

CITY OF SYDNEY

MEALS ON WHEELS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT*

Name: Thelma Crawley

Date: 1 March 2007

Place: War Memorial, Hyde Park

Interviewer: Margo Beasley

Duplicates: Master CD held in CoS Archives
Reference CD and paper copy of transcript
held in Waterloo Branch Library

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SUMMARY

Thelma Crawley, OAM, is possibly the longest serving volunteer for the City of Sydney's Meals on Wheels program. She retired from this work a few years ago, having served continuously since 1957. As a representative of Myer (the then Melbourne department store), for whom she worked as a dressmaker in Sydney, Mrs Crawley attended a preliminary meeting about Meals on Wheels in Sydney Town Hall in 1956. She was also present at the first organisational meeting in 1957. Meals were cooked in the Lower Town Hall kitchen and distributed in large heavy vats from which the food was ladled out in clients' dwellings. Mrs Crawley remembers that women from various church and other organisations delivered Meals on Wheels on regular days. Methodist women did Mondays, Jewish women Tuesdays, Catholic women Wednesdays, RSL Women's Auxiliaries Thursdays, and representatives of city firms, such as herself, Fridays. After some years Mrs Crawley began to work from home in order to take care of her sick husband, a returned serviceman, and she continued her Meals on Wheels work under the auspices of the RSL Auxiliaries. As a young woman, Mrs Crawley was surprised by the poverty and squalor to which she was sometimes exposed on her early delivery runs, and her parents were alarmed when they heard their daughter was delivering meals in Sydney's notorious Kings Cross. She did, however, cross the paths of some famous Sydney identities: Rosaleen Norton, the so-called 'Witch of Kings Cross', and legendary Sydney eccentric Bea Miles. Mrs Crawley's Meals on Wheels work is just one of her many volunteer occupations which include visiting the mentally ill, teaching dressmaking to disabled girls, and house mother to outback Indigenous children visiting Sydney for medical treatment. She is currently acting State President of the RSL Women's Auxiliaries of NSW. She says her time with Meals on Wheels was 'marvellous'. She often became very attached to particular clients, continued to visit them when they moved to nursing homes, and attended many of their funerals.

TRANSCRIPT

This is an interview with Thelma Crawley. It's taking place in the War Memorial in Hyde Park, in the rooms below the War Memorial. My name's Margo Beasley. The date is the 1st of March, 2007, and the project is the Meals on Wheels Oral History Project which is being conducted through the City of Sydney History Programme.

So, Thelma, could you just introduce yourself and tell us where and when you were born?

I'm Thelma Crawley, OAM, and I was born in Goulburn on the 23rd of July, 1927.

Thank you. Now, I'm here to talk to you today because you've got a very long history with Meals on Wheels, apart from a very full life, doing many other things, and I understand you were actually present for the first Meals on Wheels meeting in the Sydney Town Hall. Is that correct?

I was present, yes, at the Sydney Town Hall for the first meeting for Meals on Wheels.

How did that come to be?

They – well, apparently they advertised on the radio, also in the papers, as far as I could understand, and apparently they also put letters out to different department stores and that's how I got connected with that.

And you were working in the city at that time, weren't you?

Yes, I was working in the city at that time.

What were you doing?

I was a dressmaker/designer, learning my trade. (laughs)

Where were you learning it?

At Myers, yes.

And Myers then is not the Myers that we know in Sydney now in 2007?

No, no, no, different altogether.

I think then it was the department store in Melbourne?

Yes, that's right.

What were you doing up here, working for Myers?

Because I lived in New South Wales and I - - -

But you were – were they actually manufacturing up here?

We were making frocks. Actually, when I first went there to work we were doing war work; we were making parachutes, American nurses' uniforms and we were doing something else – I just can't – oh, we were making, like, a shirt/jacket type of thing for the Australian Army, they were.

But by the time Meals on Wheels got going you were into post war production?

That's right.

That is, clothing for women?

Yes, learning my trade – well, I'd been nearly through it, I'd be through it by then and had me certificates and everything like that.

So, you went off to the meeting at the Town Hall with other people from Myers?

Yes, yes, there was two of us went. Yes, two of us were sent to go and there was a lady – as I told you that I didn't know it was Melbourne or Adelaide – she spoke to us and she was the woman who started Meals on Wheels. Apparently, she started in England as far as – that's what she told us – with a bike with a box on the front.

I think it was during the Blitz was it, in London?

Yes, during the Blitz in London – and apparently her and her husband migrated to Melbourne, I have an idea, and she seen the poor people in Melbourne and she decided to do the same thing as what she done in the Blitz in London.

So, Sydney wasn't the first city, then, to have Meals on Wheels in Australia but I think the City of Sydney Council was the first council to have it in Sydney.

I think we were the first in New South Wales.

And so when you went off to this meeting, you went with somebody else from your work, a colleague from your work, but you said you were actually sent by the company.

Yes.

So, it was really the company wanting to be involved in the Meals on Wheels?

That's right, yes.

Your friend and you did just see an ad or just decided to go?

No, no. No, we were just told to go to the – to go to this meeting and bring back the information, all the information we could pick up, that was it.

And what can you remember about the woman who spoke to you?

Well, not very much, to tell you the truth. (laughs) But she – like, she was a very nice person, as though she had a kind heart and things, and she just explained everything. Maybe when she started to speak you more likely thought, "Well, what's this going to be for New South Wales or for Sydney?" but as she got into it it got more interesting and we had a lot to take back; a lot of information to take back, to come back to another meeting later on.

So, you took all this printed information back to work?

Yes.

And that was, I suppose, was to allow your managers to see what was involved?

Yes.

And whether they might make a bit of a commitment on behalf of the business?

Yes. Because weren't the only one there; there was Farmers and Knock 'N' Kirbys and McDowells. David Jones weren't in it - I remember that - and there was another one – I think it was McCathies or some name like that.

