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Full transcript of an interview with

C. R. AITKEN

On 12 March 1973

By Richard Freney

Recording available on CD

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

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

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Interview of Mr C.R. Aitken by Richard Freney, recorded in Adelaide on 12th March 1973 for broadcast on ABC Radio 5CL on 18th March 1973 as part of the series 'Now in retirement'.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

Ron, you told me a minute or two ago that you were born in Perth, Western Australia, and in the year nineteen hundred and seven. Well, now, that makes us compatriots, you know and (laughs) actually contemporaries as well, and that's rather a nice coincidence, I think. But, in any case, the parallelism ends there, because I believe that when you were quite a child you went off to the goldfields in West Australia, up to Kalgoorlie and Boulder. Now, do you recall anything of those days about yourself and your parents and so forth?

Yes; I recall almost everything except, as you say, we *did* go there when I was a baby. In those days, Boulder and Kalgoorlie were thriving cities. They were, in fact, twin cities.

Yes. Was this the Golden Mile?

This is the Golden Mile. They were – gold mines were thriving; there was a train and a tram service between the two cities. But my earliest recollections, of course, are school days, and I can remember all about that.

Well, what did your father do there, Ron?

My father was an engine driver, a static engine driver. He worked for a while on the power station up there, but mainly he worked at the mines driving the winches: he was a –

Oh, I see.

– winch driver.

Yes, the poppet head cable that goes down the shaft.

That is so, yes.

Yes. And, of course, your mother was there, too?

My mother was there, yes, the whole family.

And how did she like the life there on the goldfields, and what did she do with herself when your father was out and the kids were at school?

Oh, it was a fairly tough life in those days, and made more so because my father was – always had the gold bug. It's always said that Aitkens have gold running in their veins. Whenever there was any indication of a gold strike anywhere, Dad would up anchor and off he would go in places – Wiluna, Leonora and places like this, and Dad would go chasing gold: unfortunately never found it.

Oh! Really? In other words, he'd joined the gold rush?

He joined the gold rush wherever it was, and my mother, who was a dressmaker, of course, had to take in dressmaking to feed the four hungry kids. It was a pretty tough life, although it was a very happy one.

Yes. And did your father have any luck about this at all, did he?

No (laughs); he never found any gold.

Oh, dear! And how long did this life on the goldfields last?

Oh, we left there – I think I'd be about eleven or twelve when we left the goldfields. By this time, the gold rush had gone; the mines were petering out; the mines were closing and my parents realised the only chance for the boys – there were three of us in the family – the only chance for them, of course, would be working in the mines and So we moved to Perth, the land of – it was the city of opportunity; and we went down to Perth, where I finished my schooling at the Claremont Central School.

I see. And you finished your schooling, you say: well, that meant your first job at that point, then?

Yes; I left school at fourteen and I was always a bit 'arty', and my parents wanted me to get into something of this nature, and I got a job – I was apprenticed to a jewellery engraver. And I served with this fellow for three months, but I didn't get paid during the three months (laughs). He had racing greyhounds (interviewer laughs) and they were not very good ones, presumably, because he didn't have any money and I didn't get paid. So I was taken away from the jewellery engraving and so the world lost a great jewellery engraver. And then I went to work for an estate agent's as an office boy. That really started my office career.

Still in Perth?

Still in Perth, yes. And then I was there for some months, and then my parents felt that Perth was sort of not doing anything. Melbourne then became the land – the city of opportunity, and the whole family moved over to – – –.

Now, had this gradual Great Depression that, you know, your and my generation think about – – –.

Yes, not at that stage (coughs); no, not at that stage, no. We moved – this was in 1922 and Melbourne was a very flourishing city. Indeed, I applied for three jobs and I got them all, and this was in 1922 and I selected – this was my first brush with the liquor industry. I selected a job, office boy for James Buchanan and Company, distillers of (pause) Scotch whisky.

Of fine Scotch whisky.

Fine Scotch whisky, yes. I nearly (laughter) – I nearly said the name.

How did your parents view this?

Ah, well, my parents didn't like it at all. My father didn't care, of course; Dad always liked his glass of beer. But Mother didn't like me being associated with the liquor industry at all, and after – I must have been there for almost a year, and under pressure from her I left there and I went to work in the rag trade in Flinders Lane. A tough job, Flinders Lane, in those days – – –.

Well, how much did you earn at that?

Well, (laughs) I just can't remember what I started at. I think I probably started at about sixteen bob, but when I left there and I went from there to the Carlton and United Breweries in Melbourne, when I left there at the age of seventeen I was getting thirty-two and thruppence a week –

(laughs) Good gracious.

– thirty-two and thruppence, and I was offered three pound ten to go to the brewery: it was too big to resist. But it was really quite strange, because I was afraid to tell my mother about it, that I'd gone to work back in the liquor industry. Now, starting in Flinders Lane, I used to start work at something like eight o'clock in the morning and I would get home any time – oh, perhaps between six and seven after I'd

finished the cable. I had to code the cable that we sent to England and had to decode it first thing in the morning. And – – –.

What was this cable about?

Oh, this was a cable, you see, it was indenting for rags –

Oh, I see.

– manchester and all this type of thing: quite a complicated job. But, of course, then I had to – then I started work at the brewery at nine o'clock and knocked off at five, so I used to have to wander (laughs) the streets so that I wouldn't get home earlier or later. But eventually, when the winter set in in Melbourne, it was too cold to be wandering the streets, I confessed all and was forgiven.

(laughs) Well, you seem to be fated – or perhaps a better word would be destined, possibly, Ron – to be in the liquor industry in one of its departments or other, but how did you make some progress from that?

From progress from within it.

From within it, yes.

Well, I went to the brewery as the secretary to the sales superintendent – strange enough, in those tender years at the age of seventeen, I could do shorthand and typing – and then I decided that the only chance in an office, of course, was to become an accountant. Now, by this time the Depression was starting. It was getting pretty – things were getting pretty tough. There was no money; my brothers and my father were in and out of work and, indeed, during the depth of the Depression I was the only one working. I was one adult working in a family of six. We'd lost our house and I was getting four pounds a week, and that was keeping the whole family, and we were paying thirty-two and six a week rent out of that. It was a pretty tough time. So there was no money for schooling. I went to a second hand book shop and bought an accountancy book, which cost me six shillings, and from that and borrowing books from the company's library, books like *Company law* and *Bankruptcy law*, I studied at home by myself for three years and became a qualified accountant.

Did you really? Well, that's a great credit to you. Of course, without that you wouldn't have had a hope to have made the remarkable progress that you did make in that industry.

I don't think so; I think in those days there were not as many accountants as there are today. A young man who had qualified was noticed and, indeed, I used my accountancy knowledge to do all sorts of things at the company which otherwise wouldn't have been done. I think I was about twenty-six when I was appointed accountant of the Carlton Brewery Limited, which was quite young in those days.

Yes. Well, now, you've brought us along your career fairly swiftly to that particular point, when you got that appointment, and it wasn't long after that, was it, that you were brought to South Australia to the South Australian Brewing Company?

Oh, yes. It was ---.

Or was it South ---?

Ah, it was a long time after that. I served in various jobs for the Carlton and United Breweries, and then I enlisted in February nineteen hundred and forty. I was still with the brewery then --

I see.

-- and I enlisted and I went into the Army. I had always been interested in the Citizen Forces, where I had a commission -- a second lieutenant -- and I enlisted in the Army and, of course, wanted to be in the infantry because I felt that I was an infanter -- I was always terribly fit. But my eyes went against me and I was put into the ordinance school, and I served in the Army for just on six years.

Yes; but I seem to recall, during a conversation we had not so long ago, that you had some particular interest in providing not only official equipment for the troops but also amenities of one kind and another. Didn't you develop this?

There was a saying in the Army: 'The cat won't have it; the dog doesn't want to give it to Ron.' I first struck this when I was in the Northern Territory, where there were no amenities at all. There were troops who had been there for two years, and there was absolutely nothing. And they were very dispirited. They were very bad soldiers, and I felt that something should be done. So I got to work up there and we built a swimming pool -- there was -- this was on the creek, of course; it wasn't --

providing the water, but we put in diving boards and tanning boards and so on – and cricket pitches, and so on, and I had a tremendous lot to do with amenities – I got public speaking going – and this was all in my spare time. Then, later on, perhaps a year later, when I was up at a place called Jacquinot Bay in New Britain, the position was even worse because there were no flat areas there and there was virtually nothing that the troops could do. And then I got to work and (coughs) formed a concert party and organised water sports – anything that could be done: swimming and boating of all sorts, and I got a lot of fun out of it, as a matter of fact. I think one would have gone nuts in the islands in those days – – –.

Well, you must have had to be pretty inventive and resourceful to develop these facilities for these chaps.

Oh, I don't think I had to be. I think I put the ideas in their head and they did that – they were the resourceful ones. For example, this concert party – I mention this to you and I won't deal with it very fully – but I found in a unit of only three hundred men, I found a tailor who could make costumes, I found a chap who'd worked at Myers in the Finishing Department who could make curtains, I found an artist who could paint me scenery; and these people worked into a team, provided shows which we did, in fact, put on for as many as three and a half thousand people.

Good gracious!

And none of them had ever been on stage before.

And did you get support from the Army officials?

Oh, everybody, everybody loved it, yes; this was *greatly* welcomed.

Yes. Well, now, how long did your Army career last, Ron?

Nearly six years I was in the Army, yes.

And you finally retired with the rank of Major, I think?

That is so.

Now, I – well aware that during all this time you were interested in sports. Of course, as a young boy you were a champion swimmer, and this, no doubt, was the foundation of your sporting interests. Tell us now, how did you manage to keep your sporting interests not only going but developing, and moving into the

administrative side of the sporting world whilst you were so busy working at these jobs, more or less supporting your family, and then away at the War?

Well, I (laughs) – of course, I would have probably still been a swimmer, or interested in swimming, if we hadn't moved from Perth to Melbourne. But swimming in Melbourne in those days, before there were heated pools, was too much for me and so I drifted into athletics. I had been able to run at school; I'd been in the school athletic team; and I did in fact run for eighteen years with these Melbourne Harriers. And at a very early stage in it I took an interest in the administrative side of it. I think my first job was publicity of the Association in Victoria, and I later became the Secretary. In fact, I've held almost every office over there. And I was elected a Life Member in nineteen hundred and fifty of the Victorian Association. And it was about this time, if I could just digress a little bit, it was in nineteen hundred and fifty that the opportunity came for me to come to South Australia as the Manager of the Brewing Company.

Yes.

And so I told my wife, 'Well, now, I've given up virtually a lifetime to amateur sport. No more.' But when I came over here and saw the dreadful conditions that our athletes were competing under, it was quite unbelievable. I felt that something had to be done. And so I went back into it and on and on. I was a Vice-President of the Amateur Athletic Union – I think I was first appointed in about 1947.

But of course you became President of the Athletic Union of Australia, didn't you –

Yes, I have been President.

– and you still are?

I have been President for sixteen years, and I come up for election again this month.

I see. Well, good luck. Let's hope you'll only continue.

(laughs) Who cares?

Well, I'm sure a lot of your friends would. Now, that leads me to think about this specific development that you've brought about at Kensington, the Kensington Sports Ground.

Yes.

But that was a bit later on, was it?

No, it was – well, it started – as soon as I saw the conditions under which the athletes were competing, I felt that something should be done and I felt they had to have a decent ground of their own. I fought with the City Council for years unsuccessfully – they did in fact grass an area for us, but it was a most unsatisfactory state of affairs – and then, ultimately, my friend George Bolton of the Burnside Council – – –.

He was the Mayor, wasn't he?

He was the Mayor, and we talked over my problems and, well, history records that we were successful in taking the oval away from both league football and cricket, both of whom didn't use it. In fact, I suppose the Kensington cricket oval would be the best in the world; it's beautiful. But we got the ground and we pay very substantial rent for it, but we're very happy to have it, and we have a ground which now compares more than favourably with anyone in Australia.

Well, that was certainly a wonderful thing, the Kensington Sports Ground, that you achieved for Adelaide and South Australia. And, naturally, that leads me on to thinking on the national basis, and when it comes to national sport, of course, it's the Olympic Games. And I have here a copy of the *Argus*, November the 22nd 1956, in which the leader, the editorial for the day, is devoted to the Olympic Games. It gives a list of about eight people who were instrumental and played a very big part in getting the Games to Australia at that time and, Ron, your name leads this list of these most distinguished people. Now, I'm just wondering what (laughs) you might light to tell us about the bringing of the Games to Australia.

When I came back after the War, I found that the amateur sport was in the doldrums. We were not getting anywhere, and I felt that some stimulus was necessary. The Olympic Council had gone into recess, and they revived. At the very first meeting of the Olympic Council I moved that Melbourne apply for the 1956 Olympic Games. It was greeted with hilarity, but I had my little speech prepared, and I was able to convince them that Melbourne could, in fact, put the Games on.

But they didn't take it seriously in the first instance?

No, no, no, (laughs) it was quite hilarious. But they did, and I'm very glad to say that it went on from there. And indeed, in my opinion, the Melbourne Games were the best ever, they were fantastic, and I had a lump in my throat at the opening.

Yes, I'm sure. And this was the first time, of course, that the Games had ever been in the Southern Hemisphere.

The first time in the Southern Hemisphere, yes.

Well, now, Ron: now, in retirement, how do you spend your days?

I spend them very fully. I'm still on a number of boards which have kindred interests to those with which I was associated when I was working. This puts me in association with the people with whom I worked before and the same interests and I get a lot of joy from it. I'm still the unpaid Chairman of the Liquor Industries Council, a statutory body, and this more than ever keeps me in touch with business affairs. This doesn't take a great deal of time, but I have my own sporting interests; I'm able to devote more time to those; and, as you know, I'm a ham artist.

I don't know about being a ham artist. You wield a very artistic brush. Your oil painting is very good indeed. Just one final reference, if I may: the Torrens bank. Down there, just across the bridge, at the brewery, there's a wonderful display, particularly at Christmas time, all sorts of decorations. Did you have a hand in this at all?

Yes, I'm afraid I had a very big hand in it. You will recall that was in fact a rubbish tip. It was a dreadful eyesore –

It was indeed.

– and the brewer suggested to me that we should brighten it up; we should, you know, put some lawns there and a few flower and trees – – –.

The brewer? This is one of the –

This was –

– staff at the brewery?

– was of the staff.

Yes, yes.

And then I got the idea that we ought to make it even more beautiful, that we ought to make it a show place. On my trips round the world I got various ideas. Some of the brewers over there – there were thirty acres of gardens at a brewery in Tampa, and I got ideas from that of what we could do to make it really beautiful; and my

staff have always been tremendously keen, and ideas have come from everywhere until we have something of which Adelaide can be very proud.

END OF INTERVIEW.