

City of Adelaide  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH

SIR ARTHUR BARRETT

LORD MAYOR OF ADELAIDE 1937-41

Conducted by Bruce Edwards

2 May, 1984

Volume 1 of 1

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THE CITY OF ADELAIDE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

As part of its concern to preserve evidence of Adelaide's past and in celebrating the Jubilee 150 in South Australia in 1986, the national Bicentennial in 1988, and its own 150th Anniversary in 1990, the Adelaide City Council has established an Oral History Project. The Project provides a record of the past that complements the written records relating to the history of both the Council and the City generally. A pilot project was conducted in 1978-79.

Recognising the loss of many people who had personal experience of important events in Adelaide's past and the increasing use of oral history as a legitimate source of historical information, the Council sought in 1984 to establish an Oral History Project on a firm basis, and engaged an Oral Historian, Mr. Bruce Edwards, to carry out interviews with notable former Members and staff, and other citizens. This interview forms part of the Project.

Copyright in the tape and transcripts is shared by the Council and the interviewee for the duration of the interviewee's life, and vests wholly in the Council on the interviewee's death. Access to tapes and transcripts for either research or public use is governed by any restrictions imposed by the interviewee during his or her lifetime and subsequently by the Council.

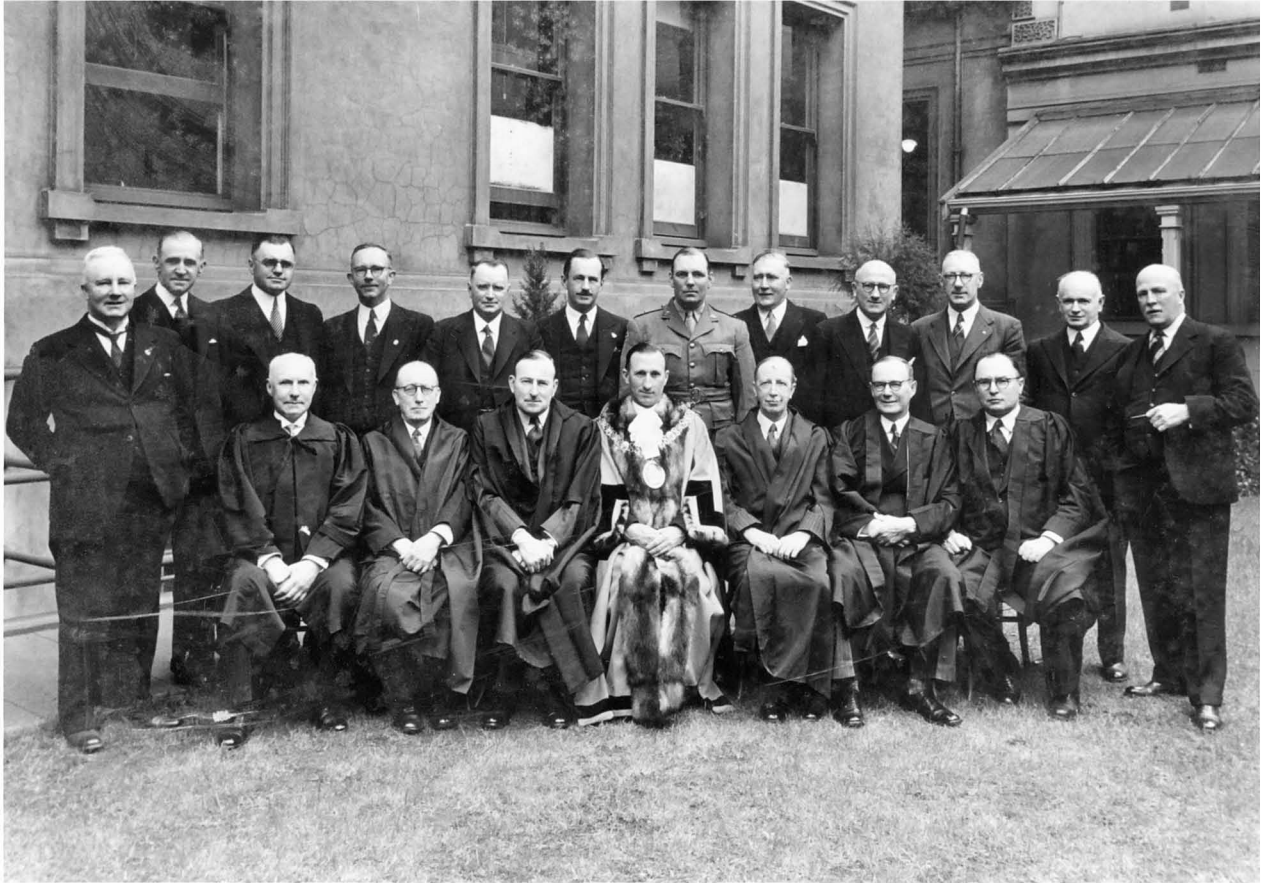
Please note that with this particular interviewee one interview was conducted by the Oral Historian, Mr. Bruce Edwards, after the Oral History Project had been formally established. Tape recordings of an earlier interview conducted by Ms. Jill Cavanough during 1978 are included in the Oral History Project folder. They were recorded as part of the 1978-79 Pilot Project. Ms. Cavanough was Research Officer to the Town Clerk, Mr. Russell Arland. Copyright and access to this particular interview are not discussed on tape. However, it is likely that the conditions agreed to in the interview conducted by Mr. Edwards apply to that recorded in 1978. Following the death of Sir Arthur Barrett in 1985 copyright vests wholly in the Council.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