So, they were all firms around Sydney?

They were all firms and they were – oh, Snows down at the other end. They were big firms here and big departmental stores.

Department stores, primarily?

Yes, but there was other, like, places – I suppose they were office workers or things like that, they were represented too, but we didn't know at the time – we were just there, doing our job.

So, was it quite a big meeting?

Oh yes, yes. It was quite - - - it was down in the basement of the Sydney Town Hall and that was quite a big meeting.

All that space.

Yes.

Was it full?

No, I wouldn't say it was full

But there must have been several hundred people?

There was – oh yes, there would have been. The next meeting was bigger.

So, the next meeting took place, I think, early 2007 – sorry, 1957.

Yes, (laughs) 1957 – I thought - - -

I beg your pardon. And that must have been then a meeting to actually get it properly established?

That is right. I can't tell you who the mayor was then but he said they could have the Town Hall and they could do the cooking in the kitchen in the Lower Town Hall. Then they said they had to know what days and it was the Methodist ladies had Mondays, the Jewish ladies had Tuesdays, Catholic women had Wednesdays, RSL had Thursdays.

These were RSL Women's Auxiliaries?

Auxiliaries, yes, from all the metropolitan area and then, you know, the other ones like the firms took Friday.

So, the women – when you say Catholic women, Methodist women, Jewish women – presumably they would have been organised out of their churches?

That's right. They'd be, like, auxiliaries of the church, I suppose, yeah.

And so they would in effect take responsibility for one day a week?

That's right, yes. We all took one day – like, one day a week was their responsibility.

So, when you first started doing it, I wonder if you can tell me just a bit about - can you remember what it was like doing the early runs? Did you go out in a car?

We went out – yes, a car was provided by work and - - -

So, it was a Myers car?

Yes - but no, actually, no. It was one of the men that worked there loaned his car.

Right.

And we used to have to go to the Town Hall and we picked up these big jars or vats - whatever you like - of food. It wasn't - we had to serve it out - and we'd pick it up, the main meal, the soup, the main meal, and then there was like a little sachet of orange juice or something like that and a sweet.

So, the main meal would be in a vat of some sort?

Yes.

So, it would be a bit like a casserole or a stew or something like that?

Yes, oh yes, it was mostly, yes, casseroles or stews or

And it must have been very heavy.

It was extremely heavy.

How did you manage that?

Well - well, the people were hungry and you couldn't see them go hungry, so you just made, you know - and you're younger, much younger than what I (laughs) - otherwise, you know.

So, who was driving the car?

Oh dear.

Was it the man who owned it?

Yes, it was the man who owned it and I'm not sure - can't remember his name.

That's fine, but what I was really wondering about was that although the women may have been involved in delivering and serving the food, quite a lot of women then didn't have drivers' licences in the '50s.

No. No, it was men, it seemed to be men. Some women had because some of them - or a couple I got to know real well - they had driven in the Army, they were army girls or had been Army girls or been, you know, belonged to some of the Forces and that. Land Army girls, they could - - -

They could all drive.

They could all drive - but just, that's who you met, you know, it was.

So, if you went out in a car to deliver the food there was possibly a man driving but you would be with somebody else from Myers or might you be just happened to be - - -

Somebody else might have been there. There could have been – some firms sent two girls, some sent, you know – so we had what we call the coordinator and she'd say, "Oh, right – you go out with this car and you go out with that car" if they had any over but sometimes we used to take – in my case we had to, like, myself and somebody else and that – but our run, our first run was up around Kings Cross. We started just behind St Mary's Cathedral and we went up as far as nearly Edgecliff and out to about where Victoria Barracks would be, then down Elizabeth Bay, on around the part there; that was the run. We had first run, I think we had twenty eight (phone ringing, background talking), twenty eight on it.

That's quite a lot of deliveries

But see, we didn't have the number of cars, we didn't have the number of people. Actually, later on when we got going and they must have been able to get more people to come in so they could cut some of the runs in halves, you know, to - - -

Reduce the load?

Reduce the load.

But that must mean then that the run took quite a long time, if you had twenty eight calls to make?

Well, it did.

Several hours.

That did, yes, but the thing is that we were never supposed to anywhere, only in twos – well, I could understand that – but we were naughty.

In what way?

Well, what we'd do, (laughs) if there was somebody there in that house or next door and one there and we knew they were all right, well we'd – I'd run in there and the helper'd run in the other one, you know, and so therefore we cut the time down.

So, you'd have the big vat of food?

Yes.

That would be in the boot of the car or on the back seat?

That's right, yes. Mostly it would - - -

Sorry, go on.

- - - sorry, mostly in the boot of the car. [clapping sound, keys?] Sorry, I play with them all the time.

Mostly in the boot of the car?

Yes, mostly in the boot of the car. The sweets used to be in, like, a foam - - -

Box.

- - - box sort of thing and they sometimes wouldn't fit in, so they went on the seat of the car but you'd just, you know, pick up one and then someone'd take the sweets, yeah.

But you'd take the vat actually into the house - - -

Yes, had to.

- - - and served the food there into their plates?

Yes, onto a plate, yes.

It would start very heavy but get lighter and lighter?

Yeah, get (laughs) lighter and lighter as you got – you were always pleased to see the last one - (laughs) not that you didn't want to see the poor people but just that it was, you know, you were getting' tired then.

So, this was in effect Myers' contribution to the community?

Yes.

Because presumably you were still paid work time?

Yes, oh yes, we were paid. See, in those days we finished work at three on a Friday, so therefore it was only a matter of two hours or something like that, yeah.

What can you remember about the people that you visited on that first run? Can you remember much about them?

Yes, the first run was a surprise because I'd been a country girl, coming to the city to live. I didn't realise, you know, what people lived or how people lived and that and of course when I told my mother and father I was going to do this and I was going up, doing the run up around the Cross, you know, they weren't very happy (laughs) because when I came to Sydney I was very young – I was only fourteen and a half and I lived with my grandmother – and they were places – “You don't go there” and, you know, imagine mum and

dad's worry but they got used to me going around and I said, "Oh, well, it was two people and we were O.K.", you know, but it was such a surprise.

