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Full transcript of an interview with

JOHN MORLEY

circa 1993

By Ted Cornish

Recording available on CD

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Abbreviations: The interviewee's alterations may be identified by their initials in insertions in the transcript.

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A series of dots, indicates an untranscribable word or phrase.

Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, - - -.

Spelling: Wherever possible the spelling of proper names and unusual terms has been verified. A parenthesised question mark (?) indicates a word that it has not been possible to verify to date.

Typeface: The interviewer's questions are shown in **bold print**.

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Ted Cornish interviewing John Morley about his interesting experiences with Afghan hawkers and various other matters.

Well, my initial experience with Afghan hawkers was when I was in my late teens and went as a jackeroo to Nonning. There was a great old character up there by the name of Ram Singh, who had one of the old cab type two horse-drawn vehicles fitted up with shelves on each side, and carried a great range of goods, which all the station hands and the natives and so forth were able to buy from. And he travelled far and wide all over the Gawler Ranges. He went as far as, if I remember correctly, Hiltaba. That included Lake Everard and just beyond there, and Yardea, all round the Kimba area - which in those days, in the '23s, was not a very big town - and Iron Knob, the whole Siam, Mount Ives, all those. He had a very great area round there and did a very great business.

One of his horses was called Violet, and he always asked us, when he wanted to move on from Nonning, which was his headquarters, to "Get Violet, find Violet from the paddock. I want to go and sell up the track". So we'd find Violet and the other horse and off he'd go. And he got all his things up by - - -. There was a great character used to drive the mail in those days by the name of George Scharenberg, in a T-model Ford, and he used to bring all his goods up for sale at Hawker. He had a very great variety of things and did a very big trade, and sweets for the natives who loved those hard-boiled lollies, and used to sell very colourful dresses to the native ladies and cared for everybody round the whole place.

And later on I moved away from there and the next great character I met, who was better known as one Solomon Shah - - -. His area was all up in the north-west, going as far north-west as Malgathing Station and Commonwealth Hill and as far north-west as Wayfield Creek, and he operated - - -. His headquarters were at Coondambo Station and he operated on all those stations near and far and he had a much better variety of things to sell than the previous hawker because they had better modes of transport in those days. He used to get his things up on the train and he used to sell - - -. Even went in to selling biscuits and things like that, which the previous old Ram Singh couldn't do because they'd go bad. [break in recording]

As a matter of fact his stock was so great he told me he carried anything from a pin to a case of gelignite, and he really looked after everybody. And I think it might have had something to do with his final days. I wouldn't be sure about that.

However, a friend of mine, Jim McBride from Wilgena Station, told me that he set him up initially with his first motorised vehicle, which was a T-model Ford and all done up nicely, that opened from the sides and the back, and it was almost like - - -. Not quite up the standards of Woolworths, but very close, in a miniature way. And he carried everything. He later on - the T-model Ford became a little bit tough for those days - he finished up with an A-model Ford which was about a thirty hundredweight truck, beautifully fitted up, and could carry everything, and he really carried all sorts of things. Even went in for dried vegetables and all that sort of thing and I think if people wanted them, he'd even take potatoes and onions out for them, and he had a very, very wide area. He covered thousands of square miles really. And they knew every inch of the country, these old hawkers. They were very, very canny, despite the fact coming from a strange country. They soon got all the clues of where to camp and where not to camp, and they were very, very good at all this. However, he went on in a much bigger way with this Model-A Ford truck. He could carry much more.

And one night I remember quite well. I met him coming - - -. I was travelling from Tarcoola to Mulgathing, going due west along the railway line at about one o'clock in the morning, and Solomon Shah was camped on the side of the road. I remember [sound distortion] because as I pulled up - - -. Soon after I pulled up and talked to Solly and woke him up and we had a yarn. Suddenly we saw a colossal white light in the west, and it was absolutely impossible to look at this light for any length of time, it was so white, and after a few seconds it gradually got less white and then yellow, and after a few minutes we could feel the tremor of the earth and then we heard the rumble, and this was an atomic bomb exploded at Maralinga. [break in recording]

This reminds me of the tremendous effort by several capable people, one of them a character by the name of McDougall who was a great bushman and connected with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and Len Biddell who was connected with Woomera and Maralinga, and he was surveyor, and Tony Jay who was the liaison officer between the stations and Woomera and mixed up with any problems that arose from bureaucrats and the stations. And these people went to no end of trouble to make sure there were no natives in that area when those bombs were being exploded. I know quite well because I was asked to assist in transport, and I've since heard that very little was done for it, to clear the area of natives, and people say nobody thought of their welfare but I know quite well that these people went to no end of trouble, and lots of station people helped in making sure that all those natives were removed from the danger area.

