

CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
ERSKINEVILLE

Name: Bill Schwebel

Date: 8 July 1995

Place: Newtown

Interviewer: Sue Rosen

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **SR: Bill Schwebel at Newtown, 8th of July 1995.**

Bill, where were you born?

BS: 28 John Street Erskineville, the 4th of the 9th 1910.

SR: And did you grow up in Erskineville?

BS: Up till I got married, '35.

SR: Gosh. And did you have brothers and sisters?

BS: Yes, there was nine of us. That made six brothers and two sisters.
The youngest died practically at birth.

SR: Did you say that the youngest - - -

BS: Yes, the youngest sister, Kathleen, she died about six weeks old.

SR: What happened, what was the problem?

BS: I couldn't tell you. I just remember the mother nursing her in the yard and keep wetting her lips with water and the father worked up the country.

SR: This is your dad?

BS: Yes. And we had to call for him and she died when she was about six weeks old, what from I don't know.

SR: Where were you in the family, what position were you in the family?

BS: I was about the fifth, the middle.

SR: How many were there altogether?

BS: Well, there was Ernie, the eldest – he died a couple of years ago at ninety three and seven months old. Lal [?] died in St George Hospital a few years ago. Then there was Gladys, she died I think in Marrickville Hospital say ten year ago and there was Les, then myself, then George, Albert and young Kathleen.

SR: Gosh.

BS: It was a family.

SR: Yes.

BS: And in the family they all bar Kathleen married and Grace, my wife, and I are the only two left out of my family and their spouses and we've been married sixty years next January the 25th.

2.19 **SR: There's not many people that have stayed together so long.**

BS: Well, we're trying to see who's going to win the fight.

SR: Right.

BS: We've only had the one.

SR: It's been going for sixty years?

BS: Haven't finished yet.

SR: And what are your earliest memories?

BS: Well, I can remember just across the railway line there was a hotel there – I think it's a boarding house now – the Cosmopolitan Hotel, and they used to cater for the workers from the railway, Eveleigh workshop. They had the gate just near this side of Macdonaldtown Station and thousands of the workers used to come and drink in the Cosmopolitan. Then they closed that gate to extend the railway line, put extra line in, and that finished off that hotel and it became one of the biggest sly grog pubs in Sydney - Tom Hartigan was the publican.

SR: That's near Murphys' place.

BS: Just down from Murphys', just down from Terry Murphy. Terry Murphy lived opposite John Street where I was born. And the fellow who lived in there before Terry, his name was Crew [?] and he was an employee of the Erskineville Council and his daughter had a little shop up the top of Albert Street and Erskineville Road and that was when the Police Boys' Club was the Old Vic picture show.

4.02 And next door to the picture show was this big house that the owner of the picture show lived – his name was Bob Evans. And when the talkies came in that finished the picture show off and I believe they demolished the big house and they built a factory – and I don't know whether it's a shoe factory or they used to manufacture the heels for women's shoes. Then, of course, it became a stadium

SR: Did they have fights in there at that stadium?

BS: Fights, yes. More wrestling, like middleweights, about twelve stone and one of them was an employee of, I don't know, Alexandria or Redfern Council and one of them, a ginger bloke, I think he worked in the St Peters brick tips to earn an extra dollar in the Depression years.

SR: Bill, we were talking about your earliest memories.

BS: Well, the earliest I can remember, I must have been about two years of age and I walked up outside this Cosmopolitan Hotel and a woman, she was a single woman who lived with her father in Pine Street, she used to supply the family with eggs, bring them down, and she saw me up there and brought me down home so I must have been about two years, wandering off. Well, then I can remember like during the war years, '14-'18 war years, before I went to school and I remember going to school first day.

6.02 **SR: Really?**

BS: Yes.

SR: How did you feel about it?

BS: I played up; I wouldn't go to school.

SR: Yes?

BS: Yes. And I remember up the top of John Street there was a little weatherboard shop and mother bought some, I think it was Weetbix biscuits 'round and put some butter on them and sent me to school that way but that's about the earliest.

