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Full transcript of an interview with

VIDA MERLE MANEY

on 16 March 1999

By Adair Dunsford

Recording available on CD

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A series of dots, **.... ....** indicates an untranscribable word or phrase.

Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, **- - -.**

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Adair Dunsford interviewing Mrs Vida Merle Maney OAM of Mundulla South Australia for the J D Somerville Oral History Collection of the Mortlock Library of South Australiana. The interview is part of the Honoured Women Project and takes place on 16 March 1999 at Mrs Maney's home in Mundulla.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

Can you tell me your full name?

Vida Merle Maney.

What's your date and place of birth?

21st of February 1935, and I was born at Naracoorte, although my family lived at Kingston at the time.

Did you grow up in Kingston?

Until I was four we lived in Kingston, and then my mother was having problems recovering from the death of my eldest brother, and so we shifted from Kingston at that time from her lovely new house there - the first house she's really owned - to a hut really we lived in, on our purchased property, first time we'd really owned our own farm. And we went away twenty-seven miles out into the scrub virtually. So I grew up at Bull Island and Avenue Range.

Is that north of Kingston?

That's between Kingston and Naracoorte, almost midway between Kingston and Naracoorte.

What sort of farming was undertaken in that area?

Well, mostly grazing. My father had purchased the farm - he'd been manager for other people's properties for years, but one of the conditions of managing the property was always that any money he made rabbit trapping was his own, and he was a `gun trapper', as he was referred to in those days, a very successful rabbit trapper, and that money was always earmarked towards eventually owning a property. And that's what it was. And our place was called “The Valley”, it had a big flat - the farm itself was about 1700 acres, but this flat, or “The Valley” itself, was about a 1000 acres of beautiful flat land, not peat, but sort of peat country, and that was mostly grazing. But we shifted there in 1939, and 1941 and '42 were very, very wet years in the South East, and in fact the water that went into the flat, or into “The Valley” didn't dry up, and so consequently all our flat bank was under water for nearly two years. And so my father went back to managing a property, and we shifted from there to live at the old place that was on the property he was managing. But it was very difficult times, because they'd purchased Strawberry clover seed, which was very new, innovative farming, at a pound a pound, and it was planted not long before the water came down, and then it was underwater. And I can remember mum recounting the story that after the water went back dad and the agent who'd convinced him that he should invest in the Strawberry clover were seen crawling around on their hands and knees to see whether the clover had survived - and it did. And in fact the second year there were patches where the clover kept on growing up so that the leaves were floating on the top of the water, almost like water lilies.

So how many children were there in the family?

I was the youngest of six - three boys and then three girls. And I always enjoyed the story that mum always said that when she was growing up, the way people had said, “What are you going to do with your family, Mary?” and she'd always say “I'm going to have three boys and then two girls”. And she did have three boys and then two girls, and then two years later I came along. And she used to tell people this story with quite considerable enjoyment, and I enjoyed it too because I was never made to feel less loved, but always that this was one time I'd had a victory over my mother because I came along when I wasn't planned. (laughs)

What were your parents' names?

Really you couldn't get more ordinary names, John Charles Smith and Mary Ann Smith. But dad was always called Charlie, so Charlie and Mary Smith. So how more ordinary could you be than Charlie and Mary Smith?

Were your parents involved in community life?

Yes. I don't really remember dad's involvement nearly to the same extent as mum's. I do remember dad being on the District Council of Kingston, because although we were midway between, our property was still in the Kingston District Council area, and dad was a district councillor there. But dad had heart attack when I was not quite ten, and he'd been sick for quite a little while beforehand, and for a long time afterwards he never really recovered - it was before bypasses and things like that, these days it would have all been manageable. But he really gave up public life for quite a while there, until he became a member of the Kingston Hospital Board, and that became a driving force in his life, fundraising for the hospital in Kingston, and then the establishment of all the facilities, and making sure that they had good staff. And it was a very influential affect on our lives.

Mum was much more involved in more things. During the war she used to organise concerts for fundraising, and she was talented in many directions - in fact she used to write for the concerts and play the - organise the music, and then star in the show, much to the embarrassment of all the children of course. And then she was also a very keen CWA member, very conscious that the CWA had been a factor which had improved the lives of rural women beyond comprehension, with toilet facilities in small towns, and places where the babies could be changed, and opportunity for women to support other women. And she was a very keen CWA member. And eventually was made a Life Member by the Kingston branch. She was a foundation member of Kingston branch, which opened I think in 1937, and was a member until she died. And I think it was when she turned 85 they made her a life member, and there was great celebrations at her 90th birthday, and she died at 93 - still an active member of the CWA.

