

STATE LIBRARY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA
J. D. SOMERVILLE ORAL HISTORY
COLLECTION

OH 740/47

Full transcript of an interview with

JULIA TWOHIG

on 22 June 2005

By Jim Douglas

Recording available on CD

Access for research: Unrestricted

Right to photocopy: Copies may be made for research and study

Right to quote or publish: Publication only with written permission from the
State Library

NOTES TO THE TRANSCRIPT

This transcript was created by the J. D. Somerville Oral History Collection of the State Library. It conforms to the Somerville Collection's policies for transcription which are explained below.

Readers of this oral history transcript should bear in mind that it is a record of the spoken word and reflects the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The State Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the interview, nor for the views expressed therein. As with any historical source, these are for the reader to judge.

It is the Somerville Collection's policy to produce a transcript that is, so far as possible, a verbatim transcript that preserves the interviewee's manner of speaking and the conversational style of the interview. Certain conventions of transcription have been applied (ie. the omission of meaningless noises, false starts and a percentage of the interviewee's crutch words). Where the interviewee has had the opportunity to read the transcript, their suggested alterations have been incorporated in the text (see below). On the whole, the document can be regarded as a raw transcript.

Abbreviations: The interviewee's alterations may be identified by their initials in insertions in the transcript.

Punctuation: Square bracket [] indicate material in the transcript that does not occur on the original tape recording. This is usually words, phrases or sentences which the interviewee has inserted to clarify or correct meaning. These are not necessarily differentiated from insertions the interviewer or by Somerville Collection staff which are either minor (a linking word for clarification) or clearly editorial. Relatively insignificant word substitutions or additions by the interviewee as well as minor deletions of words or phrases are often not indicated in the interest of readability. Extensive additional material supplied by the interviewee is usually placed in footnotes at the bottom of the relevant page rather than in square brackets within the text.

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**.

Discrepancies between transcript and tape: This proofread transcript represents the authoritative version of this oral history interview. Researchers using the original tape recording of this interview are cautioned to check this transcript for corrections, additions or deletions which have been made by the interviewer or the interviewee but which will not occur on the tape. See the Punctuation section above.) Minor discrepancies of grammar and sentence structure made in the interest of readability can be ignored but significant changes such as deletion of information or correction of fact should be, respectively, duplicated or acknowledged when the tape recorded version of this interview is used for broadcast or any other form of audio publication.

Interview with Julia Twohig recorded by Jim Douglas on 22nd June 2005 at Ethelton, South Australia, for the Labour Oral History Project of the State Library of South Australia. Towards the end of the session an additional contribution is made by Julia Twohig's husband, Brian Noone.

DISK 1

This interview is being held on 22nd June 2005 with Julia Twohig. Julia is a practising homeopath and was previously a shop steward with the Vehicle Builders' Union working in the car industry. Julia, can you let us know when you were born and where you were born?

AJR: I was born on the 6th December 1950 at Terowie, a little town in the Mid-North of South Australia. My parents were in Terowie because my father had the transshipping contract there with another man, and they had been railway people, they'd been in the refreshment rooms. And it was a change-of-gauge station, Terowie, so all goods were transhipped from one train to the other to go to Broken Hill. And I remember many stories about the transshipping: the train that took the fresh produce through the early morning was called the 'Cabbage'; and they got regular trainloads of yellowcake down from Radium Hill which would come in open 44-gallon drums and which were transhipped by those workers on a tarpaulin cover on the station in their work clothes. Many of those men died premature deaths of all sorts of varieties of cancer.

What about your mum?

AJR: Mum basically at that stage did home duties but had ran the refreshment rooms in Terowie and many other country railway stations.

And where did you go to school?

AJR: I went to school at the little convent in Terowie that was run by the Sisters of St Joseph, so they had two nuns in the school and they were entirely supported by the community, and I think very often they went pretty close to the bone for something to eat. So I used to take them down – because we lived not far from the convent – every night I'd take them dessert for their evening meal. So I had a great collection of holy cards. (laughter, break in recording)

Did your mother and father actually come from the country, or what was their background?

AJR: Well no, not really. Work in the railways took them to the country. My father was a Brompton boy, was born and grew up in Coglin Street, and came from an Irish Catholic background. His father was a member of Sinn Fein and President of the Hibernian Lodge and so he grew up with a keen sense of justice and workers' rights and was a strong unionist and believer in unionism – as was my mother. And her father, John Shoemith, was one of the original members, founding members, of what was called then the Carriage Builders' Union, which became the Vehicle Builders' Union, so it was quite ironic that I ended up being a member of the VBU in later years.

Isn't it just.

AJR: And he did his work at Islington, which was the railway workshops.

Right. And so how many children were in the family, were in your family?

AJR: I was the middle of three children – I have an older brother and a younger sister.

So when did you start work, and where?

