



# Creative RESPONDERS

## Episode 3 Transcript

### The Tin Sitters Club: Farming, Creativity and Connection

We would like to acknowledge the traditional owners on whose land this podcast was produced and pay our respects to their elders past and present. We would also like to acknowledge the commitment and sacrifice of First Nations people in the preservation of country and culture. This was and always will be Aboriginal land.

SCOTIA: Sherlock is a town in the Mallee, in South Australia, Ngarrindjeri country. It's about an hour and a half drive out of Adelaide.

On the highway there's a Baptist Church, a community hall and an old farm grader out on display like a piece of art.

MARK: Sherlock is a town that was once a sort of railway town ... but they now have a shop that's open for an hour a day, for four days a week. The railway's gone, the school that was once here is gone. They're looking for ways to give people a reason to stop.

SCOTIA: The buildings are all made from soft white limestone, the sort found in the ground here.

It's raining today and the rain is turning the earth into a shimmering white mud.

Mark Thompson is measuring out the future site of the Sherlock musical playground.

At the moment it's a bare patch of land between the old tennis courts and the edge of the highway.

But soon it'll be an inventive collection of sculptural musical instruments all made out of old farm equipment.

MARK: We're looking to build in this area roughly 12 metre square ... to build kind of like a small orchestra.

The people of Sherlock were looking to build a playground - here we are. And there's not much here as you'll notice. They were interested in other ideas, ways they could expand the idea of a playground and I suggested that we try and make playground equipment out of old farm junk.

SCOTIA: The really remarkable thing is that the instruments will all be in tune with each other. Instruments made by the creative thinkers who frequent the Sherlock Men's Shed.

MARK: We're just slowly getting local people to build the playground elements. Cos there's some really good welders here, I mean the traditional farm shed as a place to repair and keep your equipment going is a sort of really powerful tradition out in the bush so we've based a lot of what we're doing on the Sherlock Baptist Men's Shed on John Peter's property and he has got a pretty impressive collection of technology and tools to take on some pretty big jobs.

SCOTIA: I'm Scotia Monkivitch... and this is Creative Responders, a podcast from the Creative Recovery Network that explores how creativity and the Arts have a unique role to play in disaster management.

This episode, you'll hear from people using the act of creating to combat isolation and make farming communities more resilient to the social impacts of drought.

People like Mark.

MARK: I'm a designer and maker of things. I've written a few books. And increasingly I make interactive things for people. Things such as museum designs that you bang or whack or. And they produce an interesting result or you play with and hopefully deliver a sort of ah ha moment of some kind. That's what I love to do.

SCOTIA: Mark dreamt up the Long Story Short program with co-conspirator Suse Ifould, then of the Coorong Regional Council.

MARK: Suicide had been a really big thing in the area. There'd been a spate of suicides and we spent some time talking about how men have got unique ways of telling stories.

SCOTIA: The project combines art and storytelling, to create a narrative of men living in regional communities, including their daily life, challenges and hardships faced.

It uses these stories to entice the broader community to connect with these communities as they drive through the Mallee.

MARK: You come through a small town like Sherlock and your phone or will light up and say there's a story here have a listen to this.

The whole idea was that we'd create artworks or publicly visible things that say this is where there's a story and have a listen to this story. Stop here, sit down, and enjoy this place and it's a bit like meeting somebody when you come to a country town that you meet and you you meet someone whose story you remember. That's a very powerful memory to have.

SCOTIA: In Sherlock, it's the playground that will entice people to stop.

MARK: This is big open flat country with huge skies. Windy, right? So you're farming a big property, a lot of the time by yourself or just with you know maybe your family or and it can be quite - you can easily just go from day to day to day without actually socialising much

As farms have become consolidated they've been aggregated into larger and larger farms. That means that there's no longer schools. The kids now travel 50 kilometers to go to school or whatever. So Sherlock seemed to me a sort of example of a really good example of that.

I thought wow we could mix their need for a playground with old farm equipment see what we could do.

SCOTIA: Exposing people to local stories and craft as they drive through the landscape is an outcome in itself - a nearby town is focused on crafting stories about the honey industry, and they're looking to draw in passers by with a giant sculptural bee.

But it's not the audience experience alone that drives the project.

It's the act of making these artworks and crafting these stories that really excites Mark.

