

Italian market gardeners oral history project

**Interview OH872/15 with Egidio (Jimmy) Ballestrin
deposited in the Somerville Oral History Collection
in the State Library of South Australia**

recorded by Eleonora Marchioro in Nailsworth, South Australia

6 June 2011

Jimmy, tell me your full name and the date of birth.

Jimmy (Egidio) Ballestrin (JB): My full name is Egidio Francesco Ballestrin, fourth of the sixth month, 1939.

EM: Where were you born?

JB: I was born in Salvarosa, Castelfranco, Italy, or Castelfranco, Veneto, should I say.

EM: What were your parents' name and where were they born?

JB: My father was Narcisio Ballestrin, born in Vallà di Riese; my mother, Maria Maddalena Ballestrin, sorry, Dotto, that was her maiden name, she was born in Salvarosa.

EM: What region of Italy, where is that?

JB: It's in the Venetian Region of Treviso, so we're classed as Trevisani.

EM: Now Jimmy, can you tell me about your Mum's first job in Italy?

JB: My mother was, as a child, grew her hair long, and combed her hair, and any excess hair that came off she would sell. And then after that she'd for ... one of the richer people there would herd geese, and these geese were for producing down for the pillows and doonas. And then at the age of 14, she went to be a servant in Turin, sorry, in Genova, and remained a servant until she came to Australia.

EM: Do you know where your parents got married?

JB: In their region of Italy.

EM: Region of Italy. Your father come to Australia?

JB: He came to Australia in 1938, aboard the ship, 'The Romolo'. When Dad came to Australia he had just got out of National Service training in Italy, because they had two-year compulsory Army training.

EM: Now have you any brothers and sisters, and what are their names? Are they younger than you?

JB: I'm the oldest of the family. I have a sister called Lina, who is ... she was born in 1944, a brother called Silvano, who was born in '49, and a sister called Norina, who was born in '53.

EM: Why did your father decide to come to Australia?

JB: Through necessity I suppose, because they were a very large family, and also a very large extended family living with them, and they had some land but couldn't make ends meet because of the fact that there were just too many. There was all his brothers and sisters, ... nine of them in all, and also the older children started reproducing, and having the children, or the grandchildren, if you like, live there with them, and there just wasn't enough to go around. And so therefore the reasons for him coming to Australia is because two of his older brothers, which was Antonio and Isidoro, came to Australia in 1927, and in doing so then also asked one of my other brothers, or his other brothers, to come out, and he came out in the early '30s.

My Uncle Isidoro wrote a letter to my father asking if I would like to ... if he sent some money, if I would like to set up a bit of a garden in Valla', or would I like to come to Australia and they would try and help me establish a little bit of a market garden in Adelaide. I chose to, rather than stay in Italy, go with my three brothers to Australia, and in doing ... but then I had to go and do the National Service. Sorry, I'm talking about ...

EM: Your father.

JB: As [if] I was my father.

EM: So he had to do ... [laughs]?

JB: Yeah! And so he had to do those two years or more. In the meantime, he got sick, so he had to do some, he had to be recouped for a little while, and when he got out he then married my mother, and they then made application. My Uncle Doro [Isidoro] made applications for my father to come out, and didn't know that he had married my mother. So therefore I had to stay behind with Mum, and we didn't come until a bit later.

EM: Jimmy, when did you and your mother come to Australia? Can you tell me the name of the ship, what year, and what happened when you arrived in Fremantle?

JB: My mother and I arrived in Fremantle on 5 June, 1940. I was one year and one day old. And we were then taken prisoners, for lack of a better word, prisoners-of-war, for two or three weeks, before we were sent on to our destination where we were to go. The name of the ship was 'The Remo', and the reason that we were taken as hostage, was because they were afraid, firstly because we were 'aliens', and secondly because they were afraid the Captain would put the ship across the harbour, and no other ships would be able to come into the Fremantle Port.

