NSW DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING

'Millers Point Oral History Project'

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWEE:	**Russell Fitchett**
TAPE NUMBERS:	MP-FH41-42 (2 tapes)
INTERVIEWER:	Frank HEIMANS
DATE AND PLACE:	20 January 2006 at Cremorne NSW
DURATION OF INTERVIEW:	105 mins 28 secs
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.

00:00 START OF TAPE MP-FH41 SIDE A

00:01 Tape Identification

I believe it is your birthday today, congratulations Russell. Usually in these interviews we ask people to give us some details, I know it is your birthday today but which year was it that you were born?

00:38 1948 in Sydney Hospital, that is as much as I know about it, I was born in Sydney.
Do you know who brought you into the world?

00:52 I honestly don't, I just know that I was born in Sydney Hospital. I have a sister who was born somewhere in the Eastern Suburbs at a hospital there, but I know I was born in Sydney Hospital, and that is it.
Were your parents already living at Millers Point at that point?

01:09 They were. My mother had been working in the cigarette factory in Kensington; my father had moved from the North Coast of New South Wales with his parents to Observatory Hill in Millers Point and they met in the city after the war and that is how I came about, I suppose.
I believe your grandparents go back a long way to Millers Point, do they?

01:38 My grandfather was in the pilot service, he was a lighthouse keeper, a pilot station keeper and he was also a boatman in Port Macquarie. He was involved in a rescue up there - a boat had overturned on the Barney, and he got the Royal Humane Society Award for his bravery, and whatever. Then as a kick upstairs, I suppose it was, they asked him would he like to come and work in Sydney, and when he came to Sydney had the option of a house on Goat Island, Fort Dennison, Pinchgut as it is known, or the house on top of Observatory Hill, next to the Observatory and that is the place that they chose because they could walk around and do things, and not be reliant on a boat. He worked for the Maritime Services Board all his working life in Sydney and they lived in that house for thirty-nine years, I think we worked it out the other day.
Now your grandfather was also a rent collector for MSB, wasn't he.

02:43 He was. When I was a small child some mornings and some afternoon, depending on what his rounds were, he'd take me round and you could see what the area he had at that time. Places I still remember going into - I still remember going into the morgue and he used to have a game of cards with the morgue attendant every morning. I always remember these small bottles of milk that were in one of the morgue refrigeration systems, where they kept the bodies, but there was no body on the slab but this fellow used to keep his salads and that in there to make his lunches with. My grandfather would always stop there on his rounds to have a cup of tea, that was where he had his 'smoko' of

a morning, and I always remember the morgue attendant as being a very funny man, strangely enough. That was down there where the overseas terminal used to be, I don't know if the building is still there in actual fact.

What memories do you have about this morgue and being there with your grandfather?

03:47 I remember that we used to go in and they'd have a game of crib, I think it was, with the pegboard and everything and they'd have a cup of tea and they'd tell stories. I always remember the bloke always had a bottle of milk for me, the same that used to be issued at schools, a third of a pint of milk. I don't ever remember seeing any dead people or anything there. As I said, that was part of the morning round and the afternoon round with my grandfather, it used to start from up where the IBM Building is now at the end of the Harbour Bridge and we'd go round past what was then the Sydney Cooperage, where they actually made all the wooden kegs for a lot of industries in Sydney and I still remember seeing the young boys there whose job it was to carry a pot of burning embers to burn the insides of the kegs.

04:42 They charred the inside of the kegs, for when rum was put in the carbon inside the kegs actually changes the chemical composition and makes the drink smoother, what's in the keg. I remember my grandfather told me that all the staves that they made the kegs with were brought out from Sweden, or Scandinavia somewhere, and you'd watch the old fellows with the long-bladed scrapers actually getting the angles right and to watch these kegs appear as if by magic, they'd put the base down, put the staves in, they'd wire things to tighten them up and for a six or seven year old kid it was really very clever to look at.

05:25 I know a lot of people I've talked to just in recent days don't even remember that place being there, but yet it was there, it was down below Fort Street. It is where the fire station is now at Millers Point, that was the Sydney Cooperage there. I don't know if it was still there in the 1960s, but it was definitely there in the early 1950s and that but then I think all that area got knocked down, what was there, because they wanted to make new approaches for the Harbour Bridge and everything.

How many people used to work in that cooperage?

06:00 I always remember lots of people. There was also lots of kids who I would presume were apprentices, the kids appeared to me to be between thirteen and fifteen, I'd say. But there was possibly a dozen or so full-grown men, plus there was always trucks going in and out with the barrels, or the staves, the timber they were making the kegs out of. There were fellows whose jobs were to put the top in, that was the final job was when the top

went in and there were blacksmiths there, actually making the steel bands for the kegs.

06:40 I know that the old Tooth's Brewery used to get all their kegs from there. That is now no longer a brand of beer in Sydney but it was a famous old brand of beer a long time ago. There always seemed to be lots of things going on and for a six year old kid it was always exciting, my grandfather used to have friends there. I don't know whether he actually collected the rent for that because the whole of Millers Point was owned by the Maritime Services Board. The only thing freehold I think was the churches, and the manse for the church, and things like that, I don't think there was any other freehold properties in Millers Point at the time.

You also talked about a blacksmith in Bettington Lane.

07:26 Yes there was. When they formed The Rocks, or whatever, it was all carved out of sandstone, I have seen some of the pictures, Millers Point, where Observatory Hill used to slope right down to the Harbour but they cut all this area out. There was a hole in the wall in Bettington Lane in the sandstone and there was an old fellow who used to make two things, he used to make bag hooks for wharfies and bale hooks for wharfies. The bale hook was - if you have seen slasher movies, or whatever, the bad person has always got this big hook in his hand, well that was for using on wool bales. The smaller bag hooks were for picking up things like bagged flour, bagged sugar, rice, any cereals and that. The smaller bags I remember being about seventy to ninety pound and the bales of course were massive wool bales.

08:22 This old fellow would start off with a bar of steel and because we were kids we could turn the handle on his brazier to supply the air for the coals to heat and he'd quench it in water and oil, and he'd tell you why he was doing it. He was famous for these hooks, every wharfie in Sydney would get their hooks from him, because they had a reputation for never breaking. He was an old-style thing. I have been down there recently to look and there is no trace of that, it is all gone. It wasn't very flash, it was just this hole with a couple of pieces of corrugated iron on the front and his forge tools there, which no one ever touched, I mean no one every stole them or anything. It was very interesting to go down there as kids and watch him doing all the stuff, which you don't see today I suppose.

Do you remember his name?

09:10 I've got no idea. I know that he was a retired wharfie himself and he possibly made knives out of old power hacksaw blades, which are a really big wide thing because most seamen used to have to carry a knife and a spike. I don't think he made the spikes for

seamen but I am pretty sure he did make knives as a favour to people, he'd put them on the grinder down there and do whatever he did, it was an old whetstone thing and he'd put a good edge on them. The old hacksaw blades were very good for cutting rope, it sounds silly but I know that from personal experience.

So did all the inhabitants of Millers Point bring their knives to this man to be sharpened?

09:53 No. I do remember a fellow on a bike that used to have a little set-up on the back of his pushbike who'd come around and he'd sharpen your scissors, or your knives, that was, I'd say, the very, very early 1950s. At the same time in a FJ Holden utility, so it had to be about a 1953 or 1954 model, the rabbit man used to come around and he had a big wooden chopping block in the back of his ute. There was two fellows, one bloke used to drive, the other bloke was in the back, and they had literally hundreds and hundreds of pairs of rabbits and I think they were sixpence a pair, and if you wanted the fur it was an extra penny, but they'd butcher them in the back of the truck. They'd come around calling out, 'Rabbitoh, rabbitoh,' which was a good cheap feed. I can remember eating so much of it as a kid I wouldn't dare eat it today, I can remember what it tastes like and I haven't eaten it for forty years. We used to eat a lot of rabbit because it was a cheap meal in all its forms, baked, stewed, whatever. They were things that used to come round as a regular occurrence.

11:01 I can remember the ice man coming around and the ice man was a local fellow and I can't remember his name, but he won either a thousand pound, it was the major State Lottery that he won, and he bought this ice run and he went broke because refrigeration was coming in. I remember my father saying a thousand pounds probably would have bought you ten houses at Balmain at the time, I don't know how much a house at Balmain was - I can remember them being three hundred pound and that was just before the decimal currency changeover in 1966, not like it is today. There was things like that.

I remember we used to get bulk milk deliveries, you used to leave a little tin billy can out and the man would come round and he had a truck with a massive spigot and a big tank in the back and he'd fill your billy and leave that on your window sill. Then later on it went to bottled milk, of course, and I don't know when it was but I can remember flavoured milk coming in cartons and I thought that was the cleverest thing I had ever seen - these cartons of flavoured milk, chocolate and that kind of thing.

