

Friends of Black Mountain Oral History Project 2021-23

Interviewee: Dianne Firth

Timed summary: Dianne Firth interviewed by Mary Hutchison

Session #1: 7/11/2022

Time	Subjects	Key subject words including names of people and organisations
00:00:00	Introduction. When and where she was born. Newcastle NSW	Mary Hutchinson, Friends of Black Mountain, Dianne Firth, Newcastle, Born, 5 May 1945
00:00:33	Father an engineer, Mother a milliner who retired when she married. Family made and fixed almost everything, kept chooks and had a veggie garden.	Father engineer, Mother, milliner, David Jones, veggie garden
00:01:28	Children swam at the beach every day. Father was a volunteer lifesaver. 4 kids, 6 people in the house. Dianne was the youngest, siblings were very dominating, so Dianne tried to 'fly under the radar'.	Children, lifesaver, beach, Newcastle Morning Herald, siblings, dominate
00:02:53	Spent a lot of time as a child with her father and brother working on the car, pulling apart motorcycles and learning about materials, metals, maths and quantities.	FJ Holden, motorcycles, materials, maths, quantities
00:06:01	Having a large backyard and a veggie garden gave her an introduction to horticulture. They had fruit trees and she learnt how to prune them. Father believed that if you had trees, they should be productive, mother had flowers in front yard.	Backyard, horticulture, fruit trees, grapefruit, lemon, peaches, plums, grapevine flowers
00:08:38	Attended university of New South Wales, Tighes Hill campus and joined a group called the 'tree towners'. Group was working on a project to save the Norfolk Island pines damaged by pollutants fumes from the BHP factory.	University of New South Wales, Tighes Hill, Tree Towners, Norfolk Island Pines, BHP.

00:09:15	The group went around planting, similar to guerrilla gardening. They planted shrubs, and trees in streets.	Guerrilla gardening, planting, sulphur.
00:10:05	Age of 16, she was observing how places were planted, particularly in suburbia. Considered planting techniques in suburbia in the 60's as 'pretty dismal'. She learnt to appreciate plantings in established parklands in Sydney and Newcastle.	Suburbia, Buffalo grass, concrete, Sydney, ANZAC parade, The Domain, Moreton Bay fig, Port Jackson figs.
00:13:55	Went on to study a science degree because she got good marks in Maths and Science. At Uni NSW it was a requirement for her to take humanities subjects. Believes that both Arts and Science degrees are foundational.	Science, degree, humanities, Arts
00:15:28	Had a boyfriend who was studying architecture. Was a good drawer and illustrator. They would both draw together, attend art galleries and exhibition openings.	Boyfriend (John), Architecture, illustrator, exhibitions, Newcastle Art Gallery, Artists, Von Bertouch Gallery, Dobell.
00:17:38	Discussion on the idea of a 'Polymath'. Considers having a basic understanding of a whole range of subjects but one or two areas of expertise as important.	Polymath, literature, maths, engineering, music, language.
00:18:05	Father would often invite engineers visiting from overseas to come to their house. They would use the atlas to show where they had travelled. As a young person this showed her the possibility of overseas travel.	Ships, tea, overseas, atlas.
00:20:45	While at uni she started making clothes for a local shop called (Suomi). The shop sold Marimekko fabrics, and other Scandinavian products.	Shop, (Suomi), Marimekko Scandinavian.
00:21:00	Made up a suite of shirts and dresses that sold in the shop. They were successful. Shop wanted her to produce a production line. She could not manage with third-year studies as well, so handed patterns on to others to use.	Shirts, Dresses, production line, patterns, clothes, John

00:22:20	<p>Finishes Bachelor of Science degree majoring in Maths and Chemistry and marries John.</p> <p>She decided to complete a Diploma of Education, to have a teaching qualification for when they travel overseas.</p>	<p>Married, Diploma of Education, overseas, qualification.</p>
00:22:50	<p>Dianne taught Maths at Maitland Girls High and then moved to Newcastle Girls High.</p>	<p>Teaching, classroom, Maitland Girls, Newcastle Girls High</p>
00:24:21	<p>At university she joins a maths society and attends a conference in Canberra. She stayed at Bruce Hall on the ANU campus.</p>	<p>Maths society, Canberra, Conference Bruce Hall, Black Mountain</p>
00:28:07	<p>Remembers Canberra as 'fresh and new' but also having a sense of timelessness. Appreciated views of the mountains and ranges. Was aware of Canberra because of modernist architects work and felt there was a 'sense of optimism' expressed in new Canberra architecture.</p>	<p>Canberra, modernist, Architects, Frederick Romberg, Boyd, Grounds, Seidler, Academy of Science, University House.</p>
00:32:04	<p>Knew about Walter Burley Griffin from a book by Robin Boyd 'Australian Ugliness'. Remembers walking down University Avenue to Garema place and crossing City Hill, and the sense of landscape and the importance of trees. There was a sensitivity to the designs.</p>	<p>Walter Burley Griffin, Australian Ugliness University Avenue, Garema Place, City Hill, Acton hotel, Beecham house, School, arts school</p>
00:33:29	<p>In 1962 remembers the lake as a construction site with north and south Canberra divided by construction in the middle.</p>	
00:34:18	<p>Dianne and John had a son William. Dianne was able to keep working as her mother and mother-in-law took care of their son during the week.</p>	<p>Son, William</p>
00:36:55	<p>In 1968 John gets a scholarship to study overseas, in Glasgow. Before leaving they take a road trip around New South Wales that included Canberra, where the lake was now finished. Dianne resigns her teaching position in Newcastle and they go overseas.</p>	<p>Scholarships, plains, mountain range, Beecham house, modernist architecture, Campbell, Manning Clark house, Seidler grounds.</p>

