

NSW DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING

‘Millers Point Oral History Project’

INTERVIEW TAPE LOG

INTERVIEWEE:	Maureen Stapleton
TAPE NUMBERS:	MP-MA3 (one tape)
INTERVIEWER:	Margaret ANDERSON-LUNDT
DATE AND PLACE:	25 August 2005 at Millers Point NSW
DURATION OF INTERVIEW:	53mins 20 secs
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00:00 START OF TAPE MP-MA3 SIDE A (Erroneously identified on tape as MP-MA1)

00:05 Tape Identification

Could you tell me your full name and where and when you were born.

00:36 Maureen Adele Stapleton. I was born in Bega, which is in the south of New South Wales on 8th July 1932.

What are your earliest memories?

01:03 My early childhood was a country childhood, we lived in various towns. We lived a Quaama and then we lived in Central Tilpa and then Narooma, that was the last place we lived before we came to Sydney.

Why did you move from town to town at that time?

01:27 I've really no idea, maybe because my father worked on the main roads and they did get shifted around but I really don't know.

What were your mother and father's names and where were they born?

01:42 Vincent Reginald Stapleton was my father and I think he was born at Quaama. Daphne Frances Vallance, she was born in Sydney in 1905.

What type of people were they, what do you remember about them?

02:09 Good, honest, hardworking people. My mother was very musical, she played the piano at the local dances in Narooma, I loved that and always wanted to follow in her footsteps but never did. My father, he wasn't home a lot with the main roads because he worked away from home. I think sort of lived in caravans, I seem to remember we lived in caravans at one stage too, wherever they were working. Loved to cook, that is what he finished up doing when he joined the Army, he was a cook, and loved to drink. No, he was just a quiet, unassuming person.

Do you know when and where they met?

No, I don't I'm sorry.

Did your mother work outside of the house at all?

03:21 Yes. When we lived in the country she used to take in washing because we lived in a holiday place and people when they came on holidays in caravans and things didn't have the washing facilities so she used to do washing, particularly over a holiday period, this was at Narooma. We used to grow vegetables and sell vegetables. Once we came to Sydney then she worked outside the home.

Do you remember very much about your grandparents at all?

03:55 Very little. Mum's father, he was an American who, from what I hear, jumped ship out here when he was seventeen and his name was Bill Vallance. My mother's mother, she died when my mother was quite young, I am not sure what age, I think twenty-one, then there

was other children that my mother sort of took care of, her brothers and sisters. My father's family, they lived here in Sydney, I can only remember his mother and she lived out at Castle Hill. They were very religious people, very strict Catholics, I can remember going and visiting and each night as soon as we had our dinner we had to all kneel down in the lounge room and say the Rosary. That is about all I remember of her.

When and why did you move to Sydney and Millers Point?

05:09 I don't really know why. My father had joined the Army and we were living in Narooma and mum decided to move to Sydney, I really don't know why, and from that point on my mother and father never lived together again. We stayed with a cousin of my mother at Glebe for just a few days while my mother found a place for us to live in, and that was at Lower Fort Street in Millers Point.

Why did your father join the Army?

05:45 I have no inkling why he did, but I guess like most young men in those days they wanted to do what they could to help in the war.

Was the war on at that time?

Yes it was.

What about the Depression, do you remember much about that time?

06:06 No I don't because I was born in 1932 and I really don't remember much about the Depression. I don't think we ever went without because we lived on the land, at that time we were living at Quaama, and we grew our food, apparently, and I think that is how we existed. I don't ever remember being without food, maybe I was too young.

What were your first impressions of Millers Point?

06:39 Well, it was a bit like living in a country town, only everything was more crowded, the houses were more crowded together. It was a very friendly place, got to know our neighbours and the other kids about my age who lived near us very quickly and it wasn't hard to adjust at all.

What was the house like?

07:08 Well we lived in a tenement house at 3 Lower Fort Street and where we lived was downstairs, you walk down a set of steps from the footpath, and it was one big room and a little enclosed balcony and that was where we lived. I thought everyone lived like that in Sydney, I didn't realise that we were quite cramped.

How many other tenants were in the building?

