

**NSW DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING**

**'Millers Point Oral History Project'**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

INTERVIEWEES:	<b>Des Gray</b>
TAPE NUMBERS:	MP-FH28 (1 Tape)
INTERVIEWER:	Frank HEIMANS
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*Note: The opinions expressed in this oral history interview are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily represent in whole or in part the position of the Department of Housing, the Government Architect's Office, the Department of Commerce or the Oral History Consultants.*

00:02 START OF TAPE MP-FH28 SIDE A

Tape identification

*Des, people who might listen to this tape later on might want to know a bit about you, so before we get on to your live at Millers Point can you tell me what is your full name?*

00:32 Desmond William Peter Gray.

*A nice lot of names.*

After grandparents, I guess.

*Where and when were you born?*

In Millers Point, 1944.

*Was your family living in Millers Point when you were born?*

Yes, both living in Kent Street at the time when I was born.

*What number, do you remember?*

No, I don't remember the number, I know the house, but I can't remember what number it was.

*Which part of Kent Street was it?*

01:00 Not far from St Brigid's Church - on that side also.

*Was that a church you used to frequent as well?*

Yes quite a lot, my mother was very religious, a very devout Catholic.

*Your dad as well?*

No he wasn't, no, but he made us attend church.

*Tell me a little bit about your parents, a bit of background, that would be good.*

01:24 Mum came from the Gardners, I don't know if you have heard of them or not.

She had about four sisters and three brothers. She worked in a box factory down in Druitt Street, Sydney when she was first married. Then because she had so many children she stayed and raised all the children. Dad was a wharf labourer all his life. Worked on barges originally, that is how he became fireman-deckhand in 1927. But then he left that and went onto the wharves because there was supposed to be more money in it but apparently not because they were always on strike.

*How many children were there in the family?*

02:12 I lost two sisters which I never knew of, but I had three brothers and three sisters. The two sisters I never knew of, the older ones, they died young.

*Do you know of what causes?*

I only found this out recently, about three years ago, no, I really haven't found out what they died of. Never knew I had two other sisters.

*You never knew?*

No, no. One of my elder sisters only told me three years ago.

*So your mother never told you?*

No.

*How do you feel about that?*

Nothing.

*Doesn't disturb you particularly?*

No, not at all.

*It is so long ago isn't it. So your mother was Catholic, your father wasn't - at that stage of the game in Millers Point was there a division between the two religions or did they get on fairly well with each other?*

03:06 They got on very, very well together. I would say it was about half and half, Catholics and Church of England, most of my friends were Church of England I guess. *What was it like growing up in Millers Point, what sort of childhood memories have you got?*

03:21 Well there was a lot to do because of the wharves and that was our main playground - we just went down the wharves. We were either fishing or climbing up on the ships and playing on the ships themselves, getting chased by the seamen and jumping off the side of the ship and swim ashore. Mostly on the ships we played and around the wharves. There was King George V Playground up in York Street North, we played basketball up there a lot. Paddle tennis up against the wall. I suppose we spent a lot of time there. Old Mr Byrnes, I suppose he was the headmaster of the playground, I don't know what they called him, he was a lovely old chap.

*Did all the kids play there?*

04:09 Yes. Yes everyone played at King George V Playground. In them days there were other Council playgrounds around, Pyrmont, Woolloomooloo, Camperdown and we used to play competitions against them in basketball.

*Were you a basketballer yourself?*

Yes loved it.

*Who taught you basketball?*

Mr Byrnes, I suppose you could call him the coach.

*I have heard stories about an American that came during the war and taught the kids how to play basketball, apparently.*

04:42 Yes. I can recollect the Harlem Globetrotters came up there once and played

basketball with us on the courts. Asphalt courts, they weren't wood and timber.  
*Were you a good scorer?*

Oh I played guard, so I guess I was. We got picked to play down to under sixteen New South Wales, I can't remember what year it would have been. In them days the parents had to pay for it to send the children to Tasmania to play, but my parents but my parents never had the money so I never went. I got a track suit out of it but I never ever went.

*Tasmania?*

Yes, Under Sixteens for New South Wales.

*You must have been pretty good.*

Yes I guess.

*Did you ever come close to winning any tournaments?*

We used to win quite a lot, just locally with the other playgrounds, Council playgrounds.

*So can you describe it, it has all changed now King George V doesn't look like it used to, what was it like in those days?*

05:41 Well in them days it was just all asphalt, swings and slippery-dips for the younger ones. There was two basketball courts, two paddle tennis courts. Inside the building itself there was all sorts of games you could play, things like that, it was a great place to be.

*What kind of games could you play inside?*

Oh I can't remember what we played now, but there was always something because on a wet day you all went inside and done things and there was always people there supervising you.

*Going back to your family, I believe your great-grandfather came from Scotland and he had something to do with the waterside too, can you tell me about him?*

06:24 Never, ever knew him but he was a Scottish captain of a ship, used to run the North Coast Line from Sydney to Morpeth, the old sailing ships, but I never ever met him. It is only what I have been told by my elder sisters.

