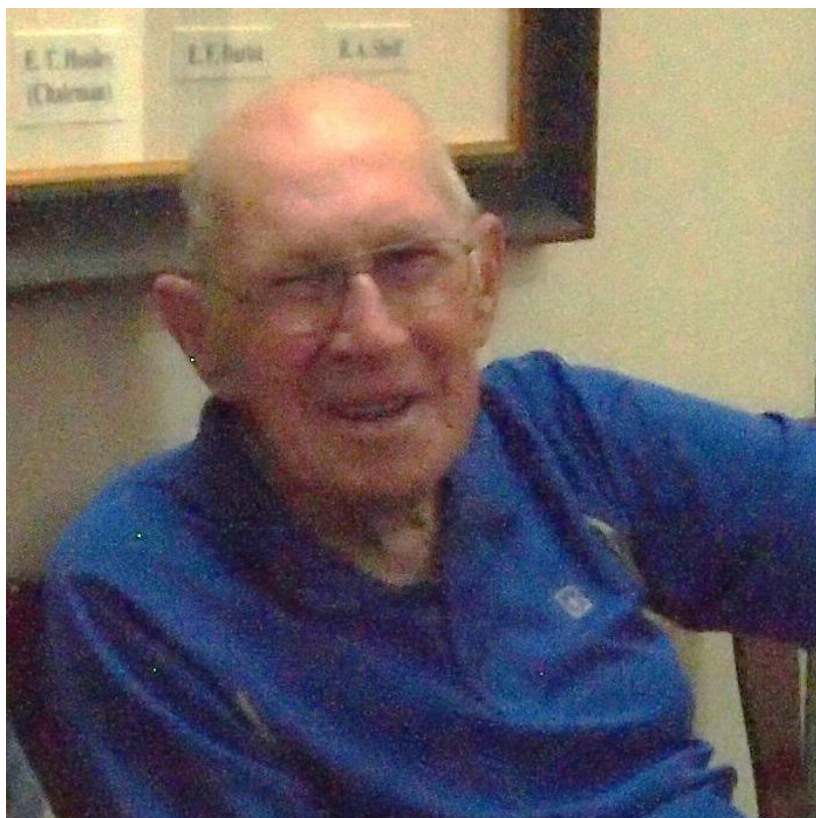


Transcript of interview with Mr John McGRATH

At: Belmont, WA 6104



John McGrath

Interviewer: Bridget Curran
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Transcribed by: Val Holmes

NOTE TO READER

Readers of this oral history should bear in mind that this is a Transcript of the spoken word and reflects informal conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. City of Belmont is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein: these are for the readers to judge.



	Page
TABLE OF CONTENTS	2
Index	3
Transcript	4-23
Photographs	

JOHN McGRATH TALKING ABOUT HIS CYCLING CAREER

Informal recording of a conversation with Bridget Curran and Claire McLean at the Belmont Museum

JM: Now is there anything you want to know, any questions, you know, that you're interested in.

BC: Yes, that would be great. You were starting to tell Claire a bit about your cycling career. Can you tell us about that again?

I think what we discussed was everyone knew about Ron Cleary. They weren't aware here that Ron wasn't the only Belmont fellow in that race, in that six day race. There was myself and Ray Furfaro. Ray lived down the bottom of Hardey Road towards the lights – near the lights – and I am still up this end. They asked about that and they seemed surprised because they only knew about Ron Cleary.

So were you living in Belmont for a long time? Were you born in this area?

[No, I was born in Sydney but have been in Perth for over 56 years, 54 in Belmont.]

Wow!

Yes, we've been in that house now for fifty-one years. That's a long time, isn't it?

It is. So how old were you when you moved in there? Was that after you - - -?

Well, I would've been thirty – well, I'm eighty-six now. What, that made me about thirty-six, thirty-five I think when we moved in. It was a new home then.

So you were already cycling professionally by then?

Yes.

What club was around then John? What club would you have been in?

When I came over here first, that was in, what, 1949, I joined the Fremantle Club. They were amateurs, then I went back to Sydney, what, '52 – yeah '52 I went back to Sydney from Adelaide. I represented West Australia in the Australian titles in Adelaide in that year in '52, and the year before in 1951 it was here – I represented here. Then when I came back here in 1960 I was professional – well, I say professional by name, you know, but we don't really make any money out of it.

Trust me, we still don't.

A couple of dollars.

Get your race (trims) back?

It's a bit different today but back then you could win a race and then get five dollars or something, second for a couple of dollars and so on. I joined the Midland club when I came back. I was with them until I gave it away.

Did you bring any photos today?

