



voiceprint

Newsletter

of the New South Wales Branch
of the Oral History Association
of Australia

8

May 1996



*... is a
... form, used
... as the result
... interview*

means of finding
the past by asking
ions of people who



Voiceprint is the newsletter of the NSW Branch of the Oral History Association of Australia and is published quarterly

ISSN: 13224360

Issue No. 8 – May 1996

Oral History Association of Australia
(NSW Branch) c/- State Library of New
South Wales, Macquarie Street,
Sydney, NSW 2000

Tel (02) 230 1697 • Fax (02) 223 4086

Editorial Committee: Shelley Barwick,
Angela Wawn, Miriam Moloney and
Jenny Allison

Please send articles and correspondence

to: Jenny Allison, 65 Amherst Street,
Cammeray 2062

Layout and Design: Vanessa Block



Editorial

We are very excited about this issue of **Voiceprint**, with its two separate aspects of oral history.

Diana Ritch has written an absorbing article on her mother, the oral history pioneer Hazel de Berg. When Hazel de Berg started in 1957, there was no name for what she did, and she just called her interviews with an intriguing collection of poets, writers, artists and dancers who came through their house "the recordings". She eventually made more than 1,200 of these recordings.

Diana has a vivid memory of the day her eldest son started at high school, when her mother brought her a cup of tea and a pile of newspaper clippings, saying she thought she would retire soon: "You get on with it, Diana, I've had such a wonderful life". She died the next day.

These warm, vivid and loving remembrances bring back to life the amazing pioneer of oral history.

Our other feature article is Jeanne Eve's experiences writing an oral history about the people who lived on Australian light stations, running the lighthouses.

These romantic symbols of a bygone era are disappearing, phased out as victims of modern times and technology. Jeanne Eve has already unearthed a fascinating cast of characters, including both the men who were the lighthouse keepers and their wives (it was mandatory for them to be married, although forged evidence was not unknown).

She has also found a wealth of information on architectural and engineering aspects of lightstations as well as daily lightkeeping duties and, even more importantly, the social aspects and general family life of this romantic-sounding but in reality, harsh occupation.

We hope that our readers get as much pleasure and useful information out of this issue of **Voiceprint** as we did in compiling it.

Angela Wawn

Contents



News:

New Members	3
Correspondence	3

ARTICLES

Shine a Light on Me!	> <i>Jeanne Eve</i>	4
My Mother, Hazel de Berg, Oral History Pioneer	> <i>Diana Ritch</i>	9



Diary of Events	21
-----------------	----



New Members

New Members to April 1st 1996:

Mary Hutchison	Writer, Teacher ACT
Philippa Major	Community Relations Manager, City West Development
Constance Fitzgerald	Teacher
Anne Giles	Library/Farm history research
Jane Stephens	PhD University of Western Sydney
Boz Brooks	North Katoomba/Laura Residents' memories
John P. Elias	Architect
Dr. James B. Roche	Medical Practitioner
Stephen Doggett	Student
Keith Robinson	Electrical Engineer
Peter Read	Historian ACT
Valda Owens	Teacher
Margaret Park	Librarian, Oral Historian
Pam Little	Student UNE
Joe Vissel	Photographer
Leichhardt Municipal Library	(Ellen Forsyth)

Correspondence received by Rosie Block in February:

"I am a year 10 student at High School. We have been given a Research & Development project which I have chosen to do on toothbrush shapes and how people brush their teeth.

I am looking for information on the topic and would greatly appreciate any that you could supply me. The topic includes why we brush our teeth; different and/or recommended toothbrush shapes and why they are effective; recommended ways of brushing teeth; and top selling types and brands of brushes.

I look forward to receiving any information you can send me....."

ARTICLES

Shine a Light on Me!

or Who Lived on Australian Light Stations?

There is currently a joke being circulated in world newspapers and on Internet: "Radio conversation released by U.S. Navy:—

Voice 1: *Please divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision.*

Voice 2: *Recommend you divert your course to 15 degrees to the south to avoid a collision.*

Voice 1: *This is the captain of a U.S. Navy ship. I say again, divert your course.*

Voice 2: *No. I say again, you divert your course.*

Voice 1: *THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER ENTERPRISE. WE ARE A LARGE WARSHIP OF THE U.S. NAVY. DIVERT YOUR COURSE NOW!*

Voice 2: *This is a lighthouse. Your call.*

Lighthouses hold a fascination for many people and have been used by the community in many images. For example, the television advertisements with the supposed lighthouse keeper in his rugged sweater leaning over the fence and lighthouse in the background – but I cannot recall the product! The image of a lighthouse in the logo of an insurance company supposedly represents strength and safety. For another meaning of safety, there is the picture of a lighthouse with light beaming forth, on a 1940's condom packet¹. The fact that the light is shining on a rapidly sinking boat is mind-boggling and indeed is worthy of many interpretations!

