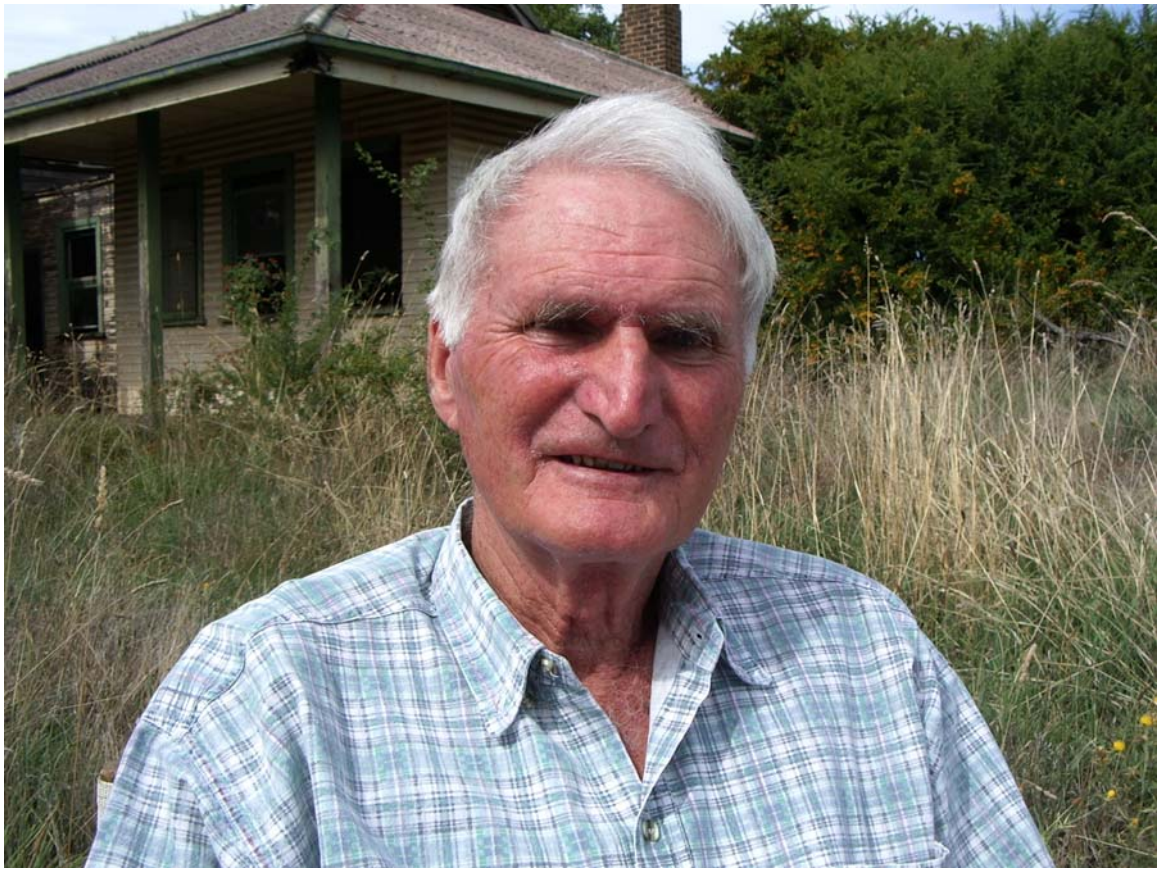
ORAL HISTORY FILE 016 – PETER BENNETT

Peter Bennett came from Suffolk to Fairbridge as a 6 year old in 1940 with his 9 year old sister Marie. With the outbreak of the Second World War Peter and Marie sailed with 28 other children via Canada in what was to be the last group of child migrants to Fairbridge for another seven years. Peter was to stay at Fairbridge for 10 years.

This interview was recorded in Peter's home in Sydney on February 15, 2006.



HILL: Peter, what do you recollect about your childhood in England and your family circumstances and how did you end up coming to Fairbridge?

BENNETT: Well, first of all I've been able to go back through my records, family records, by getting them from the university in England, and I find that my Mother was married and had a child and a young Policeman came down to live with them . . .

HILL: Do you know where that was?

BENNETT: Down in Plymouth. And she left her child and went up to London with this fellow, Bennett, and had two children by him – myself and my older sister, Marie – and then they broke up and she went back to her Mother and Father down in Plymouth, and her son, and we were put into foster care with a woman in Suffolk.

HILL: And roughly what ages were you and Marie?

BENNETT: Oh, this lady had me since I was ten days old, I believe, and Marie not much different. So, my Mother and the Father lived together for a while but then they broke up and she went back to her family. But the family would not have the two illegitimate children back with her, because he was an eminent surgeon, and they were Catholics, and so the Mother could come back to the family – to her son, but they wouldn't have anything to do with the two illegitimate children. So we ended up under foster care. Then the Minister of the Church of England up in Bury St Edmund, in Suffolk, he said that we'd been neglected, undernourished, and not looked after and well kept, so he got a Government Order for us to be taken away and taken to the Middlemore Homes. So we went to Middlemore Homes, Sellyoak, just out of Birmingham.

And my sister was three years older than me, Marie, she was listed to go to Canada in 1938 (under the Fairbridge Scheme), and she had Tonsillitis and so they put her into hospital to take her Tonsils out and she had some other thing that prevented her from going to Canada.