12:18 There was an old fellow used to come round selling oysters, he'd be in the pub every certain day and he'd come in and sell oysters. Or there would be fishermen would

come up from the Harbour and sell prawns. There was an old Chinese fellow that used to sell smallgoods, I always remember, he was such a little man but he had this big wicker basket and there may have been maybe twenty-five kilos of salamis and stuff like that in it. Later on I thought it was strange that a Chinaman would be selling that, when you'd think it would be a European-style of thing.

12:56 There was an old fellow in Kent Street, directly opposite the Captain Cook Hotel, there was a very narrow lane, it was only about eight foot wide and as kids we were always interested because we'd see this bloke coming in and out all the time. He used to dye popcorn in there, make popcorn, for sale at the Easter Shows and things like that. Apparently when he died there was a lot of money found in there because he was an old fellow and he put it away to keep away from the tax man, or whatever. That was directly opposite the Captain Cook Hotel on Kent Street and I couldn't tell you what nationality the fellow was but he was there for years, coming and going. As kids we always wondered what was in there because the security was brilliant, even though it was only corrugated iron and locks and padlocks you couldn't get into it because every kid on Millers Point had tried. You could see down from up on Observatory Hill down into it but you didn't actually know what was going on in there, you just saw him coming out with all this dyed popcorn, so as children you thought hey there were sweets in there, we can get some of this.
There was a guy called Jackson wasn't there he used to sell some stuff as well.

14:10 Wally Jackson. He had his own truck and he used to cart at the Sydney Markets, which are Paddy's Markets now, down the bottom of Dixon Street, Chinatown. Of a Friday because the distributors and that didn't want stuff laying there, going rotten over the weekend, they'd either give it to Wally or Wally would buy it off them at a modicum price, just to get it off the premises. But every Saturday morning he'd be parked there and just about everyone used to buy their greengroceries from there. I can remember coming down with my grandmother and he always had this massive big chopper for chopping pumpkins and things like that. Also, too, he made his drinking money out of it, I suppose but he never charged exorbitant prices, he made a little bit and everyone still got very cheap produce, which was good for the area and that. There was a lot of widows from after the war and he always made sure they got stuff for free if they weren't travelling that well, didn't have a lot of money and that.

15:23 But most of the people in Millers Point, shopkeepers like that, if you weren't cashed up that week you could kick something up to the next fortnight, you just put it on the bill

and they'd hold your credit, they would only give you a certain amount but it got you through the skinny part of the week, sort of thing. There were little tiny shops around Millers Point - people were living in the house behind it and just over the little shops over the years, I suppose, but I can think of three in Kent Street, three little shops in Kent Street, and each individual one had something that the other ones never sold so if you went there you got something.

Now that cottage that you lived in with your parents, or was it your grandparents?

My grandmother yes.

It was Number Two cottage on Observatory Hill - can you describe what it looked like, the layout of the interior and so on?

16:19 Yes. It looked out directly onto Sydney Harbour in a direct line with Lavender Bay, which is on the opposite side. There was a path, you walked into the house, there was one bedroom on the right-hand side, two bedrooms on the left-hand side and a lounge room and that was the cottage as such. You walked through an added-on piece, like a covered walkway, where there was a bathroom. The toilet was out in the yard, outside of the house itself, it always had sewerage while I was there but in years before it may have been an outhouse type. Then there was another building at the back, which was actually the kitchen, where we ate and things like that. Originally, I believe, it was a storage room. There was a fireplace in every room too, there was a fuel stove in the kitchen but all the rooms inside had a fireplace. They had a Welsh slate roof because when the National Trust actually came to renovating it I think the cost of the roof was hundreds of thousands of dollars because they had to renovate it with this original Welsh slate shingles and it was very expensive to do. That was one of the reasons my grandmother, they'd lived there for thirty-nine years, when they finally did leave it was because the roof was leaking and they wouldn't repair the roof until the family moved out, and I think it is a state government office, or something there now.

18:08 It had a small yard at the back, had an old copper and wash tubs out in the back yard under a covered awning. There was a side yard which led onto the adjoining house which was where the original stone wall of Fort Phillip is, there was a house and a residence there with an old couple there, Harry and Ethel Ross and they lived there for actually longer than my grandmother. They were there when my grandmother arrived and then they died just prior to my grandmother moving out of the place. The cottage itself was originally called the Messenger's Cottage, and what it was, there was a set flagstaffs on

Observatory Hill which was semaphores for shipping because you could look directly down the Harbour to the Heads and the messenger had a bike. What actually happened, in the house next door they had photos and paintings of ships for identification purposes and they'd identify the ship coming into Harbour, which were usually sailing ships, and I did see a lot of the old photos and paintings when I was a kid. They'd send a messenger, the messenger would go to the shipping company, which was usually in Hunter Street or down that area at the bottom of George Street. They'd find out what wharf the ship had to go to, the messenger would then ride back up the hill and tell the semaphore station, who'd semaphore the ship, or the tug that used to tow them around, so the ship would know what berth to go to. When we were up there it was called the Messenger's Cottage but because of the tenancy that my family had there it is now listed in books as 'Fitz's Cottage'. It was always called Number Two cottage, and that is directly adjoining the Observatory, there was only the three buildings there, and there was another cottage, which was the Weather Bureau cottage at the back of Observatory Hill, that was the only other place that actually had people living there. There was the Weather Bureau cottage, Number Two cottage and Fort Phillip, which is the big stone wall that is still there today.

So those old drawings, or paintings of ships that you saw to identify, were they in the Messenger's Cottage?

20:45 No, they were in the house next door. During the war they had put a tower for radio communications in there and I can remember this front room, having a big old, like a Marconi radio set up that was prevalent on ships, it was the old Morse Code style thing, when I was a kid and it wasn't used, but there was piles of these paintings, some were pencil sketches, some were very old photographs, and they were supplied by the shipping companies. Usually most of them had a profile, a front-on and a side view of them, so you could work out what ship it was because every ship had individual markings, or whatever. I don't think they could see the name, especially when they were right at the end of the Harbour, but you'd be able to work out the configuration of the ship and therefore tell the messenger and he'd go and tell the bloke.

21:48 Those paintings were there when I was a kid and I'd say they'd be (a) really valuable; (b) very, very historical, because of the record of the ships that would have come out there, but the fellow that lived in the place, the Ross's, I am pretty sure their son managed to get rid of them.

Would that be John Ross by any chance?

22:09 No, Don Ross, he was a merchant seaman as well, and had another brother, Maxie Ross, who was a merchant seaman as well. But he lives in Adelaide and I doubt very much that he'd be alive today, Donnie, because he was a lot older than I am now.
We haven't spoken much about your parents - can you tell me a bit about them?

22:33 Well dad, he went to New Guinea in the war. When he was a kid he was a surf life saver in Port Macquarie, he was the belt man and they won an Australian title that year - I remember that. Mum, her parents were second generation Australians and worked for the Railways at Junee, her father worked on railway stations and I don't know if her mum actually cleaned the railway stations or not. Later she came to Sydney during the war to work because of the war effort, or whatever, and she met my father then. My father used to work for the Maritime Services Board - he was a tradesman as such but never worked at his trade, he was a French polisher/cabinet maker, done some very good work, I saw some stuff he did for his mum which has long since disappeared, unfortunately. He never actually worked at his trade because as soon as he got his certificate he went off and joined the Army and drove ambulances in New Guinea. I don't think he ever fired a gun but whatever he saw in New Guinea it really affected him and when I was a kid he was okay until I was about ten years old and then he gradually became a chronic alcoholic, as chronic alcoholic as you can get and lived on the streets, basically because he didn't want responsibility, didn't like responsibility.

24:04 Mum and him got divorced, probably 1966 I'd say, and they were still living together at the time but after that he went backwards, really. It wasn't because of the divorce, it was because of what he wanted to do, he just didn't want responsibility, he couldn't handle it. But he was a nice man, I can't ever remember him raising a hand to me, me mum or me sister, I can remember him yelling and he was a good yeller. He was very good at carpentry because of his trade, I suppose, but he worked for the Maritime Services Board as a painter from after the war, that was his first job when he got back, working for the Maritime and I assume that was through the relationship with his father working for the Maritime as a rent collector previously and in the pilot stations. He used to paint the wharves in Sydney and I always remember we always had paint brushes laying around the house, which were gifts for friends that he had managed to pick up and that were excess to requirements for the Maritime Services Board and you could always get a gallon of paint off dad. If people wanted to paint a room in their house, where they had been waiting for the Maritime Services Board to do it and in the finish they'd say, 'Bugger it we will do it ourselves.' When

we moved from Observatory Hill to Gloucester Street there was a Playfair's factory on the lane in The Rocks there and dad could always swap a gallon of paint for a big string of smoked sausages, salamis, corned meat, things like that - there was always a bit of bartering that went on, and it was quite good really.