However the era of lightstations has nearly ended. Only fifteen lightstations are still manned by light keepers. With the advent of advanced navigational technology, lighthouses around the world have become obsolete. However, for sailors and fishermen with smaller craft, the reassuring flashing light at night is still desired.

All the 133 Commonwealth lightstations around Australia were under the management of the Australian Maritime

Safety Authority² but the Commonwealth government only took over the control from the States in 1915. In the early 1980's the demanning of light-stations became an emotive issue but the difficulty is that in the past a user-pay principle applied. That is, the ship owners paid money to the Federal government for the lightstations' maintenance. But today with satellite navigation and other technological aids, this form of income has become irrelevant. As in many political issues, the question is: even though light-stations are now part of Australia's national heritage who will pay for their preservation? At present, discussions are still taking place about the possibility of the States taking over the sites, for conservation plans of management to be established and there is now the waiting for the decision-making after the Federal government elections.

The Macquarie lightstation in Sydney said farewell to its on-site maintenance staff in 1989. In the early 1990's the assistant keeper's cottage (two semi-detached quarters) was sold after public auction on a long-term leasehold to myself and my husband for restoration under extremely strict heritage plans of management. To interview all people involved with heritage listed houses would be worthy of a future oral history project! So began my involvement with lightstations and the lives of the people

who lived there. Having left my professional career of twenty years I embarked on a new oral history venture in early 1995.

The chief lightstation engineer for N.S.W., Mr. Ian Cameron (now retired) was responsible for all the N.S.W. lightstations. As a boy he had lived in my house because his father, who had arrived in Australia after serving in the British Merchant Navy and British Army during WWI, became a lighthouse-keeper. This form of employment was chosen because it was a successful way for he and his wife to obtain a house during the post-war housing shortage. Mr. Cameron (Jnr.) joined the lightstation service as an electrician in the early 1950's and rose through the ranks to be eventually awarded an Order of Australia for his services. He brought about social changes such as interviewing future lightkeepers for particular personal characteristics:

Mr. Cameron: *"Oh yes, one day he called me into his office and he had a great pile of files in front of him and he said, 'I'm very concerned'. And I said, 'What about?' and he said, 'about the lighthouse keepers. I've just gone through all the records about thirty years' and he said, 'And do you know what, there's not more than two or three lightkeepers that reached retirement?' And I said, 'Now I come to think of it, I think you're right'. I started to think and he said, 'What's wrong? Should be a healthy life,*

plenty of exercise, walking up and down stairs, that sort of thing' and we started to think about it and I've thought about all the situations I've been telling you about and thought maybe if we knew more about, we're not medical people, more about stress, more about it then, and a lot of them then, I'm talking about where there were 3-men stations, there were stressful situations.'.."

I sensed there was a great story here for not only was the status of lightstations being regularly reported in newspapers and magazines³, there were also new and upgraded plans of management for the lightstation sites from the State and Federal heritage bodies, and the relocation of Cape Bowling Green lighthouse to the Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney. Books were being published about the lights in Tasmania⁴, N.S.W.⁵, and Queensland⁶. Generally the public's awareness of lightstations has continued to increase. Another recent publication was in a domestic on-flight airline magazine⁷. The best book, using oral history techniques, is a British study of lighthouse men and women⁸. With the lighthouse era disappearing, so too are the men and women, (women were always around as lighthouse keepers had to show evidence of marriage to their partner – at least one was known to have been forged!). Much information is available on the architectural, engineering and daily lightkeeping

duties but there is precious little on the social aspects of lighthouse keeping and general family life. When I chat to people at parties or gatherings of strangers, I can guarantee that someone will say to me, "oh my great, great aunt ran away with a lighthousekeeper in Tasmania!" or "my brother knows the old keeper who used to be at so and so lighthouse" or "my brother used to work on the supply boat". Lighthouses and their personnel are romantic, popular, intriguing and very much part of Australia's history.

Research Resources:

Having worked as a speech pathologist with no historical training, how was I going to embark on this project! I certainly had experience with interviewing people using both cassette and video recorders. But that was all. Now I had to start again establishing networks and learning where the resources are located. For those beginning in the area I highly recommend the following:

1. The Oral History Association of Australia (NSW) – of course! Individual executive members, the seminars and literature have been extremely supportive and informative.
2. The Royal Australian Historical Society in Macquarie Street for Australian history. Its staff are again very helpful and enthusiastic. The library is easily

accessible and extensive. To find out with ease the names and salaries of the staff at Macquarie lightstation in the 1860's in the Sands Directory was a delight.

3. W.E.A. courses, e.g. Becoming an Historian: Research and Study: Australian History: Getting that Story into Print.
4. The Sydney of City Library, Town Hall. Here in the Historical Records of Australia, I was able to find copies of letters from Governor Macquarie and England. Essentially the latter had disapproved of using Greenway as the architect for the first Australian lighthouse and the cost was too high. Governor Macquarie went ahead anyway!