After we arrived, apparently there was not much contact made with my father, and so he used to go every day with his pushbike to Port Adelaide to see if we had arrived. On a particular day he did not go because he just didn't know what was happening, but a friend of his who he had showed a photo, picked up and said, *That's Narcisio Ballestrin's wife*, and that's how we ended up coming to Adelaide, via this other chap whose name was Gino Berno.

EM: Can you remember what happened to the Italian boat?

JB: It was then confiscated, and carried, it was a cargo carrier for around Australia. It was called 'The Sydney', it was renamed 'The Sydney'.

- EM: Now we got to talk about growing up in the market garden.
- JB: Uh huh.
- EM: Where did you live? Did your father have a house ready for you and your mother when you arrived?
- JB: We lived on Valetta Road. Valetta Road is the road that runs off of Frogmore Road to the east. And yes, my father did have a house of sorts set up, a one-bedroom, one kitchen area which, I think, obviously was adequate, because from what they were used to, it was probably luxury. In years to come he would add to the one-bedroom one, one kitchen, and put a bathroom in, and a laundry in, and so forth, but it was very basic in those days – no electricity, had to wait for the ice man to come around and bring the ice, once a day, middle of summer. It would be melted before the sun went down [laughs], but they, they had no complaints.
- EM: Did your father own the land?
- JB: No, he leased it off Miss Keele.
- EM: Keele, okay. What kind of vegetable did your parents grow?
- JB: Tomatoes, beans, celery, and some bunch vegetables as well.
- EM: Did your parents sell the produce at the East End Market? Did you ever go to the market with your Dad?
- JB: I used to go to the market with my Dad, but in later years he, he used to be ... Sorry, the produce he would send to Sydney, boxed, and so we'd go to the railway station, but I did go to the market with my Uncle Antonio, which I called Tony. I went with him to the market every Tuesday, every Thursday, before school. He'd come and pick me up at 2 o'clock, and at 8 o'clock or half past eight, I would catch the bus, or walk to school, from then on.
- EM: Who in your family worked the glasshouse, and did you help?
- JB: My mother and father both worked the glasshouses, probably I'd like to say equal, but maybe not quite equal because my mother would have to then go and cook and do all the household duties. Yes, we were taught that we had to help, from a young age, and thinking back on it, we worked very hard as kids, but thought nothing of it because all my friends did exactly the same, and I didn't hear any of them complain. We didn't seem to think it was a chore at all, it was just something that was done.
- EM: Did your family know any other Italian family that lived in your area?
- JB: Very, very social, it was a very social time of our life, everybody was very, very good friends. They predominantly all are Veneti, and mainly Trevisani and Vicentini but they were all like brothers, all very social, and wine and beer had a lot to do with that social lifestyle. There didn't have to be much excuse for a party.
- EM: Jimmy, can you tell me about the traditional food in your family?
- JB: Well, there was, there was a lot of – because Mum always raised her own chicken and her own roosters – we had a lot of chicken soup, and of course the traditional Italian spaghetti and whatever ... Mum was an actually excellent cook, but sometimes didn't have time to spend a lot of time in the kitchen, because of the fact that work was aplenty. So food was always good, and she

used to try and vary it as much as she could. As I said, sometimes the time wasn't there for the food.

EM: Did your father used to make his own salami?

JB: Father always made his own salami, and his own wine, a tradition that I kept up with Dad until the time that he passed, and then the wine dropped off, but I was still keeping up with the salami. As a matter of fact, next week we start, we're making another two pigs with my brother and sister.

EM: And what about making the sauce?

JB: No, I never, and yet my parents always made their own sauce, and all their own condiments, but I haven't been into that. No, I can't say that I ever made my own sauce.

EM: Can you tell me about your Mum making those beautiful biscuits, traditional?

JB: [Laughs] My mother, as I said, when she had the time she was a good cook, and later on in life when, when they left the market garden, she had a very close friend, called Antonia Recchi, and between the two of them they never ever wrote a recipe down, primarily because Antonia didn't have the ... she never ever went to school, so therefore reading and writing weren't her strong points. All the ... recipes of the two of them was very much in the head, and it was always brilliant. Everybody, everybody said how good that my mother's cooking was, especially the *crostoli*.