07:41 Well I know there was the landlord and landlady and their three children. There was a room at the back of our place that had various tenants in it. There was a woman and her son who lived there, they moved, and the last occupants there were the first Italians that I ever met. Two Italian men who came out here to make a new life and one was settling himself in for his wife and child to arrive. So they were the first Italians I ever met.

What year would you have arrived in Millers Point?

Late 1940 or 1941.

What was the landlady like?

08:40 Well, I don't really know how to say this but we'd always been very free to do what we wanted and we never had been in any trouble and we weren't troublesome children but because her children weren't allowed out to play in the streets she felt, I think, that we shouldn't have been. She did lay down quite a few rules to my mother who thought she had to obey them because that was the landlady but we had not too many problems.

What were your sleeping arrangements?

09:25 My mother and myself and my young sister, we slept in a double bed. My older sister, she slept on a sofa and my brother, who wasn't there for very long, he slept on a bed on the little enclosed balcony.

What were the facilities like in the house?

09:47 On the enclosed balcony there was like a little alcove where there was a gas stove, we had no sink or running water, or anything like that inside the area, we had to step outside to the tap. There was one bathroom, which was two floors up, which had a penny gas meter that you had to put money in to have a bath, but we did have our own toilet for the two premises on our floor and that was a toilet out the back, but not outside, indoors.

What did you do during your childhood for games and things like that?

10:33 Well, there was quite a group of children who lived down there who, of a night time, particularly in the summer time, we always were outside and in the park which was opposite playing ball, cricket. For organised sport I used to go up to the King George V Playground, which was in then York Street North and played basketball, which is now netball. We used to spend most of our holidays in the playground, it was just organised and controlled sport by sirs and misses up there that took care of everyone.

What about school?

11:19 Well school was a bit difficult because when we came here we went to St Patrick's

and never having been taught by nuns before it was a bit different. There was one nun that took me under her wing and showed me the ins and outs of Catholic schools and she was very good to me. Because mum couldn't afford a school uniform Sister Xavier, she got me a uniform so as I didn't stand out like a sore thumb, she was very good to me.

Was this during the war years?

Yes. I went to St Patrick's from the time we came to Sydney until I was fourteen, I think I left in about March 1946.

Do you recall many things about the war years?

12:23 Not really, it always seemed so very far away. Having to have the windows blacked out at night time, we had blankets draped up to the windows. We were here in Sydney when the submarines came into the Harbour and we thought that was pretty frightening, it seemed as if the war was getting closer. Other than that it didn't really affect us that much.

What about your father being in the Army?

13:00 Well he was never sent overseas, he was actually at Cowra when the break-out was at Cowra, working as an Army cook there. He got on quite well, he was mainly with the Italian prisoners-of-war I think, and he got on quite well with them.

You were saying that you were taught by the nuns when you came to Sydney - did religion play a big part in your family?

13:30 Well, even before we came to Sydney we still did have religious teachings. I can't remember who gave it to us, but I made my first Communion in Narooma the same day as my sister and brother did, I think, certainly the same day as my elder sister did. Yes, we always went to church in the country and we always did have religion in our family.

Was there any distinction between the religions, any sort of bias?

14:23 No, definitely not. Here on Millers Point there would be as many non-Catholics as Catholics but we all mixed in together. Fort Street School, which was here on Observatory Hill, I would say the majority of the kids went to Fort Street but we still all grew up together and mixed together and no one was different.

In the boarding house, did it have a backyard?

14:59 It wasn't a boarding house it was a tenement, a terraced house. Yes, it did have a small backyard.

What was the backyard used for?

15:08 Just had the clotheslines and the laundry led off the back yard. The laundry had a copper and my mother's washing day was Saturday. You had to light the fire under the

copper and boil the clothes up and my mother's pride was her lovely white washing.

What were the neighbours like?

15:36 Good, all very friendly. Those with children we got to know very well. There was a few people we didn't get to know who were probably business people that had nothing in common with us but no one was ever unfriendly.

What type of occupations did the majority of the neighbours have?

16:05 Well the men, I am trying to think, maybe on the wharves. There were so many of the Millers Point men did work on the wharves, but I'm not sure now.

Do you know what they did for entertainment, social life?

No, I don't. Maybe I did then but I don't know, I just can't remember.

