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ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

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TITLE: Mary White as a member of the Australian Women's Land Army (AWLA), 1942-1945, interviewed by Sue Hardisty

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Mary White as a member of the Australian Women's Land Army (AWLA), 1942-1945, interviewed and recorded by Sue Hardisty on 29 March 1985 at Christies Beach, South Australia.

Mary, could you tell me just a bit about your life before you joined the Land Army, what you were doing, where you lived?

Well, we lived in Prospect, which is three miles from the GPO in Adelaide — just three miles. We had it explained to us that we lived in the best place in Australia by our father. He'd been a shearer and he'd been all over Australia, and he'd chosen Adelaide. He said there were several reasons — mainly because we had nine months of lovely weather, three months of cool, and then he said, 'Also you've got deep drainage; the sewers are here.' That used to really impress him, that there was a city that had sewerage. He'd come from New Zealand — from the bottom end of New Zealand, Invercargil. So we had a great love of country. Mother's people had come from Ireland and settled in the Flinders and bought a lot of land. Our great grandfather, her grandfather, had gone off to the goldfields and come back with money — oh, very thrilled to have this money so that he could go and buy this part of South Australia that he'd seen that looked so like Ireland. And of course he'd seen it when it was green and beautiful, and it was up in the Flinders, mainly rock — poor darling.

He gave a big swag of land to the Catholic church in the town where he'd left to go to the goldfields — Saddleworth. That's lovely land. And to think he left Saddleworth and went up into the Flinders — oh dear. But anyway they're still there on the land. We used to go back for holidays and all of us loved it there.

What did you do in the country when you visited?

Well, my father had been a shearer and he'd go back. He worked at the abattoirs, you know, sort of a settled life. He'd take a holiday and go shearing up to the Flinders. He do some shearing just to get out in the country, and we would all go and stay on the farm while he did his thing.

Did you see the sheep-work and things like that?

Oh, yes. My sister worked behind a counter when they began to organise and tell you that 'you must do something'. It looked as if she'd have to go in and work. Because she had no other training but behind a counter in a local shop on Prospect Road, it looked as if she'd have to go in and work in a munitions factory or join one of the women's services. She was horrified at the thought of that. I was 16. And one of our neighbours said that she was going to go grape picking. She had this cottage that we could

all stay in and work on the vineyard — this particular vineyard that was owned with the house. I think they supplied our linen and our very meager furnishings and furniture. But we had to supply our own food and everything. We used to just go out and work on this vineyard — right there it was — and it must have been a very mild summer too because —

Where was the vineyard?

That was at Loveday, just out of Barmera. So we sort of went and tried it first.

What year would that have been?

That would have been late ‘41. We worked through into ‘42, picking grapes around that district. We were there quite a long time.

Was that under the auspices of —

No, no. It wasn’t under the auspices of anything. She had just known — this neighbour of ours knew somebody that had this cottage that was available. Her husband was in the Middle East and, at that stage, they hadn’t heard from the men for a long time. Certainly she would have been on an allowance for a serviceman’s wife. She had two children and it was Christmas holidays, you see. But the children

went to school there. We stayed long enough for them to enroll in a school, and we just worked around there. I don't think we cut apricots. I think all we did was pick grapes.

Which children did you have?

This woman had two children. So we saw what it was like before. As I say, I think we struck a lovely summer. I can't remember it being very hot.

What did your parents think about you going away?

Well, they could see that Eileen didn't want to go into the munitions factory. She was older than I by 15 months was, but she was very shy. I was more confident. Nothing worried me. I think they thought that as long as the two of us were together — well, my father said, 'As long as the two of you go together, it'll be all right, you can join any service.' And that's why I think, because we had this background of him having come from the farm and my mother from the farm and going back to the farm for the shearing every now and again, that the Land Army seemed so obvious to us — although it wasn't called Land Army, it was some —

Women's War Service Council?

That’s right, Women’s War Service something or other. I don’t know whether it was ‘council’. But anyway you had to volunteer to go for it. I don’t think at that stage there was any talk of supplying us with anything. We just took our own working boots and hats and overalls, and off we went.

Did they give you the name of an employer to go to?

Well, at that very first stage we went to this person that had supplied the cottage. Then, when we came back after that harvest, well, we were prepared; we didn’t care what part of the state we went to. Well, we didn’t care if we were sent interstate. But we went in and saw this Women’s War Service Council. And the first job was the six months we put in down here on the flax. That was really something, because it was the wettest winter South Australia had had for I don’t know how many years now; I think it was something like 25 years. It seemed that you’d look up and here comes another rainsquall. But it was lovely. You’d just turn your back on it because there were no shelters. I think in the end they did give us some sort of — it was like a canopy off a truck that they used to take off and leave there for us to go in and have our lunch. But that was getting towards the end of that first

six months. For the rest, we'd just put stooks of flax up and make a shelter and go in behind it to have our lunch. And the rest — well, there wasn't enough shelter to worry about stopping. You just kept going, kept working.

Did you have raincoats on?

Oh, we did, but you bought them yourself. They were many and varied, yes. And of course if it rained, if the morning was just so wet that you didn't get a start, well then you didn't get paid, you see, or if you had to knock off you were docked. And we all had to pay. I think it was something like — oh, I've forgotten what we use to pay. I think it was 26 — I'm not sure whether it was 26 shillings or whether it was 36. It wouldn't have been 36, no. It must have been for full keep. You got your bed, your breakfast and your lunch and your evening meal. I think we used to pay 26 shillings. But we didn't get very much. We got about £3 a week, I think.

Who did the cooking and so forth?

Well, at Macleod House of course they had their own staff because it really was a boarding house. But in the winter they wouldn't have any — well, very few guests. So it was taken over for the whole winter.

They must've been glad to see us, I should say, for the whole winter.

Was that the flax season?