No, but I can bring some. I was thinking about being asked but I thought I'd wait and see really what you wanted. I have got some photos and I've got a very good one of all the teams that competed in that 6-day race, all together. I can point out the different riders to you, you know, the ones from here. Also we had two world champions riding at that time: Gasparella from Italy. He was world [sprint] champion at the time and spring champion and there was Pinarello, another Italian. He was a champion as well. We had a bunch of Victorians over here, of course, and they're very good riders. I mean they had the experience over us. The lead up to that 6 was very, what would you say, showed a lot of immaturity I suppose towards the governing body here because we only had half-hour teams races on the Velodrome. You know, half-hour teams races to ride a 6 day was not enough and we had a few of them but no great lead-up whereas they'd been racing in 6 days over there in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney and they a lot more experience so we were real greenhorns when we went in.

Which track was it here in WA?

That was the old Monger - - -

Lake Monger Velodrome?

Yes, the old concrete one. Oh, yeah, very hard to fall on.

On the concrete versus the boards!

Yes, I had a few falls in the early part mainly on my arm.

Oh no! Did you used to train there as well or did you train everywhere?

Train there?

Yes.

Yes, we did train there, not all the time. We trained mainly at Midland because you could generally get in at Midland any time whereas at Lake Monger they used to lock up and had certain hours, but they didn't really have certain hours to train in. It just used to be lucky if you went over there and someone was in attendance so you could get in. Of course we did a lot of training on the road as well.

That's what I was going to ask you. Were you primarily based as a track cyclist, or you can see yourself track and road?

Oh, I did roads [racing also].

You did both?

I did both, yes. I didn't do much road until I turned professional.

Is that right?

Yes. I used to – well, I played baseball: it was a winter sport then. That was in Sydney. I played that and then in the summer the track racing. Then when I came over here I was talked into having a go at it. I did fairly well. A few 'places' and a couple of 'wins' I suppose. I always had a love for the track, for the sprint; that was what I loved.

For those 6-day events, did the cyclists actually sleep at the stayover at the Velodrome? How did it actually run?

No. Well, the original concept of 6-day racing was that there had to be one on the track all the time – the whole 24 hours – and there used to be stewards who would come along and make sure that one of your team was on. But they found later on that if they gave the riders a rest, they could perform a lot better for the public of a night. Instead of being tired out, they could perform a lot better. We used to start at I think – this is only roughly, but I think it was about 9 or 10 o'clock in the morning and we used to race right through then till midnight which was generally the cut-off time. But if there was what they called a 'jam session' on, that means someone was trying to break away from the field and you used to have to keep riding until those riders were caught or they made a lap on you. So for some guys it'd be 1 a.m. before we'd finished and by the time we got home, you know, exhaustion and nerves on edge, it might be 2 o'clock or more. But you couldn't sleep. You tossed and turned all night and you had to back up again [the next day].

It was a wonderful experience. Once I rode one, really I didn't want to ride another one; because (laughter) for one thing I considered myself a bit old for it. They ride longer these days but, how old was I? Thirty, thirty-three, something like that; and that would've been considered as 'getting on a bit'. The young ones, your 19 or 20 year olds used to give you a bit of a serve (laughter). The Victorians really controlled the race. It was a set-up, you know, and was really determined by a man by the name of Bill Long. He was in charge of the event - organiser and in charge of the event. If he said that one team was going to win tonight, well, that was the way it went. It wasn't what a lot of people thought. There was a lot of, what would you call it? Collusion?

Like match fixing almost?

Yes, something like that. Well we used to get the rough end of the stick as they say. We'd ride hard in the night-time and we might finish up maybe three or four laps down at the end of the night. What a lot of team's would do, they'd say, "We'll let

you take back a couple of laps so you don't get too far behind." But they'd say they'd let you but once you made the move they have you out there for ages before you got a lap.

They'd make you work for it.

Yes, we really worked hard for it. By the time the night session came, you were feeling the pinch again, so the likes of us lesser teams we really got a pounder. But, yes, it was a wonderful experience.

Were all the riders paid to compete at the 6-day event, or you only got one year from the winnings?

No. We weren't actually paid. Fourteen might've been, some of the world top riders were probably paid but we more or less rode for prize money. I can't tell you how much we got but I know it wasn't a lot by the time we finished. We finished last and I'm not frightened of telling you that. (Laughter) You know some people say you don't know, or, "We finished fourth," when we finished fifth. We finished last but we were really out on our, you know, we were really done for at the end.

Who was your partner for that race?

Ray Furfaro. He was only 19 but he was the State Pursuit Track Champion at the time. He really didn't make a good partner because he – well, after a couple of days he saw how hard it was and then when we got behind he really didn't want to push himself to make up any time. He was content to sit back and that made it harder for me to more or less carry him along.

How do you decide when to switch riders?

I suppose it was what we'd call a 'jam session' – going somewhere and trying to get a break from the field and trying to get lap, or you'd change.

A fresh rider?

More or less every couple of laps: you mightn't change maybe for a couple of miles or somewhere like that if things were going easy and you were just pedalling along. When there was a chase on you really worked hard. Every couple of laps you'd be slinging one another.

That's what I was going to ask you. Was it like the hip sling where you would sling your rider in?