Now you all lived with your grandmother, including your parents is that what happened?

25:54 When they were married they moved in with my grandmother, that is my mother and father, and then I was born, which was not that long after, then for six years we lived with me grandmother at the house on Observatory Hill. Then after that we moved to - I can't think of the number in Gloucester Street but it was a five-storey house with an attic and a cellar on two street levels, which looked directly down Sydney Harbour over Circular Quay to the Heads and its location was right in the middle of where the Cahill Expressway is today, in the dead centre of that, on Gloucester Street.

26:34 There was an old lady, lived in an identical house next door, they were like a big tenement building. We only lived on two floors of it because it was just too big a house and three of the balconies had been condemned by the Maritime, so you weren't allowed to go out there, they actually had them boarded off so you couldn't go out there, but the view was absolutely spectacular. It looked in a line directly across the top of where the Opera House is now, which at the time was an old tram depot - as kids we used to go down and fish down there, and straight down the Heads, it was a magnificent view and it was a nice old house.

Now did you play in the Observatory itself as a child at all?

27:16 I did. My grandmother was one of the cleaners and mum worked as one of the cleaners in there as well. The State Astronomer at the time was a fellow called Harley Woods, he had a son Chris and I can't think of his daughter's name, and we used to play in the house. I used to play in the house with the daughter, who was the same age as me and I can remember all these massive volumes of books, which I presume were astronomy and archives and they are not there any more, I have been in for a look and it is all changed, they were wall to ceiling and the ceilings were sixteen foot ceilings in the Observatory. There was only one actual telescope in the Observatory that was used for looking at the stars at the time, and I have actually looked at the craters on the moon with that. There was a telescope in the front of the Observatory, overlooking the Harbour that used to get the afternoon sun and I remember all these filters and you could actually watch the explosions on the sun and as a kid this was wonderful. The Observatory itself, being the

timekeeping place for New South Wales, they used to fire a one o'clock gun in Sydney but because of industrialisation and noise, that overcame the one o'clock gun. The gun was so that all the ships in the Harbour could set their chronometers to the right time, Greenwich Meantime, for navigation purposes.

28:58 When they realised that they needed something else they mounted a ball on the top of the Observatory, it was a ball that was worked by a water-driven ram, hydrostatics, or hydraulics, and the ball itself was a copper thing and it used to go up very, very slowly and sit at the top and then right on one o'clock there was a valve that you opened and it used to drop the ball halfway down, so any ship that was in port could look and see that and know that was the time to set their chronometer. Actually inside the ball there was a small inspection door and there was two little wooden seats, so you could sit on either side inside the ball but for maintenance the degrees of the wire that it used to go up and down and was connected to the ram, you could actually go for a ride up and down in it. I have actually been in it once with the fellow that was doing the maintenance, so I can say I have ridden up the time ball in the Observatory.

30:07 END OF TAPE MP-FH41 SIDE A

30:08 START OF TAPE MP-FH41 SIDE B

That is all very fascinating stuff, Russell, what else was in the Observatory? I believe there were some flagpoles there?

00:22 The original flagstaffs, when I was a child they were laying down in the yard, they had been removed because they were excess with the new communications, and whatever. They were like ship's masts, with cross pieces and everything, as you'd imagine a sailing ship's mast. They had big copper bands on them to hold the timber from splitting and that. They were laying in what was Mrs Ross's yard, not the Observatory. In the Observatory they used to have a full-size bowling green in there when I was a kid, like for lawn bowls - I don't know what year it was they actually built a new building for a new telescope where that old bowling green used to be, and as a kid I had access to it because mum and me grandmother used to work there, but no other kids from the area were allowed in there.

There wasn't security guards at that time but the fences were always locked and a guard at the door, but we had an access door and if not we could climb the front fence, there was a little ladder on the front fence between the two buildings. The people that lived in there, I don't remember seeing a lot of people coming and going from work there but when I think about it, obviously there was other people apart from the State Astronomer but he was there for, I would say, the overseeing of everything. He was a very nice fellow and I think his son went on to be an engineer. I can't think of the daughter's name at the moment for the life of me. I know the son and daughter are alive but both Mr Woods and Mrs Woods died quite a few years ago.

32:09 In the Observatory, I still remember there used to be a rack of cannonballs in there, they had the English ordinance mark, which was like an arrow that you see on convicts uniforms in the old movies and things like that. These cannonballs were stamped, there was an impression cast into the ball, but they were still there when I was a kid and we used to roll them around, even though they were extremely heavy, I can't ever remember there ever being a gun there for them, but there is possibly still a couple of them laying around up there but they'd be covered by a feet of dirt now because of all the different things that have been changed there since I was a kid.

33:00 There was a full-length paling fence went around one side, in actual fact it is the Balmain side of Fort Phillip, because Fort Phillip was like a hexagon, that is where the Observatory is, and on that paling fence there was a fellow they used to call him the 'Mad Painter'. He wrote a treatise against royalty, he hated royalty, and every paling - and we are talking thousands of palings - I would say probably four hundred metres of paling fence, six foot high and it was written in just normal handwriting with pencil on this paint because it showed up really good on the whole fence. He used to come up everyday and treatise against royalty, he just hated royalty, I assume the English royalty, I don't know if it was any other royalty I never stopped to read it.

Now the Maritime Services Board - were they good landlords?

33:56 They were excellent landlords. They had their own tradesmen, which were on call any day of the week virtually, the rents were quite adequate at the time, like for working people and whatever, but if anything at all was wrong electrically, or plumbing or whatever, it was almost instantaneous and you always used to be able to speak to the boss of the section. You never dealt with underlings, you went into what is now the Modern Art Museum, that was the Maritime building, and you used to go in there and you saw the

rental area of that and you dealt with the man who was at the top of the thing. If you happened to have relations working there, or working for the Maritime, you got really, really prompt service. I know that everyone else that had places there have told me that they were always the best landlords that were ever there, I think it is the Housing Commission right now.

35:00 But it has also gone from being a working-class area to be avoided to, with a coat of paint, becoming one of the birthplaces of our nation. They were very good, as I say, and the Maritime Services Board even had their own rat squad, which was a set of fox terrier dogs. They usually had six to eight dogs and they always had a set of puppies coming on because my father always used to work next door to them, the paint section was next door, and he'd say, 'Do you want to come down and have a look at the new puppies?' These fox terriers - they'd take them onto a wharf and they'd seal all the sheds on the wharf and they'd just put them in there and at the end of the day they'd be hundreds of rats. When they caught a rat they'd kill it and bring it back to the boss to show them and it is something I always remember, these little foxies and some of the rats were humungous, they were really monster rats. They had their own ratcatchers, that was part of the quarantine section of the shipping because all ships had a rat guard that you put around to stop the rats getting off the wharf onto the ship and vice versa because every ship had rats on them somewhere.

Do you think it would be shades of the Bubonic Plague of 1900?

36:18 That I think is possibly the reason that they actually had the rat group, with the foxies was, because it was pretty much common knowledge that the Bubonic Plague, when it went through Sydney, which I have only read about it, what my parents told me, I said, 'How come the Maritime Services Board?' All the hotels and all the wharves and all these houses - and that was right around from virtually Balmain area, anything that was waterfront, right around to Woolloomooloo. It was because when the Bubonic Plague went through there the Sydney Council didn't want anything to do with it, they said, 'You are the waterfront looker-afterers, you have this and you clean it up, this is all in your bailiwick, you are responsible for it,' so they inherited all this. I think my father told me something like a hundred and fifty hotels, freehold hotels, and things like that were their responsibility. Everything had been condemned, had either been burnt or limed or demolished to get rid of the plague. I am not exactly sure of the years, I know it was very early in the twentieth century, 1900s.

It was exactly 1900, I think.

37:38 As I said, I only heard about it and then later in my adult life I have read a lot about it.

Now as a child where did you used to play in Millers Point, which areas?

37:53 If it was football we played either on Observatory Hill or on the Village Green, down in front of the Garrison Church. It is where the trams used to come up past the Garrison Church, there was a terminus at Millers Point, and they'd go back. As children we used to do a thing called 'scaling the trams', it was always called 'scaling the trams' to us, and I assume scaling meant to scale, as in climb. We used to climb on the tram as it came past the Garrison Church, because there was a stop there, and ride it round to the terminus just to annoy the tram driver, and the conductor, because there would be twenty or thirty kids do it. Then when the tram took off to go back to the city, to go back down Lower Fort Street and back into George Street you could jump on it there and get off at the Garrison Church again and wait for the next tram to come round.