And when dad's health became too bad for him to continue with his interests in the Hospital Board, mum assumed his position. Now dad always felt she was keeping the seat warm for him - she very much considered she'd earned the right to be a Hospital Board member in her own right. And she was also the first woman JP in the Kingston district, and eventually gave it up when she thought it wasn't really quite the appropriate thing when both the accused and the defending person were both calling her Aunty Mary, she thought that perhaps she was getting a bit too close to the situation there. And it also worried her that young people that she knew that were just in her words `skylarking around', `being foolish', driving cars that didn't belong to them, that she could be instrumental in perhaps damaging their futures by seeing them referred on and perhaps facing a prison sentence. And it started to really worry her - although she was a very strict disciplinarian to us, that she was much more sensitive to the needs of others outside the family, because of course she was afraid that we might grow up to be irresponsible or, you know, all those things that parents worry about with their children. But she was a very strict disciplinarian. And dad was very loving, gentle, kind, supportive and encouraging, so they made a wonderful partnership as parents.

Where did you go to school? Did you go from the property into Kingston?

No, I went to school at Avenue for the first few years. I started before I turned five, because it was most important that the school had sufficient numbers to be able to maintain their teachers, so my birthday is in February, and I started just before I turned five. And then I went to school there until I was eight. And then - I've got a mild case of cerebral palsy - mum was nearly 43 when I was born, and was very sick at the time of my birth with pleurisy, and a very difficult birth, and as a result of an instrumental birth I've got mild cerebral palsy, with very limited use in my left hand and leg. It hasn't affected my life because I had very sensible parents who recognised that it did need treatment - I had treatment from the time I was two. But when I was nearly eight it was recognised that I really needed more regular physiotherapy, and so I went down to Somerton Crippled Children's Home, and I was there for twenty months. And, oh, horrendous times, because I was what my mum used to refer to as `a soft turnip' and I used to become upset and cry very easily, and suffered agonies of homesickness. So much so that I would become quite ill with homesickness and come out in hives. So added to the problem of being miserable and all the hives, it looked as if I had some awful disease which might have been infectious, so I was kept in isolation for quite a bit - which was also aggravated by the fact that at Somerton at that time we all wore woollen combinations. Now you're much too young to even know what combinations are, but they were your singlet and pants all in one thing, with just a slit in the appropriate area. And those woollen combinations had become felted up from bulk washing, and it was like wearing Feltex underwear. And I suffered agonies of allergy from wool, so that I was nearly red raw with itching. And when my mum came down to see me in the September she stamped around a bit, and from then on I was given special exemption, and I was allowed to wear my own cotton underwear. And that was a big thing.

But that was my education, I spent twenty months there, and then returned to Avenue School and did grade six and seven at Avenue. And then, still because of the cerebral palsy, I went to Millicent to high school. Now Millicent's only 60 miles from Avenue, but it might just as well have been the end of the world as far as public transport went - it was almost impossible to get there. So although it was only 60 miles I only got home at school holidays, like the real breaks, not Easter or those sort of things. I had loving, caring people that I boarded with who were very much substitute parents, and who were very good to me, but I once suffered agonies of home sickness. But the reason I went to Millicent was because the high school principal's wife was a physiotherapist, and I'd been going to her on a monthly basis while I was at Avenue, like for the last two years after I came back from Somerton, but she was a gifted physiotherapist in the fact that she told me not only what I was expected to do, but why I was expected to do it, and really involved me in the exercises, and trained me in relaxation, and also in what I should expect those muscles to do, and how to go about getting the muscles to do it. And with the regular treatment that I had for the three years that I was at Millicent, I made strides of improvement that I've always retained these days---. After you've turned 60 muscle deterioration becomes a bit of a problem, and I can see that muscle tone is deteriorating. But Mrs Davidson, I'm eternally grateful to her for her skilled physiotherapy, but also involving me in the treatment for it, so that that cerebral palsy hasn't really affected my life. I couldn't type, I can't play the piano, and I was hopeless at sport, but I really did play sport - I played country carnival hockey, if you please, and was not even too bad at table tennis. But I was also very short-sighted, so I was never going to be good at sport anyhow. My parents didn't make allowances, and that's the best thing that can happen to someone with a mild problem - I'm not saying it would happen for people severely affected by it. But for somebody who was only mildly affected, I was never allowed to use it as an excuse, and I was encouraged to try to do everything, and if I couldn't do it, well, just try harder. And that's a wonderful background, particularly for someone who was as willing to be dramatic, and you know, pale and interesting as I would have liked to have been. But I never could have carried the role, because I was always rudely healthy, other than for this cerebral palsy - you know, ruddy cheeks, and a great rope of thick hair down to my waist, and you know, a very bright complexion as a child, and would have had problems convincing people I needed to lie on the couch and rest. But I would have liked that effect, because so many of the children's books at that time did have the heroine as an ailing, you know, invalid.