SIR ARTHUR GEORGE BARRETT, J.P. (1895-1984), served in Europe during the First World War (being mentioned in despatches) and commanded the Air Training Corps in South Australia during the Second World War, with the rank of Wing-Commander. In business life he was Manager of the malt producers Barrett Bros Pty Ltd, and a member of the Adelaide Stock Exchange. He was a Councillor for Robe Ward (1931-37), Lord Mayor (1937-41), and an Alderman (1941-53). As Lord Mayor he brought to fruition the building of new City Baths (opened in January 1940). From the commencement of the Second World War he was involved in various recruiting and other special war efforts. He represented the Council on the School of Arts and Crafts (1946-52), and his community service included fifteen years as Chairman of the Red Cross, and the National Vice-Presidency of the National Heart Foundation. He gave this interview a few weeks before his death.

Papers of Sir Arthur George Barrett, Maltster and Lord Mayor of Adelaide.

1865-1983. Manuscript, typescript and printed - held at Mortlock Library PRG 948.



Arthur Barrett as Lord Mayor with the Council, 31 October 1940  
ACA Accession 4785 Item 22

INTERVIEW WITH SIR ARTHUR BARRETT RECORDED BY BRUCE EDWARDS  
AT SIR ARTHUR'S HOME AT NORTH ADELAIDE ON 2ND MAY, 1984.

ORAL HISTORIAN (O.H.): Can I ask you just a few questions about your involvement with the Adelaide City Council over the years, Sir Arthur?

First of all did you have much contact with the Council before you became an elected member? Did you have much to do with them when you were just an ordinary ratepayer?

SIR ARTHUR BARRETT (A.B.): No, except once a year.

O.H.: Did you have any worries with them when you were paying your rates? Did they ever charge you too much or cause any problems for you?

A.B.: They always charged me too much. But I knew it was no good protesting.

O.H.: Did you know many of the people who were members of the Council? Any of the Aldermen or Councillors? Were they friends of yours at all?

A.B.: You know you are asking me to go back 50 years. I would say yes because I knew a lot of people and I must have become interested in the Council work and because of the things I heard about the Council.

O.H.: Right. And did your friends then encourage you to stand for the Council yourself?

A.B.: Did I what?

O.H.: Did your friends then encourage you to run for election to the Council yourself?

A.B.: Well I don't remember. As far as I remember I just made the decision out of the blue and spoke to one or two members who didn't encourage or deter me, so ... names I've forgotten really, but there was one chap I went up to see, a friend of mine, and told him I proposed to stand for the Council and he gave me a bit of encouragement and I just stood. But I did an awful lot of work to foster my own membership. I visited every street in Adelaide especially in the Young and Grey Wards. I hired a man to take me around and introduce me to the shopkeepers and I think that helped my campaign a very great deal. They were assured I was interested and not just standing for fun, and taking into consideration the numbers of ratepayers on the roll I was elected by what you might easily call a huge majority.

