool and the ice-cream. But back to that first introduction of the dining room, it was just magnificent, it was like the opening scene of the 'Titanic'. When they swing open those doors and all the mahogany pillars and the paintings and the high-backed chairs and the flush carpet and the white silver service tablecloths -

magnificent. And, of course, you had a choice, a menu I couldn't read, let alone pick a meal.

HILL: It was in French.

McMULLAN: Yeah, amazing.

HILL: We've got to press on to Australia, so when you get to Sydney were you parents with you to Fairbridge?

McMULLAN: Oh yeah. It was a six-week journey. From then on, I remember the ports – Aden and Port Said, and how poor they were – and 'watch your children, they'll be kidnapped', all that, and all the big camels and the moon, and the sun setting on the side of the Suez Canal. And the peasants throwing up the stuffed, bandaged camels, you know, with bandages on them.

HILL: Was that at Colombo?

McMULLAN: Yeah, or round Sri Lanka I think it was – India? And then finally down onto Western Australia, Fremantle. And I remember Gordon and I playing in a goods lift – a big operated thing, huge, and the size of this room, a goods lift - him and I were only young fellows operating this magnificent goods lift, and the temperature of Australia being so much warmer and bright sunny blue sky. Just a totally different scene from Scotland, the grey low sky.

And then the morning of the 1st April 1961, we sailed into Sydney Harbour. And my parents took pictures out the port side, from the port hole, and there was a magnificent big aircraft carrier there from America at the same time and she has photos of it by the way, somewhere. I don't know if it was the 'Enterprise' or something like that, but anyway, we had breakfast and were told some Immigration would greet you, blah blah blah and prepare yourselves, so we had breakfast and then up on deck, I think we'd just come into the Heads by that stage, and you saw everything – the Taronga Park Zoo and it was pointed out, whoever knew, all around Double Bay and how well it was set out, boats sitting in the Harbour, yachts, and one thing and another – and then the Harbour Bridge down ahead of us. So we all ran to the front of the boat thinking that the mast of the ship was going to hit the Bridge. So, away we went, we were all geeking away there, and it didn't. We were expecting some sort of big clash and that very mast we were looking up, my brother Gordon was up there a week prior to arriving in Australia, fell off the damn thing and near killed himself, so he arrived with a face like Godzilla - black eye, all bruised down the face.

So there we were under the Bridge and turning into Pier 13 in Pyrmont. And it was sad, it was all over, the fantasy had stopped, and this tremendous holiday had stopped. We get off, we were processed through there, picked up all our bags, Immigration – in them days was just as you see in the old movies, the long coats and the hats - and it was straight through, 'How are you?' and 'Where's your papers and passport?' And the Fairbridge people were allocated, I think, there were a couple of families, the McQuades

were on the same ship at that time, and we were allocated to the top of the Pier where the bus was waiting to take us to Fairbridge. And I think there were two or three families at that time . . .

HILL: So, all the families, including your parents, went on the bus to Fairbridge. Did it go overnight or . . . ?

McMULLAN: No. It was only a five-hour journey but there would be a lunch break, which happened to be, where was it? Lawson? on the way up. And it was through the Parramatta Road up and across . . . knowing there was something coming to an end here, I felt that horrible feeling.

HILL: Everybody felt that.

McMULLAN: Yeah, something coming to an end and a new life going to start. And we knew by then that the parents weren't going to be there, so there was anticipation of separation and that. Anyway, on arrival at Fairbridge, up the big long driveway, we thought the bus wasn't going to take the hill, but it managed it fine and dandy.

HILL: Do you remember what the bus was?

McMULLAN: It was a single-decker bus, not the old Fairbridge bus, it was a commercial thing chartered by whoever, probably chartered from a bus company in Orange, no doubt, or very similar. They weren't all that flash, nothing in the calibre of the cruise coaches. So we got there and into the driveway. I can remember the smell of the garden on approach, hanging out the window – you could see how green the gardens were, the vegetable garden, and all the segregation, the watermelons and tomatoes and whatever else they had there, all this magnificently looked after. Up the driveway, and the bus pulled in just short of the petrol bowser at Woodsey's house there. And we were greeted and the first face I saw was Robert Hillman. And he stuck with me right through my entire staying there.

