

NSW DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING

‘Millers Point Oral History Project’

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE:	Gaylene Harkin
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INTERVIEWER:	Frank HEIMANS
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RESTRICTIONS ON USE:	Nil

Note: The opinions expressed in this oral history interview are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily represent in whole or in part the position of the Department of Housing, the Government Architect's Office, the Department of Commerce or the Oral History Consultants.

Consultant's Note: Some of the facts stated by this interviewee in this interview have been challenged by Beverley Sutton and may not be totally accurate to her version of events at Millers Point.

START OF TAPE MP-FH37: SIDE A

00:02 Tape identification

Gaylene for the purposes of identification can you tell me when you were born.

00:22 1962.

Where was that?

00:29 In an ambulance on the corner of Bettington Street and Dalgety Terrace.

You were in too much of a hurry to get out, were you? Which hospital were you supposed to be born in?

I was supposed to have been born at Crown Street Women's Hospital.

Did you finish up there?

Well I did. Then I went on to St Margaret's, around the corner.

Tell me a little bit about your parents, what sort of people were they?

00:58 Well my father was a character on his own. My father was a hard-working person, they grew up as wharfies, so wharfies are in the family.

How far does the wharfie connection go back in the family?

About six generations I think, as far as I could trace it back.

How long has your family been associated with Millers Point? How many generations does that go back?

Six or seven.

That's a long time, they must have come out almost on the First Fleet, did they?

01:42 I don't know, I couldn't find any records. I've found some records but I couldn't find any records to the First Fleet, but we heard stories. My grandmother used to tell great stories about when she was growing up and all that, but there are no records or anything.

Is that your grandmother on your mother's or father's side?

02:09 Father's side. My mother grew up in Blacktown, she came from Blacktown, out west.

Tell me about some of those stories your grandmother told you, do you remember any of them?

02:21 Yes. She was always telling us stories what it was like to grow up in the Millers Point area as a kid. You know, she has told me that Windmill Street was famous for its pubs and it used to be a cul-de-sac, the Bridge wasn't there, and how wild it was down that end of town. As a kid growing up this side it wasn't safe for you to go

down that side.

Your grandmother used to live in Windmill Street, do you remember the number?

03:03 No. She told me the houses were like shoe boxes, they weren't two-storey like now, they were just one level, like mud huts.

This is before the present houses were built, you mean?

03:03 Definitely. When you go through history books and you have a look there is not many photos of what they looked like. I did look through history books to try to find out things that she used to tell me about. Like I think it is called the Stevens Building down there, that used to be the local warehouse, she said it was the house where the sailors used to go. That building has probably been around a long time there. The way she described it to me the building was exactly the same as it is now, it has never changed, it was a three-storey high building.

Is that the one they have done up now? The very modern looking one.

Yes.

So when you came out of hospital where were you living?

04:24 56 Bettington Street, on the corner, the gold house. It was a pub, then it was a shop and then my grandmother had it. My grandmother used to live on the other side of the road in Merriman Street, but our family got really big so she moved from there across the road. Then five or six years later the houses went under demolition.

In Bettington Street?

Yes.

So you are talking where your grandmother used to live, was that the same house, 56 Bettington Street, did you live with your grandmother in the same house when you were young?

Yes.

Your grandfather too?

Yes. My grandfather died when I was about five or six.

Now where was your father born?

05:26 He was born in Lower Fort Street in one of the Garrison houses, I think it is third from the Drill Hall, it has a white veranda, still does have a white veranda. It is the only house there with a white veranda.

Now your grandfather worked on the wharves did he?

Yes, they all did.

Tell me a few stories about your grandfather and his work.

05:51 His name was Teddy and in Merriman Street there was the wool store, that's where the wool come off the boats and the guys would pull it up and store it in like bales and build them up. He worked up the top of Bettington Street. That is where he was later on killed with a falling bale.

What do you know about that incident?

06:22 Not very much. I mean I was a young child at the time and I remember a lot of people running around and I remember being chased out of the room. I remember them telling me later on that he'd died. When I got older my grandmother said that it was part of the job, in those days there was no warning if a bale fell, if you didn't hear someone screaming. He got hit on the back of the neck and there was no point in taking him to a hospital because they didn't have the technology they do today, so he died at home.

How old was he when he died?

07:13 He was older than fifty, so I suppose he was about sixty when he died, I'm not really sure.

That is tragic. How did it affect the family when that happened?

07:28 Well in those days when you became a widow there was no pensions around so you had to work. That meant taking in boarders and that's what she had to do, she took in boarders.

Did she have a boarding house then?

Well she had lots of rooms - it was a big house.

Your father worked on the wharves too, did he do similar work?

08:00 Yep, he was a woolie. He worked on the wharves, did a bit of unloading of the wool bales and all that. Then he went from there to Oswald Bonds and became a storeman. That was still to do with the wharf, you know you had to drive stuff off the wharves into the storage companies.

Do you remember the wool bales being brought down Pottinger Street, do you?

When I was a kid, yes.

How were they brought down?

08:39 Well at the end of Windmill Street, well there is a building there now, there used be a wall that went around the corner well when I was a kid that was open and down in the wall there is a big iron gate they used to open up. That would go down a ramp, and the ramp was like a just big giant room that went all the way down to the bottom, so you could stand at the top and scream out and it used to echo all the way down. They used to roll the bales down and put them on top of each other and build them up. They rolled them down this ramp way once they got inside the door.

Who owned that place?

09:34 It was a part of Oswald Bonds property. They owned one in Windmill Street, they owned the one up in Argyle Street. That is the last place my father worked, in Argyle Street, Oswald Bonds were up there. That is where my father retired.

How old was he when he retired?

10:05 Well he didn't really retire - Oswald Bonds sold out and he was put off like everybody else but he was in his late sixties when that happened.

He was a strong fellow.

Yes. So was my uncle, but my uncle worked down on Hickson Road. Oswald Bonds owned a fair few places there at that time.

I believe you had four uncles that worked on the wharves.