For my particular research in maritime history I also use:

5. Personal contacts at the Australian Maritime Safety Authority, Brisbane.
6. The Vaughan Evans Library, Australian National Maritime Museum, Pyrmont. Here I found an excerpt from a diary of a lighthouse keeper on Swan Island, 1846.

August 14th: "D_o sailed sent letter by them to Tregurtha. 14th. Mrs. Wettenhall

very much recovered from a severe nervous attack. We are all of us in very good health and great reason to be thankful to the All merciful Creator".

No other references. What happened? How tantalising!

Oral History Project

As with any research project the topic had to be clearly defined and the "keep it simple" principle observed. Being my first project I decided to interview Mr. Cameron. Apparently he had kept detailed notes and information in his job which covered three decades but after he had handed them over to the government department on his retirement they were thrown out after an office move. Therefore I believed the information needed to be retrieved and the best way was primarily via oral history.

Similar to anyone who is an expert in the field, Mr. Cameron had previously been interviewed on radio and television, by PhD students and other researchers. However, he believed he had been misrepresented at times and some of his photographs had not been returned but there was still information that had not been presented. Consequently it took me two years to gain both he and his wife's trust. Once this was established, the forms of permission signed, a series of interviews began in 1995. His wife was asked to contribute individually. She has been most supportive and there was no

clinking of cups and saucers in the background (Rosie Block's words of wisdom!)

Current Status

The future plan for 1996 is for these tapes to be transcribed and written in the form of a biography. The length is not yet known nor the format. I also hope to be connected to the Internet during 1996. This is intended to be a starting point for my second, more major project.

Women on Australian Lightstations

The women were very important at these sites: not only to be a pre-requisite for the married male keeper but also for the provision of family care, general home maintenance, and hospitality for visitors. Even though it was against the rules and therefore unofficial, women also operated the light in emergencies. Most of the published information has been centred on the men, their duties and some behavioural quirks with passing reference to the women's lives, the exception being in Tony Parker's book using oral history in his English study. There is no mention anywhere of how the women's lives compared to the role of women in a changing society over the decades. Traditionally, the role of women has not been included in Australian history¹⁰. Consequently in the next few years I wish to interview as many women as possible who were

wives, daughters, mothers (in law), etcetera of lightkeepers anywhere in Australia. It would be interesting to not only record thoughts and reactions to events but also to record how these women perceived their life on lightstations and the influence it had on their current lifestyle. It is planned that a book be published on this topic in 2001, the centenary of Federation because it is anticipated that there will be a push for historical and heritage issues during this year. As historian Michael Cathcart said: "The historian must have the humility to listen to and trust the narrative of others. But the historian must also have the courage to interpret, to dramatise and to be heard"¹¹. If anyone is interested in contributing to this project or wishes more information please feel free to contact me by telephone: 02 3888001, facsimile: 02 3287500 or write to Keepers Cottage, Macquarie Lighthouse Station, Old South Head Road, Vaucluse 2031.

Jeanne Eve

¹ Powerhouse Museum (N.S.W.): 1995 exhibition on contraception.

² Department of Transport and Communications 1988: *From Dusk Till Dawn – a History of Australian Lighthouses*. A.G.P.S.

³ Bronwen Hayes: *Lighthouses? They're on the Rocks*. 1995. *The Bulletin* October 4th 1994, pp. 46-47.

4 Kathleen Stanley: *Guiding Lights – Tasmania's Lighthouses and Lighthousemen*. 1991. St. David's Park Publishing.

5 Jervis Sparks: *Tales from Barrenjoey*. 1992. Self-published. Sydney.

6 Stuart Buchanan: *The Lighthouse Keepers*. 1995. Coral Coast Publications.

7 Ian Stapleton: Fading Lights in *The Australian Way*, January 1996, pp. 82-84

8 Tony Parker: *Lighthouses* 1975. Hutchinson of London

9 Miriam Dixon: *The Real Matilda*. 1976. Penguin Australia.

¹⁰ Jeannie Douglass: What About Women? in *Signals*, quarterly magazine of Australian National Maritime Museum, No. 32, Sept.-Nov., pp. 8-11.

¹¹ Michael Cathcart: Symposium: Why History? in *Australian Book Review*, No. 177, pp. 16-18.

My Mother Hazel de Berg, Oral History Pioneer

When I finished interviewing Morris West he wrote in my copy of *Shoes of the Fisherman*, "For Diana, Walking in her mother's shoes".

I think it's the best thing he's ever written.

I couldn't hope to walk in Mum's shoes, but I certainly try to follow in her path, and as Henry Lawson said:

*"Lead me by the love you bore me
When you trod this earth with me".*

To be Hazel de Berg's daughter and to address a group of oral historians is a big responsibility. When Rosie asked me to speak to you I was honoured – then a bit worried. What would you expect from me? What should I tell you about that

most wonderful, dynamic, loving intelligent person I was lucky enough to have for a mother? Mum was essentially a private person and the Catalogue of her wonderful collection of 1290 recordings is how the public sees her. Those of us who knew and loved her know there was much more to her than that.