*Are they the big clippers, the big sailing ships?*

Yes I guess they would have been.

*So you are talking about the 1880s or 1890s are you?*

Yes.

*So there was seafaring in the family.*

Yes there is and it has gone right through the whole family.

*Your kids as well?*

My brothers, they all went to sea, my son does, he is a ferry boat captain on the Manly ferries.

*So it is in your blood, is it?*

It looks like it.

*Tell me a little bit more about your father and his work as a waterside worker.*

07:11 Well he was just an ordinary everyday wharfie, like half of Millers Point was, I guess. Didn't get much work in them days, in the 1940s, because they were always on strike.

*What were the strikes usually about?*

Better wages, better conditions.

*Do you know anything about the conditions as they were on the wharves in those days?*

Oh yes they were pretty hard, they worked very hard. I mean today with occupational health and safety they wouldn't stand for the conditions they worked in, they just couldn't stand it.

*How bad would they get, the conditions?*

07:50 Well it was just the conditions they worked in, it was hard, manual work such as wool, carting big bales of wool around. I wouldn't know what they weighed but they had big trolleys and there was a massive big steel wheels and it was hard work. Of course you had 'Pig Iron Bob', Bob Menzies, who loaded all the pig iron on the ships during the war days, or after the war, and they did that manually by hand -there was no machinery.

*What just shovelling it?*

Picking it by hand and throwing it.

*The actual iron?*

Big ingots of iron.

*You'd have to be a pretty strong guy for that wouldn't you.*

My father was only a little fellow, he was only about five foot three.  
*He must have been tough.*

08:36 He must have been. You had to be to have all them children.

*How long would it take to load a ship, say with coal, with those primitive kinds of methods they were using?*

In them days weeks, a couple of weeks. A ship would come in and it would sit there for two weeks maybe. Not like today, they are there less than twelve hours, some of them, twenty-four, and they are gone again.

*So if I can imagine it there were a whole bunch of men all throwing the iron in by hand, is that how it was?*

09:03 Yes. It was loaded into buckets and taken off with the ship's cranes, in those days there were no wharf cranes, it was all ship cranes. Loaded down into the hold of the ship and then they'd have to unload it out of the buckets and stack it down in the hold of the ship.

*It wasn't just dropped by bucket?*

No, it wasn't dropped. They had to move it by hand.

*It must have been very hot conditions in summer.*

09:30 Yes very hot. Then there was flour, they used to load flour, bags of flour. Each man would put it on his shoulder, take it up and put it down the slide into the ship. There would be another gang of wharfies down there picking it up and stacking it in the hold of the ship, and that was very hard work.

*All manual labour. Was this the same pig iron that was sent to Japan before the war?*

That was it.

*That Japan used against us.*

Yes.

*That is why they called him 'Pig Iron Bob' I suppose.*

We got it back in razor blades and cars.

*Now your father worked for a time on the Samson didn't he.*

10:10 It was an old crane barge, a very large crane barge, used to moor down at Erskine Street Wharf, which is no longer there any more. He was a deckhand on that - that is before he joined the wharves.

*There was an incident involving that ship, wasn't there?*

10:27 I don't know if I should say it or not, but me and a few of me mates we were down there one day, it was a weekend, the barge was tied up so we let it go. Let all the ropes go and it drifted over into Pyrmont. I forget the name of the ship that was there, it was a big passenger ship, the barge went very close to hitting it.

*I believe that was the motor vessel Himalaya.*

It could have been, I can't remember what the name of it was nowadays. It could have been the old *Himalaya*.

*So you was responsible for this particular prank?*

Yes, part of it.

*You and a few mates. So they found it again, did they?*

11:04 Yes, some old tug came along and pushed it back to Erskine Street.

*So your father must have been in the union, was he a union man?*

Yes he was a very strong union man.

*So did they get their conditions that they were fighting for?*

Yes they did because the men today enjoy them conditions that the older guys fought for.

*Was it a long hard battle?*

11:27 Yes. Yes, he was home most days I guess when he was on strike, naturally. We used to go down to Sussex Street and pick up things like bags of flour, or cornflakes, or whatever it was they were handing out because they weren't getting paid and the union helped the families out with food. They weren't getting paid so they used to get hand-outs.

*Do you remember the names of the union bosses in those days?*

No I don't. I should do, but I don't.

*Was the union very left-inspired?*

Yes it was.

*Would you go as far as to say they were Communist?*

I can't answer that.

*I believe Jim Healey was a union boss at one stage.*

12:23 Yes. Very strong, militant man, yes.

*Do you remember him at all?*

Oh vaguely. Some years ago, wasn't it.

*Did your father ever tell you stories about his life on the wharves?*

12:36 No, not really, not so much about his work itself. We used to go down and watch them work. He used to listen to the radio every night because the pick-up would come over the radio when they were going to get their jobs the next day. He'd walk from Millers Point to Pyrmont to do a job. I don't even think there was any transport going across that way. He'd walk the 'Hungry Mile' and pick up work.