Yes, the same.

So do you want to maybe explain to Bridget, because she probably doesn't know what we are talking about right now, what is involved in this sling shot?

Well, if you look at it, it really is a Madison but it's a 6-day one. The same rules apply generally. In the old days, oh, many years ago now, they used to hand sling and they found that pretty dangerous because sometimes you'd bring down riders. So they banned that and made it a hip sling and we used to have, in our padding, like a pad about so big, and I think from memory it was rubber. It was stitched in and you used to grab that, grab hold of that and bring your partner in. But now I don't know. They don't have many 6-day races now.

They don't, especially in Australia. I mean in Europe there's probably a few still going around but certainly not in Australia anymore. That's a form of racing that just doesn't go on anymore.

I think with the way sport is today, I don't think they'd draw a big crowd; and the money situation, you know, a lot of money involved in, say, 12 teams or even 10 teams. The later 6 days, after I rode, were restricted to 10 teams I think. When we rode there were 12 teams. It was a terribly expensive business a day to put one on and then you've got to try and make it pay. But Bill Long, of course he's dead a long time now but he controlled the race because he put the money up; and, fair enough. I don't know how to put it. When people find out these things, it gets a bad name. Even then it wasn't talked about but there were drugs around and Victorians were using them. I don't know what they were but we know that. Graham Benthine, he's still alive. He lives down in Fremantle and he was riding with Cleary, that's right. He partnered Ron Cleary and he came over one night and his eyes were rolling around and he looked as though he was drunk. I said to him, "Are you all right?" He said, "Yeah, the Vics [Victorians] gave me a pill. I come over to see if you want one." (Laughter) I said, "No way, you can keep your pills." It didn't make him go any faster. They were regularly on it. I know the riders wouldn't mention it now: it's a long while ago. As far as I know none of the West Australians were on it, but the Vics, some of them were pretty rough characters, you know, in those days. A couple of them were 'hoods'; one of them was an organised criminal. He used to organise robberies in big stores (laughter) for clothing and sell it on. There were about half-a-dozen of them in it I believe, and they were all cyclists.

Did they get caught?

I don't know. (Laughter) There was a fellow originally from New South Wales. He got in with that group because he moved down to Victoria, a guy by the name of Fred Roche; and he was a real ruffian. He'd put you off at the drop of a hat if you got in his way. He was a pretty rough character. But as I say, it was all good experience but I would never ride one again. (Laughter) No, that was enough.

Fair enough.

But they had them after that and I think they had a few here after, or a couple I went to myself, we Western Australians, Clarrie Minciullo and Don Campbell. He was a champion West Australian cyclist and of course Barry Waddell, he came from here

originally. He came from Hardey Road himself. Yeah, the Waddell's lived down there for years and years and his father, Bob, he was foreman at the Ascot Racecourse for years, a ground foreman.

Are you still in touch with their family, or anything? Did you all keep in touch with each other?

I've kept in touch with a lot of them, yeah. Every now and then we'll have get-togethers but now we're all in our 80s and no-one seems keen enough to organise anything anymore. It's a shame because it was good. There were fellows that'd turn up there that you hadn't seen for maybe forty-odd years, fifty years.

You can have one here again. We'll put on morning tea for you. You can all come and hang out at the Museum for a while. (Laughter) That would be nice.

Yeah. Generally, we used to have it down at one of the restaurants down at Fremantle because a lot of the fellows came from that area. And the ones that didn't had moved down the coast – we've got a lot of ex-cyclists now around Mandurah way. They moved down there.

What about at the time? Did you used to socialise together as well or train together?

Oh, yes, we used to train together on the road. A particular ride was what we used to call 'the two highways'. That was Stirling and Canning and we'd do a round trip from Fremantle into Perth and back Stirling around there and sometimes we'd do that five times. I all depended on what we were training for. We might even do a hundred miles, and that was after work. There could be anything up to a dozen of us, sometimes more but some of them wouldn't do the full hundred. They might stay there for a couple of laps but sometimes there'd be a lot more. And of course we all used to ride to work: everyone rode to work as well. That's come back again now too, hasn't it?

Yes. What was your day job?

Oh, I was a furnace man in an iron foundry.

Around here as well.

At that time I was at Fremantle. I worked for *Fremantle Foundry and Engineering*, which the business is still going but the foundry is not. The machinery part of it's going. They used to do a lot of shipping work when the ships came in. I used to go out sometimes if they were short-handed they'd ask me late in the afternoon perhaps

if I wanted to work back and go over on the ships and work with the fitters or welders, or whatever. It was good because from the time you left the workshop to the time you got back that night or the next morning – sometimes it'd be the next morning before you got back – you were on double time so it was good. What I used

to do, I was very good friends with the Norris family and they lived in Mosman Park and instead of going all the way back to Belmont, sometimes if I knocked off, say, round about midnight, I'd just ride up to Mosman Park and they always had a bed for me on the verandah.