Today while concentrating on her pioneering work in oral history, I'm going to fill in a bit of the background – let you glimpse some of the real person who was my mother Hazel de Berg.

Though "oral history" is now a widely accepted term, when Mum started in 1957 there was no name for what she did. She called them "The Recordings" and my twin sister Debbie, and our brother Mike and I grew up with them as part of our family. Poets, authors, artists, composers,

scientists, photographers, journalists, dancers, came through our home, and into our lives. Mum's enthusiasm and love for the spoken word was overwhelming. To her each recording was a very special moment and she felt privileged and delighted at each encounter.

I remember she used to say to me: "When are you going to do The Recordings Diana?" and I'd just say "one day, one day".

Time passed, and Mum got on with the work, the collection grew.

And one day in 1983 Mum bought me a tape recorder and a new dress. She gave me the name of a person to be recorded and some research material and said to me, "Don't ring me until you've made the appointment".

Faced with such an ultimatum I made the appointment, did the recording and I was hooked.

So began a wonderful time. Although I'd had a 25 year "apprenticeship" with Mum and had worked in the Mitchell Library Research Department for several years, I learnt more in the next year than at any time previously. Mum and I would talk about "The Recordings" whenever we could, she'd suggest people to me, I'd ask about others. If I had a problem I could come to her. Mum and I exchanged newspaper cuttings, poetry books, novels and ideas. She introduced me at meetings and functions – I was warmly welcomed as "Hazel's daughter" – and

everyone loved her so much. I still love to hear people say "your mother recorded me. What a wonderful person".

On 2nd February 1984 my eldest son David started High School. I dropped him off and arrived exhausted at Mum's place. She sat me down and brought me a cup of tea and a pile of newspaper cuttings. She told me these would be good people to record and to take as many as I could, adding "I'm easing up now. I think I'll retire soon".

She was walking past me at the time – a pile of books in her arms, she stopped, smiled and said "You get on with it Diana. You know, if I died tomorrow it wouldn't matter – I've had such a wonderful life".

To our infinite grief she did die the next day – it mattered immensely, but we were comforted by those words. "I've had such a wonderful life".

Mum was born in Deniliquin, NSW. She was the 3rd of the 6 children of George and Anne Holland. Her father was a Methodist Minister and her childhood was spent in various country towns. I remember she told me how her mother would plant trees at each new home and say "Another woman will drink tea under this tree. I won't be here when it's fully grown".

Mum said when she was 7 years old they were living in Cobar in Western NSW. There had been a severe drought. While playing outside she saw large round dark marks appear on the concrete.

They scared her, she didn't know what they were. Her mother told her "It's rain".

As a child Hazel became accustomed to writing and listening to people reading. Her father wrote his sermons and read the Bible aloud after dinner. New volumes of the encyclopaedia were eagerly awaited and read with great interest. Her eldest sister Anne had written a book by the time she was 12, and was always writing poetry. It was Anne – with her beautiful lyric poetry – who set the stage and the whole family wrote. There was a weekly competition for the best poem – read aloud. It was a warm, loving, stimulating family environment – and each child grew as a very special individual.

The girls later went to MLC Burwood and George, their brother, went to Newington – they all returned home for holidays. At school Hazel had what she called the "inestimable good fortune" to have Dorothy Law as her senior English teacher. Miss Law brought out the best in each girl and Hazel was one of her prize pupils. She also studied chemistry at school which was quite unusual for girls at that time.

After doing the Leaving Certificate she decided to become a photographer, working with Noel Ruby and learning to take beautiful sensitive pictures. This stood her in good stead when she did her recordings – taking photos of many of the people she recorded.

In 1941 she married William de Berg. He was a friend of her uncle's and his family owned Everyman's Bookshop. He was 20 years older than Hazel, very debonair and quite unlike the boys she'd known. She told me he was "the lollies, ice cream and chocolates" man, and I still remember how he'd put chocolates under her pillow to surprise her. He was Jewish and Hazel studied Judaism for several years, becoming Jewish before their marriage. They lived in Sydney's Eastern suburbs where my twin sister Debbie and I were born, and then our brother Michael.

Growing up with Hazel meant we too had a wonderful life. Our bed time stories were poems she'd make up as she went along or she'd tell us Aboriginal legends. Albert Namatjirra taught Mum to throw the boomerang and she taught us – I've still got his boomerang – we learnt about stone-age axes and how to make flint arrow heads.

When Deb and I were 7 Mum decided to study radiography – I remember how she'd put us on the kitchen table and carefully practise different ways to position our limbs for X-rays – we knew the names of all the bones – we didn't have knees we had "patellas". Mum studied and became the first woman in Australia to graduate as a radiographer – maybe her photography background helped.

