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Oral History - An Interview with Lillian Ford

An Interview with Lillian Ford

Interviewee: Lillian Ford
Interviewer: Pauline Curby
Date of Interview: 13 October, 1998

Q: You were born in England in 1909 and came to Australia, North Ryde, in 1912. You were only three but you were telling me beforehand that you remember that. Could we go right back and see what you do remember?

Well, I remember coming out on the ship. We were terribly crowded because it was all migrants. All paid migrants, they didn't come out like they did later on for ten dollars or whatever. They paid their fare. They would not allow them to travel as families. My father was segregated with the men on one part of the ship and my mother and the children were with other mothers in the other part. In our cabin, there were three women and eight children. They weren't very big. We were sleeping two to a bunk and six weeks it took.

Q: And you came from England?

We came from England.

Q: Any ideas why your parents decided to migrate?

Yes. My father was in the police force in England and he hated the cold and he decided to migrate. My mother was agreeable as long as he went to somewhere where she thought it would be alright. Well, he wanted to go to Canada but Mum said "if you go to Canada, it's just as cold", but anyway she didn't disagree with him. So we tossed up as to Canada or Australia. Luckily it came down as Australia. So that's why they decided to come out and they sold up everything over there and just came with their clothes and a few personal things you know that they wanted.

Q: Where you the only child at this stage?

No, my sister next to me. There was eighteen months between us. There were two of us. I was three and she was eighteen months when they came out. Anyhow, I can remember on the ship we had a horror of a steward. He used to always be boxing our ears. Oh, he was terrible. The children always had to eat separate from the parents and he was always trying to force this horrible stodgy porridge down my neck and I wouldn't eat it and he would box my ears and everything. I can remember that as plain as anything and I hated him. He had a white coat.

Q: You were only so little though, you think you would be with your parents all the time?

Oh well those sort of things…no, well we weren't you see, the children had to eat separately from the parents. Anyhow, as I say, he was a horror and I have never forgotten him. Anyhow, when we landed in Australia, it was in November and very hot and Dad when he left England, he had no idea…because he was a builder by trade but the building was pretty bad in England and that's why he decided to join the police force. Anyway, he came out here and he said to my mother, we got all the luggage off and he sat us on the wharf and I can remember that, the heat of that day. I mean a lot of things I can't remember but these things were impressed on my mind so much and the heat…and he said to my mum "now, you stay there with the children and I'll go and find us somewhere to live". And do you know how much he had in his pocket? Five pounds, that's all the money in a strange country.

Q: What wharf would you have come into I wonder?

Oh, Pyrmont. Pyrmont I think it was, or was it Circular Quay. I was never very sure about that because they all look alike you know. Anyway, he said to my mother "stay there". So while…we nearly roasted while…there was no cover overhead. I remember that because we had the blazing sun. Anyhow, of course he came back with a job and a place to live. The place was at Summer Hill…what's the main street in Summer Hill? Anyhow, they got half a house furnished. This lady let half a house furnished. So back we went there and coming out on the same boat was a mate of my fathers too by the name of Blow. He and his wife and one child and he got another half a house just up the road from us. Anyway, dad said…and we set off…and I don't remember the journey there. Going to this place but I remember being there just vaguely and the first night I was there I was nearly bitten to death by mosquitoes because my mother never knew anything about it because we didn't have those sort of things in England see. The landlady said put some citronella on her and that will stop them. She put the citronella on the bites that were…poison me and I had a face I believe. I remember the itches and that. I can remember feeling sore but I didn't realise how bad it was. Anyway, we were there for a few weeks and dad went to work as a carpenter he did first off. Then one night, I was in bed and I can remember this and I was itching all over. I couldn't stop scratching and I called out for mum, this is what mum told me, I called out later and I said I was itchy. She opened the bedclothes and I was covered in little black things and of course she called the landlady and the landlady said "oh, they're nothing they're only bugs, they won't hurt you."

Q: Could it have been fleas maybe?

No, they were bugs. Bedbugs and I was covered in them. So when dad came home that night my mother tore into him and said "get us out of this I don't care if it's a tent under a tree, get us out of this I've had it". So on the following weekend Dad and Mr. Blow together, she was dissatisfied with their lodgings too. They set off looking for a place. How they got to North Ryde I've got no

idea but I presume they went by train. Anyhow they went to an agent and this place you know where the Macquarie Shopping Centre is now that comes on to where our place was. Shrimpton's Creek went through when we were on this side and dad and…built this and they settled on this five acres and on it there were two log cabins.

Q: Did he buy it because you said he had five pound in his pocket?

Oh well, he had made a bit of money. He paid a deposit, he paid it off anyhow. It wasn't…I think he only paid about twenty pound or something for the lot.

Q: He wasn't leasing it?

No, no, he bought it and it had these two log cabins on it. One down near the creek and the other one up the side we were. So, they decided…Mr. Blow he said to dad "well you buy it and I'll buy the other off you and then we'll split it". So that's what they did and so then dad came home and he said to mum "well, I've found a place". Mum said "good, when do we move". He said "well you'll have to wait until we get a bit of furniture and that in it and then we'll…". So anyway and they did. Then he got it all and then he says to mum "out you go and I'll meet you tonight after work". Told mum where to go - to Eastwood station by train and then walk from Eastwood station to this…which was about three miles. Same from top Ryde whichever way we went it was about three miles. I think we were a little bit further from top Ryde, I think we were about three and a half mile but we always did it, I mean we had to for years, one or the other when we were children. So when we walked out, I can remember coming along this terrible road…because Balaclava Road, Eastwood at that time was just great big lumps of clay. Nobody ever worked on the roads or anything. I mean if they got big ruts in them, they stayed there until something heavy came along and flattened them a bit you know. I can remember stumbling along these. Mum was carrying Edna and anyway I can remember…and we got to Balaclava Road and I said I couldn't walk any more and I sat down. Mum said "no, have a little rest and we haven't got far now". Then we get to Herring Road and of course it was all uphill and to a child it looked to be never-ending. We got to Herring Road and on the top of the culverts there were big stones on them and I sat on them and I said "that's it, I'm not moving". Anyhow, we sat there for a while and mum said "Come on, we can go… you can walk a bit further. We've only got to go down there and up there." I can remember standing on top of that road and it looked like it was going forever. I've never forgotten that. It's so embedded in my mind you know. I thought "I'll never do it". Anyhow I did.