When you say you had treatment from two, was that exercising?

Yes, yes. Because my natural instinct is to clutch my thumb inside a clenched fist, and then clutch that to my chest, and my foot would drop, and the exercises were just simply touching the thumb to each finger in turn, and the little games that children play, like open, shut, and open, shut them. They weren't easy for me, and it took a lot of patience, and hours of involvement from not only mum and dad - particularly dad, he'd sit me on his knee and we'd play these games together, because of course for a two year old it has to be games. But also particularly my sister, Kathleen, who's eight years older than me, she was, you know, endlessly patient with this little sister, and she just taught me so many of these little - made fun out of things that could have been such a chore.

But the time at Somerton is something that I did not enjoy - I was homesick. I was different too, because most of the other children there were far worse than I was, and they were also polio suffers, so their lives had been divided by before they got polio, and after, whereas I was almost so much more the same, I'd not experienced that. I was also a country child in with much more sophisticated city children, and I had a fairly lonely time for a while until it was discovered I was a good story-teller, and from then I used to entertain the ward with, you know, ongoing sagas of what happened at home - no real farm ever had so many burning haystacks and wild snakes and mad bulls as ours did in the accounts that I shared with the other children there.

Was it traumatic, that experience?

Oh, yes. Yes. To me, even now, the trauma exists in the fact that you can always tell Somerton children. The nursing situation, or the treatment situation at that time was a lot of exercise, hydrotherapy hadn't really become part of the practice, but a lot of exercise, but also a forcible straightening of the limbs by strapping them into plasters stretched out straight. That would happen for two hours in the afternoon, during afternoon rest. And then after we went to bed in the evening, which was always quite early, and you'd be strapped or bandaged into your plaster frames. And even though my cerebral palsy was pretty mild, I still had frames to be strapped to straighten that foot and that arm, so that that had to be stretched out instead of a clenched fist. And because of the pain for the polio sufferers, they used to get the most dreadful cramps, and they'd rock their head from side to side, and nearly every Somerton child had a bald patch at the back of their head. It pains me even after 50-odd years to talk about it, and to think about it.

It was the treatment that was the go at the time, though, wasn't it?

It was indeed. And of course it was wartime, and we had loving, caring nurses, but they were all girls, very young, waiting to be old enough to do real nursing. There was very little trained staff. All the doctors gave their time, they were most generous to the Somerton Crippled Children's Home. They were leaders in their field, and they came regularly - Sunday morning was the doctors' visit morning, and, I mean, they gave up their time. And wonderful things did happen, but the children didn't enjoy their life at Somerton.

But, I mean, it was the time of regulations, and restrictions, and organisation, and institutionalisation of patients. Although none of us were really sick, because even the polio victims were well over the polio aspect, we were treated as hospital patients. We had education there on the site. And I'm always conscious of the fact that we lived in this wonderful old stately home, wonderful sweeping lawns down to the front fence, and then the Esplanade, and the beach, we did have a lot of opportunity to swim, but those lawns were out of bounds because we made them look untidy. (laughs)

There was also a wonderful library up there, but access to the books was only in school hours. And I was a voracious reader, and do you know, life would have been different altogether for me had I been allowed to really use that library. Because even the fact that I was only just eight when I went there, I was already reading quite fluently. In fact I really can't remember a time when I ---. I don't really remember learning to read because I had a sister just two years older than myself, and my brothers and older sister had really taught her to read, and I sort of picked it up fairly quickly. And while I'm no brilliant intelligence, I was a good reader, and could read from a pretty early age. And even at eight, though they were children's books in the library there, I would have been able to read almost everything that was there, had I been allowed.

So you came back to Avenue Range, then went to Millicent?

And for three years high school there. And then one year back to Naracoorte, which was much more convenient, and that was because Mrs Davidson had left Millicent - there was no point moving heaven and earth to get me to Millicent High School when I could be in Naracoorte and go home every weekend, and boarded in Naracoorte there, and did Leaving, as it was at that time. I applied to do Leaving Honours, but was accepted to Teachers' College to do the A Course, which was the one year teacher training course which suited you, supposedly, to go out to teach in one teacher schools. In one year's training you were supposed to have learnt it all. And I came to Cannawigra, which is one of the little schools which are still dotted around this area, a fortnight before I turned eighteen, and was teacher in charge of the Cannawigra School, with I think fifteen children, the oldest of which was only four years younger than me. But I was - oh, treated so wonderfully, and never the slightest bit of homesickness after I came here because I was accepted into the community, and the family of the people I boarded with who are still my friends, and where they went I went, whatever they did I did too. And my word, I think the teachers these days who go to a country area with a car, and their own home, they lose out on such a lot, because those of us who went to board, wherever the family went you went. We had benefits that they've no idea of, they don't know what they've missed.

