

CAMPBELLTOWN CITY COUNCIL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
Our Fruitful Record: A history of Market Gardening in Campbelltown

Oral history interview with Sam Mercorella
recorded by Katrina Spencer on 8th January 2018
at Campbelltown, South Australia

Interview OH 1130/6

Participants:

OH: Katrina Spencer

SM: Sam Mercorella

OH: This is an interview with Sam Mercorella by Katrina Spencer on the 8th of January 2018 in the Campbelltown Council Chambers. This is part of the Campbelltown City Council oral history project, our fruitful record, a history of market gardens in Campbelltown. So, thanks Sam, we are ready to rock and roll here. What is your full name?

SM: Full name's Sam Mercorella but in Italian it's Salvatore Mercorella.

OH: And when were you born, Sam?

SM: 5th of the 7th [5th July] in 1945.

OH: And you were born in Italy, I believe?

SM: In Italy, yes.

OH: Whereabouts?

SM: In a place called San Giorgio La Molar, Provincia di Benevento.

OH: Fantastic. And the full name of your father?

SM: Antonio Mercorella.

OH: And he was born in the same place?

SM: In Italy, same, in San Giorgio, yes.

OH: And when was he born?

SM: 12th of January 1912. That's from memory, and I think that's pretty right.

OH: And what was his occupation when he was in Italy?

SM: On the land, he was a mixed farmer. They used to grow wheat, the corn, have sheep, cattle, – chicken. Really, they were just self-sufficient farmers and they did some things for cash flow, they sold eggs, they sold that stuff, there was small stuff.

OH: And that had been generations of farmers, I presume?

SM: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

OH: On a family farm.

SM: ... some still doing it today. They've got all the machineries out there too. Now they've gone to broader acres but, yes, it's a bit hard over there.

OH: So you've still got family in Italy farming?

SM: Cousin. I've got a cousin left there. Most of our family moved out of that area. They've come here to Australia or Argentina or Canada.

OH: Okay, so when did your father come to Australia?

SM: 1951.

OH: And do you know why he came at the time?

SM: He came because there was no opportunities for us, for the family for the future and they were looking anywhere where they'd heard there was more opportunities and work for the family to build on for the future, but what they did, what they used to do, the male used to come out first to check it out and Dad came in '51 and we – the family came in '54 so he came out, had a look here, he had – we had an uncle, my mum's brother here already and he found that there was – he felt, yes, there was a future here for us. After three years, he called us over – the family come over.

OH: So where was he living in those three years, do you know?

SM: It was with one of my uncles here, they were ... boarding ... they had here on Gorge Road, there was some family friends there that, and he was boarding, well, like they did, a little back shed, a room and they board with

OH: Okay, so your mum was back in Italy, what was your mum's full name?

SM: Angelina Mercorella, Angelina, and she was initially Petroccia, because she was ... her maiden name. She was from San Marco ... which is about a 15 minute drive from San Marco dei Cavoti to San Giorgio, and Dad was from San Giorgio.

OH: And did she work-?

SM: She worked the land, yes. Dad – Mum, ... come here, she worked the land back – well, did what she had to do there, cook, actually look after the family, cooking, whatever but also worked the land with the family basically and when we came out here, of course, we came in '54 and we again went to live with my uncle who had a house on – where the Thorndon Park Reservoir is – the Government – the Council or the government bought, acquired his house, he was alongside – he was almost, not opposite but almost, just the Thorndon Park Hotel.

OH: Oh, yes, “the Rezz”.

SM: Yeah, the Rezz, yeah, and the Reservoir, yeah. And he – we went there and lived with my uncle and shared the house, well they used to do, and we were there for about three years in 1954 we came there, '56 we bought the property on Gorge Road, 171 Gorge Road, the corner of Silkes Road alongside the Reservoir, well my Dad did but I had – in those days because they didn't speak English, I had to do all the bookwork. I had the-

OH: And how old were you?

SM: Ten, but that's – I wasn't the only one. Every child in that environment with the Italian because they couldn't speak English and so we went to school and so we had to do all the bookwork and the accounting, go and pay bills, and you grew up fast, I can tell you now, you matured fast, but that was okay, everybody did it. It wasn't ... and that's what we did. They bought it in '56, they bought that property, and in '58 we built the house, the first house and we moved down, okay, so and-

OH: Alright. And you're saying we – did you have-

SM: My family, Mum – I'm talking Mum-

OH: Who else came out with you?

SM: There was Mum and I've got three sisters.

OH: Oh, okay. And what are their names?

SM: Maria, ... and Carmela. Now the – Maria was five years older than me and Carmela – they were twins - Immacolata and Carmela were twins, they were two years younger than me. So we all came out with Mum and, as I said, we moved in with Michael for those – until we built the house on the land that they bought and they – I still remember we paid 4,000 pounds for the land and five and a half acres and we paid 7% interest at the time, so I'm just – these things have just stayed with me because I used to do the bookwork, and but we were lucky – the idea was Dad would go and work, he was working with the railways and then he worked with GMH¹ to pay the mortgage and we would work the land, Mum and us kids, worked the land to – so we – for living. So we were lucky that we – the land was alongside the Reservoir and had olive trees all around and 40 acres, it was just – it used to be used for backup of water in those days, it was actually to feed the water to the – from Kangaroo Creek, the Reservoir

¹ General Motors Holden

up there. They used to ... and there's the pumping station to help pump the water into the suburbs, that used to happen.

OH: I didn't know that.

SM: So we were alongside and I asked the caretaker there, I said: "Look, would you mind if we pick our side of the olives?" He said: "No", he said, "Pick the lot." He said: "We don't want them." And so we were lucky and we were able to pick both sides and as much as we wanted and also because then we had two milking cows, Mum and Dad coming from Italy, they used to make cheeses and ricotta and all that, so we – I asked could we put the cows to feed in there because they had 40 acres of grass virtually not being utilised and they said, yeah, for sure. So we put a gate alongside and then also we – in those early days we had a draft horse. I saw the transition between draft horse and tractors. That was how early it was in the 50's.

OH: So you were still a child when you were negotiating all of this?