EM: *Crostoli*.

[Laughter]

EM: Can you remember who were your parents' friends, and what were their social activities? Can you name some of them?

JB: Well I can, and the, and probably the closest friends, apart from family, would have been Vittorio and Angelina Marchioro, the Zampin's, the – I'm trying to think now of the names because ... – but, but the Piovesan's, they were all ...

EM: Tonellato.

JB: Yeah, Tonellato's, the Santin's, there was a lot of very close associates, the Berno's, and as I said, they would socialise and no, no, no matter what, what time of the year, or when, and how busy they were, they always seemed to have time to have a social gathering.

EM: Do you know how your parents learnt English?

JB: [laughs] My mother wasn't a real good, didn't converse real well in English. I think that some of the problems being is that they were afraid to make mistakes. My father was a bit better than Mum, and later on in life, after he sold the market gardens, went to work for the Henley and Grange Council, and then the Brighton Council. And of course, then all his associates were, were English speaking, so he became very, good English, but very heavily accented.

EM: Did your parents become naturalised? Do you know what year that was?

JB: Yeah. My father become naturalised in 19.., I think I could be wrong here, it could be either '45 or '46, which also included me in his naturalisation. And my mother was in 1948.

EM: Jimmy, was it important for your parents to keep the, the traditions from Italy?

JB: I think it was very important because ... you know, there's always something of home. In those days especially, they all liked to have their glass of wine, and wine wasn't that easy to come by here in Adelaide, the type of wine they were used to drinking, and also the type of foods that they were used to eating, weren't readily available. So therefore yes, they liked to keep the lifestyle of their Italian lifestyle, and, and might I say, perhaps improved on the Italian lifestyle that they, that they had. Because of their poverty over there, they did all the things that they were able to, that they were able to muster here because of, and especially my mother being a servant, could see what the richer people were eating, so she would try and make a meal that was similar.

Might I go back to eating? I'll just tell you, my father had his first plate – going back saying that perhaps better than what they lived in Italy – my father claims he had his first plate of spaghetti when he was 15, when his brother got married, one of his brothers got married ... And his first steak, when he was 21, when he went in the Army. [Laughs] May I tell you there wasn't a lot of food available? [Laughs]

EM: Can you remember anything about the War, what did your father do?

JB: No, during the War my father was interned and had to go to ... he had to leave me and my mother here. By that time I think he'd set up a bit of a market garden, so we had to work, not me but my mother, had to work the market garden, and helped by a couple of my uncles ... He was, he was interned to Adelaide River, which is just 70 kilometres south of Darwin, and he was there for some ten months; came back and when he came back he was then, I don't know how long he was back for, but a very short time, then he was sent to the Riverland for a while. And he had to work there for, while interned, until the end of the War.

EM: Jimmy, can you tell me if you remember Frogmore Road, and who lived and worked there?

JB: Frogmore Road was a very ...

EM: What was it like, Frogmore Road?

JB: Frogmore Road [laughs], it wasn't as nice a road as what it is now, as in it was only, only about eight foot wide, and I don't think it was all bitumenised, but certainly you could drive a car or a horse and cart on it. There was the Santin's and the Tonellato's, the Piovesan's, the Marchioro's, in the early days, but then the Marchioro's left and went to Lockleys. There were varying others, but Veneti, I'm trying to think of ... oh, Zampin, I'm trying to think of who else of the Veneti that were in that area. Perhaps not so many more.

EM: Did your parents return to Italy?

JB: They did, they returned after they'd sold the market garden, in 1965, I think it was, and when, after they went there to Italy, my father wrote me a letter, and in that letter he said, *If I don't buy a car tomorrow, he said, I'll be scared that I'm going to catch the first plane out of here.* He said, *I don't like it anymore.*

[Laughter]

JB: But he, he soon ... Then it became, it was okay. It was just that it had changed so much, and it wasn't what he remembered. At first he was a bit disappointed, but then it was okay for a while.