Were there many ethnic people in the area?

No.

So no divide between races that you would have noticed?

Never.

Tell me about the hotels in the area.

17:05 Well, hotels. As far as I can remember when we were walking, if we were going down towards Circular Quay you always walked on the other side of the road to the hotels because you never knew when a fight was going to erupt out. A lot of the seamen and the locals - by the time they had a few beers then it was time for a fight, so you never knew when you were going to get in the middle of a fight so you always kept to the other side of the road. It was just a fight in those days, I mean it was frightening to us but it was just a fight, and when the fight was over they probably went in and had another beer.

Were women allowed in public bars?

17:49 No, I don't think so, not then. I can remember in 1954, 1955, we started going into the public bar, I was in a darts' team and our friends and their wives, they used to be in the dart team and that was always played in the public bars of hotels.

How often was the darts on?

I'd say once a week.

What about training?

18:27 Oh, you did that at home or you could go to the hotel and have a game of darts, but mainly you just did that at home. It wasn't that competitive, not to us anyway, it was just a social thing and you played other hotels, you went to other hotels. Our team was at the

Mercantile Hotel in George Street North but you went to other hotels and competed against their teams. It was a very social thing.

What was that hotel like?

Well up to that point I had never been in there but it was all right, it was good.

What was the bar like and the lay-out?

I think it had a semi-circular bar, that is all I can remember.

The floor?

I don't remember.

Were there many shops in the area?

19:30 No. In Lower Fort Street there was Leonard's fruit shop and I think Wyburn's had the grocery shop on the corner, right opposite the Hero of Waterloo Hotel. I don't know who had it after that but then McCann's, they were the last people that I know that had it. Other people have had it since then but now it is closed up, it is not open.

What about a butcher's shop?

20:03 Yes, there was a butcher's shop right around Millers Point in Argyle Street. There was the milk bar on the corner of Kent and Argyle. There was another shop, which was opposite the post office, Conran's, that was like a milk bar. I don't know what else he sold but Charlie Conran's shop. John Holly had his little grocery shop, which was just in Argyle Street, around the corner from Kent Street. I think that is all I can remember.

Was there a fish shop?

I can't remember, I don't remember if the fish shop was there then.

Do you recall people going fishing and catching their own fish?

21:06 Oh yes, we used to do that. Just below our place on Hickson Road there is a place they call The Chains and a lot of people used to go and sit there and fish. Or around further towards Millers Point at the Metal Wharf. Some people even had their own little boat and used to go out around the wharves and fish. Yes, fishing was quite a past-time.

What type of fish did people catch?

Jewfish, bream and blackfish, probably others too, but I do remember those.

They were edible?

Oh yes.

What about any hawkers, do you recall any hawkers in the area?

22:05 Yes. There was a fruit and vegetable truck that used to come around, Jacko's, he supplied everyone on Millers Point, I think, with their fruit and vegetables. The ice man used to come around naturally, we had to have ice for our ice chest. No, my memory is not good enough to remember who else came around.

During these years what sort of chores did you and your brother and sisters have around the house?

22:44 Well, because my mother went to work we had to do the shopping and prepare the evening meal. Mainly my older sister, Rayma, she used to keep us in toe and make us help her. Then when she went to work then that became my job. We all had to clean the place, not that there was a lot of place to clean. Saturdays was wash day, all the washing got done on that day, and then mum did the ironing.

What were the ages of your brother and sisters when you came to Sydney?

23:42 My brother would have been fourteen, my sister, I think, eleven and I was nine, and my younger sister would have been six.

Was the settling-in period tumultuous?

24:12 No, I don't think so because whatever we did we did together. No, I don't think so because when we went to school, the two of us that went to St Patrick's, my young sister, she went to St Brigid's, we were always together. As we had our own friends we did our own things with our friends, not so much with our sisters, but we were always together.

What work did your mother do?

24:57 I think her first job was in textiles at a place called Silknet House in Surry Hills. Then she went from there to another textile place in George Street North, I think my elder sister worked there for a little while. Then she went cleaning, she used to clean up at the Registry Office and she did clean at another place. Then she worked at Alex Cowan's, a stationery place in Kent Street. I think her last job was cleaning at the Fort Street School where all the kids got to know her very well.