SM: Yes, that was – that's the way you did it because so Mum and Dad couldn't speak English so I had to do all that for them and we were able to do – have our two cows for milking and Mum used to make – and then we had the draft horse, we used to feed them. We used to work the land with the draft horse and what else, chicken, we used to grow ducks and we used to also, in those days you could grow pigs for our – and then they stopped it many years later when the suburbs started building up we couldn't do it anymore but in those early days you could do it, so we used to grow about three a year for our own – to make our own sausages and ... smallgoods ..., So we didn't buy much other than the essentials, we had to buy pasta because we didn't grow wheat. In Italy they did but here they didn't, but we didn't grow it here at home, we used to grow vegetables like lettuces to sell to the market to make cash.

OH: And were you living on the land or were you still with your uncle at that stage?

SM: No, when we bought it in '56 we just started growing and then in '58 we moved down there ..., that's when I said we had the cows and because while we were living, until '58 we built the house, we didn't – we was – at my uncle's place we didn't have all those other stuff, the cows and that but when we moved down there at our place, that's when we did all that.

OH: So you had your Dad going to GMH at nights to work-

SM: Yeah, he was doing night shift, yep and he used to work half a day on the land... and then go to work.

OH: And you and your sisters, were you at school?

SM: We were at school, yeah, we would go to school. During the holidays, before school in the summer time, after school we'd be on the land working with Mum and just one thing, when we bought the land in '56 the owner, Jack Woodley had a share farm on it and he – and the share farmer was a bit of a boozier, he used to be at the pub most of the time in the middle of the day, he left a crop there when we bought it and in 1956 it was a real wet year and he

had ... turnips, parsnips and root vegetables. Because they rotted [in the ground], the market went through – the prices went through the roof in the market and we probably paid half the land off with that ... the crop just by memory. Instead of Dad having [to pay the mortgage] we ... and that made me think there's money here, do you understand?

OH: At a young age?

SM: Yes, and possibly a lot of those experiences were the reason I came back on the land instead of going on to uni and get a degree, I came back because I saw the opportunity to establish and make more money by working. There were the opportunities there at the time and then because I used to go to the market later on, I was a bit older, I used to go and get – go to the East End markets here to get ... we used to have them, people used to come and buy, we used to grow onions ... and we had agents who were in the market used to come and would buy them off us but we had to go to the market to pick up the empty bags when we were ready, we ... had ... established and pricing ... [phone rings] Are you right there?

OH: Yeah.

SM: And pricing, it would be on the day, whatever it was, so much a ton, and I'd go catch the bus to the city, go and get the 100 or 200 baled up bags and take them home and we all-

OH: On the bus?

SM: On the bus, take them home and then come back on the bus and negotiate the price with the agents, the merchants in the market and ...

OH: And what age were you at this?

SM: Oh, I was about probably by that time, okay, I left at 16, about – yeah, I don't know, 13, 14, okay, that kind of age factor. So that's what I did in those days and come back and then we would then – all done by hand, no machine, you cut the tops and the roots of the onion and put them in the boxes and bag them up and then the merchant would come around and pick them up whenever we told them they were ready, and that's what we did in those early days to start.

OH: So what did you use your draught horse for?

SM: Pardon?

OH: What did you use your draft horse for?

SM: For working the land. Initially there was no tractor.

OH: Oh, I see.

SM: So we had to plough the land, we had to scarify, level off the – and make the rows for the whatever you were planting so all those things used the draft horse to do that for us and then because the tractor came – I think we bought the tractor and, I don't know, just before I

left school so I would have been – I left in – I reckon ‘60 – 1960’s or thereabout we bought our first Fergie tractor which was like a Godsend. I could do much work

OH: And have fun.

SM: And I used to do all the tractor work those days and used to plough, do all the things that we had to but also what we did in – well, when I left school in ‘62, I came back on the land and one of my - my older sister, Maria, was married by then and we did a ... we’d leased – the church used to have land alongside our – down from Schulze Road from our property and there was 10 acres of land there and we leased it from the Catholic church and we worked it 15 acres, so we worked our land and 10 acres we used to lease and my sister and my brother-in-law, we went into partnership and we did - five of us would work, Mum, Dad and on that land because they had two girls, there’s twins, they were young, they could but we did ... school so we worked the 15 acres, so ...

OH: And what did you grow when you had that?

SM: Mainly lettuce, carrots, onions, beans, normally French beans, runner beans, what else did we grow? Mainly and root crops like mainly parsnips, beetroot, carrots, all those vegetables grew well because the soil was very good.

OH: So tell me a bit about the soil?

SM: Very good soil, Bay of Biscay soil. Hard to work ... hard, very soggy and wet in winter, very hard but very fertile. Grow anything. Not much ... we didn’t need much fertilisation but what we used to do later on, we bought a truck in 1962 when I left school and I started going to market with the five-ton Bedford truck and selling our own produce off the back of a truck and what we used to do also to fertilise the soil instead of buying manure, we’d go and get chicken manure from the ... in the hills where they had the chicken farms. And we’d go there and pick up the manure and bring it back and then spread it and then fertilise the soil to make it grow, enriching it to make it grow quicker and more ...

OH: And did you tend to grow, have a rotation?

SM: Yes, we did. We’d rotate-

OH: So your summer and your winter-?

SM: Every four years you come back on the same soil for the same crops, otherwise you just rotate, we used to rotate what we grew here this year, we grew something else, ... and vice, every four years we used to try and – we had it all growing, it was all planted and we also grew some potatoes when we had the 10 acres here for the Potato Board in those days so we used to do that, yeah. It was mixed farming but it was all a lot of labour intensive and what I used to do in those early days, most of the Italian community that came at the time, like my Dad, they worked in factories and railways department, wherever the work was that was secure, long term security, and the women, the wives, used to come and work on the land with us. I used to go and pick them up in the morning, most of the wives of the people that we knew, people of the villages that we knew, we knew them all and they knew us.

OH: You came from a similar area?

SM: Same towns, San Marco, San Giorgio, very similar. A lot of us came back from San Giorgio, San Marco and Molinara, they came here in Campbelltown and most of them were back on the land. Like I said, a bit of factory and land, both.

OH: So when you picked them up, did you pick them up in the truck or-?

SM: Well, at that time, at first it was the truck but then I bought a car and I used to pick them up with the car and they'd work the land and I'll drop them off at night. They all live around the area, weren't far – Hectorville, Campbelltown, around there, and that's what we used to do.

OH: It's almost like an extended family in some ways.