10:34 Uncle Riv, he would probably be my oldest uncle, he worked there. Then there was Clayton, my father Edward, Lyle worked there. Yes, they all worked there. Three of them were my uncles from my father's side and two of them were my father's brothers.

So there are great-uncles and uncles.

Confusing.

How many children were in your family, Gaylene?

In mine there is nine.

That is a big family how did you all cope?

All right.

You all lived in the same house in Bettington Street?

11:43 Until the later years, yes. Then they got their own place. In those days they didn't mind living with their mother-in-laws but later on life they ended up getting

their own Maritime Services house and we all grew up and moved out.

What was life like as a child growing up with eight siblings? Describe the house for me in Bettington Street, how many storeys was it, what was the lay-out, where the rooms were and the yard, all that sort of thing.

12:19 Well you walked in from the front door into like a long hallway and on the left-hand side was this giant big room and on the right was this big staircase that went up to the next floor. Then straight through was this giant big kitchen and off the kitchen was these other two bedrooms that were pretty big. Then there was this tiny, tiny courtyard, it was very long. Over on the right-hand side was the outside loo. If you go up the staircase there was this veranda and that was the bathroom. Then there was eight bedrooms off this long, long walkway.

A lot of bedrooms, that is how you managed to fit into the house was it?

13:18 Yes. We had heaps of people living in our house. Today it would probably be a matter of sharing rooms but in our day as long as you had a clean bed to sleep in you didn't mind sharing rooms. I remember as a child sleeping on this make-believe bed because I couldn't get up the staircase, I wasn't well enough to climb stairs so I was always downstairs, asleep in the house. I mean a lot of people would say, even Cathie Farley, I mean I've known Cathie all my life, she'll tell you that they knew about me but no one really hadn't seen me until I was about five, because I wasn't allowed out. I was allowed out of the house but I was too sick to go too far in case I had an asthma attack. Walking was a bit of an issue.

Your health problems when you were young - what were they?

14:47 Well in those days they didn't call it asthma, I was just born with weak lungs, bad lungs. I was six months old when I came out of hospital and I was just a sick child. I mean if someone asks me what is the memory that sticks in my brain mostly about being a child I'd say camphor and oil. I do remember most of my childhood wearing little brown jackets made of paper soaked in camphor and oil, I stunk of it. It is just something I remember so much about being a child.

That was the treatment was it, for the lungs?

Well it was one of her treatments and I suppose it worked, I'm still here today.

When you say 'her treatment'?

My grandmother.

It was an old-fashioned kind of a remedy.

Camphor and oil. She used to think the camphor opened up the airways.

A bit like Vicks then.

15:55 Probably. I do remember little butcher paper jackets underneath the singlets.

It sounds like your grandmother was a very formidable person, was she?

Yes I suppose.

How would you describe her?

16:16 She was a pretty big woman. If you met her you would say that she was very hard and strict but she had a heart of gold because she'd never knock anybody back. The other day I was over at Millers Point and I was on a bus and they were talking about Maggie, well it was Cathie Farley who was talking about it, whenever any children were missing they knew where to go, 'Oh they'll be at Maggie's house.' She had a big heart. I mean, growing up in that time and having a big family you'd have to be really strict, but if someone came knocking at the door and said they were hungry and had no food she always had this big black pot on the stove, always something stewing in it, or cooking something, she'd never knock anybody back.

I believe she also adopted some children, did she?

17:37 Oh yes there are six of them. Before she went to Bettington Street to live she used to live at what is now called The Fish Shop On The Rocks, at that time they were boarding houses. She rented out rooms to people and there was this one lady who lived there who had babies, never kept them, and my grandmother became her friend and after that she adopted six babies. I think she went to Western Australia for one, Queensland for another, Victoria for one. I can't tell you where else she went.

They all grew up with her in the house?

They grew up there and then she moved down to Bettington Street when they were older. My father was her only child by birth.

So six adopted children, plus your father, that is seven already.

My father had nine.

They were all living in the same house in Bettington Street?

Yes.

How many to a room would they be sleeping?

I don't know - it is lots of kids, there was kids everywhere, there was never a dull moment.

Now tell me a bit more about your grandmother, because I believe she kept goats at Millers Point.

19:17 Yes. I had all these allergies and I was allergic to milk and goat's milk is probably better than (cow's) milk. It is not like you have the milkman coming around with milk everyday, so the only way to get goat's milk is to have a goat. Behind the houses in Bettington Street there was this giant big paddock that went all the way down to the wharf and there was always grass. If you didn't get grass there you had grass up the road at the end of Bettington Street where the park was, used to take the goat there to eat the grass.

So you had milk from this goat? Amazing, I can't imagine now a goat in Millers Point.

20:01 Well I had geese in Millers Point. I used to get some weird pets off the boats. I mean we even had a lamb there for a while until he grew too big and we had to get rid of him. Animals came off the boats all the time so my dad would bring them home. I used to remember feeding them with a beer bottle with a teat on top. You wouldn't think of that now when you think of the wharves.

How did your mother cope with all the housework and the hard conditions?

20:41 Well there was more than one woman in the house to do housework. There was routines - my grandmother had her routine days. Like Mondays was change your sheets days, so everyone had to have all their sheets changed. Tuesday it was laundry day. It was interesting.

Did your grandmother do her laundry herself?

21:11 Yes with the old copper. We used to go to collect all the old broken boxes from down the wharves, the old pallets, wherever we could we'd find bits of broken furniture. We had an old copper in the yard - we had that until I was about fifteen, and the only way to get a bath was to boil up the old copper. It was like an old copper with bricks all the way around it, so it was really heavily made. If you wanted a bath you had to boil the copper, take the bucket of water up the stairs onto the landing into this tiny little bathroom - by the time you got to the bathroom the water was cold.

Where did the water come from?

Out of this tap in the yard.

The house had a well, I believe as well.

22:06 Yep it had a well. When you first walked in the hallway and you walked to the staircase. Under the staircase was this door that as far back as I can remember I was always told you never opened. This door had so many locks on it and it had 'No Entry' signs and all that. When you opened the door there was this giant big drop into the ground. I must have been about twelve the first time I ever went down there. There was like this big room and you could tell that somebody had dug it out because the dig marks were still on the wall, I remember clearly seeing those. What happened was twice a year it had to be emptied and until we got an electric pump, and that was late in my teens, they used to put the bucket down, pull the bucket up, throw it out the front door, that is how they emptied it.