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I remember we got up to the place and I can remember my mother…she opened the door and I can remember standing there saying "oh dear, oh dear" I can hear my mother now. The reason was, slabs you know these slabs with cracks like that (a few centimetres wide) no linings, ceiling you could see the iron roof and that was their first home. When dad came home, mum was in tears. He said "look, at least you are out of where you were" and he said "don't worry, I'll fix it up". The next weekend or during the week he went out and he bought rolls of canvas and he lined it all with canvas and then painted it. He didn't pull it very tight because every time the wind blew it used to go bang, bang. Once, water came through the roof and it got in the canvas and the canvas dipped on us. We were sleeping…we only had the one bedroom…only two rooms mind…and we were sleeping here and mum and dad in the bed here and my sister were in this bed top to toe you know and the thing tipped one night and we got all drowned with the water from the leaky roof but that was our first home.

Q: Have you any idea who had built that or what it had been used for before?

Well, only what my mother told me afterwards that it was an old deserted farm and it was the original houses where they lived but apparently they were quite happy to live with the slabs as they were. The man…he was an old bachelor or something that lived there and he died and that's when it was on the market. I never heard his name or anything.

Q: You don't know what sort of farming he had done there?

Like most of North Ryde at that time, it was mostly little bits of orchard. We had a few old apple trees on the place and a row of loquats and fig trees. We had beautiful fig trees. I've never seen figs since as nice as our fig trees were. You know, it was evidently an old orchard, or part of it was but a lot of it was stone so I don't think he could have done too much cultivation like as far as…part of it like the middle part of it was alright. Where we were and top part it was all stone and then the bottom part was all stone but the middle wasn't. After a few weeks there, dad met up with another man that had come out from England by the name of Stewart and Ted Stewart used to be an Alderman on Ryde Council for years. He's dead now he died not so long ago. Well, his father wanted somewhere to live so the three men got together and built this little two room place in the middle, he got the middle part. So actually, the five acres in the end ended up between three.

Q: Did your father sell that little bit of land off?

Yes, to Stewart.

Q: So he never had any idea of working or doing farming. He kept his job and it was just somewhere to live?

No. And then dad got to be quite a well known builder. Actually, he built half the houses in Ryde, North Ryde, Eastwood and lots around Sydney. I can drive around Sydney and pick out the houses my father built. He was building for about twenty…and then my brother carried on for a while after dad died until he got sick of it and went bush. Dad was building there for thirty odd, forty years I suppose.

Q: Can you picture as a little girl what the routine was when you first settled in there. Shrimpton's Creek was nearby as you said, can you remember playing there?

Yes. How we ever didn't get drowned I'll never…because I never learnt to swim and that's the truth and we used to go along…get along the creek on bits of bark and play on the creek.

Q: Your mum didn't mind?

Mum didn't know. She didn't find out until we…because my mum lived to be a hundred and two and in her latter years we used to reminisce a bit you know and we used to talk and I used to tell her about the things and her hair would stand on end when I used to tell her. As you mentioned, Shrimpton's Creek…you know now Macquarie Shopping Centre is built here and that comes right over the top of Shrimpton's Creek. I was going through there one day and I said to the man…because there was a whole lot of men working there at the bridge down Waterloo Road…I pulled up and said "what are you doing" and they were putting pipes to take the creek through. They just had the pipes I suppose it would be as high as this table you know those big concrete pipes and I said "you're kidding" and he said "why". I said "those pipes will never take the water that comes down Shrimpton's". He said "oh yes, it'll be right". I said "I can tell you now it won't because I've seen this creek…" The bridge was here and by the bridge there were floodgates and they were about ten or fifteen foot high these floodgates and when the water came down they used to make the water level out so it wouldn't carry the bridge away. And I've seen those floodgates level with the water you know. We used to walk across the top backwards and forwards. Anyway, this fellow just wouldn't believe me. He said "no, this is only just a trickle". I said "that's now but when it rains I'm telling you this creek will go up to twelve/fifteen feet high". Anyway he wouldn't believe me so I thought it was none of my business. After they got it done and the Macquarie was finished they were only in it three months and lo and behold the fifteenth all the water came down right through Macquarie Centre, washed all the cars out, flooded all the shops out.

Q: How long ago was that I wonder?

Well, how long has Macquarie Centre been built? It's a few years now of course but that happened.

Q: They should have listened to people who had been around for a while.

That's right! But of course I didn't go back and say "I told you so", I didn't know who to go to anyway but I just knew they were making a mistake because I mean…have you been out that way at all? You see right the way along Shrimpton's Creek goes right through to Ryde nearly and there's a lot of hills and so-forth and a tremendous volume of water comes down there. Because we used to love it when it was in flood, it was thrilling you know and it would happen quickly. I mean you would get a thunder storm, a bad thunder storm you know and the water would come up in no time. But this man disbelieved me, he thought I was mad I think.

Q: Tell us the details of your household, no laid on water, no electricity, no facilities…

No water. We had a well right at the back door. We had a big old stone chimney there. It was solid as a rock and a fuel stove. We came out of the back door and this well was right at the back door with a wooden top on it which nine out of ten places at North Ryde had at that time and there were a lot of fatalities, children being drowned and everything and this one was the bain of my mother's life. But she used to use it as an ice chest and everything. She used to put jellies and butter and everything down in buckets in the well to keep them cool because it was always cool down there.

Q: Nice clean water?