HILL: Do you remember, or from these files, how old you were when you went into Middlemore?

BENNETT: Three and a half, four years old.

HILL: Too young to go to Fairbridge, but your sister was deemed to be old enough?

BENNETT: That's right. And she was listed to go to Canada, the Prince of Wales School in Canada. However, she wasn't able to go, and then the war was getting closer and we got evacuated up to the North of England and when we came back to Middlemore, they said Marie can go to Pinjarra in '39, and because of the war, she wasn't able to go to Pinjarra in '39. So they said we'll hang onto her until Peter's ready, he'll be six in 1940, and they can go out to Molong. I often wonder if Marie had gone to Canada, or Pinjarra and I ended up in Fairbridge, Molong, would we have ever met again? Possibly never.

HILL: Probably not.

BENNETT: Possibly never. So, that's how we ended up in the Fairbridge system.

HILL: So, it was a combination of her delay because of the Tonsillitis, and you approaching six years of age, you had the good fortune that you stayed together?

BENNETT: Exactly. There was one thing that when we got to, because we couldn't come down through the Suez because the war was on, we had to go up around the Atlantic and across to Quebec, up the Lawrence River to Montreal, five days by train across Canada and we got to the Canadian Farm School, which we stayed there for a month. The Prince of Wales, Fairbridge Farm School, on Vancouver Island, Vancouver, which we stayed there for a month.

And we boarded the "Orangi" and came down to Australia through Tahiti and Honolulu. At Honolulu, we couldn't get off the boat because they had twenty-eight passports, names on one passport, so they had to get in touch with Washington and by the time the reply came, it was time for the boat to leave. So we never got off the boat. And the article I've written . . . for the next issue I've got my report on coming out to Fairbridge from Canada.

So anyhow, we moved onto Fiji on the boat and that was good, we were able to land in Fiji and they took us around the Island and we saw coconuts and bananas and pineapples. The kids didn't even know what they were, we'd never seen anything like it. And we left Suva and came down to Auckland and they took us to the movies in Auckland and from Auckland we came across to Australia landing here on 31st August 1940. It had taken us twelve weeks to get here and we'd travelled twelve and a half thousand miles, I believe.

HILL: Do you remember anything about the boat, the "Orangi"?

BENNETT: The "Orangi"? Only what I've read in the meantime. It was supposed to have been the largest motorboat in the world.

I've got a picture of all the – in the previous "Eighteen" magazine – there's a picture of all the boats that brought all the migrants out to Australia and to Canada.

HILL: We were at the point you were telling me that the boat that you took from England, do you remember where you left England, was it Southampton?

BENNETT: No, we left up in Newcastle on the East coast in the "Duchess of Richmond". One of those, yes.

HILL: And so, you went over the top of Scotland out to Canada?

BENNETT: Yes.

HILL: Can you recall arriving in Australia?

BENNETT: Oh yes. I remember going under the Harbour Bridge. Everyone was saying will the mast hit it? And things of that nature, and even the trip up to Molong by the train.

HILL: Can you remember if it was a night train or a day train?

BENNETT: It was a night train.

HILL: The Forbes Mail. Well we all did that, and so August, it would have been still dark, just, when you got off the train?

BENNETT: No, it was . . .

HILL: Just daylight? You got in about six o'clock in the morning . . .

BENNETT: It's a bit hard to say, because that report in there said that when we arrived at Fairbridge you could only see the twinkling of the lights at the school, it was dark. And we caught the bus from Orange, and we came all the way to Molong. We caught the bus from Orange, and the bus brought us out the Fairbridge and the truck had all the gear on it. So, I'm not quite sure, but . . .

HILL: Can you remember how you felt when you got to Fairbridge? Were you feeling up or down or . . . ?

BENNETT: Well, I was a very timid, scared, frightened little person. I think you can see that . . .

HILL: What were your early impressions of it like?

BENNETT: Well, as I say, I was frightened, a scared person. I had a lot of time and trouble settling down in Fairbridge. I go through my reports from Fairbridge and end up in tears thinking of what adults can write in a report about a six year old child. It's just unbelievable.

HILL: In what way?

BENNETT: Well, that you were a numbskull and so far behind the rest of the children that have arrived, and some of those reports are terrible. Very bad. However, I used to wet the bed and you were made to hang out your clothes and the sheets every morning and I mean, a six year old child that's come out of an orphanage. I mean, when I look back on it, it's just unbelievable that you could be treated like that.

And the Cottage Mother that we had there, she was just nasty. A lousy piece of work.

HILL: You know, the thing that's coming up so frequently is the kids recalling the little kids being slapped around and beaten up by sadistic staff. And that goes right through to the end of the '50s. And that's really the most upsetting thing that I'm hearing about all that.

What Cottage were you in?

BENNETT: I was in three or four different Cottages over the years.

HILL: Do you remember the first one that you were in?

BENNETT: Lilac Cottage.

HILL: That wasn't a girls' Cottage then?

BENNETT: Not then, no.

I've got all my school reports, and I can picture them plainly. The Cottage Mothers that were cruel and nasty to you, you got bad reports. The Cottage Mothers that gave you good reports, you can remember them like anything, because they were good to you and you were able to respond to them.

HILL: Did you have a mixture of good and bad Cottage Mothers?