When the first Indonesian Colombo

Plan students arrived in Sydney in the mid 50s they were met by a friend of Hazel's. He rang her from the airport asking her what he should do with these young students. "Bring them out to our place," Hazel immediately said "the poor children have never been away from home before". From then on all the Indonesian Colombo Plan students came to our place. Mum learnt to speak Indonesian – I remember coming home from school one day to be greeted by Mum wearing a sarong and in perfect Indonesian she told me "The black dog is under the palm tree". She was one of the first Australians to teach Indonesian and our home became a focal point for all the Indonesian Colombo Plan students. Some kept in touch with Mum all her life.

In 1957 the Australian writer Frank Clune introduced Mum to "Ken Bruce, a blind man with a great vision". Frank said Ken was going to start a project to record books for blind people and needed a "place to boil the billy". Such a place was our home and the project, Talking Books for the Blind, was embraced with Mum's wonderful enthusiasm.

Ken Bruce told Mum he'd send someone around with a tape recorder. He sent one of her old school friends, Flo Wilson, she showed Mum how to use the recorder.

In Mum's words: "I wanted to read Mary Gilmore's *Old Days, Old Ways* and thought -- since I knew Dame Mary -- it

might be a good idea to get her to say why she wrote it for the blind". This first recording by Mum on 19th March 1957 lasted only 1 minute and 21 seconds – but it started a passion that would last for 27 years.

Dame Mary Gilmore

*Life and experience belong to everyone and memory is the patch bag of life. Out of that patch bag you can take your pieces, sort, shape, put them together and make a book. It was of patches this book *Old Days, Old Ways* was made and as you "ear read" it you will see that for yourselves. When you are young you are looking out the door of life all the time, but memory is saving the patches. Whatever you do, don't lose them, the patches of memory are the things that made history and you can write or tell them as others cannot do for you have a field of your own, make use of that field. And I thank you for listening.*

Our family was not surprised when Mum brought home a huge heavy maroon and grey reel-to-reel tape recorder. Tape recorders were a novelty then and we all had to "have a go" listening to our own voices, laughing at the sound. We recorded Mum playing some of her own compositions on the piano, we recorded the dogs barking, we sang, we had a lot of fun with this novelty. Little did we know how important this was going to become – this was the rest of Mum's life.

When Mum started The Recordings we only had one car in the family and

naturally Dad needed it most of the time. Often Mum would have to catch buses to and from recordings, carrying all her equipment, but the tapes would sit on her lap and be looked after like a child. It really was a labour of love.

As I said Mum's original intention was to record writers and poets. And these writers and poets were to talk to the future. From this concept Mum developed a technique for her Recordings. They were not conventional interviews – her voice was never heard on the tapes. "Nobody", she would say "wants to hear me talking to you, they want you to talk to them".

Nowadays there is a feeling that there is a lack of historical truth in this method. Historians want to know what prompted a particular discussion. Also there is the problem that some people find it difficult to speak without continuous questions. However, there is what Mum called the "thinking voice" with no interruptions or ego trips from the interviewer (no one will ever know the often brilliant questions Mum asked). Nevertheless they are structured Recordings and while they are meant to be heard, the transcripts also make great reading. In 1965 she wrote: "As the transcripts began to arrive, I saw a new type of literature emerge. It is unedited, unplanned but real. Since it comes from people who have all paid the price of achievement...it is basic and

uncontrived...I wish everyone could share my moment of recording".

This "moment of recording" did not happen without thorough research. Fortunately she needed only a few hours sleep. Before each recording she would not go to bed until all her work had been done, her equipment checked and ready to go (sometimes she just wouldn't go to bed at all).

She was always nervous – that's 1290 times – which made each recording fresh and new – she never became complacent, never thought one person was more important or interesting than another.

When people asked her "What was your best Recording?" she'd always answer "the next one".

Her thorough research led her to respect, admire and love each person she recorded. And each person repaid her in kind. She aimed to get "the essence of another human being" – talking to them, making them feel at ease, helping them remember their stories and reveal their feelings and thoughts

She wrote: "As something emerges, [I would] ask them not to waste it on me, but put it on the tape. I have always known that history can be obtained but only the persons themselves can say how they feel and how they work". As her Recordings evolved, so did oral history. I remember the discussions before the first release form was finalised – and even then it has needed amendments.

The large, trusty (heavy) Nova tape recorder was replaced (after much research) by a much more portable Uher.

She would say "In Australia you can touch the beginning". Take Henry Lawson for example. Though he died in 1922 Mum did a series of Recordings of "People who knew Henry Lawson".

Did you know that he came to the wharf when Mary Gilmore was leaving for South America. In her words "He wanted to marry me, of course...and he went on his knees and begged me to stay".

Amy de Vere McGullum was a nurse of Lawson's. "I was in charge of the little hospital we had for incipient mental cases...Henry wasn't mental, but he wasn't normal, of course; if he'd been normal he wouldn't have written – normal people don't, do they?"

