

**Recorded: 24 November 2021**

Interviewer: Sue Johnston

Abstractor: Sue Johnston

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*The time codes in this abstract summary have been recorded based on the original audio files. Please note that the times may differ for the online audio due to the original files being combined into one file. However, the order of content in this abstract below will match the online audio.*

**File 01 (24 November 2021)**

0:00 Introduction and recording agreement

1:14 **End of File 01**

**File 02**

0:00 Explains born in RANFURLY - lived first 2 years there with mother [GERTRUDE MARY BREEN [nee Weir] and grandmother [ANNIE WEIR]. Father [CHARLES FINDLAY BREEN] coming and going from WW2. Father home from WAR in 1945. Family moved to ALEXANDRA – lived in BOARDING HOUSE until Father built family home in BRANDON STREET ALEXANDRA, next door to ST GERARD'S SCHOOL.

1:40 Describes landscape of ALEXANDRA during PRIMARY SCHOOL years and childhood adventures. No drownings recalled. Reference: ORCHARDS, OPEN WATER RACES.

3:09 Explains early attraction to outdoor activities. Reference: CHASING RABBITS, GOATS, RIFLE SHOOTING.  
Describes using mate's father's RIFLE – kept under GOODS' SHED at RAILWAY STATION. Father discovered missing cartridges.

5:00 Describes early life in ALEXANDRA. Reference: PADDLING in WATER RACES, CULVERTS UNDER ROADS, ORCHARDS on CENTENNIAL AVENUE, JACKSON'S CHERRY ORCHARD, TROUT in RIVER.

6:46 Explains PRIMARY SCHOOL DAYS at ST GERARD'S. Taught by NUNS. Didn't know any different. Left for BOARDING SCHOOL [ST KEVIN'S, OAMARU], aged 12 years. Homesick, didn't feel disadvantaged by PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION.

8:05 Explains having good friends at ST GERARD'S and the PUBLIC SCHOOL [neighbours, latter-day mate – GARY McDONNELL, & longtime workmate & fellow adventurer JOHN SYMONS]. Recalls only one MAORI family in district, compared to varied ETHNICITY in area today with REFUGEES and ASIAN OWNED SHOPS. Makes no differentiation between NEW ZEALANDERS, MAORI, EUROPEANS.

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- 10:50 Describes years at ST KEVIN'S 1956 - 59. SAMOAN and MAORI PUPILS. Learnt INDEPENDENCE. Other boys from CENTRAL OTAGO went to SCHOOLS in OAMARU. Girls went to SCHOOLS in DUNEDIN.
- 13:12 Left SCHOOL aged 16. [Dunedin 1960 – August 1966], training as QUANTITY SURVEYOR, worked for MWD, flatted with scarfies, played Rugby through grades for Union, played junior rugby for OTAGO. Goal - come home to ALEXANDRA, be a BUILDER, enjoy OUTDOOR PURSUITS.
- 14:12 Describes HOLIDAY WORK during SCHOOL years. Reference: PICKING FRUIT [TOM & PEG COONEY, DUNSTAN ROAD]; TOMATOES; PEAS; JOHN SYMONS [friend]; WAGES; LOCAL WORKFORCE; MRS MANSFIELD, [MRS SYMONS, MRS NYHON]; YOUNG GIRLS –DISTRACTIONS [while working for JERRY SANDERS on his GRAVEYARD GULLY ORCHARD]; LABOURING for BREENS – CLEANING [tidy up boxing, de-nailing, sweeping floors etc.]
- 17:20 Explains background of BREEN CONSTRUCTION COMPANY LTD. Started in INVERCARGILL on 30<sup>th</sup> AUGUST 1939 by uncle [JIM BREEN] and grandfather [JACK BREEN] – FINANCIER.
- Describes grandfather being illegal BOOKIE in INVERCARGILL, run from BARBER shop in ESK STREET. Fined by POLICE and taken to COURT occasionally but carried on operation. Daughter took bets at counter, 3 or 4 barbers cut hair in shop, but not JACK.
- 19:33 Explains how grandfather arrived in NZ from VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA, after the BOER WAR [October 1905]. Brought new wife, settled in WEST of the WAIAMU [PAPATOTARA, south of TUATAPERE] had 9 children. Reference: SAW MILLING; FLAX MILLING; HARSH CONDITIONS; LOCAL RACE MEETINGS; SUCCESSFUL AXEMAN.
- Mentions admiration of grandfather's work ethic and exploits.
- 21:58 Explains BREENS' expanding business from rural SOUTHLAND to CENTRAL OTAGO - [QUEENSTOWN POST OFFICE, 1937 first job.] SOUTHLANDERS always gravitated to CENTRAL, different CLIMATE. SOUTHLANDERS with TB came to WAIPIATA SANITORIUM. BREENS worked on the SANITORIUM [1938]. Uncle [JIM BREEN] had ARCHITECT MENTOR – worked well together.
- 23:30 Explains BREENS working on the WAIPIATA SANITORIUM NURSES' HOME in 1938. Lived in camps with tents. 1939 – building CROMWELL HOSPITAL when WW2 broke out. Father and uncle made notes about building jobs done. Still have these records. Designs simple.
- 25:10 Explains several substantial PUBLIC BUILDINGS built by BREENS in 3 years. 1937 - 1938 WAIPIATA SANITORIUM, 1939 CROMWELL HOSPITAL and DUNSTAN NURSES' HOME.
- 25:43 Explains when WW2 started [1939] – many family members in the business went to WAR. The FOUNDER [JIM], got manpowered out – took on young APPRENTICE from QUEENSTOWN, RON INDER, too young at 13, to go to WAR. KEITH BLACKMORE and father [CHARLIE], worked at BREENS [c.1938-1945] - nucleus of workforce – built ST GERARD'S 1945.
- 27:10 Explains how jobs obtained. TENDERS called for in PUBLIC NEWSPAPERS, RELATIONSHIPS and REPUTATION important. Chose which jobs to TENDER for.
- 29:25 Explains NEGOTIATIONS involved for big jobs. Compared paperwork today with early years in the business. A PLAN was 1 page, with 2 pages of SPECIFICATIONS. Today miles of REGULATIONS and