*When did that name 'Hungry Mile' actually come into use?*

13:09 I don't know what year it was but it was because men walked the 'Hungry Mile' looking for a job, that is how it got its name because of all the wharves they walked to every day. People would stand there and they'd hire two and the other six would have to go home.

*How did your father get his work, only through the radio, they'd call up a number or something?*

13:29 As far as I can remember, yes, on the radio every night, or was it every day I forget now, every night I think it was, five o'clock, they got their orders over the radio. They all had a number each and it came over the radio, 'Gang 421 to go to 17 Pyrmont,' or something like that.

*He was a member of a gang then, your father?*

Yes you were always in a gang.

*Interesting. Now your father was a great fisherman, I believe, tell me about some of his fishing exploits.*

13:57 Yes he was a good fisherman. Central Steps, which we called the 'Metal Wharf', I don't know if you have ever heard of that before, he fished off that wharf for many years. I'd come home from school and go down and catch small yellow-tail and then when he knocked off work he'd come down and get the yellow-tail and he'd fish for the big ones. He'd bring home Jewfish as tall as him, as I said he was five foot three and that is how big these fish were.

*Incredible. In Sydney Harbour?*

Yes in Sydney Harbour on Central Steps, or the 'Met'.

*Did he have a boat to catch them with?*

14:32 Not in them days. He eventually built one because he broke his leg at work so he decided to build a rowing boat. He built it in my sisters' bedroom and when it was finished he couldn't get it out because it wouldn't fit through the door or the window. So he had to pull it half to pieces and then take it out into the back yard, which was a very small yard about two foot wide, and put it back together again. It was only made of ply.

*That is interesting, building a boat in someone's bedroom. That was the only place he could do it, was it?*

Yes it was apparently. I don't know where my sisters slept when he was building it, I can't remember now.

*Got a bit out of hand with the size?*

Yes. He built it while he had this broken leg - a bale of wool fell on him actually.

*Tell me about that incident, what do you know about that?*

15:24 I was only very young. He got hurt at work, bale of wool fell on him and broke his leg, he was off work for six months, I guess.

*What about compensation, was there anything like that then?*

Well I suppose it was around in them days, I don't know what it paid in those days, but we always had a feed on the table.

*So your mum must have been quite a miracle woman to look after seven children and feed them all - how did she manage do you think?*

I don't know, she just enjoyed it I think, she liked it.

*So what kind of food did you eat in the family?*

15:59 Quite well. We had a lot of fish because of dad catching it all the time. Sunday was a great day, that was a baked dinner day, that is when you got your passionfruit and ice-cream for desert. You went up the street after, especially on a Sunday, you had a brick of ice-cream which was two shillings - it was expensive - and mum would give you a glass to take up and you got three pence worth of passionfruit flavouring to go with it.

*Where did you buy it?*

Just a little corner shop up the road.

*Were there many of those little shops?*

Quite a lot, yes.

*Do you remember the people who run them, or what they were, or where they were?*

16:41 There was old Charlie Conran. There was a Greek family on the corner, I can't think what their names were now. The same shop is still there. Then there was John Holly, he was the Deli. You'd buy biscuits by the pound in a paper bag, you wouldn't buy them in a packet from Woolworths - everything was weighed and given to you. I remember one day it was Mother's Day and I went and bought my mum a pound of salt for Mother's Day, I think it cost me a penny.

*Was she happy with it?*

Yes.

*Well it was something useful. Any other shops around? Was there a barber's shop or a butcher's?*

Yes there was a barber's shop, old Rube was the barber - he'd cut your hair for a shilling, a basin cut, of course. He'd sell you comics. I think you swapped one and paid a penny, you gave him one plus a penny and he'd give you another comic back. If your mother didn't know you used to buy 'Old Chum' cigarettes off him for a penny each. *What's 'Old Chum' is that the brand?*

17:56 There was a brand of cigarettes in them days, 'Old Chum', they're not around today. You would go and buy a cigarette off him for a penny because he'd sell it to under-age kids, naturally, ten to twelve years of age.

*This was no problem?*

Well no one seemed to worry about it. Penny a cigarette.

*That was fairly expensive.*

It was. My word. Rube Lewis was a Jew, so he was making money.

*I have heard about Rube already from some of the others - they said he was up to more than just cutting hair. What else do you think he was up to?*

Oh I don't know, I never heard.

*SP betting and things I've heard.*

I haven't heard that one.

*Some people seem to think he was. Now the look of Millers Point, I believe was quite different in your youth, like the wharves and that all looked different - how different did it look? Can you describe it as it was when you was living there as a young boy?*

19:02 Well the wharves themselves were just full of ships. Walsh Bay especially, there was a ship there all the time. See that was our playground, jumping onto ships and playing, running around. Pinch a packet of biscuits from a box of biscuits out of the seamen's mess room and sometimes we'd get chased and we'd just jump over the side and swim back to the wharf and they couldn't catch us.