SR: O.K. Now, what kind of a house did you live in?

BS: Well, the father used to call it a pigeon box. It was only a little weatherboard cottage, one, two, three, four and a kitchen and we had to put our own bath in because in those days they only had galvanised tin tubs to do the washing and to bath in so we all had to get in the same water, one after the other.

SR: Would you have your bath in the kitchen?

BS: Out in the bit of a laundry where there was a fuelled copper. It was open and had a canvas blind down for privacy.

SR: A bit chilly in winter.

BS: Oh, I can't remember but I don't think baths were a daily habit in those days, anyone.

SR: Well, what kind of a place was Erskineville for kids in the 19s, you know, '14, '15?

BS: Well, I'll give you an example. We lived opposite a church and I believe the Muslims have bought it now - it was a Church of England or a Church of Christ, I think. We were directly opposite and we used to play cricket and football out in the street because there was no other entertainment then.

8.04

There was no TVs or wirelesses or anything like that and one Sunday while the church was having a service all the kids in the street were playing football, I think, because it was in winter and the minister – his name was Carter – and he owned a pickle factory in Monks Lane Alexandria and he got the police down there and there were sixteen of us all got booked by the cops. And there was three turned sixteen and once you turned sixteen you had to appear in the senior court Newtown but under sixteen you had to go to Foveaux Street called the Children's Court. And so thirteen of us appeared down there and I appeared on me thirteenth birthday, the 4th of September 1923.

SR: But what were you charged with?

BS: Obstructing the church service. Well, this fella was such a big fella, if he had six people there it was crowded and his voice was so big and booming it'd go over all the rest of them. But anyway we only got a caution and I think the three who appeared in Newtown only got a caution too. It was so ridiculous.

SR: What was it like at the court? Did they have police there, giving evidence?

BS: I think the police who arrested gave the evidence, yes – I think so, I can't remember.

SR: And what would they say, you were playing football on Sundays?

BS: Obstructing the service, I think that was the church and I remember the thirteen of us standing in front and the magistrate there and there was a lot of young kids were paraded outside and I turned around and had a look and the magistrate said "If you don't take notice of me", he said, "you'll be out there with them" – I remember that very plainly.

10.14 But just before we appeared into court my brother two up from me, Stan, he's only about five foot high and about four foot in weight, he went over and challenged this Carter who was a massive big man and he said "Apparently I made a mistake with that brother of yours", me. But anyway I mentioned this to the magistrate and I think the police said my brother threatened Carter, I'm not too sure. And he's only a little bloke - matter of fact he was to be a jockey, that's how small he was – and he was the first one of the family who died. He worked on the dock down Woolloomooloo and he was the first one who died. Well, that was like the early life but prior to that I remember a celebration down Erskineville Park from the Erskineville schoolkids and I was only saying to the wife the other day I thought it might have been the end of the war. Well then if it'd been the end of the war I think the Catholic schoolkids would've been there too so I don't think they were there and it might have been a celebration of Erskineville School reaching fifty year old or something. And we were given three bits of fruit and a bun and the fruit shop up the top of Charles Street is all demolished now. It was owned by Tripp's [?] – we used to call it Trippy's Fruit Shop – and they supplied the fruit and, of course, there was cake shops. I don't know where the buns come from but every kid in Erskineville School down in Erskineville Park.

SR: And they had a sort of picnic?

11.59 BS: Yes, a bit of a picnic. And the football oval was in the centre and just as you leave Erskineville, like St Mary's, you go into the park there was a big rose garden, like a picket fence around it. Well then as the kids were going in they had to have a pannikin with a string around their neck so they wouldn't leave it - I don't know whether we had lemonade or milk, I don't know. But when we were going up to get the fruit and that in a bag I said "Thank you" and the woman that gave me she said to another woman, she said "The first one who ever said thank you" to me. And that only come back in my mind now last Thursday when I was talking to the wife about this meetings and I just remembered it. So discussing with the wife a lot of things have come back to me. And, as I said, I remember when they concreted Erskineville Road. You want me to continue on that?