00:39:02	John's scholarship included transport by ship to England where they picked up a car and drove to Glasgow. John started post-grad studies at university and Dianne started teaching Maths.	Ship, England, Glasgow.
00:42:04	End of session [break due to rain]	

Session #2: 7/11/2022

00:00:11	William went to preschool in Glasgow. wore a traditional uniform like 'little school children.'	Glaswegian, preschool, uniforms, blazers, caps, school children.
00:02:04	Differences in Europe included seeing many different deciduous trees, flowering shrubs, seasonal flowers and bulbs. Accommodation near Kelvingrove Park in Glasgow, which had an art gallery and museum nearby.	Europe, trees, flowering shrubs, flowers, bulbs, crocus, Kelvingrove Park, horticultural, museum, blossom, renaissance, Napoleonic plantings.
00:04:35	Other influences on Dianne including landscape paintings. Inspired by artists doing 'The Grand Tour', felt like trip was her 'Grand Tour'.	Landscape, painters, generations, grand tour, touring, civilisation.
00:06:24	John finished studies. They returned to Australia at the end of 1972. John starts work in Canberra with the NDC on Gungahlin new town. Dianne starts teaching Maths at Melrose High School in 1973.	Australia, Canberra, Gungahlin, new town, NDC, National Capital Development Commission, work, teaching
00:07:02	John and friend from Scotland set up the Canberra Yuncken Freeman office. Roy Simpson was the lead architect.	John, Alf, Yuncken Freeman, Roy Simpson, Architect, Office, Supreme Court, north and south building, Lester Firth Murton.
00:08:03	Dianne good at rendering and drawing, when not teaching she helped in the office.	Drawing, colouring, teaching, office, mid-seventies, horticultural knowledge.
00:11:00	No formal training in horticulture at this stage. Had a lot of common-sense knowledge about propagation and plants.	Propagation, record keeping, plants, Plane trees.
00:12:30	They decided to have another baby. Dianne took leave from her job at Phillip College. Upon return she job shared but	

	eventually decide to take a career change from maths teaching.	
00:13:00	1978, on advice from Margaret Hendry from NCDC, starts studying landscape design at CCAE.	Margaret Hendry, Program, National Capital Development Commission (NCDC), Student exhibition, The Canberra College of Advanced Education (CCAЕ), baby.
00:16:44	Strong value system instilled in the students. Students considered what to keep and how to move into the present. To plan for the future.	
00:17:31	Learnt about tree succession, by studying the trees on Black Mountain.	Field trips, Margaret Hendry, Glen Wilson, trees, students, succession, mother-tree, fire, seed, valley, diameter, species, diameter.
00:20:35	Discusses the heritage of early plantings in Canberra. In places such as Haig Park and Civic.	Plantings, NCDC, large blocks, perimeter planting, Civic, Haig Park, field, heritage, Black Mountain, University Avenue, vista, avenue.
00:23:42	Not many women teaching or studying landscape design at the time. Margaret Hendry influential, had an international perspective on landscape architecture.	Women, teaching, studying, Margaret Hendry, Britain, senior figures, International Federation of Landscape Architects, world, conferences, environment.
00:25:10	Margaret encouraged Dianne to engage with communities and institutions. Margaret doing a lot of work with communities, preschools and women's groups.	Margaret, people, communities, Preschools, women's groups, Landscapes, garden, courtyard, design, lectures, bushlands, nature.
00:27:14	Importance of having access to nature within 400 metres in Canberra. Examples walking paths and river corridors. Bushfires in 2003 shifted public view about the insertion of nature in city.	Nature, 400 metres, hills, ridges, walking paths, river corridors, bushfires, fire, maintained, political, residence, cost burden, values.
00:29:11	Economic rationalism started to drive decisions around urban planning. Dianne joined committees to engage with the political and economic structures.	Economic rationalism, committees, political economic structures, system, value.
00:30:34	1981, year of the disabled. Dianne worked with a team to design a garden with a focus on access for the disabled.	Lester Firth Associates, National Botanic Gardens, Garden for the Disabled, wheelchair, paths,

		garden beds, red brick, building, sensory plants, Tamie Fraser patron.
00:34:56	Disabled garden designed for people with intellectual and physical disabilities. Garden grew quickly and large.	Slopes, Black Mountain, Disabilities, wheelchair, plant selection, soils, fertiliser, client, <i>Eucalyptus magnificata</i> .
00:37:52	End of session	