That's the flax season. You see, you had to go out in the weather. After it's harvested, it must lie out in the rain and the weather for six weeks. Yes, I think it'd be about six weeks, and of course now it grows in houses. But there were great fields and fields and fields of flax lying out, doing what they call gretting. You had to come along and you'd spread it all out in great long straight lines, miles of it — it seemed like anyway — chains and chains of it. You'd have your area and you'd meet up with that girl. She'd be coming this way, and then you'd go back a row and lay it and spread out another lot. And it would be lying there for a while — oh, I don't know, about a fortnight I think — and you'd have to go back over that field with a long stick. You'd turn over the first row, and you'd have your stretch to do, and then you'd turn over the next row, and that'd have to lie on the other side and stay for so many weeks. Then you'd have to come along and bundle it all up again. Oh dear, into the factory it'd go and into the mill. Of course, in those days they had no nylon, so that was for the parachutes for the forces.

Did the Land Army girls work in the mill?

No, no. They were always away. I seem to think that it was all men, and the local girls worked with us in the fields. But I think the mill itself was all men, and they'd be local older men. You didn't see much in the way of youngsters. We did have one rather badly crippled lad that used to work with us. And children from the age of 14 to 16 or 18 would be out there. They'd leave school and work for the winter in the fields. But there were two houses of us, one at Macleod House at the bottom of the hill there. That was right at the end of the jetty. And we had, as I say, the wettest winter, and in the old days the jetty went as far — it goes out now to the reef. Well, it used to go far beyond the reef for the boats to come in. Right out it used to go. And I went out for a walk along it one really wild day. I think there were two of us and we were laughing in the wind. We got to the end of it and turned around and came back, fought our way back, and we went upstairs and looked out our bedroom window and the jetty had gone; it had just gone. I mean, you can imagine. Our mouths — I can just imagine. I've often thought, well, if somebody had taken a photograph, we just stood there. I looked at her, and I can't even remember which girl it was now but both of us were just standing there gaping — no jetty, and we've just been for a walk along it. Boy, it was a

wild day that one. That was on a weekend — well, it mightn't have been. It may have just been too bad to go to work. I can't remember really.

So how old were you when you went up to that first grape-picking job?

I wasn't quite 16. I turned 16 while we were in that first job.

So had you been at school?

No, I had been to business college the year before. Yes, I was supposed to be going to work in an office, but I never got there.

Do you remember any discussion about continuing or not?

What, at school?

Yes, at the college.

Well, it was this question of what was Eileen going to do. She was just so down about the thought of having to go and work in a munitions factory because of the thought of being closed in all day, after having been in a shop with a lot of people to talk to. And we just knew that you stood in one spot and

you worked away. I mean, that must have been a terrible time for the women to go in there, from having been housewives and mothers to going and have to stand there for hours and just do that terribly repetitive work. And that was our worry, what she was going to do. You knew that, if you went into a factory, that's what you'd have to do.

Do you remember how you felt about not continuing at the business college?

Well, I loved school. I'd have gone on for the rest of my life if they'd let me or if they'd had the money. But no, I didn't like the business college so that probably helped. I didn't particularly like that part of schooling. I found typing awfully boring. I did get a little job for about, oh, a few weeks. Somebody was on holiday and they sent you out from the college for relief jobs. I went into this office and it was probably the worst thing I ever could have done. We stood there and we sat there for hours on end copying out agreements, great long lists. There'd be a shop for sale and it was what the shop had in it and the agreement between the vendor and the — oh, they were just so boring, these wretched things that I had to type. I mean, now they have machines that just off in a second and copy them. But we used to have to type three and four copies of this wretched thing.

Did you have any other brothers or sisters?

I had a very much younger sister. She was seven years younger than me, and my brother was 15 months younger than me. So he would have been still at school when I went in first — when we first went away. And then, see, he didn't get into the army until it was occupational forces at the end of the war. He never went away during the war. My sister didn't go into the services at all. She was home with our parents all the time. She worked in dental nursing after school.

So what work did you do under the women's war service; what jobs did you have then?

Well, I think it was just the flax.

At Morphett Vale?

At Morphett Vale, yes. Then we went and did this pea picking, and that was at Reynella. The farmer's still there actually. This land that you see still being farmed is the same family. Lemon was their name, and they owned this cottage. We used to just — nobody lived in it for the rest of the year. We used to come back each year and clean it all up and go in and batch in there, and one of us would have to cook

the meals. I know I always made the same squeezy stuff when I was on duty — a mix of barleycorn or something. I am not sure just how you did it, but I know it was extremely simple because I'd never cooked anything in my life.

How many girls batched there together?

I really can't remember, because they had a lot of local girls that used to come. I think it was only eight or nine of us that would be there.

Was there any matron or supervisor?

No, no, we did that. Of course it was terribly isolated, miles — well, it wasn't miles, but there was no real road into it. It was only a track.

How did you get there?

Well, Mr Lemon came and would pick us up in town with all our bits and pieces to start the job. And then we used to have to hike off over the hills to the railway line at Reynella to go out to go home for the weekend. But when you wanted to buy the food — I can remember when I was on duty, I used to have to walk into town and I used to buy sausages because that was the only thing I knew how to cook. And then it was back over the hills to put them on and cook

them, and it was a wood stove, I suppose; yes, it'd have to be.

Did anyone ever come out to check up on you?

Oh no. We were only there about nine weeks. All those that were there had asked to go together, because I think they used to ask you was there anybody in particular you'd like to work with. And you'd probably put down your preferences and things like this, so they would know we would all get along well.

Did you know any other girls who joined at a similar time to you in the women's war service?

Yes, well, this down here is Port Noarlunga and Morphett Vale. Well, we lived in Port Noarlunga, but we worked all around the district. But it was a big group of girls. I'm just not sure how many. But that group that's in that photograph, there would be at least that many at Macleod House or more down the street. So there was a truckload of us that used to go off to work each morning. And they just kept going, they kept on going. Some of them did the same as us and shifted around with each different changing season, and others would have been sent to farms and stayed on the farms. But I think all of

those girls — it was that sort of itinerant work where they were short of labour.