BENNETT: Oh, for sure, yes. One of the first ladies I had, Mrs Featherstone, and she said, "This boy, a loveable child, but needs a lot of attention to help him do what he likes to do and help him through what he doesn't, very determined and stands up for his rights, right or wrong."

HILL: Well, you haven't changed, have you?

BENNETT: And the next one will be "dirty, untidy, uncontrollable, objective". And another one, "bright young lad, get him on side, the best one in the class." And the same with the school reports.

(Looking at photographs)

That's when Lady Gowrie came to Wakehurst, there's all the prize-winners.

HILL: Oh – first class!

BENNETT: I was six years old.

HILL: Is that right?

BENNETT: And my school reports, I've got them all. And some are brilliant and some are just "lazy, untidy, moody" – but I think you become moody when you can't just get an agreement with yourself, an agreement with somebody else with you, you know.

HILL: I think one of the problems that's coming through with all these stories is, even from the early days, Fairbridge was unable to attract good staff, quality staff. And you had a lot of Cottage Mothers ended up there because they had nowhere else to go and

they embittered, estranged and often quite sadistic. They should never have been near children.

Did you encounter any of those?

BENNETT: Oh yeah. Miss Waterland . Although Miss Waterland was funny, she followed the Heaths from Pinjarra. She was a Cottage Mother in Pinjarra. She came over with the Heaths. A terribly cruel lady, a cruel and bitter lady.

Miss Wall, she ended up at Dalmar Homes, as a Nursing Sister in Dalmar Homes.

HILL: Now you would have got there before Woods was Principal. He was Principal from about 1946 I think.

BENNETT: It might have been a little bit before that.

HILL: '45 may be.

So who was the Principal before Woods?

BENNETT: Ted Heath.

HILL: Heath. What was he like?

BENNETT: Well, he really never had much to do with us and that's why I say his reports of me amaze me because for kids six and five, and six and seven year olds, didn't really have anything to do with him. He wouldn't even know you. But everybody speaks very well of Ted Heath. As a matter of fact, on our fiftieth reunion, did you go to the fiftieth reunion?

HILL: . . . down in the Southern Highlands . . .

BENNETT: I think that was when we got the first Principal over from New Zealand, Beauchamp. Dick Beauchamp was the first Principal of the school, followed by Ted Heath and then Woods. Ted Heath left to join the Red Cross during the Army.

HILL: Who was the one who left suddenly?

BENNETT: I don't know.

HILL: There's a report that one of them left suddenly.

BENNETT: How early?

HILL: It was before Woods, one of the two you've mentioned.

BENNETT: Oh well, it would be, I don't know . . .

HILL: Within twelve hours.

BENNETT: Oh I don't know about that. The only two before Woods were Ted Heath and Dick Beauchamp. Dick Beauchamp was a New Zealander and he went with his family back to New Zealand. And Ted Heath went into the Red Cross. Now whether he was ordered off or not, I don't know.

HILL: How long were you at Fairbridge?

BENNETT: I got there in August 1940, I was six years old, I left in – I was supposed to leave in November '50 - but the Dairy Manager by the name of Jack Armstrong, he'd won a Soldier's Settlement block, and so he left and Woods kept me back to run the dairy for three months. So that was an interesting thing too. Because, when I got my reports, Woods said, "We have to hold Peter back for a while; he's not ready to leave."

But I was "ready" to stand in the breech!

HILL: Do you think that was a bit unfair?

BENNETT: Because it was unfair. It put me three months behind on my apprenticeship. And it was a lie. I mean, he held me back because he didn't have a Dairy Manager.

HILL: So you were there for more than ten years, over ten years. Take us through some of that ten years, your recollections of it. At first, you would have gone to the school.

BENNETT: Well, the school – my history is really good and bad. My reports show, "If he's interested, brilliant," if he's not interested – nothing."

HILL: Did you enjoy school? Do you have fond memories of it?

BENNETT: Some of it, yes. But I didn't really have a happy childhood. Only because of the friends that we had and the mates and everything within the Cottages, the camaraderie that we'd got between each other, sort of helped you through.

HILL: I think a lot of people are saying that, Peter, that the institution of Fairbridge and given that a lot of Cottage Mothers really were unsuitable, none of the kids had any love or affection or . . . that we've never invented a substitute for loving parents.

BENNETT: Exactly. However, there are so many people without them; it's a hard gap to fill. Fairbridge, in a lot of ways was good, and in a lot of ways, it was bad.

HILL: What do you think were the best parts of Fairbridge?

BENNETT: Well, I think we always had plenty to eat, we had good accommodation, we always had a roof over our head. We had lots of sports and lots of activities and there were quite a lot of good parts about it and some very good people worked there that were very devoted to the cause.

HILL: From your point of view, what were the fun times, what did you enjoy most about Fairbridge?

BENNETT: Just the camaraderie with the kids and being about to go rabbiting and things that kids can do, you were able to have plenty of play time early, even though you were working . . .

HILL: When we were there, on your afternoon off, if you weren't on the discipline list, you used to be able to get some billy tea . . . did you do stuff like that?

BENNETT: Well, we didn't boil the billy but we were able to go out rabbiting and we were able to go to different farms and ask them could we go wool collecting – if there were any dead wool and any dead sheep on the farm.

HILL: What did you do with the wool?