Oh yes. Well it ran off the roof you see. There was a pipe that comes…like the gutters on the roof where there were gutters…they weren't all around…but that would come down and there was just a makeshift pipe and used to go into the well. She used to draw all the water that she needed for washing and bathing because we had no bathroom. We had one of those big old tubs you know the one with a handle each side. That was in front of the fire because that wasn't a daily occurrence I might tell you. Once a week but that's the way we were. Mum used to wash in the backyard with two kerosene tins over a thing in the backyard and she did that for I suppose two or three years before dad got around to improving the place a bit but he eventually did build another house there and pulled the old place down there and then we had septic. He put septic in and then we got the water and for years we just cooked with a fuel stove and dad…I don't know whether you ever say them but we had those kerosene stoves like there was four burners and they came up like a lamp with a wick similar to looking at gas only they had kerosene. We had two this side for cooking for pots and then two over the oven. Well we had that one for years and it was a bit of a menace because like the kerosene lamps the jolly wicks used to flare up and so-forth but it wasn't too bad. The cooking was a lot easier and then we got petrol lamps. You pumped them.

Q: Are they like kerosene lights?

Yes. They had a wick at the top and we had a couple of those. Then we got the electricity but it was years after we moved there before we got a…

Q: Do you remember how old you would have been when you got electricity?

Oh, I suppose I would be about twelve, easy.

Q: Meanwhile, your father would walk to Eastwood station each day?

No, he had a horse and sulky and then he bought in Eastwood a block of land there so he could keep the horse on it and then my grandparents came out from England and my grandfather was a painter so they used to travel every

day into Eastwood. They would leave before daylight in the morning… we never saw them hardly…and they would come home after dark.

Q: So they would hop on the train at Eastwood and go to…

Wherever they happened to be working.

Q: What impression do you have of your mother coping? Do you think she managed? Was she a big strong physical woman?

No. Mum was only small wasn't she Sam?

Q: Were you conscious of her being a hard worker?

She never complained. I never ever heard mum complain ever about…Another thing she had to contend with was snakes. I mean we used to get snakes in the house and everything because they used to come…because out the back of us was Ron's uncle's place (Ron Sayer's uncle - Tyrrells). They owned a place and it was…he never did anything with it, it was always bush and rocks and we used to get these great big snakes come up in the hot weather looking for water and that. It never upset her, I mean I could kill a snake in two minutes you know and mum was expert at it too but she was always worried about it because we had, at the side of the old slab hut, we had a beautiful big tree. It was a pine, sort of a big needle leaf pine - do you know that? In the hot weather mum used to put the babies, because she had four others after us, out under the tree. A couple of times she went out and found a snake because they smell the milk you know and that used to scare her a bit but she managed to dispense with it. Considering she came from a very…well in England it was an entirely different life altogether to what it was out here and of course she wasn't getting much help from her mother because her mother would always write and say she was terrified she was going to get killed by the blacks because that was the idea they had in England! Blacks were swarming everywhere ready to cut your head off any minute! She was always writing mum these letters.

Q: So it wasn't her mother that came out, it was your father's parents was it?

Yes.

Q: How old would you have been when they arrived?

Oh about seven or eight.

Q: So they stayed there?

Yes, dad built them two rooms, another two rooms separate from us.

Q: Was your grandmother of assistance to your mother or was she too elderly to help?

No. She wasn't and she never liked it our here and she was more or less an invalid from the day she landed. She was most unhappy.

Q: Your mother had an extra burden really rather than someone to help?

Yes and she was bedridden. Well, I was about twelve I suppose when my grandmother was bedridden and never got out of bed because I used to help mum look after her and it was very, very hard in those days to get a doctor because for doctors to come out and see you they had to drive out in a horse and sulky or something like that and they would only come up if it was absolutely…and poor old mum if she wanted a doctor for grandma she practically had to beg them to come you know.

Q: Of course there was the cost with no "Medicare". Unless they were in a lodge you would really have to fork the money out. Do you have any memory of whether your father was in a lodge for medical benefits?

What was the name of the thing we used to pay into Sam? Health Commission or something, what was it? We used to pay in sixpence a week I might add. No it wasn't MBF was it. What was it called? It had a name and that covered your doctor and your hospital.

Q: So was your father in something like that do you know?

Oh yes.

Q: They started in the 1930s?

Yes, well he would have been.

Q: Oh, they were around earlier?

Yes, oh yes because it was before 1920 and then dad used to pay any bills that came up. He just had to pay you know.

Q: Do you have any strong memories of the younger children being born. Were they born at home?

No. They were all born in St. Edmonds in Eastwood. You've heard of St. Edmonds? They've got it now as a drug rehabilitation place or something and that's where they were all born, all four of them. I can remember my mother…the first one…I'll tell you something funny too. She used to have a straw basket. It was about this long and about this wide and about that deep and when she'd go to hospital to have the babies all the gear and that was packed in that basket and done with two straps. When we saw that basket being brought out we knew there was another baby but that's the only reason.

Q: No-one ever told you anything or explained to you?

Not until the last one, my youngest sister who's dead now. She died a few years ago and my mother had her at 47, no 45 that's right. I can remember she wasn't well after that and I can remember her coming home from hospital and putting her in my arms and saying "you can look after this one" and I did.

Q: How old would you have been then?

I was fourteen and I looked after her.

Q: How did you take that responsibility, was that like a privilege for you or did you find it…?

Well, I just did it and stayed at…I never went to work, not out to work because…that was another thing when I was ready to go to High School there was no way of getting there other than walking backwards and forwards to Eastwood or Ryde and my mother wouldn't let me do it. But I went…at Marsfield school…

Q: Sorry, could I just get back to the baby for a minute. Was your mother breastfeeding. Do you remember?

She tried, but couldn't.

Q: So you had to get bottles organised?

Yes and I had to find something to feed her on too. Mum didn't have a clue what to buy because she breastfed the others and I got on to a thing called "Lacto" and I fed her on that.

Q: A little fourteen year old girl!

Oh, you've got no idea.

Q: And she thrived on that alright?

Oh yes. She got on quite well.

Q: Did you have a special bond with her then?

Yes. Always to the day…it was like when she died, it was like losing one of my own. She died with breast cancer. Anyway the only one, the rest of us are all alive. The other girls and my brother. We only had the one brother. He was the last in the family.

