



## ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

---

**INTERVIEWEE:** Florence Bell Part 2

**INTERVIEWER:** Roslyn Burge

**PLACE:** Petersham

**DATE:** 5 June 2009

---

### TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **RB:** I'm just thinking for you was it unusual that your father would wear this - - -

**FB:** To me, he was just a normal person. I knew he was a bit odd but we were just a normal family according to me. My brother would come in and start juggling the apples or the oranges and mum'd say "Stop that, stop that. Don't juggle those James 'cause it's war and I've got eggs" [eggs rationed and might get broken]. And he was either juggling or father was doing some strange thing. But it was always bags of drama, you always knew when my father arrived. You know, "Oh", you know, a production, and I just thought, you know, this was a normal house. But suddenly you realised that the kids down the street, they had nice fathers but they were a bit boring. And one day I said to my mum – we were always at the Tivoli, always going to the Tivoli of a night 'cause I had to be taken anywhere if it was at night and he wasn't entertaining, he wouldn't entertain, but we were always at the Tivoli, we were always at the Theatre Royal, we were always at the circus because this is the world in which we revolved.

**RB:** Is this during the daytime or in the evening?

**FB:** No, in an evening and I'd be taken along because there were no such things as babysitters. So, I mean, I would go to the Tivoli and I'd go to school the next day and say, "Oh, I went to the Tivoli last night". "Oh gee, went to the Tivoli", these kids would never go to the Tivoli and then I'd say "I went to the Theatre Royal".

**RB: Did that lend you any special credence at school?**

FB: Oh well, they knew that my dad was strange and I knew he was strange, a bit eccentric and I knew there was something, you know. We were different; we were strange kids on the block. One day I came home and I got tired of all this, somehow got tired of all this bravado and coming in and going off and I sat down and cried.

2.02 My mother said – she was very level-headed, my mum – and she said, “What’s wrong?” and I said, “Well, mum”, I said, “why can’t dad go out in the morning about nine o’clock in a suit, come home at five o’clock in a suit, in the same suit, not like here”.

**RB: And what did your mother say?**

FB: She said, “Well”, she said, “Dry your eyes and do your homework. We’re going to the Tivoli tonight”. So, I thought, “Oh, I’ll give up”, but then I suddenly realised, you know, he’s quite interesting, you know, he’s quite – and see, the kids down the street would knock on the door and say, “Your dad home?” and I say, “Yes”. “Do you think he’d do a trick?” “Yes, go in”.

**RB: And would he do tricks for the children?**

FB: Yes, yes, he do a trick to the front door if you let him; he was always performing, always performing, yes, yes, yes.

**RB: Was that tiresome for your mother?**

FB: Oh, I think so, I think so. Everything was bags of drama. I mean, if it was raining he’d say, “It’s raining! Don’t worry, I’ll come and pick you up at school”. “No, dad, no, no, no, dad. No, no, I’ll get home”, because I could imagine, I could imagine he’d stop out the gate and say, “Well .....!” Crawl into your suitcase, crawl into your handbag or do something. But he was always, always, you know, larger than life and, you know, he’d arrive home and my mother’d say, “Father’s home” and all this. And my brother, when he was on the Tivoli my father never said when we were coming to the Tivoli to see him because he’d get terribly, terribly nervous, my brother. He started juggling and, of course, anywhere we went he’d get behind the curtains, “Dah, dah”, he was another showbusiness person, mad. And my father said about the time he sent him off to juggling and he sent him off to someone to learn juggling.

**RB: Where did he go?**

FB: Oh, I don't know 'cause I was very young in those days.

4.03 **RB: Yes, of course.**

FB: And I think he learnt by various people how to juggle hoops and clubs. And he had a slight impediment and my father said, "That's no good" so he sent him off to an elocutionist who was in Sydney at that time, a Bryson Taylor – I can always remember - and he sent him off to rectify this speech.

**RB: Did it work?**

FB: It did work, yes.

**RB: And where was Bryson Taylor located?**

FB: Probably in Sydney somewhere.

**RB: But Florence, coming back to the City of Sydney which is the main purpose of this project.**

FB: Yes, I know it's not really it.

**RB: No. It's wonderful to set the scene as it were.**

FB: Yes.