SM: Virtually, yes. And Mum used to make the cheeses and that and then Mum was a very good – a very devout Catholic and very well good-hearted, well-natured, she used to give them the whatever because they couldn't make it, they didn't have the land to do it and they came back ... and she used to give them whatever we had, she used to share with them, the people that we knew-

OH: Looked after everybody.

SM: And she wouldn't charge a cent

OH: So were they long days, work hours?

SM: Oh, yeah, oh, they were, yeah. We – that's what I think was the difference and I think we were a bit scorned down upon by the local Australian old market gardeners that were established here because they would come in and start at 7:00 [am] and go home at 05:00, 06:00 o'clock and that's it. We'd start at dawn and we'd work until 10:00, 11:00 o'clock at night, we'd start whenever the sunlight came out and work and then, we had a, maybe a break during the day, a little bit. But we'd then have a packing shed, we would pack our tomatoes and our ... all the ... we'd usually grow tomatoes as well so we'd have a packing shed to pack all, to get ready for the market for the next morning.

OH: So, very long days?

SM: They were, 10:00, 11:00 o'clock at night we'd go and then I'd go to market three days a week. I used to call them market days were Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and the off market was Tuesdays and Thursdays but I went market days and I'd get up at 03:00, 04:00 o'clock in the morning and go to the market and then come back 10:00, 11:00 at the most, have an hour's sleep, a bit of lunch and then go back to work and that's how we did it for years, but that was – that wasn't just me. I mean, the reason I then – I went into wholesaling because what happened when I started in 1962 selling, Woolworths and Coles were not big in those days, they were doing a small percentage of the market – produce in the – market share in total was mainly done by independent fruit shops ... in those days, big fruit shops, but

Woollies of course needed people like me to do all the running around in those days because they didn't have the staff ...

OH: Infrastructure?

SM: They couldn't – they weren't equipped yet so there was an old fellow, the State Manager was Ralph Downer who was ... I just left the Christian Brothers College in Rostrevor, in intermediate and come back on the land, he was an ex-Christian Brothers Boy himself but he was State Manager for Woolworths so, as we get back on the track ... come around and he was talking and we – and he took a liking to me or took pity on me. I needed help, I don't know what, but he gave me heaps of work, so because we did onions and lettuces, he gave me all the onions and all the lettuces in all their stores, 12 months of the year supply. I had to procure it.

OH: And how old are you at this stage?

SM: About 18, 19.

OH: Oh, wow. So you procured it from other market gardeners?

SM: From other, yeah, other market gardeners and also interstate because we didn't grow here some of the stuff, the onions for example is seasonal. You grow here in the summer months but in our winter months they used to be grown in Queensland, Gatton, wherever, and I had to go and source because I know – I found out where they come from because the merchants in the market used to bring them down and there was a tag, you have to put a tag in the bag and there you had your details so I would get the details off the tags and ring the suppliers up.

OH: So you weren't travelling to Queensland?

SM: No, not in those early – not initially and that's how I started and then when I got a supplier I got to know over the phone, they didn't know me from a bar of soap but ... I said, you send me the goods down and I'll pay you straight away, and we did that, but I got Woollies to and old Ralph Downer and it was good. They paid me seven days, whatever I supplied, within seven days we got paid and they were very good in that – or 14 days but it was quick. So as soon as I got the money in, I'd send it out to the growers but then I had also after that, Target – the Arrow Group, remember Target Australia?

OH: Yes.

SM: They came into the market and they gave me a number of lines to supply for 12 months of the year and I said to them, I said, look, again, their trading terms were okay but we had to pay our growers quickly. I said: "I know what it's like because I came off the land, the growers plant the crop, they've got two or three months before the crops matures and they've got cash flow problems, they need cash flow so if we can pay them sooner, now I knew they wanted a discount." I said: "We can then get it a bit cheaper because we pay them sooner but get a fair price, they won't overcharge us, that was the whole idea." I said: "We've got to pay the grower their just desert because they work hard. We've got to look after them first and

then we can do it.” And really, that worked out very well because I was able to pay and even those interstate, I was able to pay them quickly and they knew the trading terms. The growers knew what the trading terms were elsewhere and I never kept them back, I used to pay as – I had my office, I had to put an office of a couple of girls to work for me because I couldn’t do everything, I couldn’t be out and about sourcing produce at the Riverland and everywhere and be at the office too so I had – and I said: “Look, get the cheques ready for the growers, whatever we bought last week up until – weekly.” As soon as the cheque comes in from Woollies and Target, out they go, and that’s how we did it.

OH: So at this stage you’re probably early 20’s?

SM: Early 20’s. I got – yep, I started the Target stores as well, yeah.

OH: So you’re doing all of the sourcing of the products and working with the other market gardeners at home, on the land, your Mum’s-

SM: We – that phased out.

OH: Okay, so tell me a bit about-

SM: Eventually we phased that out. We grew just larger crops like potatoes, ... little bunch lines that we used to call, we phased them out because we couldn’t do it – we couldn’t do everything, I couldn’t do everything but we still planted crops that we could look after like onions and lettuce and potatoes, that kind of thing.

OH: But you sort of scaled back?

SM: That was – yeah, scale – on that, more what we call bigger crops rather than the small bunch line where you ... labour intensive whereas we had the tractor, we could plant and then harvest with the tractor, it was a lot more – yeah, you could do it.

OH: And who was doing that work?

SM: Dad was there doing it, a lot of that when I was racing around or I was doing it – Dad and I.

OH: And was your Dad still working at GMH?

SM: No, he left. When I left school and come back ..., he left GMH, come back and worked full time. When I started marketing our own produce, he – we had enough income to do that, in ‘62. By 1962 when I come back, it was all – the land was paid off so we really didn’t have that stress of paying the mortgage.

OH: Right, and you were living with your parents?

SM: Yes.

OH: And your sister, she was still-

SM: Well our sisters – two sisters were married, my sister Maria had been married, they had bought a house just down the road on Gorge Road and Hann was the owner there, they used to have land where the De Corso's are now on the opposite side. There's still the land back on ... corner of Avenue Road and Gorge Road, they used to live opposite that, they had a house there and they lived there, my sister, Mary, and come and work ... up the road and the two girls, Immacolata and Carmela, they were still single at home and then when they got married they moved out like you normally do.

OH: And did you marry at this time?