SR: Yes.

BS: Up over the railway line before you get near our bridge - in Erskineville Road there's a bit of a bridge used to be up and that was all clay - and when it rained and a lot of rain and the vehicles in those days was a four-wheel wagon and four horses used to pull them. Well, what it's taking up, whether it's wheat or wool or what I don't know, but the wheels used to sink down to the axle so they'd take the four horses from the back truck, put it in the front, that'd be the eight horses to pull it up over the bridge and park outside a timber yard which is Ogden's timber yard - Ogdens owned it - and then they'd give the horse a bit of a spell, they'd come back and bring back up the other one.

SR: And you can remember when they concreted that road?

BS: Yes. And then after that they concreted the road, all hand-mixed concrete because they had no concrete mixers in those days.

14.05 **SR: When was that about, when would they have done that? Are you talking before 1920 or later? You're not sure. That's O.K.**

BS: It might be a year or two one way or the other.

SR: Yes, but around the 1920 mark?

BS: Yes, yes.

SR: You were a kid still - were you a child still?

BS: Still at school.

SR: Yes.

BS: Oh, yes.

SR: Well, just talking about Erskineville generally, what sort of a place was it for kids at that time?

BS: Plenty of fights.

SR: Yes?

BS: Plenty of fights, yes. "Survival of the fittest" was the motto of Erskineville in those days.

SR: Were there a lot of kids in the neighbourhood?

BS: There were no chemist shops and modern methods in those days.

SR: Right. Were you aware if people used contraception at all or it just wasn't an option?

BS: No. I think the only contraception in those days was a syringe and carbolic soap.

SR: What did they do?

BS: The women used to syringe themselves up when they become pregnant.

SR: Like abortion?

BS: But, of course, that was out of my – I don't know, I was too young to know.

SR: So were you aware at all or even later on of abortion?

BS: There was nothing like that. Oh, there used to be a woman who's around here by the name Hunter. She used to go around with a catheter in her pocket and I believe that the police wouldn't touch her because she used to look after the police's girlfriends.

SR: Right.

BS: These are stories. I was too young to know actually what an abortion was or actually what sex was. There was nine in my family and the kids used to say "Oh, your father and mother nine times. I've only got one in my family. My father and mother only had one" – this is the talk because we were innocent, we knew nothing, not like the kids of today.

16.12 **SR: And did you get any sex education at all?**

BS: No. Only sitting in the gutter telling dirty yarns, that's all the sex education.

SR: So your parents never, ever said anything to you?

BS: No. I remember – I can't tell you how old – I was working and my mother said "Anything you want to know, come and ask me".

SR: That's what she said?

BS: Yes.

SR: And did you?

BS: I think I learnt by experience.

SR: And you mentioned this carbolic soap. What's carbolic soap?

BS: Well, carbolic soap used to be a soap that the average person used to use because of lice and vermin and sand soap was used to scrub their floors because they have no carpets or linos in those days. They used to scrub the floors and table top with them and whatever with the sand soap and scrubbing brush.

SR: So carbolic soap was pretty strong disinfectant sort of stuff?

BS: Yes, it was a red colour, carbolic, yes.

SR: And people could use that as a contraceptive?

BS: Like when they got pregnant they used this bowl in their vagina.

SR: Did it work?

BS: Well, I'm here.

SR: Yes. It must have.

BS: And eight brothers and sisters.

SR: Couldn't have been too good a method. What kind of a kid were you?

BS: Kid?

SR: Yes. What sort of a kid were you?

BS: Oh, a knockabout kid. I remember when I was a young kid – I was probably about eight, something like that – I found a snake. The only school I've been to, Erskineville School, which is only one step above kindergarten and I found a snake out there about three foot.

18.13 **SR: A snake?**

BS: Head chopped off and I put it in the teacher's drawer. I remember him. He had a beard - we used to call him Mary Popkin. And our headmaster was a little fat bloke and we called him Poison Guts. Yes

SR: Yes.

