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Full transcript of an interview with

ELLINOR WALKER

On 3 December 1972

By Janet Robertson

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, - - -.

Spelling: Wherever possible the spelling of proper names and unusual terms has been verified. A parenthesised question mark (?) indicates a word that it has not been possible to verify to date.

Typeface: The interviewer's questions are shown in **bold print**.

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Interview of Miss Ellinor Walker by Janet Robertson, recorded in Adelaide for broadcast on ABC Radio 5CL on 3rd December 1972 as part of the series 'Now in retirement'.

TAPE 1 SIDE A

Miss Walker, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that you've always lived a very full life, with many interests. Is it possible to pin it down to any kind of pattern?

Yes. Well, actually, it is. My life has always flowed along in three distinct streams, most of the time concurrently. And those streams have been, first of all, my professional life, which was the teaching of little children; and secondly, the great amount of voluntary work that I've always done with a number of organisations coming under the general heading of 'social, political associations'; and then my recreational interest which has ever been literature and drama, with some personal writing.

Why did you decide to become a teacher?

Well, it was necessary to choose a profession, and I dearly loved little children and thought that working with them and helping their little minds to expand at the beginning would be a most fascinating task. And so just at that time Miss Lillian de Lissa had come back to the Kindergarten [Training] College with the Montessori method, and the time seemed just right for me and I decided I would take that up.

You went to the Kindergarten Union to be trained, did you? Where did you go to school before that?

Well, my chief education was at Highclere School, the school run then by the Miss Derringtons and later by Miss Vera Ellis, and I owe a tremendous to Miss Amy Derrington, who was my teacher, and whom I always link up with my very happy lessons and especially my English lessons.

What kind of family life did you have?

A very happy one. I was most fortunate in my home. I had very dear and wonderful parents, one brother, with whom I had both lovely companionship and very happy childhood. And I was born in Melbourne, and we came to Adelaide when I was just

short of ten years old, and I've lived in Adelaide ever since and – in different parts of it; and I am of course completely a South Australian.

What did your father do?

He was a banker, the Manager of the Commercial Bank [of Australia Limited] in South Australia. My mother was a musician, a very, very fine musician, and was very prominent in the musical life of Adelaide in those earlier days.

Was she a professional musician?

No. No, she was not. But she was a highly gifted amateur, and she took her Mus.Bach. degree at the Adelaide University when my brother and I were in our early teens.

Do you remember any of the people in the musical world of Adelaide at that time, which must have been quite a while ago?

Oh, yes, we were well in touch with all the people at that time. Of course, Professor Ennis was the Director of the Conservatorium, Dr Harold Davies was teaching and my mother took special lessons from him; Mr Harold Parsons was the teacher of cello; Miss Guili Hack was the singer; there was Mr Bevan; there was Mr Bryceson Treharne and Herr Heinicke with the violin.

So you had a terrific musical background to your life.

Oh, yes. I was born and bred in music.

After you'd finished your training, where did you start teaching?

Well, for a few years I was the director of one of the free kindergartens in the city of Adelaide – a very interesting experience indeed. I was the director of what was then the Halifax Street Kindergarten, which later moved to be the Keith Sheridan Kindergarten. It was very hard work, but very interesting. The director had not only to run the kindergarten but to train students, of which she had two, to assist her; and also to do a certain amount of social work among the mothers.

What did that involve?

Well, that involved visiting their homes – and it was very well worth while to learn so much about the life and the homes of those people who were less privileged than I had been.

How many children did you have in the kindergarten roughly, do you remember?

Oh, I've forgotten the number at this distance of time, but there were quite a large number. Yes. Oh, several scores of little ones. And of course all under six. It was – those kindergartens, of course, are the real pre-school work.

What happened after that, because you went on teaching, didn't you?

Oh, yes. Yes. I set up, eventually, my own school at Fullarton in our own home, and it was known as Greenways School, and it was a school for little children from three to eight years old. And so it covered the kindergarten pre-school work and the early primary work.

And how long were you associated with Greenways?

Twenty-four years (laughter) –

That's a long time.

– so there was many children passed through my hands, and the school became very well-known in the district.

Did you use drama at all, at that time?

Oh, yes. I introduced drama wherever it was possible, because it's always been a part of my life to love that and to use it where it can be used, and I feel, and I think it is generally felt, that drama is very helpful in education – with little children as well as others – so that I used to dramatise their history stories and dramatise the different things they learned and write the little plays for their concerts and make up their little songs, and so on. Use it quite a lot. (laughter)

I should think there are a good many people who remember you from their time at Greenways School. (laughter)

Oh, I think there are. And of course some of them are grandmothers and grandfathers now. (laughs)

Sounds – seems dreadful, that, isn't it? When did you first become interested in social work?

It began when I was just about nearly of age, my realisation of the responsibilities of citizenship, the responsibilities of having a vote, and the very, very great need for women to take their equal part in the government of the country and of the state.

Also I had a very strong feeling indeed for the non-party principle. I've never been able to attach myself to any party. I have been non-party in principle right from the beginning.

How long has the League of Women Voters been in existence?