Oh, that's lovely.

And I didn't even have to wake anyone up, I just dossed down, had breakfast there. They were a really nice family. All the boys, the three boys, are cyclists. One of them now, well he was, is Mayor of Claremont. Is it Claremont?

Oh, right.

I'm not too sure whether it is Claremont. I don't think there's a Mosman Park mayor, is there?

I'm not sure.

I'm not too sure, but that's Ron Norris. Sometimes he pops up in the news. He raced, but not for long. The other boys, they raced. Well, Ken Norris is still around. Ken Norris till, what, maybe three or four years ago was riding veterans and masters. He used to go overseas and won a lot of master's championships. Have you heard of him? [Bill Norris was a top sprinter as well.]

I know the name, yes.

Ken married a girl gymnast by the name of Val Buffham. She's still alive too. They live down round Fremantle way somewhere.

And what bike would you have been riding? Like you'd ride to and from work. Did you use a fixed gear, did you have some gears? What did you use?

Well, if I was only going short trips I'd ride the fixed wheel. If it was the track season, I'd ride the fixed wheel because we all reckoned without it, the free wheel you're inclined to, you know loaf a little bit whereas with the fixed wheel you'd have to work on whether it is downhill or up.

That's why I suspected you'd be on a fixed wheel because obviously being a track athlete they tend to be a little bit more inclined to want to stay on that fixed wheel.

But you know I've come unstuck a couple of times.

(Laughs) I think everyone has, John.

Yeah, coming down Greenmount; of course then it was not like it is today, it was pretty narrow. I'm going back to when I first came over, say, 1951, I went out on the

fixed wheel on the track bike and I intended just to ride up Midland and round the brickworks and back home that way.

Along the river?

I got up round Midland and a cyclist that I knew came up alongside of me and he was going up Greenmount – over Greenmount to somewhere else – and he wanted me to go with him. I said, “Oh, no.” He said, “You’ll be all right. All you’ve got to do is go back on your pedals.” I said, “Yeah, I know what you’ve got to do.” Anyway, we parted company at the top and coming back I’d forgotten that I didn’t have a lock ring on the sprocket. Do you know what a lock ring is?

Started to unwind?

It goes on the reverse way of what your sprocket does so it stops that winding off.

Stops it spinning off.

I didn’t have one on it and I unwound it by jumping back on the pedals and unwound the darn sprocket and come off as I had no control. I left the road and I just missed the telegraph post and I smashed into a lady’s fence. She had a hedge and I smashed into that, took a bit of skin off and buckled the front wheel. She came running out and she was very good, took me in and patched me up and she said, “How are you going to get home?” and I said, “I don’t know. I don’t know. I suppose I’ll have to ring a taxi.” So I was going to have to get a taxi from there, home. (Laughter) I never did that again!

I bet you still didn’t learn your lesson though? I bet you still didn’t ride with a lock ring on, did you?

(Laughing)

No. I knew it!

It’s funny, you know, what you used to do when you were young. I remember back home in Auburn in New South Wales, I had a bike for the track and I had an old bomb that I used to ride around everywhere to work, handlebars up, and the old fixed brakes, you know, and a couple of screws go in to hold it together. One screw kept coming loose and instead of getting a screwdriver and tightening it up properly I used to (laughs) carry a five cent piece, or a sixpence, and I used to get off and tighten it up. This day I hadn’t noticed it and the screw dropped out and the handle went and dropped in the front in the main street but fortunately I was only going along about 12 miles an hour or something and the bike just stopped and I went straight over the top. (Laughter) A bit careless!

It happens in riding a bike though.

With singles, you know.

Yes.

Even singles. I remember twice I put a single on without glue on the front wheel, you know, rolled them over a bridge. You're coming across a bridge and, you know, had to make a sharp turn and it rolled.

Rolled the tyre.

Yeah. Twice I did that. You'd think I would've learnt my lesson. (Laughter) But they were good days. I survived! (Laughter)

You said you were from Auburn. How did you come over to Perth from there?

How did I?

How did you end up in WA?

Well, that's a long story. Do you have time?

Oh, yes.

Well, when I was racing in Sydney I was racing as an amateur with the Canterbury Club, and a fellow by the name of Geoff Baker – he's still alive today and we still keep in touch - he was the West Australian State Champion at the time. He was over in New South Wales to ride to get experience because he wanted to go up to Queensland for the Australian titles. Of course he didn't have much opposition here apparently so he came over and I got to know him really well and he said, "If you ever decide to come over to the West, let me know and I'll fix you up at our place with board with mum and dad. So after that was said, quite a long time went by and Geoff finally went home. I don't know what made me – whether probably I'd always wanted to come over here and have a look at it but it seemed so distant. It was like another world. People used to talk about West Australia over there as though it was another country. It was so isolated; even then in 1949 it was very isolated. So I decided to come over here and I arrived by ship on the *Strathaird*.