Q: What a big responsibility though.

Yes. Then my father, he was building as I say so then I took over all his bookkeeping and everything. Self taught because I didn't go to college or anything but I was self taught and I did all his bookkeeping and a lot of his other work you know, I did that and besides helping my mother. I took over all the housework and everything for mum because after Eileen was born, she wasn't that good for a long time. She came good in later years but she wasn't too good about that time.

Q: How did you feel at this stage? Did you feel you were missing out on something other girls your age were going out to work in offices or factories or where you quite content and accepted the situation?

Well, I accepted the fact that I had to…I did work for a while. I wanted to take nursing and I always liked it you know. I went to work for a while in a doctor's place. His wife died and he rang up because he was a friend of the family and asked my mother if I could go there and look after his little boy, he was only a little fellow, because he was fretting so much. He had a cook in the house but she was a tough old thing and wasn't a bit sympathetic to the child so I went to him. While I was there, I used to help him in his surgery and that too until he married again and then I left. There was a private hospital in Eastwood and the matron came to see me one day and asked me if I would go and work for her. She knew I was keen on doing this and she said that she would give me the preliminary training and then…because I wasn't old enough. I was only sixteen and that she would give me the preliminary training and then I could go straight ahead from there when I was eighteen because you had to be eighteen.

Q: To go into a public hospital?

Yes. But she threw me into the deep end. I mean I was even in the…because she mostly had the babies you know the maternity and I was expected to help in there and I'll tell you what! Anyway, I stayed there because I got…I was there I suppose about twelve months and then mum got really sick and I had to go back home.

Q: So at the age of sixteen you were there trying to help deliver babies or just on the sideline?

Oh yes. No. Help deliver them. You were in there with it.

Q: It turned you off the idea yourself?

Oh, I was never going to have any children. Oh jeez, I didn't like that messy business. I said "that's it".

Q: Can I just go back to school, right back to the beginning of starting at Marsfield Public School, how would you get there?

Walk.

Q: How far was that?

Oh, I suppose it would be a good mile and a half to two miles.

Q: Marsfield Public School is…?

It's not there now.

Q: Just refresh me on what road it was in.

Balaclava.

Q: That's right.

We used to walk to school in all weathers.

Q: It's interesting that your father's building work seemed to be going well during the Depression as that is one industry that was hit very badly by the Depression.

Yes. For a while but then things…the Depression lasted a few years. Well in the beginning, he was alright and then things tapered off. He had an old man that used to do some work for him. He was an old Italian by the name of…I don't think it was his real name…but his name was Green and he came from Eastwood and he had three sons. And this old Green reckoned that he had been up to a place out at Grafton, a place called Coopernook and he found gold there he reckoned and there was tons more. So Dad loaded up his truck with all the machinery about the place and he got old Green and there was another builder from Ryde…two other builders a Mr. Brown and what was the name of the other one? And they came along too with their truck and they went up to this place and apparently in this Coopernook was this great big waterhole. Well they had to pump all the water out of the waterhole before…they took pumps and everything. They went up there and they were going to make their fortune. Well they got the water all pumped out and then one night they had a terrific storm and the whole thing collapsed…took all their machinery away and everything else and filled the waterhole. So that was the end of that. So then they all came back home. Well then things started to pick up again and dad got more afterwards you know, after the Depression. It was a bad one though.

Q: Well for some people it did pick up but some people didn't have their first real job until the Second World War so it varies in what industry you were.

Well he always said…I can't even remember ever going without so he must have made a you know…been able to make a bit…Oh and he used to do a bit in the…we used to grow strawberries too around the place.

Q: So they were sold commercially?

Yeah. Oh well they used to take them into the markets into Sydney.

Q: A carrier would take them in?

Yes. Well he used to make a bit out of that and then I think he did a lot of alterations and that as things started to pick up a bit and building got into full swing again. Then he got going again but I can never remember us ever going without anything you know. I mean we didn't get luxuries and things but we were always…ate and all that sort of thing. A lot of families didn't.

Q: Then in your young married life you managed OK as well as you said your husband went to work for your father so you didn't really find it too difficult?

No. No. And we did alright and as I say we used to grow most of the stuff we had anyhow. We had cows, I had ducks, chickens and I mean…and always grew vegetables. Practically self supporting you know so it wasn't hard to live. It was…but some families had… Another thing we used to do in the Depression too, there were a lot of us like young people out there, we used to share. Like if I had a surplus of something, I'd share it with…and they might have something I didn't have and we sort of kept each other going like that. It was really quite, when I look back over it you know we sort of helped each other because everybody knew everybody you know. I mean there were no strangers, they'd all lived there for years and so-forth.

Q: During the Depression years, a few people have mentioned to me about homeless people down near the Lane Cove River living in humpies. Were they strangers?

Yes but they wouldn't have been locals, they would have been people coming in probably from perhaps lost homes and that but there weren't a lot of them. I don't remember…we used to go down there a lot. I don't remember a lot of them there. There used to be some.

Q: Jack Blackie mentions they would come out and pinch fruit.

Oh yeah. Because Jack was the younger generation, he was younger than us. Yes but he worked for my father.

Q: Oh did he?

And Bobbie Clayton. Do you know Bobbie?

Q: I've met him I think.

Well they were both apprentices with dad, Jackie and Bobby and another family that was out there, the Colsher's. Have you heard of them?

Q: No.

Well, they lived…they had a property there where the new M2 goes through. You know where the cemetery is? Well their property was just this side of that and facing onto…come right down onto Epping Highway. Well their property went ages ago, bought up by the government intending to put this road through. Well Bill Colsher, he worked for dad too and they were local boys you know.

Q: Would your father deliberately get local people for jobs. I suppose he wouldn't have to advertise would he?

Oh yeah. He always had two or three apprentices.

Q: Probably from families he knew?

Well, the boys to train them. But then he had his own team of bricklayers, his own team of other workmen. He always had…when he was going well, he always had enough work to keep them all going. Plumbers and so-forth because he did a lot of big work in Sydney too and he did a lot of country work.