BENNETT: We used to send it into Molong and get paid for it. Same with the rabbit skins. We used to do rabbiting. The ways of earning money were quite good to a degree, but we were able to go pea picking around the different farms and different places.

HILL: And so Woods, Fairbridge, would let you do this?

BENNETT: Oh yes.

HILL: So you could go and do some harvesting, so picking peas and what else would you do?

BENNETT: Fruit picking and turnip digging and that sort of thing, you know, at different farms.

HILL: And you kept the money?

BENNETT: Well, you didn't keep it but they put it in your bank for you. Rabbiting was probably was the main source of pocket money for most of us.

HILL: Where did you sell the rabbits?

BENNETT: In at Molong. The skins, only the skins.

HILL: This is because you were ridding a problem. It wasn't for the meat?

BENNETT: Well, it was a bit of both. We ate the rabbit too, oh my word. The rabbit plagues were so bad that Woods would be able to tell a farmer that he'd be able to get all the kids to go on a rabbit-drive. Did you have rabbit-drives? Well, see, Myxomatosis had been hit in by then.

HILL: That's right. We had Myxomatosis brought in the mid-'50s.

BENNETT: What we had to do, all the kids would go right across the paddocks, right back for miles. They'd have one paddock right up the end with a wire turned up and all trees and bushes thrown in there, so we'd drive the rabbits and hares all the way into there. And the kids would get five shillings a drive. Because they'd be gutted and paired. They wouldn't be skinned, they'd be gutted and pared and put on a truck that had bales in it . . .

HILL: What's gutted and paired?

BENNETT: You'd gut them and put them into pairs. Two rabbits at a time and they had these pipes down the truck and you threw the pairs over the pipe and of course, they weren't refrigerated in those times, but they did have flywire around so they wouldn't be blown, and they'd be on the markets the next day down in Sydney. They'd drive the trucks straight down to Sydney. And we got up to two and a half thousand pairs at one stage. And the older kids could stay behind and do the gutting, you just cut them down and took the guts out and slit the legs through and they'd get an extra five shillings to work . . . and all the way through the night to get the rabbits away, because the skins were going to the felt factories, where they were making all the hats and things out of the skins. And the carcases were going on the market.

So there were a lot of areas that were good.

HILL: Swimming?

BENNETT: Well, I had a problem with swimming. In 1938 – I've got my records from 1938 from the Birmingham Library – I was put into hospital with suspect Mastoids of the ears. Anyhow, the report came back that it wasn't Mastitis of the ears, but it was severe bruising of the ear-drums, so you can only presume that was the old story that they boxed your ears, so I had damaged ears.

HILL: Do you have any recollection of that?

BENNETT: No, only that whenever, at Fairbridge, whenever there was swimming at the dam or anywhere else like that, as soon as I went into the water, I'd end up with infections of the left ear. So I wasn't allowed to go swimming.

HILL: So this affliction resulted from someone banging you on the side of the head, did it?

BENNETT: I believe so, yes. In Middlemore. Not at Fairbridge. I was put into the Birmingham Hospital while I was at Middlemore. And so, even now, I've had three operations on that ear and I've just gone deaf in that ear.

HILL: So, it's done some permanent damage? And you probably got belted on the side of the head at Middlemore?

BENNETT: I believe so, yes. Because there were two of us that were put in for the same reason into the Hospital. I've got it in one of my reports somewhere. I've often wondered what happened to the other child.

HILL: When you went to Fairbridge, were you having breakfast at Nuffield Hall, at this stage. And you can remember a typical day? Take us through a typical day – the bell rings.

BENNETT: The bell rings at six o'clock. You're out and had to strip the bed down and I've have to take my sheets out and hang them up and then you'd do an hour's work around the Cottage first, cleaning up, and the bell would ring again for breakfast. So you raced out for breakfast. I remember the porridge. I'll never forget the porridge because the big bags of rolled oats used to come in a big 200 llb bag, and by the time it got a third of the way down, it was full of weevils. And one morning I was having my breakfast and I wouldn't eat it. And Woods came past us, "What's the matter, Bennett?" And I said, "It's got maggots in it, Sir." He said, "They're not maggots. This is the larvae of the weevils. Good protein. Eat it." Well, I wouldn't eat it. Those things happened.

HILL: How did he react?

BENNETT: Oh, I was the worst in the world. I could never eat vegetables – pumpkin, it used to make me sick. And he'd say, "You stay there Bennett until you finish it. And when you've finished your plate, you'll bring it over to my office."

So I'd sit there and sit there and, as soon as he'd gone – one day I nearly sat there all day – and no good in belting me, it didn't make any difference – so I used to put it in my hanky and put it in my pocket and throw it out afterwards.

HILL: We did that once. We had a German gardener who was very good but he grew a root vegetable called a Kohl Rabbi . . .

BENNETT: Well, having your hands in your pockets is an interesting point too, because I suffered very badly from chilblains – no shoes in one of those magazines it tells you where the trainee boys had a meeting with Ted Heath and Beauchamp and Cohen, and they were allowed to put their opinions of what should happen. And they voted that Juniors do not wear shoes. Can't have any shoes. So being a Junior, I didn't have any shoes and Molong was the coldest place in the world. And I used to get these chilblains on my fingers and they'd bleed and my toes would bleed. I can't believe it.