SM: No. I got married at 28. I got married at-

OH: So you were busy setting up all this work-

SM: Yeah, and I got married, in fact, as one of my auntie's mother said, I was already married to my work, because I was, believe me, I was flat out. I used to go to Virginia and load semi's to go into – because I also started doing, selling onions interstate for other merchants interstate with that connection that I had to bring in for Woollies and I met other suppliers and we used to have other agents in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and I'd be sending – so I'd be out there loading at Gawler River, they used to grow a lot of onions, and I'd be out there loading semi's with the growers to get them out to Brisbane or Sydney and then when I was doing that, actually Dad was on the land here, but that was as well as the land that we had, I used to do a lot more merchandising and in the end I found that I, well, merchant side of things grew so big that I just didn't have ... so we stopped the growing on the land and then the church sold the land, the 10 acres, so we only had the five acres and we – and Dad used to do what he could but no pressure, no need to worry about it because I had that much work. We used to plant the land and not-

OH: But it wasn't your main income?

SM: More larger bigger crops but, yeah, that's how it all started but it's always a bit of a progression with me gaining experience, the opportunities were there offering, we needed to establish ourselves and I was that busy working – work just came from everywhere to me and it was amazing, I didn't really have to push hard. In fact-

OH: So you developed a pretty positive reputation by the sounds of things?

SM: Well, yeah, I think the – that's when I think the growers helped me because I used to pay them quickly. I paid them a – I didn't underpay them or overpay them, I paid them what – there was a ... market, three times a week there used to be a market report and that's what you - \$10 a box, and I used to pay around those – they all knew what the prices were so we used to stay, and then I put my commission on top of that and they knew that, it was all done above board and quickly paying, so they helped me because what I did, when I started supplying, as I said, Woollies, I had to go and buy produce from interstate, then I could no longer be regarded in the market – they had market bylaws, you're no longer a merchant on wheels. If you bought local produce from ... South Australia, you just – you could do it off the back of a truck, it's okay, but they call you a merchant on wheels, but if you got produce

from interstate then you had to buy a store, a merchant, you became a merchant, so I had to buy a store in Union Street in the East End Market I had to buy a store there to-

OH: A shop front?

SM: Just to qualify as a merchant because I couldn't bring produce in.

OH: Right, so who was running that store there?

SM: Well, I used to use that as an office in the morning but then I'd sub-let it out. I let it to somebody and they used to run, sell whatever and that's how we – but initially I used to have the store to – I had to have it to qualify and I used it as an office, a contact point in the market in the morning instead of the back of a truck, sell off – for the local market, sell off that, out of the store. Well what happened was when I joined, that just brought back another memory, the – when I had that – what they call the South Australia Fruit and Veg Chamber of Commerce, that's ... fruit and veg, and I joined because I was a merchant by that time and the older ... in the market said, look, son, there was a couple of other young fellows ..., you guys, the cost of doing business has gone up, we have to go up from 10% to 12% commission. It's not enough – 10% is not enough anymore – this is the oldie and I thought, well, fair enough, I was doing alright so I wasn't complaining and it didn't hurt me but they had more structured offices and the merchant – than me, I was all hands-on on everything and our costs were minimal in comparison. So I thought, okay, being a bit of a thinker, I said, okay, they want to go up to 12, I'll go to 8%, instead of – from 10 I'll drop to eight. I'll charge ... at 8% and then I can sell that bit cheaper to the supermarket. Now, if I do that, instead of – if I go up like they do, they sell one box of lettuce and you get 12%, an extra 2%, but if I go to eight and I sell two, I'm getting 16%, I'm doing the work, don't forget, okay? This is my logic, so ... and pass it on to the growers and pass it on to the buyer, the saving, and what happened? Instead of selling two, I was selling hundreds more.

OH: Of course.

SM: So suddenly I'm snowballed with work and so much so that the Target Group had an Englishman, Sam Halliwell, he was sort of managing from Melbourne, based in Melbourne head office, and they had the office here, the local office but it was really controlled by Melbourne, and he used to come over, we used to – he took over the ... and he used to come over time to time and we used to meet, I would have to go to Melbourne to discuss some policies, things that you do with marketing, and one time he got the bright idea and he said: "Sam." He said: "I've come up with an idea. I'm going to get one national buyer and distributor, like you're doing with South Australia now." – By that time I was doing a lot for South Australia, most of it – and he said: "I want one supplier for all Australia." And they had shops in Perth, Sydney, Melbourne, I can't remember Brisbane, I don't think they had any in Brisbane, but and South Australia, so and I said, and he said, and yeah. He said: "And I've chosen you to do it for me."

OH: Oh, wow.

SM: And I said, Sam, I said, don't be silly. I said: "This is Australia. You can't." I said: "What are you talking about? I'll help you with the suppliers because I had the contacts

interstate but don't do that, it's hard – I can't be everywhere.” He said: “No, no.” He said: “We did it in England, in Tesco we had one supplier.” And I said: “But you know the population of England, 60 odd million and the size of England, do you know the population of Australia and the size of Australia?” I said, think about it, Sam. And he said, nup. I said, I pleaded with him not to do it. He said, nup. I said, well okay, Sam, if I say no, what do you do? He said: “I'll take South Australia from you.” And I said: “Oh, no, okay, we're doing it.” I said: “If that's the way it's going to be, I'm not going to – I'm not going to lose South Australia so I'll do it but you're going to help me.” I said: “We're going to work together. You look after your side, I'll look after this.” What I did, it made me think, I had my contacts in Perth, in Melbourne and Sydney we did ..., yeah, What I did, I got grower packers, like Sumich in Perth, they used to supply Woolworths as well and I said: “What we'll do”, I said: “I told him we had this job done, oh, I could do this.” And I said: “What we'll do, we'll pay you cost plus whatever, cost of the produce plus you running cool rooms and whatever you need, you'll have to tell me, when you give me a quote you include everything and you include your costs and then we'll split the profit 50/50.” That's what I said to them. So save me, and I said: “We'll get the standards from the Target stores and you've got to meet those standards and you change accordingly but it would be cost plus 50/50 and we get paid – and the other thing I was just going to say ... with Sam.” I said: “Now interstate they don't know Sam Mercorella from a bar of soap, okay, the suppliers, but they know cash. Now if you want me to do that, you've got to pay me seven days.” And he said: “Okay Sam, I'll do that.” So we, Friday, the end of the week, we, the invoice ..., by the next following Wednesday I got paid for the week, last week, and I had to again, the cheques ready for the growers, out, or suppliers.