O.H.: Right. When you were elected first did you have to seek a political party endorsement at all, or did every one run as independent candidates in those days?

A.B.: There were no parties in those days. Although I was a member of the Liberal Party and I was a member of what was then known as the Political Reform League who set out to reduce the number of members of Parliament and if you looked in the paper then and you looked in the paper now you wouldn't see much difference in what was being said. The Liberal Reform League had its name then changed into the name of the Young Liberals and as far as a Party went I belonged to it but I was not an active prominent member of it. I was a member of it because I paid my subscription and that was that.

O.H.: Right, I see. In the papers for the period when you were Lord Mayor I noticed there were references to a group called the Liberal Municipal League. Can you remember very much about the Liberal Municipal League. Did they play much part in Council elections?

A.B.: Now you have got me on memory now. I won't vouch for what I am saying but I think it's correct. The respective councils of the municipality of Adelaide were separate. They didn't want to be together and the smaller councils were always complaining about the bigger councils and the bigger councils were always doing nasty things to the little councils and it struck me it would be a very good thing to have a body which could get together and discuss these matters and I think I formed the - what did you call it?

O.H.: That would be the Municipal Association, was that the name?

A.B.: The Municipal Association, and even then we had a certain amount of dispute because the Mayor of Unley, he said, "You have got no right to take the Chairmanship of this Committee. You're only a social bloke and I'm the Chairman of the biggest municipality in the set up." So I didn't care two hoots and he took the Chairmanship and we used to meet every so often. Whether we did any good or not I don't know, but at least it gave an outlet for discussion on municipal matters and I think it had some effect on quietening down the, anomosity is not the word, the dissensions that arose among the various councils of the larger city.

O.H.: Right. Very good. Now when you were first elected to the City Council the Lord Mayor, I think, was Glover ... Do you have much recollection of what he was like as the Lord Mayor when you were first there as a new councillor?

A.B.: All the Lord Mayors of those days were highly respected men. Some of them had been Lord Mayor before and some hadn't been but Glover was highly respected and, as it was in those days, the Lord Mayor was there really to see that the Town Clerk carried out the orders of the Council. And the Lord Mayors of those days didn't have much bother with the Council because they had competent Town Clerks who hadn't the slightest desire to do anything but what they suggested to the council and carried out their own instructions.

O.H.: Right. Do you have any particular memories of Sir Jonathon Cain as the Lord Mayor? I think he was the Lord Mayor before you became the Lord Mayor.

A.B.: Have I any memory of him? Yes I have. He altered the whole aspect of Lord Mayoralty. He was a shopkeeper in the Gays Arcade, I think, and he rather overdid the social side of the Lord Mayoralty by giving receptions to bodies which perhaps had very little claim on the Council but nevertheless what he did was appreciated by those people, and if he carried it a little bit too far it was not a retrograde step, but instead of the Lord Mayors in Adelaide entertaining only the great visitors - interstate and overseas visitors - Cain entertained all sorts of people, and I remember the story told of him, I can't vouch for its truth, he had three receptions one morning and the second one he dashed to Hammant the secretary and said, "Hammant, who am I entertaining now?".

O.H.: Did you find that you had to make a change when you became Lord Mayor? Did you cut back the number of receptions at all?

A.B.: I cut back the number of receptions, not drastically, but brought it in to what I thought was a more orderly position and I think that was a good thing. There was at that time a great furore over button days, and the number of permissions given for holding a button day exceeded the number of Fridays in the year. And I said in my campaign I would reduce the number of button days which I did. But I didn't reduce nearly as greatly as the general public would have liked, but when you get to the point of saying "yes" and "no" to a charitable institute of repute, it's very hard to say "no" and that's how we left it. There was still a lot of button days but they were more orderly and I think that they became more acceptable.

O.H.: When you were a Councillor you then decided to run for the position of Lord Mayor. Why did you want to be Lord Mayor rather than just remain an ordinary member of the Council?

A.B.: Heaven knows what a man does after 40 years. I suppose I thought, "Well this is a position I can take. Why not have a go at it?" And I think that the change in the type of Lord Mayor from the rather ebullient side to Cain to what I might term the gentlemanly side, I suppose I shouldn't say that, of the previous Lord Mayors seemed to be a propitious time to change, and I suppose a bit of ambition.