It's been hard to cut down on the number of examples I can give at this talk. When I rang Pam Maefarling at the National Library of Australia for some tapes she said "You're so lucky, you've got so many to choose from". That's what Mum used to say: "I'm so lucky I've got such a choice, I can record anyone, no one's ever done this before".

Back to the poets. After her first recording Dame Mary suggested Judith Wright and as Mum said "I just kept on". She was encouraged and supported by John Thompson from the ABC. He gave her her first list of 27 poets and then she

used the Penguin Book of Australian Verse as a guide.

During the next 27 years she did almost 500 interviews with Australian literary people. Her work became well known. Douglas Stewart was a great "ambassador" for her and often when she'd ring to make an appointment the person would say "Oh yes... Douglas Stewart told me about you".

One of my favourite recordings – and indeed one of Australia's most popular poems – was Dorothy MacKellar saying "My Country". The recording was done on 2nd December 1958, when Dorothy MacKellar was in Hospital – propped up on pillows wearing a pink bed jacket and a special brooch. By the time she had finished saying "My Country" both she and Mum were in tears.

Fortunately for Mum, and oral history in Australia, Harold White (later Sir Harold) was the National Librarian at this time. He had been to Columbia University, seen their oral history work and had become most enthusiastic about it. He encouraged Mum in her work and offered the tapes a permanent home in the National Library of Australia. He also arranged to have the tapes transcribed. This job was done by Pat Thompson, wife of Mum's good friend John Thompson. I remember when Mum received page 10,000 of the transcripts, she wrote a poem to Pat Thompson.

The Artist: For Patricia Thompson

In the Beginning was the Word,
and the Word multiplied
beyond all expectations of its sound.

Now, within my hand,
I hold a transcript of page
Ten Thousand.

Ten Thousand is pre-history,
carbon-dated time before clay tablets,
Sanskrit and Christ's Calendar.

One thousand bore William the
Conqueror, after Mohammed.
At the sunset of the Twentieth
Century of Christ's Calendar, the
first satellite soared up to the moon...

and we built
the Opera House of Sydney Harbour
where Slessor's bells sound back two
hundred years
since Cook looked up and saw the
Southern Cross
while Banks sketched likenesses of
strange plants here
When you are close to something,
everything is clear –
Ten Thousand years is not long ago.

Tell me...
do your finders feel those centuries,
the way the artist does in paint or
stone –
sensing a structure in a shapeless
phrase –
fingering shape from sound?

Do you hear the light-year messages
in your mind and seek new meanings
in the stars,
making symbols like rock carvings
that tell of a Dreamtime
in markings that hold the Dream?

All artists work alone
within the continuity of mankind;
and you have worked through time to
graph an age,
day after day,
year after year,
page after page.

Wouldn't all transcribers love to get such
a poem about their work?

Harold White supported Mum's
application for a Commonwealth Literary
Fund grant and until she was contracted
to the National Library in 1971, these
grants helped cover some of the costs.
As Graeme Powell, the Chief Manuscript
Librarian at the National Library said in
1974: "It is particularly impressive in that
for so many years Mrs. de Berg built up
her collection with almost no assistance".
As I said, Mum was contracted to the
National Library in 1971. This simple
impersonal statement hides a very
personal story of how much of this
collection came into being.

In 1970 I was in hospital. I was very
depressed. I'd just had my second
miscarriage and thought I'd never have
any children. Mum's faith pulled me
through. She came into the hospital and
announced: "Well, I've bought a beach
house so you can take the children on
holidays. I'm going to give up The
Recordings and get a job to pay for it".

When the National Library heard this
they asked her how much she needed.
\$2000 a year. So it was agreed. Mum

would go under contract to the National Library and do 60 recordings a year. They also supplied her with new tapes, paid for the transcripts and helped with accommodation, transport and office facilities when she travelled interstate. Mum was always very proud that her collection was housed in the National Library.

The tapes had originally gone to Canberra in 1963. That year Mum made a gift of all her recordings to the National Library. Before that I seem to remember piles of tapes all over her bedroom. She collected all the tapes and put them in boxes. She was worried, as if they were children, that they might be hurt on the way to their new home. She need not have worried – they had their own Commonwealth car, and were treated like national treasures. We waved them goodbye, in tears.

Mum wrote: "...when I came back into the house yesterday after seeing the tapes go and saw the battered tape recorder I was reminded of the Hindu custom which, in giving thanks for the harvest, decorate their machines with flowers".

In 1960 Mum decided to include artists in her recordings. She wrote: "I began recording the artists almost by accident. In 1957 William Dobell had just completed his portrait of Mary Gilmore, and, as I was recording writers and poets, I thought it would add to literature to

have him say how he painted Mary Gilmore's portrait".

Daniel Thomas from the Art Gallery of N.S.W. gave Mum her first list of 25 artists. I remember her standing, holding this list and saying: "I know the artists are wonderful, but I don't think I'll ever love them the way I love the writers". How wrong she was. The 25 names grew to over 200.