MARK: As they say in the bloke's shed world is that men tell stories next to each other rather than face to face. Having a task means that they're more comfortable talking about something

SCOTIA: Something that's hard to talk about face to face is the impact of drought, and the changes to farming over the decades.

Much of Australia is experiencing a period of drought - lower than average rainfall across most of Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia which began three years ago, in 2017.

It's a slow-building emergency, being felt here in the Coorong region, at the lower end of the Murray-Darling Basin. Today's rainfall is a rare and welcome occurrence.

A study on farmer's mental health in 2018 found that isolation and financial hardship were both factors in the amount of psychological distress apparent in farmers experiencing drought.

Strong social ties are identified as a vital foundation of a resilient community.

The Men's Shed and local sports are the main ways that the farming community around Sherlock comes together.

But it's the participation in creative processes, like the playground project, that enables the opportunity for deepening these connections, reducing isolation, giving voice to experience, making sense of the unimaginable and generating shared resilience building.

MARK: It has a sense of isolation about it. It's like so many other small country towns or around Australia, people here are very firmly determined to survive.

SCOTIA: And there's something about the creative problem solving that happens in the shed on John Peter's property that gets Mark's imagination firing.

MARK: it is about creativity and it's an interesting thing for me that I actually think that a lot of what those people would normally do in the shed is fundamentally creative that the problem solving stuff which they find hugely fascinating you know and just and they'll stand around and scratch their chins and nod and when something comes out well it's it's hugely satisfying. And I spent a lot of time saying this IS creative. This is every bit as good and meaningful as art. All right. And they sort of go, yeah maybe...maybe.

SCOTIA: Follow the Murray River from the Coorong, east - along the New South Wales-Victoria border - and you'll find farmers and artists collaborative in other creative ways.

Ian Tully is the director of the Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery.

IAN: I'm also the director of the outreach program called the Acre project. I happen to be a practicing artist and my interest there is around environment, it's around farming agriculture rurality, people living in the regions.

SCOTIA: A major project he's been working on for years now is called Twig. It comes from a similar place to Long Story Short.

IAN: We're talking about the Millennial Drought when this came about this program. Men are generally the farmers and men generally - blokes have trouble talking about health, they have trouble talking about mental health and this is one of the big symptoms of the drought is mental health issues affecting all and sundry but particularly blokes and we know too that farms are only getting bigger, communities are in decline.

SCOTIA: Drought was a factor - and increasing isolation on big rural properties.

Ian: Operations are getting bigger and bigger, tractors are getting bigger, all of the plant is getting bigger. We don't need as many workers on the ground. So what happens? We lose the workers on a farm for example, so there's you know maybe four or five in that family. Then two leave the primary school the school numbers decline. They don't need as many teachers at the school and on it goes. It's you know a domino effect essentially on the rural environment where services are in decline right across the board. There are towns that will absorb some of those but the smaller towns are evaporating before our eyes unfortunately. So that adds another layer to that isolation. So if you've got one farmer working you know what used to be five or six farms. It's a long way between his boundary and the next one you know across to the neighbour to talk. So we really are losing that social connectedness in that sense.

SCOTIA: The 'twig' or 'twiggy' was a local concept before the Twig project.

IAN: It's quite peculiar to this area of northern Victoria as far as we can tell but it refers to a small fire lit on the side of the road and it's been typically going back over the years a male domain I suppose where blokes have come back from footy training or been to the movies or whatever it was but they've decided to continue the conversation so pull up on their way home light a fire and continue to talk.

SCOTIA: It's this sense of connection and community that the Twig Project sought to replicate through art.

IAN: a typical twig residency would last for something like five to six days perhaps. We'd bring an artist onto the farm. He or she would be then left with the farming family or the farmer if the farm was on his own and in one case it was. And the artist would share the time over those five or six days with the family so, sharing their meals stories getting to know the lay of the land, getting to know the farming operation how it all works there and working with the farmer ultimately in bringing together a production if you like at the end of the residency.

There would be a twig. So there'd be a fire. The farming family would invite the friends, the family might be the neighbours it might be the milk tanker driver, it might be the shearing contractor, the vet whoever they thought would enjoy this moment and they would come to the twig, the fire.