**RB: But tell me about your father entertaining at the department stores.**

FB: Yes. Now, he suddenly got this bright idea that up to this stage there had been no children entertaining in the stores at Christmas.

**RB: When are we talking about now that your father did that?**

FB: We're talking, oh, gosh.

**RB: Just roughly, '30s?**

FB: Might have been, yes, it could have been the '30s or the '40s. Unfortunately, I never asked 'cause as I say it was all established when I came along in 1933 - of course, it could have happened then in the '40s when I was a youngster. But he had this bright idea so he went into Mark Foy's - so, as the population was smaller people knew everybody more – and he approached the Foy's, he gave them this idea that "Why don't you have entertainment in the stores during the Christmas holidays?" Now, you must appreciate that the Christmas holidays were a big thing because you had Christmas Day and then Boxing Day, the pantomime opened at the Tivoli Theatre and it went on for six weeks, not like now.

5.58

And they were pantomimes; they were beautifully staged – my brother was in them – on the Tivoli and they did some beautiful and they lasted for six weeks because there was no other entertaining, so

not like today where there's so many facets of entertaining. However, he went to Mark Foy and he put the idea to him and they thought that was pretty good. But Mark Foy – one of them – there were many Mark Foy's, it was a family of Foy's – anyway, one of the Foy's who ran the Mark Foy's in town, he once again was a frustrated magician and he said to my father, well he said, "Yes", he said, "but can you teach me a couple of tricks?" Well, father didn't particularly want to teach him any tricks because you don't teach people tricks outside the circle. However, they used to make an appointment and my father would go along up to the secretary at Mark Foy and say to Mr Mark Foy's secretary, "Mr Wallace at ten o'clock", and Foy'd come out and they'd go in, close the door and my father taught him a few tricks. Then he went away and my mother had to go in and pick up the contract and she said she bought a special edge-to-edge coat – I don't know edge-to-edge coat [front pieces just meet, no overlap or buttons] – for the consultation and went in and - - -

**RB: For the consultation with the Foy's?**

FB: - - - with the Foy's and to pick up the contract. And from there entertaining started throughout. Then I think Anthony Horderns [department store] picked it up – not with my father - but that's where you got the Farmers [department store] and I think they used to have fairy bells or fairy castles; there was a lot of entertainment during the school holidays in the stores, yes.

**RB: Do you remember going with your father or to see him in Mark Foy's?**

FB: No, no, I can't remember, no, no.

**RB: Did you not go because your father was nervous of having you there?**

FB: No, well, he couldn't take us to where he entertained the children because - - -

8.06 **RB: At home, no, but I'm thinking of the department store.**

FB: At home, no, no, because we just thought it was part and parcel of father's work. And, I mean, you know, he entertained us enough at home. Why would he do it for us .....

**RB: Certainly there's the photograph where he's got the Punch and Judy props. Did he need someone to help him with his props or was that something he could manage alone?**

FB: No, that was all – he could do it alone, yes, yes.

**RB: You also talked about the corner where McDonalds - - -**

FB: Yes. Now, where McDonalds is today - - -

**RB: And we're talking about the corner of Park and Pitt.**

FB: - - - Park and Pitt, yes, it's a McDonalds today and then previously it was a bank. But then it used to be called 'Poverty Point'. Now, how it got that name I do not know but I think actors and everyone in the showbusiness profession would meet there of a Friday or some other days and dad'd say, if he was in town to do business or if he went to town for something or other or whatever, he would say "Oh, so I saw so and so at the Point today". And there was – and the sign's gone but when it changed I think it was a hotel - I'm not too sure what was there. But when it changed a few years ago there was a sign to say what it was but I don't know where that sign's gone and McDonalds hasn't got it at all, but it was called Poverty Point.

**RB: And there was a sign there on the building?**

FB: There was a sign on the building. I think it was a hotel and then it sold to an insurance company and they did have a sign to say what it was called.

**RB: When you say your father and the other artists would meet there, would they meet on the pavement or would they go inside to the hotel?**

10.05 FB: I think they just met on the pavement. I think they would just pass and it's just like a meeting place, I s'pose, a bit like the Domain, I'm not too sure. He would just come home and say, "Oh, I saw so and so at the Point today", yes.