Do you think it was an advantage being a country girl, though?

Oh, yes, of course it was. Yes, because at Teachers' College, I mean, we were threatened with those who didn't get good marks could expect to go to the two schools which they threatened us with at those times. I mean, it wasn't threats at all, it was only the legend within the Teachers' College hierarchy that you'd go to Mudamuckla or Nunjikompita, way out on the Nullarbor - neither of those schools exist these days. But none of our group were sent to Nunjikompita or Mudamuckla, and in fact I think they were only ever male teachers sent there because it was so isolated. But because I was a country girl, and didn't really enjoy my one year of living in the city - I enjoyed the experience, but could never wait to get home. And for the five and a half years that I was teaching I never went anywhere, or had holidays anywhere, I went home, and that was a very important thing to me. And I don't really know why, because as the youngest of six I used to complain vigorously that “You're picking on me", and "I'm sick of you" - they're two phrases that still get thrown up at me by the older members of the family, they were apparently my catchphrases as a child. But no, I loved to be home in the heart of the family.

So the family was still on the property at Avenue Range?

Yes, yes, and in fact my two older brothers - my eldest brother died when I was two, and we shifted from Kingston when I was four, eighteen months after. But my two older brothers, one was married three weeks before I was, and the other one married about six months later, so they were really home all the time in those growing up years. And wherever they went they had to cart their younger sisters with them, so no wonder they were 33 and 35 when they got married, because they were never given the opportunity to go anywhere without three sisters tagging along. But they were, I think, naturally late marriers and they ----.

So they were still at home when you were teaching?

They were still at home, yes.

And when did you meet John, your husband?

Soon after I came here - I'd become friendly with John's sister, Mon, because we played in the same hockey team. And Mon was just an excellent hockey player, and so everybody admired Mon's hockey playing ability. And I was goalie in the hockey team, which as anybody who knows hockey knows that that means you don't have to run around a lot, and I was a largish girl, so I was able to fill up a fair area of the goal, and I was goalie. And when I was playing in the Tatiara hockey team we went to Horsham for inter-league exchange, and we were obviously organising rides, and John had not long bought his own first car, and he offered to take a car load of the hockey players. And Mon offered me a ride, and I went with them. And the family always teased me about it, and the fact that Mon said to John, "Well, look, you hold my watch", and I said, "Well, look, hold mine too", and they always considered this was a very romantic first …. But that was when I first met John.

And then John was a member of the Hall Committee, even though he was only in his - well, I think he'd turned 21 by that stage, but he was secretary of the Show, and on the Hall Committee, and a very important aspect of social life within the community was the Saturday night dances. John didn't dance, but he used to go to the doorkeeper, and he'd quite often ask me to go to supper with him, which was the first step towards a romantic involvement in those days. I always joke about the fact that John was really very, very shy, he really was - it quite affected his life very much to be so shy. And the first time he asked me to go out we went to one of the local drama productions, which were a very important aspect of social life in those days, and I wasn't feeling very well the day he rang me, and I'd had a very bad headache, and had I been able to think quickly enough I'd have probably put him off, because I knew that he had no conversation. But I accepted. And we went to this drama production, and the lady I was boarding with at the time also went to that production, and she was very amused that at interval time as soon as the lights went up John shot out, left me in my seat in the theatre, and dashed out. And she went out to – I don't know - get a drink or something or other, and there was John standing with his toes over the edge of the kerb, taking deep breaths to get the courage to go back. But really we went on from there, and have had a long and happy relationship.

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE A: TAPE 1 SIDE B

[First few words of Interviewer not recorded]

…. …. …. came to teach at Cannawigra?

In 1953, and I taught there '53, '54 and '55. And in 1956 there was a problem with staffing in Bordertown, and so the Cannawigra school was closed, and I went into Bordertown to teach from September in '56. And that was a very memorable term because I was invited to go there, and the Inspector, who was a power in the land in those days, asked me "Do you have problems with discipline?" and I said, "Oh, no, I don't have any problems with discipline". I got into Bordertown, found I didn't know anything about it - because a one teacher school is self-disciplining, and a class of 56 grade fours was a very different question. 56 children - I'm sorry I'm getting it all - it was 56 that went in there. I had 67 grade fours, 43 of which were boys. And it was really a very traumatic experience because there was really only physically room in that classroom for 66 children, 33 double desks, and if they all turned up somebody had to share my table with me. So it really was hard work for that term.