O.H.: Well that's natural enough. When I looked up the records of your election as Lord Mayor, I noticed that in 1937 you were opposed by Ethelbert Bendall. Do you remember much about him?

A.B.: Who?

O.H.: Ethelbert Bendall who ran against you for Lord Mayor when you were first elected. He was an Alderman I believe. Do you remember much about him?

A.B.: He'd been a member of the Council for some time and perhaps the best thing I can say about the election was that I defeated him rather firmly.

O.H.: Indeed. Was it considered remarkable at the time that you won when you were only a Councillor while he was an Alderman and more senior than you in the Council. Did it surprise people when you beat him?

A.B.: I know one man who was surprised.

O.H.: He expected to win, did he?

A.B.: No comment.

O.H.: Well, when you became Lord Mayor, Beaver was still the Town Clerk for his last year or two in office. Was he a good Town Clerk for the City?

A.B.: He was an excellent Town Clerk. He did not have the respect of all the Councillors because I think that he knew far more about Town Clerking and Town management than they did. And he ran the Council very well indeed.

O.H.: Did you as the Lord Mayor have to get very involved in the detail of how the Council staff ran the various departments of Council?

A.B.: No.

O.H.: Were you happy to leave that to Beaver?

A.B.: I left that to Beaver and to a lesser extent Stone the Treasurer. I did keep an eye on the workings of the Treasury but I had to do nothing more than keep a casual eye on what was happening and seeing that nothing was getting out of hand. But the staff at that time was a very good staff indeed, and still is.

O.H.: When Beaver came to retire during your term as Lord Mayor and you had to consider who would replace him, how did you go about deciding who should take over the position of Town Clerk?

A.B.: Before Beaver was elected, now here again I am relying purely on memory, before Beaver was elected to the position of Town Clerk there had been another man promised the position but when Beaver came along he impressed the Council considerably and this rejected man did not get the position. But when Beaver retired during the war it was not easy to find a man and that man was then given the position which he had previously been denied.

O.H.: And that was Morrison wasn't it? Did he turn out to be a good Town Clerk too?

A.B.: Well he was a Town Clerk and he didn't wreck the Council.

O.H.: I suppose it must have been difficult for him and for you particularly once the war came and men went off to the military and so forth. Was it especially difficult for the Town Clerk then to run the Council staff?

A.B.: It altered the aspect of the Lord Mayor completely. My wife and I we used to do a lot of social work especially at night. I used to go into the country which I had no right to do but I always got the permission from the local Mayor before I went there. I did not just butt in on them and I was in some demand. All that stopped of course when the war came. The social side stopped and I had a certain amount of collaboration with the Central Command to undertake.

O.H.: Now with the finances of the Council you said that you kept a bit of an eye on them with the Treasurer. I was impressed when I read through the Council reports to see the way in which in your term the deficits were gradually reduced and the Council was no longer running in the red. Did you have to make special efforts to achieve that position?

A.B.: Did I have to what?

O.H.: Did you have to make special efforts to achieve the position of running the Council in the black?

A.B.: No I don't think we did. We simply - do you mean in respect of the war?

O.H.: Yes.

A.B.: Ah well, a lot of the social work declined, and people weren't in the mood to pay heavy rates during the war time but I think it was a natural orderly process of retrenchment which didn't have much effect on the conduct of the City, but I think the aspect of the City did decline a little during the war. Not to any extent. There weren't any holes in the footpath or anything of that sort. You didn't go about planting conservatories all over the place.

O.H.: Indeed. Did you have to spend a great deal of your time when you were Lord Mayor representing the Council on other committees and bodies around Adelaide?

A.B.: Some, yes. The Municipal Council and the Lord Mayor was a member of the Infectious Diseases Committee and one or two other things I have forgotten.

O.H.: Was that work on those Committees very interesting or did you regard that as rather a boring side of the job?

A.B.: No, I regarded the whole thing as rather interesting. I wasn't bored with any of it. Except I was put in the position of having to continue for four years but I began to get a little bit tired after about 2½ years and I would have preferred to resign in the usual way. That was three years. But circumstances arose and it was necessary for me to stay on for an extra year.

O.H.: Yes, I did want to ask you about the fourth term that you had. Sir Lavington Bonython was a member of the Council for many years. What did you think of him?