**RB: On a personal sort of reflection too, your father did so much entertaining for other people, what did you as a family do for entertainment or in that .....**

FB: Yes, yes. Well, we didn't really have a Christmas. When it came to Christmas we didn't have a Christmas because my father was - of course Christmas-time was a very, very busy time and by then he had several men working for him, yes.

**RB: Do you remember how many?**

FB: Just about two or three, two.

**RB: Would they go with him or as separate events?**

FB: Separate events, separate events.

**RB: So, he was managing a large scale of entertainment?**

FB: Well, not a large scale but it was a scale in those days.

**RB: He needed to give the work to others?**

FB: Yes, yes, yes; because the population of Sydney was very small.

**RB: What were the other men called – were they all Professor Wallace as well?**

FB: No, no. What were their names? Oh, there was a couple of them and then they branched out on their own. They would do some of dad's work and he'd probably do some of their work and they would come and help him when he got too much work. And the thing is he would be employed by various families – not every year but every second year – as these children grew up.

12.03 And he entertained the jockeys and the jockeys thought he was rather good because he knew beans about horses. So, he'd never ask the jockeys what they were riding and the jockeys rather liked because he'd never ask them for a tip or what they're going to ride 'cause he knew beans about horses. And so he'd never discuss politics – of course he would vote Labor - but he'd never discuss politics because that wasn't just right. And even today personally I don't think people should express what they like in politics because, you see, your audiences come from all various religions, politics, and personally I don't think they should express their opinions - that's my personal opinion.

**RB: You say “of course he was Labor”. Were the family very involved in politics in any case, as in Actors Equity?**

FB: Yes, Actors Equity, yes, and he used to go to the Labor meetings here in Petersham because Labor was a very strong area. But he did attend his Actors Equity meetings; he was very strong and thought very much about that because, as I say, a lot of actors could lose a lot of money by entrepreneurs who were very shonky.

**RB: Do you remember where he went for those meetings?**

FB: He used to go – it was in Pitt Street somewhere, I think - I'm not too sure. It was in town, it was in the town itself.

**RB: And because he was in Actors Equity, Actors Equity would cover a number of entertainments, not just magicians or jugglers.**

14.05 FB: Oh, no, no. Actors Equity – I think they are today but I think probably it's under a different umbrella today.

**RB: Yes.**

FB: I think it's probably the entertainment industry and whatever.

**RB: But I'm thinking then there must have been quite a mix, a variety of people.**

FB: It was, yes. Yes, it covered a lot – it was the union of all the theatrical world as far as I know.

**RB: Did your mother need to work?**

FB: No. She wasn't allowed to work. You see, once you married in those days you didn't go to work, you weren't employed; you were a married woman.

**RB: Were there women jugglers or magicians?**

FB: Not in those days but there have been in latter stages, yes, yes.

**RB: And what about your father's work – did he have to do other work as well?**

FB: No, no.

**RB: He earned sufficient income from - - -**

FB: That's right, yes.

**RB: That's really quite amazing.**

FB: I know. And to think that they bought this house for – what was it? – eight hundred dollars, four hundred pounds, bought it. My mother, she was very good at keeping money.

**RB: But also the fact your father had a car. Not everybody had a car so early on.**

FB: No, nobody had a car. Yes, yes.

**RB: What sort of vehicle was it, do you remember?**

FB: It was like a van. It was like a van for him to put all his gear in.

**RB: You've got these wonderful photos, Florence, in front of us.**

FB: Yes.

**RB: Could you tell me about your father's "gear" as you call it?**

FB: Yes. Of course they did everything in those days.

**RB: What about this photograph here with a rickshaw?**

FB: Now, that was advertising a film called 'They meet in Bombay' and it was Clark Gable and Rosalind Russell. In those days before the film came he would stunt for these men. Now, that was a film with Laurel & Hardy.

16.08 **RB: And this is your father in what looks like a sort of Swiss - - -**

FB: Yes. And that would've been in Pitt Street or Castlereagh Street.

**RB: And who's he there with?**

FB: He's there with one of his fellows, another theatrical man.

**RB: And the family dog?**

FB: No, the family dog. Don't know who the family dog is and father said it was as deaf as a beetle.

**RB: Tell me about this photo. Just back with the rickshaw, was this your father pulling the rickshaw?**

FB: Yes, this is my father, yes, yes.