Was it a well dug by convicts?

23:14 It was a pub, that is what I was told, and they used to put the bottles down there on strings and the water was really cold. When I went down there to have a look on the Merriman Street side of the wall you could see it seeping through, so I'd say it was like a stream coming through that way. I don't know what Department of Housing did after they renovated, I mean I have never seen them pump it out, maybe they've got an automatic pump under there, I don't know.

Did anyone used to drink that well water?

23:59 No you couldn't. One year it didn't get emptied - I don't know why it didn't get emptied - but my brother ended up in hospital, really, really sick and I remember we all had to go and have injections. Some fever he got and my uncle got it and I think my other uncle got sick too and they said it was because the water in the well hadn't been emptied. Then after that it had to be limed twice a year.

If people didn't drink that water from the well how did they get sick from it?

I have no idea. Maybe they went down into it, I don't know, I have no idea.

How would you get to the well - was it through a passageway or just going down stairs?

24:52 Down a ladder. When you first walked in the front door the door was under the staircase and the well went right under the front room of the house. When you walked in off the street there was this hallway and there was the staircase going upstairs and there was this door that went underneath the staircase, it was

underneath the downstairs room, it was under street level. It was probably bigger than the room upstairs, it was pretty big.

Now you said the house was a pub before it became a house, did it have a name, the pub?

25:46 I don't remember that and I've never really found that out. I mean I have seen pictures of it but at the front I have seen that it had two glass bay doors that open outwards. They were there, they still are there but they are closed off from the street, there is a big piece of metal.

Was the house free-standing?

26:13 No, it was joined to a house, it is in a terrace block. The house next door was 56 -2, now they call it 58. Upstairs on the landing there was a doorway that went into that house and then when Housing Commission took over from Maritime Services they bricked it all up and made the property next door a separate property.

What was Bettington Street like in your childhood? Can you describe what went on in the street?

26:56 Lots of cricket games. They used to have lots of parties. People would come out, like if they could celebrate anything they would. They would close off the street and everybody would come out and have tables outside and the kids would be playing. A different way of life now.

What got that community together do you think?

27:29 I don't know, they were probably more civil to each other, they knew each other. I remember when people lost their jobs - then there was no pension or dole or whatever else and the neighbours would rally around and help that family out. I remember my grandmother lots of times saying, 'Oh well, we don't need these rabbits, we'll give them to the people across the road because they've got mouths to feed too and he's just lost his job.' I remember my dad saying, 'I will ask my boss at work if this guy can come and work part-time, or fill in the gap.'

Community spirit, you mean.

Big community spirit.

They all seemed to work for the Maritime Services Board was that why they knew each other?

28:28 If you didn't work for the Maritime and you didn't work as a wharfie you worked for Bushells, that is how it was in that day and age.

I believe Bettington Street used to have a Maritime workmen's shed.

Yes, on the corner.

Can you describe that shed and what sort of things went on there too?

28:49 Well the guys every lunch time would sit outside talking and having their smoko break. The shed was at the corner on what looked like a vacant allotment, the shed was up on a ridge.

What was it made of?

The shed was made of old tin, it was a rusty old shed.

It was a gathering place was it?

Yes the Maritime workmen got there and they'd have their smoko break and they'd have the little fire with their billy on it.

You used to be passing that as a child?

29:34 Well yes because my house was on the same block, my house was only four doors away from where that was, so the kids used to notice it. If your bike broke they wanted to fix it. They used to be there all the time, I used to think they never did any work.

30:04 END OF TAPE MP-FH37, SIDE A

30:05 START OF TAPE MP-FH37, SIDE B

Now what sort of shops and businesses were there in the street as well?

30:15 At 58 Bettington Street that was the local hairdressing salon and all the ladies would meet there on a Saturday. Yes, every Saturday at Sylvia's - women outside waiting to get their hair done, that was a hub of a place.

Who used to run that?

I can't remember, it was a lady and she lived on the premises.

What about some of the other places in the street?

30:52 Palisade Hotel was on the other side of the road. The vegie guy would turn up there every Thursday with his truck and sell eggs and vegetables from there. It was a

pretty quiet, otherwise, street.

Was there still a blacksmith in Millers Point?

31:13 Yes he was down the laneway right down the end and we used to say his blacksmith's shed was built into the rocks. It was, it was like a little alcove inside this little shed.

In Bettington Street too?

No, he was in the laneway behind Dalgety Terrace, down the laneway there, Rhodens Lane.

So there was a blacksmith there, what did he do? What kind of things was he making?

31:52 Well he used to do the shoes for the horses up at Centennial Park. I remember him telling me once when I was a kid when he said he made the shoes for horses. I was thinking where are the horses around here and he said, 'I do Centennial Park, I do here.' He did all kinds of bar work, like making bars, or iron gates. At that time he was doing repair work for the Maritime Services to fix up the metal fence in Dalgety Terrace because it had fallen down - when I was a kid the wall fell down.

Do you remember his name?

No, I don't.

Now that place where the ladies had their hair done - is that now a tenancy office.

It is a Tenancy Rights Office at the moment of the Department of Housing.

How would you get from the Palisade Hotel down to Hickson Road? What was the means of doing that?

33:00 Well there was a roadway there, you just walked straight down. Or you could go down the stairs in Windmill Street. You went down Windmill Street, right to the end and then turned around the corner and there was these stairs that went down. That's how I used to get down there to take my uncles' dinners down to Hickson Road. They were working for Oswald Bonds at that time, they were working down where the theatre company is now. It was probably the same building but down further.

Where was the spiral staircase?

33:50 The spiral staircase was in Munn street. You'd go along the back of the Palisade Hotel there, there was a walkway, and the walkway would go further than it does and the spiral staircase would probably be about where the park is now and it

used to go all the way down into Hickson road. The spiral staircase was removed years ago - it was removed when the wharf was built. When all the houses came down that all disappeared, all went, under demolition.