AJR: I started work in 1968 and I got a job at a ship's provedore in Port Adelaide just doing office work and – – –. But it was a really interesting job, supplying goods to all the ships that came into Port Adelaide – a bit like the transshipping, really – and so there's some very exciting and interesting things that I got to see as a young girl that I'm sure most jobs wouldn't have provided.

And did you join the union at that stage?

AJR: No, I didn't join the union until – I was actually the only person who wasn't on staff in that small office. No, I didn't join the union until I got my job at – I left there and worked for the YCW, the Young Christian Workers, which was –

Tell us about the YCW job.

AJR: – a youth organisation, and it had a history – came from Belgium originally – and it was attached to the Catholic Church, and it was basically bound up in social action and justice for young workers. So it was a very, almost a natural

jumping-off point for a young Catholic working-class girl, because it supported all the things that I'd grown up to believe in. And we did some interesting actions: we were responsible for getting the conditions of hairdressing apprenticeships changed. At the time their conditions were absolutely abysmal – of course, all females at the time – and they earned shockingly low wages and had terrible conditions, almost non-existent conditions.

So was that a paid job or was it – – –?

AJR: Yes, that was a paid job. It was very badly-paid for an organisation (laughs) that was primarily concerned with justice. I was probably paid about half of what I should have been, and did hours and hours and hours and hours of voluntary work.

So what other sort of things did you do?

AJR: Well, they eventually gave me the job of organising youth activities in the western suburbs, and so I set up worker-based groups in different places. I had nurses' groups at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital and a worker group at the Actil factory, which was huge in those days; another one at the Wigg's Stationers. And I'd go and meet at lunchtime – a bit like a union organiser, really. And we had quite a system in the YCW of leadership training. But the whole thing was based on the 'see-judge-act method', so you'd talk about the situation you were working in, you'd analyse it and make a judgment about it, and then you'd plan the action. And so the group would help the individual plan the action or help – they'd decide on a group action together. So it was all about – I saw some amazing growth for young people who took steps to change things that were unjust in their life and to see that result, to see people develop and grow and challenge things – – –.

I remember we got very involved in, as an aftermath of the Vietnam War – well, during the Vietnam War – a lot of the YCW people from Vietnam were imprisoned on Kon Song Island and held in these tiger cages, and so we got very involved in supporting them and we conducted a huge campaign where we sent President Chu a birthday card and he got hundreds and thousands of birthday cards asking for justice for these young workers, and we made replicas of the cages and spent many nights in Victoria Square sitting in these cages and drawing attention to their plight. So we became very involved in lots of different actions.

We were very involved in opposing the apartheid system, and my first really big active participation in a rally was the night of the Springbok game at Norwood Oval, and I remember arriving there and realising that we needed to say something, and so we scabbled in our bags and found lipsticks and we wrote our protest sign with lipsticks. And I still remember looking up and seeing these old men that I knew who were priests, who many of them came from interstate from New South Wales, who were rugby supporters, and they were there with their picnic rug and their thermos going in to *watch* the match (laughs) and we were on the opposite side, going into the match but for a very different reason. So that was a night where I had to think ‘I’m going to make a commitment to this.’ And it was quite scary because it was a seething mass of people – probably the first time I’d been in such a crowd – and you just got pushed down these concrete steps at Norwood Oval until the fence was pushed over –

And you were on the oval.

AJR: – yes.

And you talked about the Vietnam War, so were you active in the Peace Movement as well?

AJR: Yes, I certainly was around the place. I remember going to several meetings of a group called Pax Christi, but that wasn’t really where I felt comfortable. So I certainly joined the Moratoriums.

So how long did you stay as an employee, as an employee–activist with the YCW?

AJR: I worked for them for three years and I worked in the western suburbs and in the South-East, so I had Mount Gambier and Millicent as part of my territory. And when I finished the three years here in Adelaide I did extension work in Shepparton working in the canneries and amongst the fruit pickers. And then I went particularly to Wollongong and worked with the Portuguese community and the young Portuguese workers there who were having a pretty rough time. And from that point spent quite a lot of time in Asia, went to represent the YCW at a meeting of Asian factory workers in Madras in India, and from there went visiting – and really that was a huge change for me, came from that whole experience.

How many of you were out there doing this sort of work, do you remember?

AJR: It was a pretty big movement all around Australia. In South Australia there would have been at least two or three full-time workers at most given times in the YCW.

And did you get prior training on this, or how did you get the skills to be able to conduct groups of adult people and to be able to talk about these issues?

AJR: Well, it's really interesting because we came through a training system that had started when we were still at school in the YCS, the Young Christian Students, and so we had leadership training, active leadership training, within the YCW so you learnt a lot of skills including things like public speaking and how to present yourself and how to write letters of demand and all those sorts of things. And it was interesting at the time, in Latin America and particularly in Brazil and places like that, the YCW was under great attack by those right-wing governments, and so their members were incredibly progressive and active, and a lot of the leadership would get taken away, jailed, tortured, and they couldn't ever capture the head because, because of the system of leadership training, the next layer would step up, the next line would step up, and so a lot of that training happens along the way. And then we did all sorts of training: we did some counselling training, some training through other unionists who would come and talk to us; but a lot of it was flying by the seat of your pants.