A.B.: Bonython was a highly respected man in every way and he was respected as a Lord Mayor, he was respected as a philanthropist and he was respected as a gentleman.

O.H.: When it came to the question of whether or not you would go on as the Lord Mayor for a fourth term, how difficult a decision was it for you? Were you very unwilling to go on?

A.B.: I was unwilling to go on. Circumstances arose which compelled me to go on and those circumstances I don't think there is any point now in reviving.

O.H.: That was when Sir John McLeay first came into the Council affairs, wasn't it?

A.B.: I forget when he first came into the Council. But he was Lord Mayor some few years afterwards.

O.H.: Was he involved at all in the circumstances that occurred when you felt compelled to go on for a fourth term?

A.B.: Well I think all the interested members were involved.

O.H.: I thought it rather curious when I read through some of the Council minutes of about that period that at one stage Sir Lavington Bonython offered his resignation as an Alderman and then tried to withdraw it and wasn't allowed to withdraw.

Do you remember very much of that?

A.B.: No I don't remember that.

O.H.: One of the achievements that you had when you were Lord Mayor was the building of the new city baths as they then were. How bad were the old city baths that had been there before them?

A.B.: Well they were just a concrete pool, their amenities were poor and they became really misplaced in that one position, and Councillor Charlie Lloyd, who was in Young Ward I think, he brought up the question of new city baths and it was not received very favourably, but I rather thought it was a good idea, and I supported it strongly and then we got the new Olympic Pool and it was a vast improvement on the other one. We had an opening night with the Governor doing the opening ceremony and it was a gorgeous, lovely, beautiful night. We walked into that new place and it was well decorated with a couple of palm trees and so on and we walked in and there was a crescent moon enlivening the whole show and it was a really beautiful night.

O.H.: That must have been one of the high points of your career on the Council I guess.

A.B.: I don't regard anything as a high point of my career. I don't think it had many high points but there was a big change from one type of Lord Mayor through Jonathon Cain to another type of Lord Mayor and the Council had to adjust itself to that.

So, I didn't try to do anything spectacular in any way. I just ran the things I thought fit and encouraged the Council to keep its finances and not to spend more than they had. We borrowed money for capital expenditure and how much I don't know. I've forgotten.

O.H.: Alderman Grundy was a member of the Council for many years, I noticed from the records. What are your memories of him and his role in the Council?

A.B.: He was a very earnest man, totally honest and a man who had the interest of lot of other Councillors.

O.H.: Did he ever want to be Lord Mayor himself?

A.B.: I don't think so. I don't think his aspirations or his ambition went that way.

O.H.: Was the Council in your time very concerned about the issue of slums around Adelaide? The issue of slums and poverty and poor housing around Adelaide. Did that become a big concern in your time?

A.B.: Playford put me on a Committee to examine the Building Act and we went all around the municipality of Adelaide - I'm talking the larger municipalities of Adelaide - and we made some recommendations, and we found that the men who had framed the original Act were not foolish people and they'd framed the Act in such a way which was appropriate to the times. And we made some recommendations, some of which were adopted, some of which weren't, but the slums of Adelaide especially down the south end did concern the Council very much.

O.H.: Did the changes your Committee recommended help to get rid of the slums to some degree? Did they make much difference?

A.B.: It made a difference in the long run but just coming after a war or during a war and things were all topsy turvy you couldn't expect a revolution and you didn't get it, but it nevertheless did form a basis of future activity in buildings and so on. I tell you one thing, for instance you'd know Sir Henry Simpson Newland, a highly respected specialist doctor, who did a wonderful lot of work to returned soldiers. He wrote into the Council said - Look, I've got to go out at night very often and then none of the houses in the street have got numbers on them. What about making it compulsory for houses to have numbers on them, so the doctor can see where he's going at night. And I think we made a rule that every second house should have a number attached to it so that night walkers and night people would know where they were, and that was one of Simpson Newland's really constructive things.

O.H.: I see.

Did you belong to the Adelaide Club or any other Clubs around the City?

A.B.: Yes I belong to the Naval and Military, I belong to the Adelaide Club, Cricket Association.

O.H.: And did other members of the Council belong to the same clubs? Did you tend to move in the same social circles with other councillors?

A.B.: No, some did and some did not. But on the whole they were not members of that club.

