

OH 692/55 TAPE 1 - SIDE A

NATIONAL WINE CENTRE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT.

Interview with Mr Robert Hamilton at North Adelaide on 28th February, 2002.

Interviewer: Rob Linn.

Well, Robert to begin at the beginning, where and when were you born?

RH: I was born in May 1926. That makes me seventy-five.

In Adelaide?

RH: In Adelaide, yes.

Could you tell me about your parents and your family, Robert.

RH: Well, my father, of course, was the grandson of Richard Hamilton, who first migrated to South Australia in 1837. And my mother, her name was Chambers, and Chambers and Blades were prominent in the brewing business. Chambers and Blades were brewers, as you would know, and also very prominent in those days in the pastoral industry. Chambers Pillar, Chambers Creek and all those sorts of places in the far north.

So who were the brewers? Chambers and -?

RH: Chambers and Blades. And they had a number of hotels in the old English system, tied to a brewery, and a few hotels. And Green Dragon would be one down on South Terrace in Adelaide. So she was one of that family. And she was also the girl next door at Ewell vineyards, Glenelg. So they were married. *(Laughs)*

Ewell was one of the best known vineyards in Australia, Robert. Would that be true?

RH: Yes, it certainly was. And certainly on a size basis it would've been because originally they bought, under the scheme from the South Australian company, an 80 acre section. And then Richard Hamilton's son, Henry, also married the girl next door, Mary Bell, and the Bells 80 acres section, [because Mary was] an only child, then came into the Hamilton family. So they had 160 acres—two sections.

[not correct]
ACB

And this is at what would be Warradale today?

RH: Yes, Morphett Road. Oaklands Park or Warradale, yes. They used to call it the Marion district anyhow, as you would know.

Well, in those days Marion was a vast district of almonds and vegetable gardens and vineyards.

RH: Indeed it was. It was sort of the bread basket for Adelaide, wasn't it?

Yes.

Did you grow up there, Robert?

RH: I grew up there, although I was a boarder from a very early age. But I grew up there, yes.

This is at St Peter's College, was it?

RH: Yes. Queens and St Peters.

So your parents Christian names were -?

RH: My father was Eric, and she was Doreen—Doreen Chambers.

So what would your earliest memories be, Robert, of the Hamilton vineyard and winemaking facilities?

RH: Well, probably the biggest thing [was] the fact that the whole of the countryside, including the Hamiltons Ewell vineyards, was open land. A lot of it was dairying country where lucerne was grown because there was good bore water, and water for irrigating lucerne and so on. So a lot of dairymen were there.

And also, of course, along the Sturt Creek itself—Sturt River—it was vegetables. Not [only] vegetables, fruit trees really. And vines. And basically table grapes for the Adelaide market. The ~~Central~~ [East End?] Market as it was down in Grenfell Street.

Western
There was a family Westons, weren't they?

RH: The Westons were well known people there. A lot of people in that area were well known. Many of them moved off up to the river, and a percentage of them grow grapes up there. And fruit of various sorts.

As a child, did you have much to do with being around winemaking?

RH: I was always hanging around the winery because it was a good place to play in. Climb around the tanks and the vats and things. Pretty dangerous, I think, looking back on it. Plus riding bikes around the place like most children. Course, no bitumen roads or anything. They were all just gravel tracks.

Could you describe the winery to me, Robert?

RH: It looked like a collection of tin sheds, I suppose you could say.

That's my memory. (Laughter)

RH: Tin sheds with wooden vats and open cement tanks. The old system of winemaking—open tanks. And then we made a great progressive move—[through] my Uncle Syd Hamilton—to update the winemaking. So we then used closed fermenters—wooden fermenters—and that rather did away with oxidation of the wines and things like that. It helped a lot. Improved the winemaking. And then followed by refrigeration a little bit later on. In fact, we were the first—certainly the first people to put refrigeration into winemaking practice. That was 1936—early 30's. Sometime around that period.

That was an ammonia plant, was it?

RH: That was an ammonia plant. Yes, old ammonia plant with a brine tank, called the brine (*couldn't decipher word*), and the brine could be circulated through pipes, through which the grape juice—grape must—could be circulated as well. So it was a very updated system. Works for a small winery even today. Our old Springton winery is set up in a more modern fashion but on the same principles really. If you tried to crush vast quantities, well, it wouldn't work. But, I mean, for small quantities—small winemaking—it's quite okay.

Now you said the Springton. Is that the Eden Valley one?