*So what about wool stores and things - were there wool stores there then that are no longer there? Were there bulk stores?*

They've all gone now. Dalgety's Wool Shed, which used to lead down to the Dalgety's Wharf where they'd load the wool from up top down the chutes and onto the ships.  
*What kind of a store was it?*

19:57 It was just a great big store, a monstrous big building with stacks and stacks of wool in it. That was one of our playgrounds, we'd go in there and play. The guys who worked in the wool sheds, I don't know what they were called, if they caught us they used to take our pants off and wipe this red dye on our testicles and send us home. Mum would always know then, 'Ah, you've been to the wool sheds all day.'

*That was a traditional thing, was it?*

Apparently it was. Not many of us got caught but the ones who got caught that is what they done to you.

*I wonder how that would go down today. Was it dangerous to work there? Was there asbestos in the sheds? What do you remember about that?*

20:49 I can't remember. I don't know, not that I know of. It was mainly just timber sheds, just thick large timber it was all built out of. I don't think there would have been asbestos there, could have been.

*What happened to those wool stores?*

21:05 They are just gone, they are not there any more.

*What came in place of them?*

I think there's houses up in there now, the top of Merriman Street.

*It must have been when they built the tower, the MSB tower.*

That's right the MSB tower, that is where it was there. They put the tower there and carved the big wall away.

*Now some of the kids that I've spoken to, or some of the men I've spoken to who were kids then, had billy-cart races and things, were you one of them?*

21:37 Oh yes, that was a favourite. We used to race from the top of High Street, there was a street called Munn Street - it used to go all the way down into Dalgety's Wharf which had a very sharp bend on it and went round into Sussex Street, the 'Hungry Mile'. We used to race down there. Kids would stay halfway down to make sure there was no traffic coming, but there wasn't much traffic in them days of course. There was one day we built a billy-cart, and about half the size of this room the box would have been, we got it from some store down in Erskine Street, carted it all back home, put axles on it, wheels, and about fifteen of us got in it and down the hill we went. Well we didn't turn the corner because it just wouldn't turn, so we went straight through the gates of Dalgety's Wharf, big steel gates. There was quite a lot of people got hurt that day. I've still got a scar up here actually. Underneath my chin there. We all fell out, just smashed.

*You had forgotten to design the steering?*

22:45 It just wouldn't turn the speed we were going. You just pull with ropes naturally but it just wouldn't turn the corner.

*Must have been a very large billy-cart to hold fifteen of you.*

Well it was, as I say it was about half the size of this room this box. We had a name for it, I forget what it was called though.

*So you lived at 30 High Street.*

Yes.

*Did you have the top or the bottom?*

The bottom.

*Can you describe the house as it was?*

It had a little front veranda and they are exactly the same today as they were then. A very long hall going through it and there was three bedrooms down that hallway.

Then there was the main kitchen-living-dining room combined area, an old fuel stove there we used to sit around every night to keep warm. The laundry, bathroom and kitchen was actually out in the laundry, that is where the stove was. We didn't have a washing machine, the old copper for boiling. The bathroom went off that, the toilet went off that. It was a very tiny area to cook, bath, wash and everything in the one room.

*How many bedrooms were there?*

Three bedrooms.

*So for seven children plus your mum and dad - how many to a room were there for the kids?*

24:05 Well there was four boys in one room, mum and dad in the middle room. My eldest sister had married by the time I was growing up so Shirley was in there. Then she got married and Pam came along and she went into that room then. So that is how it worked out. It worked, I don't know how, but it did.

*So did you share a bed with another brother?*

Oh I did, I shared a bed with my eldest brother, Richard.

*What was the sort of community feeling around Millers Point? Everyone was in pretty dire straits in a way, that they were not wealthy families, they were battlers and so on, so how were the relations between people?*

24:50 Oh quite good they all got on well together, you'd never see an argument or things like that. You'd just leave your front door open, you just wouldn't close it, people would walk in and out and say, 'I'll have a cup a tea,' and go again.

*What kind of entertainment was there for the men after work, what would they do when they came home?*

25:12 Oh most of them would go to the hotels. Wasn't much entertainment around in them days. Go and have a bet with the SP bookie on a Saturday.

*Which SP bookie did your father use?*

There was quite a few, I won't mention names. There was one up the road about three doors from us and dad used to sit out the back lane, he was a cockatoo - for years he done that.

*Now this is the Palisade is it?*

No in High Street, the back lane of High Street.

*Which hotel was he associated with?*

He drank in the Palisade Hotel.

*Your father did. That was the closest one, wasn't it?*

Oh yes I guess it was.

*I have heard of Cec Moore, who was a SP bookie, wasn't he.*

I wasn't going to mention his name but he was the one dad cockatood for.

*Other people have already filled me in on him. Any stories about the SP bookie you may have?*

26:09 I used to run bets for mum and dad, they used to have their shilling each way on a horse on a Saturday. In them days I used to pedal to Windmill Street, down the back lane of Windmill Street, take their little bets with me, they'd write them out on a bit of paper for me and I'd take them round. I remember one day I was going round and a dog chased me, bit me, threw me off me bike and I never got the bet on and it won and I got into trouble because I never got the bet on. The horse won.

*So did you get an repercussions as a result of that?*

Just a sore backside.