HILL: And of course it happened. Here it is in black and white.

BENNETT: And hands in pockets – Woods said to me, "Hands out of your pockets, Bennett." So he said, "Come down to the machine." So I had to take my pants off, and he sewed the pockets up on the machine." That leather-working machine he had down the end of the hall, there. Sewed my pockets so I'm smart, I undid them. And I got caught again. So he sewed them up and then got an assistant to cut the pockets out. And he said, "Now open them up." It was true.

No, I went through the Junior ranks not a very happy child. I was really a fairly late maturing person. The boys were talking about masturbation and all that sort of thing long before I knew anything about it because I was a very late maturer because I'd had Diphtheria as well as the ear problems and my medical reports, I remember in one period I'd only grown nine inches and only put on one pound of weight and ended up six feet tall and only eight and a half stone. So, I wasn't a healthy child. It's only when I started to fill out and mature that I got over all those problems.

So when I came into the Senior ranks, I developed. And the big problem there for me, too, was with Steven Blundell and Dickie Mason and myself and the younger fellows, we were always the youngest – from 1940 until the people came out in 1947 after the war.

HILL: Of course. You were at the bottom of the pecking order.

BENNETT: Yes. And immediately when they came out, you felt yourself a Senior. And because you'd been treated like that, I know that I was cruel to those other kids younger than me. Eddie Baker – he won't say it. But I remember being very cruel to Eddie Baker and some of those young kids. I'm very sorry for it now, but you didn't know! You lived by your peers. Your standard had been set. Your peers were though, they could fight, play football, work like a dog, you know.

Now, Woodsie loved the people who could work like a dog and who could play sport. Unless you were particularly bright like you were and, there were a few of the bright ones that Woodsie helped through.

You lived under your peers and I was not too good to the younger kids when they came out but later on I realised just how silly it was. But, at school, I left school – I was put out of the class at school by Gordon Dodd who was the headmaster – before I was fifteen . . .

HILL: This is at Molong or Fairbridge?

BENNETT: At Fairbridge. I never went to Molong. We didn't go to Molong School in those days.

HILL: So, in those days they did all the schooling on the Farm at Fairbridge?

BENNETT: Yes. And never got an Intermediate. I didn't even get into third year, Year 9, the Intermediate. I left in Year 8.

HILL: So, you would have been about fourteen"

BENNETT: Fourteen. Went straight to the dairy on the farm. I had the longest traineeship that was there.

HILL: It must have been three years plus.

BENNETT: Nearly, yeah.

HILL: Can you remember the different jobs you did. Tell us about dairy. Dairy, I often say . . .

BENNETT: The milking boy would get up . . .

HILL: And you didn't have machines.

BENNETT: We used our hands. We were milking six cows each before breakfast.

HILL: Well we would, on the six bays at the dairy when I worked there, there were machines on four bays and you hand-milked two, but you had to hand-strip . . .

BENNETT: We hand-milked the lot. But, you know, even at the dairy, it was very hard for sure, the cleaning and scrubbing and everything else you had to do. But we did the killing of the sheep and we were killing about eighteen sheep a week at this stage, and we did a [unclear] once a month, a couple of the pigs, now and again. Yeah, I did a lot of time at the dairy, that's why, as I say, when I was supposed to leave Fairbridge, because he had no Dairy Manager so I ran the dairy for three months.

HILL: Can you remember how many guys were on the dairy gang, was it six?

BENNETT: Six. It was six in the early days.

HILL: . . . Did you look after the piggery as well?

BENNETT: The piggery, yes. There was six on the dairy, one on the piggery, one on the poultry . . .

HILL: . . . one on picking up, one on cleaning up, one on the wagon to get the milk into the village . . .

BENNETT: Oh no, they were the same people that did the milking.

HILL: Yes, sure, but one of them would be on the poddies too, feeding the calves . . .

BENNETT: It was funny, with the poultry, I went onto poultry just after the fowls had finished moulting, I don't know if you know that fowls moult. Fowls are in their fairly good peak of laying now but when March comes, and April, they'll lose all their old feathers and they'll grow new ones. And while they're moulting and growing their new feathers, they don't lay. So you go through a six-week period with no eggs.

So, the boy in front of me in the poultry was in the peak of the moulting period and he was carrying the eggs down in his hat, from two hundred chickens. I came on to the poultry, and all the new pullets that they'd bought were just starting to lay their small eggs and all the old hens were starting to lay again. And I'm carrying two baskets of eggs, over two hundred eggs a day down from the poultry. And Woods said to me, "Very good Bennett. That's the best report I can see that you've been able to get." He said, "You'll become a poultry farmer." I said, "Oh yeah." He said, "Yes, you'll become a poultry farmer and I know the poultry that you're going to." He had me lined up to go to a poultry farm.

And this is one thing I'll say about Ted Tepper, I didn't respect Ted Tepper until I left the school and then I realised how good Ted Tepper was. I'd done a Vocational Guidance Test and it said I should be a Fitter and a Machinist or something in engineering. So Ted Tepper said, "I can get you a job as a motor mechanic." And my sister had left the school and she had got married, and she was living in Forbes. So I got her husband to ask at a couple of garages up there could they get me a job as an apprentice motor mechanic. Which they did. So I was one of the early ones that didn't have to go on the farms.