So this three-year period you did all those things, you were overseas for a period of that time: what was your main aim overseas, what were you actually doing overseas, what was happening there?

AJR: What I did was I presented Australia's – I was representing Australia, and so I talked to them about the sorts of work we were doing in factories here. Then I was invited to the different countries of representatives, like the Philippines – and I got to the Philippines the week after martial law had been declared, and that was a pretty amazing experience. I met people who were risking their lives on a daily basis. I met the young girl – I remember meeting the young girl, Clara, who worked for a big lingerie company sewing the 'Made in the USA' labels on the underwear, that was her job. And those people worked for a dollar a day and the conditions were life-threatening. And I saw a lock-out in India, took part in a lock-out in India where I saw a truck reverse over a man and just no compunction, just drive over him. That's how cheap life was. And then in Singapore I took part in

some lock-outs there, too. That was interesting because I sort of stood out a bit there, so I was ---.

Couldn't have been very old at that time.

AJR: No, I wasn't very old at that time. Twenty-one.

So you would have had to really come to terms with this very quickly.

AJR: Yes, that was a big change for me. I remember getting home, thinking, 'I don't know how ---.' You know, the kids that I knew then, I just didn't want to do those things any more, they weren't interesting, they weren't fun. I suppose it made me really think about the important things in life, and I sort of felt a lot that I didn't fit for a fair while.

So when you came back to Australia, what was the next thing that happened?

AJR: And I've given you the wrong order because I got the job *after* I came back to Australia, in the car industry. This is a long time ago. (laughs) So yes, pretty well after that I worked a couple of different jobs. I had a job at Haigh's chocolate factory and a job at a place called Associated Bakery where I worked with a lot of Spanish women, and again we took some actions to change their working conditions – they were working in water without the right protective clothing, and it was just so hard. It was probably the first time I'd ever worked with a group of people who really spoke very little English, and to see how they were so particularly vulnerable in the work situation – there's a lot of fear about if they objected to anything they'd lose their job. And then from there I went to Chrysler which is now Mitsubishi.

So do you remember when you started at Chrysler?

AJR: I started at Chrysler in 1972.

Right, so that was when Whitlam came into power.

AJR: Yes. It was.

So we were seeing quite a bit of social change happening, and you were experiencing a large factory, car manufacturing factory.

AJR: Which really had it all their way. I think the government were so grateful to have them here that they pretty well had their way in terms of work

conditions. But it was typical in Australia then, it wasn't anything unusual that we had such bad conditions.

Tell us about it. What was your first job, and tell us about what it was like.

AJR: Well, the first job I was given was on the paint line and I was a scuffer and polisher, and that was wet-and-dry rubbing cars down, so it was pretty mucky, it was very wet, you were working over open drains. And they used to put through two hundred and twenty cars a day so it was fairly busy, and it was on that line that I got very involved in bringing about some small changes in that way and working with a group of people and seeing friendships develop, and then gradually being involved in what became the Rank-And-File organisation, which became really a mass movement of workers for change, and it was a very exciting time.

So when you started as an employee in the vehicle industry, was there an expectation you would become a member of the union, was that a condition of the work?

AJR: Oh yes, yes, it was a closed shop. Absolutely.

So it was a closed shop.

AJR: Yes.

And so what union did you join?

AJR: The VBU.

The Vehicle Builders' Union.

AJR: Yes.

Okay. And so the Rank-And-File Committee started. So tell us about that, tell us what happened – how did it all evolve?

AJR: We were in our little section and apart from the actions that we were taking a big action happened on the actual moving assembly line, and it involved a lot of young migrant men who put in the head lining in the car refusing to work because of the conditions that they were working under. So it was the first example I know of of a guerrilla strike where they took out two essential workers and blacked the jobs behind that, so it effectively stopped the line. And we basically got away

with using that tactic for about eighteen months (laughter) until they brought in laws that changed that and made it illegal.

So these couple of workers that stopped work and the ongoing action, obviously minimum amount of industrial action but a massive amount of destruction.

AJR: (laughter) Disruption, yes.

Disruption. So what, did they get paid, these people?

AJR: It was a fairly spontaneous sort of thing. It came out of just desperation, I think. Yes. Well, it was a legitimate strike, so (laughs) it was pretty hard, the company were really running around. And from that action, and from – the people who were actually starting to see things and change things in their different sections really identified each other at a meeting and said, ‘We need to meet again,’ and that was the first meeting of what we eventually called the Rank-And-File – or what we called the Rank-And-File – – –.

And so was the Rank-And-File Committee sanctioned by the Vehicle Builders’ Union officers?

AJR: Oh no, definitely not.

Oh!