**RB: So, what would he do – he'd drive up and down the street in that?**

FB: Yes, they would advertise the film coming.

**RB: And he'd run up and down the street?**

FB: Yes.

**RB: And who's the lady in the rickshaw?**

FB: Don't know this. This is a film, "Dad and Dave, On his Selection", I think.

**RB: Which one's your father here?**

FB: This is my father.

**RB: With the white beard.**

FB: And this was Hal Alexander who was then the President of Actors Equity. This was advertising something and I'm not too sure what that was.



**RB: You're father looks debonair in his - - -**

FB: Yes, oh, yes, yes.

**RB: That's Martin Place.**

FB: That's Martin Place.

**RB: With his pipe upside down and his gumboots.**

FB: Yes, advertising something – I'm not too sure what that was.

**RB: And this wonderful one with the Punch & Judy.**

FB: Yes, yes, yes.

**RB: Were you allowed to play with the puppets?**

FB: Well, I had my own puppets; he made me my own puppets and that was me. There's a film of me down in the archives in Canberra.

**RB: He made the puppets himself?**

FB: He made some of the puppets and my mother used to make the costumes.

**RB: So, how would he make the head?**

FB: Well, I don't know whether he made – I think the heads were probably imported but she would make the costumes.

**RB: What about this little Punch & Judy stage – would he make this?**

17.53 FB: It was quite large, it was quite tall. That was possibly bought many years ago from somebody who had retired. Yes, and the "W".

**RB: "W" for "Wallace" in the curtain.**

FB: Yes, there was, yes.

**RB: So, your father had a stepladder or some paraphernalia behind?**

FB: It was a glove puppet.

**RB: And he would hold it up?**

FB: Yes, yes.

**RB: But these puppets that you're holding - - -**

FB: They're glove. I mean, that was just a photograph of me but I had my own little situation like this.

**RB: Your own little stage?**

FB: Yes, yes, I had my own little one.

**RB: So, you would play puppets as a child?**

FB: No, I entertained, I entertained, yes.

**RB: Did you? Where was that?**

FB: It was a few years after my father's death and then, as I say, all the puppets were sold and mine were sold and that was the finish, came in the end.

**RB: What name did you travel by?**

FB: Wallace. I said my name was Wallace, Florence Wallace.

**RB: Not Professor Wallace still?**

FB: No, no, no, no, no.

**RB: And where would you entertain?**

FB: I entertained children in private homes, like my father.

**RB: How would you get those jobs?**

FB: Well, probably people would refer.

**RB: Did you advertise?**

FB: No, not particularly, no, no - they knew of my father.

**RB: How long did you do that for, Florence?**

FB: Oh, for about four or five years. And then, as I say, and then I was about eighteen and then I decided that I would go overseas.

**RB: So, you did this entertainment before you went overseas?**

FB: Yes, yes.

**RB: Did you do any work in the city of Sydney or in the department stores?**

20.01 FB: No, no, no. A long time ago at Buckingham's I did a little stretch in Buckingham's, once again during the holidays - Buckingham's was up in Oxford Street - and I did a few weeks there but I was quite young, I was quite young.

**RB: Did you enjoy it?**

FB: I did enjoy it; I did enjoy it, yes.

**RB: And never felt the bug of your father's profession biting you?**

FB: No, not particularly. I just think that that era passed and my brothers were away and I think my mother thought, "Well, time to finish it all, you know, just call it to an end" and the puppets were sold and the magic was sold. My father, he had a great collection of magic and although he didn't do big illusions he bought them, he bought books and books, he was a great collector of books, and as I say all that was sold after his death.

**RB: And you say he would develop his own tricks from those books?**

FB: Yes, yes, yes, he did.

**RB: And you said he bought magic.**

FB: He bought – he never used them. Why, we don't know but he used to store them in various places unknown to my mother - he was a great collector of things. For example, this room, that was our room and here he is and this is me – that was the room.

**RB: That's your front room?**

FB: That's the front room.

**RB: It looks like a storeroom. Heavens, what a fantastic photograph.**

FB: Yes.

**RB: So, these very large - - -**

FB: Yes, yes.

**RB: What are those used for?**

FB: Well, we don't know why. He was a great collector of these things and he just collected everything: collected books and posters, oh, I don't know, and tricks, everything he collected; he collected everything and anything, yes.