RH: Yes, that's right.

We'll come to that one later.

So the Oaklands Park winery, there were large jarrah vats as I recall.

RH: Yes, that's right. They were jarrah vats, yes.

In fact, one huge one.

RH: Yes, that's a big fellow there [in the photograph]. That was the biggest wooden vat in the southern hemisphere, so it was said. That was just over 52,000 gallons. So it was about 230,000 litres. Really that was put in for the days when we established the bulk Port business—Port (*sounds like, type*) business as the English would call it. They would never use the word (*type*). They'd just say Australian (*couldn't decipher word*) or Australian Tawny—for the UK. We'd get large orders—say, an order in for 1,000 hogsheads, 60,000 gallons—and we used to do the blends in those big vats. And they took a lot of grapes to fill them, too, I might say. It was quite good handling really.

Were you drawing grapes from far and near in those early years?

RH: All the Marion district. And Reynella. And Happy Valley. All through that area because there were vineyards all through there, as you're well aware. Reynells were down there and so on.

Tell me some of the people that your earliest memories—obviously there was your father, Eric, and your Uncle Syd.

RH: That's right. And the winemaker then in those days was John Seeck, and he was a Russian, and he was attached to the Imperial household in the Tsar's time, was sent across to Geisenheim and learnt to make wine. And he spent quite a lot of time in the Mosel. I think his family probably wanted to get him out of the place, as he was only a young man.

Anyhow, he was then sent out to Australia to have a look around from an investment point of view for some Russian business people. Perhaps they were thinking the revolution might be coming. Who knows? So he turned up in Victoria with wine knowledge. He'd been in Spain for a while, too. And he turned up in Victoria, and he worked on winemaking for Dr. Harris, who had a small vineyard up there. He then moved to South Australia and he went to Reynells. He lived at Brighton, and he spent three days a week with Reynells, who were bigger than Hamiltons, and two days a week at Hamiltons. So he'd drive up in his old Dodge to Reynella and then he'd come down to us the other two days. Very tall. Enormous man actually, he was. Huge fellow. And I remember him quite well.

He had this puristic attitude by Australian standards at the time about white wines particularly; that they should be a very light and clean—like the Mosel wines and the

Rhine wines. So then that's when we started making the old Hamiltons Ewell Moselle, which kept us at school, I reckon. *(Laughs)*

Seeck's daughters went to Woodlands—Helen, and the other one whose name escapes me. Dos would know actually. But they were Woodlands girls. They were very tall. One's name being Tamara—Tammy. And so anyhow the *(couldn't decipher name)* family over in the western districts at Willara, she married one of them. And of course the progeny is Tammy Fraser.

And Seeck had a son, who was also the size of his father, and he's mixed up in all these salt evaporative fields. I'm not much up on any of that, but I remember I met him once or twice. He came down to the winery after his father had retired over to the western districts. He lived over there for quite a long time actually. And the son, I've never heard of him since to tell you the truth. I don't think salt fields prospered.

Robert, were Hamiltons one of the few wineries in Australia making dry table wines at the time?

RH: Yes, white wine certainly. And the others, quite frankly, were bloody awful wines really. They were around the place. What they'd do, they treat them like fortified wines. They stuck them in wood, left them there without any sulphur in them or any sort of preservative. They'd turn yellow, of course.

Syd Hamilton used to have violent arguments—friendly ones—but with other winemakers. Roger Warren of Hardys and people like that at the time. He'd say, 'These wines are acidic'. Well, nobody used to calculate the acid in the wines in those days—volatile acidity, to be more exact. So we don't know what they were, but they were high. *(Laughs)* They were awful wines really.

So, Robert, what was the method that Seeck introduced, and obviously that Syd Hamilton had a lot to do with.

RH: Yes, he did. Absolutely.

So the method was that you crushed and pressed, and then -

RH: Well, we crushed and pressed. We built a cold cellar, as we called it, which was an underground structure. I can't describe it but about twice as high as this house and about twice the width.

So a deep vat.

RH: Deep. Deep. And we had two vats high. So those vats—I think they were about fourteen feet diameter. So twenty-eight feet. Allowing a bit of head space, it was about thirty feet. They were quite a big hole in the ground, which they [had] scooped it out, as a matter of fact, using horses. I remember them when I was much younger. About 1934/35. Somewhere roundabout then. Mid 30's.

Anyhow, they [dug] down [and] hit the water. I remember that part of it. Because the water used to drain off underground from Mount Lofty and was not very far below the surface. Created a problem actually.