AJR: No, definitely not! (laughter) Surprise, surprise. So the Rank-And-File Committee was definitely – we spent as much energy actually in trying to get the union to do what *we* thought their job was and to oppose them as we did in opposing the company, which was a bit sad. But I think the VBU at that point in its history needed a bit of a shake-up and I think it had got very complacent. There wasn’t a lot of involvement from the shop floor and they didn’t like it initially because it was such a big change: ‘Who are these people coming to tell us how to do thing?’

What were some of the tactics you used? Did you have any occ[upational] health and safety issues or anything like that?

AJR: In *my* particular job we had *many* occ health and safety issues, so we tried direct action and confronting the foreman, and that didn’t work very well; so one of the things that used to happen is that the drains would fill up and they were just putrid, they were really – a terrible stench came from them, they hadn’t been cleaned for six months – and so we started to think smart and to employ some other

strategies. And we had a fifteen-minute rotation where every fifteen minutes someone would feign faintness and gastric upset, and so (laughs) pretty – created chaos, the line stopped, and by the afternoon the drains had been cleaned. And so it was a pretty powerful thing for people to see. We did that, we didn't hurt anyone, and we actually got a really big improvement. It made people very ill, you know? It wasn't just that we were doing it for the sake of some fun – although it was pretty good to relieve the boredom! (laughs)

And how big was this Rank-And-File Committee, like this Rank-And-File group?

AJR: The first Rank-And-File group was only about half a dozen people.

And so it grew?

AJR: And it gradually built, yes, absolutely.

Grew over what period of time?

AJR: I think the first meeting, I was living in a rented house in Thebarton and we had our first meeting there. We didn't know most of the people, but at that meeting of the head liners we could see the people that were active and we said, 'Well, do you want another meeting?' And it was the ones who were really keen who came to that meeting.

So the Rank-And-File Committee was made up mainly of what, members of the Vehicle Builders' Union?

AJR: Yes, we were all workers.

All members of the VBU?

AJR: All members of the VBU at that time.

And what level of support did you have from other unions at the time, do you remember that?

AJR: We did get support from other *unionists*, not so much from unions; but certainly we activated – workers became very active, and the forklift drivers were fantastic: they used to – the people who had mobility in the plant became the ones who took the newsletters around. We had a system where they used to send CKDs, 'completely knocked-down' vehicles, to South Africa, and we used to put in our newsletter into the crates and send them, write them personal messages and all this

sort of stuff. Pretty amazing the day they opened the crate up and found a return message, which was absolutely solidarity.

That would have been worth celebrating. Did you have any celebrations?

AJR: Yes, I can still remember the person screaming as they ran down the aisle with this (laughter) – I'd love to find that, I don't know what happened to it but I'm sure someone's got it in their archive somewhere.

And how often was the newsletter put out?

AJR: Every two weeks.

And so you'd give people – that would go wide and far, through the whole of your ---?

AJR: Oh, absolutely. People looked forward to it. And people were then involved in helping to prepare it, to print it – the old Gestetner job, you know, the roneo – and then to distribute it. And so at every level people would get a job.

And so did you eventually have any effect on the Vehicle Builders' Union, did you start to look at perhaps challenging some positions in the union or ---?

AJR: I wouldn't say while I was at Chrysler, at Mitsubishi, that that happened at all, no. They were still really reacting to us. And on one occasion, on a May Day march, a Trades Hall May Day march where we entered a float into the parade – and we had an old car body on a trailer and we were all chained to the car body, the line, and we had people in foreman positions who had whips, so we did a great parody; and people were, it was like a moving street theatre, we were acting out the roles of street theatre – and I think it was at that march that – I can't remember whether it was Whitlam or Dunstan who was heard to say – he was at the microphone and he said, 'More rank than file, I think.' (laughter) That was a famous quote. And we weren't real keen on Bud Abbott at that stage, so there was a great chant of 'Abbott is a rabbit' that went up.

'Bud Abbott' being Roy Abbott, the Secretary of the ---.

AJR: Yes, Roy Abbott, the Secretary of the VBU.

Right. So what was happening then with Roy Abbott? What were you saying on that occasion?

AJR: 'Abbott is a rabbit', that was the cry, so we had a lot of people there all chanting this, so he wasn't very happy. But they were pretty actively opposed to us. In retrospect, what they could have done is, if they'd been less reactionary, it could have been a great coming-together, because I'm sure they had a lot of experience and could have helped us and taught us a lot of stuff. But instead –

They were probably fearful and not knowing how to deal with you.

AJR: – instead they blocked us from meetings and had security people on doors when we got to meetings, and they'd use a technicality to keep us out of meetings.

So how long did you stay – did you stay in that one particular section of Chrysler, or did you move to another section?

AJR: No, I was pretty well there until I got sacked – – –

Oh, okay. What happened there?