HILL: You were one of the few.

BENNETT: And that was because of Ted Tepper . . .

HILL: And you stayed with your sister?

BENNETT: No. I boarded in Forbes.

HILL: But you stayed close with your sister through Fairbridge?

BENNETT: Not real close.

HILL: A lot of people have said that it was very difficult, even if you were the same gender, because you were split up . . .

BENNETT: Very seldom did I see my sister, or she see me, or very seldom did we talk to each other very much. Because you were just weren't allowed to mix with the girls. That was it. [unclear]

HILL: And there was no opportunity to anyway. I mean, you were in different Cottages anyway, weren't you?

BENNETT: Yes, so, I was appreciative of Ted Tepper then. And he started the girls being able to go into the hospitals to do Nursing and Laurie Field went into the Banks and things like that.

HILL: He was the Welfare Officer – he was the guy that found the jobs for people at the end?

BENNETT: Yes. But because of your peers, and everybody loved Woods to a degree, with these sports and work and everything like that, because Tepper wasn't oriented in that way, he didn't get the respect that Woods got. And it was sad . . .

HILL: Wasn't he a bit heavy-handed though, Tepper? Somebody said he used to poke kids in the back with his keys?

BENNETT: He might have. I'd never known Tepper to hit anybody. He may have . . .

HILL: I don't know, I never knew him, he left before I got there . . .

BENNETT: I know some of the Cottage Mothers used to hit you in the middle of the back with a ladle. To sit up straight.

HILL: You've talked about the good things you remember, like the camaraderie and – did you enjoy sport?

BENNETT: Oh yeah. Well early in the piece I didn't. As a matter of fact in my reports it says, "He's no good at boxing, he cries too easily," I mean, I'm the smallest kid in the school . . .

HILL: How old were you when you started boxing?

BENNETT: I was six years old. You know . . . some of the reports of mine, you cannot believe it. What they've written about a six year old child. I couldn't believe it.

HILL: This is terrible stuff, isn't it? But you can't believe they were doing that to six year old kids.

And you like the rabbiting, and that gave you a lot of fun. What do you think were the worst things about Fairbridge?

BENNETT: I found the worst thing for me was the lack of understanding. You couldn't express yourself, you were like a vegetable, or for want of a better word, a dog, being told what to do.

HILL: And nobody to turn to?

BENNETT: No fear. No-one to turn to. As a matter of fact, that Senate Hearing they were talking about the goods and the wheres and the why-fors of the place and one of the Senators had asked that Mr Kennedy, that represented Fairbridge - which was a disaster, he should never have been there – if there were any complaints, where could the kids turn to. And he said they could do this and they could do that. And I bailed him up too. That's all bullshit. I mean, you couldn't turn to anyone. Woods was supremo.

HILL: And what everybody said, it was the same when I was there, if Woods had to back the staff or the kid . . .

BENNETT: Exactly. I got sent down to Woods many, many times for giving cheek, back-chatting. And you know, you only really back-chatted if you think they're wrong. You don't back-chat for the sake of it. So it took me a long time to really conform to the regimentation of the school. I had a few problems in those lines and that was the same at school in the classrooms. You'd get on with some school teachers and not on with others.

I always said that I can't remember anyone giving me a kiss, or patting me on the head and saying "good job", or putting their arm around me – it just didn't happen. And you find that very difficult in later life when you have a family. My wife said to me, "You're not like a Father. You don't give the kids a cuddle or anything else like that." That chilled me when she said that, you know.

HILL: . . . and he said exactly the same thing – that he had difficulty being a Father, that he had difficulty being a husband, particularly with the children . . .

BENNETT: So, yeah. Life at Fairbridge was unique. We'll never see it again. I don't want to see it again! I mean, I've been on the Old Fairbridgians Committee nearly as long as Laurie and John and Dennis and I have always tried to keep the balance. They want to spruce the place up and say everything was great. Even last Sunday, we had an Old Fairbridgians Committee meeting and John was saying, "Oh, the discipline, the discipline." I said, "Well, in my opinion, discipline is an evil word." If you can't get children to do things with a bit of attention and care and love, why do you need discipline, you know.

"Oh," he said, "Begley was the best discipliner of them all."

I said, "Begley was evil! He was evil!" I mean, he used to kick you in the arse for doing something and he's robbing the place blind! You'd get terribly punished for stealing. I mean, I was a trainee in Green Cottage, and Jack Armstrong, his wife, Mrs Armstrong, was the Cottage Mother – very nice people. But Jack was a thief, but only a mini-thief. When the razor blades would come out for the kids, Jack would use them first. And when new stocks came, he'd get them first, and things like that. He was a petty thief, you know. But these others, they were out and out criminals.

HILL: We're going to get Begley. What do you know about Begley . . . ?

BENNETT: He was bad. See, I don't put Jack Armstrong into that category. But he was a good man, and his wife was a good person, too.

HILL: What job did you enjoy most?

BENNETT: I don't know really. Actually, I used to like doing the manual work at the manual school – carpentry and metalwork and things like that. And I always had ambition of being a builder rather than a mechanic. Because I used to enjoy it. I could make myself anything. I used to get into the workshop and get some old boxes and cut them up and make myself a case and put my football gear in and different things like that.

I made a bed lamp once and wired it all up and blew the whole bloody works right through the school.