BS: So anyway I put this snake in this Mary Popkin's drawer and anyway the teacher asked who put it there and, of course, Bill Schwebel, and I had to take it up and bring it home but I didn't bring it home. I put it in the sewerage in the middle of the street, John Street.

SR: You put it in where?

BS: Down the sewerage. In John Street it comes down and drops in the centre and that's where the sewerage was and when there was a hell of a lot of rain it used to flood up because I suppose the outlet was only about six inches and the water used to come up. And I'd wake up in the night in the home and the water'd be up and I remember the sewer rats swimming around in the bedrooms and all over the place until the water subsided, it stopped raining and it went down the sewer. In the '30s they had what they called relief work - I think it was two weeks in five - they were called dole work and they reconstructed that sewerage, made it much bigger so I don't suppose that happens now.

SR: But did you actually have raw sewage going through your bedroom?

BS: Not the raw sewage, the stormwater sewage. Oh, no, they had the toilet sewerage, they had the toilet, ordinary toilet.

SR: So you're talking stormwater and it would come into your house?

20.01 BS: Stormwater. There was a dip in the road - it's still the same. I remember when it got sealed - and I'll tell you the story about that - and the outlet was only about six inches because they had like the gutter and this concrete or rock or whatever it was and any of our balls used to go down there you could climb down and get it.

SR: Right.

BS: Yes. And I think the outlet for the rainwater was only about a six inch and with the storms it used to flood up. But the people who owned the house we lived in, their foundations - still down there, three two-storey houses, still down there - about three foot from the ground, they wouldn't get that. Our home was built say about six inches off the ground so the flood would come up and the water rise and you can like

lay in bed and you can paddle your hand in the sewer water and I remember like the sewer rats crawling around. Yes, this is true, floating about like a kitten [?].

SR: What was your address?

BS: 28 John Street. It's demolished now; it fell to pieces.

SR: No wonder.

BS: Yes.

SR: Well, what sort of a family do you come from – how would you describe your family?

BS: A real down working class family. My father was a hod carrier.

SR: What's that?

BS: Well, they used to have like that and a back on it and a stand down here, used to carry it on his shoulder, supposedly used to carry about eighteen bricks and then they want cement, they fill it up with cement and they'd have it on their shoulder and take it up and empty it out. And then if it rained – there was no public holidays, I don't think there was any public holidays, there was no sick leave, and like if you didn't work you didn't get paid.

22.03

And I've been out with the father, I remember, on a job out at Earlwood when Earlwood was starting to get built and it started to sprinkle and they had to go into the shed and the foreman booked down the time that they stopped because of the rain and then when they went out to work again, when they started work again, and in between the rain they never got paid and there was work. And then the Benevolent Society down in Quay Street, the railway, and I remember the mother and a pram, a kid in the pram, another one at the end and I used to hang onto the and we had to walk from John Street Erskineville down the Quay to the Benevolent Society and we used to get what we called breakfast and a loaf of bread and they'd get the bread, meat, and throw it over to you like that and you'd put it in a sugar bag and you'd have to wheel it back home. That's like food. That's when the father couldn't get a job.

SR: When was that? What years are you talking?

BS: Before the '20s. The father enlisted and they came down to the house and when he saw the nine kids, the officer in the army, he said "Oh, you've done your duty there" and wouldn't take him.

SR: That was a relief.

BS: Nine kids. We'd have to say eight kids because I think the little youngest daughter died before then, in that period.

SR: How did the First World War affect life in your family?

BS: The war?

SR: Yes, the first one. What can you remember about it?

BS: The only thing I can remember about it – and I was, what, four, five – I had a coat made out of an army uniform and in the wintertime it was cold and your nose runny and all that and a lady next door I remember her saying quite blatantly, she said “Another stripe for you?”, wearing all this rubbish. Yes, Mrs Cross, her name was Mrs Cross.

24.23 **SR: O.K, so your father was a labouring man.**

BS: A labourer, yes.

SR: And did he have permanent work or it's just like when he could get it?