- EM: Jimmy, would you say your parents have settled well in Australia?
- JB: Oh, they did settle well, and were very, very happy to be Australian residents, and as I said, never ever wanted to go back to Italy to live. There was never ever that thought that crossed their mind. As a matter of fact, when my mother first arrived in, in Adelaide, after the Fremantle episode, she kissed the ground and said, *I'm sick of eating the bread ...* Oh, in the Italian version she said, *La crosta del pane de un servo di sente croste* which means that she only got the leftovers when she was the maid.
- EM: And what about the love of football for your Dad?
- JB: Well my father went every Saturday while West Torrens (Football Club) were playing, with Vittorio Marchioro, Silvano Zampin – I'm trying to think ... there was another one there who sometimes went – but anyway, they went regularly, religiously, every Saturday, at an age ... I can remember going to the football with my father when I was very, very young, and so he must have ... from the age of me being about six or seven, he must have went to every football match from then on. It didn't matter how ripe the tomatoes were, he'd still go to the football. [Laughs]
- EM: Can you tell me about when the Eagles won the first premiership in 35 years?
- JB: Yes. When, when they won the premiership in 35 years, my brother, who is also a staunch Eagle supporter, as we all are, he actually wrote to the club and told them this man here, and he was ailing a little bit, a little bit sick, and so the Eagles sent a few of their players with the Cup, to my father's place, and he thought that was Christmas, he loved that. His favourites of course were the Hank brothers, who were also Frogmore Road residents, although they were just over the other side of the river and they were actually Torrens, Torrens Avenue, which was the same road. It was separated by a small wooden bridge, which was called the – don't know – but it was only small bridge where only one car could pass at a time, you couldn't ... It was certainly no super highway. Well, the Hank brothers were just the other, one side of the, of the river, and I don't know whether I mentioned him, but the Rebuli's were the other side. Then of course later on came Lindsay Head, and he was another idol of my father's.
- EM: Now Jimmy, I'm going to ask you about your childhood, and some of your memories. What do you remember about growing up on Valetta Road, and who was your friends, and who did you play with?
- JB: Well Valetta Road, in Valetta Road ... we ... my first recollection of life was this big, black-bearded man, coming home, or coming up to my mother, and hugging her. That black man happened to be my father [laughs], because he'd been up in the Territory (Northern Territory), up in this Adelaide River, and he was so bronzed ANZAC-ed, never had a shave all the time he was up there, and I, I hung onto my mother's legs. [laughs] I don't think my father could get around me too easily [laughs], because of the fact that, you can imagine they were away for quite a while and they wanted to greet each other. That was probably my first recollection.
- My other recollection was when I was, and here again I'm not sure how old I was, but it was certainly while my father was away, because I had to ... and we had a glasshouse ... because I can remember being at the end of the glasshouse

and my mother calling me, and I wouldn't come. I said, *I've got a sore leg, got a sore leg, got a sore leg*, and my mother came and said, *If I come up there and have to grab you, I'm going to whack you*. When she got to me she said I was burning like coal, and I said that there was a wheel that was turning in my knee. As I said, that was while Dad was still away.

I can still remember that my Uncle Doro had a little truck, and Rene Destro, who was an Australian lady married to an Italian chap, they took me to the Royal Adelaide, to the Royal, not the Royal, the Children's Hospital it was. I went there with this bung knee, and Mum was absolutely petrified because they asked her to sign so that I would have my leg cut off. It got to the stage where they said to her, *You either let us cut his leg off, or he's going to die*, and she actually signed, and she was ... that was, she said that was one of the worst moments of her life. Don't know what happened because I've still got the leg [laughs], and so I'm very grateful that that didn't happen.

That was probably the earliest recollections. I'm guessing I might have been four, because I was toilet trained when I was, according to Mum when I was three months old back in Italy, because she had three sisters and they all fussed over me, and all the rest of it, so I was toilet trained at a very young age. But when I went to the Royal – sorry, I keep calling it the Royal – to the Children's Hospital, they put a nappy on, on me, because I didn't know how to say, *I wanted to go to the toilet*. [Laughs]

EM: Oh, you couldn't speak English!! But who did you play with?