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- DOCUMENTATION - all digital. Mentions CONSENT PROCESS working with LOCAL BODY BUREAUCRATS. TRUST important between OWNER, CONSULTANT and CONTRACTOR. Have to live with mistakes.
- 32:57 Describes evolution of HEALTH and SAFETY requirements in BUILDING INDUSTRY. COMMON SENSE prevailed years ago, dangers still there. Today have to show paperwork whether the work's been done or not. REPUTATION very important – what you live or die on as a CONTRACTOR.
- 35:52 Explains returning from DUNEDIN in 1966 - fully qualified QUANTITY SURVEYOR after 6 years training. Also learnt to play football and drink in DUNEDIN. Father's ill health factor in return to business. Mentions SYD MCEWAN, father [CHARLIE'S] right hand man. Worked for BREENS for 25 years.
- 37:52 Explains BREENS' HARDWARE SHOP in OMAKAU, opened 1950. After WAR ended the Company had lots of work in MANUHERIKIA area. Opportunity to build on relationships with locals, sell them CEMENT, PAINT, bought in bulk. 1970's - closed, taken over by bigger outfits, PLACEMAKERS.
- Explains moving BREENS' HEAD OFFICE back to ALEXANDRA. Some employees set up own BUSINESSES – TIMBER MERCHANT, BUILDING SUPPLY STORE, until taken over by larger SUPPLY COMPANIES.
- 39:30 Describes CONTRACTORS' CHALLENGES – go where work is, lots of travel, time away from home. 1983 – new SKI BASE at CORONET PEAK, MOW (Ministry of works) DEPOT at HAAST, TREBLE CONE, TUROA SKI TOWS, RADIO MASTS, new LAKE ONSLOW DAM. Required good people carrying on Business at home.
- 41:00 Explains combining workforces from BREENS' and CONTRACTOR JOHN SYMONS, for some jobs. Spread too thinly, took on too much, inexperienced – learnt from this.
- 42:25 Describes BREENS having workforce of 40. Got Business back on its feet by working very hard – 3 thousand hours a year, 50 – 60 hours a week. Employed different ADMINISTRATORS, QUANTITY SURVEYORS, PROJECT MANAGERS. Explains taking on MT COOK AIRLINES (owners of CORONET PEAK), in 1983 – 84. Learnt from this.
- 44:25 Explains contract with MOW (Ministry of Works-GOVERNMENT ENTITY), to build new BASE at HAAST. Sent by father to do QUANTITY SURVEYING COURSE in DUNEDIN. Covered CONSTRUCTION, SCHEDULING, PRICING, NEGOTIATING – all necessary for CONSULTANT or CONTRACTOR. Father self-taught – gained knowledge on job, an inherent intelligence, worked hard. Brought up family with these values.
- 47:06 Describes split with uncle from BREENS in 1950. COMPANY, losing money, Uncle PROBABLY BIPOLAR - not understood then. Given car when left. Set up BOARD of DIRECTORS' from farming community in OMAKAU so money could be borrowed from banks.
- 48:25 Describes natural evolution of taking over COMPANY in 1978. Took it in stride. Never wanted to work or live anywhere else. Had worked from TUROA in NORTH ISLAND to PORT PEGASUS in SOUTH ISLAND.