BS: When you could get it with the building game.

SR: Was that common, like most people in the area worked that way?

BS: Yes, yes, yes. That was the working conditions of the working class in those days and that was when the trade unions were starting to come up and stopped all that: you got sick pay and you got holiday pay. All the conditions that we're enjoying today we can only thank the trade unions for.

SR: Your dad, did he get active in the union or politics? Was he politically involved?

BS: No, no, no. I think dad was more for his kids.

SR: Did he have things, like did he have shoes to wear to work?

BS: No, he had big clodhopper boots and then Friday when he come home, he'd wash his grey flannel to take us out of a weekend and we used to go up to Brighton-Le- Sands long before it ever got built for a train drive and the steam trains.

SR: How would you describe your mother – what did she do?

BS: Washerwoman, incubator.

SR: Did she work outside the home ever?

BS: She used to do a bit of midwife. There was a Nurse Merse [?] lived in Wilson Street Newtown. Anyway, up the street and when she wanted a midwife to help her like with bringing children she used to get mum because having nine kids she was experienced.

26.20 **SR: Yes.**

BS: I remember a time - I can't tell you how old but I was only young – people come from Alexandria, their baby was dying and they come for my mother to come over because of her experience to save the kid and I really think she saved that baby's life, if I can remember. But, of course, this is all coming from me now but couldn't remember it yesterday but your questions bringing it back. Yes, I'm sure mum saved that child's life.

SR: What was the matter? Do you know what was the matter with it?

BS: Oh, no, I wouldn't know. I didn't know if a person had influenza or a leg off: we were too young.

SR: What were common illnesses? What were the sort of illnesses that people got in those days?

BS: More colds than anything else, I think; you couldn't afford to buy good clothes. Up the top of this street there's a factory. You see the factory up the top of Watkin Street here?

SR: Up on King Street, yes.

BS: Yes, and Wilson Street, that used to be a baker's and when I was young Robels [?] bought it out – supposed to be the baker from Germany – and they used to get the flour in bags, like sugar bags, like that. And the truck'd pull up in that lane, just up here, the lane, and they had a horse and they'd have a hoist up the top. They used to tie the rope around the bag and get the horse to pull up and that's how they used to take all the flour up the top.

28.06 Well then dad used to get flour bags from there for blankets for us and I remember the mice running all over the bed, nibbling this flour. People in Erskineville, they were poverty-stricken. People today, they talk about the needy today. It's nothing compared with those days; it was forty eight hours a week you worked. I started work on forty eight hours.

SR: And how old were you when you started?

BS: Fourteen.

SR: What did you start working at, at fourteen?

BS: The first job I had was a foundry down in Marrickville – I can't think of the name – seven and thruppence a week.

SR: And what did you do?

BS: What you call a rapper, the moulders, and as they're taking the mould off their moulds you had to get a hammer and tap it so to lift it up – seven and thruppence. September, it was dark when I went and dark when I came home from work. I only stayed a few days.

SR: This is the interview with Bill Schwebel at Newtown. It's day 2 because we had technical problems yesterday. Bill, I don't know where we got up to - I think we asked about what sort of family that you came from. Who controlled the finances in your family?

BS: There was no finances to control.

SR: Really? Like who looked after the rent?

BS: The landlord did next door.

30.02 **SR: Right.**

BS: Mother lived in the house for thirty eight years and when she passed away in that house the rent was eleven and eight pence a week for thirty eight years. She got buried on the Tuesday, I think, and they put the hand out for the rent on the Thursday.

SR: And did your family rent all their lives – they never owned their own home?

BS: No. Only the kids started to buy their own after the war.

SR: Your mother, was she responsible for the budget, you know, and paying all the bills and organising that?

BS: Oh yes, oh yes. She was the cook and every Friday night we'd have to go up the road and buy say two or three tuppenny pieces of fish and tuppence worth of chips and that'd go through the family because you had to wait till the father come home from work because he got paid on a Friday night. So there wouldn't be any money in the house until he came home and then the kids'd have to run up the street in Erskineville Road to buy the fish and chips. I think that was a ritual on a Friday.