*Was your father a gambling man?*

26:48 I wouldn't say he was a gambler, he loved to have a little bet of course, but they never had much money to bet with but Saturdays they loved to have a little punt. Even mum did, she used to have a shilling here and there.

*Did mum get together with the other mothers in the neighbourhood? After work did they socialise, or what?*

27:12 The only socialising mum would ever done was with the church, the other women, that was her life really, the church.

*Do you remember the names of the priests and the nuns and so on at the church?*

Oh yes. You must have heard of her of course, Sister Antoinette. Some of the others I can't remember. Father Smith. No, I can't remember all of them.

*What was Sister Antoinette like?*

She was a lovely lady, beautiful. I believe she is still alive, have you heard that?

*Well I've heard it but I believe she must be over a hundred if she is alive.*

She turned a hundred this year I think, someone was telling me.

*She is in a nursing home somewhere is she?*

I think so.

*You don't know where?*

No.

*You told me before, when I spoke to you on the phone, when you described your house at 30 High Street, about the back yard and the clothes line and you told me a story about the clothes line - can you tell me that again.*

28:17 The clothes line used to be out in the back lane, it wasn't in the yard of the house, and they were just on wooden posts with thin wire running off and that is where they hung their washing. I wasn't around this time that it happened, but a seaman, a drunken seaman, was apparently walking down the lane going back to his ship and got caught up in the clothes line and accidentally hung himself. So the Council, or the Maritime Services Board who run the houses, they took them all away and made people put lines in their yards.

*Definitely dangerous.*

Well it turned out to be, yes, but apparently they had been going for many years until this happened.

*Did you have hawkers coming to the streets selling you things like clothes-pegs like in the olden days?*

29:10 Oh yes. You always bought your ice for the ice box, the rabbit man would come round, the fruit and vegie man would come round in his little truck and sell fruit and vegetables. There was one particular guy who used to come, John the Chinaman, he was a very large man and he used to carry two big suitcases with him and mum used to buy clothes off him, mainly for the children, and she'd pay him something like one shilling and six pence a week, that is how she'd pay things off when she bought clothes. He used to come every Saturday morning, this chap.

29:54 END OF TAPE MP-FH28 SIDE A

29:55 START OF TAPE MP-FH28 SIDE B

*Now the Council had an unusual way, apparently, of collecting the rubbish, how was it, do you remember that?*

30:10 Yes. They used to have open trucks and there'd be about six garbage workers and they'd just have a great big hessian bag, well not a bag just a big hessian cloth, and they'd just walk up our street, our lane, empty the garbage out, which would be in the lane way in big large tins and throw it straight into the hessian bag and drag it up to the next one. Whoever lived upstairs they used to throw it down a chute and it would land in the garbage tin. They would just throw it onto this and then when they got enough garbage in it they'd all pick it up, six of them, and throw into the truck

and go and do some more. It was time-consuming, just dragging this hessian along all the time.

*That is a strange one. I wonder how that would go over today with the occupational health and safety rules.*

Health, yes.

*Now tell me a little bit about the schools that you attended. Where did you start off?*

Kindergarten was down in High Street, I can't think what the name of the place was.

*Lance, wasn't it?*

31:13 Lance yes, Lance Kindergarten. Went there when I was a youngster of course. I always remember that place because they used to give you milk every day, but in the milk they used to put fish emulsion, it was something to do with your health it was, fish emulsion, some emulsion, it was horrible. Anyway after we left there we were sent to St Brigid's school and from there you went to St Patrick's at Church Hill, that is where I finished off my schooling there, at St Patrick's.

*To what grade did you go?*

31:47 Oh I didn't go that far, second year I think it was, or first year, I was fourteen when I left school.

*Was that the usual thing to do in those days?*

Yes. A lot of people stayed on a bit longer and got better education, I never did. I actually wasn't even fourteen when I left, because I had to get a permit to leave school. I went into a butcher's shop originally when I was fourteen, an apprenticeship with a butcher's, but I didn't like it, so I left. When I turned fifteen that is when I joined Stannard Brothers on the small ferries.

*What was your job there with Stannard Brothers?*

32:27 At fifteen you was a junior deckhand and we used to do little ferry runs round the harbour. They had a fleet of ferries, six ferries, and just doing ferry services all round the harbour. Workers up to Cockatoo, workers from Balmain to the old Manly Ferry Yard at Cremorne, workers down to Garden Island, ferry runs down to there.

*So it was mainly transport for waterside workers?*

32:57 Yes I guess so, mainly waterside workers. Used to take the coal lumpers up to Balls Head to load the coal ships. They used to have a pick-up there, the same as what

the wharfies had and they were all transported up there every day and brought back every night by ferry.

*How big were those ferries?*

About sixty foot long.

*So quite sizeable.*

Not compared to the big ones today, no.

*So how many men would you transport at one time?*

33:28 Different sizes, some of them were double-deckers they'd carry up to 250.

The little ones they'd only carry a 100, 110.

*So you were actually a deckhand?*

Yes, deckhand. As a matter of fact the old Lithgow, she's still floating around the harbour today.

