Transcript of oral history project interview with Joyce Clague 8 November 1996

Excerpt 1

**Sue Taffe:** Interview with Joyce Clague, Friday the 8th of November.

**Sue Taffe:** Joyce could we start with you talking about how you came to be involved in FCAATSI?

**Joyce Clague**: Well, I was back living on the mission which was Ulgundahi Island on the Clarence River with my family. I wasn’t married then. There was invitations sent out to Aboriginal people to go to a conference. The conference then wasn’t in Canberra. It was held at that time at Newport [Sydney]. And FCAATSI [Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders] was the host of that meeting with the WEA, that’s the Workers’ Education Association, and they had this place that people can be accommodated as well as, you know, rooms where you could meet and talk with people. That of course was back in ‘59 when I first got involved.

**Sue:** ‘59 – Oh Newport – I think it might have been ‘60.

**Joyce**: ‘60 was it?

**Sue:** Yeah. You would have been quite young?

**Joyce:** Yes. I was in my teens then. And I of course went, which was a little bit strange because where the letter came to was a superintendent of the mission that I was on. And this was, it was also a change with the people who were looking after Aboriginal people at that time. Prior to [that], they didn’t communicate or didn’t want you to get involved in anything and particularly anything politically or looking at social issues.

So, this person, Margaret Plater, who went with us, decided that I was available to go. A couple of my uncles went as well, so it meant that I went. And we caught the train of course from Grafton and came down here to Sydney and was billeted by a person here in the city.

And of course, these people were in some ways involved in not only FCAATSI but the Australian Fellowship [Aboriginal-Australian Fellowship]. And we stayed with one of those people who was involved in the fellowship. And from that developed great friendship of people because that person that we stayed with who was then in Summer Hill, a person by the name of Grace Bardsley, she of course was very much involved in trying to see that things related to Aboriginal affairs would be changed.

I’ll never forget asking Grace at one stage about – and of course this was when there was no funding for Aboriginal people at all. You didn’t get any forms of grant to do research or anything of this nature. You couldn’t get social services and you – well our people didn’t even get the pension or child endowment. So, there was very little money and what money that you had, you either worked for it or raised it or if not someone either from one organisation was able to pay your way by either fare or – there was never ever any [money]. We didn’t even know what it meant for sitting fees. You never got that either. So it was – you did all the things that you did. You raised your funds but you also did it voluntary.

But I would say it was an experience which I am thankful for because I think it made you more aware of our people and the contribution that they made to this country. But not only made to this country but how you should get around about doing things in your own community. I think that it certainly did enlighten me about the health program, housing, education – a whole host of things – not just on one issue.

And of course, the people that you met there. I remember at that Newport meeting, Gough Whitlam, who was a former prime minister in this country, he was one of the delegates in that meeting. So, you were mixing up and talking to and discussing issues at that level. But of course, you never thought of that because I, when I first came here and was introduced to these organisations, I was very shy and didn’t want to talk and didn't talk too much.

But of course, I think one of the great traits with Aboriginal people you know how to and you learn how to listen. And I think that was one of the things even though I didn’t talk, I did take in a lot of things and I listened and that was fairly important.

Excerpt 2

**Joyce:** ... Now one of the Aboriginal men who later became very well known in the Northern Territory – and some of the issues he took up from his cattle station – was a person by the name of Martin Tjampitjimba. Well, his nickname used to be Stumpy.

Stumpy Martin was from Willowra. And he used say, he said to me, ‘Hey Joyce,’ … like in regards to all this stuff that comes in like soap and bandages and different little eye drops and, could be just, sort of things that came in from the Health Department. ‘You know, all these – ’ he said, ‘do people pay for these?’ And I said ‘No, they’re given because it’s a Commonwealth – this is a thing by the Commonwealth. You are given this from the Commonwealth government.’

He said to me, ‘Now we get this from the Health Department. Do we pay any money for it?’ And I said, ‘No, this is free.’ And he said, ‘You sure about that?’ And I said, ‘Yeah, I’m sure.’ And he said, ‘Look, I have worked here on this cattle station all my life.’ (And I’m talking about a man who’s 40 years of age.)

He said ‘My grandfather worked here and so did my father. Now these people have said that –’ (now that’s 3 generations has gone through that cattle station). ‘These people have said, “All this thing that we bring in to you is – it’s coming out of my pocket! I’m paying for it. I’m paying for it,”’ he said. And I said, ‘What? Did he say that to you, Stumpy? Did he say that?’

‘Yeah,’ he told me. ‘This come out of my pocket – my own pocket this come out and this is what – you know? And of course, he was charging us, to pay for it, he was charging, you know.’ And he said, ‘This is not all what I paid, you’re paying only a small bit and everything.’