Was this when they were building the big tower, the Maritime Services Board Tower?

34:39 Yep. There were houses all the way along there. I always thought it was a shame, these houses had nothing wrong with them but they were demolished.

How old were you when this happened do you think?

About sixteen or seventeen.

What do you remember about that?

34:58 I remember them knocking them down, destroying them. I mean I saved a lot of bits and pieces out of those houses that two years ago I turned into stained glass windows. I saved old doors off cupboards and bits of wood and things like that.

Now I believe there was a tragic incident that happened in Bettington Street when you were young, tell me about that.

35:36 At the top of Bettington Street there was the park, at the moment it is all flat but when you were growing up you had to go down stairs to go into the park and there was this big wall that went right around. One of the local girls decided that they wanted to walk on the wall and one of them fell into the blacksmith's roof and got killed. She was about six or seven, she was only small. It was higher up than it is now, when you look at it now you see the wall, you look over the wall - it doesn't look as high but when we were kids the park was down here and the wall was up there, it was a pretty big drop.

That was pretty tragic.

36:32 Yes, terrible. My grandmother wouldn't allow us in the park unless she knew where we were.

What park is that?

It is the park at the end of Bettington Street.

Is that where the Eye-Ozzey was, the eye hospital?

The Eye Hospital was up past the woolsheds, up there.

No one seems to remember it because it was demolished before anyone's time. Have you ever heard about it, or seen it?

37:07 No. It was an old building when I was a kid, it was never used, but that is what

I was told it was, I mean even in history books. I went back digging through to see if I could find something about the old woolsheds, just a photo or something, you know, and maybe in Maritime Services there might be history about it but in the State Library I couldn't find anything.

So what schools did you attend, Gaylene?

37:41 I was home-schooled through Fort Street Public because I was a sick child. In those days they didn't have special need classes for people who were sick, so my grandmother got homework and kept me at home. I would never have been able to get up and down that hill anyhow unless I was carried, or I was pushed up.

So who taught you, your grandmother?

Yes my grandmother.

She taught you to read and write?

She taught me most things.

You owe quite a debt to your grandmother, I think.

38:18 Well people say to me where do I get all my crazy artistic designs from, or crazy thoughts, well I get them from her. I think that is where I get most of my charitable side, my big heart, it comes from her.

When you were able to go to school which school did you go to?

Fort Street Public, for the last two years there.

Of primary school. What was it like in those days.

38:55 Pretty cold. A lot different to when my kids went there. The grounds were just tar. I remember that there was a preschool across the road from Fort Street Public. There was a building across the road there and there was a preschool there, the preschool had something to do with the Maritime Services for the workers, something for their kids.

So it is a different preschool from the Lance Kindergarten. So did you like school when you were able to go?

Yes.

Obviously your health had improved by that stage?

39:56 Well it was a lot better than it was. I mean I got up the hill. Getting down the hill was a bit of an issue but I had an old wheelchair by then, so it was fine. There was this guy whose mother was my grandmother's best friend and they only lived about

six houses away from us, his name was Dennis, he wasn't all there, so he was just like a big brother, so he used to love pushing me around everywhere. Even when I was little he used to push me around in a little red wagon, take me for walks up the road. We used to go up the road to John Holly's and pick up the groceries and he used to pull me back.

A wagon he made himself, like a billycart thing?

41:07 A billycart. I think it was an old fruit box with a hole in it and with some old wheels on it, it was nothing really flash.

When you finished your time at Fort Street Primary which high school did you go to?

I went to Glebe High.

Was that good?

41:41 Yes it was good until I got sick and then I was back at home again. So then it was by correspondence most of the rest of my education.

You've had tough haven't you.

Well yes.

Doesn't seem to have affected you much. Did you manage to play any sport?

No, I didn't.

What about Sunday School, did you ever go to Sunday School?

42:09 Yes. I went to the Holy Trinity Garrison.

Was your family religious?

Yes, my grandmother was. She used to make sure that every child was christened before we were six months old.

Catholic?

No, Church of England.

Now I believe you have got a story to tell about climbing the Bridge or something, is that right?

42:46 Well when we were kids we always climbed the Bridge. The Maritime Services shed was just on our corner, so the guys that were there were some of the painters of the Bridge so they used to let us climb the Bridge.

You had no trouble climbing the Bridge?

Well I didn't get all the way to the top until I was older, but it was just an adventure

to get on the Bridge. I mean now you pay a fortune. I was saying to somebody the other day when they said would I like to climb the Bridge and I said, 'Yes, but I don't think I'd have the energy to cop all those stairs.'

Did you ever go up the pylon?

43:30 Yes. We used to go up to see the Cat Lady, she lived there.

Tell me about her.

43:35 She was this little old lady who we used to do messages for and instead of us climbing all these stairs she used to lower a basket for us to put the stuff into and pull it all the way up. We used to think she was crazy, I mean she was, and she had all these white cats and they used to run all over the bridge and she loved them. In her later years she never came down much.

Where exactly did she live?

44:10 When you came down the stairs from the pylon from the top there was like this little room, she lived in there. She had about twenty cats that lived in with her.

It was a room inside the pylon?

Yes.

On the bridge level?

No this would be above, there is a room there.

Was she was a recluse?

44:37 Yes I suppose you could call her that. She was there for a long time but she always had white cats, I don't know why she always had white cats, at least twenty of them. We used to think it was amazing but she used to say it kept down the rat plague. We used to say, 'What rat plague would there be on the Bridge?'

A noisy place I would imagine.

45:05 Yes. It was funny. I mean somebody asked me the other day what I remember most about the Bridge as a kid and it was when I first got my licence my dad used to say to me, 'If you can bypass going under the Bridge you are right. Go down Argyle Street, don't go so much under the Bridge.' He used to say, 'Missiles fall from the Bridge,' and I used to think yes, right. Then one day the welding plates off the Bridge used to fall and they were like the screws, or something off the Bridge, they used to fall all the time down onto cars, anything that was in the way. I remember once seeing

one go through the bonnet of a car, like the screw part.