Did you also play in the wool stores?

38:55 We really drove the people that worked in the wool stores mad during Christmas holidays because it is very easy to topple bales of wool over. Very dangerous, but we didn't know that at the time. The old wool stores, what used to be called Dalgety's Bond Store, we used to play hidings in there and hide from the men that were chasing you. I remember up behind the Palisade Hotel in the wool stores up there, there was a wooden conveyor belt, which was the bales would be off-loaded off trucks, out the front, then onto this conveyor belt and it would go along maybe a hundred feet and it would drop down. The wool store was built right up above the wharves and there was four or five levels on it and what they used to do - with whatever bales had to go to a certain level - there was a massive set of what looked like railway sleepers, pushed across, so the bales could drop from the top, hit these sleepers and bounce off onto the floor that they wanted to get them off to.

39:53 Also to get them onto the wharf down below – they are not there any more because all those wool stores are gone – but they were like a cast-iron pipe, probably five feet across, with two railway lines inside and they put the bales on them and slide them directly to the wharf where they put onto the ship. We done some dangerous things there. We used to swim in the Harbour. I still remember what used to be called the Metal Wharf and I found out later it was called the Metal Wharf because of the blue metal that was

brought there, and that was to do with building buildings in The Rocks and the wharf front itself. We used to get up onto the top of the bond store there, that was probably thirty-five feet about the water, run along the ridge-capping on the roof, down the tin and then jump. I was there on a ship years later and I actually measured it and it was twenty-two foot wide on the wharf that you had to clear from the roof before you hit the water and we never lost a kid, we never lost a kid on that, and all the kids used to do it from the time they could climb up onto the roof.

41:10 It was things that you could do in the city that not many other people could do in the suburbs. You could go down fishing off the wharves. The Maritime Services Board had what they used to call 'scow punts', they were a flat-bottomed punt, which they used to put a collar around the pylons on the wharf, fill them with creosote and as the tide went up and down the collar would move up and down with the creosote to impregnate the pylon and therefore protect it. We used to get these little punts and we had a hand spear, usually made out of a piece of dowel with two spikes on the end of it, two little harpoon spikes, and we'd go hand spearing Leather Jackets for meals and everything.

41:58 When we were kids most of the kids had what they called 'Our Pensioners' you had someone that when you got a feed of fish you always made sure that they got a feed of fish. It may have been an old couple that were just doing it a bit tough or whatever, single men or single women that would like a feed of fish. It was always very easy in the Harbour, especially at Christmas time, when there was lots of Tailor around, you could catch those on a line, but Leather Jackets, you could always spear a hundred Leather Jackets in a morning and that was a lot of fish, so you basically looked after people that couldn't go and do it for themselves. Most kids had their own designated people that they'd give things to so everyone got a good chance of a feed of fresh fish.
Did you also go to Luna Park as a kid?

42:48 We used to….. at the time the trams were still running across the Harbour Bridge, which was on The Rocks side of the Harbour Bridge. The electric trains were on the Millers Point side and you walked down through the subway, up the stairs, up onto the Harbour Bridge and get the tram across, usually without paying. You'd usually hang on the back of it or whatever, and you would go across and the guards or the conductor now and again they might stop the tram and say to get off because it was dangerous, if not you could walk across there in twenty minutes. We used to go across and swim in what was called the Olympic Pool, I think it is still called the North Sydney Olympic Pool. Then on weekends at

Luna Park when it opened at lunch time, usually about twelve or one o'clock, you made sure you'd had your swim in the morning and you were waiting there because the first two hundred kids used to get a bag of lollies and about five or ten tickets, which enabled you to have rides on the things for free. We also knew if you got inside there was a little side exit you could get out and come back and get a second lot, sometimes a third lot, depending on how many kids were waiting.

44:02 When you did that with the amount of tickets you got, you always kept two tickets for Coney Island, which was the absolute end of Luna Park because for two tickets you could get in there and there was a lot of free stuff in there. Giant slippery dips, a big rotating plywood disc that with centrifugal force span you off, there was lots of things you could do in there for free. That was a cheap afternoon out because I think it cost you got threepence to get into the swimming pool at the time and I don't know, a pie might have been sixpence at the time, I am not too sure, but you could always get extra fun out of the afternoon. Then when you were finished if you were lucky you knew someone that worked on the little ferry that was there and you could get the ferry back to Circular Quay and then just walk up from Circular Quay to Millers Point.

Now I believe Russell that you used to 'borrow' the little boats that were motorised, tell me that story.

45:02 They used to be called tow-motors - they were a small tracking device for towing. Before the systems we have got today on the wharves for moving cargo around there were little cast-iron wheeled trailers, not unlike the Railway used to use for shifting ports around, or you see it in airports now, you see the same little trucks towing their baggage around, the same thing. On the wharves they had a Holden motor in them, if I remember rightly, and they only had a handbrake, they had forward, reverse and a handbrake, I can't remember them ever having a footbrake. As kids every kid before he was eight years old on Millers Point used to know how to drive one of them because we used to at times drive them, not to do damage with them because they were governed to a certain speed so they couldn't do any damage if they bumped into anything, but we did drive them off the end of the wharves into the Harbour.

45:59 In between 10 and 11 Walsh Bay there was a four foot drop off the wharf, you could go off 10 Walsh Bay and it was a four foot drop to 11, and if you were really game you could jump off just before it went off the edge. I don't know how much damage we did over the years to whoever the stevedoring company was that owned them. There was one

fellow, he done it once when I was there and he done it on other times, if you drove a fork lift with the actual tines, and it is very hard to break a fork lift's tines, if you drove it off this four foot ledge the tines would hit the ground and the full weight of the fork lift was on the tines and they'd ring like a bell when they broke, they'd be a sound that I reckon they could hear at Town Hall Station, this metallic bong. By the same token if that was ever done you never went back to the wharves for a month after that because they'd be looking for you and you'd get your bum kicked.
You were real rascals.

47:05 We were larrikins but two things we never did, and I can never remember any of the people that I grew up with, we never vandalised telephones because telephones - not many people had them in their home and we never stole cars. We took fork lifts and things but we never took them out of the area but to own a car was a big thing because those big old style Packards, Dodges, Humbers, [????], if one family decided to go to the beach and there was a mother and father and three kids you could get at least another five or eight kids in the back seat of the car and youse could all go to the beach and we always remembered that. That was a very special thing, if someone had the car they could take other people's kids to the beach and that so we never ever vandalised them. We never vandalised the phones for the same reason, if someone had to call a doctor or had an emergency, I can never ever remember in my childhood the phones ever being vandalised at Millers Point. There were three outside the actual post office there and one in a little alcove in the post office, which has since been bricked up apparently. As I said we were buggers of kids in some ways but in other ways we were very responsible.
Were those phones the red phone boxes?

48:24 No. The original red phone boxes were there for a long time. They were very good for putting fire crackers in because you can guarantee you'd blow at least one piece of the glass out with what used to be called penny bungers. But that was the older kids that always did that, it wasn't kids that were between the age of eight and twelve, that was the kids that were between the age of seventeen and twenty that put the fire crackers in there because at the time they were the only kids that had the money to buy fire crackers and also they knew the workings of explosions. They knew if you put an explosion in an enclosed space things have got to blow out.

49:09 I have seen the bigger kids do it but the kids of my age, we never did that, we used to play with the crackers, take them down the wharf and throw them in trying to make fish

explosions, you couldn't do it but it was fun. We never done any of the dangerous stuff, it was all good clean fun.

Who maintained those phone boxes?

49:29 There was lady - a friend of mine that I went to sea with, was called Ronnie Roberts and his mum and his dad….his dad was a local identity, he had an early onset of Parkinson's Disease and he shook and he was always known as 'Shivery'. Ronnie's mum was a lovely lady and as far as I know is still alive, was a very good friend of my grandmother's. She was the cleaner of the phone boxes, so you wouldn't get kids urinating in the phone boxes or anything like that because they knew Ronnie's mum had to clean them. As I said before, they were a lifeline for people that didn't have phones in their homes, and as I said, in the early 1950s there was very few phones in homes around there, everyone relied on that phone box on the corner, or the phone boxes on the corner. As I said, it was just something we never did because basically we didn't want to hurt our friend's mum or make work for her.

Now I believe that you used to see movies on a Saturday afternoon.