Anyhow they stuck [the tanks] in there and of course they maintained [a temperature] at what would now be described as about 15°C. So the wines were made, and when they got hot they'd take them out through the brine. The brine would be circulating through a pipe about that big in a jacket, you see.

So a very broad pipe, was it?

RH: Yes, a big one. About that big.

About a foot?

RH: Yes, about a foot diameter. And with an insert, say about six inches—about half that inside—and then the brine would be circulated through at that temperature. The brine was about 10° Fahrenheit. Something like this. It was pretty cold. And that would cool the things down. They'd say they go back at an ideal temperature, and then they'd be drained off, fermented out dry, and they'd spend the whole of their lives—racked, filtered, and all rest of it—down there at that low temperature. And the bottling department was right on top of it. It was a concrete structure so it sat right on top of it. And then they went up into bottling. So the wines never [felt] any effect of heat. The volatile acidity would've been very low.

Was there wood of any sort? These were concrete tanks I gather.

RH: No, they were wooden vats.

They were wooden vats in the ground?

RH: Wooden vats. They put them down there.

Were they wax lined?

RH: Yes, they were waxed.

So didn't touch the wood as such?

RH: That's right, yes.

So in effect they were in cool storage the whole time.

RH: The whole time. And that gave us a style of wine that was, at that time, unique. Like the wines we see now I suppose.

Much fruitier?

RH: Yes, much fruitier, and it was like the wines now in 2002. You know, that was fifty years ago. Sixty years ago. So that really made Hamiltons.

Now Reg Tolley was telling me, Robert, that Syd was an extraordinary inventive fellow.

RH: Oh, yes.

With tools and machines?

RH: He used to build motor cars and all sorts of things. He was a very inventive man. He built new filters, [for example] that hadn't been thought of. What's here now are the sorts of things he thought of half a century ago.

So was Syd more on that side of the winery and your father more in the marketing side?

RH: One was business and marketing, and that was my father, and Syd was technical, I suppose you could say. And vineyard, of course.

So was the office in the winery as such?

RH: Yes, the office was in the winery. It was right in the winery at one stage and the whole thing was all boxed up. In fact, I've got this chair. It's been done up but it was in my father's office. They were just offices and that was all. The whole thing was integrated in the tin structure.

In those days, Robert, was the Australian industry pretty much family based?

RH: Oh, entirely really. Entirely. In South Australia there were certainly no public companies. And even people like Leonay—Leo Burings—were all family. The other ones, the co-ops of course, came after First World War, didn't they?

Yes.

RH: The co-ops came to light then. And really they were formed, as you would know probably better than I do, they were really formed after having put these soldiers on blocks with grapes, they had to do something with the grapes.

They had an awful lot of Doradillos, I know that.

RH: Yes, that's right.

And Pedros.

RH: Yes. As a matter of fact I've got an old grape ledger somewhere. I saw it not too long ago. Dos' uncle, Harold—HR Clampett, Bob Clampett's uncle as well—he was one of those up at Clare. They had grapes up there as well as Clare Valley Co-operative, didn't they? And I see where Hamiltons bought grapes from them, because the first year that he had his crop, they hadn't built their distillery. Everything [was] running late as usual. *(Laughs)* So they bought the grapes. Apparently what they did then—they charged him for it, the way I read the ledger anyhow, and the year after when another crop came on he drew back his spirit and took it back up and stuck it in his wines.

Would the major market in your very early years, Robert, have been for fortifieds?

RH: Oh, fortified wines entirely. Except for when the Ewell Moselle came along. But overseas it was all fortified.

What was the range that Hamiltons had? Could you tell me?

RH: Sweet white and Port *(couldn't decipher word)*. Australian Tawny. Australian *(couldn't decipher word)* as it was called. I got the shock of my life when I went around to see a few of these people who would just Australian wines in [all sorts of mixtures]. They were medicated wines, and mixtures like *(sounds like, Vi-bron-a)*. That's one brand I can remember. *Penfolds' Irona.*

Cheered you up probably. *(Laughter)*

RH: A good medical reason for drinking alcohol.

But the other thing was that in those big old hotels around Britain—London particularly—there was always one sort of mandatory Australian wine on the bottom of the wine list.

And we used to get into a couple of those, but that was really nothing much. It was port and sherry types.

So you ran across the whole ambit up to the cream sherries -

RH: Yes, that's right.

Did you do a flor fino, or of that style?