And then another year in Bordertown, and then I returned to Kingston for the last term before I was married, and we were married in June 1958. And in those days one resigned when you got married. You were able to go back as a permanent temporary teacher, with special exemption if you were married, but you were no longer a permanent Education Department member. But I got pregnant about a month after we were married, so I didn't ever go back to teaching.

So where did you live?

Where we're living now, we've lived there for the 40 years of our married life, and that's right next to the shop which is now known as Maneys of Mundulla. And at first my husband and his brother had bought the shop in partnership, and really it was John's brother's wife who ran the shop, but when our David was five months old they decided, my brother-in-law and sister-in-law - that's Kath and Geof Maney - decided to shift into Bordertown, and we bought them out. And so from the time David was five months old I've been involved with the shop. For a long time we had full time help, and then part time help, but for the last 26 years I've been virtually running it alone.

And it's a drapery business?

Yes, drapery and fancy goods, with materials and buttons, and a very large range of haberdashery, of buttons and laces, and those sort of things, ladies underwear, and some fashion, toys, china and glasswear, dress materials, knitting wools, all the things that little old country stores used to have. And in fact so many people come into the shop and say, "Oh, this reminds me of the shop I used to know when I was a child" at such and such. Almost every town used to have one, very few have them still, and we're working towards there not being one here too because it feels as it it's time now to---. The children have not known anything other than living next door to the shop. At first we were separate, I was very conscious I was able to say that our house was next door, rather than adjoining, but practicalities dictated that we should join that verandah to the shop, and make it into a large family room, to be a store room and pool table, and things like that for the children as they were growing up. And I practically live in that room these days, because that's where I do the Tactile books.

So the children have always had a working mother?

Yes, yes. But also a mother that's always home because it – people whose - the children whose mothers played golf, or played bowls, or played tennis, or even farming children whose mother was required to shift sheep, wouldn't have had their mum at home as much as I was at home, because I was always there, except when I'd go to meetings - school meetings, which were usually daytime meetings - but they were the only daytime meetings that I mostly went to.

And how many children have you got?

Four children. David will be 40 in a couple of months, and Ann-Marie will be 28 this year, so that's our family. And we've got David, Elizabeth, Peter and Ann-Marie.

And Ann-Marie’s the youngest?

Ann-Marie's the youngest, yes.

And they went to school in Mundulla?

Yes, they did, and all had their education at Mundulla, and at Bordertown High School, and Ann-Marie’s gone on to be a teacher. And it was Ann-Marie who really suggested the involvement with Tactile books, which took it out of a one-off thing to become something which has moved on from there. Because she knew that I’d been involved with one session of Tactile books at our Church Guild, and the class were asked to suggest a suitable class project that they could do for Book Week, and she suggested that the class should do a book where there was braille in it for blind children, and with pictures that the children could see with their fingers. And the teacher at the time said, “Well, that’s a wonderful idea, Ann-Marie, but who could instruct us on that, because certainly we’d need some help”, and she said, “My mum knows all about this”. So on the strength of one partly completed set of books, I’d become the expert. And so I went along to the school and we did do a Tactile book as her class project.

Tactile book isn’t a familiar term for most people because - I used to call them at first books for the blind, and immediately people’s immediate reaction was, “Oh, braille”. Well, yes, the braille is certainly there, but I don’t do that, so I can’t really claim any credit for that. Over the years I’ve had two loyal and dedicated braille writers, and they’ve done the braille writing for all of the books. But what I do is build up the pictures to create a scene, which is a simple illustration, so that the blind children can have the pleasure of a picture book, a picture book which they can touch with their fingers, feel with their fingers, and so of course tactile is to touch as visual is to sight, and audio is to hearing. And so they are touching books, or feeling books, but they are unique in their production, I think, because – I'd read about them, but I'd never seen one before I became involved with it.

So there was no sort of formula?