AJR: Yes, I remember I was sacked by the general foreman, Harry Dont [pronounced don't], a man called Harry Don't – that was an unfortunate name, we had a great time with that – but I think he was just fed up with my constant agitating for some change, and so probably in reaction said, 'You're fired.' So I took that up with the union and the company set up a meeting, and the Rank-And-File gave the company till three o'clock to make a decision about my employment. But the workers being a little bit keen actually downed tools around five to three, (laughs) so they did reinstate me and they asked Harry Dont to walk me back to my place of employment. And so as we walked there was just a slow handclap that went through the whole place and the whole plant erupted in cheers. I'd made very good contact with a lot of non-English-speaking workers and the Greek guys used to bring me in biscuits and the Italian guys would – you know, just made good relationships with lots of those guys, and the Rank-And-File had really – the whole plant was activated. It was a different place to work and be and we had massive meetings with three thousand workers. I think about three thousand workers downed tools that day that I was sacked. So it was a very powerful thing. And I'm sure it made changes to people's lives. These people who just stood in front of these huge, big press machines and came to work and limped into work and limped home and hated it, you

know: it changed how it was for them. ‘What’s on today? What are we going to do today?’

‘What’s the next action?’

AJR: ‘Can’t wait to get to work.’ (laughter) And some of them would say this to me, ‘Oh, it’s good,’ you know. I remember standing at the first big meeting we had on the back of a truck, and all this sea of hundreds and hundreds of people standing in this crowd, and went to speak and you’d hear a voice from the audience say, ‘Show us yer tits.’ (laughs)

Oh, that’s choice.

AJR: So, you know, women in the industry at that time were few and far between, our numbers were low.

So some time in 1973 it was decided by the group, the Rank-And-File group, that we needed to start spreading a bit of our sunshine, and so it was decided that I’d leave Chrysler’s and go for a job at GMH¹ at Elizabeth. And that was absolutely a planned tactic. And I went for the interview hoping that they didn’t know who I was, so I did actually get a job and I got a job in the vehicle assembly plant – the VAP – and some months later found out that I only got the job because they thought I was the daughter of Senator Jim Toohey [pronounced ‘Too-ee’]. My father’s name was Jim Twohig [pronounced ‘Too-ee’] but they were different people –

And spelt differently, too.

AJR: – yes. I often thought I should have sent him some flowers or something. But that’s how I came to be there, apparently. And someone from administration told me that.

Interesting.

AJR: Yes. So I got a job on the moving assembly line and I think I was the first woman to work on the moving assembly line in South Australia, and it was a bloody hard job. You worked on steel chequer plate and I think I did seven operations in two minutes, and if the worker behind me left the car door open I

¹ GMH – General Motors Holden’s.

would get behind. So I'd get on the train at Port Adelaide, and the train in those days went directly into the factory, delivered you to the factory door, and those first couple of weeks the end of the day I'd get on that train and one of the old boys would have to wake me up when we got to Port Adelaide because I'd be sound asleep. My feet would be just throbbing. So that was pretty amazing. I did things like put in the headlights and the bumper bar and the bonnet spring – which was an absolute art, I can tell you: flicking that spring around so you just got it on – the seal mouldings, the battery tray, all those sorts of things. But there were seven operations and you had two minutes to do it, and you were using huge pneumatic guns so just the weight of those – the weight of those with that air behind them – was phenomenal. So lots of people had RSI² injuries.

When I got there I was definitely not welcomed by the workers so nobody spoke to me for three days, and then on the third day a hand came up out of the pit with a drink, and said, 'Do you feel like this?' And it turned out to be Les Bowling, who also became a very active unionist and activist out at Elizabeth, and that was sort of the breaking of the ice. And three months later they elected me their shop steward. And I remember we had a lot of young guys on that line and a lot of them who I would say lived fairly precarious lives on the outside world; so I did things like would really object and would front when policemen would arrive and want to pull someone off their job to talk to them. There was a real lot of harassing of young kids and I didn't want to know what they'd done but I thought it was quite inappropriate that they do that. And so we got those sorts of things changed, and I suppose in doing that and in just conversing – – –. I remember one guy saying to me once, 'You know, I've never had a *girl* before that was just like a mate.' So it was just a whole change of how you be with people that people learnt about.

And one of the first actions we took out there was over – we used to get a six-minute morning tea break and it was pretty well impossible to drink a hot drink in six minutes, so that was one of our first actions and we got fourteen minutes.

Okay. So you said that it was most likely you were the first woman on moving assembly line: did that encourage other women to take on that role as well eventually, do you think, or – – –?

² RSI – 'Repetition Strain Injury', also known as 'occupational overuse syndrome'.

AJR: Yes, they gradually started to become – more women were employed, I guess, as they saw – – –. It was hard work, though, it was really hard work.

And what was your status at the time, were you married, were you single?

AJR: I was married then.

And married to – – –?

AJR: I'd married, I'd met Brian in City Square in Melbourne –

That's Brian – – –?

AJR: – Brian Noone – and we were at a demo about rights of young people who were in tiger cages in Vietnam and so that's how I met him, so that was a good start. (laughs)

What year was that?

AJR: Nineteen seventy-three. And that was the beginning of a beautiful friendship and we've been married thirty-one years this year. So Brian had –

So there were children from that marriage?