Q: So besides house building, what other building did he do?

Oh, factories and during the War he did a lot of work for the government building these camps for the prisoners and so-forth. He did two big camps for them. One at Oberon, and one at Cowra. He also did one somewhere else. Where was the other one? I think he did some at Bathurst too where they used to take them to work.

Q: A lot of people have talked to me about this endless debate about the railway that never went through North Ryde that was going to go through St. Leonards to Eastwood…

From the time we went to live out there, that railway was on the cards you know and it's still not there.

Q: So what sort of things did you hear about it?

Oh, there was…every new government that got in, they were going to do it. They got in on the promise they were going to build this St. Leonards to Epping railway! I can remember that from the time I was a little child you know and it never eventuated, and still hasn't. Then Mr. Spooner came in as a member of parliament and he was a friend of my father's. He said this railway is "no good. What we want is a good expressway right from Epping to Sydney". So he worked on that and that's what they got.

Q: The Spooner Highway which is now Epping Road. Ron Freeman told me that his family used to say the Sutherland-Cronulla railway was built instead of your railway.

Probably.

Q: But did you ever hear people say that. I don't think that's true but he said that was the thing that people said?

Well, they were always saying that, yes. If there was something…….

Q: The first car you saw was your father's?

Well, one of the first and he came home with this car and it was one with a canvas hood you know open at the sides. We used to have to put the canvas bits on the side in wet weather you know and pin them up. He came home and he bought…he went and had three lessons to drive it and he was a most atrocious driver until the day he died, dad. Oh, he was a shocker! Anyway he came home and he said "right we're all going for a picnic to Bobbin Head". Do you know Bobbin Head?

Q: I certainly do, it's quite a distance from North Ryde.

And the road was about that wide. So the first day dad…and I can tell you he only had one gear on the car because he never used low gear or anything and he went down Bobbin Head with all of us in the car at top speed. I don't think he knew how to …

Q: Quite steep?

We made it. We went down to Bobbin Head because he had a boat down there. He built a boat and put it… and then he had a bigger one.

Q: A sailing boat?

No. They had motors on them and he used to keep it there because he loved the water, he loved fishing, dad. We used to go down to Bobbin Head a lot. Well the first one, it was too small so he got rid of that and then he bought a bigger one with a cabin that slept seven. We used to go down there and stay but then the War broke out…

Q: So the car, was this before you were first married this car?

Oh yes.

Q: So that was probably in the 1920s. Quite early for someone to have a car?

Oh yes. As soon as they came out.

Q: So he was doing well wasn't he?

Yes, he got this car as he was a bit sick of the horse and cart! And then of course he could drive to wherever his work was you see without having to go by rail.

Q: No wonder he supported Eric Spooner and the Highway.

Yes. Well that's right it was more in his interest to have a good road than to have a railway. Anyway he bought that and then he bought a truck and I can remember the first truck he bought. We called it 'Old Bertha' because it was an old thing - a second-hand old thing you know. It was, oh it was shocking. I learnt to drive on that and I was only fourteen or fifteen, fifteen or sixteen I think when I learnt to drive and I used to go out on the road and all. I never had a licence…of course I was too young to get a licence.

Q: So who taught you? Hopefully not your father.

Well, he showed me where the gears were and I taught myself but I used to drive around the yard shifting timber and all that sort of thing. That's what he bought it for more than to go anywhere. Well, we had that old truck for years and then someone pinched it which was the best thing that ever happened. I don't know what they wanted it for but he got it back but it was all wrecked. He lost two vehicles like that - trucks. A brand new one and a…he found the other one burnt out at somewhere out near…where was it? Somewhere where they found it burnt out, some bush somewhere.
Husband: (He loved his pipe didn't he)
Yes, he loved his pipe, dad. He always used to sit and smoke a pipe.

Q: Now, you have mentioned Eric Spooner and of course he was a member of the U.A.P. which was a forerunner for the Liberal Party. Did you feel your father had strong political ideas?

Yes, with them. I'll tell you something, you've heard about De Groot? (A New Guard who opened the Harbour Bridge). As a matter of fact under Jack Lang my father nearly went bankrupt. I don't know whether you heard but he closed the bank of New South Wales and wouldn't let anybody take any money out. It was the Bank of New South Wales dad was in, yes.

Q: He was in dispute, we had to pay loans back to foreign …

Oh, he made a mess of a lot of things but anyway dad…

Q: Some people regarded him as a hero of course?

Oh yes but he was related to my sister-in-law. He was her husband's uncle and she said he was the biggest so-and-so that ever walked. She reckoned if he could look after his own home he would have been better off because he had a mistress in about four houses. Oh, he was an old doer I tell you, old Jack Lang. My sister-in-law, her husband's mother's, his sister - Jack Lang's sister and they didn't have much time for him I tell you. Anyway, when he closed the bank and dad had all his money in there you see, in this one bank. And I'd said to him a few weeks before because we'd heard rumblings you know and I was doing dad's books at the time. I said why not split it and go to the Commonwealth Bank too, put some in the Commonwealth Bank. "Oh" he said "I've always been with this one and I've found it alright" and he wouldn't listen. I wanted him to put up half his money like his working capital in the Commonwealth but he wouldn't. Anyway, he got caught and of course he paid all his bills and he couldn't get any money to pay the men and I tell you it was a really bad time. However, he managed to get through it. I don't know how he managed but he did.

Q: They didn't lose their money, it was just stopped?

Oh no. It was tied up and they couldn't touch it. Well what happened was I think he was starting to get a run on it and I think he was frightened that they were going to crash.

Q: What were you going to say about De Groot?

Well, my father…this De Groot thing started up see and this fellow he was going to get rid of him. I don't know what he was going to do but he always used to ride around on a horse…

Q: De Groot?

Yes. And he was military man, always dressed up as a real military style fellow you see. Well he started up all these different bodies in all areas and there was one out at North Ryde. They used to meet down in the bush and my poor mum, I can see her now. She used to get worried sick that they would get caught.