How long did that take?

About eight days I think. It was a wonderful trip on the *Strathaird*, P&O liner - lovely food, and that was only in steerage class, you might as well say third class, but it was lovely. I stayed for nearly two years before I went back again, and when the team was picked we went to Adelaide to the Australian titles. That was in 1952 and they were going to select a team for the Olympic Games and we had hopes that we might, as a team, get in the team pursuit. They were talking about picking an elite side, not just a patched-up side, a side that worked together for quite a while and pick them as a whole. And they were going to – the winners of the 4,000 metres team pursuit looked like getting picked to go so we put a lot of effort into that. We got to the final and we got beaten in the final by South Australia. By that time the Olympic Committee had changed their minds anyway.

And they wanted to paste together the team?

Yeah; with the makeshift team that went over, you know, a couple of South Australians I think and no-one from here, and New South Wales and Queensland; something like that.

Was that for the Melbourne Olympic Games, was it? Was that for Melbourne?

No.

What Olympic Games are we talking about?

That would've been the Helsinki games, 1952. Russell Mockridge from Victoria, he won the gold medal for the sprint, and he and Lionel Cox won the gold medal for the tandem.

Yes, back in the days when tandem was a racing event.

Yes, fast time. Incredible time.

I have a lot to do with the tandems now, John, because I'm actually with the Para-cycling, the disabled cycling; but just to let Bridget know, back in the old days tandem racing was a legitimate form of able-bodied racing, but at some point along the line it stopped or ceased being an elite level event. The only reason tandem racing exists today is because of Para-cycling where the back rider, the stoker is vision impaired; so the pilot is a sighted rider and the back rider, the stoker, is visually impaired. But back in the days you're talking about, you would get two top elite riders together and put them on the tandem, and that was some of the most spectacular racing you'll ever see on a sprint – sprint match racing with the tandems.

Australia won the tandem sprint in Melbourne when it was on and a fellow by the name of Brown was one - the other was Tony Marchant – and they won the gold in that event. But where a sprint cyclist was seen doing at that time, 12 seconds was regarded as a pretty good time for 200 metres and the tandems were doing ten, ten-and-a-half. That's how much faster they went. It's a pity it died out because it was a good event, very good to watch. Spectacular! So you race in it, do you?

Not in tandem. I have a lot of friends that are vision impaired so I actually have a partially paralysed arm so I raced for 10 years with the Para-cycle team and other team members were the vision impaired tandem riders.

I knew one. He was an amateur cyclist and, oh, he won a lot of titles in the vision impaired but I can't think of his name.

Here in WA?

Yes, West Australian. I can't think of his name now.

Did you ever try tandem riding yourself or was it a specialised sport?

No, I didn't ride tandem at all. I think I was only ever on a tandem once as a try out.

Yes, you've got to try it at least once. (Laughs)

I tried it out but I didn't like being on the back. I like to see where I'm going. (Laughs)
You had to put full trust in the leader; oh, yeah!

I've been up and down that same Greenmount Road on the back of a tandem.

Have you?

Yes; and it's a very awkward experience not being in control of the front of the bike.

Yes, I bet it was.

We always say with the vision impaired, just close your eyes. (Laughter)

I don't know whether I told you before but I rode over here at one time, from Sydney. When I went back I went back in '52. After the Adelaide championships were over, I went back home because Mum had been ill. I only intended to stay a short while to make sure she was all right; but how things change, you know? Dad had a stroke and I was the only one sort of single and didn't feel right about leaving them so I stayed. Then when they passed away I decided to come back here.

To ride back.

And so I rode back.

How many days did that take?

Roughly 30.

Did you have a set number of miles in your head that you wanted to cover each day or you just rode?

No, I just rode to see what the conditions were like one day. And I mean things were really bad then. Once you got past from Ceduna it was all dirt.

Wow!

A lot of the time if they'd had rain it was just mud. I remember it was taking all day to do 30 miles.

So how many spare singles did you take with you?

Oh, no, no. As I say, I had no idea what I was up against (laughter) and I did have singles to start with there and I had half a dozen. By the time I got to Melbourne I had to get most of them repaired and by the time I got to Adelaide, they were going again. When I got to Ceduna I stopped at this bike shop for a bit of advice about how the roads were and he said, "You're not going to ride on that?" "Yeah, why?" "You won't get round the corner on that bike." I said, "No?" He said, "No, not on those tyres; no way." I said, "Well, what do you reckon?" He said, "You need a pair of heavy duty wheels to get through." So I said, "Okay." I think I wound up selling my wheels to him and paying him off like with what he made up for me. Of course by doing that - - - That's right! He only had 26 inch wheels so that meant my brakes were no good, they wouldn't fit onto the wheel and he said, "You don't need brakes. It's all flat." It was nearly all flat except coming down to, oh, not Balladonia. Where they had the telegraph station?

I can't think now.