RH: We had those, but they only sold in Australia because Spain was the big one there, of course.

And they were very difficult to make, I believe.

RH: Yes. The wine's got to be at the right strength. If it's too high, it kills the yeast. If it's too low, it goes acidic.

The tolerance is pretty low, isn't it?

RH: Yes, it's got to be spot on. And [it's difficult] to get the right, so it will grow on the surface. It's a pity that more people don't drink sherry now, but it was quite a process really. Often wonder how these people get on in Spain and Portugal with those two wines now. I mean, it's amazing because sherry and port are well and truly on the way down, aren't they, everywhere.

Yes, they are. It's been turned on its head in thirty-five years.

RH: Yes, that's right.

So it was 80/20 thirty-five years. It's the other way around now in terms of table wines to fortified. An enormous difference.

Robert, when do you come into the company?

RH: Well, [it was] after I joined the Navy, that was the thing.

This is what?

RH: End of '43. And then I was away, up in the Pacific. I was away until October '46. The Second World War finished in September '45, didn't it?

Yes.

RH: What they did was that I was on a corvette, and after the war they turned the corvettes into a mine-sweeping flotilla because there were mines in the Southern Ocean. There were mines up around the top of Cape York and the Barrier Reef and all that area. So they kept us in [until after] the old ones who'd been in since '39/40 got out first, and so that meant the other ones stayed in.

After that, when I came back, I didn't know what to do with myself. So I started to do science at the Uni for a while. I did one year, and I passed it. I was pretty discontented, to tell you the truth. Because I'd been a boarder for twelve years and had been around there [at Queens] when I was about that big.

This is Queens?

RH: Yes, Queens. I got tossed in there because my father used to go every year selling wine to England. My mother would go with him sometimes. When she'd go with him, I'd just get parked in there. *(Laughs)* Then on to Saints afterwards and then the Navy for three and a half years. I was fairly discontented.

I had one grape picking season for the firm and I got sick of it. So I hopped in the car and I went and moved around Australia. 'Choofed' around and worked all over the place. Then I worked for wine and spirit people—not Hamiltons, they weren't established there anyway—in Melbourne, in Victoria. I enjoyed that. It was about meeting people and all the rest of it.

So it was in the trade, Robert?

RH: In the trade, yes—.

I'd moved all over the place. I used to go overseas from there as well. It was quite a pleasant life actually. *(Laughs)* And my father asked me, 'Well, what about joining the firm?' I said, 'No, thanks, I don't want to. I'm enjoying what I'm doing'. I was working for a firm then. He said, 'Well, we're thinking of setting up over here in Victoria and setting up our own distribution agency'. He said, 'Would you like [to join?]' I said, 'No, I'm quite happy about it'. We sort of left the subject at that.

And the next thing that happened was that he *(couldn't decipher word)* it, and then Syd was going to sell out. He was going to buy Syd out of the business. That takes us on to about 1950. Somewhere roundabout there.

Just before you go on, Robert, there's Syd and Eric.

RH: Yes.

Now there was another brother, Burt?

RH: There were three. Syd, Eric, Burt. Burton actually his name was. And there was Ian, the doctor, around the corner. He was here in Palmer Place. Ian Hamilton. He was a surgeon. They were all shareholders.

So Burt would be Hugh and Richard's father?

RH: Yes.

Now I've got the connection.

RH: That's right. Hugh and Richard. Burt had seven children, I think it was. One of the females married a Jacka. Another one married a bloke by the name of John Cook. And then there's Hugh of course. Hugh is down at McLaren Vale, as you know.

Yes.

RH: And there's Richard. That's another one. And then there's Christopher down at Mount Gambier, a solicitor. That must be about it I think. I think there might be another one, too.

But in effect there are quite a number of shareholders amongst the brothers.

RH: They were all shareholders and nobody had controlling interest. My father had the largest interest, and the reason he had the largest interest was that on that 160 acres, part of it of course had the winery on it, and the house on it, and old Frank Hamilton divided it equally amongst them all but he left the block that had the greatest assets on it to my father as the oldest son. And so, in effect, he got the winery, and the house on it, and the stock probably, too, I suppose. So that gave him a greater share. It didn't give him 50% plus.

And then Syd was number two, and Burt and Ian were about the same. I think had about 8 or 10% each. Something like that. That was how it worked out.

So your father was looking to buy Syd out?

RH: That was it. So we got to that, and he said, 'Well, if I buy Syd out, would you be interested in coming back then?'