50:34 Yes you could always go down in the city because there were so many movie theatres as well but on a Sunday afternoon the Missions to Seamen, which was in George Street North, that is the Church of England Missions to Seamen as opposed to the Stellar Marist, which was the Catholic's mission to seamen, which was on Kent Street just past Celtic's House at the moment, it is not there it has been moved. We used to go down, there was a minister who was almost a James Robertson Justice look-alike, his name was the Reverend Craven Sands, I can remember his name, he was a very brusque fellow but of a Sunday if there wasn't too many seamen in the place watching the movie, and they always had a movie on Sunday evening, we could come down. We were always very polite, 'Mr Craven Sands can we come in and watch the movie?' and he'd say, 'Sorry tonight boys, we are full up,' but most of the time very rarely that was the case, you could always go in there. At some stage they'd always serve a cup of tea and bikkies, that was for the seamen but if you were there you could have a cup of tea and bikkies with them as well and he was very good, as long as you never played up or skylarked or anything, and of course you had to sit through the small prayer at the start, there was always a small prayer and that was the cost of you seeing the movies that you had to get the religion.

What sports did you play at Millers Point?

52:07 Basically most kids played cricket, the cricket was usually played on what was

termed the Village Green. Football, which was just pick-up sides, it wasn't anything really organised as such. We used to play at a place called King George Playground, which was up on The Rocks, right on the side of the Harbour Bridge, we used to play a lot of basketball and paddle ball up there, which was hitting a ball up against the side of the Bridge. They had a woodworking shop up there and you could make your own bats. If it wasn't that it was billycarts, we always had billycarts, there was always kids with skin off their knees and whatever from crashing billycarts. Of course you fished and you swam in the Harbour, which usually at the time because of the pollution that was in the Harbour you came home with an oily scale on your body and usually tar or creosote on your pants and shirt and everything and your mothers would always know exactly where you had been, 'You've been in the Harbour again, you are not supposed to go in there,' but we never lost any kids in the Harbour. Another thing, if you can call it a sport, was sneaking on board ships, you could go on board for a look and get the ship's crew to chase you and I don't know if that was sport or not, but it kept us fit we ran around a lot.

You mentioned earlier that people wouldn't vandalise telephone boxes because it was communal - was there a kind of a code of ethics in the community?

53:44 There was. First and foremost was that you never ever stole from a working person, you could steal from the boss or steal from a big company but it was just totally out of order to steal from a working person. The homes, very rarely the front doors were closed, the windows were always open, and I don't know of anyone of the kids that I played with…... as I said we'd steal from companies and things like that and later on in life there were some very famous criminals came out of the place but the thing was that you didn't rob working people, they were sacrosanct. There was just no way because everyone was in the same boat and everyone knew everyone. That was the thing, the esprit de corps I suppose, if anyone at all was in trouble everyone in the village would help those people. There would be very few people that weren't…. not inter-related but through social things or work things that weren't bonded together in a very, very tight-knit community.

54:56 It is not like a ghetto or such, or an ethnic community because there were tons of nationalities and that but everyone blended in. I can never remember any racialism, racist remarks, or anything like that. There were two Aboriginal families: the Taylors and Charlie Taylor's mum, she was a lovely lady, and her husband. They lived in Kent Street and the Taylors lived in Trinity Avenue and they were the only Aboriginals that were in Millers Point but very good friends, still to this day with the Taylors. We had so much in common, his dad was a painter and my dad was a painter, his mum was Joan and my mum was Joan and we

were both named Russell. But the area itself was just a very compassionate area, there was always people, if someone had heard that someone was having a bad time or things like that you knew that someone would be around there to help them and it was very good.
Russell what was Christmas like at the Point?

56:16 Christmas I always remember …..no one would ever be turned away from anywhere. On Argyle Street, opposite the Village Green, I can always remember that about every third or fourth door, those that were travelling a little bit better financially than others - there was these little five gallon pump-up kegs, they were actually an air-pressure beer delivery system, they'd leave them on the footpath with a wet bag or some ice over them, some glasses. There would be like a meat safe thing, with sliced cold meat and some Christmas cake. For anyone that was walking past that didn't have the wherewithal to have a decent Christmas, and this was anyone at all that walked past, there was a cold beer there for them. The mother of the house would come out and check that there was still cold meat there and a bit of bread to make a sandwich out of.

57:21 There were some down-and-out people on Millers Point, transient homeless people. There was an old fellow called 'Porky' Ryan, who had tried to enlist for the war but be couldn't because of a medical thing and he later became an alcoholic, homeless person. By the same token when the men went away during the war Porky was working on the wharves and Porky could get meat, eggs, butter, jam, things like that, for wives who had lost their husband during the war, he always made sure that people never went without. Later when his life became a bit more downtrodden and whatever, through medical or his own alcoholism or whatever, people always made sure that Porky in the winter time had warm clothes. They'd walk past and go to the shop and buy a couple of pies for him so he wouldn't go without a feed, that was the sort of people they were. But he is the one that sticks in me mind because every time you walked past he always used to say the same thing to you, 'G'day sonner,' and he had this real gravelly voice. If they said to you, 'What did Porky say to you?' you'd say, 'G'day sonner,' and that was it. He was a lovely old bloke and as I said, he had been a down-and-out for a long time and I know he passed away a long time ago.

58:51 The people at Christmas time, there was always something. They had the Wharfies' Picnic, the Painters and Dockers' picnic, the Maritime Services Board Picnic throughout the year and at Christmas time they always had their own little function and that, and you could always go with the other family. There might not be a present there for you but you

still got to drink the soft drinks, eat the ice-cream and eat the lollies and that. The people themselves at Millers Point always used to seem to make sure that everyone got a little bit of something, there was always that camaraderie in the place.,

59:35 END OF TAPE MP-FH41 SIDE B

00:00 START OF TAPE MP-FH42 SIDE A

00:02 Tape identification

You said that most of the people at Millers Point worked for the Maritime Services Board or did some related work, what did the mothers do mainly?

00:27 The mums - very few of my friends' mums worked. Russell Taylor's mum worked in Farmers, the old Farmers shop, which is now David Jones, I think, she was behind the counter. My mum was at home. I don't remember many people's mums working unless they worked in a shop at the Point, one of the little shops or something. That was part of the fact that they were living in the house and the shop was there and they were on call, they could walk out from listening to radio or doing housework and serve in the shop. I don't remember many of the mothers working. There was a little playground called the Lance Kindergarten, it is at the bottom of High Street in Millers Point, it was council-run or council-funded, and most of us kids or kids of my generation went. It is still working as a child-minding centre at the moment. A lot of the mums used to go down there to give them a hand to look after the kids and things like that. It was only for kids pre-school, up to five years old, I suppose. I don't remember very many people's mums working, mostly the dad was the breadwinner and the mum was the homebody and I think that was just the way it was in those times.

Talking about schooling what was your path of schooling, where did you start off?

02:02 Whilst I was living in Millers Point I went to kindergarten and first class at Fort Street Primary School, which is next to where the Cahill Expressway disappears under the Harbour Bridge there, with most of the kids that I grew up with. When we shifted out of the area I did my schooling where we were living and of a weekend I came in and stayed at my grandmother's and spend all the time I could at Millers Point because that is where all my friends were. The people I went to school with at Parramatta and places like that I can't

remember their names, very few names I can remember, whereas I can remember nearly all the kids' names from the Millers Point area.

What was the school like at Millers Point, the Fort Street school you went to?

02:52 It was just a state government school and had the normal six classes. It was a modern building, I think it was built in the 1950s but I could be wrong. I can remember the oleanders, there were oleanders everywhere, which they found out later were poisonous to kids and we were always playing with the seed pods, which is the poisonous part. It was basically an inner-city school with cement playgrounds, there was a little bit of grass but not much, a tarred thing. I always remember a big incinerator at the back, an industrial incinerator that used to be burning most days at school, you'd go up there and there was fire going. As I said, I only spent a very short period of time at the school there but most of the people of my age they done all their primary school there and then went off to either Rozelle High School, or some went to Fort Street High and things like that.

The school now is down to about forty-five students, it is marginal at the moment, how many were there in your day?

03:59 I have old photos at home of school pageants and things there, fancy-dress balls, with just my class and I think there was over thirty-odd kids in my class. I can remember an outing, I think it was 1954 Easter Show, that all the mums - and there was probably ten or fifteen mothers in this photo at the back of the whole class which was the kindergarten class at the time, all at the Easter Show.

04:31 You can imagine what pandemonium it was because it is well-attended now but the Easter Show was a very big event. I mean as kids you'd always try and save up, or get some money so you could go to the Easter Show every year. All the kids of our group would get on the bus down at Circular Quay and go out to the Show Ground and the first thing we'd do is we'd go in and go straight to the boxing tent to watch Jimmy Sharman's boxers, I always remember that. It was a very big event and the ladies at the time, because they weren't working were more involved with the looking after, just like P&C type things.