It's practically on the border of South Australia. Eucla, yes.

I think I know where you mean. You can still go out to the power station now. There's just a little building and the power line, but it's miles out of Beach Sands.

When you come to it there's this great big hill – a joke! Straight down, no turns or anything, straight down then flattens out and I thought, "Well one thing, we're not going to run into a car." The only thing that I thought was a rabbit might run out. I wasn't going to walk down. Of course I had a ratchet on, you know? I had to have a ratchet on.

Yes, it's a bit too far to ride on a fixed wheel.

So I just sat on it and let it go. (Laughs) And that was the only hill in over a thousand miles.

What did you do for food along the way?

Oh, I used to travel pretty lightly with just a couple of packets of biscuit and I had some powdered milk. I used to make up some powdered milk of a night if I could get some water, and that was pretty scarce at times. When I got to Balladonia I think it was I couldn't get anything at all in that way because I think the roads had been out for a while and supplies hadn't been coming through. It was a bit like the Wild West.

It sounds like it.

Yeah, it was. I mean at Balladonia I ordered a meal and I went out because it seemed to be taking a while. I walked out into the kitchen and the old dear in there was walking around with a bloody cocky on her shoulder! (Laughter) And I thought, "Oh God, I hope it hasn't dropped on me meal!" (Laughter)

You didn't worry about food hygiene back in those days.

No. There were some funny experiences in some other little place along there too. I can't think of it at the time but when I sat down I was looking at the walls and I thought, "They're cheques!" and all one wall was bank cheques. When he came out I said, "What are all those?"

All the ones that had bounced?

Yeah.

Were they really?

People – he said they'd come in, they'd order a meal and when it came they'd say, "Oh, look, I'm sorry I'm out of cash. Will you take a cheque?" "Well, yeah, I'll take a cheque," because they had nothing else. So they used to diddle him. He said, "All those bounced." And I said, "And you're still here!" He said, "Oh, yes, I'm still here. I don't make any anything." (Laughs) There were funny times, really funny times.

That would be a great trip to do that ride. Even now I would like to do the ride, and that's with bitumen so I couldn't even imagine what the journey would have been without bitumen.

But the way society is today, it's dangerous, isn't it?

Yes, all the road trucks and the great trucks there, it's a bit different.

There was no fear of anyone knocking you on the head although I did get a fright one night on the Nullarbor. I used to camp down before it got too dark because out there it gets very cold of a night. Even though it's warm of a day, the nights are freezing so I used to camp down, get piles of wood, dry wood, and have one pile there and a pile there, say, and I put my blanket and a waterproof sheet - I think that's about all I had - and I'd put that in between and light up the fires so I'd be

warm on both sides. Then I'd make sure I had a lot of spare because you'd wake up through the night and the fire'd be nearly out and you'd wake up shaking. I'd just get up and throw a bit of wood on again. But I only stayed in – oh, I slept out about six nights I suppose. The rest of the time I stayed somewhere.

So you actually managed most of the time to ride and get somewhere where you could actually get some bed and lodgings?

Yes, well, that's right; because there wasn't much out there.

That's what I'm thinking.

Not like there is today. There was the roadhouse at Balladonia and there was another at Cocklebiddy. I wish I could think of the names of the places now, but there were only about three places; that was all.

You hadn't mapped it out before you went. You just went and started riding.

Well, no-one seemed to know anything. (Laughter) Once you got past Ceduna, nobody knew too much. The truck drivers would sometimes stop and talk to you and ask you if you wanted a lift, but I didn't take lifts because I thought that would defeat your purpose. I wanted to ride, you know? Anyone can get a lift but I just wanted to ride. The only time I did take a lift was in the Adelaide hills, because I'd met this couple in Murray Bridge and they were on holidays. I stayed at this hotel in Murray Bridge and the old fellow he was – well, they were Lutherans and he came out and had a look at my bike and he said, "You look as though you've been travelling a bit." I said, "Yeah." He said, "Where you going to?" I told him and he said, "We're leaving today for home in Adelaide, would you like a lift?" and I said, "No, no, I want to ride." "Okay." He told me a lot about himself, you know, about working at the zoo as a zookeeper in Adelaide. Very nice people they were and he said, "When you get to Adelaide will you look us up? You might stay with us a while." So when I was riding through the Adelaide hills, only a few miles out of Adelaide, I was going along and I heard this voice scream out. I think he'd forgotten my name but he called out anyway. I turned around and he was running from the bushes down to the road, so I stopped. I didn't recognise him at first and then when he came up to me I realised who it was and I said, "Fancy seeing you out here," and he said, "We're out here getting the gum leaves for the koalas for the zoo." So he talked me into going home with him. He was going to get me a job at the zoo and he definitely wanted me to stay in Adelaide.

Aaah!

I think he thought I was going to be another son or something.

Surrogate son!