At that stage I was working for a bulk wine agent. It was Alfred Palmer and Sons, and Harry Palmer was the bloke, and I used to see Harry around the place as he used to go around because he used to call at places where I worked. And so he said, 'Would you be interested in coming to work with me? I've got the Hamiltons agency anyhow'. And that came about the same time as this idea of Hamiltons moving into Victoria with their own set-up. So, anyhow, I did.

I used to go around talking about Lindemans bottled wines or whoever I was working for. I used to go around to all these places, a lot of whom were Hamiltons customers. I knew them all there and that Hamiltons bulk wine was being sold because they were buying bulk and bottling it themselves in those days. That was the way they went. And one of the biggest one was a firm by the name of Taylor Ferguson, who were the Johnnie Walker Scotch Whisky agency, and it was owned by a bloke by the name of Frank Hermann, whose father had the Ballarat Brewing Company. It was all intermingled.

Were Crittendens going in those days?

RH: Yes. Oscar, I knew him. Old Oscar, and then of course Doug.

That's Doug's father—Oscar?

RH: That's Doug's father, that's right. Oscar, yes.

So anyhow my father just got to the stage of almost finishing off the negotiations with Syd and he had a heart attack. And so my mother rang me, and said, 'Well, you'd better come up and see how it's going'. So I came over. The next thing was that she said that if he does go ahead, that's it. Or if he does go ahead you'll have to come back. So that's why I came back to Adelaide.

Actually I didn't come straight back. He got better, and then I acted for the Hamiltons Ewell Vineyard's Victoria Pty Ltd. I ran that for a while, then I came back here.

So did that then handle the distribution in Victoria, did it?

RH: We took all the distribution. Actually Harry Palmer retired—Alfred Palmer's bloke—and then we took it all back into Hamiltons Ewell vineyards. I just went around the same people, as far as Hamiltons were concerned, that we used to deal with and then we started getting into the hotel trade and the restaurant trade.

Was Victoria always a large market?

RH: It was our biggest market.

It's interesting, isn't it?

RH: Yes.

Was there a call for dry reds there at that time?

RH: Oh, yes. Lindemans Cawarra Claret, so called, was big.

But it surprised me that the Melbourne market, even in those times, was much more towards the table wines, with the reds particularly.

RH: Yes. Absolutely.

Seems to've been the exception in Australia.

RH: Yes, that's right. You're right because the Italian restaurants were always big in Melbourne as you know, and they drank red wine. They were very good for the wine trade because whereas those other wines weren't selling, the Italian restaurants, were red wine places. We missed out a bit there. We put our Moselle into them, which was a lesser drink in terms of white to red ratio, but I used to know them all and get around Marios, and old (*couldn't decipher word*) up at Marios.. (*Sounds like, Tree-arc-ers*) and all these places. They're still there. The sons are around the place. Donti and David. And old (*couldn't decipher name*).

I remember once [a story that concerned] Lindsay Hassett. I was in there one day [at the restaurant] about to have lunch when [I heard], 'Oh, here comes the sweet Hock man'. Because Syd had this thing [with his wine] about a little bit of sweetness. I don't mean sugar as sugar but residual sugar in the wine. On the German style, you see. This again went back to Seeck. And, of course, a lot of people didn't like it. A lot of people want their Hock to be dry white. It's like Riesling. 'Oh, here comes the sweet Hock man'. That would be me. So I'd wander in there. Lindsay Hassett and a crowd of people were having lunch. They were playing, too, but having lunch. After lunch, we all got together and we started to play cricket in the restaurant. We were using bread rolls for the balls. And I've forgotten what we used for a bat but we had a pretty sort of merry time. But old (*couldn't decipher name*) didn't mind. He was quite happy.

So that was the sort of thing you could strike in Melbourne.

RH: That's right.

You must've had a good few happy years, Robert.

RH: Yes.

So would you've been in your twenties when you came back?

RH: Oh, yes. I would only be about twenty-four I suppose. Something like that. Not very old. So I was pretty frisky then. *(Laughter)*

TAPE 1 - SIDE B

So, Robert, this is the way in which you came back to Adelaide.

RH: That's right.

What did you strike when you came back to the winery? What was your task?

RH: Well, I think it was a mixed bag really because I took over Syd's role of course. The actual winemaking was done by Maurice Ou, a winemaker, Frenchman. As you know, Maurice is a bit old now.

Could you tell me a bit about him?