JB: Well, as I said, Johnny Marchioro is probably our, ... probably my, my closest friend at that time. Later on, as another family arrived on, as it was called River Road then, which was not far from where we were. His name was Melbourne Recchi, and we were fairly close friends. Then of course my cousins, Frank Ballestrin, Norma Ballestrin, but we seemed to live a long way away, but it was very short, if you know what I mean. It was nothing for us to go and play with someone that lived 500 metres away. We were never short of friends.

EM: Can you tell me about any of your birthdays as a child?

JB: No, birthdays weren't celebrated much in our family. Birthdays come and not really, not really one that was memorable.

EM: Jimmy, how old were you when you started school, and which school?

JB: I started school when I was five, at what is now called Flinders Park Primary School, but then it was called the, the Underdale Primary School. That was on the corner of Holbrooks Road and Hartley Road, which was ... we, we rode our bikes there, but when you rode your bike, every second day you'd get a three-corner jack in it, so therefore you'd have to walk the next day. I did that for two years, and then from there I went and did another five years at Marist Brothers, Thebarton. They were my best years of my schooling life. Again I had such friends as Johnny, Johnny Marchioro and Mel Recchi, and all those sorts of people.

I started first year in Marist Brothers, Thebarton, but I had two cousins that were going to CBC [Christian Brothers College], and I was talked into going to CBC from Thebarton. Well, I can't claim that they were good years because

we were, after having the liberty of plenty of room at Thebarton, Marist Brothers, we seemed cooped up, and so therefore ... and we had to learn different subjects, and it was a bit harder for me.

EM: I was just going to ask you did you know other children from your neighbourhood, but you just said you did, didn't you?

JB: I did, there were other, there were some, there were some, across the road there were some, the Rositano's, who were, they were a Calabrese family, and then there were some Napolitani, and there was other ... There was the Canino's and there was the Esposito's ... there was quite a few other children that, in that area, some a bit younger, some a bit older, but we always socialised with them, it was good.

EM: What did you like about school, and what are some of the memories that stand out about school?

JB: Well the, probably my favourite subject at school was the, was Maths. I wasn't too good at English because I can remember one day, this was in my CBC days, when Frank [Ballestrin] and I shared the same class. We went, we had a composition to do over, over the weekend, which we both did, and they called the two Ballestrin boys out, *Frank and Egidio, come out the front here, and just read your, your compositions out*. So Frank read his out, and that was deemed to be the best in the class, and mine [laughs], mine was the worst in the class [laughs], so English wasn't my strong point. [Laughs]

EM: Anything else of that school that you ...?

JB: Oh, the school, of course them loved playing football there, and that was a big part of the liking of Thebarton, because everybody played football, or cricket, or whatever was to become, to keep all the boys together. I can remember playing, I've only ever played one game of cricket in my life, and that was for the CBC Under-14 Bs, in which I took a hat trick, and ended up with the figures of five wickets for three runs, but it wasn't due to my good bowling, because I couldn't bowl. I still can't bowl, never been able to bowl, but sometimes good luck does follow you.

[Laughter]

EM: Now we're going to talk about life after school. Jimmy, I like to ask you about your life after you left school. Jimmy, how old were you when you left school?

JB: When I left school I was 14, because, as I said, if I had have stayed with, at Marist Brothers, Thebarton, I perhaps would have went on for a bit further, but I didn't ... Firstly, I know Mum and Dad were struggling at home, so I went to get a job, and I applied for an apprenticeship with Perry Engineering, and although I was under age, they said they would, yes, they would put me through an apprenticeship. I can remember I was getting £2/17/6 a week, and when ... I did 12 months there, and at the end of the year I topped the five first-year apprentices at, at Perry's. I didn't top the state but I topped the five, and when we started again next year, those other boys were on £5/10/- a week, because they went to second year, I stayed on £2/17/6, so I went to the officer in charge, and I said, *Look I ...*, and he explained to me in plain English, that he would not be able to put me up until I was 16, and then I would have to do another 12 months after that, and I was 17 before I got a rise. So that meant that I would have had to be two and a half years, almost three years, on the lesser wage. The other ones who were in the same class as I was, would have

been getting something like ten and a half pound at the time, and so I said, *No, I'm going to, I'm going to leave here.*

So I went to work for a mosaic flooring company, at the age of 15, I was then getting fourteen and a half pound a week. I think that put a smile on Mum's face that she could have a bit more money to spend, because I, I gave her £10 every week, and then paid tax on my £14, and whatever was left was for me to spend, which was usually about £2, which was good, that's all I needed.