Session #3: 8/11/2022

00:01:10	Dianne is in her final year of studying Horticulture. She agrees to be a research assistant on a research project on Black Mountain Tower.	Black Mountain, lecturer, research, grant, Black Mountain Tower, Lester Firth, family, debate, agencies, collate data, community groups, political, Ian De Plater ,
00:05:00	Finishes her degree, receives a Bachelor of Landscape Architecture. Decides to practice solo and consult on domestic gardens, estate gardens and garden design. She does this for several years before returning to Lester Firth Associates and tutoring at Canberra College of Advanced Education (CCAЕ).	Degree, Bachelor, Landscape Architecture, CCAЕ, solo, work, domestic gardens, estate, garden design, housing project, Yarralumla, Lester Firth Associates, Dean, Roger Johnson, tutor, multidisciplinary, studio, baby, permanent part-time.
00:07:53	1990, the CCAЕ became the University of Canberra and the new Dean asked Dianne to apply for the position of lecturer of landscape architecture. She was successful but as part of her role was required to do a PHD.	CCAЕ, University of Canberra, Dean, Judith Bryan, position, lecturer, landscape architecture, PHD, staff, faculty, environmental design, masters.
00:09:35	Whilst taking some students out on a field trip to Pialligo, Dianne noticed some Redwood trees. After investigating she discovered that Walter Burley Griffin had planned an east lake where the airport is today that was to be ringed by redwoods.	Pialligo, Sequoia, Redwood, Airport, maps, planting, American Redwoods, plantation, ring, large lake, Lake Burley Griffin, Walter Burley Griffin, East Lake, design, picnic, canoeing, sailing boat.
00:11:12	She decides to look further into this topic for her PHD. She starts researching by searching through maps at the National Library and the plan drawers.	PHD, part time, topic, designed, map, National Library, plan draws, catalogued, competition entries, National Capital, 1911, Federal Capital, Mountains, Black Mountain, Mount Ainslie, Hills, Kurrajong, surveyor, Scrivener, ornamental lake, city, Barton

		Highway, views, ranges, Parliamentary Library, archives.
00:14:02	Her research into the topic reveals many of the decisions made around the early design of Canberra were about politics and economics.	Politics, economics, journey, mechanics, landscape, Hansard, supporters, detractors, building, enquiry, decisions, electoral, economic downturns, war, Canberra, National Capital Development Commission, prime ministers, Menzies, Littleton Groom, document.
00:16:30	Her research into the planning of Canberra, uncovered the importance of individuals within group organisations.	Organisations, structure, individuals, NCDC, commissioner, key people, town planning, engineering, architecture, landscape design teams, funding, successes, Lake Burley Griffin, Sir William Holford advice critical, unifying, north, south, aesthetic, capital.
00:18:37	PHD was a personal journey. It became 'excruciatingly difficult' to finish with family and work commitments. She would wake up at 3 am to complete a few hours study before the family woke and she had to start work.	
00:19:54	(Short pause) Dianne discovered through her research that Black Mountain was identified as significant in Walter Burley Griffin's competition entry.	Black Mountain, language, second version, highlighting, site, ranges, view, competition entry, mountain, colour, Mount Ainslie, hills, ridges, valleys, flood plans, designs, Marion's drawings, elevated views, land use, wild, west lake, arboretum concept, Yarralumla.
00:22:35	Explains that Griffin scholars explored Marion and Walter's experience of 'the wild' and how this informed the Canberra design.	Wildness, Griffin, scholars, nature, American, Australian, administrations, revegetation, Black Mountain, foothills, botanical gardens, wild nature, city, arboretum, vision, first design, guide.
00:23:40	She believes that Black Mountain and the foothills have lived up to vision of the first Griffin design.	Black Mountain, foothills, vision, Griffins, future generations, guide, topographic features, road layout,