22.12 **RB: It looks like a pile of gingham tea towels over here.**

FB: Oh, ..... yes, yes.

**RB: And when you say he “buys magic”, what does that mean for the layman?**

FB: Well, for example there is a trick, there’s a big trick and [Les] Levante [famous Australian magician] used to do it on the stage like sawing the woman in half and father would buy these. He never – he was just a great collector of all these things and he would store them in other areas so that my mother didn’t know.

**RB: Outside the house?**

FB: Outside the house, yes, yes.

**RB: So, how did you unearth all of these things eventually?**

FB: Well, at his death somebody said to my mother, “Well, you know, Jim’s got a few things under my house”, and we’d go and my brother said, “For goodness sake, I wonder how much more he’s collected over the years”. He just was a great – like, people collect books, people collect - like on ‘The Collectors’ [television show], collect a lot of things.

**RB: Of course. You’ve got this other wonderful photograph of your father sitting down with these two puppets.**

FB: Yes.

**RB: Could you tell me about those?**

FB: That’s a young photo and this is a couple of his puppets, yes.

**RB: They're extraordinary. You're pointing to this one.**

FB: Now, this photo, now I remember this. There was a film called ‘Orphan of the Wilderness’ and it was a story of these people went out into the wilderness and they caught this kangaroo and they tamed it and they taught him to punch, fight, box, box.

23.57

And the story was they would bring this kangaroo in. ‘Orphan of the Wilderness’, it’s an old film; it’s in the archives. And they asked my father – Cinesound produced it – and they asked my father to be the ringmaster. And Cinesound was at Bronte in those days and I was only about seven or eight and I remember going out to Cinesound and sitting for hours. Cinesound, they made it into a tent, and my father was the ringmaster and there he is, calling in the kangaroo. Now, we sat five hours in there somewhere, somewhere while they took that shot over and over again and this is a photograph from the

movie. But the movie is still around; I mean, as I say, it's down the archives in Canberra now.

**RB: Do you remember the kangaroo?**

FB: Well, I didn't see the kangaroo because the kangaroo wasn't there at that shot, see. But Bronte was Cinesound and we sat there for five hours while they took this shot over and over again and that was that.

**RB: What about this photo with the hot dog stall?**

FB: That was at the Show, the Sydney Showground.

**RB: Which one's your father?**

FB: This is my father.

**RB: He's a tall man.**

FB: Yes, he was quite tall. And this chappie here, he was a wonderful clown and this is 'Happy Harry' – of course, he's on stilts. Now, Harry was in Changi and Russell Braddon wrote a book and Harry is mentioned in that.

**RB: What's Harry's surname, Florence?**

FB: Harry Smith, he was Harry Smith. And he came home and he gave lectures, talks, on the funny side – if there was such a funny side – of life in Changi.

24.57

Life in Changi was terrible but Harry, being a clown and being a comedian managed to work up a little concert party within the Changi camp and he came home and he used to give lectures on the funny side of living in Changi, if there was such a funny side. And there was a magician there in the camp called Sydney Piddington and he came home and he married a lady who was an actor on 2GB. And those days there was the Lux [soap] radio plays, and they used to go from eight till nine o'clock of a Sunday night on the radio – of course, no TV. And Sydney Piddington married this lass and my father said – the Empire Theatre was no longer at the railway there, it's no longer there, the Empire Theatre.

**RB: The railway at Central?**

FB: Central. Big theatre there in those days and I always remember it was a big variety show and after it my father and my mother and I went backstage to see Sydney Piddington and my father said, "I have a basis of an act that you and Lesley could do". I mean all this, you know, he had everything, everything. And he gave this basis to

Sydney and Lesley and they went on and they were very, very famous overseas, called 'The Piddingtons'.

**RB: They were.**

FB: Well, she used to go in a submarine and he'd go to the Tower of London and they stormed, they just took London by storm and they came out here and they took Australia by storm and for a long time the Piddingtons, the Piddingtons. But my father said, "You'll only be able to do it once. You won't be able to do it going on because somebody will work it out" and they became very, very famous, the Piddingtons and then they retired.