RH: Well, he had a very interesting career actually. Unfortunate in some sense. I mean, it wasn't pleasant rather, not so much unfortunate. His father was a French Consul in Brazil and he was sent to Montpellier to do the agricultural and viticultural degree. He was the Dux of the three year course. He was Dux for each year, so I've been told. He was pretty bright—very bright, in fact.

Then his father was moved to Saigon, as it was, in French Indochina. And Maurice had married at the end of his time at Montpellier and took his wife and two young children back out to Saigon. And, of course, the Japanese moved in as we know in 1941—wasn't it? And they moved in and he was put in a prison camp. The whole family was put in

prison camp. They separated the men and the women, as you know, but they were there until the end of the Second World War. So it was basically '45.

So how he came to Hamiltons I'm never really quite clear, because we were looking for a winemaker. Seeck had stayed on until the end of the war and gone off, or was about to go off, and the next step was that we wanted a new winemaker. Syd wanted to get a new chap in. So, anyhow, Maurice saw an advertisement of ours when he was in Borneo. That's where he was put in the camp. And where he saw that up there, I don't know. An Australian newspaper must've been sent up to him to read about what was going on back at home. I don't know.

Anyhow, Syd wrote to him. Had an address, wrote to him and engaged him, and he promptly forgot about it. Never had a response would be a better way of putting it I suppose. I've been told that one wet winter's morning in 1946, I presume, that they rang from the winery to say that there was a Mr Ou here—at 7.30 in the morning rang him at his house—a Mr Ou with his wife and two children, who says he's the new winemaker and wants to start work.

So Syd hopped in his car and raced around to the winery to meet Maurice, who'd turned up unsolicited in effect, and said, 'Oh, good, I'm glad you're here'. So he started him at work. *(Laughter)* That's how it started.

So he'd been reunited with his wife and two children?

RH: Oh, yes. That turned out quite happily. That turned out happily. So Maurice stayed with us until he retired. He was a very clever fellow—Maurice.

It was interesting because he embraced the same views—the wine purity. Then after that, of course, the industry changed again.

So that's how that Hamilton Ewell Moselle style, particularly that light fruity style was kept?

RH: Yes, that's right. Kept going. And he embraced it, I suppose you could say. And he was a very good winemaker. A marvellous mathematician. He's got a brain like a computer. You didn't need one with Maurice about. He was one of those sort of people. He didn't use a calculator or anything. Somebody would say, 4625 divided by 67.5, what's the answer? And he'd tell you. *(Laughs)* One of those sort of people.

So, Robert that was Maurice Ou, who must've put an enormous amount into Hamiltons.

RH: He did.

I know he had a reputation through the industry for the quality of his work. All through those early years when you were back in the company, Robert, were the firm entering in wine shows in Australia?

RH: Yes, we did sometimes. We got quite a few awards of one sort and another. Got a few cups. As a matter of fact, Marg's got those somewhere. And we haven't put them out on display, but we got the Grand Championship in Sydney. I haven't seen the cup for quite a while. They're not up at the cellar door. We showed overseas—London—and we have got various awards for that which are hanging on the wall up there. They were Wine and Brewers Awards as they termed them. We took quite a lot of prizes for red. A lot of them were fortified wines—sherry types and port types—but also dry white table wine as well. Royal Sydney, too, we took a lot there at different times.

So the show circuit was an important part of the industry?

RH: Yes, it was. And we certainly viewed it as such. And we've got a lot of awards and certificates about the place somewhere.

Robert, with your memory in the firm, through the 50's and perhaps the early 60's, were there certain occurrences that you could start to see significant changes occurring at the time?

RH: In the 60's particularly [table] wine types were given a push by Victorian wine writers. I'm thinking of Coonawarra when I say that, particularly, because they certainly did a lot towards supporting the Cabernet Sauvignons of Coonawarra.

Would that've been the Walter James types?

RH: Walter James would be one of them. And they were pre Halliday—James Halliday. And there was a fellow by the name of Mendlesohn who was another one. And people who handled the wines like the Seabrooks for example.

George Seabrook.

RH: No, old Tom Seabrook. There was Tom—that was the one I knew. There was Tom, Doug, and then up in the Barossa there was Ian Seabrook. And the Wynns would have to take a very prominent part there because when they brought the Coonawarra wineries from Tony Nelson. I don't know what year that was now. Yes, it was early 50's, wasn't

it? And they gave a great push to those styles, the variety particularly, and the growth of Cabernet Sauvignon. I think we missed out. We weren't farsighted enough really, looking at it at that time. We should've thought about it seriously at the time. There was no immediate reward, but there could've been in ten, fifteen, twenty years. I suppose you've got to look long term. This is a long term business, isn't it?