The artworks that were produced whether they were projections onto the silo wall or the side of a field bin that the artist had made or whether they were sculptural pieces that had been assembled and maybe cobbled together during the week welded by the farmer perhaps. Or they may have been two dimensional works but whatever it was they would be there lit in the dark.

One of the wonderful outcomes I guess that wasn't anticipated was the depth of the relationship between the artist and the farming family.

SCOTIA: The project has made a lasting imprint in the community - one farmer has even taken to hosting his own Twigs.

IAN: he's brought the artist back on more than two occasions and commissioned that artist to make work on his property. He's invited the community onto his property. He's brought musicians to perform and it's just the most wonderful thing to come out of that.

I mean I think everybody embraced it. People embraced it and were genuinely moved a lot of the time certainly by what was going on.

SCOTIA: In projects like this one, finding the right artist is important.

IAN: Having that local connection is really critical in finding who would work well with an artist. Having said that you know these people had not necessarily had an artist on their farm or had been in close quarters with working with a creative person like that and obviously vice versa.

But we recognize the crucial element in all of this is that they are both creative professionals. The farmer is a creative professional and so is the artist, they just work in different areas and that was sort of one of the underlying rationales I suppose for getting this together is because that's what we wanted to celebrate.

MARK: This is the tubulum, or thongophone, the lowest instrument in our collection and it's made from old irrigation pipe and they're inserted into a 44 gallon drum and the longest pipe is a bit over three metres long. So when you make a playground you have to make

something that is relatively safe and not easily wrenched out of shape too so that's a really big consideration.

It's irrigation pipes tuned to the right length to give us a C scale with all the flats and sharps and everything in it as well. It's only one octave but we have two altogether there's another smaller one that'll be an octave higher but we've nearly run out of irrigation pipe now so

The round part that you strike is actually part of the irrigation pipe it was kind of the joining mechanism for them it was like a ball that a round ball that came into a sort of clamp a semi circular clamp and it was sealed just there.

In the end it will - as you can see from the other one over there - it will look like a strange Mallee rocket...

SCOTIA: One corner of this giant shed does not look like the others.

It's full of farming equipment, tools and stacked tractor tyres. But in the corner are musical instruments made of old farm gear ...

MARK: What we're looking at here is several sets of xylophones made from old water heater pipe so [plays xylophone]

And so they are painstakingly cut to length and tuned right and over here is another one that's um [plays xylophone]

Right so there's another one down by your feet there this one's sitting on an old petrol tank right.

Which actually gives it a really nice resonance too. So finding things that resonate really well has been an interesting challenge.

These change pitch at different types of weather right. The tubulem the thongophone they change pitch depending on air pressure.

SCOTIA: And there's a blackboard listing the ambitious plans of the Sherlock musical playground.

MARK: So this is our instrument wishlist. So the thong-o-phone, as built by Kevin Hall and Rob Hughes, that's still being built.

And our gas bottle gongs and we were trying to make tail shaft chimes but they turned out not to be good enough steel to make good tone. Some small chimes which is the brass xylophone that we've now got three of and we're probably going to have five altogether. They're sort of like our string section if you like and they've turned out to have good tone.

Pagoda bells which we can't tune properly. Tool xylophone - we've actually got enough to make quite a few but they are all un-pitched.

Tongue drums which we have four kinds, we'll probably have maybe five.

A 44 gallon drum kalimba which has turned out not to be practical.

There's a few more little possible things too like a giant fart machine you know which may yet happen. I'd love to see it happen.

SCOTIA: The shed belongs to John Peters.

JOHN: I've been here all my life. Yeah I've been here all my life. We've got a mixed farm. Cattle, sheep, cropping. We're in a low rainfall area I suppose you'd say - 15 16 inch rainfall or for 375 to 400 rainfall. We've been here over a hundred years. My grandfather started here in 1912 then my brother was here. Now my son is taking it on because I'm past retirement age by a long way. I still work full time but.. it will eventually get handed on to the next generation.

SCOTIA: The Shed Nights he hosts here once a month pre-date the playground project by ten years.

Men from the area, most of them farmers come from all around to meet in the shed, have a barbeque and a chat on a Friday night once a month.

JOHN: You know, they say don't stop it because of the interaction in the community. Men need men, you know we work on our own seven days a week, don't see anybody quite often and all of them don't interact with the community. They don't have anything to do with community activities, but they'll come here and talk.