28.03 **RB: Your father had helped them?**

FB: Yes, he gave them the basis; he gave them the recipe of this act. Of course, they went on and did greater things but he gave them the recipe. She was a very clever actor, she could remember lines and, oh, they did big things in London, they really were the stars of London, yes.

**RB: Looking at this photo again, is your father dressed as a cowboy?**

FB: Yes, as a clown, I think, yes, as a clown, yes.

**RB: And I can see – why hot dogs?**

FB: Oh, I don't know. It was something that used to come in in the middle of all the – they would entertain the crowd while something else was coming on, I think – I'm not too sure.

**RB: It says 'Coronation' up there.**

FB: Yes, the Coronation Stand [Sydney Royal Agricultural Society showground?].

**RB: Entertainment for the Coronation?**

FB: No, that's the Coronation Stand.

**RB: You can see I'm a sportsman.**

FB: At the Coronation Stand. Yes, that's right. And this was at the [performing] Artists Ball.

**RB: What an outfit. Your father's got the most extraordinary, huge feet.**

FB: Yes. Well, I know. Oh, gosh, yes. Now, those feet – I've got another photograph. They always had an Artists' Ball at the Trocadero 'cause the Trocadero's a great big dance hall, beautiful big dance hall.

**RB: And what as the Artists' Ball?**

FB: The Artists Ball was once a year and they would all dress up as, oh, something. Like, there's my father dressed up as - - -

**RB: But were they just for artists or they had to dress as an artist?**

FB: No, they were all for the show people, it was the Artists Ball. Everybody, all the show people went and dressed up.

**RB: What was your father dressed as here?**

FB: Oh, just don't know, I don't know, he was dressed as something. And my brother, my elder brother, went - of course, father had all these costumes, you know – and my elder brother went as a fat man. He wasn't fat but he looked so fat, he was so authentic that people, you know, they said, "You poor thing, you're so fat" but he was dressed, because he had the bellows and of course father had everything, you know.

30.09 And so they used to go. And there was a character, well-known character here who went as a baby. Yes, who was it? It's all in the archives.

**RB: Which archives?**

FB: I just don't know but I think the ABC. The ABC, I think, might've - on 'Street Stories' [radio program] or one of those they may have. But there is something in the archives somewhere about one of these well-known actors. He was dressed as a baby and he lived at Bondi and he got the tram home and he sat in the tram as a baby.

**RB: This photograph here, this is of three men - - -**

FB: Oh, this was probably taken – yes, this is of my father again.

**RB: Which one?**

FB: Yes, here.

**RB: Is he holding a rabbit?**

FB: Oh, gosh, I don't know what he's holding there, yes.

**RB: He's got the most wonderful pair of pants; these materials are fantastic.**

FB: Yes, yes, yes.

**RB: And he's wearing makeup there, from the look of it.**

FB: He probably is. Yes, he used to use the white - - -

**RB: Do you where that was taken?**

FB: No, no, I just don't know, I don't know.

**RB: And going back to this photograph, Florence, which is such a fantastic photograph, was the rest of your house like this?**

FB: Oh, upstairs it was a bit.

**RB: Part of me thinks - - -**

FB: I know.

**RB: - - - it's terrible to have sold it but part of me thinks, "My goodness, living with this".**

FB: Oh, well, it was, yes, yes, living with it was just beyond – and he just used to collect. I mean, when he died we had so many trunks, wardrobe trunks. What else did we have? Oh, gosh, magic lanterns. We had magic lanterns where you put the slide in, the slide and we had magic lanterns, we had - - -

**RB: You kept none of this?**

31.59 FB: No, no. I think we were just glad to get rid of it. I think my mum was – the time had come.

**RB: And so no sadness about parting with any of these things?**

FB: I don't think so; I don't think so, no. It was sad that my father died, of course, she missed him very much but she got back to living a normal life which was a normal life.

**RB: What did your father die of, Florence?**

FB: Carcinoma of the bowel and he worked right up until he practically couldn't work any longer because, you know, you promise children, you're entertaining and you must entertain them, so you .....

**RB: Was that a strong element, that the show must go on?**

FB: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.



**RB: How has his work influenced your life?**

FB: Well, I always knew that it was an extraordinary childhood, extraordinary childhood and sometimes I used to think, "Oh gee, dad, be normal". And then looking back, no, it was a good childhood. As I say, it was stable. I mean, he'd carry on and carry on but he never, ever abused my mother, he never insulted her; he respected her very much.