In what way?

Because one of the people was – I'm trying to think of her name – she used to walk up the tram lines in – Bea Miles.

You visited Bea Miles?

We didn't visit her but she'd be around and she'd be up around there with this board on, you know, penny to read these things and that and she'd ask if we have any soup over or if we have any food over, you know.

Did you ever have any over that you'd give her?

Oh, no, no. It's sort of – in some cases where they were very sick or an old man, you know, can't look after himself, if you had a little bit over you gave him a little bit extra and that – because the men were not like the women. Like, you'd go in to a woman and she'd give you a pot to put the soup in and that was her tea at night. She'd have the hot meal in the middle of the day and eat the soup, warm the soup up, but the men didn't seem to go in for it like that.

So, they weren't as organised as the

No, no. And they weren't - - - well, some of them only lived in such a tiny room; it only took a bed and a washbasin or a little thing at the top of the room.

When you say it was a real eye opener for you as a young woman in Sydney, is that what you mean?

Yes, it was.

The poor conditions that people lived in?

The poor conditions that people lived in and then you'd go into a place which was lovely but most of all it was – I think it was made for people who couldn't cook for themselves or anything like that, because some of them you went down, like, under stairs, underneath the buildings, going into basements - - -

So, they were, like, in the basement?

- - - in the buildings, yes. And we had one chap, he only had a very small room and a bed and we used to go in to – had to put the meals on the table, on this little bench at the top of his bed and he had cockroaches and they were all over the - (laughs) they were everywhere; they were in the bed – we used to fold our dresses around us because we had dresses with big skirts, fold them - - -

..... The “new look” [1950s fashion]?

Yeah. And they were big enough to put a bridle and saddle on, (laughs) hup, and put ‘em in the Melbourne Cup - we were, at one stage – but that was us girls talking, you know. But the poor devil, he could never have cooked; he had nothing to cook with or anything like that.

So, there was a really clear social need for Meals on Wheels?

Yes, it was really – I think it’s the best thing the Council ever done, starting it, and I was pleased to see it go right out then throughout New South Wales and that. But, no, there was a lot of sadness, a lot of sad - - -

What are you thinking about when you say that, that there was a lot of sadness?

Well, you’d go in – one woman now - I can’t think of her name, but she was one of our first coordinators down at the Town Hall and I hadn’t seen her from years – I’d changed over from work, doing Meals on Wheels to RSL, to do it for them on the Thursday - I’d finished work and I walked in this day and here she is. I hadn’t seen her, might have been about nine years.

Walked in to do a delivery of a meal?

To do this meal and this woman’s there. She knew me but I had to think and all of a sudden what she said to me when I walked in, “Oh, Thelma, I never thought I’d have to have Meals on Wheels”, and I thought, “Oh, what a beautiful woman and you deserve everything you get; you’ve worked very hard”. But then later on, about twelve months or eighteen months later, we went in – we had a key to go into her door; some of them we had keys – and we found her. She had passed away, sitting in her rocking chair on her little verandah. So, it was really sad.

Was she the one you told me about before who always had the table set?

Yes.

Can you tell me a bit about that?

She always had a lovely lace tablecloth or linen and lace tablecloth all set out with the lovely knife and fork and her china plates - and her dinner plate was a china plate; beautiful - and always had a little table set, you know, like if she was going to entertain the Queen or somebody. (laughs) But it was lovely – no, some of them went to a lot of trouble.

It means, I suppose, that people, even though they may be sick or ailing in some way and are unable to cook for themselves or are in very reduced circumstances but they still take a pride in the - - -

Yes.

- - - daily ritual and the appearance of things.

And I felt some of them just put their good dress on because the majority of the people you met were – that's the only time they had someone to speak to or have a yarn to, you know, and they tried to hold you: they'd start up a yarn, where you had to keep going to keep the food warm and that but many a time I felt like, you know, I could have sat down – (laughs) lost time. But that's me; I can't help it.

I guess that might be a fairly common experience because often the people who do do this kind of work are caring and want to take an interest in people who have particular needs. But in fact, the requirements of the Meals on Wheels is always that the people go around very quickly, isn't it?

That's right, yes. Some of them were on for two or three years and some of them – mostly men – the women, they used to say, "Oh, we've got tired of it", you know.

Got tired of -?

Got tired of the meals because they were the – they knew what they were gettin' on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. When we went to the foil plates, see, they could give them a variety, where the other ones - - -

It was easier to make it?

- - - had this and they just, yes – and then they'd say, "Oh, I got tired of that" because they were just, "We know what we're havin' on", you know.

What would they do if they got tired of Meals on Wheels?

They'd go off it - so I don't know what they did or they had somebody to shop for them or they went, doing the shopping, you know, themselves.

It's interesting, isn't it, because it implies that the Meals on Wheels were not always strictly necessary, that there was a bit of choice involved?

Yes, well, see, you had to have a doctor's certificate, always. That was always you had to have a doctor's certificate, the doctor had to think that you needed it and that and the last was, though, they used to have a doctor's certificate every six months – I don't know if that still stands because I haven't done it for three years because I got a bad heart but I loved, still love to do it. But you fall in love with them. We had a dear little woman - she reckons she was a very good ballerina and she's supposed to have danced the leading lady in France and that and I believed that because she had photographs – and we got very attached to her, so when they put her in the nursing home we visited her.

Did you? Just on your own time?

We went out, just on our own time go out there - and she had nobody. And she spoke beautiful French – she used to go into French for us and tell us how nice we were (laugh) and that – but she, you know – oh, we had some beautiful women and men and we had some that, you know.

Some who were more difficult?

More difficult too.