OH: So you knew the market, you knew the growers but you knew the psyche of both, the business and-

SM: Yeah, well, I'd made them – I knew all – I mean, and also-

OH: Understood both sides?

SM: Quite experienced over time, doing interstate produce selling and buying from interstate for my requirements and also selling onions to the other merchants. I was in touch with the markets all the time so I was able to do that.

OH: So in some ways you're getting further and further away from this kid at Campbelltown growing-

SM: Yes, it just happened. I didn't have the time, I – something was – and then of course on top of that later, we didn't grow anymore, Dad got on a bit in age and we stopped growing but I went into export as well. The Government come – the Federal Government come over looking to export Australia and they were looking at people like me, young people at the time to, in my 30's. I was 30 something when I started exporting, I – to go and sell Australia, and I said, I was interested to - when they came over, we had a meeting at the merchants there, Chamber of Commerce, and all the oldies are – and I said, yeah, I said, I listened to them, I said: “That would be interesting, I think I could look at that.” And the oldies said: “You're nuts, Sam, what's wrong with you? You can't export fresh produce around the world. Are you losing your mind?” And I said: Well, why not?” I said: “There's refrigeration these

days, there's forms to keep – we're sending produce from here to Queensland refrigerated and it takes nearly a day and a half." So I said: "No, well, it's only eight hours to go to – or six to eight hours to go by plane, eight hours to Hong Kong and six hours to Singapore, by air freight it's probably fresher going there than going to Queensland or Sydney." So, sure enough, I took that on as well and I started travelling, well, Asia.

OH: So did you have a team back here?

SM: Yeah, by that time I had people working for me and I had people receiving stock, assembling, I had a packing shed to do the orders for Target because I had to do the orders here and send them to all the stores so I had people doing that.

OH: And did you have family involved in that at all?

SM: No, I was on my own. Just on my own. I employed staff wherever.

OH: So you're off doing that and you said your parents sort of stopped the growing-?

SM: Stopped growing, yeah.

OH: And so did you sell up the land then or-?

SM: No, what happened, when I got married in '74, I was 28 and then I said to Mum and Dad because there's four of us in the family and I was responsible for Mum and Dad and I – whether they got a pension or not, they – I looked after them, that was my – that was just the way-

OH: You were the son.

SM: The Italian culture that it was my job and we just did it and so I said to Mum and Dad, look, there have been so many families who over the years we've seen them argue once the parents pass on and it comes to splitting the property there's big fights in the family and it's not worth, I don't want that. I want the family to stay together. You choose, you make the split, you split up the land now. There's four of us and but you, you've got to look after ... I built the house for Mum and Dad on Gorge, 171 Gorge Road because Mum wanted – and I built the house where I built my house at Auldana and then in '74 - in '75, '76 I built their house and that's what Mum wanted, she ordered and she got what she wanted. Okay, so that's how it was – it was on her land but on the proviso I did it – my sisters didn't have to spend any money, I did whatever Mum wanted but it would be mine when Mum and Dad eventually couldn't live there anymore or whatever, that would be my house, that would be my share, but I paid the building. All I got the land extra, if you know what I'm saying, but that way Mum could get what she wanted, I didn't have to go to my brother-in-law's and a meeting that I knew would be cumbersome, so I did it all and paid for it and then it came back to me, and they did the split.

We had a meeting, I said, okay, let's have a meeting with the family, just not the in-laws, just us, Mum, Dad and us four kids and Mum and Dad had thought about it, they thought this is Sam's, this is Mary's and this is Carmel's and this Immacolata's. They split the land up, and I

said to them, you leave yourself a block on – for yourself, the house plus there's a block between Silkes Road and Gorge Road between the house, there was a block of land there, it's fairly large, it was about three or four houses ... blocks in there, it was one of the large blocks, leave it there just in case later on there's not enough in pension or something happened, that's for you guys to sell and have the extra cash, so you worked for it, it's yours, but once we split it all up and we did it by the book and advised by our accountants at the time what you could do to – and Mum and Dad were able to get pension because the house was mine, that kind of thing, in mine – it was done in a way that we could do it, comply.

OH: Business – smart business.

SM: So I didn't – the accountants did all that for me and I just did that and then they were able to get pension, they didn't really need much more but I made sure that whatever they needed, I supplied, I funded, if you know what I'm saying, but we split the land up and then each one of us have done their own thing. I did eight – I cut part of the land up between the Village and Mum and Dad's house, there was – we put eight units in there. I got Homestead to come in and do a bit of a joint venture. We supplied the land, they did the housing and I got one unit out of it with – as the land component. In the end, they built it for me, I got one – they got the rest, which is the deal we did and my son still lives in the unit now.

OH: And the rest of the land, was that then sold off?

SM: It was – they cut up and sold – the rest of the land, my sisters did what they want. One sister did units again, Carmela did the same and the block of land that was Mum and Dad's, for Mum and Dad, when I reached a certain age I realised, I mean, I was doing okay, I said to Mum and Dad, look, make – give that to the girls, keep me out. That was going to be – in the end that was going to be split up four ways like the rest of the land and when it came to the crunch, I was more than happy with what I was doing and I said, look, give that to the girls, make it three, instead of four blocks, the four of us shares, make it three, so they got more. It was just the land side of it and then they built whatever they – each one of them wanted to build. They sold it off or did a house on it and sold it, that kind of thing, and that's what they did. My two brother-in-laws put units on it and sold them and the other one, Maria, who was alongside me on my land and when I did the Village, we're talking now back, oh, later on, about 15 years ago because the land was still there, it was all split, all in their names and my name, I still had the packing sheds going, don't forget, on my share alongside the Reservoir and Maria was alongside and I said, I come up with the idea that I looked at we were going to do something with the land and I said, my Auntie – one of my Auntie's was in the Italian Village at the time and I used to ... I looked after her because she was ... my Uncle, they didn't have any children and I was the male and I was very close with my Uncle, the one that we went and lived with when we came, I was very close with him. Any time, he used to – anything he needed, used to come to me and I used to do it for him, just that family connection if you know what I'm saying, and she – he passed away unfortunately, 67 he got acute leukaemia and passed away very quickly and she was left on her own, my Auntie, and then eventually she couldn't stay – she stayed on her own at the house for a number of years but in the end it got too-

OH: Too much.