Yes.

RH: And actually Syd saw that himself after he sold out of Hamiltons because he set up Leconfield, which Richard has now, of course.

I mean, Syd in one sense was still one of the pioneers of the newer era.

RH: Yes, he was. Yes, you're right.

Because people weren't buying in a big way then when he was in.

RH: No, that's right. You're right.

He was well in his seventies when he got that.

RH: He was my age when he started. He said to me one day [that he was going to establish Leconfield], being seventy-five at the time. And so I said to him, 'Oh, uncle, you're getting a bit long in the tooth for this, aren't you?' 'Oh', he said, 'what do you mean?' He was offended by that. *(Laughter)*

So he set it up and said, 'I want it for ten years. Seventy-five to eight-five, that'll do me. Then I'll just do something around nothing and then I'll probably die when I'm about ninety'. Well, that was exactly what he bloody-well did. *(Laughter)* But he was remarkable: a very short, lithe man. Did you ever meet him?

No.

RH: He built the winery himself. He'd been a sailor on windjammers for some years, and he was like a monkey. I went down there one Anzac Day. I don't know why I didn't go in March, but I didn't that year. I've been asked to go down there a number of times and so I hopped into the car and went down there.

I walked in the winery and saw construction going on. You could see the scaffolding and all the rest of it. And I walked in the winery and there was nobody about, and looking around for him I saw way up there this bloke welding. 'Oh, my God, it's Uncle Syd'.

And I thought that if I shouted he'd probably fall down. So I just slowly walked around. 'Oh, is that you Bob?', as he called me, 'How are you?' So down he came on the ladder, and he was then about seventy-seven or seventy-eight. He was pretty bright. He certainly had all his marbles until he died.

I believe he helped Richard set up the winery at Willunga.

RH: Yes, that's right, he did.

He was well in his eighties then.

RH: That's right, he was. He was a remarkable fellow. And as I say, he sold it to Richard. Actually he offered it to me, as a matter of fact—the Coonawarra place—and I said that I don't think that I will. I'd bought the place in Eden Valley. So I thought it was easier and nearer. I took the easy way out. And so then Richard bought.

Now Leconfield's got quite a name.

RH: They sure have. And they're good wines, too.

Very good wines.

RH: Good wines, yes.

In fact, all the Hamilton holdings are making good wines. (Laughs) Hugh's making good stuff.

RH: Yes, Hugh's making good wine. He'd got a nice place down there with that set-up on the hill.

Yes, he certainly has. It's fantastic. He's got the best view of any winery down there.

RH: That's right. He has, yes. He's got 360° vision there.

So Syd was one of those sorts of people. And he was never ill until he died really. So there he was.

So that was his move to Leconfield. And just prior to talking about that move you were saying that there were some changes in the 60's and this was part of it really.

RH: Well, that was part of it. Certainly those things were on the move. The white wines were then starting to improve, the white wines particularly. I suppose Lindemans played

a bit part there when they started off commercially with Moselle. Because they could see what we were doing. We were doing a couple of hundred thousand cases a year. It was really big business. So they decided to start up on the same style of wine and they put in with their financial capacity because they were a public company,. They hadn't been taken over by Penfolds in that time, I don't think.

No.

RH: No, they hadn't. And they set up in a much bigger way and with the Sydney market they certainly dented our share there but not in the rest of Australia. Not in Melbourne or in Brisbane and other places.

Had the impact of pearl wines been felt quite strongly?

RH: Pearl wines, when did they start? I'm just thinking about the Gramps.

'56.

RH: I was going to say it was earlier than that. Barossa Pearl certainly made actually created more business for white wine as a whole, rather than diminishing somebody's market share of it. I think they did a lot of good because they improved the style of white wine—improved white wines generally—and we were well entrenched with Ewell Moselle retailers. I think it did us more good. In the Sydney market though, in the end, Lindemans held their grip.

Now, did politics play a bigger factor in the industry in those days, Robert?

RH: Oh, yes, very much so. You mean with government?

Yes.

RH: That goes back really to the beginning. After the Second World War they paid for grape growers. From that point of view they paid a bounty to winemakers if they paid a fixed price for grapes. As you know, £3 or £4 a ton, whatever the variety was. And if you didn't pay it, well then you didn't get the bounty when you exported. And it was a shilling a gallon, or something like that. We paid it and we used to get the bounty. Penfolds, they said, 'Oh, blow it! We've got a big Australian trade', so they didn't bother about it. They bought the grapes for ten bob a ton less, or whatever it might be, and did it that way and forgot about the bounty.