Were you a seasonal or rural worker?

That's right, we were considered to be seasonal, you see, all through.

So when you stayed at —

Pea Pickers Inn.

Pea Pickers Inn, can you describe how a day would go?

There were times when nothing — you got up and had your breakfast and went straight out the front.

What time might that be?

Well, it'd be very, very early, but I don't really know whether we started at seven or eight. It was very early. I have an idea that possibly — you'd have to ask Eileen whether she remembers — we were on so many buckets. You got paid by the bucket perhaps. I think we did. I have an idea that we were paid by the bucket, how many buckets you picked. That's right. You had a bag, and that must have had some designation on it that it was yours. You filled

that bag, put your peas in that bag, and that represented so many buckets, I think.

What happened when the bucket was full? Where did you take that?

You just took it up to the bag and put it in the bag.

Did the bags have to be sewn?

No, no. We didn't do that. They would have probably had a look in them to see that they did not have leaves or something. But the boss would set you going and he'd go off and do something else, and there'd be local people there. But it just never occurred to us not to work. You just started and you kept going. The same with grape picking. It never occurred to you that you could say, 'It's too damn hot, I'm going home'. You just kept going.

So was there a roster with cooking and so forth?

Oh that's right, there was a roster with the cooking and the sweeping. You had to sweep out each of the rooms and tidy up the kitchen. But at the evening meal and the breakfast, everybody washed their — there was probably a roster for the washing up too and the wiping up, and everything was put away.

Everything was done very methodically. Nobody left anything hanging around. You only had the bare minimum anyway in the way of clothes. People didn't have loads of things to leave lying around. You had your work clothes and your uniform.

What were the bathing facilities like there? Was there a bathroom?

I think one's memory does things for you. Some of it was so primitive. I can't really remember how often we got a bath there. Miss Wocky's I can remember — that's on the top of the hill here at Christies — there was a row of showers on the back porch and a bathroom somewhere. And of course Macleod House was built for borders, so there were several bathrooms and you didn't have any pandemonium about who was going to get the bath and who was going to get the showers or anything. It was all set up for living for that sort of thing. So Macleod House was probably the best accommodation in that respect that we had anywhere. But I can remember working on the cherries. At one place there was a bath — I am not sure that you could drain the bath; I think you used to have to take the water off out. But it was only just stuck in a storeroom; it was just there.

Did you carry the water in?

Yes, you had to. That was on the stove in the kitchen somehow. You took a bucket in and got a bucket of water, and then a bucket of cold water to go with it. A lot of places had these chip heaters that went phut, phut, phut. If you weren't careful, they boiled over on you. I'll never forget one place that was at Berri. That was the next winter. Instead of working out, we decided we weren't going to go back to the flax that second winter; we were going to find some easier way of spending our winter. We went to Berri and they'd built — they called it a hostel, but it was just walls of asbestos that were divided off into little cubicles with two beds in them. I really don't think there was a wardrobe. I think you hung your clothes behind the door. There was certainly no lining in it. There were wooden supports and there was no ceiling. I think possibly it became more civilised as the war went on.

But the very first, that would have been '43 — no, it would have been the winter of '42 we were down here, so it must have been the winter of '43. The weather up there was glorious, but the nights were freezing. We used to go to bed with everything we possessed on our bed because, you see, there was nothing to stop the condensation. The condensation would be dripping off the roof onto you during the night. You'd have caps on to keep your head warm. That was how cold it was; you couldn't sleep. Oh

dear, the nights. Of course all deserts are like that, aren't they, and there it is pretty much desert. It's only irrigated all along the Murray. It's all desert land. Everything grows beautifully if you water it. But oh those nights were cold. Beautiful days though. We used to work in the factory there, packing dried fruits and hydrating potatoes and things like that.

Did you choose to work in a factory?

Well, I mean, you had to do something for the winter. You were either going to be out on the flax again or — because there's no crops to pick at that time of the year. So that's what we did the next winter. We spent six months at Monash. We lived in Berri, and the packing shed was at Monash. We went out on the back of a covered truck with benches in it to sit down. It was pretty crowded, that was, and we'd be all stacked in on top of one another, back to back and shrieking all the way.

Could you describe the work in the factory?

Well, it was all concrete floors, and we'd have to push great trolleys in with layer upon layer of fruit. They were dried to the point of — the fruit appeared to be dried. When we picked it out in the vineyards, you'd put it on racks and it'd stay out

in the sun. First of all they put it through some sort of sulfur dip. Then they'd put it on the racks and it'd stay there for about six weeks, I think, and then they'd pack it. But in order to be sent overseas it seemed as if it needed further hydration because that fruit would go into these long tunnels. They'd be on like a trolley, layer upon layer of these, and you had to have them at a certain depth. They couldn't be on top of one another; they had to be spread. You'd spread them on these trays, put them on these trolleys and wheel them into these great long tunnels. And I'm not sure what sort of temperature they would undergo. Then afterwards they'd come out and we'd pack them in different cartons and things to be sent or to be sold overseas. Mainly I think that was for export.

So was your work varied in the factory, or was it constantly the same thing?

Well, no. You went from — yes, you'd do running it into the hydration tunnels. You'd have to go in there and check that they were — yes, because I can remember they always had these salt tablets and said that, if you spent a certain amount of time in there, you should take salt tablets.

Were they big enough to walk in?

Oh yes, you walked right in with these great tall —

So did you carry —

No, no, they were on rollers, these trolleys. They rolled in. And you'd go in and out to check that they were, I suppose, getting the right amount of dryness. I don't really know what we used to do; I've forgotten now. Then we'd come out and you'd put it in cartons.

Was it very hot? Do you remember it being hot in there?

Well, it must have been for us to have the salt tablets there. It must have been hot in the tunnels, yes. But it never worried us. You did things without — you'd talk away all day. You always had somebody nearby to have a chat to. But they never seemed to worry, as long as we kept working. I can't really remember much. We had a great social life in Berri.