AJR: – yes. Brian had to make a decision where we'd live because he was from Melbourne, I was from Adelaide, so he decided that my work in the car industry was more indispensable than his was, so he came across from Melbourne and he got a job in the press shop at GMH at Elizabeth, so –

So they had to contend with two of you!

AJR: – two of us! (laughter) So yes, he had a job with all the non-English-speaking men and made great inroads and friendships there. They used to tease him continually about being a bearded man. But it was great, because there was a bit more energy in the Rank-And-File and it was good, the start of lots of action out there.

One of the things that we did – and a lot of the stuff was – I don't think it would happen now, but they used to put people – people would go off for six weeks with a carpal tunnel injury and have surgery and they'd come back and they'd put them on the same job. And I'd be saying, 'This doesn't make sense for the company. Apart from the fact that it's damaging for the person it doesn't make sense.' So you had

those sort of what I thought were fairly blind arguments, I could never work out – it was almost like there was a sense of the people were starting to have an opinion and to take some control of what was happening to them, and the company were going to be bloody-minded about it, just *because*. Because they couldn't get used to the fact that we might have a brain and be able to make an assessment of the situation, you know? So it wasn't welcomed, our involvement definitely wasn't welcomed. But we had some great times out there and some great fun.

So the Rank-And-File Committee that existed at Chrysler –

AJR: Spread to –

– spread to the GMH at Elizabeth.

AJR: – yes, we took it to [GMH].

So that's where you took it.

AJR: Yes.

and did it have the same sort of effect? It grew?

AJR: It did, it did. It had a very similar effect. It was a little bit different out there because there was a different culture at Elizabeth. There was a bigger British migrant population, and amongst that group you had some amazing people who understood unions and worker stuff; but there were also a lot of people who had come, almost escaped from England to come here, they had a very satisfying life. I remember one Englishman telling me not to be too disheartened by their lack of support because he said, 'You know, I know So-and-so grew up in England and he had nothing, he had a council house and no prospects, and he's come here and now he's got a fine house and a job and a car and he doesn't want to risk those in any way.' So it was quite a different group of people from the group at Chrysler; and they were very divided by the jobs they had. The different plants at Elizabeth would almost have different ethnic groups. I remember people – there were some good people in the other unions there who were really – like Teddy Gnetenko was really fantastic, he'd ride around on his little bike – I think he was an electrician or something –

Toolmaker, I think.

AJR: – toolmaker, yes – but any rate, he had that mobility so he'd come round and check and see how you were going. We did some interesting actions out there. I remember one meeting that I was so incensed with the union, some of the boys from the press shop had the noose hung over the tree waiting for John Sandilands to arrive. (laughter)

John Sandilands being – – –?

AJR: He was the VBU rep[resentative].

He was the Vehicle Builders' organiser, was he? Okay.

AJR: At one point I led a march, an occupation of the – I think we were on the afternoon shift when we did it – of the administration block, and we spent the night in the administration block.

And do you remember what the issue was about?

AJR: Yes, we had a national action going over our log of claims, and we just thought we'd up the ante. And I think we had a pretty narrow time limit in which to do something so we took this particular action, and it was pretty empowering.

Tell us what you did when you got into the admin building. (laughter)

AJR: Well, we didn't know *what* to do, we were a bit surprised to *be* there, I think! But people availed themselves of the food and drink that was available, they enjoyed sitting in the swivel chairs, generally having a nose through the paperwork, and a lot of people sat in the foyer. Yes, I'm sure it was a life-changing event.

Oh, it would be.

AJR: I don't think you'd be able to do it now with such ease. I think the look on the admin staff's faces was what stays in my mind, they were just – you know, you talk about the 'slack-jawed, open-mouthed' person, well, that's what they were like: they were just stunned. And we just virtually walked past them and walked in.

Was this when they knocked off, or you just walked into their office and occupied it?

AJR: No, we stopped work to do it, yes. And all of the actions against the guerrilla strikes, that had all gone through the courts and we'd lost that as a –

As a tool.

AJR: – as a tool to take action and to get some change, so yes, we were trying a different tack.

But I can remember taking an action on the shop floor about someone coming – putting them back on the job when they'd been injured on that job originally, and saying to people – and they were all up in arms about it – and said, 'Look, I'll do something about it if you want me to,' because I used to think there was little point in me going on my own to do these things. So part of my deal in accepting the shop stewardship was to say, 'I'm only there as a spokesperson, as a representative of you; I'm not going to be out there on my own.' And so this particular day, 'Oh yes, Julia, we'll be there, we'll be there with you, we'll be right behind.' They were right behind me all right, they were *hiding* behind the blooming crates and machinery, and I turned around and there was nobody there! (laughter)

These are the cartoons that we see!

AJR: So I really spat the dummy that time. Any rate – – –. But just generally, to see that months after I started there and to see the support and pretty well probably half the VAP or maybe more in that action, all of us in our blue overalls –

Must have been incredibly empowering.