Tell me some of those stories you mentioned to me. You don't need to name anybody but you have mentioned to me on another occasion that some of them were pretty difficult to deal with.

Oh yes. We had a chap down in – he was in Macleay Street and he was down under – oh yes, Macleay Street, he was – down underground, we used to go down a few stairs – and oh, he'd say, "Open that meal", and we'd open the meal for him. "Don't want that", and he'd throw it. I've worn a couple 'o' times meals down the front of my dress, you know. I wasn't the only one. I let it go - some of the girls put a complaint in. We're supposed to take back anything that we think that should be being done but it didn't matter what you gave him, I don't think he'd be happy with. And another man, the Council used to give them a Christmas and Easter gift with food in it, to take 'em over, because they've only got meals five days a week.

So, the Easter and Christmas hampers, as they were called, would tide them over the holiday period?

Yeah, that's right. We'd go out to the – oh, we were at Roper Centre then and we'd go out there and pack them about half past six in the morning, do that delivery and then come back and pick the meals up and go out again.

So, all of that was additional volunteer work on top of the meals?

That's all additional, yeah. And he – this one fellow, he said, "Don't go", and he opened it then and there was eggs in it and he threw the eggs (laughs) across the room. "You know I can't have this, you know I don't - wouldn't cook that", and you know, and I thought, "Well, how ungrateful. You don't have to pay for it", you know. But others'd be so grateful, you know, they couldn't thank you enough and you'd have to say, "Well, please write to the Council". In some cases, we wrote to the Council

Because the people did actually pay for the meals, didn't they?

Oh, yes.

But not the hampers?

No. No, the hampers was free, the hampers were a gift from the Council.

It must have been a very big production in the kitchens in the Lower Town Hall.

Yes. Well, the girls that came back off the runs used to peel the vegetables for the next day.

Really?

I never done that, because I had to go back but the girls - - -

Because you had to go back to work?

Yes.

But the ones who didn't have to go back to work - - -

Yes, or didn't work.

- - - they also did a lot of the food preparation?

Yes. They went in – when they came back, they went down and they peeled the potatoes and all the veggies that were to go out the next day. So, when the women came in in the morning they were all ready to start to be cooked, yeah.

That's an enormous amount of labour, isn't it?

Yes.

It probably also depended very much on there being a lot of women who weren't in the workforce?

Oh, well, it would be, yes, yes, because in those days when some of the men come back from the war I don't – I think the women worked so long and then they, you know, finished work. But I think the volunteers they got was absolutely marvellous. I often wondered and would have loved to know the amount of women they did get, you know.

.....

And men – because the men were there, too. Some of the men that retired from work were driving but they'd only drive in certain areas because, well, they didn't like the city and there wasn't that many cars in those (laughs) days. But no, they thoroughly – I thoroughly enjoyed it; I thought it was marvellous and I'm not the only one. You've talked to the girls and we get together – we talk about our days and our funny things that happened on Meals on Wheels.

You mentioned to me before also that more than once you found dead bodies.

People, yes. They'd gone to sleep and not woke up and then - (laughs) oh, there was one lady we used to go, an elderly lady, and she had this moth-eaten carpet or mat in front of a beautiful fireplace and as you walked in the front door it was there and we weren't allowed to walk across it; we had to go all the way around it and if we walked across it, oh, it was, you know, she'd get real upset and yell but one day we walked in and we could smell gas and she was laying - oh, well, not actually laying, sitting sort of slumped in the lounge. Of course, both of us ran to turn the gas off because it was choking us and we ran across the mat but she was gone. She'd not deliberately gassed herself. She'd put the porridge on and it just spilt all over and put the fire out and 'cause the case was leaking into the thing and it got a - and we talked about her quite a lot. We used to say, "I bet she was going mad at us, running across that good mat" (laughs) and it was as bare as bare can be - but she was a beautiful old lady.

Yes, and probably trying to extend its life as long as she possibly could.

Yes, that's right. Maybe it'd been a gift to her from her husband or a gift from somebody very close and that's sort of - because you'll find those things too.

Yes, something precious.

Yes.

And were you ever in any danger?

Oh, no, not really that you realised you were. We went into one place - and that was in Kings Cross Road, I think it was - and there was an elderly gentleman in a place - he was a Jewish gentleman - and we used to serve him meals but this day we walked in there was three people and they had masks on. Now, not masks - like, it was like a face of a monkey or - - -

Like a party mask?

- - - party masks, that's what I'm trying to say - and we took no notice, you know. They got him his (bangs table) knife and fork and we thought, you know, everything was all right and came out but we didn't realise till we read in the paper that they were there, holding him up. He was a diamond merchant or he had diamonds in the place. But we were in there and we were laughing and going on. He just - he was a man that never smiled or anything, so you didn't take any notice - but I'd say we could have been in a little bit of danger but no, nothing really.

They probably just wanted you to come in and get out with no interruptions.

That's what I'd say, too.

Not draw any attention to it.

Yes, yes. We had a fella pull a knife on us down in Onslow Avenue, two fellas. They didn't do anything but they wanted the food, so we just gave them one of the foil food and went - - -

Dinners.

- - - back up to Kings Cross (laughs) and got another one but we didn't get hurt – it wasn't enough to – but I suppose if we hadn't of given it to them we wouldn'ta known what they - - -

These were just people in the street, were they?

Yes, just people in the street, yes. We used to find it hard later on parking.

Yes, parking.

Parking was one of our biggest bugbears you might say and we were told we could park and most of the police up around there and up to Edgecliff they'd just look at us and keep going because we had a big sign back and front, 'Meals on Wheels', but we struck when the women came on - they liked to do some - - -

The women parking police?

Yes.

They were a bit meaner than the men?

Oh, my word. (laughs)

Is that right?

Yes. And as we came back and we told them, like, we'd had this problem and the Council paid our fines. They said it was the only way they could do it, you know.

So, there was no turning a blind eye?

No, no.