Can you tell us about that?

Oh yes. There were always dances and plays and concerts, and there was always the picture theatre. We were right in the township. I remember I tried to learn to play the piano. One of the people who went to the church — we went to the Catholic church. And

one of the women, I was walking home with her one day and she lived right opposite the hostel, her daughter was away in the Air Force. She said, well, one thing she missed was her daughter practising on the piano. And I said, ‘Oh, I’ve always wanted to learn the piano.’ And she said, ‘Oh, you see the nuns.’ And I went up. And all my life I’d had no trouble learning to sew and I’d learnt to type and do shorthand. And I hated both of them, but I didn’t find them very hard to do, just monotonous. As a child I’d always got the scissors out and made things and I’d knitted from quite an early age. And I just thought piano would be the same. Goodness me, hours and hours of practice, and I didn’t seem to be getting anywhere. I didn’t last very long. I found that a lot more difficult than anything else I’d ever learnt to do. You have to have a natural aptitude, and I didn’t have it. But anyway they were very, very friendly, all the towns people, they were lovely. They’d invite you into their homes for singsongs.

What year would that have been?

I think it must have been ‘43. There weren’t many fellows around, you know. Girls danced with girls.

Who put the dance on?

Oh it'd be something for raising funds for the different charities, you know.

Can you remember anything about the plays or the concerts or who put them on?

I think the school would put them on. They were always very aware of the — what was it called that the women used to work so hard for, the charity? Comfort fund, that's right, comfort fund. Particularly with townships along the river you found that. We were down here for six months and there was nothing in this area. The nearest used to go home for weekends. And in those days you caught the train — no, you didn't, there was a bus, a local bus from here. But of course at Berri you couldn't go home. It was 140-odd miles from Adelaide, and so you were there for the six months.

Did you have weekends off?

Oh you didn't work over the weekends. I don't remember ever working overtime in Berri, no. You just worked your eight hours or whatever it was. In those days I don't suppose it was eight hours; it was probably more than eight hours. But you just worked your day. And then, as I say, they were very social people, very kindly people along the river. But we were there for six months and then back

through the same old routine of grape picking. The first year we went to Kingston-on-Murray. That would have been after the peas and the cherries. We went up into the hills after the peas and picked cherries and raspberries and gooseberries. I can remember one day poor old Eileen — there were just the three of us or maybe four of us picking raspberries, yes raspberries, and they've got an awful lot of thorns. And we're picking away along these — they'd be on canes, and you picked near one another. But I don't think we were opposite one another as you are with grapes. And suddenly Eileen was attacked by — she must have stood on a bed of hopper ants. Oh she was screaming. They're terrible things, because they hop all over you and bite like mad. They'd be dangerous. I think we had to rip her clothes off, and she was running around in sheer hysteria. We didn't know whether to laugh or cry or what to do. It was terrible and we had to get these wretched things off her. But even after incidents like that — I can remember cutting myself terribly on the river once and the blood's gushing everywhere. But it never occurred to me that I should just say, 'Well, I'm going home now.' Even after that incident — and she'd been bitten all over — we just went back to our work.

Do you remember any accidents happening?

No, not really. Nothing, no.

Do you think you ever had to do any dangerous work?

No, not now. I mean, a lot of the girls that went out on the farms, they'd be able to tell you stories, I can imagine, of being asked to do all sorts of things that a man might tell them to do themselves. But they were probably just like us and would just do it. But, no, our work wasn't — I would never have considered it at all dangerous. It was very, very uncomfortable, mind you. Strawberry picking is another one like the peas. You see, that's the strawberries and cherries and raspberries. They'd all have various things. Except for the very, very big cherry farms, most of them had all the different crops. You'd do a day on this and then a day on that.

How did the peas grow? Were they on —

No. Peas were just pea plants along the ground, just like they are now and they use a machine. We used to crawl along. They used to plant them in rows though. We crawled over the top of the bush really a lot of the time. We would have one leg on one side of the bush. Because after you'd pick them, there's nothing left. They would just hoe that in because it fed the

ground. But that's how you picked them, you crawled along. And with the strawberries it was the same thing. You were on your knees for hours on end. You would start in the morning and you just did the same thing all day. But the cherries were lovely because they were so pretty. You know, there's great long boughs of beautiful looking fruit against a glorious blue sky and lovely white clouds and the green leaves. Oh, it was a lovely job picking cherries. But you didn't feel so much satisfaction because you knew it was only going to feed people. They did tin, of course, quite a bit of it. But most of it was just to feed the city people because they always are just an extravagance — although the trees would have died if you didn't pick them. Somebody had to pick them. Local people were always there. It was always quite interesting because there were always different people to talk to.

Were you with Eileen throughout your —

All the time. The only time we were ever separated was once her fiancée came home from active service and she got compassionate leave. At this stage, I just can't remember what time of the year it was. There couldn't have been any particular crop that they wanted me to go to on my own. So I stayed home with my parents in Prospect. I used to go by tram into the city and then on to another tram out to the

Rosella canning factory. I remember I asked for compassionate leave after a very short time. You see, I was the only Land Army girl, and the girls that worked in the factory thought me quite odd. And I had nobody to talk to because they had their own little cliques and so forth, and so I didn't belong. I was very, very —

Did you get sent there?

Oh yes. Well, they needed extra labour. They were always looking for labour. South Australia was pretty hard up. We had girls come from other states here, but we never ever went interstate. None of us went interstate.

Were you ever in Berri when they came across?