SCOTIA: Kevin comes along to Shed Nights - he's a friend of John's from a neighbouring farm.

KEVIN: When the project started, I couldn't see how you could use old farm machinery to make musical stuff. Until Mark and Rob Hughes and Andrew would come visiting my junk heap. But they call it a 'fascinating resource centre'. So, it's just the different way people look at stuff. You could do this with this and do that with that.

Mark: Kevin's Resource Center is just fantastic. It's just so full of great things.

KEVIN: It's just a different way a different mind looks at it.

SCOTIA: What's great about projects like this is the meeting of minds that brings new and fresh perspectives to the world around us.

MARK: I'm always amazed by the jobs that people just turn up and say "John, this is broken. Do you have any idea we could fix it?" And somebody said "John and Kevin, they're the tin sitters" and I said "tin sitters, what does that mean?" And somebody said "Yeah they'll just sit on a tin and look at a piece of broken equipment and sort of work out how to solve it, fix it up, right, they they'll just sit and gaze at it and chat and maybe leave it for a bit and then sooner or later they'll work out how to do it.

SCOTIA: Kevin and John - they're a really good example of what Mark and Ian are trying to bring to the surface with their projects. Farming as creative work, that involves problem solving, thinking outside the box.

They have a reputation for it.

KEVIN: Well we get nicknamed this tin sitters club country cause we sit down and work stuff out, engineering stuff. It's always been a passion of mine making stuff. This is quite a challenge. It's nice to have somebody that knows how to tune stuff.

I think it's something that's born in you. You get good sports people they're good at any sport. Somebody that's good academically but somebody that's got it up here - can look at the problem and solve it.

I'll always look at a machine or new machinery and stuff and I'll sit there and try and work out what makes it work. How does it work. I think that's just something you're born with.

SCOTIA: Creative spark.

Kevin: Yeah. Yeah. I don't think it's something that you can learn as effectively as it is if you're born with it.

SCOTIA: And the tin sitters have turned their attention to the creative problems that arise as you try to build a playground out of farm machinery.

KEVIN: You know the saying two heads are better than one.

SCOTIA: Like the thongophone ...

KEVIN: It took a while working at it. Rob tried to use mathematical calculations and we came up with a different method that worked out better. Just by measurements around the drum. We were trying to mount eleven pipes around the inside of a drum and he was trying to work it out mathematically but it didn't quite work out.

JOHN: Basically there's not too much between Kevin and I that we can't nut out if we have to work together on a project or something.

JOHN: A lot of people have got no concept of what happens on a farm day by day. You might see a tractor going round or a dog chasing sheep and that's about where it finishes. Farming, we've just gotta do so much for ourselves. And what you did this year for your program goes, if you think you're going to do the same thing next year it won't work. You've got to be adaptable.

SCOTIA: For some farmers, bridging the rural urban divide is essential for disaster preparedness.

VERITY: if you eat or if you wear clothes and most people I know in Australia tend to do both tend...(laugh) then you're already involved to a certain degree with agriculture. Your future is just as just as closely integrated to this as ours is.

VERITY: I'm Verity Morgan Schmidt CEO of Farmers for Climate Action. We represent farmers, graziers and industry leaders from all across Australia from the banana fields in

Tully beef producers out at Longreach right down to viticulture lists in Tasmania and across to wheat growers in Western Australia.

SCOTIA: Verity's main message for Australians who aren't involved in farming is get informed and explore ways to connect with rural and regional communities.

VERITY: What we need to do is make sure that we actually bridge those rural urban divides which sadly have widened over the last couple of generations. We need to get people from urban areas reengaging with how food production and fibre production occur within Australia.

SCOTIA: Verity says that if all Australians re-engage with farming, it will help bring about practical changes and policy responses to drought ... something made increasingly urgent by climate change.

VERITY: I think one of the most devastating things about drought is that it's a very slow moving emergency it creeps up and it tightens like a vice until it's got you so tight that you don't know which way to turn. And this is why it's not quite as visible as an emergency as say a cyclone is when one crosses the coast. There's no immediate red alert that goes off. And yet for farmers drought in many ways is actually more destructive because it takes place over many years it erodes, it erodes the resilience of the business the resilience of the community and the resilience of farming families as they deal with the impact of an ongoing drought.