It has been in existence for sixty-three years. It was formed in nineteen hundred and nine, the moving spirit being Mrs J.P. Morice, the niece of Catherine Helen Spence, and of course Miss Catherine Helen Spence was its first President. At the time of my joining the suffrage struggle was at its height over in Britain, and that helped to spark off all my interest in the whole question. The League members and myself, we were very, very keen about the suffrage movement in England, and it played quite a big part in our thought and our lives. And I owe a tremendous lot to the fine women that it brought me in contact with – I've mentioned Mrs Morris; there was Mrs Elizabeth Nicholls; there was Dr Constance Davy; there was the first secretary, Miss Nan Whitham, and the second secretary, Miss Blanche Stephens; and very outstandingly Mrs Carlisle MacDonnell, a later President, who among other things, to our great pride and joy, was chosen on one occasion to be Australia's alternate woman delegate to the League of Nations.

In your time, what do you consider the League's most important achievements?

I should say the work for women police and women on public boards, the first – running the very first women that ever stood for municipal councils, conducting and helping campaigns for women in Parliament, long before the election of women was finally achieved. But all that preliminary work was paving the way and was invaluable. Then, of course, we did actually succeed through the years in changing the law of the State in several ways. The statute book is different because of the League of Women Voters, outstanding examples being the *Guardianship of Infants Act*, which was passed in nineteen hundred and forty, and which gave equality of power to mother and father over the child; and then the law for women jurors, which was passed just a few years ago. I was personally involved in the one concerning the guardianship of infants – I did a very great deal of work in that, and was present at the deputation that was finally held to the Attorney-General, Mr Shirley Jeffries, at which time we presented to him a full copy of the law that we wanted, from

beginning to end, an act of parliament which he could use without having to alter at all. And actually he did alter it very, very little indeed, and what was finally presented to Parliament was very much what we had drawn up – and particularly the important clause four, which gave – which definitely stated the equality of the parents, and which made that law the best equal guardianship law in the whole world at that time.

The League was also – has also been involved quite considerably with equal pay, hasn't it?

Oh, yes, it's always stood for that. Equality for women in every aspect of life, including, of course, the economic one, which has always been to the fore, and it's been a very long struggle. Of course, of late years, it has – that work has been definitely put in the hands of a committee that represents many groups, and we are one of them, but before that, we were the ones that took the lead in that and did a great deal of work to try and acquire it.

The co-operative movement was another of your great interests. Can you tell me something about that?

Yes. That played a big part in my life for a number of years, and I still believe co-operative trade and commerce to be the perfect way of carrying out these things.

How did you first find out about it, or become interested in it?

It was the visit of Miss Helen Topping to Adelaide. Helen Topping had lived in Japan and had been – she was the daughter of missionaries there and she had been the secretary to Kagawa [Toyohiko], the great Japanese humanitarian and co-operator and peace-maker. And she came to Adelaide and to other parts of Australia to speak about co-operation and to urge people to realise its value and what it really meant. And a great many people responded, and I was one that felt that it was the answer to all our economic troubles. We can point, for instance, at the South Australian Fishermen's Co-operative – generally known as SAFCOL from its initials – which, like practically all other co-operatives, started in a very small and modest way – a handful of men with a very small handful of money but with strong faith in that system of trade. Consequently, as they were faithful to their principles and to their co-operative, it has become extremely successful and now, as we know, owns

equipment worth many hundreds of thousands of dollars. There are quite a number of different kinds of co-operative enterprises, but they're all run on the same principle: that people join together to supply themselves with goods or services.

In all this very active part of your life, we seem to have missed out on your third great interest, which was literature and drama. How's that fitted into your very busy life?

Oh, well, when you love anything very much you always fit it in, and I've been an omnivorous reader from the time when I was about four years old, and reading has always been my relaxation and my recreation, and also of course drama. I love the theatre and I love drama in any form.

Were you actively engaged in any particular productions?

Well, I wrote a play about the co-operative movement, which was produced by Theatres Associated in Stow Hall under the sponsorship of a co-operative education group, and of course that was a great joy to me to have it produced and to see it acted – it was a real drama. And also I was – had a big part to play – it was my privilege and joy and hard work to have a big part to play in the Centenary Pageant, *Heritage*, which was produced by Heather Gell in the Centenary year here, 1936. Heather Gell and I were the co-authors of that. We collaborated. Heather Gell, of course, was an outstanding exponent of Dalcroze Eurythmics and the art of music and movement, and she contributed beautiful symbolic scenes with her eurythmic classes. I wrote the historical scenes, and also a few symbolic scenes that linked up one with another.

Do you remember any particular scene that figured in the pageant?

Well, I remember them all (laughter), but this year I've been specially thinking often of the scene that showed the building of the Overland Telegraph wire from Adelaide to Darwin because, of course, we've celebrated a hundred years of that, and we had quite a scene in the pageant to portray that, to show the building of the line and things that happened, and finally the praise that South Australia gained for the wonderful undertaking. At that time we were only a hundred and ninety thousand people in South Australia, and yet they managed that terrific task of carrying that telegraph line over a continent that was practically a pathless desert. And that was to serve the whole of Australia because of course it linked up with the cable to England and developed the international cable line.

Well, in spite of the fact that you have been officially retired for a good many years and you no longer have to run your own home, would you describe your present life as a quiet, reflective one?

No, I would not. (laughs) I would describe it as a very busy one. I'm still very active in the League of Women Voters, and also I am the secretary of the Campaign to Stop Offensive Advertising, which is quite a big movement which was initiated by the League a couple of years ago.

Do you think that you'll ever sit back and do nothing except look at the view?

Well, not until I have to, I think. The time will come, I suppose, when I will have to, and then I'll have the memories of all this work I did, which was hard work but happy work, with all the wonderful fellowship that one gets in working with people of like mind in things that are trying to make the world a bit better.

END OF TAPE: END OF INTERVIEW.