It was strictly by the letter of the law?

No, that's right. And we used to park in Ward Avenue and the only park you could get a place was near the police station where the cars had to come in and out and we just parked there and just seen the police, "Can we leave it here?" "Yeah, O.K, we'll keep an eye on it", you know, and no problem, no

problem at all, we never had there but we did have for parking and I think sometimes we had to walk a long way, carrying things, because we - - -

Carrying heavy things?

- - - couldn't get parking space and that.

When the changeover came to foil plates, presumably the meals were still delivered hot?

Oh yes, yes.

But they had what, a foil plate and then foil over the top?

They had a foil plate with a foil lid, yes, and they were all kept in an oven, so just when we were ready to go – like, we all had numbers, naturally, they packed that particular - - -

You all had numbers?

Well, you had – each run had a number and so your boxes had your number on the top and as you went to the counter out at Roper Centre you'd say, "Number eleven" and they'd pack it straight out of the oven in and you went. So, the stuff was delivered pretty, pretty hot, yes.

So, that way when you were running up and down the stairs around Kings Cross you could just take one or two meals at a time?

Yes. We had a basket, like, a basket we could take two or three at a time – and then in the end they were putting the soup into cups, into drinking cups.

Polystyrene or -?

Yes, something – drinking cups with the little handles.

Disposable?

Disposable – and that was easier too because then we didn't have to carry the whole, you know, lot up and that.

And ladle it out?

And ladle it out and that – but that was quite good.

You said that the menus changed a bit once they went over to the foil plates.

Yes.

So, what kind of food would it be then, if it formerly was casserole?

Well, they'd give them chicken with a white sauce on it and a little baked potato or pumpkin and a green, I always had two greens. Or if it wasn't – fish, they could have fish and then they'd have a baked dinner. Like, it might be – no, no – yes, pork or beef and that and because then we had diabetics too.

So, some people needed special meals?

We had special meals, yes.

Was there fish on Fridays?

No, no, we'd have a variety.

Not specially.

No, not specially.

But Catholics could have fish on Friday if they wanted to?

Yes. Yes, on their card was all lined out and it, like, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, so they could have fish on Friday.

So, they could in effect pre-order what they wanted?

Yes, that's right. So, oh no, they had a variety and as I say it was better when we got the foil plates – much better for us too. (laughs)

Was that still operating out of the Lower Town Hall then?

No. That didn't happen - - -

Where was it happening by then?

I don't know - the City Council split and they formed the South Sydney Council and they took them out of Lower Town Hall and took them up to Roper Centre in South Dowling Street and that's where the foil plates come in, then.

And they were cooking there?

They cooked there.

And then served it onto the plates?

Put 'em on and we took them out - but they also had a dining room and they used to bring them in the Council buses and they could have their dinner there, with places. We used to have to set those tables before we went out.

So, that was another job of yours?

That was – yes.

Setting the tables for the ones who came to the Activity Centre to eat?

Yes, that's right – because upstairs, like, they could play cards or knit or sew or talk or write or read up there but they used to - - -

So, it was a much more social way of eating?

Yes, yes. Yes, that's right.

Presumably, those people were a bit more ambulant?

Oh, yes. They were – a lot of them could move around but they wouldn't have been able to walk and it was too dangerous out, crossing South Dowling Street and that for them, but they used to come and they used to arrive about half past ten and they'd go upstairs and then when the meals – soon as we got out of the way they served them their meals. In the early days, they used to have two seatings. That meant some of the volunteers had to stay in and they were mostly the women that couldn't do the – you know, they couldn't have walked, they couldn't have carried and that.

But they were still capable of serving?

They were capable of serving, yes.

So, some of that work was done by volunteers also?

Yes, that's right, yes.

Were you still on the same run when it was operating out of the Roper Centre or were you going in another area?

Yes, exactly, took always the same run. Occasionally, if we were shorthanded, somebody didn't turn up, well, we'd take that other run out and do two runs at the one time and that but other than that, that was my run and I think I'd have missed it if I'd been taken off it, (laughs) I'd miss my ladies and gentlemen.

Yes, I suppose you get to know them over many years, don't you?

Yes, that's right.

And you also – I think it was the late '60s when you transferred over from being somebody who worked on Meals on Wheels from Myers to somebody who worked on Meals on Wheels from the RSL Women's Auxiliaries?

That's right. I changed over because in the course of time I met Lady Yeo and her husband was the president of the RSL, state president, and she talked me into joining an auxiliary, which was City of Sydney.

Because your husband was in the Army Services, wasn't he?

Yes. Yes, yes, he was in the Second 4th Battalion – and I went over, I joined City of Sydney Women's Auxiliary and from there she taught me to go and (laughs) do it, so I changed over and I went with them and we used to do that Thursdays, every day.

But you were still working at Myers at this time, were you?

No, I had left then and was working at home.

So, it was relatively easy for you to structure your time so that you could do that?

Yes, that's right, yes. Well, once I went to RSL Myers wouldn't support me. They didn't say they wouldn't – I never put it to them because I, you know, I thought, "Oh, well, I'm working from home, I'm not working", so I went over there and I done it for them right up till three years ago.

So, when you were working from home, were you still doing work for Myers as a

Only on and off.

On and off.

And only when they called you.

Just a bit of freelance work?

Yes, that's right, yes.

So, then you only stopped doing the Meals on Wheels for the RSL Auxiliaries – how long ago did you say?

Three years.

Three years.

Yes.

So, that means you were doing it – it must have been near enough to forty [correction: fifty] years?

That's right.

But you still all the time did the same run?

Yes.

Around Kings Cross?

All around Kings Cross – take this one off and put this one on and go up this street, you know, yes.

You must have seen a lot of changes in the people over that time?

Oh, seen a lot of changes in the Cross. The Savoy Hotel, which was burnt down, we had two people in there we'd served for quite a number of years and both got burnt in – it got burnt on Christmas Day and we'd been there Christmas Eve to see them and give their things and that was - - -

Did they die?