No, I wasn't. I knew that it happened. But I can't remember what we did my last winter. Oh yes, we went to Undalya. We went to Undalya and stayed in a magnificent place we used to call Undalya House, a lovely big old home. It's still up there. My niece told me she had it offered to her the other day — well, not that long back, about 12 months ago. She's got horses and her husband's in the Education Department, and she was offered this beautiful home with five acres of land for $58,000, and her husband wouldn't buy it for her. He said no, it was too big,

too many rooms. It's got cedar beams and cedar doorjambs and beautiful windows in it. It's really lovely. The thing that I always remember is this magnificent bathroom — all white tiles, a great big bathroom. There was a row of showers on the back verandah, slapped up. They were like the rooms I described at Berri, no lining, just asbestos. You can imagine how cold and draughty they were all winter long. You'd dash in and everybody'd try and make the bathroom because that was so beautiful. But there were all these wretched showers we had to share. We were there for six months too. But I seem to remember that the weather wasn't nearly as bad in the north as it was down here.

That was flax there too?

Yes, flax. The same system, great long lines of flax just spread out.

Who did the initial harvesting?

The local farmers grew it, yes.

Who did the cutting?

They did. They harvested it. We got it off trailers. They'd bring out a trailer on the back of a truck with all these sheaves and sheaves of what looked

like hay but was in actual fact flax. Somebody would throw it off. They'd climb up and toss it off, and then you'd put it in stooks so that, if it rained, it would shed the water. You didn't want it going rotten standing in these stooks. And then you'd start and spread them in these great long lines. That wasn't all that hard. It was just that the weather was always something that was a bit —

Did you have to bend over to do it?

Oh yes, and the tying up afterwards. It is hard enough, my goodness, yes, but not nearly as painful as pea picking or strawberry picking. That was really hard work. And the grapes, some of the grapes were very low — not along the river, but if you came down. You see, in between a long stay, perhaps we'd have to go and help in the winery at Marion and their vineyards. And they are very low; you had to bend over to pick them. I should have kept a diary. I probably did and then destroyed it. A lot of those photographs, I never bother with them.

Were you in a hostel up at Undalya?

Well, this Undalya House was a hostel like, but it was so gorgeous. It was a beautiful place. I do not know how many rooms. It has seven bedrooms. My niece was telling me the other day that there are seven

bedrooms in it. So we were all in these rooms. We had great big rooms. Eileen and I shared a room, and it had polished floor. We used to have to polish this wretched floor regularly, because you had to look after everything. You couldn't go at the end of six months and leave everything filthy, could you? So it all had to be looked after on a regular basis. And it wasn't ever left to the matrons to do that. You did it all yourself.

> When you were at the Pea Pickers Inn, the eight or nine of you altogether, what were your leisure activities?

Sleep, sleep; yes, my word. On a weekend I think we used to go home. I can remember one of the girls. Her fiancée came back from somewhere, I do not know, and he and his friends came down. We must have stayed there that weekend just to entertain them. But they were lads that we'd met when we were up at Berri. That is right, that's where they'd met. They must have been guarding the people of different nationalities that were in — I don't think there were any soldiers from overseas in South Australia. I think what we had here were people of different nationalities, Japanese, Italians, Germans, that for some reason had been rounded up and put into a camp at Loveday. Maybe they wouldn't sign papers to say they were loyal to the King. I just don't know why

they were there, although they must have been recent, I think, recent arrivals because, come to think of it, they used to come to the dances sometimes at Berri, yes. So they must have behaved well and been allowed to come to the dances, because I can remember — but they could never speak very good English. They must have been recent arrivals from these different countries and put in there simply because —

> Do you remember talking about them with the other girls, about whether you'd danced with them or not?

Oh yes — well, that never bothered us as far as that goes, I don't think. Well, we were so hard up for partners, you danced with — I mean, you would have been glad to dance with grandfathers sort of thing, and we did. Grandfathers sometimes were wonderful dancers. I can remember there was one tall very handsome German chap, and we used to call him Crook Custard. He wouldn't have known what we were saying, I suppose. But we probably didn't call him it to his face, but our reference to him was always Crook Custard. But that didn't seem to — we never questioned it. They were in — I don't think they had guards with them, but they may have had. Maybe the soldiers — you see, the soldiers used to come into Berri, that's right, from Loveday. It was quite a

long way away. They used to come in sometimes. No wonder we had a marvellous social life, because there were men available, weren't there. Yes, we did have a wonderful social life at Berri. So the soldiers would come in and bring the — the fellows must have — the soldiers must have been there when they were there.

Do you remember working alongside prisoners of war?

Well, no. The first year we went to Kingston-on-Murray — I'm just not sure which year that would have been. Well, we went '41 and '42 to Loveday and Barmera with that friend of my mother's or that neighbour from Prospect. Then the next summer, we did all this flax, then the Pea Pickers Inn, then the strawberries and the cherries in the hills. And then it's back to the river again for grape picking. There was a whole crowd of us. I think there were about 16 who went to Kingston-on-Murray. We all stayed in the one house. It was a group, a family — Holmes was the name. There were a sister and two brothers and they owned a swag of — they were ex-servicemen from the First World War. They had blocks, all different fruit, apricots and peaches and currents and sultanas. We worked on these three blocks, you see, but we all stayed in the one house. One farmer's wife fed all of us. That was that first

summer we did that. I can remember, look, that summer was really, really hot. I can remember one little girl that had come — and it was her first job in the country — I don't think she'd ever been into the country in her life. She had a pair of little light patent leather shoes and her feet were burnt underneath. She couldn't stand up. She had blisters on her feet from these light shoes.

What sort of background do you think she came from?

I don't really know. Caddy was her name. I think it was Caddy. I think it was her. Eileen will know. You ask Eileen about that, whether she knew about her background. You never talked about your background. There were a lot of German girls, you see, from the Barossa, and then of course there were a lot of Irish too. You see, I think — I shouldn't say it, I suppose — probably it's got something to do with our historical alliances that a lot of German girls and a lot of Irish were in the Land Army. It makes it a lot easier than making bullets, doesn't it, really. That's probably got a lot to do with it. I don't know really.

What was the feeling towards the German girls in the Land Army?