HILL: But you weren't allowed a bed lamp in the dormitory anyway, were you?

BENNETT: No. But I was making one. I wired it up wrong and plugged it in and blew the fuse and fused the whole school and it all blacked out. And Woods didn't know where it went wrong.

HILL: What's the worst trouble you got into at Fairbridge, can you remember?

BENNETT: I can't really. I don't think I got into any serious trouble. I never got a public thrashing. Did you read my report to the Senate Hearing that was written in the . . .

HILL: No, but I can get it off the Website because it will be on Hansard . . .

BENNETT: Because I wrote these things. I said that Principals, school and farm, were dismissed for behaviour of sexual harassment, physical harassment and mental harassment. I said that management people were dismissed for stealing properties and things of this nature. Why did two people shoot themselves? What was the Police report? Nothing. And on the bottom, I said I'd like to be able to open up the books on all of Fairbridge to see what really happened there.

HILL: That's what we're going to do.

BENNETT: And I've been pressing for that for a long time.

HILL: Well, they won't do it; but we'll do it. The Parliamentary Committee system doesn't have the resources to do it, but the first stage of what we're doing is these stories and we're also doing a physical history . . .

BENNETT: So there were suicides even after they left, weren't there? We had Peter Johnson in my time, and then Joey Smith and Rudy (?) D[unclear] who gassed himself in

his car later on in life. And, you know, there's a lot of things there. But, I suppose this goes on in all institutions too.

HILL: Oh sure. I think Fairbridge just had the . . . and there's been this terrific book written, "Orphans of the Living," a woman's written a book about Australian children . . .

I also take your point about Laurie and all those apologists, if you like, for Fairbridge. I'm deliberately going to interview them . . .

These stories are quite explosive.

BENNETT: Well, it's an amazing thing, when I was having a bit of a discussion with Laurie – we clash on everything – I've got a lot of respect for Laurie, he's done a good job of what he's doing and that, but he's got no tolerance for anybody or anything. He find someone's written a letter in and he reads it out and he correct all their spelling, you know.

HILL: He was talking about the reunion and I said to him . . .

BENNETT: I was amazed. When we started off I said we'll get between 60 and 70. When he told me that he's up to 105 . . .

HILL: Because a lot of the people I'm talking to don't go to the reunions . . . they're highly critical of the Old Fairbridgians who they see as apologists for Fairbridge . . .

We owe it to kids who are in care now to be pointing out things that were wrong in the hope that it isn't repeated . . .

It was official recognised in 1946 that the institutionalisation of children, even when it was well-run, was bad for children . . .

BENNETT: I was saying to Laurie, you know, I was saying to him, "I've always tried to keep you fellows in balance." I said, "because Dennis has been a very fortunate child and you and your two brothers had silver spoons in your mouths. I said," You're not really talking about the rest of the situation". And he says, "Oh, you're gradually coming on our side." I said, "I'm not being on anybody's side, Laurie." I said, "I've tried to get a balance down the middle."

HILL: You're quite right. They don't realise they're not representative. I recognise I'm not representative. I had a dream run . . . my brothers the lucky five per cent.

BENNETT: Well, I know another three. The Fields. They had a pretty good run too.

HILL: Ninety-five per cent of Fairbridge kids . . .

BENNETT: Malcolm was able to go to Glassons and you know, they had a dream run. They had their Mum here too.

HILL: That's the single biggest difference. Kids who had a parent.

I had two last questions, one was: just tell us a bit about leaving Fairbridge. Can you remember the day you left Fairbridge?

BENNETT: Yes. The day I left Fairbridge I started an apprenticeship in Forbes. I wasn't so bad in Forbes.

HILL: Now, the leaving of Fairbridge – did you get an outfit? Did they buy you an outfit?

BENNETT: Yes. My outfit was mostly on the cheap, on the very very cheap. I saw the outfits of people who left after me where they'd spent about two hundred dollars – or a hundred pounds – mine was just about within about the ten pound limit that we had because I didn't really want much and I was going into an apprenticeship. The main thing that cost me most was probably the overalls because I had to supply my own overalls and keep them clean in those days. So I really only got a pair of good pants, a jacket, a couple of shirts, a bit of underwear. I had a very restricted outfit compared with what most of the people had that I'd seen leave.

I went to board at a place, which, I must say Fairbridge did give me a lot of help there. I was paying a pound a week board and they were paying a pound a week for me. And they paid for Tech. fees and all that sort of thing for me . . .

HILL: Fairbridge did?

BENNETT: Yes. I didn't have to put half of my wages back into the bank like most of the people had to when they went on the farms, and things like that. And so I found it very, very difficult to mix with the people in the town, or in Forbes, because I'd been at Fairbridge for over ten years and I had spent one night away from Fairbridge, or away from the Fairbridge discipline – talking about camping when we went away from Fairbridge, but we were still under the Fairbridge discipline – one night when Ted Tepper was bringing one of the Old Fairbridgians down to Sydney to find a job, he brought me down with him and left me at my brother's place for the night.

My brother was an amateur photographer and he was developing of the photos see, and I'm sitting there watching him. Do you know what? I sat there and sat there and crossed my legs and I was too frightened to ask him could I go and have a piss? That's how much confidence I had in myself when I left that school – absolutely none. It took me ages to come out of my shell.