- - - and they died, they were burnt in the thing – but now there's a big building there. But all the different places have changed and that – we've seen different changes.

Were there people you visited over a very long time, that you can recall?

No, not – some were a long time which I'd say about five to six years, you know, but then they were, you know, either passed away or they were put into a convalescent home, which they had to go, they just couldn't live. Yeah, and I think the Council stepped in, too, because some of the places were very, very dirty. One place we had was the old chap and he used to go out and pick all the garbage up for the garbage men and put them in his room and he'd stack 'em all on top of one another. But he used to collect this – well, I suppose they were thrown out – these beautiful china cups that were broken and he had quite a few of the old commodes I think they used to put under the bed and with handles off or cracks - and he'd hang 'em all around the room but you weren't allowed to walk around that. Well, I don't think you could have. You used to have to walk up over the rubbish and put it down in the kitchen (laughs) and the others and we used, we all - - -

So, you'd climb over piles of rubbish?

Oh, yes, piles and piles of rubbish. But that was him - he was, you know, he was happy and then the Council – it'd get beyond the girls going and they'd say, "Oh" - you know, we used to have a little meeting about every three months, "Oh, so and so and so and so", you know, "we can't climb over that rubbish", and the Council used to go out and clean his house up and that. And we had another lady in Greenknowe Avenue and used to have to step over everything and the smell was shocking but she played on us one day. We got there, knocked on the door and she says, "Oh, I've fallen, I've fallen", you know. And we thought, well, she could have, because she'd told us she'd

been knocked over by a tram in Melbourne. Anyway, we rang the police and I rang the ambulance and they came and they knocked the door down and she was sitting on the lounge, as happy as Larry. She said, "See, I've got someone to talk to now" – and, you know, these people are wasting their time and I said, "Oh, sorry, but she said she'd fallen and she couldn't get up, you know" and she's fine.

So, she was just lonely and manipulating people?

Yes. She was, you know, really and truly lonely.

There was one very famous person you visited, I think?

Yes, Rosaleen Norton.

Who was known as the -?

The Witch of Kings Cross – and she was in Roslyn Gardens and we used to go 'round stairs and down and we'd knock on the door and she'd open the door - and I think she used to paint her face with either plain flour or – (laughs) because it was just white but she'd pencilled all the eyebrows and all the makeup – but as she opened the door there was a picture on the wall – you used to have to go in and sort of turn right – a picture of the devil and it was one of those that the fire went 'round the picture and it was black as anything inside and she'd say, "I'll have it on there". And she had a little round table and she had, like, the plates, everything, all put out and as you put the food out or put the food on the table there was cats and they'd come up through your arms and through your – the first time we were there, like, my helper was – she's dead and gone now; she was a beautiful woman – she was dancing, and she's good "Ooh, ooh, ooh", you know. (laughs).

This is all the cats climbing on her?

Cats everywhere and she – and they were all black cats. That's what we - - -

Naturally.

Mm, and Imelda used to say, "And they've all got blue eyes" (laughs) and I never had time to look at their eyes, I didn't know what blue. Imelda was taken up with these blue eyes and that. But everything was black, that room, the walls were painted black. She wore this black but this white face, (bangs table) you know, was just a thing.

Was she pleasant to deal with?

Lovely to deal with, no problems at all, although they'd apparently had a lot of problems with her, but not with us girls – well, not with me, anyway, I can say.

When you say they had a lot of problems with her, what do you mean?

Well, apparently in the building, you know – like, in the building they had problems with her because, see, she used to run those witchcraft things too.

Yes.

Yes.

On what grounds would she have been receiving Meals on Wheels, do you know?

Well, apparently, she was very sick and when we went to her she only had, like, about twelve months to live.

I see.

Yes.

So, she was probably quite frail?

Yes, she was – oh, yes, she was very, very frail but I think she still thought she was, you know, young – but she had beautiful paintings.

Did she?

Yeah, lovely, because she was a painter too, they tell me.

Yes, I think she was an artist too.

Yeah, and she was – beautiful things there and that.

There was one old man you also mentioned to me who gave you a gift, I think, at Christmas time?

Oh, always, yes, gave us a gift, a dear old chappie. It was always an orange tied up with a red and green ribbon – how he got it on the orange and kept it on the orange I don't know but he did – but that was his Christmas gift.

That was his gesture?

And we - - - everybody got an orange tied up with these two things. No – oh, Christmas time some of them – and one old chappie used to always say, “You can have a wine with me now”, you know, red wine.

Would you?

No, I couldn't, I don't drink. (laughs)

You don't drink?

I used to say, "We're not allowed to", (laughs) "not allowed to. We'll get the sack if we drink it".

That's a good excuse.

Good excuses to get out. And we had another chappie, he had the biggest watch I'd ever seen. We used to call it 'Ben', the watch.

Like Big Ben.

Big Ben. And that – if we were one minute late he'd be at the door and he'd have his arm out the door and this big watch on and he'd say, "You're one minute late!", (laughs) as though one minute'd make - - -

Yes.

Yes.

I suppose for some people, when they've got nothing else all days and they really wait and wait for the event to happen.

Yes. Well, the ones you had to worry about was the diabetics because they have got to eat at certain times, so therefore you've got to try and get there, you know, on time, a little bit before to give them, you know - the diabetics.

Better to be a little bit early than a little bit late?

Yes, a bit late, yes.

Did you ever have any problems on that score?

Oh, yes, in some cases you'd get held up. Like, you'd go somewhere and the dear old lady or dear old man'd want something done, you know, little thing done - mightn't look much but minutes ticked away.

Like changing a light globe or something like that?

Yes, something like that or sponging a table or – but little things, little, you know and it was only there to keep you there to have a yarn, that was all and that but - - -

A bit of company.

A bit 'o' company, yeah.