*That was called the Lithgow?*

Lithgow. All Stannards' ferries were called after country towns.

*Were they a good company to work for, Stannards?*

Great company, yes. Family company.

*The pay was reasonable?*

34:02 Yes because you got paid overtime, you always looked forward to work on the weekends so you could get a bit extra.

*How did you get your training for that? Did they train you on the boats?*

34:12 Oh yes they just trained you, all the older guys that worked there trained you.

When I first started at Stannards, they were at the old Opera House, where the Opera House stands today - that's where their base was, which was the old Fort Macquarie, where the tram sheds were. Now they are in Balmain today, it is not owned by Stannard Brothers any more.

*So you were actually continuing the family tradition of working on the water - did you like the work?*

Oh I still do today.

*How long did you actually work with Stannards?*

34:47 I was with them for eight years and I left and went down to Garden Island to work on their tugs, down at Garden Island. I was there for thirty years and I left

there some eight years ago and I'm back with Stannard Brothers now for the last eight years, which is now actually owned by Adsteam, not Stannards. A little story I can tell you about Stannards. When we were down at Circular Quay where the old Water Police used to be, old Albie Stannard, who was the original father of the Stannards company, asked me to wash his car for him, which I did. He wasn't the boss, he just used to walk around, his sons used to run it. So I washed it and he gave me a pound, this was in 1959, 1960, it was a lot of money, gee this was a good job. Some twenty-odd years later my son went to work there, at the same place, and old Albie happened to be there this day and he said, 'Would you wash me car, son?' He said, 'Sure.' Washed his car for him and he gave him two dollars, so the price never went up in all that time.

*You got the best part of the bargain. He didn't get any more generous as he got older. Any incidents that you can remember that happened at work, anything that stands out?*

36:08 Oh yes, I guess. There was a couple of jets flying across the harbour, doing their manoeuvres and what have you and one of them tipped and went into the water just off Fort Dennison. One of the guys, who was driving one of the launches to a timetable to a ship, he went across to it to see if he could help and he had a big black American Negro on the back of the launch with him, he was bringing him off the ship. He said, 'Would you put that cigarette out, please. This might be all fuel around there.' The American guy said, 'Yes sure guy,' and threw it straight into the drink. Boom.

*Caught fire.*

Yes.

*The actual jet plane was it an Air Force plane?*

Navy Air Force.

*Did the guy survive?*

He got out of it.

*Interesting. Anything else, any other anecdotes?*

37:03 I remember chasing a whale at the corner of Jeffrey Street in the ferry, he was stuck in the corner. He was only a baby whale, although he was quite big, really, he couldn't get out of the shallows in there so the skipper, I was only a deckhand at the time, just went round and kept nudging him with the bow of the ferry and got him

out and away he went.

*You don't see too many whales in Sydney Harbour any more.*

Oh yes you do. Just recently.

*You saw one?*

I have. Sydney Heads is full of them. Not full of them but you get your two and three coming down again.

*Thanks for telling me.*

37:39 Nearly two years ago there was two underneath the Harbour Bridge, two whales, just two years ago.

*Now going back to Millers Point and your childhood again - there is a couple of more questions I want to ask you about your paper run. Tell me about your paper run.*

37:57 Oh yes, everyone had a paper run, I guess. The paper run was you'd go down all the ships and sell all your papers and magazines. English ships were pretty hard, they wouldn't buy and they wouldn't tip you, which was a pretty hard thing because you never got paid very much for the day, doing your paper run. The Americans were great, they'd buy all your magazines, didn't matter what you had they'd just buy them and they tip you very well too, that was always good fun.

*So you sold lots of papers.*

Yes.

*How did you get to the ships?*

Just walked, big leather strap.

*From the wharf, you mean?*

From the paper shop to the wharf, just walk.

*You told me a story about walking at low tide through the water at Darling Harbour, what was all that about?*

38:47 Well if it is a very low tide you can walk from One Walsh Bay right up Walsh Bay, along Darling Harbour, up into Cockle Bay, which is now the playground of the yuppies, up around past the old goods yards where the trains used to meet, then back up through Pyrmont. We walked the whole way under every wharf at low tide. You just couldn't do it today because most of the piles have gone, they are just all concrete wharves now.

*So you actually walked below them.*

Yes we walked all the way round.

*At water level.*

Well, you was in about three inches of water, it had to be low tide - you couldn't do it at high tide. We just walked all the way.

*Interesting. There is another prank that you told me about before, which was to do with the clock tower, what was that one?*

39:38 Darling Harbour again, right opposite High Street, there used to be a massive big clock, I think it was McIlwray-McKecchin's Wharf. Everyone looks at a clock naturally and one day the hands started to be moving round and round and round and no one could work out what it was. They eventually found out that it was my brother who was up in the clock tower turning the cogs around. So down came the police, the fire brigade and they had ladders up there trying to get him out, but he'd already beat them to the punch - he was out and he was standing up in the back lane of Kent Street, watching them.

*Trying to advance the time was he - he was in a hurry, was he? What time did the pubs close in your day?*

40:26 Oh six o'clock in the very young, early days, yes. The six o'clock swill.