What was the interest that you and your brothers and sisters had as teenagers?

26:00 Nothing specific, we just liked to get outdoors as much as we could. I mean kids didn't stay indoors in those days, they just got out as much as they could. My brother, he liked bike riding, he used to go to a bike riding area, I can't remember where it was now, a riding track, and ride there. My elder sister and I, as we became teenagers and left school dancing was our main hobby and I think Aileen, when she was old enough she started dancing too. We didn't go to the same places an awful lot because we had different friends

and went to different places but dancing was definitely the big pastime.

What were the dancing places?

27:08 Paddington Town Hall, the Trocadero, Surreyville Dance Hill on City Road.

Sometimes we'd go to Air Force House and there was another one we used to go to regularly, a friend and I, of a Sunday night, a church dance at Pymont.

Any more local?

27:42 No, I don't think there were any local, unless St Patrick's. The CYO used to put on an occasional one, I believe, and they used to have movies of a Sunday night in their hall in Harrington Street. I don't think the dances happened very often but the movies were on every Sunday night.

28:21 END OF TAPE MP-MA3, SIDE A

28:29 START OF TAPE MP-MA3 SIDE B

Do you recall very much about the transport that was in and around Sydney in Millers Point?

28:40 Well, trams came to Millers Point and the trains, we used to get the trains from Wynyard. When we went to picnics of a weekend there was a group of us used to go to Cronulla or down to Waterfall, go down through National Park and down to the water holes in National Park. Mainly there was a group of us went every Sunday for a long time to Cronulla and we always went by train, no one had cars in those days.

What friends were they?

29:24 Oh, just people who grew up on Millers Point. There was the McCudden boys, Tony and Eddie McCudden, Ronnie Rochford, Valerie Williams, Joycie Kelly. I have lots of old photos but I can't sort of put a face to them at the moment. Kevin McBride. A group of about twelve to fifteen people every Sunday, that was our day out to go to Cronulla.

What was it like at Cronulla?

30:10 Good, we loved it. It was just our favourite beach at that time.

How old were you when you left school?

Fourteen.

Was that the normal leaving age?

30:30 No, I just walked out one day. I'd had a bit of a run-in with one of the nuns who had apparently confused me with someone else and the things she was saying to me I was so upset I just walked out of school and never went back. I went and got myself a job at Woolworths, opposite Wynyard Station and that was my first job.

What did your mother say?

31:04 She was okay with that. I'd done well at school, the year before I had done my Intermediate and passed every subject so she was quite happy for me to leave.

What do you recall about working at Woolworths?

13:18 I loved it, I loved being out in the workforce. The only thing, because it was so close to St Patrick's School when the nuns came in to buy things I had to duck down behind the counter, but they never came after me. I think they might have been glad to get rid of me.

Did you work there for a long time?

31:37 No, not a long time. I can remember when I left they gave me a lovely send-off and a present, the staff bought me a nice present, but maybe twelve months. Then I went to work at the local shop, McCann's grocery store, on the corner of Lower Fort Street and Windmill Street. From there I did a short stint at Mastercraft Chocolates. In 1952 I started to work for another firm, Christie's, and I worked with them full-time until 1999 and then I did a bit of casual work for them right up until 2005.

What type of firm were Christie's?

32:40 Christie's were one of the oldest firms in Sydney, they did all the Scottish regalia, kilts, at that time and all military accessories, medal ribbons, badges of rank etcetera. Umbrellas, they were always famous for their umbrellas, and umbrella repairs.

What type of work did you do for them during your years with them?

33:05 I started off doing the office work and at times I would help out in the shop, I didn't mind doing that, but mainly always in the office.

Did you have control over other staff?

I didn't have a title of any sort but I guess just experience because people did come to me because over the years my experience and knowledge was fairly valuable to them.

Who owned the company?

33:45 When I started there the Christie family owned it. Then in 1971 it was sold to Leon Simon who still owns it today.

Where is it located?

Now the office and warehouse is at St Peter's and the only shop they have now is in The Rocks area, George Street North, in The Rocks area.

Where were the premises that you worked in?