SCOTIA: Drought as a slow-moving, creeping emergency is being exacerbated by the impacts of climate change.

CSIRO analysis commissioned by the government in 2008 found that the frequency of exceptionally hot years had increased rapidly in recent decades, and the areas affected by this heat were increasing.

VERITY: The Heat stress is far deeper. Their capacity to actually manage is becoming eroded and that's providing an increasing urgency to the need to take action on climate change and to really recognize the impact that drought is having on Australian society.

VERITY: I think you know part of the challenge is that Australian farmers are very very good at managing climate variability. We know that we are the land of drought and flooding rains I get told that more often than I care to think about. And yet what we also know is that we're seeing an increasing severity of these droughts and that's taking a severe toll.

SCOTIA: It can be hard to cut through the political fighting to talk about the practical changes that need to be made in response to this climate emergency.

The shift to farming in a harsher reality.

But the past few years have seen attitudes towards climate action change in agricultural leadership and on farms around the country.

In 2018 President of the National Farmers' Federation Fiona Simpson declared that climate change was making drought worse in Australia.

And Verity says attitudes on the ground are also changing.

VERITY: Five years ago a movement like farmers for climate action would have struggled to exist and yet now we are overwhelmed with demand with more and more farmers reaching out to us and saying 'look you know I felt that I was the only one that was thinking like this'.

SCOTIA: But for farmers, facing the reality of climate change can also come with a significant amount of grief.

VERITY: so I think this is why sometimes the conversation regarding climate change in agriculture can be difficult. It is confrontational. It is a lived reality. And so it is at times deeply challenging to actually accept the science because that science is it's almost unthinkable. What that will actually mean.

SCOTIA: This presents an opportunity for the arts to play a role in supporting our capacity to approach the unthinkable.

If the strongest action we can take it to get informed about food and fibre production and get involved by visiting and engaging with rural Australia, then projects like Long Story Short and the Twig project can be an entry point for engagement.

VERITY: I think we've seen fantastic examples around the country of where art and agriculture have come together. There's a wonderful program run in New South Wales which actually uses art to engage students with agriculture and look at some of the big issues facing agriculture including climate change. You look further afield and you see initiatives like the blue trees that are being painted across the country in recognition of suicide in regional communities. You see areas like Coupland where the horse roads as you run into...as you go into town, have actually played an important role through a very entertaining form of artwork played an important role in actually revitalizing those communities. And one of the things that we sometimes fail to reflect on is that agriculture in itself is actually almost a form of artwork.

VERITY: So there's this deep, deep connection that I don't think we often tap into between what we're doing with the land which is in some ways a form of art it's a productive, very productive form of art. But many farmers are as deeply passionate about that as artists are about their work.

SCOTIA: Back in John's shed, Mark is showing us the latest creative challenge the group is tackling ... how to make beautiful old hand-held wrenches into an instrument.

Mark can imagine students coming from nearby towns to play Amazing Grace on the orchestra of percussion instruments.

But for the instruments to be played, they have to be in tune. He lays the tools on strips of foam and plays them with a hammer.

MARK: these are all sorts of weird and wonderful tools and there's some really interesting things there's resonant points in the bar of a xylophone that is basically 2/9th of it's mass and it's length. If you hit at the right point it will ring quite nicely...

SCOTIA: Unlike the pipe you can't shave a sliver of wrench off until it's in tune with the rest of the playground.

MARK: They have nice tone but they are not necessarily a pitch that's in tune with everything else and I have been experimenting long and hard with - see that's F4 - nearly F4.

SCOTIA: But the tin sitters and the other men of Sherlock will turn their minds to the problem, and I'm sure they'll find a creative solution.

MARK: It lights up the same parts of the human brain as any other creative experience does you know that. And it's practical it's deeply practical. But it rings the same bells as any other creative experience. Those creative experiences can work in many many different ways. They don't have to carry a big gold frame around them. You know they as long as you get that same kick. The fact that those kind of engineering creativity experiences are done together only kind of magnifies their value.

Creative Responders is an initiative of The Creative Recovery Network hosted by me, Scotia Monkivitch. Thanks to John, Kevin, Mark, Verity, Ian, Country Arts SA, and especially to John's wife Rosemary who made us a cup of tea and an amazing cake.

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Thanks for listening.