SM: Too much and she wanted to go into the Village, into a Village, and I rang the Italian Village and I knew most of the people in the top brass anyway through the Italian connection and we worked out, we took her there, worked out a deal she was happy with and they were happy with and with the pension, whatever, they did it all and she went in there, but because of those connections, I started looking, well, I thought there's an opportunity here to – you see, I'm always one to value add-

OH: I can see that. Entrepreneur?

SM: I don't know what it is, I think I was born with it, I'm not sure, it's in the gene, I'm not sure what it is but I said, okay, instead of just selling the blocks off and investing the money, why don't I keep the land ... this Village ... you keep it, you actually own the land and you sell the licence to the retiree, same thing, because they've got the rights through the licence, legally speaking, but you still own the land, but when they on-sell, say they after, and they reckon after 10 years there's a bit of a turnover, they either could go into a nursing because I did independent living, I didn't do care because I'm not a doctor myself, I rely on other people and then that becomes problematic and then I'm liable. They do the wrong thing and I'm liable so I said no, so there were three sections, high care, low care or no care, so they're independent living which ... they're going on, ... not people look after themselves or we do what we have to do, do the maintenance and whatever we have to do and that comes out of their maintenance fee but we've got to arrange it all for them which is good, so I looked at it and I thought, oh yeah, we don't need as much land so you put two units in, if you – the blocks of land were a certain size with the Council and you only need the half of that so you put two instead of one so on the land I didn't make quite double but almost on the land component, do you understand?

OH: Right, yep.

SM: And then, of course, on the on-sale, there's the DMF, they're called Deferred Management. Now, when they on-sell after 10 years, 25% stays with the Village which is ours on the sale which is – it's just the way this retirement village ... works.

OH: Yeah, I understand that.

SM: And I, because I was ... with my experience with Auntie, I ... and it started getting the old brain ticking over.

OH: Ticking around.

SM: How can I value add and also keep it in the family. I thought, well, this would be a wonderful way to have the grandkids, Mum and Dad's grandkids, remember them because this is what they started. I was caretaker for a number of years but now the grandkids can actually get involved-

OH: The heritage.

SM: In some shape or form and it's in their name and it's in – there was more of a sentimental thing too, I mean, I could have sold the land off and invested the money but no, I

chose to go this way because it (a) had the benefits and secondly, it was also sentimental that I put it in Mum and Dad ... I had the Mayor here open the clubhouse and it's in Mum and Dad's honour, it's all there, there's a plaque there, I ... which one in there it was – anyway, so we did that and I put their name, Mum and Dad, name on the car park, Angelina Carpark, Antonio Carpark-

OH: Yes, I've seen that.

SM: And Mercorella Lane, but I notice I didn't appear anywhere because it's not mine – this is Mum and Dad. That's their land. That was the rationale behind that and we did – and then of course my sister, Maria, said, so whatever you do, I'll do too and I was a little bit concerned when she said that because I thought it was a new concept for me and what if it doesn't work out. I don't mind me not making what I... but I don't want her to lose, but fortunately we got on to crowd – I looked a few up – providers – retirement village ... and marketing and Village Care came up to me, a lady by the name of Loretta Byers, she was very – she impressed me, she was very upfront, very fair, professional and we gave her the marketing and the management and that's included in what the residents pay and it worked out within two or three years we'd sold, we did 33 units on there, 22 on my section and 11 on Maria's section and we had them sold within about three years. We did it in stages and so then I was happy that, and now Maria, since then, she's got five acres down the road and she's done Thorndon Park Estate, that's hers, she's done another 50 or, she'll end up with – 56 now but then she's got a bit of land left alongside of hers and she's still working, she'll get another 10, 15 on there. She'll end up with 70 or 80 on her section.

OH: So when you say she's still working, you mean...?

SM: The land.

OH: Market gardening?

SM: Market gardening, yeah. They've got a bunch line, little radish and parsnip and because the boys are in the market, George, one of the – he's been – he's got a store in the market and he's still there but they're thinking of getting out now that they're doing the Village. They've done ... they've sold, I think ...

OH: So that's the third generation?

SM: Yeah, that's right.

OH: Fantastic.

SM: And then my son now is running our Village and is running their Village so he will end up – with the family, with Vince, with the boys there, but he's managing it for them because Tony, my son, he's got a law and commerce so the accounting side is – came in handy with the commerce side and law, legalistically he knows how to work legally as well, to do comply, all those things ...

OH: ... and accredited.

SM: And he's very, very good for that, so it all happened really luckily that suddenly I'm – and he ... he gets paid for doing that, Tony gets a management fee for that so he gets an income out of the – instead of growing vegies, he gets an income out of managing the Village.

OH: But he's still getting money from the land.

SM: Exactly. And on the on-sales, you're getting 25 – say they're selling for [\$] 400,000 a unit, there's 100,000 for the Village on each sale so I look at it this way, there's 22 there, even if we sort of ... sold ... there's another 2.2 million there to come back in later.

OH: So you're still getting good money out of the land.

SM: Value adding.

OH: So out of your parent's original block, how much of that is now still with the family?

SM: Well the 33 units, well, 33 with Mary and myself, the rest are sold.

OH: The rest are sold, so about half of the land, do you think?

SM: Yeah, no, might be not quite about half, about just under a half to a third, a third and a bit ... short ... because the other ones, the blocks were bigger and they've all got, say 11 by, let's look at this one, there's 11 that we did, Maria did on her section, they're all about the same, there's two more so 33 and then Mum and Dad, there's 44 block it would have – not - 44 sort of units that are not – that have been sold off without being a retirement village and we got 33 on the two that we've got, just not quite half, do you understand? Just a little bit more than half was sold off. The Village is still in the family, there's about 33.

OH: So it's stayed with the family?

SM: It's 40% or something, you do the numbers.

OH: So things have changed a lot from those early days and but you said your sister has still got a bit of the market gardening going.

SM: She stayed – she's still doing it, yeah, because they – Maria didn't really do much schooling here, she was 14 when we came ... 13 or 14, she was five years older, if I was eight, she would be 13, coming up, because I ... yeah, I was eight coming on to nine but we came here, my birthday's in July, we came here in May, so I was eight when we came here but I was nine, really close to nine, so she was 13 or 14.

OH: So I presume you didn't speak any English when you arrived?