EM: But what did you enjoy about your job, working with the mosaics?

JB: It was very interesting. I ended up leaving there at one stage because I was put with, with a chap who was doing partition work, putting up partitions, and being innocent as I was then, probably not now, but he used to swear like a trooper, and that got the better of me, so I said, *No, I'm going.* So I went and then I went to work with people as a truck driver, with people called Michell, JB: H Michell & Co, and I stayed with them for a while.

Then Primo, my cousin, he had a concreting business, and asked me to go and work for him, and he said, *Look, I'll give you so much money,* and the money was good, so I went there because the money was needed. By that time I was about to be married for the first time, so I needed the money.

EM: What kind of things did you do for social life?

JB: Social life, again those people that we, that I'd mentioned, for instance Bruno Piovesan, Johnny Marchioro, Frank Ballestrin, Mel Recchi, Guido Rebuli, we all stuck together, and religiously had to go to the dance every Friday night, which was the Windsor Ballroom, and Saturday night, which was at Glenelg Town Hall. They talk about women being wallflowers! We were the wallflowers because we weren't game to ask the girls, at first, for a dance, so we just stood around. [Laughs]

So it was good, but we'd also all go to the football together, some of us played, some of us watched, and then we'd go, and if there was anything, any function on, or anything to do of a Sunday, we would go and hang around the Henley, at Henley and Grange beaches a lot, went and played, throw balls or whatever we had to do, so it was very, very good. In winter of course the football. That was in summer we did that Henley, but in winter of course there was the football.

On Sundays, a lot of it was [hanging] around because Guido Rebuli had a shop, a grocery shop by then, and it was a delicatessen as well, so it used to keep open of a Sunday. We used to hang around there and wait for him to finish, then we'd go in someone's car up to Hindley Street, to go just for a cruise around. It was usually either Bruno's [Piovesan] car or Frank's [Ballestrin] car, or someone like that, because I didn't get a car until was nearly 18 I think.

EM: When did you get married?

JB: I got married for the first time in 19 – now I've got to stop and think – 1961, and that marriage produced three boys, Stephen, David and Paul, who are now almost 50. Now with that, things broke down after a while, I was told my services were no longer required, so I had to ... In the meantime, I'd been to

Darwin, working for Primo. Primo sent me up to ... not Darwin, but in the Territory, to work for about three months, and money I could see was aplenty there, so I thought we needed money, money wasn't ... I suppose my wife wasn't a real good manager of money, but we needed the money, as I said, and I thought, *If I can do six months up in the Territory, we might be established.* We had a car which had broken down, couldn't afford to fix it, so I thought, *Maybe we can get another car,* and all the rest of it.

I went to Darwin for, for, as I said, a period of time. In the meantime there was a chap who offered us a contract to do, to do concrete in houses. That fell through, but I worked for another Italian chap, and we were doing some work, and then again the famous knee blew up like a balloon. I was in the Darwin Hospital, and the comments were made by one of the doctors when he came around the next morning, that talking to another doctor, he said, *I don't like what's going on here.* So I then said to my then boss, I said, *You better get me to a plane to Adelaide, because I don't want to be here.* When I came back, it was just ... it was a Friday, I can remember, I couldn't get in to see a specialist, but I went and saw a Dr Kirby. He just gave me two tablets and my knee was better by next morning, by Monday morning, sorry, not next morning.

In the meantime that's when I was told that, not to hang around because it wasn't the ... the marriage had broken down. I had intended staying, but instead of that I went back to Darwin, and I thought, because I couldn't, couldn't bear the thought of my children, me not being with my children. So I went back to Darwin, the pillow used to get a bit damp of a morning, but still that's the way it is. I was lucky I had some friends there, some good, ex-Adelaide friends, who helped me through some tough times, a bit of alcohol too, helped.