And I said, ‘But he get it from the government for nothing!’

And he said, ‘He had us fooled all those years, all those years he’s – and I said to myself “this is the best, this is the best white man ever!” You know? He’d given us all this medical stuff and everything and we don’t have to pay for it and he’s taken it out of his own – oh he’s good! He’s good this fella. And I tell you that …’

And I said to him, ‘He’s pulling the wool over your eyes if he’s thinking, he’s so [generous].’ So, he said to myself, ‘Oh I’d like to go and, you know, get this station from this fella.’ I said, ‘Yeah, time might come that you can get this station from him.’ So anyhow one day we heard that the station was up for sale. We heard it in Alice Springs and these fellas said, ‘Hey! You know that Edgar Parkinson place? It’s up for sale!’

**Sue:** So where was that?

**Joyce:** This’s in, in Alice Springs.

**Sue:** Right.

**Joyce:** Just out of Alice Springs, Willowra Station. This Edgar Parkinson’s – and I said, ‘Look okay you could get – you could try and get it. What you can see is the Loan Commission. You can go to the Loan Commission.’

Now we wrote, we wrote that first Loan Commission [application] for the people. And we said to them, ‘We’ll make an application to the government and they will only charge you so much percentage for it and you will be able to sort of pay it back slowly, every … but you’ll have to pay it back. It’s a loan. It’s not a ... they don’t give it to you.’

And he said, ‘All right. All right we’ll do that.’ So, we wrote and I got them to sign and everything. Wrote this letter, oh, real good letter you know and sent it away to Canberra. And then I said to them, ‘You know, you fellas can hurry this on, you know. You can hurry this on if you save 2 dollars at a time out of your pension, out of the child endowment, and if you work you give a little bit more because – and you fellas’ll have this soon.’

So, I was asleep one night and so was Colin. We heard this – and this was, oh must’ve been a year later – and I hear all this noise at the back there and talkin’ and singin’ out ‘Oi! Oi!’ And here’s … 2 and 3 o’clock in the morning this was, you know. These fellas just came from Willowra Station and they woke us up. Colin out there, you know, cookin’ and making them a cuppa tea, cookin’ bacon and egg, toast and everything. And I’m sayin’, ‘What’s these fellas, you know, think?’

And I get out and I say, ‘What you fellas makin’ all this noise for and everything?’ And they said, ‘Oh we’ve brought you this money’. And I said, ‘What money?’ They had it in a little sugar bag, little sugar bag that full. There was … and all these … the pensioners, the people who was working, some of the people who – child endowment, were givin’ the children money too. All in this little sugar bag. 32,000 something … 32,000, but I know 58 cents was in that.

And they said – they said to me, ‘Now you keep it here for us and we’ll bring you some more later on.’ And I said – well I couldn’t sleep! I couldn’t sleep. I’d never seen money like that before! It was under my bed and I couldn’t sleep. And they said, ‘No, don’t put it in the bank! Don’t put it in the bank!’

And I said, ‘You fellas staying here. You sleepin’ here tonight. You sleepin’ here tonight because you gunna put that in the bank!’

‘No no no! We don’t trust those fellas with the, you know, with the bank and everything.’

And I said, ‘Yeah, but you know if you put that money in now, it’ll create more money.’ They said, ‘No.’ But it did. So I said, ‘All you fellas sign, sign, sign for that thing.’ No one – and that’s how they, they had – now that cattle station was quite a big cattle station, and they paid that off. Now they own about 4.

**Sue:** So that was the deposit, that 32,000?

**Joyce:** But the most deposit I’ve ever seen. But I was so nervous and they – but I think that’s the thing with our people. If told how to do it they can do it. And that certainly did prove – like these were people that couldn’t read and write. Okay I taught Stumpy Martin how to write.

Because I said, ‘Doing it with the thumb is – that’s all right, that’s legal. That is legal. But for your own satisfaction and everything and so that people, so that you are not different from someone else, you learn to write.’ And so I sat – he stayed with me – his whole family stayed with us until he got to capture how to write. Okay and it wasn’t real sharp writin’ but he was able to write his own name. And that was terribly, terribly important that our people were able to do that themselves, without getting the, without putting the thumb print on.

**Sue:** Yeah, and it gives you more power, doesn’t it?

**Joyce:** Oh of course it does. And that’s what empowering people is about. But I tell you, they frightened the hell out of me with that money!

**Sue:** So, when abouts was that, when they bought that Willowra Station Joyce? 60s or?

**Joyce:** Ah, that was in – that would be 70, just after the, ah –

**Sue:** The elections.

**Joyce:** The election – Whitlam.

**Sue:** Right. ‘72.

**Joyce:** ‘72, ‘73. Yeah, round about that time. Yeah.

**Sue:** Great story.