Oh, never any resentment. I never ever saw resentment at all. You judged everybody as you found them. You took your friends from anywhere.

Were their parents ever considered aliens?

I never knew whether any of them had parents in — I did know with a lot of them that they hadn't spoken English until they went to school. You could tell that. You could really pick that up, because they would have such funny sayings. One particular girl, she told me she used to follow the plough. They had a small holding somewhere, and she said she used to have her father's cigarette papers over her lips to stop them from burning. She'd walked behind the plough. I don't know how old she would have been. There was one place where we were, Berri, and in the bathroom there — I can't remember whether we had showers at Berri — anyway, we had this chip heater and it boiled over on one of the girls. Actually she was Cornish. She had come from up where the mines were and up around that way.

What area was that?

Burra or possibly a bit further up around Moonta. I think she came from Moonta or Wallaroo. What's it called? Moonta, Wallaroo. They used to have copper mines and tin mines up there, you see. They'd come

out in the early days just to actually go to these mining areas, and they'd grown up in a close-knit sort of Cornish atmosphere. Anyway, this wretched thing boiled over, and we never ever got her back into a bath again. She used to always stand in there, washing herself from top to bottom. She just would not use that chip heater.

Did she go to hospital?

Well, we were in Berri. I suppose she did. I don't really know. I suppose she did. It was very civilised in Berri. There was a hospital and a doctor and everything was very available.

Could you comment any further on the backgrounds of the different girls? Did you get a feeling that there was variety or that you came from similar backgrounds, aside from the Germans?

Yes, I don't really know. You sort of never question anybody about their background. You always listen if people talk. No, I couldn't really say. You see, we were all coming out of a pretty bad depression, weren't we, really, and where our father had always worked, I suppose a lot of them hadn't. But I don't know. I never got the feeling that anybody — nobody ever talked politics. You know, everybody was very discreet. Nobody talked. They went off to their

different church services. But that was very much a closed subject also. You never talked about your religion or anything. When you look back, we were a different people to what the young ones were in our children's generation. They were so open, weren't they. They discussed everything and criticised everything, yes. But in our day, no, we didn't criticise much at all. I do remember one day down on the flax and it had been raining and raining and raining, and the manager for some reason came out at a last sunny moment. He was walking past me, the manager of the flax mill, and he said, 'Not a bad day today,' and I said, 'What would you bloody know? You've just come from your nice warm office.' So I did have a comment that day. Isn't that terrible. Poor man, he nearly dropped. He just wasn't used to that. It used to be so cold and so wet. They'd walk out and always while the sun was shining. They never came out while it was raining. There were never any squalls when they were around. They were very careful not to get themselves wet.

Where were you when your uniform came through when Manpower took over?

Well, it was after Kingston I'm sure. Oh, I think we were at Berri, yes.

Do you remember that day?

When the uniforms came through?

Yes.

Well, looking back, I can remember being very surprised at the quality. Somebody's said since that that really was something to do with the material. It really was supposed to be for the American contingent and somehow it got lost or something and ended up being abandoned. But they were. It was beautiful material. Our coats were lovely. The soldiers used do say, 'Look at ours in comparison to yours.' We did have lovely material in them. The summer uniforms used to do up so nicely. Everything was very, very good quality. Our shirts and our boots and our hats and overcoats. You didn't get issued with gloves, but all the girls wore gloves. Oh yes, they were a big surprise, yes.

Once Manpower took over, did anything else change in terms of what you had been doing?

Well, no. We'd been doing it for so long, no, I don't think so.

Wages?

No. I wasn’t aware of any great rise, because I think our wages were possibly a little varied from one job to another. Of course you’d have your times when you were shifting from one job to another where you didn’t get paid. But it never seemed to worry us. I mean, when we got short of cash, I suppose mum and dad would have always bought us something. So that would have eased the burden. But, no. I think we had to possibly — I don’t know whether we ever filled out forms or anything more regularly. I think always we were left pretty much to ourselves and didn’t have to — of course, we went from private home to private home for a good deal of the year. It was only when we were in the six months of winter that we would be in an organised or more organised sort of arrangement in the hostel either at, I suppose, Undalya, Port Noarlunga and those places. But the rest of the time we would go from private home to private home. You were generally made very welcome. People were very glad to have you.

Did you get any reaction when you wore your Land Army uniform in the city?

No, no. I don’t think anybody took any notice at all. There were so many uniforms. No.

What about when you got on public transport?

No, I never felt that anybody — they might sort of say, 'Oh, what's that?' and you'd say, 'Oh, the Land Army,' and they'd ask you what you did and so forth. But no, there was no — I don't think people were surprised by it because, before it started here, it had been reported in England. They had photographs of girls working in the English Land Army.

Do you think people were aware that a Land Army existed at the time?

Oh yes, I think so. Yes, I think so. They mightn't have — yes, because people always read the papers in those days. Everybody read the paper, and there were a lot of photographs and lots of articles on the Land Army and photographs of the girls in England and how dirty the work was. It was pretty obvious to everybody. But I don't think anybody was surprised by it, no.

Did you know any women in the services?

Yes. One of my girlfriends from business college joined the AWAS, Australian Women's Army Service, and became a signaller or something like that, yes.

Were her conditions any different from yours?

Well, she used to talk of all this marching and the discipline. They had a lot of discipline that ours didn't have, yes. I think there was — we weren't aware of being terribly governed even when there were a group of us in the flax mills.

What about wages? Do you think there was any difference between her pay and yours?

I don't remember ever being aware of her being better off or anything. She probably was, but no. I used to write to her all the time and she used to write to me. That was a great deal of our time. We would spend an awful lot of time writing letters, because there was always somebody asking you to write to so and so, even if they —

This is to servicemen and so forth?

Yes, yes.

Did you ever want to join AWAS?

No. The marching and the discipline would have annoyed me. As I say, it would have seemed such a waste of time, whereas every minute of our time we were doing something that we could actually see, and that was very —

Do you remember at that time discussing with anyone your joining AWAS?