And I remember so vividly how things looked – the hospital looked so sharp, and the gardens, the fresh paint and the clean looking buildings – everything was so in order. And Gloucester House was off to the left and the rockery garden at the roundabout there and up into the garages where Woodsey's house was and the general office and the petrol pump, of course. And we were mustered outside there and waited to be sort of like processed through Mr Woods and his office staff, and then of course, introduced to and allotted different Cottages. We were all put in the same Cottage at first, Brown Cottage, and we off and Newberry was the Cottage Mother at that stage. And it was magnificent, because of the smell of milk and honey. It was so pungent in the air. This must have been a Saturday because I remember the following day walking down the hall, we had tea in our Cottage that night, so we'd obviously missed dinner, and we were marched down the hall by the Cottage Mother and you'd smell that pungent smell of milk and honey. It was just so in your face, milk and honey. But when we got into the Cottage, introduced to Mrs Newberry and she had a big Yorkshire Pudding and roast dinner going, so that

certainly cheered the old anxiety up. And then of course we had Brian North and a couple of other seniors there and Robert Hillman who stuck to us like glue and it was a relatively big Cottage . . .

HILL: How long did your parents stay?

McMULLAN: Oh, just overnight. Gone the next day, gone that morning. I think they might have even gone that night back into town.

HILL: Describe, as you recall it, a typical day at Fairbridge after your parents left.

McMULLAN: Oh well, it was an anticlimax really, the whole thing. Just confused because your mind's still on the sea, still in the journey of the ship really, and then things had happened so fast . . .

HILL: How did you handle the idea of your parents going?

McMULLAN: Well that was, for two days I sort of went into a bit of a shock and I sort of shut down and I was crying and things like that. A total separational thing and abandonment. But I think what made that more-so, was the fact that I was unsure of what was going to happen to them. I could see what was going to happen to us but I couldn't see what was going to happen to my parents.

HILL: Were you unsure about when next you would be with your parents?

McMULLAN: But more so the point, because of his nature being the alcoholic and the brutal way that he treated my Mother, I wasn't sure what was going to happen. So I always lived in that anxiety of what was going to happen next. And you could never predict an alcoholic's behaviour. So that anxiety was coupled with being separated and then facing what we had to go through in Fairbridge.

McMULLAN: So, you've overcome that, you've settled into Fairbridge. Tell us a day that you remember, a typical day, the bell rings and . . .

McMULLAN: Yeah. I remember very happy days for me, very happy days.

HILL: Fairbridge was a happy experience?

McMULLAN: Yeah. In many, many ways. Mrs Newberry was a great Cottage Mother, a great organiser, and made us feel very warm, very welcome. I can't say the same for the husband. Although he had his own position, but she made you feel very warm, I was young, seven and a half, and through those periods there. Well, on a typical day, out of bed at six o'clock, the familiar old bell and up and at it. Work around the Cottage, have your shower, the seven o'clock bell was back, make your bed and get ready for breakfast. And I was a good eater, so I always looked forward to the breakfast. And off, marched down to the Hall in assembly fashion, and sometimes if you were dressed in your school

uniform – and Mrs Newberry was a stickler for dressing you up, making sure her kids looked well – your shoes were polished, your clothes were ironed and one thing and another, and we were taught all these things, how to do it for yourself. These things here have been in good stead in my life today. That I don't see the kids . . . but back onto the day at a time – marched down to the Hall . . .

HILL: What do you remember about breakfast?

McMULLAN: Breakfast? Well, I didn't mind it too much. It was the big mug of milk, porridge, or cereal of a Sunday, and sometimes of a Sunday you'd kick a goal, you'd get what was left from the Seniors' breakfast – lamb's fry and bacon, eggs – but your typical breakfast was the porridge, the bread the butter and the honey, and a big mug of milk. And that was adequate, really, it was quite adequate. And, of course, you had a big lunch during the day when you'd come down there, twelve, twelve-fifteen or something . . .

HILL: Did you go to school during the morning?

McMULLAN: Yeah, and you'd come back for a cooked meal at lunchtime at the Hall. There was a General Assembly at the Hall and they were great days too. You could see all your friends, all your girlfriends and one thing and another.

HILL: After school?

McMULLAN: After lunch you'd go on – and the school down there was magnificent, and there were quite a few of the outringers too, like it was families. The McNamaras, and there was a German family there too who'd come to school in traditional bib and brace leather outfits, and they were beautiful looking kids, blonde, blue-eyed . . .