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- 50:00 Describes changes in CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY over decades – PENCIL and PAPER to DIGITAL. Still member of QUANTITY SURVEYORS' INSTITUTE but been a CONTRACTOR for years. Uses computer to write, so competent enough to get by in the BUSINESS.
- 52:19 Explains changes in BUILDING CONSTRUCTION CODES – ST JOHN HEADQUARTERS CROMWELL, new MANIOTOTO AREA SCHOOL – upgraded, worried about overdue GRADE 8 EARTHQUAKE. More money spent to increase chances of people and buildings surviving.
- Reference: CHRISTCHURCH EARTHQUAKES; BUILDING FAILURES.
- 56:11 Describes changes to BUILDING MATERIALS – still STEEL and TIMBER, but more and bigger - BOLTS, BRACKETS. Compared buildings in 1950's and 60's after WW2 - well engineered, now BUILDING CODES dictate quality of buildings – 66% acceptable LEVEL of COMPLIANCE, if not reached, buildings demolished. [Special codes these days re public buildings like ST. JOHNS, fire stations, schools, hospitals – re earthquake requirements in the main - very, very expensive.]
- 57:53 Discusses what the future in CENTRAL OTAGO may look like. Reference: NZ's SIZE, OFFSHORE MARKETS, TOURISM, CLIMATE CHANGE CHALLENGES.
- 1:59:58 Describes locals' initial reaction to CENTRAL OTAGO RAIL TRAIL. Laughed, too ignorant to see potential. Opened in 2000, admitted being wrong. Brought LIFE to RURAL COMMUNITIES between CLYDE and MIDDLEMARCH – CYCLING and WALKING evolving.
- 1:02:12 Describes walking along RAIL TRAIL – chaining TELEPHONE POLES to moving DIGGER as they were removed from the TRAIL, [(August– October 1990)].
- 1:02:46 Mentions that not all visitors have opportunity to fully explore area - driven from QUEENSTOWN dropped off at start of RAIL TRAIL, taken back to QUEENSTOWN after walking or biking. Most entranced by beauty of big skies, wide open spaces.
- 1:04:15 Describes how and why ALEXANDRA and surrounds play such a special part in BREEN FAMILY – BUSINESS and RECREATION.
- Describes special features of other areas in SOUTH ISLAND and their inhabitants. Reference: SOUTHERN ALPS, WEST COAST, FIORDLAND, WESTLAND, HARSH and RUGGED.
- 1:08:32 Explains importance of RELATIONSHIPS in BUSINESS – will be judged on RELATIONSHIPS with PEOPLE – CLIENTS, CONSULTANTS, CONTRACTORS.
- Explains BREENS now employs over 200 people. Taken over by family members, grown more by next generation.
- 1:10:18 Describes family members in the COMPANY – LINDSAY - MANAGING DIRECTOR, TREVOR – GENERAL MANAGER, MARIA – HEAD of ADMINISTRATION, PETER – HEAD QUANTITY SURVEYOR. All went overseas, then returned.
- Unique situation, ups and downs, but works well. Paid INDEPENDENT DIRECTOR recently appointed from outside family.

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- 1:12:18 Describes trip to NEW GUINEA in late 80's looking at prospect of setting up BUILDING COMPANY there. Had backing of local LAWYER but decided against it.
- 1:14:08 Describes spent more time away from home, than at home. Acknowledges wife, VALMAI, brought the children up. Supported their sports, continued own sporting interests (NZ REP in SOFTBALL —[ Japan tour July 1970]. Shares love for OUTDOORS with family. Reference: REMARKABLES, MAKARORA, MAORI SADDLE, HUNTING, FISHING, CLIMBING.
- 1:17:12 Describes 5th GENERATION working at BREENS – [oldest grandchild RYELEE BREEN started work for Breen Co. as designer 30 NOVEMBER 2020.