**RB: The fact that you say those things though, Florence, does that intimate that other entertainers were not so conservative?**

FB: No, I don't think so, no. I think that considering his work, no. I mean, I've learnt later in life other children's families were all a bit strange. I mean, I've heard of others when growing up their father would come home, drunk, and they had no money, gambled it away, and all that was completely foreign to me, it was.

34.01

And my elder brother tells this lovely story but he came home from school one day and he said "Dad", he said, "I need all these books now for high school", and he said, "Here's a list", and my father said, "Well, there you are. Off you go, get them all, there you are". And he said, "I used to play with a kid down the park" and he said he came to school the first day "and I didn't see him for a couple of months and then I met him down the park and I said, 'Oh, Bernie'" – whatever his name – he said, "you haven't been to school". And he said, "No", he said, "my parents couldn't afford the tracer". And my brother said he's probably a director of BHP today. And there was no hesitancy and, of course, drink or alcohol or no money in the house didn't enter into my life and then later on you hear about – when you go out to work and other areas you think, "Oh, yes, my father wasn't very good".

**RB: So, your father wasn't so unusual after all?**

FB: Not in that way, no, no, no. Embarrassing in another way.

**RB: Our parents always embarrass us somehow. And did you ever eat the rabbits?**

FB: No. Oh, no, no, no, no, no. Oh, no, no. They got too old and I think they were put away – or I don't know. No, no, you never ate the rabbits, no.

**RB: Upper class.**

FB: And there was another time he took me to a house – it was out Maroubra – and he knocked on the door and there was a passage down the side and he knocked on the door and a man came around the corner and he was about this (indicates visually) tall – I was taller than him, you see.

36.01 **RB: A dwarf.**

FB: Dwarf. And I looked at him and my father said, "Oh, hello, Will. How are you going?" "Oh, good, Jim. How are you?" "Fine, well". "How's the show?" "Good houses" – that means you're having good houses. "Yes. Front of house good?" "Oh, yes, yes, it's good, it's good, Fred". "Yes, yes, Jim. Yes, yes, we're doing well. Yes". "And it's going well?" "Yes". "Saw it the other day. Looks pretty good". "Yes". They were having this conversation backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards and my father said, "Oh, well, Will. Hope it keeps going, hope it keeps going. Keep entertaining". And they chat away and he got in the car and I said, "Oh, dad, he was a little man", and he said it was the pantomime of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves and he was one of the dwarves. My father didn't even take any notice of him, he just had a conversation.

**RB: Did your father by chance ever entertain at, say, the Lady Mayoress' events or any events in the Town Hall?**

FB: No, no, I can't recall him.

**RB: Or hospitals?**

FB: At hospitals, in the grounds they would have – in the grounds of hospitals, in the gardens what I remember there was a lot of charity work going on. Now, there's something. In the middle of Hyde Park there was a temporary building there and artists would perform there for the Australian Comfort Fund. Now, you must remember I was only about eight or nine and I remember going there one night – they were doing a special fundraising concert – because like all artists came together for these. As you recall, if there's tsunami, flood, all the artists do something. Well, all artists from all aspects come in these days, there's always the singers and the bands.

38.02 In those days it was the same. During the war they used to congregate and give their services for the Australian Comfort Fund and the ACF or to collect money to go overseas - like, a lot of women knitted socks and etcetera, everything for the soldiers. And there was a temporary building in Hyde Park because one night my mother had a set of tails my father bought - and she used to call it tails, they were two fox tails and one would come around and she's say, "I'll wear my tails" and she said they were very warm. Anyway, off we went to this concert and coming out it poured rain and these tails, they looked like rats' tails.

**RB: But your father performed there?**

FB: Yes, he performed there. And there was another concert at the Trocadero and they did a skit - I can't remember what it was but the

punchline was my father came out - 'cause they would do everything at these fundraising concerts and, as I say, all aspects would come together: magicians, jugglers, contortionists, acrobats, they'd all come together to give these free to collect these funds. I don't know how much it was to go, I just don't know. Anyway, they used to do this skit and there was this skit that was something to do with butchers but the punchline was my father came out across the stage with somebody else, I don't know, with all these sausages around their neck, you see. Anyway, after the show I remember we went to Kings Cross for coffee or something – and Kings Cross was lovely in those days; there were lovely little shops and the Cross was just a beautiful place – and when we came home, got in here, and my father had all these sausages, dollar sausages.