Is it true you used to abseil from the Bridge?

46:07 Yes, the far end pylon, I did that as a teenager.

How did you manage to do that without them catching you?

Well I mean the guys on the Bridge knew us growing up there. I was learning abseiling at the time and they said, 'Why don't you abseil off the far-side of the Bridge.' So we did it more than once, we went up and down.

That is pretty adventurous.

I know. Do it now and you get arrested.

When you say the guys you mean the painters on the Bridge, you used to be friendly with them, did you?

46:45 They all had their smoko break at that Maritime Services shed down the end of Bettington Street. Some of them were residents of Millers Point so they knew the kids and who the kids were and who they weren't.

Interesting pursuits for a young girl to do.

47:07 Well yes. I mean I abseiled for a fund-raiser, I was in my thirties, off what used to be called the Regent Hotel and now it is called the Four Seasons, I think, in George Street there before you get to The Rocks. I abseiled from the roof down to the twenty-fifth floor for a Youth Week project. I mean that was nothing.

You were game.

47:46 I wouldn't do it now. I mean if you go backwards and take your time walking down the pylon it is not that bad, but I don't imagine running down like we did. When you are kids you do crazy things.

Coming back to the Cat Lady - did she have a name?

48:06 I don't remember, she was just known as the cat lady. She used to drop a basket to us, we knew what time to get there of a day. Well, twice a week we used to go get her groceries. We used to go round to John Holly's and get it and I remember she used to give us money for a little bag of lollies. We used to buy her groceries from John Holly and then take them back, there was a few of us.

Talking about the businesses and shops in Millers Point, who were the businesses and shops around your area? There was John Holly on the corner of Kent and Argyle.

48:50 When I was really young his mother and him owned the shop on the corner

of Kent and Argyle Street, they were there. Then later on they moved over into Argyle Street on the other side of the road. There used to be a chemist on the corner, he'd been there for many years, next to that was the greengrocers, next to that was Lawrence Dry Cleaning and next to that was a packing business, now it is a fish shop. When you walked down the hill there was a private residence and then there was John Holly, now it is a laundromat, and then further down was a private resident, another private residence and on the corner was a lady that used to sell fruit and vegetables and a mixed business.

Now what sort of a place was Millers Point to grow up in as a teenager?

50:13 With all the pubs around it was pretty dangerous for a girl, it was pretty loud and noisy and lots of drunks. So going out you had to be strict. After a certain time of night I wasn't allowed to come up Argyle Street. The corner of George and Argyle Street was off-limits after seven o'clock of a night because the two pubs on each corner used to have fights all the time, they were very famous for their blues every night, so you weren't allowed down there.

Talking about arguments and fights and crime - what was the crime rate like in your time at Millers Point, was it bad?

I don't know.

Do you remember any kind of violence on the streets?

No, I can't remember any.

Drugs, did they exist yet?

51:28 I led a real sheltered life back then.

Well these things came later, didn't they.

51:40 They did. Sometimes I imagine what my childhood was like and what children today have to live with, I think sometimes instead of getting better and better we've got worse and worse. Simple things, like I was telling a committee the other day when I was kid the thing that sticks out in mind is Christmas Day and Boxing Day and how people rallied together and no matter how poor they were they had the greatest Christmas. Boxing Day we used to take over Kent Street. We didn't ask permission, we didn't ask for permits, we used to put a car at each end, or if we didn't have a car I think we used furniture, we'd block off one end of Kent Street all the way up to where the Bridge is now, and we used to have cricket games. We didn't

care how many windows got broken, we had this cricket game going and everyone was out in the street with all their tables and their grog and whatever else and people were talking. Guys were there playing cards, or women were there playing cards, everybody knew each other. Today that is all gone.

What was your first job after leaving school?

53:03 I was doing cleaning for the Esso Building in Kent Street, that was an after-school job.

So Esso still owned that building then?

I think it is a block of flats now, then it was the Esso Building.

So it was office cleaning?

Yes. Emptying waste baskets.

You also worked for Bushells apparently.

Yes for a little while.

Where were they situated?

53:39 They were down in Playfair Street then. They owned the building on the corner, it is now called the Clock Tower. Bushells owned that property but in that property was a big carousel, so I ran the carousel for them.

You didn't pack tea like most of the other ladies did.

54:09 My lungs wouldn't have been able to handle it. I was paid by Bushells, they owned the carousel on that property. You may think why would they own a carousel but they did, they had a carousel there.

The kids used to have rides?

54:23 Yes kids used to go on it all the time and I was the one that had to make sure that it was packed away every night. I mean you say to people there was a big giant carousel there and they don't believe it, but there was.

Tell me a little bit about your role in the Green bans at The Rocks, I believe you had some part to play there.

54:49 In Cumberland Street, yes. Well, with the changeover between Department of Housing from Maritime Services Board there was this big thing when the Housing Commission came in and started to say houses weren't suitable to live in. A lot of residents got together and decided to try to save what we could. See, with one of the properties it was a toss up between a hotel, a parking lot and we wanted a place for

our older residents to live so we fought the Maritime Services and Department of Housing to build flats there. Every time they brought machinery onto the property it ended up getting destroyed, or somebody decided that it needed to be removed.

Tractors and bulldozers do you mean?

Yes.

Because they wanted to demolish the houses?

56:13 All the houses that were there and they wanted to build a monstrous hotel. They even wanted to build a giant big car park there, I don't know why, but we needed the place for our residents to live, the residents at the top of Cumberland Street that lost their homes. There were all these older residents who had nowhere to go.

You managed to put them into the Sirius Apartments, is that right?

56:38 Well Sirius Apartments were built and then they relocated into there. Sirius Apartments are made on a French design and they were brought in like duplay (?) box and joined together. They are nothing like the original plans. The original plans had little balconies on the Cumberland Street side and all this, well they are nothing like that. The one-bedrooms are nothing like the original plans.

Your husband apparently had some part to play in the blocking of the street as well?

My uncle. He lent me the semi-trailer.

Tell me that story.