What about the church, did a lot of people help the church?

05:26 I know the Garrison Church, my grandmother was very involved in it. My mother and father were married in it, both me and me sister were christened in it and my sister was later married in it. We used to go down and they used to have a thing called CEBBs, which was Church of England Boys Brigade, they had a little uniform and you could join that. I can remember in what is a museum there now in the Garrison yards, that was where

the Sunday Schools were always held and my grandmother used to take me down there because I was with her all weekend and it was part of the thing that I had to do, I was obliged to go, when she went to church I went to Sunday School until she came out of church. She used to go down of a Saturday afternoon and if I had nothing to do I'd go down and help her polish the brass in there, she was very good in that respect. She used to do the flower arrangements, someone donated the flowers and she did the arrangements for the main church meeting of the week, which of course was the Sunday.

06:36 I always remember there was this massive brass eagle, like a lectern, and it stood there and that was my favourite bit if I could polish that. I think it is still there in actual fact, I think it is still in the church itself.

How far did people usually go with their education at Millers Point?

06:56 Most people that I know of …..when you went to high school there was three years of high school and there was a level called the Intermediate Certificate. If you wanted to go to tertiary education, like university and that, you had to go to fifth year, which was to get a Leaving Certificate and very few of the friends that I grew up with went past Intermediate Certificate. I think Russell Taylor got his Leaving Certificate but Russell was always a very good rememberer, whatever he read he could recall that, and to this day he has got a Master of Business Administration, he has been the primary person and at the moment he is the head of the Aboriginal Housing Organisation, he has been the head of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit, which was basically an Aboriginal think-tank, come holder of records for them.

08:04 He is what I always point to as the cleverest fellow that I ever grew up with because to this day he is still highly thought of. He used to own the corner shop at Millers Point, the corner shop on Kent Street, it was a milk bar. When he retired out of that he decided that because of his Aboriginal heritage he would like to go back to school and do something for 'his people', like the Aboriginal people. He never said he wasn't an Aboriginal, he is very light coloured, but he never went out of his way. Now he is doing as much as he can in the hierarchy of his people's set-ups to try and get the stigma of Aboriginals wasting money. Because he has got all these qualifications he can find trim things and that is why he is really sought after. I only found out the other day he is going to hand his job in as the State Aboriginal Housing bloke and he is going to Canberra again to live down there and do something, I assume it is the same but on a federal level.

09:22 Most of the people got their Intermediate Certificate, I myself didn't. I went for it

but I never got it, I was not a good school person, I was always the one that was playing up in class, although I really did enjoy Mathematics, History and English, they were the only things I was interested in the rest I didn't care about.
So what was your first job after leaving school?

09:45 My first job was selling papers all day at the corner of Carrington and Margaret Street in Sydney, at a place called Shell House. I worked for a bloke called Voissey, he owned the paper shop at Erskine Street in Sydney and he had three all-day newspapers stands. This was a fixed stand, it was like a fold-up sandwich board display but the newspaper trucks used to come round and drop your papers, you'd tell them what you needed and what amount you needed. I used to sell up to three and a half thousand papers a day, *Women's Weekly*, magazines and things like that. That was my first job, I wasn't quite fifteen years old. Actually, I sold newspapers on board ships, strangely enough, for the same newsagent of a Sunday because seamen love getting a newspaper, they love keeping up-to-date with news, and they were very good tippers as well. Because I was a big lad he asked me would I like to do this newspaper stand all day, and at the time I was getting eighteen pound a week, less a couple of quid tax and me father was getting about sixteen quid a week or thereabouts, may have been seventeen pound a week, working for the Maritime Services Board, so there I am, a fifteen year old kid, getting more than me father. That was the first job I had.

11:19 Then later on I worked for PMG, delivering telegrams around the city and having grown up in Millers Point, The Rocks, I knew the city like the back of me hand and it was quite a good job, you were on a pushbike out in the elements all day and it was good fun. The paper job wasn't going to be a life time thing, although I'd probably be a lot richer than I am today.
So after selling newspapers did you get a more permanent job?

11:50 My grandmother got me an application form for the PMG, which was Post-Master General, or the Post Office, and now Telstra, or whatever, it was a government entity at the time. I became a telegram boy, which was basically called a junior postal officer, that was your designation, and you rode pushbikes and hand-delivered telegrams. Also at the time before the transmission of stuff we've got today with computers radio pictures used to come in from overseas and they were like a wet fax machine, it is very hard to explain but the photo was sent over in a coded electric pulse, or whatever, and when they came in at the GPO this could be anything, like the assassination of Kennedy photos, or things like

that. They came to the GPO and you had to get on the pushbike and ride to where Grace Brothers was up at Broadway, past Central, to give to the newspapers, which was the *Mirror* or the *Sun* group, which was the *Daily Sun*. These were wet negatives, they still had the fixture and everything dripping off them, and you took that up there and that was of course, stop the presses and they'd put these pictures in the paper.

13:15 I done that for about fifteen months and then later on I worked for the Railway for about a year and I had a lot of jobs in between, pumping petrol and things like that. Then at one stage I worked for Goodyear Rubber at Bankstown and I found one day after being there I was the boss of the section and I said to the fellow, 'Why am I the boss of the section?' and he said, 'Because you are going to be the only one that can speak English here. Tomorrow there will be a Qantas bus arrive here and you will see some of the biggest men you have ever seen, all northern Italians. They will come off and they'll be all wearing suits and everything, but they will work in their suits, these beautiful silk Italian suits.' Very few of them will speak one word of English and I was just pointing and using sign language and that, they were the new immigrants that were coming into Australia at the time. This was later, when I was going on to be eighteen years old then.

14:14 After one day of that I thought no, I can't be a boss and I can't not talk to people and I rang up a friend of mine who was a merchant seaman, he was a deck boy, and I said, 'What have I got to do to go to sea?' He told me what the basics was, so I got a train into the city, just walked out of the factory and said goodbye, and fortunately in a freak set of circumstances I actually done a chest X-ray, an eye-sight test and a full medical in two days, passed all them. Then on the following Monday there was a new system come into the Merchant Navy, by which they could increase port quotas by bringing people in and I was the first kid in the Sydney precinct to be taken in under this new system and then I stayed at sea for thirty years, so that was it.

So you were away a lot were you?

15:14 I was really lucky, I got to have a look around just about everywhere in Australia on a ship I've been. I was fortunate - I went to China in 1966 before China was barely being opened up to the outside world. In actual fact, the week that we went over on a ship, it was called the *R W Miller* and that was Miller's washed coals and also Miller's beer and they brought these tankers over and the oil companies wouldn't give them cargoes and he said, 'Well I'll show you what I can do,' and he got a wheat cargo, filled the oil tanker with wheat and sent it over to Shanghai, and we were over in Shanghai for a week, and the day after we

left, and it was news all around the world, they pulled all the crews off the foreign ships and put them in cages and marched them through the streets. It was a very scary procedure but fortunately we'd left the day before. Because the Seamen's Union in Australia had looked after cheap crews on ships that were being downtrodden by overseas employers we had a very good rapport with the people in China. It was a Socialist union the Seamen's Union of Australia, well the heads were Socialist, but when we got to China the people over there bent over backwards to show us anything we wanted to see, anything we wanted to do - there was no restrictions on us, whereas everything else was kept in a box. We got open-slather for everything, we could look wherever we wanted to, do whatever we wanted to do, go wherever we wanted to and fortunately the ship's captain let us do that, he said, 'You are never going to get here again, go and have a look at the place.'
This is during the Cultural Revolution then?

17:10 It was. It was in March 1966, it was just after the decimal currency changeover, which was 14 February 1966, I remember the jingle.
So you spent most of your life at sea then?

17:29 I spent within days of thirty years at sea. I was what was classed as an Able-Bodied Seaman, you do twelve months as a deck boy and then two years as an Ordinary Seaman and then you automatically become an Able-Bodied Seaman because you've learnt your trade. Although you were classed as an unskilled labourer, or semi-skilled labourer because you knew about splicing wire and making ships run, and painting them, and steering them and whatever, but thirty years - it was a very good life and I enjoyed ninety-nine per cent of it. Towards the end what happened was - because I was an Able-Bodied Seaman I worked up in the sunlight, I steered the ship, I kept lookout, maintained the daily maintenance of the ship and things like that but I did it on deck, I never did it in the engine room. I never had a good rapport with engineers and when the new system came, it was what they called multi-skilling, you had to be an integrated rating and work down below and on deck as well and I honestly didn't think I could work with the engineers so I stayed untrained. I could have trained and got a lot more money and the retraining consisted of ten weeks next to the casino in Launceston at the training school down there, where you only learnt what you knew anyway, but I never ever re-done that. The opportunities for work shrank steadily for me to the point where I got the same job four times in a row and I said, 'If I get it a fifth time I am going to retire.' I had my home paid for and a bit of money in the bank so I just retired and I have been unemployed ever since, for the last eleven years.