She wrote:

"The first recordings don't have the detail of the later recordings and yet they are among the best in the collection. I think I asked them to say how they painted and what they tried to convey. Eventually they came under the headings:

1. *Short biography (including training)*
2. *General method of working*
3. *Particular method with regard to one picture*
4. *Essence*

About May 1965 I began to think the artists' recordings had reached a critical stage where they should be complete – to be contained within the period 1960-1965 (although Dobell's first recording was earlier). I think it is important to call a halt to one set of recordings – for about 20 years – to allow them to develop.

I rang Daniel Thomas, who had been asked by Hal Missingham to help me, and asked him to fill in the gaps. He made out a list for me (complete with addresses) by about September. As I went on recording the pace quickened but the artists were co-operative and, by the end of the year, the artists were finished.

The speed with which they were finished was helped by a number of

factors. I could now record in the art galleries of all states. Daniel Thomas wrote from the Art Gallery of N.S.W. saying when I would be there and I wrote to all the artists and arranged for them to call in. Many, of course, had to be recorded in their homes – but they all knew about the recordings and long explanations were unnecessary.

Not every Australian artist is recorded but the recordings are representative. Not every artist recorded achieved any special significance but they are all facets of the whole.

When someone died, during the period 1960-65, whose name was on the original list, I asked someone close (wife, husband, friend) to say how they worked, etc. It's not the same, of course, but it's better than nothing.

There is too (and I noticed this among both the older and the younger artists) a recognition of those who, at great personal hardship, broke the ground for today's flowering. Some of these could never be recorded but their work speaks for itself and to them will always go the honour of first in the field.

*Even after recording the artists I still don't know – any more than the artists do – what makes a creative artist, but they are all influenced, finally, by their environment. Whether it is love, or love-hate, it is there – 'the beat of the country that built my heart', as Judith Wright wrote in *Train Journey*.*

For my own part, I too fell in love, consciously and forever, not with one artist and one painting, but with Australian art by Australians. And love, in the long run, is the best motivation there is".

Not all Mum's recordings were poets, authors and artists. Also in the Arts field

were sculptors, like Tom Bass, Lyndon Dadswell, Robert Kippel and then actors, including John Bell, Robert Helpmann, Barry Humphries, Jane Winchester, Bron Syron, Garry McDonald, Doris Fitton and many, many more. There were also architects, Robin Boyd, Leslie Wilkinson, Walter Bunning, Harry Seidler.

Under the broadcasters was Wilfred Thomas. Mum, with her usual concern for quality sound did this recording in his hotel bathroom – the only room where it was quiet enough. Cartoonists were also recorded, Eric Joliffe, Martin Sharp, Unk White and Bruce Petty.

Then there were the composers: John Antill, George Dreyfus, Peter Sculthorpe and the musicians who played their pieces, Roger Woodward, Don Burrows, Sir Charles Mackerras. Naturally photographers were recorded, among them David Moore (photos for the Library and catalogue cover), Heather George (our Godmother), Max Dupain, talking about the equipment he used for his photographs. There were dramatists, set designers and movie producers such as Ken G. Hall (who speaks about seeing his first moving picture in North Sydney Oval in 1908). Other movie producers included Bruce Beresford and Peter Weir who sent a letter to the National Library saying what a wonderful experience it had been to be interviewed by Mrs. de Berg.

Indeed almost everyone Mum

recorded remembered it as a particularly pleasant experience.

Graeme Powell wrote in 1974: “Mrs. de Berg is a woman of great charm...She is also exceptionally determined and patient and her persuasive powers have finally overcome the hesitancy of a number of men whose shyness or irascibility was notorious”. Such a man was Norman Lindsay. Mum was determined to record him and one fine day in 1965 she and I set off for his home in the Blue Mountains – I didn’t normally go to recordings with Mum but this was an exception. When we arrived, Mum said “Diana, Norman Lindsay often walks around with his clothes off. Just look at his face”. Fortunately he was fully dressed. Mum gave him the cake she brought him and went inside and did the recording. I waited outside in his beautiful garden.

May Gibbs too was difficult to convince – but Mum was determined. May Gibbs didn’t like meeting new people so Mum rang her every day for a month until she said “Why don’t you come over, Hazel?” So Hazel did, and that’s how the only recording of May Gibbs was made.

Not all Mum’s recordings were in the arts field – she was fascinated by all aspects of science – geology, medicine, radar, astrophysics, aeronautics, computers. She recorded Dick Smith and Nancy Bird.

In 1967, a year before his death, Mum recorded Lord Florey. She told me about his recording. He produced two paper bags – one cheese, one crackers – and put a bottle of wine in the middle saying, “We’ll have this while we do the recording”. He talked about many things including the area he’s mainly remembered for, the discovery of penicillin. I don’t have his recording but I’ll read from the transcript. I’ll also read the part where he says he’s now being “blamed” for the population explosion.