34:20 I started in George Street, right opposite St Andrew's Cathedral. Then when that building was being pulled down and I think that became the Electricity Department we moved round into Pitt Street. Then, when the Hilton Hotel was being built we moved from there to the opposite side of the street at 248 Pitt Street and we were there until 2004 and that is when they closed that shop and took premises down in The Rocks area. But it was always known as the Pitt Street shop but it is not there any more.

What year did you meet your husband?

35:16 Well, I knew him from school days because he went to St Patrick's Boys' School, which was on the opposite side of the road to the girls' school in Harrington Street. We got to know each other over the years through living and playing in the area, I just knew him from the time I was at school.

What was his name?

Jim MacDonald.

After being friends what attracted you to each other, do you think?

36:01 Oh that is a hard question to answer, isn't it, because I don't know. We just always got on so well, even though we didn't have many interests together. He didn't like dancing, so I used to go dancing and he was quite happy. He used to take me to the movies of a weekend and if I was going dancing he'd even come down to see me off to the tram while I went dancing so it wasn't a problem. How can you tell what attracts you, he was a very nice person.

Where did you live when you got married?

36:47 When we first got married we lived in Kent Street in a terraced place, had a room and a balcony there. After that we moved to Lower Fort Street and lived in two rooms in a terrace place there.

What type of work did he do?

37:10 He used to work at bicycle place at Redfern, Malvern Star Bicycles I think it was. Then he worked at a bond store and then he worked at Playfair's meat place, which was in Argyle Place, which is now the Clock Tower Building.

Did you have any children?

No.

How long were you married?

1953 and we separated, I think it was in 1966.

Do you recall why you separated?

38:00 I can only say that after a few years of marriage we knew that it was a bad mistake, we had no interests in common. He did drink quite a lot and was quite jealous, but in saying that he still was not a bad person. I just decided that eventually my health was suffering and I had to leave, so one day I packed a bag and I left, and that was it.

Where did you move to?

38:43 I got a little bachelor flat at Kirribilli and to be able to live there and pay the rent I had to then take a cleaning job at night time, so I'd leave my job at Christie's of an afternoon and run down the street to my cleaning job so I could pay the rent each week, but that was all experience.

Where was the cleaning job at?

At the ANZ Bank on the corner of Pitt and Hunter Streets.

How long did you stay at Kirribilli and in that job?

39:18 The cleaning I had to eventually give up, I think it was in about 1967, 1968, because the doctor told me I was doing too much. I am not sure how long I stayed at the flat at Kirribilli, probably twelve months and then I shared a flat with a friend at Woollahra.

How long did you stay at Woollahra?

39:52 I can't remember because we moved around a bit. We moved to Bondi and then to Sans Souci.

Did you ever consider remarrying?

No.

Are you still living at Sans Souci?

40:18 No, I now live out in the Western Suburbs, at Schofields.

How long have you lived there?

Eleven years.

Do you still have an association with Millers Point?

40:31 Oh yes, very much so. I have a niece who is doing this interview, who lives at Millers Point, was born and bred here and still lives here. I have lots of friends who live down here

and lots of friends who..... every year we gather for a little reunion, so those that have moved away we get together on the first Saturday in March every year. We keep in contact that way.

Is your mother still living?

No, she passed away eleven years ago.

Your siblings?

41:13 My elder sister Rayma, she passed away twelve years ago. My brother and my younger sister are still alive, yes.

Where do they live?

My brother and his family are in Western Australia, in Perth. My sister lives at Greenwell Point on the South Coast.

Do you miss not having had children of your own?

41:41 I don't think so. I mean when I first got married all I wanted to do was have children but it didn't happen and was probably fortunate that it didn't. I have always had children around me, my niece Margaret she has always been around me. My other sister's daughter, Tracy, I have had a lot to do with her over the years. Friends that I've had - their children have always been with me, one friend in particular when her mother passed away I became like a surrogate grandmother to her three children and we are still very close. The children are all grown up now but we are all very close.

Are there many children around you now?

No, not really.

Do you think fate has played any part in your life?

42:42 No, I don't think so. I think I have had quite a good life, I haven't done anything very exciting but I've enjoyed my life. I haven't got very many regrets, one is I haven't travelled enough in Australia but that could still happen.

Do you think your life has been influenced very much by having lived at Millers Point?