		Griffin avenues, landscape, traditional avenues, landscape.
00:24:55	Dianne worked as part of the heritage council and the LDA (Land Development Agency), and the LDA design review panel. Her role as a landscape architect was to protect the original landscape intent that made Canberra special.	Heritage council, LDA, design review panel, major review panel, protect, key issues, Canberra, visual experience, city.
00:25:56	Believes there is a continuing issue of how to manage and maintain Canberra's landscape. Issues focus on maintaining the fusion of nature park and city.	John Stanhope tree replacement review, nature park, suburbia, Black Mountain, Turner, O'Conner, Lyneham, Aranda, Cook, fire, flair ups, foothills, interface, government, managing, wild nature.
00:29:06	Discusses Margaret Hendry's work.	Suburban landscape, tree plantings, Sun, Shade, playgrounds, mums, seating, kitchen garden, water, birds, slide books, trees, grass, pathways, Dick Clough.
00:31:39	As a student she did learnt about landscape systems. Students learnt about plants and animals, but it was focused on coastal landscapes and never applied to Canberra.	Student, landscape systems, Plants, animals, coastal landscapes, Jervis Bay, bird counts, identification, ecosystem health, system, relationships, plant material, biodiversity, Greening Australia, butterflies, fungus.
00:34:40	During her PHD studies the main concerns about the lake included sedimentation and mosquitos. Blue green algae not as much of a concern in the early period.	Sedimentation, cross border, catchment, erosion, mosquitos, blue green algae, turbidity, fluorescent green, toxic, towns.
00:38:16	Discusses the importance of design in ensuring people can recreate in the bushland without destroying nature.	Design method, experience, brittle gum, <i>Eucalyptus mannifera</i> , trees, pause point, path, Friends of Aranda, Friends of Black Mountain, interest groups, rangers, park managers, hand removal.
00:42:16	Discusses suburban trees and the balance of managing trees, their characteristics, and their benefits to the city.	Street trees, suburbia, long live trees, short lived, tree

		replacement, oaks, catkins, pollen, spring, city cooling, birds, insects.
00:46:40	She was always interested in making things, she started to make ceramics. Eventually moved into “cleaner arts and crafts”, such as sewing. Started making Marimekko wall hangings.	Ceramics, kiln, woodfired, Hunter Valley, clay, bowls, landscape architecture, drawing, arts and crafts, curtain, bedspreads, wall hangings, Marimekko.
00:48:22	1972, moves to Canberra and buys a townhouse in Mawson. Fitted the townhouse out. Met a friend who quilted, inspired by her to make her own quilts.	Canberra, townhouse, Mawson, quilting, bed, satin, Diana, America, traditional, quilts, patterns, design, exhibition pieces, Sydney quilt guide, Canberra quilters, parents, friends, associations, wall hangings, projects, Girls Grammar, junior school.
00:50:25	Canberra Bicentennial, Craft ACT approached friend, Diana to coordinate Canberra’s quilting submission. Dianne assisted with the project.	Craft ACT, Diana, Canberra quilt, exhibition, truck, travel, Australia, designed, Parliament house, letter, collaborative, project, teaching, Judith Brine, University, newsletter, women, craft, staff, female, Dean.
00:56:05	Held an exhibition in 2017 at the Belconnen Art Centre. Dianne retired from the University of Canberra in 2011 and became an adjunct professor. Collaborating with poets at ‘poetry on the move’ festival.	Retired, adjunct, research centre, Poetry on the move, national, international, local, poetry, seminars, poems, colours, shapes, associations, director, CCCR, Jen, poets, Canberra, city, design, Australian poets.
00:58:22	She had less than a year to fill the main gallery in Belconnen Arts centre.	
01:00:01	She produces a triptych in response to a poem about Black Mountain. It consists of an illusion of Kyoto, Black Mountain and white gums.	Triptych, Kyoto, Black Mountain, white gums, poem, shapes, colours, forms, 4.17 metres wide, 0.68 metres high, 3 pieces, hall, Belconnen, art centre, broody, Aboriginal, colonial, vegetation, wombat, textile piece.
01:03:27	In 2013, she makes 20 works based on the topography of Canberra, 3 works based on Black Mountain.	Works, topography, Canberra, Black Mountain, perspective, plan, elevation, solo exhibition, Craft ACT, avenue, felt, <i>Eucalyptus mannifera</i> .

01:05:44	Black Mountain a 'physical presence' in her life in Canberra.	
01:07:24	Describes 'so little' documented evidence of Aboriginal uses of Black Mountain area. Would like to know the Aboriginal cultural stories of the area.	Cultural values, Aboriginal, presence, documented, evidence, knowledge, Black Mountain, foods, nuts, berry grasses, animals, hunted, snake, stories, children, mountain, archaeological evidence, Canberra region, cricket team.
01:09:32	Knowledge of early roads following the Aboriginal pathways. Canberra was a meeting place. She believes more work is needed to understand Aboriginal relationship to Canberra.	Research, roads, meeting place, story, prominence, Canberra, city, national capital, National Capital values, Territory values, land.
01:12:15	End of session.	