EM: After you were married, how did you stay involved with your parents?

JB: Oh, very ... We'd never ever lived very far from my parents, and my ... We actually lived on land that was owned by my father. We built a house, I built a house in 1964 there, and always very close to my parents, and brother and sisters, so I always ... it was never ever an issue that we weren't close because, like most Italian families, they like to keep theirs very close to each other, especially seeing that they had to leave their own when they left Italy, and I think that they realised how close they needed to be to their offspring, and the offspring to them as well.

EM: When did your parents die?

JB: My father ... firstly my mother died in 1988 at the age of 73 of a heart attack, and my father died in 19, sorry, 2007, and he was 93. He had a growth in the stomach.

EM: Can you tell me about all of your children and grandchildren?

JB: I can. I've got Stephen was the oldest, who was born in 1962. He's got two children, both boys, Thomas and Cooper – a fairly good name, Thomas, Cooper. And then I have David, who was born in 1964. He's got two children and they are – I've got to stop and think now because I don't see much of them they're up in ... they're up in northern Australia – it's Taylor and Jack. And then there's Paul who was born in 1965. He's got two children who are called

Victoria and Hudson. Then we go to, then I've got Matthew, who is now 32, I think, and he was born in 1979, and Venetia, who was born in 1980.

EM: Have you been back to your parents' home in Italy?

JB: I have, I went there in 1974, and in doing so didn't know what to expect. I always thought, having spent a lot of time in Darwin, as I've just mentioned, everybody used to boast, how good Sydney was, how good Victoria was, how good Western Australia was. We used to boast of South Australia and so on, and I really thought that's exactly how Italy was. They used to talk about and boast about it, but when I arrived there, I arrived there in early-June, and it was just so picturesque.

I was picked up at the Rome Airport, and we drove through to, to the Veneto Region, and in doing so we saw all the fields there with the poppies sitting on top, the red poppies, and of course there was a song that Mum used to sing all the day, *Gli papaveri alti alti* which means the poppies are high, high, high, and that was exactly right, because they were about a foot higher than all the wheat and so forth, but it was so picturesque I thought, *Oh, it is beautiful*, to the extent that once when I was here in Adelaide, I was doing a bit of building, and a Calabresi block came up to me who, he used to be a truck driver in, in Italy, and he used to be, he used to travel all of Italy, and he said, *Where do you come from?* I said, *I'm Italian*. He said, *Oh, what part?* I said, and I told him, and I said, *The Veneto Region. What part of the Veneto Region?* I told him again. Anyway he said, *What?* He clasped his hands and he said, *What are you doing here?* He said, *That is the best part of the world*. I said, *Yes, I know I've seen it, but when you're hungry it's not very nice*. And so that's why we're here, because my mother and father were very, very hungry, and they had to come away so that they could bring up their family in somewhere, in less poverty than what they had. It is beautiful, because that's exactly how I saw it, it's such a beautiful place. Mind you, I've never been back there in a winter, so I don't really know what it would be like in winter.

EM: Now Jimmy, before we finish there's anything else that you would like to tell me?

JB: Well I, I'd like to say that in all our time, as I said, my present wife, Jackie, and I were married in '77. She rescued me from a time of ... once I'd left I was fairly, I wouldn't say I was the most religious person in the world, but I was fairly religious and used to go to Mass every Sunday, and blah, blah, blah. But when my world collapsed I didn't want anything to do with church or whoever, or anything, but of course, Jackie was a very, and still is, a very strict Catholic, and so gradually she brought me back to the fold, which was good.

Then we became ... in '77 we got married and produced Matthew and Venezia., but in the meantime – oh sorry, they were both born here in Adelaide – but in the meantime we were in Darwin and we were, just after our escapade to Italy ... the reason I went there then was because I'd injured my back very badly, and I was out of work for 12 months, and in those days you didn't get WorkCover or insurance, and so I thought, *What am I doing here? I've always been going to go to Italy, let's go now*.