Now let's talk about the shops and the businesses around the Point. Who was on the corner of Kent Street and Argyle Place, for instance?

19:25 There was a chemist shop right on the corner but next door there was what we used to call Marie and Tony's milk bar which was later owned by Russell Taylor. It was a very small mixed business but mainly a milk bar, you could buy bread but you could get your milkshakes and your lollies and your ice-creams there. The people that were in it were of Italian origin, very nice people. In actual fact I met the lady and she'd be well in her eighties about two years ago and she was still alive then, her husband had died previous. Next door to them there was a dry cleaner's shop and then there was a fish and chip shop on the corner. There is a small lane, I don't know the name of it, next to the Captain Cook Hotel, this is the very beginning of Kent Street, and there was a fish and chips shop there, it was rough fish and chips but it was tasty.

20:26 Directly opposite the post office on the corner of Argyle and Kent Street there was what was called Charlie Conran's shop. There was two shops. There was Charlie Conran's, which was a milk bar and it was the old style milk bar with tables you could sit down and actually have a milkshake or an ice-cream sundae or things like that. Next door there was a small general store for dry goods and you could buy refrigerated cold meats and things there - that was called John Holly's. Then later, what happened to those houses there, the foundations started sinking and the doorstep over the period of years you went from having no doorstep to stepping down about eighteen inches to go into the shop and in the finish they condemned the buildings and there is a small block of flats there now. Charlie Conran never opened another shop - he left the area, he stood for the Liberal Party which was like a snowflake's chance in hell in Millers Point because it was just so devout Labor.

21:33 John Holly opened another little shop in the opposite side of the street and John was a funny little man, he had a withered right arm, but I could be wrong, but he had a massive hand-driven slicing machine. During the war he was another fellow that tried to enlist but he couldn't because of this infirmity that he had, but he always made sure that the men who were away fighting, when they came home on leave, because bacon was very hard to get and things like that, he had a cool room of it over in Pyrmont Cold Stores and he always made sure when the soldiers were home on leave that they always had eggs and bacon, so that was his part of the war effort. John for years had that little shop there and I don't know whatever became of him but he was an institution.

22:24 There was Reuben Lewis's barber's shop, which was infamous because he sold

condoms on display in the front window. During the war, apparently, he made an absolute killing from the armed services, the Americans and whatever, because he had condoms. As children we knew roughly what they were and then later on of course we knew what they were. His name was Reuben Lewis and I assume he was of Jewish origin, I could be wrong. He knew how to cut hair one style, it was basically called a 'basin cut'. He had the hand clippers and a pair of scissors and the clippers were never ever sharp, they always pulled the hair on the back of your neck, but he basically trimmed to the top of your ears in a circle and you looked like you had come out of a Franciscan Order or something, it was really a cruel haircut. There was another barber's shop just up the road and he was twice as expensive, Reub was threepence for a haircut or sixpence, I can't remember, at the time and the other fellow charged twice as much, so if your mum gave you money to go and get a haircut and it was a shilling in one barber and sixpence in Reub's and you went to Reub Lewis's you had sixpence to spend over but when you got home your mother knew where you got your haircut and that you never went to the good barber because the haircuts were so standardised.

23:45 There was a little butcher's shop there, they called it the Garrison Butchery, but I don't ever remember it working as a butchery until the 1960s but it was always there. There was also what they called ham and beef shops, there was one opposite the Palisade Hotel, which was basically a sandwich shop for the wharfies. The wharfies would come up, put their order in for lunch, walk across to the pub, have a couple of schooners of beer, because they used to get an hour for lunch and there was no counter lunch at the Palisade, they'd pick their lunch up and eat it on the way back to the wharves. There were quite a few little sandwich shops around there.

24:26 There was a paper shop and then later on a Laundromat, which is there today, but that was more modern. There was a shop in Windmill Street, the corner of Windmill and Lower Fort Street, there was a greengrocer's there and a shop where you could buy dry stores and biscuits and things like that.

24:57 There was one new office building opposite the Captain Cook Hotel and it is a veterinary products dealership or something now, I don't even know when that was built. The only other businesses that were around was betting shops. Prior to the TAB there was five illegal SP, starting price betting shops around Millers Point. There was one in Windmill Street, which was the most frequented because he had a better set-up than most. At Christmas time if you had been gambling with him, depending on the rate of your gambling,

there was always an envelope there for you at Christmas time. I can remember as a small child having threepence each way on a horse, which was a big bet at the time. At Christmas time you might get an envelope and there might be ten shillings in there and that was your rebate for gambling with him. The bigger gamblers, like the fathers and that, they might get fifteen pound, which was a lot of money but by the same token he'd won a lot more off them during the year.

The pubs were they pretty full?

26:09 When we lived in Gloucester Street there was a hotel up the lane from us, which was once again in the path of the Cahill Expressway, called the Red Lion Hotel. My father had these big green corked bottles, which were Resch's bottles, you could actually buy them, a corked bottle with a wire-topped stopper in it. The hotels would also refill them for you, so of a Thursday night, which was pay night for the Maritime, I used to go up to the pub with him and he'd buy me a small bottle of *Blue Bow* lemonade. There was only two soft drinks you could buy in the pub, *Blue Bow* lemonade was probably a two hundred ml. bottle, or this stuff was like an orange juice, called *Palato*, I don't know why, I suppose, from 'palate'. Thursday night that was my treat and I had to take his big bottle of beer home for him and mum had have tea on the table when he got home from the pub. After we'd had tea he'd take me down to the end of George Street, where the Menzies Hotel and the concourse for Wynyard Railway Station is now, that used to be the Wynyard something or other Hotel. There was a newsreel there and he used to take me into the newsreel, buy a packet of Jaffas or a soft drink or something and he'd leave me there for two hours because the newsreel went for two hours. It was the only way you could get pictures of overseas happenings at the time, like prior to television. Dad would go and have a drink with his mates at the pub there for two hours and come and pick me up and take me home. That was the weekly treat.

28:01 Everyone had their own hotel, but no one used to be exclusive to one hotel because they knew their mates would be at a different pub at a different time. It wasn't very far to walk and there was so many hotels. I think from my grandmother's place within a kilometre radius there were twenty-seven hotels, and that was from Observatory Hill and that extended up to where Caltex House is, the Dunbarton Castle, down to the First and Last at Circular Quay. They all did good business, there was obviously a market for beer, which there still is.

28:45 END OF TAPE MP-FH42 SIDE A

28:48 START OF TAPE MP-FH42 SIDE B

With all those pubs going was there an alcohol problem around Millers Point?

28:59 Not so much that you'd notice. As I said, my father, later in his life became a chronic alcoholic, whether that was war nerves or whatever, but the men done really physically hard work. Before they were called waterside workers, or longshoremen as they are in America, they were called coal lumpers and the Coal Lumpers' Union became later the Waterside Workers' Union and then later the Maritime Union of Australia. Coal used to be transported in hessian bags, what we call corn bags, they were bloody big bags and I don't know how much weight was in them, but that was all done by hand, hence the need for those wharfies that I talked about earlier. Most of the stuff was in bags of a hundred pound, or things like that and they were physically working all day, so they probably enjoyed their drink of a night. I know there was families that had a problem with alcoholism, with husbands beating wives, giving their kids a very hard time, but that was in the absolute minority. Most of the time the people that drank were social drinkers. Very rarely of a Sunday if you went to someone's house and you happened to be there when lunch was being served, if you were a kid there was always another plate for you and the mum and dad would have a bottle of beer on the table of a Sunday. I can't remember any big dramas from drink.

30:35 I can remember seeing two well-known street fighters fight on the corner of Kent and Argyle Street and they literally belted each other around for twenty minutes, stopped and went and had a couple of schooners and went back and got into the fight again. But these things happened. I have seen almost the full crew of a passenger ship called *The Southern Cross* come up and take the Lord Nelson Hotel to pieces because someone had belted one of the crew. One of the local fellows, a fellow called Johnny Bergen, who was known as 'Cuts and Bruises' because he always had cuts and bruises because he loved fighting, he'd belted one of the crew and the whole crew come up. I was selling papers at the time, I may have been twelve, and I could see them coming up and I thought there is going to be big trouble here, so I took the papers back to the paper shop and bolted up and said to my uncle, 'Come and watch this.' We were looking from Observatory Hill down

on the whole proceedings and they virtually smashed all the windows in the pub and anyone that was there copped a belting, it was basically like a mini-riot, and then it was all over and it was back to normal. That is a long time ago, I'd say I was about twelve at the time, so that would probably make it about 1960.