VS: And I think that's why I became involved with it because had their been a standard set, or a level to reach, being the most awkward person, and totally untalented in the direction of handicrafts – I mean, I always say that you can tell which button I've sewn on, it's the crooked one – that I've gone on to eventually taking workshops in handicrafts, if you please, that are only handicrafts which are related to Tactile books. But really the story of how I became involved I think is interesting, because it's the sort of thing that happens in our lives so often – we've never heard of something and then we hear of it again closely followed to that, and probably we may have heard of it before but it made no impression. But my first introduction at all to Tactile books was in the dentist's waiting room at Naracoorte – I'd gone to the dentist's - and picked up a *Women's Weekly*, and the *Women's Weekly* at that time had a double page spread called *About People*, where there might be four or five little articles about people who did interesting things. And there was a group of women in New South Wales, in Orange in New South Wales, who met every month to create Tactile books. And it just told us a bit about how they created horses, with tails that you could feel with your fingers, but with hard hooves, and the horses had manes, and the cows had udders of a softer material, and so on. And it just gave a few of the basic details about it, and I thought, "That's interesting", but probably would never have thought of it again if it hadn't been for the fact that Elizabeth at that time was an exchange student in the United States, and she sent me a copy of a magazine called *The Farmers Wife*, and that was much like a *Women's Weekly*, except it was glossier, and more tempting ads, and that sort of thing. And that had an article about a group of women in Iowa, which was the state she was in, who met to make Tactile books. It didn't give me really much more detail than the first little tiny paragraph had done, but this time it stuck in my mind because both those articles had asked virtually the same question, "Have you ever thought what it must be like for a blind child never to be able to enjoy the pleasure of a picture book? They can learn to read through the wonders of braille - of course they can enjoy the stories being read to them, but the pleasure of a picture book is denied to them unless somebody creates a Tactile book".

Now at that time, I was looking for a guest speaker for our Church Guild - I was President of the Guild at that time and it was our Uniting Church's turn to host a combined meeting of all the Guilds in Mundulla, and I wanted a guest speaker who'd knock their socks off, you know, somebody a bit different that they'd never heard of. So I wrote to the Townsend House School for the Blind in Adelaide, and asked them if they could put me in touch with a guest speaker who would be likely to come – we offered to pay the expenses and, you know, those sort of things. But they said they couldn't put me in touch with a guest speaker able to come because nobody in South Australia made Tactile books. But they went on to say that if you would be prepared to have a go, they'd be delighted to receive the books, because there is such a need for them.

And so I put it to our Guild ladies, not to have a go for this very special vital occasion, but just for an ordinary Guild meeting, and they agreed to be involved, and in fact our Guild have been involved every year ever since in producing a batch of Tactile books. Except the immediate following year, because we had a go at them, but we didn't complete the books that we started on that day, and I took them home and put them up on top of my wardrobe, and every so often I'd take them down and blow the dust off and think, "Well, I don't know how to finish these". And it was because of Ann-Marie's suggestion to the school that the librarian said, "Oh, yes, well, we can do the covers, and yes, we've got a heavy duty stapler that would be able to staple these pages together, and yes, we would be able to do those" – things that I didn't know how to do, how to suitably bind them. But we soon found that the stapled together pages was not ideal, and we went on to doing them with the loop binding, which we still do, the coil loop binding. And for a while the council used to do that for me, and the council girls used to do it. But then my braille writer, and very dear friend, and tremendous supporter who does the braille for me these days, Geraldene Killmier, became involved with doing so many aspects of the braille and she asked me would I mind if she did the loop binding for the books for me because she wanted to buy a loop binder, but she could only justify it in her own mind if she had more use for it.

And so she's been doing the braille books, or the Tactile books, with the loop binding, ever since. She does the braille writing, she does the ordinary typing, and gets that photocopied. Then her husband cuts that out and neatly sticks it into place, and her husband does the back covers, and then does all the binding for me. And I get the books from the Killmiers ready to go, and with that wonderful neat finish to them, so that when somebody opens the book to start work on them it's like a new exercise book to a child, they always do a good job with the first page, and it has that impression for the people involved with the books, that it sets a standard, and it is amazing how much difference that makes. When I used to get the pages photocopied, and then asked the ladies to cut out the strip of visual words to stick in place, that was one thing they would really be prepared to try hard to get the picture right, but because the children weren't going to be able to see that visual writing we'd get some very skew-whiff levels on the sticking in of that. But when the Killmiers took over, that improved altogether.

So you began with - was it Jean Hensley?

Yes, Jean Hensley was the first braille writer, and she was a mature lady. I'm not quite sure how old Jean is, but I'm sure she's in her eighties now, and when I started about – well, she probably was only the age I am now, which means that she was really quite young when I started. But she for many years did the braille writing for me, and gave of her time and encouragement, and so much – because she's an experienced braille writer she knew the amount of words that should go on to a page to mean that the children's interest was retained, and the type of paper – she supplied the paper through the Braille Writers' Association, until our project well and truly outgrew that. Because they had to account for every page of the braille paper, and braille paper, which is like a light cardboard, became quite expensive, because the proportions are different to the normal photocopying paper, and it became up to about thirty cents a sheet, and it became a prohibitive expense for the Braille Writers' Association, and Townsend House School used to supply it for a while, and it became really quite an expense for them, and I just decided that we would change the size of the books, instead of being so wide as the pages were in the normal braille books, that we would go to a normal A4 page, and that we would have that light cardboard, which is used in photocopying. In fact it's a hundred and fifty grams per square inch, that's the sheet, that's what I always order. And I buy it in 500 sets – like blocks of 500. And that works out so much cheaper, I think it's about eight cents a sheet in comparison to about thirty cents a sheet. And that's a factor to be considered.