Q: Oh, your father was in it?

Yes and so was every other man around.

Q: Interesting, because this was like a fascist organisation.

Absolutely.

Q: In Italy and Germany of course.

Similar.

Q: Which is why they were hanging around in the bush?

Yes that was why they were hiding in the bush but they were going to bring Jack Lang down you see which eventually I think they did.

Q: Sir Philip Game the Governor sacked him.

Yes, but I think it was through this other err…through this organisation and of course dad used to go out to these meetings at night and poor old mum she was always sure he was going to get killed or something. She used to beg him not to go but he did. I can remember quite clearly about that.

Q: What sort of other people were in it?

Mostly businessmen. They were mostly business people and people that were being hurt by Jack Lang's government.

Q: Would some of those market gardeners been in it to?

Yes. Some of those would have been in it too. They'd have all been in it. I didn't actually know this because I mean I didn't…Dad never talked about it, he never ever…I think he purposefully kept it all to himself so that if anything happened mum and…wouldn't get involved you know.

Q: People have found out since there was all talk of secret armies and all sorts of things.

But they never got to that. They weren't armed or anything like that.

Q: Do you know how long your father was in that?

Oh well, a few years until I think Jack Lang was sacked and then of course it disbanded because there was no reason for it.

Q: 1932 he was sacked.

I'm not sure but I think it would have been around about that time.

Q: Do you remember that day when the Harbour Bridge was opened?

Yes.

Q: What did your father say, do you remember his reaction.

"Good on you" I think he said I've forgotten now what he said but of course dad and that knew the plan but he never told us. They were very secretive actually. They never ever talked about it you know. What they did or anything like that. That's what used to worry my mother. She didn't know whether they were secretly armed or what they were because he never told any of us. He never got us involved in it at all. Never did. None of the men did. It was just themselves so that there would be no trouble caused for their families if they could avoid it you know if they did get caught.

Q: You were a young woman at this stage, did you have any strong political ideas yourself or did you just follow with what your family believed?

No. I was always…I always used to work with the Liberal Party like it is now. I always used to work with them because I liked the men that were running it and I used to work with them. For Anderson, I used to go and work on election days for him and Spooner, I did it for him and of course in those days too we used to drive people up who couldn't go and vote - we used to drive them there. I always think of the woman "England" who used to live next door to us. Dad said "go and pick Mrs. England up, it's a long way for her to walk" and in the end she'd say "I'm coming in your car but I'm not voting for you". And he said "I don't care who you vote for, we're just giving you a lift". She was like that, she'd rub it in you know.

Q: A lot of the Labour people wouldn't have had cars to go and pick voters up of course.

They never offered. It was always the Liberal people that used to…it never made any difference if people wanted to…

Q: Eric Spooner is quite an interesting character because of the job creation schemes that he created during the depression…

He was a very good politician.

Q: What are your memories of him personally. You said you worked for him. Did you know much about him as a person?

Yes. He was a very nice man. A very quietly spoken man. There was nothing bombastic about him but he was a genuine people's man I would say, Eric Spooner.

Q: Even though this was later on, did he have New Guard sympathies?

No. He was never involved with that not to my knowledge. I don't think so, no. I don't think he would be in anything like that. Well I mean I never ever heard him mention anything like that and I was in his company quite a lot. He was

very…always trying to improve the lot of the average man, Eric Spooner. He didn't have big ideas. I don't think he went into Parliament intending to come out a millionaire like a lot of them do Labour or Liberal you know. I mean he was a genuine politician and old DM was too but he was a bit different. He was… D.M. Anderson, he was…I don't know. He used to have funny ideas and things but I don't think he was as capable at carrying out the ideas as Eric Spooner was.

Q: Relief work was done all over Sydney under Spooner schemes at Cronulla, everywhere not just the Ryde area.

Oh, well everywhere. Well he was a member of Parliament, so anywhere. No, he was quite good like that. He always tried to help the underdog and so-forth you know. He was a very good politician as I say.

Q: Can you remember the actual Spooner Highway being built?

Oh yes I can remember it well.

Q: Can you remember it cutting through people's properties?

Well, it didn't really, it didn't. Because it followed the road from Epping to Marsfield school and then the road used to come then around Balaclava Road and down Waterloo Road if you wanted to go further. The bit between Balaclava Road and Herring Road, there were two poultry farms there. They were Wilton's Poultry Farms. They were there and then on the other side there was orchards. Well they sort of just cut through part of the poultry farm and the orchards.

Q: Whose poultry farm was it?

Wilton Brothers. It ran right through, the poultry farm, right through from Balaclava Road to Herring Road. They owned the whole lot. One brother was this…Archie was here and William was here, they had their house and then they worked the whole thing. It was a very big poultry farm.

Q: You don't remember any problems with land being resumed or protests?

No. No there were no protests. They welcomed it actually I think. And then there was a bit taken from the other side.

Q: Was that when Paul Street was cut in two?

Yes. Well see Paul Street ran there and they had to come down from Herring Road but that was all bush. That was no problem from Herring Road down to Shrimpton's Creek and then Paul Street sort of come down along there. There was no problem and of course the rest of it followed the road through. That road was there.

Q: What was that road called before the Spooner Highway?

Lucknow Road.

Q: You said it was made of concrete as a lot of the depression built roads were.

Yes. They built the whole of the Spooner Highway with concrete as far as Lane Cove. Then of course it joined onto the road to…that was all established road but they only had to take it through Lane Cove from Epping to Lane Cove and that was all concrete.

Q: Do you remember people getting relief work on that road?

Oh, I would say there would have been yes because they employed quite a lot but they used to do it in bands you know. When it was first built we used to go crook because they left a join and it was a bump for a long time.

Q: In the middle?

Yes. Like they would do a strip and they would put this band there. Well you were constantly going as you were driving…you were driving over this…bumps you know. It was interesting when that was being built. It was a great thing I tell you when it was finished. I think by the time they finished it, I think the War was on. The Second World War started.