AJR: – yes, it was. And it was interesting: we were driving one day, Brian and I were just driving out Elizabeth way, and we stopped at traffic lights and I looked across and there's this towy-haired, blond man who worked on the VAP, and he had quite a few little children, they looked very close together. And he was a man who I'd say that life hadn't been kind to and probably had very few prospects, and he's just about bursting out of the car and he's saying, 'G'day! G'day Julie, hello Brian! I remember, you changed my life!' This is at the stop lights at Elizabeth. So it was pretty – I could tell you story after story about people – just their opening up, just developing, knowing they had choices in life, knowing they didn't have to just do what everyone told them to do; that they could actually have an influence over how they were treated. And to see that, to see – like it's such a privilege to be a part of that. I just think it's just phenomenal. And I continued in that line until halfway through '74 when I finished there and I was actually – I was still working there when the first delegation of Vietnamese women came out, just before – in fact, liberation occurred while they were here, and they came and stayed with us. And they were

women from the North and the South and it was the first time they'd come out of their country to Australia. And that was a pretty exciting thing. But I was newly-pregnant and extremely sick, and I remember hanging onto the front of the car I was building and knowing I couldn't do that job any more.

Can I just take you back a little bit to the person you mentioned earlier, Les Bowling?

AJR: Yes. Well, Les had been at Holden's some time when I started there and he was definitely an activist and a unionist, but I think until that time had been pretty much on his own. And so he managed to get himself involved in (laughs) quite a few things. He was, I think, sacked twice and reinstated twice. One of the good things that happened at Holden's too was the combined shop stewards' meetings, so that was a very different thing, it was a further development from what had happened at Chrysler in that the other unions started to support things that we were doing. And we became very involved in the 'Nationalise the car industry' movement, and that involved people also from outside, people who were interested in the multinationals and the role they were playing in Australia, and GMH really didn't like that at all. And our slogan was 'Kick the General out' and we did lots and lots of paint-ups in bad Italian and all sorts of languages using that slogan. But it was fantastic. It touched a very good nerve with the workers because I think even back then, in the early '70s, we were seeing the beginning of that selling-off of Australia. And we did quite a bit: we explored the HJ and the first car that was developed in Australia and we looked at all the history of that, and actually used to explore the politics and the philosophy around owning our own car and building our own car, and involved people – very good people – from outside. I think, too, the Worker-Student Alliance, who were very big at Flinders Uni, had become somewhat involved at Chrysler's, probably more so after I left, and that action kept going with the sacking of Will Hite and the jailing of Will Hite, and that was a pretty powerful thing to be involved in that.

That was at Chrysler?

AJR: That was at Chrysler. And Will refused to accept the sack.

Did this happen before you left Chrysler or after you left Chrysler?

AJR: Yes, that happened after I'd left. But I was still very involved with the Rank-And-File down there, and I remember he was put into Adelaide Gaol – that was still open then; it wasn't a tourist venue – and I remember I had to be a visitor to Will, and I visited him from outside the gates on a microphone and had a conversation with him. It was quite a memorable thing. And I always remember he was a vegetarian and the gaol staff, of course, just had no idea how to cope with that, so I think he got quite run-down and weak because he lived on peas and potatoes and carrots.

And so when Will was jailed, did this create a movement from both the major industries?

AJR: Oh, absolutely. The Rank-And-File had combined Sunday meetings of Chrysler and GMH workers. It just got more and more powerful, you know? And that's why they asked me if I'd leave Chrysler and go and work at Holden's, that was in order to do that work. And a nice little story about my dad, too: he had a job in the Depression at Woodville at Holden's, and I remember him telling me the story that the foreman, he'd never worked with another human being who'd spoken to people, human beings, so badly, treated them so badly. So my father was a very genial, laid-back man but could only take so much, and so at one point he let fly at this bloke and laid him out on the track. So the line stopped for the first time for a *long* time. And as Dad picked up his gear and left, I remember him telling me there must have been a thousand men at the gate waiting for his job.

That's always stuck in your mind.

AJR: Yes, and he's buried in the Cheltenham Cemetery, in the shadow of the General! (laughter) It used to be quite a family joke about still going to work.

So just a little while ago you were talking about the difficulties you were having continuing your position on the line at General Motors because of your pregnancy. So what happened, is that around about the time that you decided to leave?

AJR: Yes, and I left the man responsible for that pregnancy there, working at Holden's (laughter) so I'll let you talk to him about that. He can probably tell you about his and Les's involvement and sacking – although I kept up that involvement:

I would go out to the gates and hand out the leaflets and I took the baby out there. That continued, and I kept up that action.