There were Federal wine and brandy associations, and State associations, and of course the contact with the Minister of the day and there's always been a lot of lobbying—in the best sense of the word. In other words, trying to get a fair deal really. And of course, the industry's has always been on about licensing laws and things like that, in the States particularly. It's been something that's been a source of problem and contention going right back to prohibition during the First World War.

Well, just after. 1919.

RH: It's been a good thing really [to have the standards]. The standards are high as far as export. You can't just shoot anything overseas that you want to, or anything like that. It's got to go through tasting panels and it's either approved or not approved, and maintains our standards really.

So all through those years the government impact was always there -

RH: Yes.

Well, the brandy industry had been very big in Australia, hadn't it?

RH: Oh, yes, the brandy industry. Well, they've always escalated up and down on spirits—duties on spirits—to raise a bit more money. It's been political really.

Well, Robert, did you have a bond store at Ewell?

RH: Yes, we had a bond. We distilled whisky as well, of course. And gin. We made grain spirit. We made beer without putting the hops in. A flat beer, in other words. A fermented out beer—dry wort. And then we'd distil that in different strengths for whatever the product might be. Full strength alcohol for a base for gin, Vodka and products like that. And then we'd break them down for various other products.

So if you were doing whisky, you'd be using a barley, would you?

RH: Yes, we used barley and malt. Barley and malt in that case. The malt used to come from Barrett Bros.

Kent Town, were they?

RH: That's right, Kent Town. They're redoing that place there, next door to Princes. I drove along Dequetteville Terrace the other day. They're turning it into apartments.

And we used to bring out the peat from Scotland. They'd use that in their drying period for the malt, or drying it off. That's right. They'd spread the barley after it'd sprouted. That's right. And then they'd dry it off with peat underneath. That was their normal process. We'd put the peat with their stuff and that would go up through copper sheets with perforated holes in it and sort of permeate the barley malt, and then we'd take that and that'd give us the character of the whisky.

Was that a big seller for Hamiltons?

RH: Well, it was for a while but the Scottish distillers, instead of keeping to their main brands like Johnnie Walker and Dewars and Haigs and so on and so forth, they decided when they saw the local brands—Corio in Victoria and Gilbeys Gilt Edge was another one, Milnes, here in South Australia, which was a Gilbeys product actually, and one or two others, which were products of those distilleries anyhow—they brought in these so-called secondary brands, lower than those top brands of theirs. They brought them in at a lower price, down at the Australian price, and gradually, you could go and buy a bottle of Scotch—a bottle of Scotch—for less or at about the same price as a bottle of Australian. That obviously affected the sales of the Australian.

So, Robert, Hamiltons as a wine company had everything from spirits right through.

RH: That's right. It had an enormous range of product. It had too many products I think, looking back. It was very hard to programme a whole year's activity because you had a large vintage coming in, say February/March/April/May, and had to deal with all the wines. And in the so-called off season, the distillery produced grape spirit for the fortified wines. Then during the winter months we'd start making grain spirit. You had to handle all these other wines as well, which included a vast range of port types, sherry types, dry whites, dry reds. Looking back, we should've probably cut all those spirits out. We looked in and saw the dry red business growing with the varietal side of it so much, we would've been much better financially to have done that.

Planned better.

RH: Planned better, over another two decades.

The 60's and 70's though we're moving into, Robert, were very significant change in drinking habits, weren't there?

RH: Very much so. Absolutely. And people's habits generally. Social habits, too.

Weren't they? Where they drank. Didn't stand in front bars just drinking beer and that disappeared. I mean, they still do but it's a lesser part of it, isn't it?

Were Hamiltons making a line of dry reds at the time?

RH: We had the wines from the Springton winery, and wine from Langhorne Creek. We had a vineyard down there. Or I had a vineyard down there, to be more exact. And we bought grapes down there. And they were Shiraz wines. They were almost entirely Shiraz wines. They were, in their day, good wines. They were well made wines. They'd been put into French or American oak. By today's standards, I don't think any of those wines, including some very well known ones, which I won't mention, stand up really. Today's wines are pretty cracker.

Yes, you don't get too many bad wines.

RH: No, you don't. They're really good.

Thank you so much, Robert, for providing all your memories today.