HILL: Again, a lot of people make the point you come out of Fairbridge, you'd never used a telephone, you'd never managed any money.

BENNETT: Never used a telephone, never managed any money. There's nothing that you'd been able to do yourself, never mixed with any society except Fairbridge.

One night in the early years . . .

HILL: Were you lonely?

BENNETT: My word I was. I had my sister in Forbes, but she had a young child and her marriage wasn't going too well anyhow and she ended up being divorced and so forth, so I didn't have a great deal to do with my sister in Forbes. But I was fortunate, I went to an old lady's place that treated me pretty good but she didn't have any money or anything much; her kids did. I remember one of them said to me, "You going to the Pictures tonight, Peter." I said, "Oh yeah, I'll go to the Pictures." And he tried to give me the money. But I said, "No, no. I don't want the money. No. I'm all right." I didn't have any money. I didn't go to the Pictures. I walked around the town for two hours and went and walked home again. It's just the way you are. This is the way you were. I think to myself today how stupid I'd been over those years, but that's just the way you are.

So I ended up getting through my apprenticeship but it was a battle. Actually, what brought me out of my shell most, was I had to go into National Service and because the National Service is like Fairbridge, it's regimental and institutional, but I could fit into the institutional part where a lot of the other kids couldn't because they'd never left their Mum. And between being with them and them being with me, we got camaraderie, I was able to come out of my skin a bit and . . .

HILL: So that was as turning point for you?

BENNETT: Definitely. When I went into "Nashos", I was eighteen years old, nineteen years old.

HILL: How old were you when you got married?

BENNETT: Twenty-four.

HILL: And life turned around for you about then, did it?

BENNETT: It turned around about eighteen or nineteen. That's because I was able to play a bit of football with the under-eighteens in Forbes, and went into the "Nashos" with them. It was in a different community, even though I was with camaraderie with my mates at Fairbridge, you didn't know – like you say – you didn't know how the other half lived. And you didn't know anything about your money . . .

HILL: It's funny you mention that because if I look back on it now, when I left Fairbridge . . .

BENNETT: Your Mum didn't have that many friends or anything of that nature either, so she wasn't in the social world at that stage.

HILL: Yes. I hadn't thought of that.

And the last question: what do you make of it all now when you think back on it all? Those chapters, getting to Fairbridge, and afterwards?

BENNETT: There was definitely good and bad. And I think it's helped you make a better character in the end, you know. And you have had to fight your way through life, there's no doubt about that.

You know, I ended up with Qantas, I was, I ended up with quality assurance in Qantas and I was a foreman at Qantas at one stage, and in engineering, but I really conned my way through it. Because I didn't have the bloody Intermediate. I didn't have any schooling. My schooling was absolutely nil, nitch, and that's why I get so upset with Laurie, you know, because he's . . . you know. We had a girl that's been on the Committee for some time, a Daphne Brown, she married one of the Appleby's. She's a lovely lady, a lovely person. But she can't read or write either. And she's tried to write Laurie a letter and Laurie's just picked it to pieces.

And I said, "Laurie, you know, we didn't all have the bloody silver spoon that you had and going to Orange bloody High and everything like that, you know." I said, "Me," I said, "I left school in bloody year 8. I didn't get an Intermediate." I said, "I got no bloody schooling at all. I'm really illiterate to a degree, not like you people are." I said, "The best thing I've got now is my computer. I write a letter and I'm amazed at how many words I've spelled wrong."

HILL: And that's the biggest gap in my education. Now I've got a string of university degrees and I still can't spell. And it's the same thing, not as bad as you, I got a Molong Intermediate Certificate, and so that allowed me to enrol at Tech. to do the Leaving and I got to university, but I still can't spell. But that's one of the big gaps . . .

BENNETT: Well, I can tell them that anyone that went to the school when I went to school there, we did one period of schooling by correspondence during the war. We had one teacher for nine classes, they had a trainee girl over there to teach the little ones, who was a pretty smart girl, so they left her off the kitchen duties or whatever, and took her over to the school to teach the little ones.

We kept the month's work that came up from the Education Department, you tried to go through it and try and do something of it, you'd bundle it up and send it back to them, and when the next month's came up, last month's would come up too, and it's covered with red ink – that's wrong, this is wrong, that's wrong. You couldn't even look at it because you'd got the next month's work to do. And nobody to help you. You had no

teaching. The Cottage Mothers couldn't help you, the Cottage Mothers I had were worse than me, you know.

Some of the kids were good and smart in school, but the majority of us like Steven Blundell and Jimmy Young went into the Army – Ted Tepper got them into the Army. Ted Tepper was an ex-Army man and he got them in, which they shouldn't have got there. The first report of Ted Tepper came back to Ted Tepper of Steven, "We've had to teach this boy how to read and write." And he'd had ten years at Fairbridge.

And really, apart from the bright ones, Woods didn't care about the rest of us. "You'll work on the poultry farm, Bennett, you're got two hundred eggs." That's true.

HILL: Well, one thing that Sherington points out in that book, is that the Fairbridge Society in 1949, just before you left, passed a resolution that said that "any kid that wants to stay on at school, should be encouraged to do so." But of course, it was never implemented . . .

BENNETT: He didn't care whether I could read or write and nor did anyone else very much. Anyhow, I conned my way through Qantas.

-End-