So you began with - Jean would do the braille and then---. Just tell me exactly what you have to do to make a Tactile book.

Yes, at first I would go to the group with all sorts of things, and I'd expect people to create a horse from material, and template, and wool, and it became rather threatening to people, that they didn't really know how to begin. I really had an elevated level of expectancy of women's capabilities. I think that I thought that most people were better at things than I was, and so if I was able to do a horse of some sort, from my working out how to do it, that they would be able to. And that's not the case at all. People of – women of my age and older like to be instructed quite precisely as to what to do, and they found the situation quite threatening. And also I found that we weren't getting as much done as I wanted, so I became involved with the preparation, and in fact now I do nearly all the animals, prepare them. So I go to a group, and now I have the books, the fifteen copies of each book which we do, the books are all prepared ready to go, and if the book requires an animal – for instance if it has a frog on every page, well, there might be twelve or fourteen pages, so there are sufficient frogs prepared---.

AJR: Times fifteen. (laughs)

Times fifteen. And so the numbers become up into the star nation of numbers at times, particularly counting books, because if you add up everything from one to ten, that's 55, and multiply that by fifteen, that becomes a large number. And I prefer not to give that total to myself before I start . But we also set to work then and have an illustration on each page. Eventually I did become familiar with the work done of the group of women in new South Wales, that that lady, Nell Woolston, who was the organiser there, became an authority on Tactile books, and in fact produced a little booklet called "Creating a Tactile Book". She'd by this time shifted to Tamworth, and I think she's since retired, because I think she wrote the book to set down all her experience when she was in her 80s, And our books are quite different, in the fact that Nell and her group worked on much more three-dimensional books, so a horse had wonderful rounded haunches and things, whereas mine are just flat illustrations - we don't attempt to be three-dimensional at all. But where Nell's books might have three or four illustrations to the book, we have an illustration on every page, like a picture book for a small child. And the text is limited so that by the time they're ready to turn over the page the text is complete for that page. I can tell – I'm not being very organised here. I didn't answer that question you asked me.

No, that's fine, that's fine. (laughs) But the process is that you actually take the books out to organisations.

Yes, and that's been a wonderful source of friendship and joy and pleasure to me. I go to schools, and CWA groups, WAB, church groups, and I arrive mostly for a workshop for the day. I arrive about ten in the morning and set people to work, and then we go till about lunch time, and then I talk about the project. In fact even the groups that I've been going to every year, and there are many of them that I've been going to every year, almost since it started, there's always some recent update that I can tell them about. And I talk about the children who receive the books, individual children, and the schools where the books are sent. At first of course we only had one copy of each book, but we've graduated, as I say, to fifteen.

Where do they go to?

Yes, Schools For The Blind in each state of Australia, including the Catholic Education system in New South Wales and Queensland, because they also operate a School For The Blind. But that doesn't bring you up to fifteen of course. A couple of individual children receive them, and then there are ten braille copies, and five copies which are not braille, that are just visual writing, and they go to the special schools, like Spastic Centre, and Regency Park Special Schools, and the Kent Town Special Schools, in fact five special schools within South Australia where the children might have cerebral palsy, or multiple sclerosis, or muscular problems where they need the tactile stimulation, to be encouraged to reach out and touch. And these books do encourage them to do that, to lift the horse's tail, and feel his ears, and feel the dog's tongue, and the cow's udder, and those sort of things. And so five are non braille, but still used for handicapped children. And then the ten braille copies go to Schools For The Blind all around Australia. But there are still two individual children who receive them, who are as yet still too young to go to the Schools For The Blind, like, because they're always residential schools for country children, and these are country children.

And so you began way back when, with the one at the Guild, and got that finished through the school system.

Yes, yes.

Did you send them to Townsend House?