He had three sons but his wife, she was a funny sort of woman, I don't know. There might've been something wrong with her but she wasn't very friendly and then of a day when he went off to work, and if it was wet and I didn't go out, she used to sort of keep in her room all day and wouldn't appear. But apart from that, he took me to his church one night. Of course he told people about me, about being some sort of hero because I was riding across Australia. I said, "I haven't got the clothes to go in, I only travel lightly. I had nothing nice to go out in. I had, like a travel bag I used to strap to the back of my bike.

A saddle?

I had a carrier on the back. "Oh, no trouble," he said, "I've got three sons. We ought to be able to find something for you." I thought, "I'm not going to get out of this," so I had one son's shoes, another son's trousers, and another son's shirt. (Laughs) So off we went to this church and it turned out it was like a social night. It wasn't really a church meeting; it was like a social night and he'd taken me round introducing me to

everyone. Very nice people. I even remember their name: Schumacher, a German name. A lot of Germans migrated to South Australia.

Yes.

So cycling really has been a big part of my life.

The journey and experience.

Yes.

What sort of cycling shoes would you have been in back then? Did they have a cleat?

Beg your pardon?

The cycling shoes back then.

The cycling shoes?

Yes, what you pedal in? Your cycling shoes?

Yes.

Just the leather strap-on?

Yes, I think I've got a pair at home.

Do they still have a block to lock into the pedal still?

I'll have a look. I think I've kept a pair at home in the shed.

If you ever want to donate any, it would be nice to keep them.

I can donate them because my sons have never been interested in cycling.

And the clothing would've been woollen back then – or jersey?

Yes, wool for the road – silky.

Oh, a silky material for your track?

I've got an old one of them too but you wouldn't put it on display. It's been put away for that long and now I don't know but it seems to have got some sort of rust on it.

It's all that sweat.

I can just show you what we had.

The shoes would be definitely interesting.

Yes. We had aluminium blocks.

Ah, okay.

They screw on the blocks.

Your cleat.

Yeah, like a cleat.

Do you have like a favourite moment in your career too or anything that you are really proud of, like a favourite race or anything like that?

What, a favourite event?

Yes. Or did you have any particular race that's really memorable to you as like your favourite?

Yes, I think two stand out in my mind. One was the Australian 10 Mile Track championship at Midland Oval.

That was a flat track, wasn't it, the Midland Oval?

Yes; very fast. Yet it wasn't banked but a very fast surface. I used to do good times. Actually in this race there was a long programme and by the time that - the Ten Mile Championship was the last event – it came on, it was just about midnight. It made for a good race because it was so still. There was no wind resistance or anything. It was so still. Our instructions really were that between ourselves we had three – each state was allowed three riders and there was myself, Bernie Fudger and Don Brown. Bernie at that time was the best ten-miler out of the three of us and I was second best and Don was third. The idea was for Don to take me with Bernie on the back. We wanted Bernie to win. He was the key for our team. Anyway, Don got some idea into his head towards the end that he could win it himself, so when the final lap came instead of him being in front of me he dropped back and he left me to it. I thought, "Well, if Bernie's going to have any chance at all, I've got to go early." Bernie knew and he was right on me and, right, I'm off! I took off with about three-quarters of a lap to go. It was three laps to the mile track it was and then the broadcaster gave me away – Tommy Townsend. I don't know if you've heard of him?

No.

He's still around today. He was calling the race. He put all the other riders on alert and they started to go too, so instead of me being able to get to the front with Bernie and come down onto the pole line, I was three wide. Anyway, I got him up to the top of the straight and I said, "Right then, away you go," and I moved for him and he just got beaten for first and finished second. I finished fourth and the first six of us all broke the Australian record that night: 20 minutes, 28 seconds for ten miles. That

was what they called 'human pace'; that was a fresh rider came on each lap. To me, that was possibly the best ride, even though I didn't win it was probably the best ride I ever made.

The other time was in New South Wales when I was riding with the Canterbury Amateurs. We were in the what's-her-name, the premiership - what they called the premiership on the track – and that was a four-man team pursuit. And of course there are so many clubs in New South Wales – amateur clubs – we had to ride three times before the final to qualify in the one night.

What distance was the team's pursuit back then?

Four thousand. Anyway, we won the New South Wales Premiership that year. As I say, we had to ride four times in the night to get it.

Get through the qualifications.

Yes. That and the one I just described were probably the two highlights.

And what year would those have been?

That year would've been – I can't be exact about it but I came over in '49 so, yeah, it would've been about '49. I think it was just after that that I came over here, because in '48 I was in Melbourne so it must've been '49.

That sounds amazing. Back in Perth in those days, were there many bike shops around?

Oh, yes.

There were?

A lot of bike shops. The main one as far as most of the racing cyclists were concerned was Eddie Barron's Flash Cycles. They were at Midland and they were there for many, many years until finally Eddie passed away then the business passed on. I don't know whether they still go under the name of Flash Cycles but at that time Eddie had about, oh, four or five working for him in the workshop because they used to make their own. They'd build their own and they'd go right through the whole process: the enamelling and everything they did there. He was a wonderful bloke.