57:23 Well at the top of Cumberland Street there are these old houses and King George is on one side and there are these old houses up on this kind of hill thing and they were under the demolition order, so a group of residents, I think there three women and four men who got arrested that day, we got together and we blocked the street off. The Sheriff couldn't get in, the bulldozers couldn't get in, no one could get in, the houses were saved. Once the media turned up everyone else disappeared. So we hit the paper, I've got a copy of that somewhere at home, and it said, 'Three women and four men were arrested for saving these houses.' It has got a sign, 'Save Our Homes'.

Are you one of those four?

I'm there.

Where did you spend the night?

In the lock-up.

Was that an interesting experience?

58:33 Yes. First and last time. Because I was only a minor I got a slap on my hand and my father got a good talking to about keeping his delicate daughter under control.

How was the street blocked off?

58:54 The semi-trailer, we flattened the tyres, we took the battery out of it. It had a container on the back that wasn't full, but would have weighed a ton, so for them to remove it they'd have to get the guys from the wharf to come up, take the container off and then pump the tyres up, or change the tyres, so that would have taken at least a day. So that gave us a day's grace. If the Sheriff can't get in, he can't get in.

59:42 END OF TAPE MP-FH37, SIDE B

00:03 START OF TAPE MP-FH38, SIDE A

00:03 Tape identification

Now I believe you spent quite a bit of time with the Estate Advisory Board, tell me about that time.

00:19 Yes I spent nearly ten years on that.

What is the Estate Advisory Board?

00:30 It's a group of residents and Department of Housing and the Police and the Ministers and people who are representatives of the Estate. We get together and we talk about issues that are going on in Millers Point, like traffic or the pubs, or things that need to be discussed.

Were you one of the community representatives?

Yes.

How many community representatives were there?

01:13 To start off there was about four and then it changed years later when they had one representative for every street.

So what sort of issues were discussed at those meetings that you had?

01:29 Well for a number of years Walsh Bay was a big part of it, a big part of how much impact it would do to Millers Point. See there is so much history down there that in my part I was always worried that they would get rid of history. Like Wharf Number Nine was full of history - that should have been preserved. Some of it was, some of it they got rid of. My biggest argument was we should preserve our history, not get rid of it.

What were the residents concerned about?

02:20 Impact. How much impact would it have into Millers Point. What would be the height of buildings. Traffic was another one. Yes, just things like that.

Was it a heated debate?

02:45 Yes for a long time. We even had a protest once, a big march. We would picket all the wharf. Open walkways was one thing, the rights of people to walk around wharves, that Walsh shouldn't be closed off. They have always been open to the public and the public should have the right to keep a hold of our open space.

How did the developers react to the public concerns about that?

03:28 Well they didn't like it, but you know we did a lot of walking around with them. There was a Walsh Bay Committee, Shirley Ball was a big part of that. I was invited lots of times to go on walks with them and probably to tell them stories of things I remembered as a child. Colin Toohey was on that committee for a while.

There were quite a few changes made to the Walsh Bay thing before it was finalised.

Terrible changes.

What were the original proposals and how did it change?

04:15 Well, buildings weren't supposed to get as high as they are. There is a few there in Windmill Street and the corner of Hickson Road where the Weigh Tower is, the building there, that building is higher than it should be. They are the things that we fought for, but they still went ahead anyhow.

Were the plans changed often to accommodate the concerns of the residents?

04:54 Well they were changed but they look terrible. Even now, not as a resident, I go to Council meetings all the time and there is a building in Windmill Street that is up for demolition soon, it is going to be a block of flats - it is going to be higher than what was ever discussed. There is not that much sun on the end of Windmill Street as

it is, so when the building goes up higher there will be no sun on those premises at all and they will end up becoming damp boxes.

Now that the Walsh Bay development is completed how do you feel about it?

05:49 Well I went for a walk a few weeks ago down there, some places you can't get into and I think that is really a shame. It has always been open that you could walk around the outside of the wharves but security guys were there and said 'no public access', it is just a shame that we've lost the public walkway. I mean I can understand it is a private residence area but when I was having a look there are things that were taken off the wharves that will never return. I'd just like to know where they are, they've been thrown on the tip or something.

So how do the rest of the residents in Millers Point feel about Walsh Bay? Have the people kind of mixed in with the rest of the population at Millers Point, do you think?

06:43 Well no, I think they think rich part, poor part.

They have never really merged?

No.

Likewise from the other side?

06:56 Probably. It is really funny, when I was growing up I was always told the poorer you were the closer you lived to the water. In history records, even in the Garrison records, when I look back the Chinese lived near the water, the poorest part of the people lived near the water, and the richer part lived up on Observatory Hill. Now it is the other way around. It is like the rich ones live down there and the middle-class or the poor ones live in the middle. It is just like a big turn around.

So how long were you on the Estate Advisory Board?

Ten years.

When did you give it up?

07:44 When I had to leave Millers Point, about five years ago.

We'll talk about that a bit later. Now I also believe you had a part in saving Lance Kindergarten, tell me about that.

08:00 Well one of my children was going to Lance Kindergarten and at that time Esso owned the land. They decided that they wanted to sell it and they were going to demolish it and build a block of flats. There was no other kindergarten for miles and miles from where we lived and so we decided to protest. I don't know why - we got

dressed up in black capes and all that, but we did and we marched to Parliament House, took all our kids with us, protested there. Protested at the Esso Building for weeks and weeks until we had this big meeting with them. The day that the place was supposed to be demolished, they said this was the day it's going to happen, we decided to chain ourselves to these big giant trees that were on the property. Once the media turned up Esso told us they wanted to talk to us the next day and they told us that they had sold the property to the Kindergarten Union, KU. So the building had been saved.

Excellent. How many children do you have?

I have three.

They all went to Lance Kindergarten?

All went to Lance Kindergarten.

So you saved the place for your kids.

09:36 Yes and the next generation and the one after and the one after.

So how long did it take, the whole process of saving that?

About three months.

Did you chain yourself only once to the trees?

Twice.

Why do you think Esso gave up so quickly?