Q: Just about I think in 1939.

Yes, I think they finished the Spooner Highway when the War broke out because I know it hadn't been up very long. I used to have to…because when I first started working on the buses when the War broke out…you see my husband…I was left with two children and I had to work.

Q: Had your husband been killed?

Yes, he was killed on the corner of Cox's Road and Lane Cove Road. I was six months pregnant with my youngest one so when she was old enough I had to go to work because I had no money. We hadn't been long in this place we were in and I applied for a widow's pension…the police came around and they applied for me but Jennifer was three months old before I got it so there was six months when I didn't have anything. It always amuses me and then when she was twelve months old I had to go to work. The day I started work they took it off me that's how quick they took it off but it took them six months to give it to me. It was only two pounds a week or something but still it would have been handy. Anyway when I had to go to work, we weren't allowed to work when we wanted to. You were directed into various things.

Q: This is in relation to the manpower situation because of the War?

Yes and I mean I was offered a job in a fruit shop in Ryde and they said they wouldn't let me do it. They said no but I had to go where I was…because I wasn't that old, you see, I was young. The first job they offered me was munitions at St. Mary's. Well you know where St. Mary's is up near Penrith. I would have been about three hours travelling up there and three hours getting home so I said no I wouldn't do that. Then they wanted me to go to Melbourne for aircraft and train as a supervisor. I said "I can't, I've got two children". Then they said the only other thing is we are going to start and put the women on the buses to replace the men, what about that?

Q: Men had always been the conductors before that.

They never had any women on them. So I said I'll see, I might be able to manage that and mum was going to help me with the children to look after them when I wasn't there. My mother's hair stood on end she said "you can't do that, that's a man's job". I said "it's a man's job but I can do it".

Q: She was worried that there would be rough passengers?

Oh, everything, yes. I said I can handle it and she said "oh, I don't know whether you will". What appealed to me too, we got men's wages. You see that was the condition that they put us on that they had to pay us men's wages. Then again we didn't get any kid glove treatment you know. We had to do what the men did and put up the same as what the men did, worse actually. So that's what I did. I went down for the interview and they directed me, manpowered me into it.

Q: Government buses?

Government. To replace the men you see.

Q: Would you come along the Epping Highway or all sorts of routes?

Yes. Everywhere. Wherever was needed and I ended up on Epping because after you have a certain amount of seniority you can pick where you went. I stayed on for thirteen years.

Q: Did you enjoy the work?

I did until one morning when I woke up and I thought this is it, I'm not going any more. So I went in and resigned. They said "what are you resigning for?" I said "because I'm not going to die on this job". I'd had it. The depot must have said take sick leave three months off have the holiday and then come back. They didn't want me to go because at that time too they were going to put woman on permanently driving and I could drive because we had to learn to drive a bus in case of emergencies but they were bloomin' old buses. I mean

the ones they drive now are like Rolls Royce's. I would have loved to have driven one.

Q: It didn't appeal to you driving old buses?

Oh, they were shockers.

Q: How did you manage with the children? You said your mother had to help. Did you take them over to her place in the morning?

No. What I did I went down and lived with her and I let my sister live in my house. At that time my dad was sick too and I was helping mum with him and I went and stayed down with her and the children went to school and they were alright. There were seven years between my two so the older one was able to help look after the little one. We managed alright but I wouldn't have managed without my mother. I don't know what I would have done but I had to go to work because you had no choice. Anyhow, we got through life.

Q: What are your comments on the community of North Ryde over the years?

Did you see a lot of changes over the years or were you looking at a rural community that was changing to the suburbs even between the War.
No. It didn't until after the War. The biggest thing to happen to North Ryde was the army camps like during the War but prior to that it was just the same place. It never changed for years, same people lived there. If you saw a new house going up it was a real thing but no, really it wasn't until the war that it changed at all. Where the army camps were you see they turned those into housing estates afterwards and the first of the army camps was opposite Frew's Garage. They were mostly built by English migrants and they came out here as builders like from overseas and so-forth and if they built four houses they got one and somebody else got that.

Q: Where was that camp?

You know, in Twin Road.

Q: I'm thinking of the one in Blenheim Road.

Well, that went right through.

Q: Oh, it's the same one you are talking about?

Yes. It went right through. Mrs. Wells but then she didn't have an orchard. It was mostly vacant land there and it went right through and they put this through for the trucks mostly the army trucks that were there. And all the boys that were there and of course I got to know quite a lot of them of course during the War because they were…they got to be regulars you know. I used to write to some of them, they were being sent away. Some of them came back, some of them didn't.

Q: Did the School of Arts at that stage have functions for them?

Yes but North Ryde never really changed.

Q: Even places like Gouldings Hill Estate sounded to me like the first of a suburban sub-division?

It did. Between Ryde and North Ryde, see. That's where the first settlement of early houses started. Down Macquarie Road. You see Macquarie Road was all bush. Well they started to build houses right down there and right at Lane Cove Road and there were new roads going off, new roads. Then the golf course. The golf course…that belonged to Nell's ??? first wife's family. They owned all that area.

Q: What was the family name?

The Heard's family and then at the other side were Bensons. Bensons came there. Then the school, then the church of England and then there was the two storey shop which is still there. That was the only shop then. Coffey Roberts…but he wasn't the first. When we were children, he used to deliver our groceries from there. His name was Mr Goodall and he used to bring our groceries. He used to come out and take our orders one day and deliver…we used to get everything delivered out there.

Q: It's still very much a rural community. Were there any people like your father who had a block of land but weren't using it as a farm and were commuting to work?

Oh yes, although most people used to work the land a bit, like self-supporting and that but it would be orchards and poultry farms. A lot of poultry farms there. See down the other end of Waterloo Road, there was Pool's - they had a big poultry farm there. Then around the corner there were Markwell's. They had a big poultry farm. There was mostly…and then up on the hill at Lane Cove Road there were Martindale's and Thompsons. They had poultry farms. See, it was mostly a poultry farming area.