43:15 Millers Point is different living to living in the suburbs. Millers Point, when we first came here it was like a village and everyone took care of everyone, if someone was sick people were in and out, looking after them. That doesn't exist so much in the suburbs but I think in parts of Millers Point it still does. That is why it was not hard to come from a country town to Millers Point because that is how it was in a country town too, people looked after each other.

What type of changes have you noticed in Millers Point over the years?

44:04 Well it is much more crowded, of course, with all the visitors that walk around. I can't say that I have noticed a lot of changes because I don't live here, but I imagine living here now would be different because you don't know your neighbours like you did before and that I think would be pretty hard.

How much has Sydney changed since you were young?

44:36 Oh quite a lot. It is much busier, it is completely..... I am trying to think of the word where there are so many different races of people in the city now, it is very difficult at times, particularly travelling on public transport, you see a lot more ethnics than Australian people, particularly on the trains that I travel on. That makes you sometimes think golly, the place has changed over the years.

What train line is that?

That is the Western Suburbs, the Richmond Line.

What is one event of particular importance to you that you remember?

45:42 One event I do remember is the day the war finished, on 15 August, it was a Catholic school holiday. We had always been told that when war finished everything would close for a week, or two weeks, and to have food stocks and be ready. The day that it finished one of the boys who lived down near me, Les Dooner, he and I were at home because we both went to Catholic schools and we heard that war was over so we quickly dashed up to Wynyard Station to the shops there and bought food to make sure we had food. We saw all the excitement and the dancing going on in Martin Place, so that is something that will always live in my mind.

What do you think is your greatest achievement?

46:45 I haven't got many great achievements, I haven't achieved anything. I suppose getting through to seventy-two and still being healthy and still enjoying life.

What has given you the most satisfaction, looking back?

47:09 The most satisfaction to me would be to have come from such a close family, because you hear and see of families who aren't close and I could never imagine that happening. I think it would be the worst thing that could happen to anyone.

Your greatest mistake?

47:42 Well my greatest mistake was probably not living a bit before I settled down before I married, it could have saved a lot of heartache, but I thought that was all I wanted to do,

as soon as I could get married and have my own life. It doesn't always work out like you want it to.

What do you see for the future of Millers Point?

48:17 Well, I would hope that it would go on as it is now but I fear that greed will take over and they will want to sell the places, just to make money, for the money. It is such a wonderful position but it will lose all its charm, it will lose its history and everything, if ever they do that. It would be the saddest thing that could ever happen to any part of Sydney because it has got something now, with all these little houses and some of the old residents are still here and if they lose that it would be the greatest shame ever.

What residents do you still keep in contact with and see?

49:18 Well first of all my niece and there is Kath Burgess, Florrie Ballard, I can't think of her married name, Amanda Barlow, Judy, she lives in 12 High Street, Molly, who is one of Millers Point's oldest old-time residents, a wonderful person she is. Who else lives here? There are still lots of people but they are my closest contacts.

How often would you visit Millers Point now?

About every two weeks, about once a fortnight.

Can you think of anything that we haven't discussed that you would like to discuss?

50:39 No, I think you have pretty well covered it all. I think people that have lived on Millers Point, even if they have moved away still remain friends. Whereas if you live in another suburb and you move away you don't keep that contact with as many people as what Millers Point do. Millers Point people love to be with Millers Point people, they love talking about the old times we had here. It was just normal times, I guess, but we had a lot of fun.

When you attend the reunions annually what type of people attend them with you?

51:31 Well, I don't know. None of them are business people now because we are all too old, retired. Most of them are very involved with their grandchildren and families. But they are just people who lived here, started their working life here and a lot of them, when they married eventually moved away. They are just working-class people who still like to keep in contact with their school friends.

Any final comments at all?

52:21 No, I don't think so. I don't feel that I have ever done anything spectacular but you have a certain amount of pride when you say you were brought up and lived on The Rocks

and that is it, people do speak about it with pride.

Anything you wish you had done that you haven't other than travel further afield in Australia?

No that is all, nothing. No regrets.

Thank you.

53:14 END OF INTERVIEW WITH MAUREEN STAPLETON & END OF TAPE MP-MA3 SIDE B