09:53 Because we told them we were going to stay there. We rang up every media place we could and protested. It is true - there was nowhere else in the city for children to go. Where else are kids supposed to go? I mean there is no more day cares around, are more kids supposed to run the streets? We hassled the KU to buy the place. We wrote letters off, we got a petition together, wherever we could push our story we pushed it, we hassled anybody and everybody.

Good on you.

10:35 I mean we even hassled the garbage guys not to pick up the garbage from the Esso Building up the road. I mean they were going to take away our kindergarten, let them have some stinky garbage for a day. I don't know if that ever happened but that is something we did ask the garbage guys to do. I mean we were in the Esso Building there every day, we took our chairs up there. The kids couldn't go to day care so we

would turn their front foyer into a day care area - they probably got sick and tired of seeing us. We took the kids there, I know there was a lot of toddlers running around all over the place screaming and carrying on, I don't care. We took finger painting, I think we took this homemade play dough. Why not? I figure the guy was sick and tired of seeing us in the end.

You think that is why they gave up.

11:39 I think so. I think after having ten kids screaming in their foyer for over a week I think they had had enough. I mean he kept telling me he had no control over saving the property but I said to him, 'Well where are we supposed to take our kids?' There weren't many parks around, at that time - there was only two parks: the park at the bus shelter, there wasn't really good parks to play in. Where else were we supposed to let our kids go and play and whatever? At that time too they sold off Esso's pre-school up the road, Fort Street Public was sold off too, so I think Esso was just getting rid of their stock. We gave them what they wanted, we just stayed in their foyer, I think it was for about a fortnight, it was more than a week, I know that, we were up there every day.

Regarding the Lance Kindergarten- it wasn't the original kindergarten, was it, at Millers Point, there was one somewhere else?

Yes it was in Bettington Street.

Until when do you think?

13:05 Well it is over a hundred and something years old, but it was originally in Bettington Street.

Do you know where in Bettington Street?

13:15 No. Somewhere in my family tree I found records - I found some notification that somebody in my family tree went to Lance Kindergarten when it was in Bettington Street. When I tried to get records about Lance Kindergarten they did tell me that that wasn't the original site, that it was located in Bettington Street, but where I don't know. I think it might have been down the far end of Bettington Street, more down near the water end. But it was only a small property, I know that, they said it was a tiny property and that is why they moved. I would say over a hundred years, maybe longer.

Now I believe you know something of the underground tunnels at Millers Point, tell me that story.

14:11 Well I always liked history and I always liked stuff about older things. In Windmill Street Oswald Bonds owned all those properties and with fathers and uncles working there you had to take their meals to them at supper time and whatever else. I used to investigate things, so I got to learn about all these tunnels. There is one tunnel underneath Windmill Street that goes off to the Palisade or the Lord Nelson and it is there. When Walsh Bay people took over they thought some of my stories were a bit crazy, so we went for this walk and I showed them where all these holes were in the ground, big giant holes that looked like tunnels. They were way up high, I remember if you were down here the tunnel is way up there and you used to climb up all these steps to get into them.

Where did they start from exactly?

I'd say they started at 35 Windmill Street, underground.

How would you get down there then - to get into the tunnels?

15:53 You'd have to go through Oswald Bonds, now it is called the Theatre Company, and they were about four floors underneath the ground, I remember you had to climb down lots of stairs.

Underneath where the new building is now – the Sydney Theatre Company - on Hickson Road?

Yes, way down.

You started in Windmill Street and went down.

Went down that way. Underneath Windmill Street is where the tunnel is anyhow.

Do you have any plans of those tunnels?

16:22 No. I did ask Walsh Bay for a copy of them if they ever found them but nothing ever happened.

Did it go to the Palisade or to the Lord Nelson Hotel?

I think it went to the Palisade, because it was more over that way.

Now you left your house in 56 Bettington Street, when exactly was that?

16:56 I would have been in my twenties. I moved for a short time into Trinity Avenue and then moved from there into Windmill Street.

Why did you have to leave Bettington Street and move to Trinity Avenue?

17:18 See, 56 Bettington Street was one big house and when the Housing Commission took over they closed off the doorway between the two houses. I was

renting the property next door from originally Maritime Services, then the Housing Commission took over and the Department of Housing wanted to move me on, so they moved me to Trinity Avenue temporarily until one of the houses in Windmill Street was renovated.

Was that 4A Trinity Avenue you moved to? How long were you there do you think?

Yes. Eighteen months.

What was that house like?

18:14 It was a flat. It was up all these stairs. They had big metal steps at the front and it was a killer - I mean, they were dangerous when they were wet.

That was only a temporary move until you went to Windmill Street, what number Windmill Street did you go to?

45 Windmill Street.

I think I know those houses, that is where Eileen Pearson lives, isn't it?

No.

No, she is 15 Windmill Street. So what was the house like at 45 Windmill Street?

18:54 Two-storey. You walked in the front door and straight in front of you were the stairs to go up, three bedrooms upstairs. A lounge room, a dining room and family room altogether, small kitchen. When I first took over the property off the kitchen was a doorway and you walked out into a passageway and the toilet was down in the backyard. About ten years after I had lived there Department of Housing decided that they would put a walkway. Change the door from where it was and put the door there and put like a closed walkway down to the bathroom and the toilet so you didn't freeze to death when you went out to go to the toilet.

Modernise it?

Modify it, yes. I mean in pouring rain to run to the toilet was like you got drenched before you got there. For security too, that is something we pushed for, for the renovations to be done, because you don't know who is in your backyard in the middle of the night and if you are dying to go to the toilet you have to go.

When you were living at Trinity Avenue, going back a little bit, you said to me earlier that the house was next door to a box factory.

It is now the nursing home, Millers Point Nursing Home.

Darling House you mean?

20:26 That was a box factory in my grandmother's day, something to do with in the war - it was a box factory. It was just this old stone cottage. When I moved to Trinity Avenue it was this old stone cottage that no one ever used, it was overgrown with weeds and everybody dumped rubbish there. At that time Shirley Ball had just taken it over and some plan that she had to turn it into a nursing home, so we had garage sales there. We helped to clean up the property, we cut down the grass, got rid of rubbish, tried to clean up the property as much as we could. For a little while the property was vacant and then somebody asked could they rent it out, I don't know how they ever lived in there with no windows, but they did. The money was made years later to build Darling House.