Now, your work with Meals on Wheels is only part of the volunteer work you've done.

Yes.

One of the reasons we're sitting here in the War Memorial, in one of the back rooms that people probably don't know exist - - -

(laughs)

- - - is because you're still associated with the RSL Women's Auxiliary.

Yes.

And what's your title at the moment?

My title at the moment is Acting State President of New South Wales.

Which I imagine is quite a big job.

Well, 'specially at the present moment, because all our affiliation fees are coming in and we're getting ready for a congress in May where will be new elections to see who gets the job.

And you've been actively involved with this organisation for -?

For thirty nine years.

And you've done lots of other volunteer work?

Yes, I've - - -

Can you tell me a bit about that?

Well, Windgap, the disabled children, I've worked for them for many, many, many years and I taught the deaf and dumb sewing and dressmaking. We had - - -

Did you do that in your home?

I went over to Parramatta to their – done it over there - and had the privilege to go to a few of their weddings, which was lovely – but the most important one was to me was two of the girls, they started their own business over at Hurstville.

Is that right?

And they did extremely well, yes, they've done extremely well. So, they keep in touch with you, you know, and that.

That's very rewarding.

Very rewarding - but that was really, you know, one of the things. I've also volunteered to be what they call a house mother to the Aborigines that were sick. They bring to - used to bring to Sydney – I done that for ten years, to my

own home, and they came from out the back of Mount Isa – but when they came down we had to take ‘em to St Vincent’s Hospital ‘cause they took them through the Catholic Aborigine missions and they treated them out there and I had one little girl which I said, Leanne, and she had warts - - -

She meant a great deal to you?

Yes. She was very close, we became very close and she was lovely, you know. She had these warts everywhere over her and I used to have to paint each wart of a night time and she’d stand on a table and whistle and dance - but if she wanted something she’d do the bird dance or the kangaroo dances, something for a

To entertain you?

Entertain us, yeah, but unfortunately she passed away in Brisbane – but my husband flew me to Brisbane to see her before because we would have liked to adopted her.

Yes, you mentioned that.

Yes.

And it became a very personal relationship.

Yes.

That’s very

And then we had – I had, after my husband died, the Chernobyl - I had two Chernobyl girls for three days, which was lovely.

And why were they here?

Because they were where that reactor blew up in Russia and they were affected, so they brought them out to Australia and gave them – they brought them out in two lots, brought them out and gave them about a fortnight to three weeks. It was to help them because some of them were in shock and then - - -

So, it was for treatment or a holiday?

No, no, just for a holiday and to see Australia and that was interesting. We got over the language which was only one thing I was worried about but they learnt the cakes were in what tin and what was in the (laughs)

Children are very quick to learn, to serve their own interests.

Aren't they? But they were - - - I really enjoyed their company, you know, I really enjoyed things and they got to – they could speak a little bit of English but it was very, very hard and that – but, no, that was really, really lovely.

How did you come to be the sort of person who did all this volunteer work? I mean, there are plenty of people who don't do anything like that. What was your own background, your family background?

Well, we lived in the country. We lived down in - 'round the snow country because dad was police and they were all – grandfather was police – and down there, I don't know, every - we'd come home from school, mum'd say, "Go across the paddock. Mrs so and so's sick". We never knew what was in it but we were taught - - -

You were taking things to her?

Yes, we were always told, "You must help people", you know, "you must help people", and the last thing my grandmother said to me – her and I were very close – before she died, she said to me, "You're put on earth to help people".

That's a very nice thing to say, isn't it? And lovely for a grandmother to see that in you?

Yes.

So, obviously the Meals on Wheels people around Sydney have been big beneficiaries of that

Oh, yeah. So, I just like helping people. I get a lot of fun – not fun, but you know – and I've been a mentally ill visitor down to Rozelle Hospital for the last thirty nine years.

Have you?

Yes. With RSL, yes.

So, what do you do in that work?

Well, we go down there and they give us – like, there's wards – we ring up and we take afternoon tea, homemade afternoon tea and at Christmas time – it's only in the last twelve months at Christmas – we used to go down and cook 'em a Christmas luncheon for different - - -

Actually in the hospital?

Actually in the hospital. In the Cane Centre, which belongs to Veteran Affairs, it's got a beautiful kitchen in it but they've now closed it down because Rozelle's going to be closed. There's only three wards left down there now. They're going over to Concord soon as that's finished being built. Yes, so that

was very rewarding to see and we still see some of the older ones, you know. Fred, 'Dancing Feet' we always call him because soon as he sees you (laughs) he wants to dance.

So, he's still a patient?

He's still a patient. He was a Prisoner of War under the Japs and he's been knocked about a bit – but he's been in there, I think someone told me the other day, thirty eight years or something he's been in; a long time and that, you know.

Also, in spite of doing all of this and having had your own career and your own business you also looked after a very sick husband for a number of years?

I did, for eighteen years, yeah.

And he had a lot of things resulting from the war?

A war problem, yeah, yeah. War cause; he had seven war causes and that. Yeah, I nursed him right up till the last eighteen months and the doctors took and said, no, he had to go into a nursing home, I couldn't nurse. Well, it got – actually was gettin' beyond me, I admit now, but before I wouldn't, you know. I was proud, I 'spose.

And trying to do the best by him, I suppose.

Yeah. No, he was very, very ill and that. Very young to be – well, he went to the war when he was fourteen and a half. So, a very young man.

A baby.

Yeah.

Are there other things you'd like to talk about about on Meals on Wheels? It's a long, long time you've done it and I suppose – I mean, we've touched on the surface of the things you've done. Just wondering if there are other points you'd like to make about the way things may have changed, the different kind of services, maybe different approaches to diets and food over the time?

Well, I think now they only deliver them a couple of times a week because some of them put it in the chill/frozen, isn't it? Well, they were talking about that for quite a number of years and they tried to work it out and Mr – anyway, I can't think of his name – he was from the Council and he went out on the runs with us, different runs, because they were thinking about putting a little oven in for the warmin' up but some of the – majority of places didn't have room to put one in.