Mentions another granddaughter, HEAD GIRL at DUNSTAN HIGH SCHOOL in 2021, accepted as TRAINEE OFFICER in NAVY. Sister in same family, just returned from 5 days on THE SPIRIT of ADVENTURE. Time will tell if any more family members join the COMPANY.

1:18:37 **End of File 02**

### **File 03 (24 November 2021)**

- 0:00 Introduction
- 0:34 Explains relationship with long-time friend JOHN SYMONS. Won TENDER for first job together - built 6 new single men's quarters at HAAST [1978]. Worked together for 2 DECADES.
- 2:38 Explains BREEN and SYMONS TENDERS to erect RADIO MASTS for RADIO OTAGO.  
First Mast erected at SPRINGVALE [ALEXANDRA, began 6<sup>th</sup> JULY, 1980]. No experience, but up for challenge. Learnt on job, didn't call in PROFESSIONALS.
- 4:55 Describes process involved – FREE CLIMBING MAST, BELTED, ROPED at top, very scary, almost gave up.
- 5:54 Mentions other MASTS erected – PORT PEGASUS [STEWART ISLAND] BULL CREEK (OTAGO COAST off MILTON). [Both JUNE 1981 - OCTOBER 1984, construction, maintenance & removal]. WANAKA [28<sup>th</sup> November 1980], QUEENSTOWN [7<sup>th</sup> NOVEMBER 1980].
- 7:23 Explains experience gained erecting MASTS, won job at TUROA [SKI FIELD, MOUNT RUAPEHU]. Highest MAST at SPRINGVALE [95.1M HIGH]. Explains working with HELICOPTER, precision required.
- 8:40 Describes feeling BOLTS of ELECTRICITY while guiding new section onto MAST.

- Describes lining up BOLT HOLES, effect of HELICOPTER DOWN WASH and limited COMMUNICATIONS - no hands free.
- 10:46 Describes very windy conditions while erecting section of MAST at PORT PEGASUS. PILOT let TENSION off STROP, section began to topple, JOHN CRADOCK would have been killed if it had fallen all the way.
- 12:08 Describes another windy night at PORT PEGASUS, leaving FIVE THOUSAND TON SHIP team was living on, came ashore, attached extra ropes on MAST, number of big STEWART ISLAND KIWIS running around. Team consisted of JOHN BREEN, JOHN SYMONS, JOHN CRADOCK and SUPPORT CREW – including RHYS [REG] WALKER.
- 14:09 Describes problems of HELICOPTER PILOTS. Harder to see as further from ground, only small target to line up. Mentions able to climb MAST in 40 KNOTS as long as wind's blowing towards MAST.
- 15:17 Explains 100M MAST at BULL CREEK, off COAST of MILTON, removed when OIL EXPLORATION over, after 5 – 6 years. Debate over who would climb to top. Describes importance of ADRENALINE. Yelled OBSCENITIES at others, including PILOT BILL BLACK. Describes process of DISMANTLING MAST.
- Describes hitting finger 3 times, felt nothing.
- 18:35 Explains relationship with HELICOPTER PILOT, MAC MAXWELL. Trained under SIR TIM WALLACE, doing VENISON RECOVERY. Worked for JOHN SYMONS moving IRRIGATION PIPES, helped with ERECTION of MASTS [First job - 6 JULY 1980]. Done over 30 THOUSAND FLYING HOURS. Didn't think he'd live to 50, just turned 70 [NOVEMBER 2021].
- 19:32 Described work on LAKE ONSLOW. [November 1981 — June 1982]. MAXWELL flew in STEEL to repair smashed IRRIGATION WEIR. New work for MAXWELL – COMMERCIAL CONSTRUCTION.
- 20:53 Explains PLANNING and PREPARATION for jobs – often at 3am. Describes raising a 30FT YACHT out of LAKE TE ANAU. Several attempts. Mentions SYMONS told reporter about a SPECIALISED TEAM with SPECIALIST GEAR. In reality – was a cray fisherman from Haast with CRAYBOAT. Got YACHT ashore, challenged unsuccessfully by DUTCHMAN who laid claim to INSURANCE.
- 23:48 Explains importance of being prepared. Self-sufficient up MAST, usually 2 up MAST, 3 in exceptional circumstances, GEAR on GROUND, sorted first.
- 25:02 Describes JOHN SYMON'S ACCIDENT at TUROA. WHITE OUT conditions on MOUNTAIN ROAD, fell off front of LANDROVER, run over by front and back wheels with chains. Taken to WANGANUI HOSPITAL – survived.
- 28:00 Describes how HELICOPTER PILOTS de-ice SKI LIFTS. SEVERE SLEET conditions – HOOKS and CHAINS. Mentions close call when loose CHAIN flew past ear.