31:55 The ship's crews used to come up and not so much drink at the Point because they weren't seamen's hotels - the seamen's hotels, strangely enough one called The Slip Inn where the Danish princess now, that used to be called the Royal George, that is where she met her husband, the Prince of Denmark. There was one up the road from there and it was called the Welcome Inn and it was a notorious seamen's pub which used to lead on to the Hungry Mile and it was known as 'The Bunch' because there was a bunch of bad buggers in there. The seamen never used to come up off the wharves to drink at the Point, they'd go and drink at Pyrmont and anywhere else.

32:40 The pubs of course were different hours, one was an early-opener and went from six to six. All the pubs used to shut at six o'clock at one stage and then later they stayed open until ten o'clock, to the hours now where they are virtually twenty-four hour trading. *Were you a member of the union when you were at sea?*

33:00 It was a catch twenty-two situation. To get to sea you had to be a member of the union and you couldn't be a member of the union unless you were already at sea. As I explained before I was lucky - I was the first person to come on under this new system so I automatically became a member of the union until I paid me dues, it was a couple of quid, a quarter at the time, say maybe four dollars a quarter. You had to be a member of the Seamen's Union of Australia to work on Australian ships and in my area on the ships, on the deck department, or the engine room. The catering was the Cooks' and Stewards' Union, or Cooks' Union and Stewards' Union. The officers and the engineers had their own unions but you had to be a member of a union and the Seamen's Union of Australia was run by a fellow at the time, the president, was a fellow called Valance Elliott. He was an avowed Socialist, had been a Socialist in all his working life, and he basically transformed the Australian coast from being very hard conditions on ships to having decent living conditions, decent standards of food, decent wages and that.

34:28 I was always, and still am, a proud unionist. When I was at sea I was normally a union rep on the ship, the delegate, and I dealt with the shipping companies, or the captain, or whoever it was that I had to deal with, it was a big part of my life being a trade unionist, as were most of the people in Millers Point. The men were very proud of their unionism, I

mean May Day March - the first six rows it will be from Millers Point, Balmain and Pyrmont because they were always proud to be unionists and proud to be part of the fight to get better conditions for their industry.

35:06 The ladies, the Seamen's Union always had a women's auxiliary in every state in Australia. In Brisbane they actually used to bring you down sandwiches on a Monday morning to the pick-up where we used to go for our jobs because they knew that most of the seamen had been drunk all weekend and wouldn't have had much to eat so they made sure they fed you on Monday morning.

Were there any strikes that you were involved with?

35:33 I've been on individual ships where we were trying to get a condition, whether it be a safety issue, wages, or part of the overall union applying for a thing. I was never involved in any big strike, with the exception of what was called the engineers' strike and that was the engineers, the only time they ever actually went on strike which was really surprising because you used to sit back and wait until everyone else had lost wages through going on strike and then just get the conditions that would flow through, they would say, 'They've got them we want them.'

36:15 The Seamen's Union, there was day strikes here and there but usually because at the time the union had a lot of power, nowadays the employers have the power and it is like everything, the wheel turns. It was a very good part of my upbringing - the fact that…. it was like being from the Point, you knew the rules, you knew you had to be part of the union and you had to produce for the union, you didn't want to let the union down in your work, whether it was being a waterside worker, a painter and docker or a merchant seaman, there was a bit of pride in being a trade unionist. Plus the fact that the union was one of the strongest there was in Australia at the time.

Now there are plans afoot to change Millers Point from a maritime precinct to more of a residential precinct, the Patrick's wharves are going to be vacated very, very soon - how do you feel about all that?

37:13 It is a shame but everything isn't static. I find when I revisit Millers Point now there is only possibly three or four people that I grew up with that are still residents there. I find that the people that have come into Millers Point ….. a lot of people through their circumstances are not as well-off and it has reverted to being a slum. What they will do with the Patrick's wharves and everything is probably build million-dollar condominiums and whatever, because of the water views and everything. But Millers Point itself has in the

last fifteen years started to go back to what it was when I was a kid, it was a place to be avoided because it wasn't very nice. Today you can go down what used to be called the 'night-soil lanes' or whatever and you'll find empty syringes, that people because of their circumstance in life are addicted to drugs, or whatever, and when they use a needle they just throw them out in the back lane. There is actually a mob called the 'Needle Stick Group' they come round and pick up the syringes so the kids can't play with them. When we were young there the council always had the place spotlessly clean, you can go down there and there is a lot of garbage laying around. It is because of the restrictions of finances, I suppose, with the councils, that they don't do it as often as they used to.

38:51 They haven't got the work force that they used to have, the contractors aren't as conscientious as what the council employees used to be. As I say, I don't know if building condominiums on the wharves improves it or not because the people that come there are not working-class. They may be workers as such but they are not workers that are working on those wharves where their houses are now. They are not workers that were blacksmiths or coopers, or whatever they were in those times gone by, they are more an elite. Because of the price of things they are either highly skilled and highly educated people and that has gone out of the area. I am not saying that it was dumb when I was a kid, or people weren't educated but now it is a different class of people that have moved into the area. You've got both extremes with the new home units and condominiums, these are the wealthier part of our civilisation, and you've still got single mothers and drug addicts living in what used to be Maritime Services Board accommodation, so it is getting a vast extreme between the two. By the same token it was still a lovely place to grow up.
Would you like to live at Millers Point again if you could?

40:16 I would move back there tomorrow, even though it is not the same as what it was. If I could go back to the old house or any of the houses on Millers Point I would do it if I could afford to do it. The memories of growing up there are still good memories and there is still people that I can visit in Sydney around there and go to different places for a beer or to see organisations like the Seamen's Union - it is still there. I would move back tomorrow if I could and I have always said that, there is such a good bond. I think most of the people that I know would say exactly what I have just said, it wouldn't be the same and everything but I think a lot of people would like to go back there, only because it is central and the memories are such good memories there.
It is nice to have those memories.

41:12 It is. In amongst all the stuff that goes on in the world today, with terrorism, you can go back to a more peaceful time when people genuinely thought well of their neighbours and looked after their neighbours and that is something that is always in there. I like to think that these places could come again but whether or not they ever will, it has gone too urban or whatever, plus as I said, the situation has changed. We are talking fifty years ago and fifty years is a vast span in one's life.
I don't think you'd could bring those times back actually, life has progressed too far.

41:56 The innocence has gone. I know of cases where people have answered a knock at the door and someone has been standing there with a knife at Millers Point and saying, 'Give us what you have got,' and it is because they were junkies, or drug addicts, or just were thieves. That has happened in the last few years, people I know have told me about that, things that would never ever be thought of happening years ago. This is not a Millers Point phenomenon, I think this is a world phenomenon, we have all grown too hard.
We are coming towards the end of our interview - is there anything else you want to talk about?

42:34 I think this is really great that someone has decided to put the reminiscences on tape and the majority of people will have their own story to tell, as mine is, and I've really enjoyed doing it, to tell you the truth.
I've enjoyed hearing you very much.

42:56 It is nice to think that somewhere in the future, whether it is fifty years from now which will make a hundred years from the time I grew up there, someone will be able to say, 'Gee, that bloke enjoyed his life growing up in that environment.' That is all there and it can't be changed and now it is going to be there for a long time. For reference reasons what I have told you today may be able to be correlated with other people's reminiscences and give a really good overview of the place and it is really great.
You only spent eight years at Millers Point was it?

43:37 Only eight, but as I said, I never was away from it longer than I had to be, I could never get back there quick enough. As I said, the fun and the people that were my original friends from the time when I can first remember things, those friends are still my friends today because we had the bond of growing up in that area and I think that is the reason. We may have grown up somewhere else but we still have the bond. I know today a merchant seaman fellow I knew is getting buried today, sometime this morning, but there will be a lot of people that I know from the merchant seaman side and from Millers Point as well will be at the wake after the funeral. I will see people there that I probably haven't

seen for a long time but they are still going to be my friends because we were friends when we were kids, that is the thing.

Would you go as far as to say you are what you are because of Millers Point?

44:39 I think so. I think in the Australian vernacular I've been being 'fair dinkum' - that my priorities in life are that I will try and help anyone that I possibly can until they kick me in the teeth. I mean I think the grounding that you got of being (a) compassionate; and the fact that you had a respect for property and things like that; that was all ground in from that original Millers Point creed, I suppose. You did things the right way and you never stole from working people, that's the thing, that you look after people of your own class and that, that is the best way I can put it.

That's great Russell. Thanks very much for the interview.

45:54 END OF TAPE MP-FH42 SIDE B AND END OF INTERVIEW WITH RUSSELL FITCHETT