SR: A ritual?

BS: Yes. Well, every Friday. Not for religious reasons [meaning Catholic tradition of fish on Fridays] because we're not religious.

SR: Did your father stay employed? You know across the 19s and across the war period and up to the 1920s, did your father stay in work most of the time?

BS: I should imagine he did.

SR: You don't remember any long periods of unemployment?

BS: No. There were the short periods; that's when we went down to the Benevolent Society. Like the mother had a baby in the pram and another one sitting on the end and then another one hanging onto the handles of the pram and we'd walk from Erskineville down to Quay Street, Railway Square for the Benevolent Society and that's where you'd get a loaf of bread thrown at you – thrown at you – and some Grainos [?] I think it was, like a morning breakfast and a lump of meat and you'd get it in a sugar bag.

32.29 **SR: Would they wrap the meat up in paper or anything?**

BS: I remember them throwing it over onto the counter.

SR: Just a lump of meat?

BS: But whether they wrapped it up or not I don't know, I can't remember that part.

SR: Can you remember how your mother felt about having to go to the Benevolent Society?

BS: Oh, just a necessity, that or starve, because there was no dole and if you didn't work you didn't eat.

SR: Did she ever make any comment about how they delivered that kind of charity?

BS: Oh, no, no, no. I think she was just pleased to get food. See, our religion in those days where a lot of Catholics were around about and Protestants and that but our family, our religion was food, clothing and shelter.

SR: And your parents weren't affiliated with any religion at all?

BS: I never believed in religion, never.

SR: So you never went to Sunday school or anything?

BS: Just because it was opposite and Christmas parties.

SR: So you'd go to the Christmas party?

BS: Yes. That was the only time I went to Sunday school come Christmastime for a Christmas tree and the Christmas party.

SR: Did your family celebrate Christmas?

BS: Well, the only time of the year you'd have a chicken in those days was Christmas Day. It's the cheapest food today but in those days it was very dear and I really think without being too sure they'd buy a chicken and it'd take them about a month to pay it off at sixpence a week or something like that.

34.24 **SR: Wouldn't people keep chickens in their backyard for eggs?**

BS: Our backyard was divided by the owner of the property next door. He had a back fence dividing the backyard and he had his pigeon loft and a lot of building material in it.

SR: So did you have much space in your backyard for playing in?

BS: Very, very little and yet the mother was very fond of her garden.

SR: What sort of things would she have in her garden?

BS: I wouldn't tell. I wasn't interested in anything like that.

SR: Were vegetables there?

BS: I was more interested in out in the street, playing with the other kids.

SR: Yes, but would your family grow vegetables in the garden?

BS: Oh, no.

SR: No. What about politically? Were your parents politically involved?

BS: Political?

SR: Yes.

BS: No.

SR: Not at all?

BS: No.

SR: What about in the union?

BS: But I remember my father used to read I think it was the *News*. There used to be two papers in those days, *News* and the *Sun* and I think the *News* went out of action about 1920 to '30 but the father used to read the paper and the light in the house was a little gas pipe from the war with a little burner. It was very, very dark and dim but I can remember him reading the paper like to the mother and for us kids to hear but it was over our head.

36.04 **SR: Yes. And you can't remember the issues were that concerned him? Can you remember your parents talking about things – what about the conscription campaign in World War I? Can you remember talking to your parents, talking about that?**

BS: No, I can't, no, no, no. I was too young?

SR: What about the Wobblies? They were around then.

BS: I don't know. I remember them, yes. I don't remember them, I remember hearing of them. And, of course, "wowser" was a very common word. That was a provocative word, to call somebody a wowser.

SR: And what did it imply, calling somebody a wowser?

BS: A wowser was a person who was always in church and would never drink but I think a Wobbly was a workers' movement, wasn't it?

SR: Yes.

BS: Yes. But this is the first time I heard that "Wobbly" for many, many years so I can't recall actually what Wobbly means.