So I went over there for, for, I don't know, quite some time, I think it was something like two or three months, but I was there I think six weeks before

Jackie arrived, and as I explained before, thought it was very, very nice, because people there ... there was, a lot of Italian-Australians were there, and we used to hang around one of the markets. We would go and see parts of the Dolomites and all that type of stuff, so every, every Saturday or Sunday there would be somewhere to go, and I said, *When we came back, we would come back to Adelaide*, because I always said that I'd been away from my mother and father and children, for long enough.

In the new year of '75, we were due to come back to Adelaide, so all our stuff was all piled up ready to go, but December '74, Christmas Eve, Cyclone Tracy hit Darwin, and in doing so it also took all our possessions, everything, all our belongings, any money that we had, because of the fact that outstanding jobs that I'd done earlier, everything went. We were very fortunate in that the house that we were living in disintegrated completely. Then through the lightning strikes that every second seemed to happen, it was almost like daylight, we found a place, a unit near us, that had, that had, was still standing, so we went in there. When we were in there, it seemed okay, because this chap that was, that was living in the unit said, *Look, I've been through four cyclones before, I know what it's all about*. He had a carton of beer, *Here, have a beer, have ...*

Alright, so we did that, and then in the meantime [laughs], the roof started lifting up and down, and then one of the front panels come adrift. I was with Jackie and two of her friends, and so we, we arranged that I would go under the bed with Jackie, one of the friends would go in a cupboard, the other friend would go in another cupboard, but then when we get to go under the bed, there was no room, so three of us were under a small cupboard that would not house me now if I was ... because I'm a lot fatter than what I was then. It was a bit scary because as the lightning strikes, as I said, the roof left, left us, both ends of this unit left us, and we were exposed to, to the elements.

The eye of the cyclone came and we thought, *Good, that's the end of it*, but then ten minutes later it returned the other way, and if you know anything about cyclones, they have a reverse action, and you could see boats and you could see caravans and cars being flipped all over the place, because we lived very close to a Nightcliff Beach, which was very close to the sea, it was quite, quite scary. The strange part about that is that I'd always thought, because my legs were exposed, I could see this big, steel beam on top of me, and I was consoled with the fact that I would lose, or badly injure, my legs, but I thought, *Well, that's alright, I won't die, I know I'm not going to die, but my legs might go*.

My mother claims that at that same time, she dreamt of me being back in Italy as a little boy, and I was, I just, I fell into what they call the *pozzo* which is the well, I was falling in, and she grabbed me by the legs, and as she did, my legs come off. I don't believe in, in physic powers or anything like that, but it was just a strange feeling that I'm thinking that my legs are going to be maimed or broken, or something, and here she was dreaming like that at the same time.

Other things, yeah, we, we did alright with Darwin because of the fact that I would have been okay. I had a partner there, and this partner had big ideas, and they weren't real bad ideas, but he then got very sick, got osteomyelitis or whatever, and he said that I'm not going to ever, *If ever I get sick, I'm not*

going to hang around, and he didn't, he took his life. So that left me with a fair bit to do, because we had something like seven or eight employees, and then some out in the bush, so I'd have to go bush. So a lot of work was done in Darwin, and that was good because it made, allowed me to forget what, you know, some of the things that perhaps I didn't want to remember.

Then when that was all over, we came back here and started again, doing things I shouldn't have, like ... and I started concreting again, and I shouldn't have, but still that's, that's the way it is.

EM: You're happy with your life now?

JB: Oh yes, extremely happy with my life. Like most other people got aches and pains, but that's nothing. No, no, my life is very ...

EM: Good

JB: Yeah. We've got, now we've got a caravan, and in that caravan we do a lot of travelling around Australia. We've been to the top of Western Australia, top of, top of Cape York, which is Queensland, and Darwin again, and all that, so we've seen most of Australia, but still we're going to go again shortly.

EM: Well Jimmy, thank you very much for sharing your story with me, I really appreciate it. You've given me such interesting information about your life in this interview today.