Yes I did, and we actually did five books. Four the Guild were involved with, which I'd completed except for covers and binding, and one which the school children did, with much more preparation, I might say, because I really went to that first Guild meeting with limited preparation. Really it's quite ridiculous when I think back now, that I had not even written the visual writing on each page. And those pages of those four books were all circulating separately, but we still didn't get the wrong illustration on the wrong page, because we were mixing up *Bacon For Breakfast*, and *Jenny's Birthday*, and *My Garden* all---. There were several page threes going around, and I was sitting there frantically writing the visual text. Why I didn't have the commonsense to write that down beforehand, because I couldn't read braille, the ladies couldn't read braille. But I've always felt from that very first day I'm meant to do this, that Divine Providence has a hand in this very much so, and I feel that I'm led in so many ways, that there's been so many coincidences that can't be coincidence, that I do think that the Dear Lord guides me along the way.

And so that first day we partly completed four books, and the fifth one the school did. And we sent off those five books, and I thought, "Wow, there, that's done". Because - the saying that the road to hell is lined with good intentions, so I've done my fair share of paving. And I often intend to do things, but don't complete them. But here was something that was finished. And I really did consider it a one off project, didn't expect ever to be involved again.

But by this time Jean Henlsey had shifted to Adelaide, and she went to the Townsend House Christmas party, and rang me afterwards to say that the librarian at Townsend House was going around the Christmas party showing the books to everybody, and saying, "Wow, aren't these wonderful. If only we had more of them". So Jean said to me, "If only you could feel motivated to continue this work. I'm prepared to continue doing the braille writing for you". And that was followed up by a letter from Townsend House saying that the books were absolutely wonderful, they were quite the best of their type which they had, which made me feel, you know, very elevated and achieving, until I remembered that they'd told me that they really didn't have any books of this type, which brought me back to size. But they did have commercial books, which are not nearly so detailed, much more visually pleasing, but not so tactilely challenging.

And then that was followed by a wonderful series of letters from the children, rolled up in like a Gladwrap cylinder, and those braille letters were written to me from children. And the comments that they made, how they really enjoyed *The Watering Can*, they thought that the lady who'd made the wheelbarrow had done a good job, and they really enjoyed *Bacon For Breakfast*, and they thought that Old McDonald was a great farmer, and they loved the stories. And I just put it to the Guild, "Will we have another go?" And as I said, we've been having another go ever since.

And we've improved, the books that we do now are still not perfect. I've been involved with nearly a thousand, not one has reached the level I'd like to see, there's always a flaw, but we've improved vastly. But we've retained the simplicity of concept, not a great deal - we don't crowd the pages, they've got limited illustrations on them, and we work on a few basic templates. Probably I've got six or seven horses and that would be the limit. We've got probably only four or five cows – one where its head's down eating the grass, and one where the head's full on looking at you, so that you can see the two ears, and the horns, and things, and the two eyes, and one side on one, which is more difficult to get ears and horns right. And then a cow with a calf with her, and a lying down cow – I think they had five cows, only five. Teddy bears we do in profusion, because you can make teddy bears - by just moving their arms into a different angle you can have him jumping, and running, and skipping, and hopping, and standing on one leg, and climbing, and going upstairs, and in bed. Teddy bears are much the most useable of our things. But the cats – we've probably only got five or six different cats. And so the templates are not varied, but it does mean that the children become very familiar with those shapes, and they can tell you almost instantly that that's a horse, or a cow, or a giraffe, or a variety of templates. They like familiar animals. But we do have different ones – they love crocodiles, because crocodiles have got very dangerous teeth, like, pinking shears make very dangerous looking cardboard teeth in there. And because I've visited Townsend House a number of times and seen the children using the books, I do know what appeals to the children.

And the feedback from the visits is just enormous, and one little story that I like to share is that I went there, and a little boy came into the library - I didn't have time that day to go into the classroom, so I intended it to be just a visit. And the librarian and I were inspecting the books, chatting away about them, and little Jacob came into the library, and so the librarian got him to give the quality control inspection. And he had some very good comments, and one in particular that I treasured greatly, was the fact that when - the story he was looking at was *Farmer Brown's Big Red Truck*. The truck was used to cart sheep, or feed sheep, and to cart wood, and these sort of things. And one of the pages was, "Farmer Brown's dog loves to ride on the back of the truck". And I had the dog on the truck. And the lady who'd done it had seated the dog just sitting down on the truck, and I said, "Oh, no, dogs don't ride on a truck like that, you know, they've got their forepaws up on the back of the truck, and you know, their ears streaming back". Because this was at the time when the ladies were still preparing the animals. And so we changed the dog and did one with his forepaws standing up on the rail of the truck, and his ears streaming back. And Jacob ran his fingers over that dog and said, "That dog's really enjoying the breeze". And that was a treasured moment for me. And also he pointed out to me, or by his question made me realise that blind children have no perspective. We'd done *Farmer Brown's Big Red Truck* thinking the sheep - with the sheep in front of the truck, which when you think of that – when you really look at it we automatically [Tape incomplete]

END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B