O.H.: And did you find that your business life was much affected by being on the Council and being Lord Mayor? Did you find that you didn't have much time to think about your own private business affairs?

A.B.: I had an odd job and I used to say I could run my business by telephone from England, and I could've, so that although I paid full attention to my business in Adelaide, it didn't affect the conduct or the efficient conduct of the business.

O.H.: You must have had some other good people in the firm to keep it running smoothly while you were at the Town Hall.

A.B.: We had generations of employees through the business. Father to son, son to grandson and they get on very well together.

O.H.: When you came to retire as Lord Mayor after four years in the position why did you decide to go on as an Alderman for several years after that rather than retire?

A.B.: Well, I suppose for two reasons. One, I was interested in the job, I was beginning to know something about it, and the other was that I didn't relish people saying, "Oh he's been Lord Mayor, he's got a knighthood and now he's chucked it". I didn't think that was proper, so I stayed on for another 9 or 10 years.

O.H.: Yes, something like that. 10 or 12 years, a fair time. Was the Council after the Second World War a very different sort of body to what it had been before the war?

A.B.: Not to start with, no. It was only in the later years that the change in personnel and the change in outlook became apparent.

O.H.: Can you remember any especially funny incidents that happened while you were involved on the Council?

A.B.: Yes, but not for recording.

O.H.: I see. Were there any particularly dramatic moments in the Council Chamber, great conflict between members, or anything of that sort that happened while you were on the Council?

A.B.: There were always verbal contests but there were none that I remember that couldn't be settled with an apology.

O.H.: And did you find that outside the Council Chamber members who might have clashed inside still got on alright once they were out of the Council?

A.B.: I don't quite follow you.

O.H.: Did you find that even when members had had verbal clashes inside the Council did they still manage to get on alright outside of Council business?

A.B.: Oh yes. Yes. We were not aggressive types.

O.H.: One of the members of Council from time to time over the years was Bert Edwards, who people tell me was rather one of the great characters of the history of the City of Adelaide. Do you remember very much about him?

A.B.: I remember Bert Edwards. I remember his sojourn out of society for a while. And I remember that when he decided to re-stand for the Council, when he was free to do so, there was a lot of discussion, and the members of the Council almost unanimously decided - well he has done something that was against the law, he's paid the penalty for it, you can't penalise him twice and we would not oppose his re-election.

O.H.: Was there much disagreement amongst Council Members about coming to that view? Did some of them feel that he should be kept off the Council?

A.B.: No, No. I don't think there was much disagreement in the Council at all. There were some members liked more than others, some members respected more than others but there were no members of the Council who were disrespected. They were all there for the purpose of running the business, running the Council. And they did it in their own way and in my opinion they did it very well.

O.H.: When you came to retire from the Council altogether after several years as an Alderman, did you miss Council life once you were off the Council?

A.B.: I used to take an interest in it through the register and newspapers but it so happened that when I - I didn't retire, I simply didn't re-stand for election. And I went with my wife on an overseas trip and went around Europe and Italy and so on and that was it.

O.H.: Lord Mayors and Councillors these days often seem to go on overseas trips while they are in office on behalf of the City. Was that ever thought of in your day?

A.B.: Not on behalf of the Council. I have no doubt they went on overseas trips, but as far as I can remember they were not sent on overseas trips at the Council's expense.

O.H.: Right. When Morrison's time to retire came, I think about the end of the war, you had to appoint then a successor to Morrison. And Mr. Veale was appointed as the Town Clerk. Was he an easy choice to make from among the Council staff or were there several people wanting the job?

A.B.: You know, an "easy choice" is hardly the word. Veale was a highly respected soldier, he'd done a great job of work with the Military in Timor, and we thought - I forget what he was, a Major-General or something, I forget what his rank was - but we thought that a man of that position would be well able to run a body of men after he had had the experience in the army.

O.H.: And I guess that you had quite a few returned men both on the Council and on the Council staff in those years after the war?

A.B.: I suppose we did, yes.

O.H.: Well then, are there any other things that you can think of that you would like to mention about your time in the Council that you recall as being important?

A.B.: When you turn that damn thing off, I'll tell you one of the stories but not when it's on.

O.H.: Very good then. Well, I don't think I have any other questions that I want to ask you, so thank you very much for your time in granting us that interview.

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(15/8/84)