One of the other great things for me that came out of my involvement with the car industry was our connection with the Progressive Art Movement. So it was a pretty wild and exciting time: it was the time of Whitlam, big social change; support for the arts; a realisation that workers could also be creative; so it was a coming-together of the intellectuals – people like Brian Medlin, who recently died, who was one of the leaders of the Moratorium movement, Annie Newmarch, Pam Harris, Mandy Martin – all these people who are great artists in their own right opened their art, art became a public thing, and they honoured us, they honoured workers and said, ‘What is it that’s happening in your life?’ They painted our lives, they wrote poems about us, it was just amazing. And we were part of that process with them. An honour and a privilege. We formed a singing group, and people like Wallace McKittrick who wrote poems and songs that we performed; we performed at the same time as Redgum – we were called ‘The Assemblers’ because we all worked on the assembly line, people like Martin O’Malley who’ve gone on to fame in another union were part of our group. And yeah, it was a pretty exciting time and I think had a big impact and a big influence on lots of people’s lives, people like Will Hite and the Aarons, Dave Diss – Dave Diss, who’s still writing letters of protest to editorial columns and letters to the editor – and yes, it was a very formative time and I’m sure had a huge impact for change on many, many people, not just on ourselves but on many, many people, the ripples went out deep and wide.

Politicised a lot.

AJR: Absolutely politicised. If there’s one aim that we should have in all of this, it’s to help people realise their full potential as human beings. Surely that’s what unions and justice and all of that has to be about. And I think it was a rare and real experience of that that I was lucky enough to have.

It might be an opportune time to just introduce you to Brian and ask him to say a few words about his own sacking and the sacking of Les Bowling, because he continued on at Holden’s after I left and it was also a very interesting time.

Okay, Brian Noone we’re now going to speak to, and Brian, would you like to tell us the story of your sacking and the sacking of Les Bowling?

AJR: BRIAN NOONE: I think there was a log of claims on. But we built up a very close – working on the line, I was on the wiring line and Les I think was on the main chassis or engine line or the final assembly line – and we used to have regular meetings at lunchtime, not just industrially; we'd talk about social matters, family matters. And so when the log of claims came along we had the guerrilla tactics where one person would go home and the union or the campaign would support them, the rest of us would sit round and talk all night, and the production stopped but everybody else got paid so it was a good way of having a strike without losing money. But eventually the company got sick of that and I think Les and I would always hold these meetings and we would just basically hold them and then let people decide what they wanted to do. So we got accused of – we weren't *pushing* it, but we just facilitated people to make a decision, whether it was about a compensation claim or about an unsafe hoist or a log of claims. So somehow or other they eventually gave us an ultimatum that we had to stop these guerrilla tactics – it was a national campaign at the time – and they sacked a hundred and fifty in the VAP. But the main intention was to get rid of Les and myself, basically. We were out for about four or five days, I think, and people were getting a bit itchy at that stage – I mean, a job's a job. There were socio-economic problems at the time. There were a lot of migrants there who were doing quite well – they had a car, a house and a swimming pool, which they would never have had in their own homeland, England or in Europe – so eventually people started to dribble back in. I remember one Saturday morning standing there and people were dribbling in. So they took everybody back except for about ten, twelve people, and eventually they took the other ten and Les and I were left out. I think ten didn't get their jobs back, and Les and the other ten took theirs to court and I decided – we had lost it industrially, and that was it for me, so I moved on to a different industry after that.

And did Les get reinstated?

AJR: BN: Les got reinstated, but I think the deal was he took a package instead of going back to the job, so he left the industry as well.

Right.

AJR: BN: But the tradition still keeps going: there's still the combined shop stewards there. The factory's completely changed, we probably wouldn't recognise

it
now ---.

So now back to Julia: is there anything else that you'd like to add?

AJR: JULIA TWOHIG: Well, I was just thinking of Brian's comments about change, and I believe now, if we went out to Holden's, we wouldn't be able to find our way around. Many of the jobs are very automated and they have in fact got lots of robotic assembly line jobs done now. And it reminded me of the day I got my job at Chrysler, when the employment officer told me, 'You'll probably get bored. You certainly won't enjoy your work, because basically most of these jobs could easily be performed by a monkey.'

Oh, God!

AJR: So how times change.

How times change. Julia, you've gone on to become a homeopath –

AJR: I have, I have my own practice.

– and how long have you been doing that?

AJR: I've been doing that now twenty years.

And as far as I know you and Brian are still activist in your community?

AJR: Yes, still activists, yes.

And what's Brian doing?

AJR: Well, Brian's been very involved in the Greens Party, and he continues to take action about things in the environment and issues of social justice, as I do. He's just been over to Elliston where they've got an issue of abalone farming affecting the Australian sea lion population over there. So I guess we just continue trying to do our small bit and to make a difference. And I always remember someone saying to me once that the world's in the state it's in because it's full of 'nice' people. And I'm probably not a nice person, if that's the case! (laughter) You know, I think if everyone did a little bit the world would be a completely different place.

I think that's a wonderful way to end the interview. Thank you so much for being part of this project, and it's wonderful to see your compassion and your passion

for what you've done, and the contribution that you and Brian have both made to making things better for working people.

AJR: I feel like it's been an honour and privilege to be involved in that way, and in a way I feel like I'm also honouring my roots.

Thank you so much.

AJR: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW.