

Sue Pechey - 2007



Sue Pechey came to oral history by accident, an accident of marriage. In 1973 she married into a Yugoslavian family and started to learn their language, mostly from her husband and mother-in-law, Jozica. With the language came the family history and after a year or so, having arrived at some sort of fluency Sue wanted to put Jozica's stories down on paper, but found the task impossible. Speaking limited Slovene was one thing, but writing in Slovene, one of the most heavily inflected European languages, was out of the question. Translating straight into English would have seriously interrupted the flow of Jozica's stories. So Sue started taping and then translating. The family teased her unmercifully, along the lines of 'Why are you talking to Mama? She exaggerates

everything, you know.' But Sue was hooked.

Arriving back in Australia in the early 1980s, Sue picked up some of her former connections, including Marjorie Roe, then audio-visual librarian at University of Queensland, who lent her a cassette recorder and suggested people she might interview. Sue started by using the questionnaire developed by the bicentennial project, then being run by Louise Douglas.

'I had discovered oral history and felt comfortable with it immediately. I had sat through history classes in the early 60s, where Greenwood's notion of history was always a matter of Kings and captains of war and industry, and often wondered where all the real people were—now I had found access to their places in the warp and weft of history.'

In the following thirty years Sue held many positions in the Queensland Branch committee, ran workshops all over the state, contributed to Branch publications, developed teaching materials and presented a paper at the American Oral History Conference. On the grounds that the best interviewing is often achieved when interviewers are working amongst their own peer group, Sue's main interest now lies in skilling enthusiastic members of the community to undertake their own projects.

As a free lance practitioner, Sue has had come in contact with an inspiring peer group including Marjorie Roe, Roberta Bonnin, Geoffrey Bolton, Niles Elvery, Lesley Jenkins and Suzanne Mulligan.

One of Sue's major works was an oral history of unemployment, done for the National Library and the Department of Education & Training in the mid-80s. This was an Australia-wide project, with Sue's team looking at unemployment in the southeast Queensland country towns of Gympie, Warwick and Crows Nest. Sue was the team leader for four interviewers, four transcribers, and an office manager. The project involved a lot of travelling, and training of interviewers. Sue has often thought that a follow-up on a percentage of informants would be interesting.

Other highlights include interviews done in Augathella about 10 years ago when she lived in the town for about 10 days; a workshop run in April 2007 and then being present for the launch of one project that was helped on its way by that workshop--Don Watson's windmill project beside the Cobb & Co Museum in Toowoomba; working with nurses who had lived in at 'the Diam', at Princess Alexandra Hospital in Annerley conducting a workshop to help people learn how to do the interviews, monitoring the transcript and then editing it into a coherent form and publishing the book.

In conferring Life Membership on Sue Pechey, we acknowledge her outstanding contribution to oral history through teaching best practice and mentoring many projects. We also recognise her efforts to try and gain greater recognition for the value of oral history in Queensland.