“People sometimes think that I and the others worked on penicillin because we were interested in suffering humanity. I don’t think it ever crossed our minds about suffering humanity. This was an interesting scientific exercise, and because it was of some use in medicine is very gratifying, but this was not the reason that we started working on it...I suppose we’re all glad now that it works, but then you’ve got to see the reverse side of this medal, because I’m now accused of being partly responsible for the population explosion, which is one of the most devastating things that the world has got to face for the rest of this century. It isn’t true, the tropical medicine people have done much better, people with malaria and people who have controlled intestinal diseases and so on, they’re the ones that are responsible for the very big increases in population taking place in all countries of the world including Great Britain”.

In 1970 Mum went overseas – the only time in her life that she left Australia. Before she left she bought and read *The Encyclopedia of American Art and Literature* (all 6 volumes so she'd know the background for each person she recorded). Appointments were made and recording done in London and New York. The one I remember was with Robin Brett, an Australian geologist who worked for the NASA Spacecraft Centre. It was a 90 minute telephone link-up from New York to Houston and he speaks about handling the moon rocks.

In a completely different field and indeed a category all of his own is Stafford Bullen, of Bullen Bros. Circus. In a 1977 recording, he speaks of his growing up in the family circus, training animals. Politicians were not neglected – Arthur Caldwell and NSW Premier Jack Lang are included. Jack Lang spoke to Mum about “my poor mother” and how he introduced child endowment, and the widows’ pension.

Today no discussion on Australia would be complete without some mention of our Aboriginal people. When Mum started in 1957 they weren’t even included in the census. Whites were still taking their children and they had no land rights. Dame Mary was concerned and wrote a poem about the lost children which she read on tape for my mother.

In her Recordings Mum tried to get the “essence” of a person. In this talk I’ve

tried to get the essence of my mother, Hazel de Berg. I hope I’ve succeeded in some way – but you really had to know her to realise what she was like, and to have seen the radiant glow people remember about her.

Though she had spent over half her life in Sydney she was a country woman at heart. When she died, we knew she wanted her ashes to be scattered on the Hay Plateau at the Deniliquin turnoff. Debbie, Mike and I drove out there and turned down towards Deniliquin. We drove until we could no longer see any houses and then walked into a paddock. In the middle of the paddock was a tree and we remembered how Mum had told us what to do if we were lost in the bush. We were to put our arms around a tree and say “this tree is our Mother” and stay there, not wander off, and she would find us. We went up to the tree, put our arms around it and said “This is our Mother”. There we scattered her ashes. Her headstone is the stone she carried in her bag – her solid mandala.

We sang the 23rd Psalm and said the last of “My Country”:

*“Though earth holds many splendours,
wherever I may die,
I know to what brown country,
My homing thoughts will fly”.*

Coming home Debbie and I went through Mum’s things. Among her papers we found poems and stories she

had written, letters she'd received and we found this that she had written about her beloved Recordings.

"I have come a little way along the road a blind man showed me – a road I hope someone else treads in the centuries ahead – but I have come a long way in love – and perhaps knowledge – for the people who express our country".

We packed the last of her Recordings and as we did I said a silent prayer to the National Library:

*"Take good care of these her children
Growing with us through the years".*

At the bottom of the last drawer I was delighted to find in Mum's handwriting Wilson's last speech from "Fire on the Snow" by Douglas Stewart. It was a memory and a message from Mum. The memory was of Mum and Douglas Stewart at the opening of the Art Gallery. They were both sitting on a bench under the concrete stairs, each holding a glass of wine and reciting the entire script of "Fire on the Snow" – taking it in turns to say each part. It was a wonderful sight.

Mum often quoted Wilson's last speech to me and I felt that the message from her was "It was hard work, but it was truly living. Take this, my gift to the future".

I'll let Douglas Stewart with Wilson's speech have the last word.

*"And whatever death is,
The endurance remains like a fire, a
sculpture, a mountain,
To hearten our children. I tell you
Such a struggle as our is living; it lives
after death.
Purely, like flame, a thing burning and
perfect".*

Talk delivered by **Diana Ritch** at the State Library of NSW/Oral History Association of Australia (NSW Branch) seminar on 21 October 1995.

Diary of Events



18 May

"How to Frighten the Horses and Survive: Writing hospital histories".
Speaker Dr. Bryan Egan. NSW Society of the History of Medicine. 2.30 Worrall Theatre, Sydney Hospital. Parking available in hospital grounds at commercial rates. Donation requested from non-members. Ph. Judith Godden 876 4352.

29 May

"Houses and People: Vignettes of Life in 19th Century New South Wales". Talk by Elizabeth Ellis, Curator of Mitchell Pictures at Metcalfe Auditorium 5.30 for 6 p.m. \$15 for members of the Library Society, \$20 non-members.

Courtesy PHA