- 29:00 Explains how three JOHNS and crew thought they knew it all.  
Describes toughness of the LIFTIES [ski lift operators]. Use PICK AXE HANDLES to bang ICE off bottom of TOWER, work up to top, then de-ice ROPES.
- 30:21 Explains FRENCH DESIGN of SKI LIFT TOWERS faulty. REBUILT in OHAKUNE.  
Mentions FRENCH CONSTRUCTION ENGINEER moved hand over hand across ABYSS between TOWERS to bang ice off. Successful, very DANGEROUS.
- 31:40 Describes SKI LIFTS at TUROA, 7-8 THOUSAND FEET ALTITUDE. 4 SEAT DETACHABLE LIFT built to replace CHAIR LIFTS, still got ICED up, TOWERS collapsed.
- 33:15 Explains wife, VALMAI, home alone with children. Often delayed. Jobs extended.  
Mentions Son TREVOR asking if Dad was ever coming home.
- 33:56 Describes challenges of conditions at PORT CRAIG VIADUCT – WEATHER - wet, cold, mid-WINTER mud, worked 50 days with no break. Heard THUNDER one day, thought something had collapsed. KERRY EGGELING – WELDING would get shocks, not impressed. Good camp, food and hot water.  
  
Explains thriving on DANGERS, CHALLENGES experienced. Young employees sceptical at first, followed example and learnt to take chances.
- 38:04 Describes relationship with ARTHUR BORRELL, BAREFOOT FARMER and MUSTERER, and wife [LORRAINE]. Farmed THE BRANCHES [SKIPPERS]– first family to WINTER over. ARTHUR wanted SHEARERS’ QUARTERS, bought CARTER MERCHANTS SINGLE MENS’ QUARTERS HUT [from KERRY EGGELING]. Describes moving the HUT along very narrow SKIPPERS ROAD - ROCK chipped out to make room. Hit bump, HUT went over side of CANYON. [JANUARY 1980]
- 41:44 Describes MAC MAXWELL, HELICOPTER PILOT, retrieving the HUT piece by piece [March 1980], putting on trailer, towing to ARTHUR’S yards.
- 42:38 Explains ARTHUR lost life – believed to have been collecting data, for BOTANIST ALAN MARK, in tunnel. Body never found. Mentions LORRAINE BORRELL buried in SKIPPERS’ CEMETERY.
- 43:45 Describes building a 30M SPAN SUSPENSION BRIDGE for ARTHUR BORRELL – to keep sheep out of silty water [SHOTOVER RIVER]. ARTHUR badly injured while working on BRIDGE – fell 6 METRES.
- 45:58 Explains relationship with PAUL OLSEN, ex ST PETER’S TEACHER [GORE]. First teaching job, taught BREEN children, MOUNTAINEER. Adventures together – climbing, hunting, helping ARTHUR. Mentions ARTHUR noting PAUL seemed quite capable for a TEACHER.
- 47:07 Describes HUNTING – SIKA in NORTH ISLAND, chased WAPITI and MOOSE in FIORDLAND (for 4 DECADES – given up now), WEST COAST, SOUTH WESTLAND.

Describes CHALLENGES of FIORDLAND – importance of making good decisions on camp sites – all sites flood at times. Mentions a trip with PAUL and children from WEST COAST to NORTH ARM (HEAD of GEORGE RIVER), TE ANAU – heavy RAIN, RIVER rose, wet CLOTHES, stayed put in one tent, safe by morning.

51:04 Discusses MOOSE STORY. Believes sightings, evidence, browse differently from RED DEER and WAPITI. KEN TUSTIN – MOOSE MAN – TE ANAU, written 2 books on MOOSE. Mentions a chapter on MOOSE in book currently writing.

54:43 Explains always aimed to be there, or thereabouts, as a CONTRACTOR in OTAGO SOUTHLAND. A good life in a good place. Has worked hard, supported by good people at home and work. Mentions difficulty having to work and live away from home, wouldn't suit some young people now.

“People most important”.

**End of File 03**