40.05 My mother said, "What are you doing with the sausages?" She didn't know, he came home and he said, "I've got these sausages". "Where did you get the sausages?" She said, "Oh", she said, "There are too many there" and he said, "Oh, I think Mrs Fitzsimons would like some sausages next door". So, she said, "Yes" – twelve o'clock at night.

**RB: Twelve o'clock at night?**

FB: Twelve o'clock at night, so she expected him to say the next morning he'd go. No, next thing he goes in, knocks on the door.

**RB: But you were going to tell me the punchline of the show.**

FB: Well, we don't know what the punchline was but the punchline was my father arrived across the stage with all these strings of sausage around his neck.

**RB: Right.**

FB: I can't remember the ..... but the punchline of the joke, the punchline as I say, you know, was this. So, we get home, we have all these sausages and, "Yes, do you think the neighbours would like some sausages?" "Yes", said my mother. Well, twelve o'clock at night, oh no. Knocks on the doors, "Mrs, would you like some sausages?"

**RB: He worked to a different pattern of life and times.**

FB: Yes, yes.

**RB: Well, Florence, you've been very generous with all these reminiscences and these wonderful photographs.**

FB: There is a photograph and of course I wanted to go to – I haven't got it here but I wanted to go – I can show you anyway, it's upstairs somewhere – I wanted to go to our – yes, our school balls were a big problem. I wanted to go as a fairy and my father said, "No, you don't

go as a fairy, you'll never get a prize as a fairy". "Dad, I don't want to get a prize, I want to go as a fairy". "No, you won't go as a fairy". And I went as a clown.

**RB: And did you get a prize?**

FB: And I had these feet and that hat. (Indicates visually) I've got the photographs somewhere upstairs. And I said, "But dad, I want to go as a fairy". "No, you won't go as a fairy. You won't stand out – there'll be ten thousand fairies".

**RB: So, that was never part of your father's act?**

42.02 FB: No, no. "Fairies, everybody'll be a fairy. You go as a clown. You'll stand out as a clown". I stood out so well, I mean with these bloody big feet and this big hat – couldn't miss me. And I said, "Dad, I want to go" – this was a problem when we wanted to do something. You had to do it his way because it's dad. "Stand out", I stand out.

**RB: Well, these are wonderful reminiscences and I'm sure we could talk all day. I think I'm going to have to turn off the machine but beforehand thank you very much for this wonderful reminiscence.**

FB: I'll tell you one very funny story. There are many funny stories but my brother was in a concert party and dad was very keen – we all had to go to the dentist every six months and I still do, right through my life I go to the dentist and I still do because "In the theatre", he said, "you've got to have good teeth". He had beautiful teeth - seventy two, he had magnificent teeth – and he used to go to Mr McDermott. Now, this is something. He used to go to Mr McDermott in Macquarie Street, John McDermott; he did all the theatre people's teeth and his brother was Emmet McDermott, the Lord Mayor of Sydney and he was an orthodontist. However, my father used to mix up his own toothpaste, didn't believe in the toothpastes you buy, so he used to mix this toothpaste. It was horrible - we used to throw it out he used to get – but he mixed this and this. And my brother wrote from New Guinea and the letters were censored, of course, and he said something about a toothpaste. My father said "Right", so he made up this tin of toothpaste. Unfortunately, he put it in a Christmas cake tin and it was 'roundabout Christmas and when James sees this up in the islands, up in New Guinea he thought, "Mum's cooked a cake" and when he opened it up it was all this bloody toothpaste, you see.

44.07 And he wrote a letter and this letter – 'cause everything was cut out, you see. An ordinary soldier'd say, "I've just been to Port Moresby" – well, that'd be cut out, yes.

**RB: Yes, yes.**

FB: Well, he must've gone stark ravers in this letter because it had, "Dear father and mother. I" splash, "did" cut out, "did". My father said, "I don't think he appreciated that toothpaste!"

**RB: I think in your father's tradition of entertaining that's a very good point to stop. Thank you.**

FB: Right.

**Interview ends**