Would that have been under that name, Flash Cycles, the bike manufacturing?

Yes, Flash Cycles. You know Barron Avenue, or whatever they call that?

Eddie Barron Avenue, yes.

That's named after him.

That's who it's named after! Well there you go, I never knew that.

They used to call him Mr Cycling, a good bloke.

I never knew that.

And in his day he was a champion cyclist himself and so was his younger son, Bevan. Bevan was a champion. He lives down at Mandurah now. A lot of them moved down to Mandurah. I don't know why.

Peel District, they're a good bike club.

They think they're going to the country but they're not! I've got friends down there. I go down there occasionally but it's like a small city, isn't it?

Yes. It's not that far anymore now, driving. It doesn't take that long to get there like it used to.

I go by train when I go down. I've got a good workmate who retired down there.

Very good.

Yeah, so I don't know if I can tell you much more.

That's great.

I raced in Melbourne in 1948. A mate and I rode down there and we lived in Melbourne for nearly a year. We joined the Carlton Club – Carlton Amateurs – and raced with them mainly on the road. They were funny. I remember the first meeting we went to, not a bike meeting, well, not a race meeting, more or less just a meeting in the club rooms. A lot of them wouldn't have anything to do with us because we were from Sydney. There was a lot of animosity at that time. Not everyone, but there were some people who if you said you were from Sydney they hated you! In Melbourne the competition between Melbourne and Sydney is ridiculous really. I mean, we're all Australians.

What about towards the later part of your career? How did you decide it was time to retire?

Getting too slow.

Was that a hard decision to make though?

No, it wasn't a hard decision because I had a family. I had a young family, but I did make a come-back when I was what 42, and I enjoyed it. I had a job where I was only working 8 hours a day.

Only! Only working 8 hours a day is standard now (laughter).

No, 8 hours was the usual thing. What is it now, six?

Oh, well, seven and a half. It depends if you want a one hour lunch break or half-an-hour. (Laughter)

Yeah, so I was working there and then things got pretty tough and they started putting off people. No, I've got it back to front! Sorry about that. Then we got a lot of work in and they wanted us to work overtime working a ten-hour day and all day Saturday at one time.

So you hung the bike back up again?

Yes, I just had to hang it up. I just got one season in more or less. But that was all right. I won the two-day tour but only in D-grade. As I had had a long spell off I was graded D-grade. I won that anyway so that was something.

Was your family glad that you gave it up or did they support it?

My wife loved it. Of course her brother raced, John Conti. He was a young professional but only raced as a junior and he gave it up and got married at about nineteen. No, my wife loved it. She used to come to the 6-day. Every night she'd be there. Everywhere, well, wherever I went she went, you know, down to Collie. We used to have a lot of races in Collie, mainly road races, and she was always there for me. She loved it and she still does. We still watch the Tour de France and I've been watching the Tour Downunder.

What do you think about the hour record now that the USI's done a backflip on all the rules? Do you think it's a good thing or maybe not a good thing?

I don't know. I don't place a lot on records. Well, I suppose it's a good thing for the person, you know if he's wrapped in it. I don't know. It'd be pretty boring I think.

An hour.

I mean I always like someone to compete against. I didn't like individual pursuits. I liked team pursuits but I didn't like individual pursuits. I used to find it very boring.

I think it's at least had the desired effect they want, which is all of a sudden now they've got a lot of riders wanting to do the hour record because of the rule changes; whereas previously, people had just forgotten about it. They couldn't be bothered having to get the right bike and equipment to meet the standards.

Some of these records were made on pretty heavy bikes.

That's right, which is why they tried to standardise what was going on but it sort of made the one-hour record stagnant a little bit because riders were then reluctant to want to give it a go. I mean Jack Bobridge - - -

Affect the record by how much?

Jack Bobridge? He actually didn't, and he just missed out I believe, but who recently broke the record? One of the European riders? Rohan Dennis is the next Australian who would have a crack at it I believe. A lot of the young guys are keen now to have a go at it. You know Eddy Merckx said though it was one of the hardest things he ever did in his life, was the hour record. He said it took him a long time to recover afterwards and despite him riding multiple tours and capable of riding day in, day out, he said it took him a very long time to recover from just the one-hour record.

Yes, well, when you come to think of it, you've got no-one there to pace at all. You've just got to know your own pace. Sometimes it can be hard. Well, it was always hard as far as I was concerned, but tandem pursuit I loved because you've got that pace.

Yes, but it's hard. You're under pressure there because if you're the weakest out of the link you're really letting other people down, so I guess if you're the sort of person to be really pushed because you don't want to let the others down, it makes you a better rider.

Yes, that's right.

End of interview.



John McGrath pictured at Midland Junction at the end of his marathon ride