HILL: Where did they live?

McMULLAN: They must have lived up near the McNamaras or something. And the McNamaras were great people, skinny long and slender sister and her brother, Paul. I was a good friend of Michael McNamara and his brother Paul had Polio. His tall, skinny sister – all lovely people. I can remember one occasion there, but that's another story anyway about Mr Homan getting 'jobbed' by Mr McNamara, came down and 'jobbed' him.

But the school was brilliant. I had trouble learning though, terrible trouble converting to an Australian education. I couldn't read, I couldn't pick up, I was just sort of mimicking what was being done. And I got paranoid about reading and to this day I'm a terrible reader, I have to force myself to read. But classes were brilliant. You know, I can remember sitting in a class there and twenty kids, there was a partition there, the middle room, and there was a music room there and music was a big thing and we had some lovely teachers there. A couple of older ones there, but I can remember looking out the big Tudor windows at the Poplar trees blowing in the wind on a typical sunny day and I used to do a terrible lot of day-dreaming there, because it was all cloudy in Scotland and

one thing and another, but there were just some great scents in the air because the gardens again were well managed by the kids. And right along the school perimeter there . . .

HILL: What are your most vivid recollections, the best things you felt about Fairbridge?

McMULLAN: The camaraderie I think. And always something to do – the Scouts, the balls, we all had a part in that, we were always involved in something, even though I was a pretty useless sportsman, I wasn't much good at sport at all, I was always picked as a reserve and they used to go down with the boys and the [kitchen]ovens with the overcoats on and get under seven stone seven or whatever it was they had to be, and things like that.

HILL: Football Carnivals, getting down to the weight levels.

McMULLAN: I was fascinated by all this. The big breakfast before you go . . . they knew you wouldn't be any good with nothing in you. I think it was the camaraderie you know and the Scots and the Cubs were just brilliant. I learned things there.

HILL: You were saying before that Fairbridge was a far better environment for you as a kid than you were used to.

McMULLAN: Yes, for sure. There wasn't that level of anxiety, fear – even though you had your politics in living with other people and older boys, the hierarchy and one thing and another – but it was a far better, a far more productive, the young minds looking for something to do, there was always something to do. Junior Farmers. I can remember being left at Molong, going for a pee or something, and missed the bus and having to walk back to Molong, back to Fairbridge in the black, through the old garbage tip, through Mort Cottage. But yeah, there was always something to do and you were encouraged to do a lot of things – letter-writing, studies down in the Hall at night-time.

My education was pretty poor though. I probably needed to be looked at somewhere along the line, whether I was Dyslexic, I don't know, but I always had trouble with reading. But there was no shortage of interests and I elected to do cooking in the Junior Farmers, so I was in there with the girls up at Woodsey's house, cooking cakes and that was just magic, all the fresh eggs and one thing and another. And when you got down here, they had the white games – the Scout games. So I would have missed all that. I judge that today, and quite truthfully so, that I see what families have lost in what they're giving to their kids today – generously in their habits and their manners, respect, what they're doing contributing to their kids – we wanted for nothing you know. And where the elders and the teachers would fall off, there was people like Brian North and the older guys, the trainees would take over. And you'd create your own little gangs of fun, too.

And your Saturday afternoons, after lunch you'd get your pocket money and the tuck shop was opened, and you'd buy your goods, your chocolates and your lollies and your milkshakes and those little milkshake lollies. And you'd be off to Molong Pool for the afternoon. That was a great thing there and the thing that I cherish today is that I can look back on that, even though I had some lonely times in life over the years, I look back

on those moments there and they were tremendous moments of camaraderie, fellowship and sharing one another's pains and gains. That was really all about growing up and being able to face your life and enjoy them with your partner and so on. There were some tremendous moment there, even though there were a few dark moments.

HILL: What were the worst?

McMULLAN: The worst? Probably one of the Cottage Mothers. Just changed the whole concept of Fairbridge for me. The attitude, the lack of interest and the lack of her ability to be a caring, sharing kind of woman – Mrs Kenniston – her and her husband. She was Cottage Mother at Brown Cottage for a while and also Blue. We had come back, we had a stint in South Australia . . .

HILL: You left and went with your parents?