And another thing that amazes me is that that country has very little water, other than a claypan known in my days as Dingo Claypan - I think it has another name now - which had water in it only after heavy rains. There was absolutely no water in the area for natives to live on and it rather intrigues me to think that the people worried so much that so little was done when so much as done, and the natives just couldn't live in that area without water. It's a well known fact that when they established Maralinga, they had to condense water for themselves to live on.

Reverting back to the Afghan hawkers, Ram Singh and Solomon Shah, they must not be confused with the Afghan camel strings which carried stores to outback stations (coughs), and wool as back loading in strings up to eighty camels carrying six to eight hundredweight and one bull string, I remember, which loaded up to ten hundredweight per camel. These Afghans were common carriers as distinct from hawkers. These strings operated in my days to Cordillo Downs, four hundred miles north-east of Lyndhurst Siding, via Murnpeowie, the Strzelecki and Innamincka, past the old Cobb and Co coach drawn by bull camels, abandoned at the Cobblers Sandhills, which used to carry passengers through the sandhills where motorcars couldn't traverse. One car would pull up on the south side and the passengers would unload into the camel coach and the other side of the Cobblers, the north side, get into the other car en route for Innamincka. [break in recording]

Ironically, following the advent of four wheel drive vehicles signalled the end of the camel strings carrying stores and wool to the outback. These camels, once the four wheel drive came in and the big trucks, they lost all their business. The poor old Afghans just pulled off all their hobbles at Marree, Farina, Lyndhurst Siding - all along the track - let the camels go, most of which finished up in the Simpson Desert. And today the most magnificent camels are breeding up in the Simpson Desert, some of which are being exported back to the country they originally came from, free of disease and a better camel than the ones initially imported into Australia. [break in recording]

... they'd build a cell. There was a police house there but not cell, so they built a cell. When they had finished the hostel they built the cell and the first bloke to go in it was the policeman, Bob Depury (exclamation from listener), who got mixed up in those dog scalps, and he was the first bloke to be locked up. And Cecil Goode and a detective called Damon[?] went up there, and Jimmy Davies who had Tingatingin Station in those days - you know, Ironback Davies - they were - - -. They put through twenty-eight thousand dog scalps in six months through the policeman. So this Damon was a very smart cookie. And old Cecil Goode was a pastoral inspector

and he drove him up there and he just went straight out to Davies and he said, "Look Davies, bad luck old fellow, but you've got to own up. You'll get off if you turn King's evidence. The others have spilt the beans. You'll get off scott free". He hadn't even seen the others.

Listener: Oh, what a mean thing to do.

Davies admitted the whole lot. The other three all got - - -. Bob Depury the policeman got a stretch and Lionel McCarthy - - -. You know Lionel McCarthy?

Yes.

He got a stretch. And this fellow, the father of this bloke that's on TV - on all this country stuff - what's his name?

Listener: Harry Butler?

Not Harry Butler, the other fellow that comes from round Port Augusta. Not Port Augusta.

Listener: Broken Hill?

Oh, Absalom?

Absalom's father, he was the other one. But isn't that funny? They built the cell and the policeman was the first one to go in it.

[Interruption: break in recording - few seconds without sound - general conversation.]

I said, "What about Wilgena? Mulgathing - you've given this a twenty thousand gallon tank and we're going to put it in. What about Wilenga? Giving the tank stand and a two hundred gallon tank?" and she said, "Yes, I'll talk to bloody Cliff Hall - he can do it". So she told him, she said, "You make this tank". I said, "It's got to be high enough to water reticulate right through the hostel. It goes through the ceiling you see". Right. So I was there again in about a month's time, having a look round. Here's this tank stand and I've never seen such a gross [?] in my life. It was a four two-inch pipe with about two struts on it. It would fall over on a windy day. So lo and behold if she didn't come poking around, and she said, "What do you think of the tank stand?" I said, "Look, my kid could make a better job than that. We just wouldn't put the thing up. I'm sorry Mrs Taylor". She said, "I've never seen such a bloody awful thing in all my life!" Oh, she was wild! She said, "I'll get to that Hall and I'll tell him what to do".

Listener: Did he build it himself?

Yes. (laughs) Oh, it wasn't even built. It was a shocking thing. Anyway, we got the tank stand and up it went. We put an electric motor in it.

Listener: And it's still there.

But later I got - this was all built for a start - a beautiful building, and one, the north line became a junction for the north line. Tarcoola sort of rose from the dead again so I decided to build a dentist's surgery there - dental surgery. But unfortunately they didn't built it at the start and it would be too costly these days. They built it with concrete or bricks or something. But anyway, they asked me to go up and open it for them.

Male Listener: What year was that?

So there's a plaque outside - "opened by" myself.

Listener: How very nice.

I got the Governor of South Australia to open the hospital, you know. You wouldn't believe it. (laughs)

Listener: Still, very important, these outback places. Which Governor was that at the time?

Male Listener: Did you see the other day where they had the police band up there?

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