Oh no, no. I would have said the same even then. Even though I was only very young, that would have been my reaction. I knew I wouldn't like that marching up and down.

Did you think you had joined a civilian force or a military force when you —

I thought of it as being at least a government body. I don't know that I ever thought of it as — I thought of it as a service, yes. I didn't think of it as just being civil, no, I thought it was a government body. The people Holmes, the three farms that were together at Kingston-on-Murray — I still see Mr Holmes; well, it's the son of one. He was there though, he and his wife. And I went back once after the war. At that stage we hadn't kept in touch, and I had my children in the car and we had a tent. We had all four children. It was a very hot day and I got out of the car and they were sitting in the shade. And I ran off to where this Lou Holmes's house was when I was there, and I couldn't find it. So I raced up the hill, a bit of a rise, to the parents' home and there was nobody home. I came back and I said, 'Well, I can't find Lou and Win's place.' And do you know what I did? It never

occurred to me until years later when I struck them and I said, ‘I went looking for your house,’ and he said, ‘It got washed away in the flood.’ Yes, it had gone in the flood. Well, I don’t know whether it actually washed away, but they had to take it — it was no good, they couldn’t live in it after that big flood in '57. But then after that I’m just not sure how we — it was only the last few years. Now, how did we find them, or did they find us? We’ve been quite friendly with them ever since. I rang him for Christmas. We have a chat every now and again. We went back there each year, Eileen and I, after the first year. There were about 16 of us, and they asked Eileen and I — just Eileen and I. And each year we’d go back every year and do the season there. I never asked him why did he ask just for Eileen and I. But we used to work with Aborigines there — Jimmy James, the blacktracker and his two daughters. But I don’t ever remember, even that first year, whether — that first year that we went out and we were so close to the Loveday camp — whether we ever worked with men because they used to come out and work in the —

How many Aborigines were working there?

Oh, there was quite a group of them. It was funny. Holmes supplied a cottage right down on the river and it was all painted, whitewashed inside and

everything for the Aborigines to stay. And you'd look and you used to see their fire. They would sleep outside. But oh, it was lovely weather on the river.

Do you think they got paid for their work?

Oh yes, oh yes. Oh, they would have been paid, oh yes. They were like that, the Holmes. I think that is probably why they had such a — but Lou told me dear old Jimmy used to always want his wage early, and he used to get it too, and he'd always be broke. I suppose they gambled. I just don't know what they did. Whether they drank a lot I really wouldn't know, or whether people took advantage of them I don't know.

Would that have been the first time a lot of you would have seen Aborigines?

Yes, and I can remember once — it probably doesn't pay to put this on any tape — we went to Barmera to a picture show on the Saturday night and we struck the Aborigines in the street. And of course Eileen and I had been working with them all week, and so we stopped and talked to them. And people were a bit, you know, looking askance at us. I realise that they didn't treat them that way. But they were lovely. Eileen used to work with Lily on one side of the

vine. I don't think I ever — I probably did with the other girl, but I don't think she talked very much. But Eileen used to be able to talk to Lily. But I think the young one didn't converse very much at all with us. Whether they spoke their own language when they were on their own and the child just hadn't — she was very young, perhaps 14. But that was the only time we ever struck Aborigines I think. He was the quite famous blacktracker, Jimmy, and his whole family was there. I think there were quite a group of them, others, as well as Jimmy.

> Land Army is a service. Did you ever hear any discussions at the time about the Land Army being the fourth service? Was that a topic of conversation ever?

Well, I don't think it ever was. I always considered myself very young and naive. The older girls probably talked about it. But I just love nature and I'd get off and just wander off all on my own.

> You would go for walks?

Oh yes, always. Whenever possible I'd take my pushbike and ride for miles on a weekend when we were at Berri. And then of course at the weekend, these lads that were in the army, a whole group of them would come over and we'd get a dray, hire a

dray or borrow a dray or something, and off we'd go to a special bend, a certain bend on the river, and we used to have what we called a chop picnic. Nowadays of course they're called barbecues, but it was the same type of thing. You'd all stand around and sit around and sing songs. It was just so relaxed, and there was never really — if you can understand what I mean, they were like brothers to us. They were men that were in the service that needed companions. Though romances did grow out of it, there wasn't a lot of pairing off, if you know what I mean. I'm not even aware that there were equal numbers. I don't think there were. I certainly never had a boyfriend amongst them. Most of the girls had boys that were away that they were writing to, or some of them were married. But it wasn't like that. It was just companionship. And we used to always call it a chop picnic, 'go for a chop picnic'. I suppose we must have put in so much and somebody would be relegated to go and see the butcher and get the chops. It certainly wasn't me because I wouldn't know one chop from another. And then we'd have fruit, and off we'd go. Perhaps all day you'd stay there right on into the evening, just singing away and talking away.

Was there much swimming?

Oh no, because in the winter time the river is still quite cold. I think that we never even looked for yabbies that much. I can remember going yabbying, but that would have always been in the summer too. But it would be warm enough to paddle your feet, and that'd be as far as you'd go. But in the summer at Kingston I used to swim across the river after I'd picked grapes all day. That was my relaxation, over the river and back.

When were you first aware of the Land Army being a service?

I think I always thought it was. I just took it for granted that it was a service. It never occurred to me that it wasn't — until it was over. And when it came to your demobbing, there was nothing. You were just turned off, free, go, it's over.

How did you feel?

Well, it didn't worry me because I was very healthy and it never occurred to me that there might — I knew that there was a little bit of worry with at least one girl. She'd contracted tuberculosis and, in those days, it was considered pretty bad. I just don't know whether — I think there was a bit of a query about what would happen if she needed medical. I think somebody assured her she would always be

looked after. But there was no great kerfuffle about it. Even when we did discover we were on our own, there was no hope of war pensions and you weren't going to be invited to join the ex-service women's association or anything, I don't think that bothered us. It didn't bother me anyway. I don't think I would have joined in any case. But, no, we did think that it was — I know that I just thought it was an army, the same as any other service. It never occurred to me that it wasn't. It wasn't until, as I say, it was all over and it was made quite clear that 'Don't expect anything because you're not a service.'