McMULLAN: Yes, to Whyalla. And there was a chance for reunification there, but of course, the alcohol got the best of him, and we had to flee for our lives and through a long process we managed to get back to Sydney and eventually back to Fairbridge Farm School.

HILL: Your Mother came with you as far as . . . ?

McMULLAN: She had to flee for her life. My Father caught up with us again in Adelaide and we came back in traveller-type condition . . he built up this old Vauxhall ute and promised the world to my Mother and that it would never happen again – the brutality and the ongoing alcoholism – and she had to flee for her life in St Mary's one night. He was drunk again and obviously going to give it to her when he got her home and he stopped the ute and she grabbed the two girls and walked off into the darkness and that was the last time I'd seen her. And we were too tired to get out the back of the ute and I had terrible nightmares for days and days. I'd look down this dirt road and these old Army huts . . .

HILL: How old were you?

McMULLAN: I'd probably be about ten by that stage.

HILL: So, you'd left Fairbridge?

McMULLAN: And I was coming back towards it . . . after that period we got involved with the Welfare Officer, the Welfare Department and my brother Gordon stood up and said, because they going to put us in a boys' home, Yasmar or whatever, and Gordon had the tenacity to stand up and say, 'Look, we had been at Fairbridge your Honour, blah, blah, blah can we go back there?' So there was contact made to Jack Newberry and he came and picked us up at the Child's Court in Penrith and on we went and I can remember crying in bed that night – the abandonment, the disillusionment again. And from that period on, we were in Blue Cottage with Mrs Kenniston.

HILL: A different type of woman?

McMULLAN: As opposed to Mrs Newberry, she was a lazy, self-centred woman who cared not for the children at all unless it suited her and we were really her slaves to look after her and her two children. And her husband was somewhat of a brutal bastard too. He thought nothing of putting the big six, the big nine-inch boot up back of one of the children.

HILL: So that second period at Fairbridge was less pleasant for you?

McMULLAN: Yes. It had taken on a whole new trend. More so because I was worried about my Mother because I didn't know where so was; the Father, he was lost in the depths of alcoholism, so there was this terrible cloud of despair and then coupled now with this new Cottage Mother – and it was a great period of time too, because the Beatles were fantastic, all the kids, and the Dyson- Holland's were right up there – '63, '64 – and there was that year of the kids there and all the big music, but on the homefront, in Blue Cottage, I think there was a fair bit of time when we moved over to Brown Cottage, which I felt more at home in anyway, and the elder brothers were up in Mort Cottage, Bob and Paul. And Gordon and I were back down in Brown Cottage under the care of Mr and Mrs Kenniston. But, as I say, she was a woman, very self-centred, selfish person, and cared not. We buried more mutton under that big gum tree out the back of Brown Cottage than they'd know in the half of Rookwood Cemetery. It would go off in the 'fridge. So her idea of a good meal was boiled spaghetti with a bottle of tomato sauce in it. I was galled because I was very much interested in cooking. I used to get in there with Mrs Newberry and I would do things, prepare things. Knock up the flour for the whitewash, for the gravy, help prepare the vegetables. And she would put on a three-course meal . . .

HILL: We're finding that the Cottage Mother was a big factor in the experience, so why did you leave Fairbridge? when did you leave?

McMULLAN: Well, it was a case of reunification really and after that twelve months, maybe longer, my Mother was able to contact us and one Saturday morning my Mother was sitting up on the stage with some man . . .

HILL: In Nuffield Hall? She turned up?

McMULLAN: Yes, she just turned up one day. With no announcement, nothing. By this stage, I didn't know whether she was dead or alive and trying to face life on that situation. So I was able to go up there and I just broke down in her arms – 'where have you been?' And uncontrollable sobbing and crying and full of emotion and I was trying to say that this Cottage Mother has been a bastard and this, that and the other and not looking after us, and I missed Mrs Newberry . . .

HILL: Who was the man, the new fellow?

McMULLAN: This was the husband-to-be, Gordon Bind (?), my new stepfather. And a brilliant man he was, too. He looked a bit like you, actually, and he was to change our life completely. The proposal was that they were going to be married, she was to become a housekeeper to this man – he'd lost his wife in '63, and he needed company blah, blah, blah, so we were asked to come and live with them, my brother and I. We did. We moved down just prior . . .

HILL: Only your brother and you? Where were you other brothers?

McMULLAN: Paul and Bob were still up in Mort Cottage at this stage.