Q: You are old enough to remember before the Depression. Did you feel these people were doing it tough then, the poultry farms and the orchards? It doesn't sound like a very lucrative life even before the Depression?

No. Well it was like this. They would have a lovely season with a good crop and the next thing a fierce hailstorm would come down and wipe the lot out. Same with the chicken farms. They used to get their chickens wiped out with hailstorms. Kill the chickens because you know when the chickens are in sheds…they don't have them like they do now, they had runs and they were free to come and go. Well as soon as the hailstorm was on, the noise on the roof of the tin shed the fowls would all run out and they would all get killed.

Oh, I've seen poultry farmers pick up dozens after a hailstorm. We used to get a lot of those.

Q: So you think even after those big changes after World Ward II with the Housing Commission and the War Service homes, do you think they would have kept going even if those changes hadn't occurred?

No. Markwell's went right through and Thompsons were a long time after the War, the Thompson family because there was a big family of Thompsons. He kept his.

Q: Jacob's. Did you know the Jacobs?

Oh, that's out at Marsfield, yes. Well they were very big poultry farmers but then they had properties in the country too. They had that to back them up. They had a big property where my brother bought a property out at Glen ?????? and they used to work…a lot of their stock went out there. They had turkeys there too. Around Marsfield there were more orchards and gardens except the Wilton's and Christies. Christies had a big poultry farm too. It was sort of a mixture of poultry farmers and orchards. Both Marsfield, Eastwood and North Ryde, right into Ryde and then from Ryde it changed. From Ryde down to this side down towards Putney and all that it was more or less residential and West Ryde was more residential.

Q: Do you remember the Chinese Market Garden sort of fading out or leaving. Do you have memories of when they left?

Yes. They gradually got pushed out with the development and so-forth. There was a big Chinese market garden at Quarry Road and Lane Cove Road. That was a very big Chinese garden. Well that went first because they built all houses on it.

Q: I get the impression they had leases rather than owning any land?

No. Most of them…well, the Chinese garden next to the School of Arts that belonged to Bill Cox. See it was part of his property and he leased so many acres to the Chinese you see and he did the market gardening on it but they didn't own it - the Chinese. They weren't allowed to buy, see the Chinese couldn't buy. They had to lease because they were only here for a limited time. They were only given permits to live here I think. Five years at a time and then they had to apply I think.

Q: Because of the so-called White Australia policy.

Oh yes, yes.

Q: And those ones next to the School of Arts I noticed you mentioned before they had women there but not Chinese women. Are you talking about prostitutes or people living with them?

Prostitutes. Oh, there was one there we used to call her ‘Skinny Mary’. She was as thin as…I’ve never seen anybody so thin in all my life and she was about 5’ 8". Thin and she was always dressed up to the nines and she would periodically appear there see. Well she used to drink and when she got drunk he used to lock her outside.

Q: The Chinese fellow?

And we could hear of a night-time…our bedroom window overlooked the Chinese garden and you’d hear her saying "you dirty stinking Chinaman, me a lady and you’re treating me…." "Me a lady", this used to get my husband…he used to roar with laughter. "Me a lady and you treat me like this" you know. But he would lock her out until she sobered up and then he would let her back in.

Q: She would visit, like she would be a working prostitute in town say and come out every so often?

Yes, then she would stay there with him. She might stay there…

Q: What sort of people were they. Did you have much to do with them?

Yeah very nice. They were always very, very polite and nice and they were never any trouble. They were very good citizens actually. There was never any trouble with them.

Q: Someone told me that he used to work in a hardware shop and go and do deliveries and he reckoned that the smell was unbelievable?

Oh, yes.

Q: He said it was poor living conditions.

Yeah, oh very. They weren’t fussy how they lived I mean there was no…bare floors and they always smelt of fertilisers and things you know…the garden. I don’t think they washed too often and then they used to smoke their opium pipes and that’s very a very strong smell. Very strong but there was no law against them smoking. Evidently they were entitled to do it if they wanted to you know.

Q: There was never any trouble?

Oh, no. The only trouble was when ‘Skinny Mary’ came! She used to cause a bit. But no, the men themselves were very hard working. Worked from daylight to dark. No they were never any trouble, they were good citizens really. There

was never…I mean people used to say to me "aren't you frightened of living next to Chinese?" I'd say "why, they're alright". It never worried me.

Q: What was their English like? Did they converse with you?

Yes. It was broken English but you could understand them. I remember one time, it was before Shirley was born and I was eight months pregnant that's right. There was some fellow…I was working in the Library one day and this fellow came in and he was mentally retarded. Big boisterous fellow and he must've taken a fancy to me.

Q: An Australian?

Umm. And he lived down Waterloo Road. His mother used to send him up for books. Anyhow he must've taken a shine to me or something, I don't know why. He broke in and tried to get to me one night. So, one afternoon rather when I was up in the flat. I wasn't in the Library, I was upstairs and he tried to get in. He had an iron bar and I thought he was going to break the door down. So I called out to the Chinaman out the back. I used to call him Charlie. I said "Charlie, come here" out of the window see to get me help but old Charlie was just waving to me. He's not taking any notice so the people who lived in the shop, she heard me and she came down and got rid of him and told him she would call the police if he didn't go. Anyhow we reported him to the police and his mother had to get him shut up. It was a shame because he was just a bit simple you know but I was a bit frightened because he was such a strong fellow you know. The shock of it set me off early and I had my baby that week.

Q: Did you go to hospital. You wouldn't have had them at home. Which hospital?

I went to a private hospital at West Ryde run by one nursing sister. She was good, very good but she was overworked too much you know but the second one, Jennifer, I had her in Ryde hospital.

Q: At Denistone House by which time it had become a public hospital?

Yes.

Q: We've talked about a lot of things and I don't want to wear you out. Are there any other things before we finish?

No, no. You ask me any question you like. I'll answer them if I can you know.

Q: There's nothing else you would like to add Mrs. Ford. I would like to thank you very much for giving me your time and your memories of North Ryde on years gone by.

If, there's anything else you want me to answer after, I will.

END OF INTERVIEW