*So was there a lot of activity at six o'clock?*

Yes, people everywhere. We were too young to go and have a beer or anything, we used to sit round the corners watching.

*Was alcohol a bit of a problem for the guys there?*

Oh I wouldn't say it was a problem - I'd say it was an enjoyment.

*Now there was some friction, or fights between some of the Australian sailors and the English ones, wasn't there?*

41:07 Yes. It was an Anzac Day and *Dominion Monarch* was tied up at Dalgety's Wharf at the bottom of Munn Street and a couple of seamen went into the Lord Nelson Hotel and started playing the guitar and singing songs, which were not Anzac Day songs. A couple of guys took offence to it and give them a couple of belts and sent them off. But within five minutes the whole crew of the ship come marching up Munn Street - well it was on for young and old, there was about three hundred off this ship come up and then the guys from Millers Point just bashed the hell out of

them and sent them all the way back down Munn Street. Two paddy-wagons turned up and they just saw there was that many people there, they thought they would get out of there, so they left. It was all over in about three hours.

*Three hours of fighting?*

Yep.

*So how many Aussies were involved in that fighting, if there was three hundred Englishmen?*

42:07 About forty or fifty, I guess.

*And they beat them?*

Yes.

*They must have been tough then.*

Oh yes.

*Was it common to see that kind of thing happening in the streets?*

We used to see a lot of fights, yes. I wouldn't say it was common, but it was good to see a good stoush every now and again.

*Now what was Christmas like at Millers Point? Christmas Day - what did you do on that day?*

42:36 Well, I think the guys would all head down for Central Steps, which we called the 'Met', the 'Metal Wharf'. It was a bit like Bondi Beach down there on Christmas Day, the kids all had their toys, their bikes, rubber tyres. We'd all swim for the rest of the day and play around and eventually get home for Christmas dinner late. That was a great place, the old 'Met'.

*So did the families come together or everyone had their own family come to the house on Christmas Day?*

It was just families stayed together.

*You have fond memories of Christmas Day?*

43:09 Yes it was always a great day. We used to get chickens for lunch, we never had chickens during the year.

*Never?*

No.

*You couldn't afford them?*

43:19 Couldn't afford them. Dad used to raise them in the back yard, buy them

down the markets for two pence each or whatever they were as chickens, raise them by the heater during the winter, out in the back yard when the summer months came, raise them and come Christmas Day he'd chop their heads off and we'd eat them, that was Christmas lunch.

*Interesting. So chickens were expensive?*

Yes. You just never bought them like you do today, frozen or in the shops or anything, you never saw chickens around.

*Did anyone keep chickens in Millers Point apart from your dad, was it fairly common or what?*

Oh yes other people did.

*Now what happened in terms of technology on the wharves? I mean over time everything improved and things changed and as the wharf technology changed were you part of all that changing technology? Did you notice much of it?*

44:16 Oh yes there was a big change over the years from the time I started. Containerisation changed everything. Where ships would stay in for a week, and we used to get a lot of work because the ships would anchor down the harbour, they'd be at least six or seven ships at anchor, and we'd have to run timetables down to them, take stores down to them, change their laundry, bring it backwards and forwards, customs would be going down, agents, so it kept all the smaller launches in them days very busy. Today they go straight to the wharf, unload in twelve to twenty-four hours and they are gone, so it is too quick a turnover today, which is good, I guess.

*So when those ships used to come into port did some of the men on them look for accommodation in the city?*

No they always lived on board.

*Did you make friends with any of those characters if they were there for two or three weeks? Did they come much ashore, or not?*

45:14 No, not really, I don't think so. The people next door they made friends with some guys of a New Guinea ship, he was an Islander and they seemed to have made friends with him. Every time he came he would always come up and stay with them or have a meal with them.

*Did you ever get invited on board those ships?*

Yes, we used to go on quite a lot, especially the Burns Philp ships. My uncle was a

seamen on there and we used to go on there and he'd feed us up with ice cream and things like that, which there was plenty of.

*So how long did you live at 30 High Street?*

Until I was twenty and then I got married and left.

*So tell me a little bit about how you met your wife.*

46:01 At a dance, no it wasn't, it was at a party in Kingsford. She worked for Elite Furniture and the girl she worked with was engaged to my mate and they got talking and said we should all go out one night, which we did, and that is how it started.

*So she's not from Millers Point?*

She was actually born in Uralla, up near Armidale and they moved down to Sydney and went to Botany, that is where Judith lived.

*So when you got married you moved out of the area, did you?*

Yes. We moved out and went to Mascot, lived in Mascot for a few years. Then up to Botany for about twelve years I guess and then moved out here.

*How many children do you have now?*

Two. Geoffrey, the boy, and Lisa.

*You said one of them is also involved with the waterfront.*

Yes, Geoff is a skipper on the Manly Ferries.

*Is he enjoying it too?*

Yes, he loves it.