It is marvellous now, Darling House, it is a wonderful development.

It is, it is great.

Was that a big fight to get it going?

21:51 Oh yes. Shirley Ball was fighting for years to get that place going. It had been vacant for a long time, I mean most of my childhood memories of that place was an abandoned building, or an old block of ground left with an old stone building on it. *So it wasn't actually a box factory when you were young, it had already closed?*

It would have been in the war days.

Do you know what sort of boxes they used to make there?

No.

Darling House is quite a successful development now.

It is, it is great.

Now you lived in 45 Windmill Street for quite a while, how many years do you think?

22:52 About twenty.

Why did you leave finally?

Troubles with a bad neighbour.

Right next door?

Four houses away.

So you couldn't stay in Millers Point with him around?

23:16 It became impossible for me to live there.

Now you moved to Glebe in 1999 was it, about then?

In 2000.

What is your present-day connection with Millers Point?

23:34 Well someone the other day asked me about Millers Point. You can take a person out of a community, but can you take the community out of the person? No, no, no, no. I can move out of Millers Point but you can't take that part of it out of me. For years I blocked off Millers Point, I didn't go there, I didn't have much to do with there, and it was just like there was something missing in my life. I decided why should I do that to myself? For a while I had to stay out of Millers Point because I had an order against me not to enter the boundaries of Millers Point. I mean the Department of Housing gave me great letters saying at a later date I can return there because I am a protected tenant of Maritime Services days. Maybe when I am older, or things change that I can move back there. I go there a lot because I feel like my family tree is there and sometimes it is nice to go back. In Bettington Street there's all these trees planted. I mean you can ask Cathie Farley - she will tell you that I was this green nut when I was a kid and all the trees in Windmill Street - I planted those trees. I planted the trees in Merriman Street. They are probably the wrong trees to plant in that area, but when you are a teenager you don't know these things. So I go to look at certain trees. There's a tree planted straight across the road from my grandmother's and there is a seat there, I go there lots of time to think back on what life was like. If there was ever a fight to save Millers Point again someone said, 'You would be a part of it,' - yes, I would be because it is a great area, there is lots of history there and it would be a shame to see it go. You don't know what is in the future. I mean the government, if they push through the Woolloomooloo development with Frank Sartor, the East Darling Harbour development, if that gets pushed through no heritage areas will be protected. Millers Point, Glebe, we will all have to rally together to save public housing.

What do you feel about that new proposal for the development of what they call East Darling Harbour, which really is West Millers Point?

27:13 I think it is wrong. I think it is an eyesore. I mean the wharf area down the other end with all those flats on it, it doesn't look right. I mean, it is a sad thing. I know it is all open space but we need to keep some of our open space open - I mean put a park in or put a place for kids to kick a ball around. It is something that has been taken away from kids, there is no proper place where you can kick a ball.

Has Millers Point changed a lot in terms of its looks since you were young? Are many of the heritage buildings gone?

28:02 No, it hasn't changed that much. It shouldn't change. I mean a lot of things we want to save for the next generation and the one after. If we allow businesses to come in and start building fancy high-rise buildings, selling them off, this will go.

What do you feel about that sense of history at Millers Point, do you think it is being maintained?

28:40 To a degree. A lot of the new tenants who have moved in are high-need tenants and they don't care about history. I was talking to someone the other day who lives in my old house and he doesn't give a rat's arse about history, or what happened there before, it is just a roof over his head. I said to him, 'Would you be a part of getting out there to save it?' He said, 'No. Department of Housing will find me another place.' There is no community pride, just a roof over his head.

29:35 END OF TAPE MP-FH38 SIDE A

29:38 START OF TAPE MP-FH38: SIDE B

Gaylene when I spoke to you earlier you made a comment, you said, 'they are killing history at Millers Point,' what did you mean by that?

29:51 Well there's not enough history told. You read history books and it is pretty plain, like the oral stories you are telling is really good because a lot of history dies with people. People don't write things down and families don't carry on stories, like stories that were told to me I remember, but my children - they are not interested in history, they don't care. I think that in the long term if it is not put in a book no one will remember. New residents who come into Millers Point: some do care, some don't, it is just a sad thing.

So you say you still identify very much with Millers Point - how often do you go back there do you think?

Twice a week, maybe three times.

Do you have friends to visit there?

31:08 Yes, I visit my old friend that lives in Sirius. Sometimes I go for a walk, I like to sometimes go for a walk, and I walk down to the wharves and at least once a week,

mostly on a Sunday, I go for a walk down to the old Sydney Theatre Company and have a coffee on their wharf. There it is really nice, you can sit outside and it is nice to look at all the changes. Some of the changes are for the better. I remember the wharf next door - that wharf was sinking, the pylons on that wharf were sinking. Now they've straightened up that wharf and cleaning it up and it looks amazing.

Were any of those wharves swimming places for the kids?

Yes the Met. We used to swim at the Met all the time.

You too?

32:15 Yes. Used to dive off Wharf Number Nine into the Met there. I remember once my brother lost his bike and my father had to pay the Water Police a carton of beer to dive down to get the bike out.

So many memories for you at Millers Point.

Oh lots of memories. Fishing off the wharf.

Well thanks a lot Gaylene for sharing those memories with us, it has been wonderful to have that.

I hope some of them are good.

Anything else you want to talk about before we end?

No, that's all.

So when you think about Millers Point now what do you think about? When I say the words 'Millers Point' what comes into your mind?

33:09 Cricket games, barbecues, ringing the church bells at the Garrison. The dome on top of Observatory Hill, we used to be able to tell the time by. Things like that.

There used to be this dome and it used to make this noise every day, so you knew when it was twelve o'clock, three o'clock, that hasn't been working in many years.

Well, lovely memories to have. Thanks very much Gaylene.

33:58 END OF TAPE MP-FH38 SIDE B & END OF INTERVIEW WITH GAYLENE HARKIN.