You mean like a little microwave sort of thing?

Like a little, yes and then they – what else did they -?

Because the issue about keeping the food hot was – like, it was a logistical problem but there are also health issues and so on, weren't there?

Yes, that, yes, that's right. And see, some of them too – devils, I used to call them and I'd tell 'em to their face – you'd open their fridge – they'd say, "Oh, put it in the fridge, I'll have it later, and here's Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday's food in the fridge. And then when they were talking about this chill that's when they said, "Well, how are we gonna heat it up?" – which, as I said, some of the places couldn't do it. So, that was, you know, shelved.

That was a big change. I mean, some meals are delivered chilled now but obviously to people who are in a position to reheat.

Yes. Yes, and then because they had to move from Roper Centre; they had to move the kitchen down to Alexandria, I think they call it, down there, you know. But the South Sydney Council was very good to their volunteers because once a year they used to put on an afternoon tea and they were thanked and we'd have, like, a little meeting of what was going on and the girls used to appreciate that and they'd give them a little gift of a pen or a pad or some little things.

A token?

A token of thank you, you know, which was lovely. And we had one woman - she was from the beginning, Jess Connelly - and she had to retire because she couldn't walk any more and the Council gave her a lovely set of glasses and a big bunch of flowers and, you know, really made her a queen, as we called it, because she was a queen to us. She was more like a mother to us than what we – but that was nice and we all appreciated the Council doing that and that but then, of course, you'd get the other side, the girls, you know, it wasn't enough for some of these people.

Some of them felt they weren't being thanked enough?

Yes, and that. Which, oh, to me it was enough thank you just to see the faces of people receiving our meals; you see their smiles and work their personality out and things, you know.

You must have been to a lot of funerals, I suppose?

Yes, because that's because I got too close to them (laughs) and they'd let us know, you know, that they'd died or you'd see it in the paper - and Imelda was great. She used to read the paper, I think, every morning, the back page first, and she'd ring me up and she'll say, "Oh, Mrs so and so, you know, died. Do you think we ought to go?" And I'd, "Oh, O.K.", and we'd go, you know, and

the families really appreciated it, you know – and they always got a nice card from the Council, from South Sydney Council, signed by the mayor.

That's nice.

And that was nice, you know. It was all those little things are very, very – well, it just shows you're appreciated, you know, and that.

Did you develop friendships yourself out of relationships with people that you delivered with, with drivers and runners and so on?

Yes, yes, I did.

I mean, you would have known a lot of the people particularly when you were doing the work with the RSL Auxiliaries?

Yes, yes.

You'd have known a lot of women anyway, I suppose?

Yes, yeah. Yes, well, Imelda was my – when I went to RSL she was the first driver and we got very close till she became a chronic diabetic and then even when she gave it up and she went up to Henry Kendall Retirement Village, that was, I still used to go up once a month or every – or she'd come into Gosford and meet me and we'd go and have a cup of coffee and her husband would bring her in, her husband and her. And the last driver I had was Arthur

Yes. And he was very good, he was good too. But now he's got Alzheimer's and he's in a nursing home and he just stares at the – but he was an ex-serviceman and he had hearing aids in both ears and he'd say, "I can't stand it" and he'd turn 'em off and we'd be his ears, you know (laughs) but But I've only had – there was Imelda, Arthur and then Stan. Stan, he took over when Arthur got sick – he'd just retired from work and he was a neighbour up the street and I happened to say, "Oh, well, now you can do Meals on Wheels", you know.

You nailed him.

So, he said, "Oh, well, I'll drive when Arthur can't drive, so he done it with me too and that.

So, you're not doing Meals on Wheels any more because you've got a few health problems?

That's right.

But you haven't retired entirely, have you?

No, I haven't retired from my – no, I haven't retired, only from that, and that's – I would have liked to have still gone on for another few years.

Was that because it just required more physical exertion?

Yes, yes. Well, I – in some cases you haven't got lifts, so you've gotta climb up a lot 'o' stairs and that and I shoulda woke up because I found I couldn't – I could go up so many stairs and I had to sit on the stairs but I wasn't gonna give in, you know.

Nobody wants to give in.

So, finally I was told I had to and that and the Council gave me – I've got a lovely certificate and they gave me flowers and they gave me, like, a crest from the Council.

Have they?

Very nice, yes.

What, like a framed like a plaque?

This was like a little plaque from the Council but I have got a framed certificate with over forty five years service on it.

Very nice.

Yes, so, you know, I've gotten that I go as long as I can with everything, you know – I'm not young, so. I hit eighty this year, so. (laughs)

It's a bit one.

Yes.

Are there any other things you'd like to add?

No, I don't think so. I think I've got through everything I – I wrote myself a few notes. No, that's all of the things – I thought of, you know, Rosaleen.

Yes, that was a great story.

Yes, and there was other ones, you know, had the – lot of other things and things you seen in the streets up at the Cross and - - -

Yes.

- - - you know. (laughs)

I imagine you.

Just one, I just thought of this – Imelda and I were in, I think it was Macleay Street or there somewhere; it was near the Alamein Fountain, and it was a terrible hot day and she said, “Look, I’ll do this side and you do that side”. So, I ran in and done mine. When I come out, she hadn’t come back. So, there was a little tree there, so I stood under the tree (bangs table) and I wasn’t looking and this woman come up and nudged me in the shoulder and she said, “Move on, this is my beat”. (laughs)

And you said, “Well, you can have it”?

Yes, my word, I did. (laughs) I moved on, I stood in the sun, yes.

Yes, bit of a different world in Kings Cross as your parents well knew.

Yes. Yes, that’s right. They were all the – it was all the places where I was told not to go. (laughs)

That’s a very nice story to end on. Thank you very much, Thelma.