*Now talking about Millers Point again as a suburb, what sort of physical changes were there to Millers Point, like the demolition of any heritage buildings or changes to the finger wharves, while you were there for those twenty years? What did you see change? You've already told me about the wool stores disappearing - were there any other physical changes to the area?*

47:32 Walsh Bay itself that has changed a hell of a lot, there's no shipping goes there whatsoever now, it is all just apartments. Cockle Bay, that's all changed, it used to be full of ships there all the time, we'd be taking ships in and out of there all the time, now it is all just restaurants and movie houses.

*How do you feel about all that?*

I don't like it at all, I think it is bad what they have done. They are going to start doing it again now with Darling Harbour from Millers Point down.

*Well there is a plan now, when Patricks go to use that space for putting an extra 25,000 people in, what do you think that is going to do to Millers Point?*

I think it will ruin it, it will just be terrible. There will be no heritage left whatsoever. It should be left the way it is.

*So what is your opinion of the demise of Sydney as a working harbour? Is it sort of going out the window, that concept?*

48:33 I think it is wrong what they are doing because they want to make it a leisure harbour instead of a working harbour. If you look at people who travel on Sydney Harbour they like the look of that sort of thing, to see the ships come in and go out and the tug boats moving around, the barges. They just don't want to look at someone's big house down in Rose Bay - they want to see something that is going, moving, working.

*Yes that's a shame I think too. So what do you think the future of Millers Point is looking like? As far as you are concerned how do you see it?*

Doesn't look good but things have got to move on I guess, at the same time. I'm not happy with it but it will happen.

*Well there's more residential coming and less port activity. So you have good memories still of Millers Point? What do you think of when I say Millers Point, what kind of images come in your mind?*

49:30 Oh I still like it. At least once a year we go down and have a bit of a reunion with all the old friends and mates. It will still be Millers Point.

*Do you think it will ever come back to what it used to be?*

Never, no.

*Now Des, I believe you've got a story about some elephants, tell me that story.*

49:57 Yes. Once a year the ship *Bombadalla* used to come in from New Zealand bringing the Worth Brothers Circus across to Sydney. When they unloaded all the animals off the ship they used to put them underneath what we used to call the arches, the 'Hungry Mile' is full of the arches and that is where they would store all the animals. They'd sit them there for about two days and then after two days they'd march the whole circus up to Prince Alfred Park. For every year I can remember my brother used to jump on the lead elephant and they'd let him lead all the way through the city up into Prince Alfred Park. It was always a good time to wait for, for the circus to come to town.

*He was the elephant rider.*

50:40 Yes, sitting up the front on top of him. No one else was allowed to, only him, I don't know why.

*I have had some stories told to me by other people who have seen the elephants unloaded with cranes and things from the ships. Is that right?*

Yes they'd unload them with the big ships' cranes.

*It must be weird seeing a tiger lifted, or an elephant.*

Naturally the tigers were in chains, the elephants just had big straps around them. It was always a yearly thing, you'd wait for the circus to come in. You could smell it.

*Would you be taken to the circus as a kid?*

No, I don't think I ever went to the circus, that was our circus time once a year.

*Now your parents, after you left Millers Point in 1964, your parents stayed on, tell me what kind of life they had after you left.*

51:33 Yes they stayed on. Mum was a diabetic and she got glaucoma and she lost her eyesight for a long, long time. My other brothers, two of them were still living there, my eldest brother died earlier, but John and Bobby lived there with her. They were at sea most of the time. Actually, they both lived there on their own for some twenty years before they both died, they both died on Millers Point.

*What about your father - when did he die?*

52:04 It was in the mid-1980s. He was actually in a nursing home when he died, he was eighty-three when he died.

*So after you left Millers Point did you have much connection with the suburb?*

Oh yes, we used to go back at least once a week. My children loved going down there, they loved Millers Point. We'd always try and go down once a week. We never had a car until much later. When we did get one we made sure we went down every second or third day.

*What would you do down there?*

Oh we'd just sit and talk and I'd go up the pub with my brothers, leave Jude at home with mum.

*So what sort of feelings do you have about Millers Point, what sort of memories come back?*

53:05 That's hard to say. I mean I wouldn't want to live there today, it is nothing like

it was them days. No, not the same.

*So what has changed there then?*

The people have changed, it is not the local people that was there, the working class people. There are still some working class people down there, but there are too many people who have moved in. Once the Maritime Services Board sort of sold up and give it to the Housing Commission, I think it is called, things changed then.

*There are lots of new people coming in now who are basically public housing tenants, what do you think that is doing to the suburb? Is it changing it at all?*

I wouldn't like to say on that because I don't know who they are even.

*You haven't been living there for forty-one years.*

54:01 That's right, forty-one years.

*Do you miss it?*

Yes I do, especially when we was young growing up, that's the part you miss. I don't think the kids do what we done today, we were pretty naughty kids. I think. They used to say, 'Look out, here comes the Gray boys.'

*Anything else you want to talk about Des, we've covered most of my questions?*

I will most probably think of something later, but not at the moment I can't.

*Okay, well thanks very much for the interview, it has been very valuable.*

54:47 END OF TAPE MP-FH 28 SIDE B AND END OF INTERVIEW WITH DES GRAY.