SM: No. It didn't take me long. The first couple of years, the first year was a bit hard but then when you're young you learn quickly, your mind picks it up very quickly and the first year I think they put me up because we come here in May and I wouldn't have passed and they put me into Grade 2, which I was doing Grade 2 in Italy and they put me here and they

just put me up because of age. We went to Athelstone for about three – Athelstone Primary School, but the second year I got the most improved in the class and I passed normally without any difficulties.

OH: ... assistance.

SM: And, yeah, so I was lucky for that – in that school, that was – when you're young, and when we went on to Rostrevor my mother, being a devout Catholic, sent me there for a Christian education, not so much for a normal education, she wanted me to learn the Christian side of things which was a good thing, I have no complaints about that because it taught me a lot to be ... to respect people, it taught me a lot to be understanding and help the less fortunate, that kind of thing. It was a good thing but in doing so I, because I was at Campbelltown, I went from Athelstone when we built down here, we went ... I went to Campbelltown for three years and because I was pretty sport orientated, I loved my sport so I loved footy, in those days soccer wasn't really established and I played Aussie Rules and they made me ... I was vice captain of the team here in Year 7, Grade 7.

OH: So the school team?

SM: The school team, and we came – we won the lightening carnival that year so and, it was – at that age you think you're pretty good in that sense, it makes you feel good, but then when Mum decided to send me to Rostrevor I'd heard that up there they're all super students and super athletes and I'm thinking, well, I'm going to be a nobody here, I didn't want to go. Mum said, no, you've got to go. I said, but Mum, why? Let me go to Campbelltown, I've got my friends and no. Okay, so I had to do it all so I had to ring around and I found out there was a – they had a three year waiting list and I thought, oh, phew, I don't have to go so I said to Mum, I said: "Mum, you're wasting your time, they've got a waiting list there, three years, there's no way I can get in there." And no, "You go up there and you tell them I want you to go up there." I said: "What are you talking about?" I said – so I get up with the truck ... make her happy, I go up there with the truck, we had the truck all ready ... we had somewhere, I had to go up there with something, it was some little old truck we had and I get up there, I had a licence and Brother Kelty was the headmaster or the boss there and I said to him, I said: "Look, Brother, to be honest, I really don't want to come up here." I said: "My mother – and I know you've got a waiting list." And I said so, but I'm coming here, and he said: "Oh", he said: "Son, I think, come inside, let's talk." He thought, I'm going to fix this little, he thought I was being smart so he brought me inside and asked me questions and I could sense that things weren't looking good, that he was going to let me in. I thought I'd done an Oscar performance but it didn't work out. He says: "You know what, son? Tell your mum to go and buy a uniform, you're in." So I ended up in Rostrevor.

OH: So what age were you then? Is that ...?

SM: Well, I was 16 when I left. I would have been 13. I was only three years there so 13 and, but anyway.

OH: You were driving at 13?

SM: No, no I wasn't. That's ..., I wasn't driving, I was ride the bike there that first time and driving was later. I bought the truck when I left College, that's right. Yeah, erase that one. No, it wasn't right.

OH: So you thought you were going to get out of it but they thought here's a kid-?

SM: And, of course, yeah, as I said to you, I was there and I had to ride a bike to school every day and back, that's all we could afford. Nobody drove me there, if you know what I'm saying? I had to go by myself like most kids in those days, there's no – day school, I was a day student, so I, yeah, I went there and because I was worried that they were super students and super sportsmen, I couldn't be much better at the sport but I studied. I've never worked so much homework as I did at Rostrevor and the first three months took me a while to adjust to the new school and the discipline and all the different control-

OH: Yeah, totally different.

SM: It was more structured than the public school and so I – after the exams I get up there and the whole class was standing up clapping and I'm thinking: "Oh, what have I done this week?" So they used to give you the strap ... got the strap until I understood the system. You do – you're young, and I thought, what have I done this time, and he – the head – the teacher was Sam Davis and he said: "Hey Merc." He said: "You're Dux of the class." And I never heard the word Dux. All I could remember was dunce.

OH: Oh, no.

SM: And I'm thinking, oh, my God, what have I done? I've worked so hard, this is my thoughts, and I failed. How am I going to go home and tell Mum and Dad, they've paid, that I've actually failed? And I said: "Oh well", I said to the teacher: "Okay", that's what I'm thinking this ... And I said: "Okay." He said, "Is that all you can say?" I said: "What do you want me to say? I did my best and I failed." He said: "You idiot, you came top." And then I dux-ed the term – the exam for four terms straight, so I-

OH: So you learned that word Dux very quickly?

SM: Very quickly, and I dux-ed the class for four terms straight and then because I got to know the system I was always second, third, I did okay but I didn't put the effort that I used to, if you know what I'm saying, to achieve.

OH: Took your foot off the pedal a bit?

SM: And, of course, then I had made up my mind to go back on the family business and of course the Brother's begging me ... the headmaster there has begged me to stay. Just go to uni. "Don't be silly." He said: "What's wrong with you?" I told him I was going to leave in intermediate – that second year. I said: "I'm going to leave next year after Intermediate." He said: "No, no, don't." – He especially ... Intermediate, they really Brother O'Sullivan, Brother Kelty, they all – the Brothers, the teachers that I had, they all really begged me to go on. I said: "No." And Mum's also said: "Why don't you go on?" I said: "Mum, you can't afford me. I've got to come back and work because you've done every-

OH: You were doing the books at home?

SM: Yeah, I was: “We’ve got debts. We’ve got to pay them off.”

OH: So a big decision for a young man?

SM: But it didn’t bother me and also I’d worked out that by going to the market there was – I could make more than what I’d heard what lawyers and doctors were making, okay, it was a different job, there was prestige, but there was no prestige on the land but I could make more if I worked.

OH: More opportunities.

SM: And as it turned out, and also when I was, during that period we were doing ancient history I saw the Venetian traders and they’d go to the Orient and buy the ... and bring them back and I thought, what a life. They travel the world and they get paid. And guess what I did afterwards?

OH: Yeah, exactly. A new generation of traders?

SM: So it must have been in-

OH: Sunken in.

SM: The genetic makeup that that’s what I had to do and I got no regrets. I worked in ... there was no prestige in my job but I loved every bit of it, hard yakka.

OH: Yeah, sounds like a lot of challenges.