HILL: And they were happier?

McMULLAN: Well yeah, I don't know the full story. They were older.

HILL: So, the two younger ones went?

McMULLAN: Yeah. I think it was mainly to clean that side of it up, the fact that we were ten year olds, twelve year olds – actually it was twelve and thirteen – and she went up, we came down, and one of the teachers gave us a lift down actually. I don't just recall, but it was a Primary School teacher gave us a lift down. Dropped us down there, and I think we actually had a holiday there at one stage prior to going down, an introduction in the August holidays or something like that. We had a couple of weeks down in Concord and found this is the life! Bed to yourself and TVs and fish and chips and milk bars.

Anyway, eventually we got down there and we were staying there on a fulltime situation and my life had changed and I'd become dependent on eating. I got fat. My education was still lingering. I went to Mort Lake Primary School and I did Year 6 there, and then went onto Ashfield Boys' High and I did two years there but as I say, my education was in a terrible state of affairs and no-one seemed to pick up on that in my family. I was saying I was doing things and I wasn't, trying to keep up with myself. But sure enough I was asked to leave school in 2F. So, for all those years to follow . . .

HILL: And you were fifteen, so what did you do then?

McMULLAN: Well my Mother marched me up to the abattoirs and said, 'Can you give my son a job?' And that was the old day of the pick up the labour, standing in the labour line amongst the drunks and the murderers there at the State Homebush Abattoirs, and my Mum says, 'Can you give my son a job?' She's thought she's marched me down to Sydney University!

And, sure enough, 'Yes, stand him in there and give him a start.' Three dollars fifty a day and we're down in the gut sheds there, horrible stinking smell, all the guts came out on this big slab table as wide as this . . .

HILL: That's not bad – it's twenty bucks a week in those days.

McMULLAN: Well it was, kept us going. But I picked up alcohol very early in the piece you know, and I didn't realise where I was going. Because of my low self-esteem and one thing and another, I was becoming very insular in my own way of thinking, and as soon as I put alcohol into the equation . . .

HILL: So, the alcohol started very early?

McMULLAN: Yeah, thirteen years of age I was drinking. Or going catering. My parents worked for All Suburbs Catering. I can remember the old . . .

HILL: What, you'd go with your parents who were caterers?

McMULLAN: Yes.

HILL: And you were drinking then, before you left school?

McMULLAN: Yeah.

HILL: Did they know?

McMULLAN: Yeah they did, but I don't think they realised the depth of it. But I can remember the whoosh, old eighteen gallon keg in the back of the hall, a great familiar sound to me. I'd rush up there about a half hour later as a kid, the head of that for me, went' you [unclear] And sure enough, at the end of the parties, I'd be topping up the old DA bottles and capping them and putting them back into a box and taking them off to the parties. So, it was the start of another road for me, alcoholism, that I didn't realise that I was in. It changed the way that I felt. I had a very low self-esteem, I had a very mixed up emotional balance in myself, I didn't know if I was Arthur or Martha, I thought I was a dummy. All of these things came into play and it was weighing heavy on me but I couldn't manage to step out of that square. And I wanted to be out. I wanted to learn and I wanted to be smart. I could see all the people around me seemed to be far smarter than me.

HILL: You're not upset because, you said that you loved Primary School at Fairbridge, but nobody picked up on this.

McMULLAN: I probably was doing enough to get me by but my writing and my reading and my spelling were atrocious.

HILL: A shockingly high proportion of Fairbridge kids spent their minimum secondary school years in the General Activities Classes.

McMULLAN: That was the thing. I knew there was more in me than what was coming out here and it just seemed like I was leaving the house without the shoes on, so to speak.

HILL: I've got one last question: put Fairbridge in the context of all of this and how does it measure for you? Pretty positively?

McMULLAN: Oh yeah. I believe, looking back now in my life, it was a great launching pad for me. Prior to that I think my Mother once said to my brother Bob McMullan, "Do you think we did the right thing coming to Australia?" And Bob's reply was, "Yes, Mum. I think I would be in gaol and still there today if we hadn't come to Australia." Bob died twelve years ago. He was also tainted with alcohol and that's another story all together. You know, the family disease, alcoholism . . . On the whole; it was a great experience for me. I'm still in touch with David Kinsella, are you familiar with David Kinsella? And he's got a very colourful story too.

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