> Just before it all wound down, did you give any thought to what you might do when the Land Army disbanded?

No, it never worried me that I hadn't been trained for anything. I knew I wouldn't keep going doing that sort of work. I loved the country, but that was the war and that was over. As I say, we talked just recently about how very, very hot it is on the river and we'd be out in it all day and we never complained, and it didn't matter how dirty we got we still didn't complain. And somebody the other day at this barbecue turned around and said, 'Well, during the depression I picked grapes,' he said, 'and, my God, I complained every minute of the day. I said,

‘Well, that’s the difference, it was wartime.’ We just knew we had to be doing something and that would be preferable. You just couldn’t get out of being part of it. We were part of it.

So what did you do when the war ended?

I just answered an advertisement and got the first job that I answered. It was millinery, and I just did it. I wasn’t there long and I got engaged and got married, and the milliner said, ‘Well, it’s a great pity because you really have a natural aptitude.’ I just did it, just even down to — well, she was making individual hats and so forth, and I went straight into it and did it. She said even down to how you hold the hat — it’s a strange trade in that you don’t have a bench, you don’t work on a bench, you work on your lap, and it just seemed natural to put it down there and do it. And she said that I really did have an natural aptitude, and I loved it. But I got married.

What year was that?

It was ‘46, wasn’t it? The war finished in ‘45, didn’t it? Yes, ‘46. We were married in the March. It wasn’t long after. We were on hydration right at the end of the war out at — it is all suburbs now the same as this. All the country grows houses. It

used to be at the foot of the hills there. What was that called? A big factory that hydrated potatoes and apples. What was that place called? We used to live in another hostel and I think that must have been so bad that I can't even remember that. It was right at the end of the war and I've no recollection of what the place was. It must have been pretty ghastly, that one. I can't remember what it was called now — Hectorville. It is a suburb of Adelaide. Hectorville, right at the foothills, straight out Payneham Road. But I don't think any of that would be there now.

Did you join the Victory Day march?

I can remember being in the streets when everybody was carrying on.

Was that the day the war ended?

Yes. No, I don't think I would have marched. No, I am not aware of — I don't think we would have. Were any of the girls at the Victory Day march ever? Oh well, I wasn't. I'm not sure of it. I know that I wasn't there. I didn't go. I didn't, no.

Just going back to your different workplaces and that, did you have much to do with the employers in any of the situations?

Well, always if you were in people's homes you ate your evening meal with them and went to bed in a bedroom in their home. As I say, most of them were very, very nice, very warm-hearted people and made you very welcome. They'd talk to you about different things. It was very interesting. But, you know, you sort of talk just in generalities. You didn't get down to the nitty-gritty on any subject, not like people do today.

Looking back, do you feel your contribution to the war effort has been acknowledged?

I don't think — I didn't expect it to be acknowledged, no. Well, it hasn't been acknowledged, of course; it's been almost denied. But I didn't expect it. I didn't want it. As I say, to me, we knew we had to do something. Everybody was going to be mobilised. The thought of going in and making bullets, oh no, I couldn't bear it, and all that marching was good for nothing to me. It's different with men that were going to war. They had to be disciplined in order to withstand the horrors and the rigours. I suppose maybe that's what the marching for the girls was for. But they just seemed to do so many hours of it, according to these different women you'd talk to. Oh no, I wouldn't have liked that. Of course, medically I was never

one that could stand blood. I knew I couldn't nurse, I couldn't work in a hospital. I knew I just couldn't. Oh dear, even now when an operation comes on on the television I leave the room. So I knew I couldn't do that. But I didn't expect them to — I didn't expect to be honoured, no. There must be a lot of people who worked during the war that did things that were terribly, terribly dangerous and —

> You know that we are making a film on the Land Army. Is there anything in particular that you would like to see go into that film or any messages you would like to communicate with people about the Land Army?

I think it's important that there is a record made of what happened and how many girls were in it. But no, I don't think we needed to be particularly recognised. We did what we did and we did it because it had to be done.

> Is there anything else you would like to add?

I can't think of anything. Your childhood is so long. You know, you're waiting for Christmas and your birthday, and each year is so long. And the war years had that same elongated aspect. I mean, the business college and after the war sort of all telescopes together. But those war years had that

same — maybe it was because we changed so many jobs. But, oh gee, looking back, it seems such a long period of your life. It's really quite hard to realise that it was only from '42 to '45. It must have been only three years.

When you look back on that time in your life, how do you feel about that time out of your life? In what sort of a way do you look back on it, with what feelings?

Well, I'm so glad that we won the war. Weren't we lucky when Hitler took off for Moscow instead of England. No, it was really — I was very young of course, but I was unaware of the danger really. I think most were. But we did have to do something. We knew because the men were away that it had to be done. But I don't look on it as — except that it was so broadening, you met so many different girls.

Is it a happy time to look back on in any way?

Well, yes, I think it was very satisfying. I don't know that I would say that I was any happier then than any other time in my life. But I certainly wasn't unhappy. No, I certainly wasn't unhappy. It's just the length of it. That's the thing that strikes me always when I look back on it, how long it seems.

It was three years, and there's no other three years in the whole of my life that has so many memories.

> One last question. As you have said, you were quite young, but do you think you had an everyday awareness of there being a war on, or could you easily forget when you were in the country doing farm work?

No. I think possibly, if you were just on a farm, you may. But with our sort of shifting around from place to place — and the mail was so important, whether the lads — no, I don't think that there was ever a day that you weren't aware that that was going on. But we weren't aware of — our war was an entirely different war to England's war or Europe's war. It must have been terrible. No. You were always aware that there was a war on, that's for sure, yes.