SM: But the motivation for me and the satisfaction came when I was able to do my work and help others along the way, even growers, sometimes they were struggling a bit and I would help them out in some shape or form.

OH: Sounds like your mother had those values too?

SM: Yes, that’s what they – she – I told you, she’d give cheeses and whatever because of – but that’s passed on and I’ve got no regrets. I think we had a good run and but I thank Australia because, let’s be honest, the reason we came here is because there was no opportunities back home for Mum and Dad and the Australia did offer ... and the Government, I’ve got to tell you, helped me immensely. When I did export they were really supportive, I’ve got to say to you, and also I found supermarket managers and that that really backed me and I had a lot of help along the way and the opportunities were there.

OH: And certainly they obviously recognised that.

SM: Well, I think they – I think there was a few that recognised that and also they needed people like me and they saw probably the value that I was ... I needed to do it, I needed ... and they could. A bit of a win-win situation.

OH: And hard worker?

SM: But generally that time – that period, the Italian market gardeners were all the same ..., they come back, work the land and the family would work the land and Mum would – and the Dad would go and work somewhere, but that's how it all started out there.

OH: Did you have any other market gardener kids with you at Rostrevor?

SM: There were some – there were the – there was a few, not many. Not many, no. The Italians, there was only a handful of us at the time. After that there was a lot of Italians went there but not – at the time I reckon only a handful of us, a dozen Italian names that I remember, and not many because they couldn't afford it, basically. Mum really was a devout Catholic and wanted me to, and she sacrificed to do it, so to speak, but no, they couldn't afford it so they didn't do it. Later on, they became more affluent and then they could – paid off their debts and whatever and were able to spend more money on education.

OH: So you're still in some ways making a living off of some of that land?

SM: Yes, the Village, through the Village, yeah.

OH: Through the Village and through the families, do you have any memories of when the land started to be sold around you and-?

SM: Yes, it's ... would have been '70's it started being cut off – '70's, '80's. Pockets started being developed and it just went on from there.

OH: So some, I mean, it's inevitable progress but I imagine there was some sense of losing that land?

SM: Yes, I didn't really notice it because it was gradual. You could see and you know the people that sold were getting on a bit in age or whatever and the kids weren't doing it, the land and they had to do something with them so the good part about it also that I could see that would happen, the value had gone up from - so the, realistically that was the big plus-

OH: Profitable.

SM: So they made a living out of it and so the valuation was so high that they made more profit again by-

OH: Being able to sell it on?

SM: When they sold it.

OH: And I think part of your-

SM: Capital gain ... the capital gain aspect of it.

OH: And, for me, part of your story is that the founding of the family here in Australia and that you're still passing that on to the generations and still have a little bit of that land left which is lovely, isn't it?

SM: Well, yes, I try – I'm trying, I'm trying to pass it on ... now but fortunately young Tony, I've got my lad he's involved and one of my other daughters and we still help when we can. She's divorced and my wife goes and takes the kids to school because she's working, my daughter, she's an architect, and the other daughter's a lawyer so she works with ETSA [SA Power Networks] and so the oldest daughter, then Sonia, then Tony's got law and commerce but he didn't like to do any of them so and but I encouraged him not to do it if he didn't like it, I said, don't do it because I chose-

OH: Yeah, exactly.

SM: Not to do it and I've got no regrets. I said: "Life is short and you've got to enjoy it. If you don't enjoy it, it's a chore", I said: "I've enjoyed my job." So I encouraged him not to do it if he didn't like it and that's what I'm – so we still help where we can. We, well, no doubt and now we've got the shopping centre that I told you at Christies. I bought that - we've got Coles as a tenant and I bought that from a long term sort of retirement, a sort of pension – that's my pension but I bought that when I had all the income from the supermarket business and the export. Target alone in those early days when they were doing this ... they were doing \$300,000 a week turnover and then we had Woollies and we had the export so there was quite a volume, my margin was small but the volume was big. I didn't make money out of the margin and cash flow was good because I had those seven-day trading terms.

OH: And you seized the opportunities as they came along?

SM: And now we're passing as much as we can to the kids, the three of them we help Angela, which we ... they're doing well, her husband's a developer and he's done very well for himself so he doesn't need – they don't need any more help but the other two, they still need a bit of help financially and otherwise and we share it. I don't need it. I only need so much. As it turns out, Coles have gone from strength to strength down there at Christies Beach and I bought ... I built three speciality shops at the front of Coles, we did a deal with them because they had the lease over the whole of the land, we didn't put the rent up but they released some land because they didn't need it and we put some ... right on the beach, on the front row, and that gives us extra income but more or less it's Coles because they pay, they've got 4,000 square metres or thereabouts and they pay good rent, not so much per metre, it's below per metre but it's the volume again. There's an old saying in the market, you don't pay in a percentage, you pay in dollars so I've always had the attitude, how much dollars is it bringing in? Forget my percentage, the percentage will come back later, we'll work it, whatever fits in, as long as the dollars are there, let's do it.

OH: So it's been a great journey here in, starting off in Campbelltown as this kid working on the market gardens?

SM: Yes, yes, it has been. I've got to say to you, a lot of us kids, not just me, a lot of us have had similar experiences in different fields. I mean, I'm not, nothing special, if you know what I'm saying.

OH: But as you said, it's given you ... your family came for opportunities and they found them.

SM: And I was able to be lucky enough to benefit from them, from those opportunities that were here.

OH: It's a lovely story, Sam, so thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to add to this interview that we haven't talked about today?

SM: Not really. I don't think there's anything unless you want some photos of some land, how – as it was. My sister, Mary, might have some of the old Bedford truck that we had bought, the first truck, '62, whatever, when I left college. I didn't keep it but she kept the photo of the old truck ...

OH: Oh, lovely. Well I think-

SM: So anything like that that you may want, I'll see what they've got and I can let you have it and ... just take some photos of it and give it back to her because she wants to keep it.

OH: Certainly, yeah.

SM: Maria's got more, I haven't got a lot but Maria's got more of those old times.

OH: Well, Ann Sharley I think, is going to be in contact with you later in the week about-

SM: Who's that?

OH: Ann Sharley who works here at the Council and she's going to talk to you about getting some photos and

SM: Alright, whatever you ... let us know what you need. I'm not ... I'll see what she's got and I'll give you whatever she's got.

OH: Okay, so thanks again. I'll just push this on pause and we should be right.