SR: Can you remember any election campaigns that were happening?

BS: Yes, yes.

SR: What can you remember?

BS: In those days in Erskineville a Labor bloke'd stand up on a box and he'd be cheered and cheered and cheered. Whether they knew what he was talking about, I don't know, but if a UAP, United Australian Party, as [the conservative] Coalition is today, he'd get pelted with tomatoes; they wouldn't listen to him.

SR: Where would they stand up?

BS: On a corner of Charles Street and Erskineville Road there used to be a fruit shop there called Tripp's and it was called Trippy's – I'll talk about that when you want me to - I think it was about five shops. They're

demolished now because we was up there just now. Been demolished when they was building Erskineville Road.

38.09 They used to stand up there and spruik and the Liberals used to get pelted with tomatoes; no matter what the Labor would say they would cheer him. Yes, it used to be fun for us kids in those days, watching them. And then corner of Brown Street, the next street back, remember we used to go up there too, listening to them.

SR: That's Brown Street Newtown?

BS: Yes, the next street along Wilson Street and up the top there was Marcus Clark's had a retail store there and that got burnt down next to the Salvation Army and I don't know what it is now.

SR: Can you remember did people heckle and ask questions? Those people standing on boxes and spruiking, can you remember any of the things that they were on about, what the issues were?

BS: Oh, no, no, no, don't know. I don't think they knew themselves.

SR: And your dad was never associated with any political party?

BS: No.

SR: Well, what sort of discipline was used in the house?

BS: Discipline?

SR: Yes.

BS: Well, I don't think there was very much discipline. We were given a very, very open, free life.

SR: Really?

BS: Yes. Like there was eight. Like the youngest sister died when she was only a few weeks old, Kathleen, but we were given a pretty good free life.

SR: Well, what if you did something that was wrong or that you weren't allowed to do what would happen?

BS: I don't know. Never, never in my life did I get a hiding or a smack on the bottom, never.

40.04 **SR: So were there rules in the house about when dinner was or how to treat one another and they were just understood?**

BS: Nothing like that, no. We had our particular place around the big table. The young kids had a stool made – there might be three of us sitting on a stool – the others have chairs but we were just interested in eating because food was never, never plentiful.

SR: With the meals – you know how you said you were just interested – what was a typical meal, what would you have? Would you have your main meal in the evening, the main meal?

BS: I think in the '30s or the '20s and '30s - and I think it was very common in Erskineville – bread and dripping, pepper and salt.

SR: Did you have that?

BS: Oh, day in, day out - butter was too dear - or dry bread and jam or syrup, golden syrup. But you can never have a feed but I remember when I was a kid I always had to go up the road and buy half a pound of blade steak for the father to have for breakfast because in those days it might be he'd have breakfast at five and he wouldn't have his lunch till twelve so he had to have a good breakfast because of his hod carrying which was a very, very heavy, heavy, manually heavy job and such a long period. There was no morning teas or nothing like that in those days. There was a small billy and a tin pannikin for them to drink out of and on an open fire.

42.11 **SR: And what sort of things would he take for lunch to work – do you remember what he took with him?**

BS: Mostly corned beef, yes.

SR: And bread?

BS: Yes, the delicatessen - ham and beef shop we called them in those days – Ted Turner was the name and the fella who had it and every night I had to go up and get thruppence worth of corned beef, I think, thruppence worth.

SR: And when he came home, what time would your dad come home from work?

BS: My father never drank, never, never drank, so there wasn't stopping at the local waterhole and come home drunk. Never drank, never, never drank.

SR: So what time would he get in like if he was starting at six in the morning?

BS: I think it was about sixty hour a week in those days. I started work at forty eight hours, five and a half days.

SR: So do you think he'd turn up at home around five or six in the evening or four or three o'clock?

BS: Yes.

SR: Five or six?

BS: About five or six, yes.

SR: It's a long day.

BS: Yes. Well, it's only in your generation that you get decent working hours. I started work at forty eight and a half hours, five days and a half a day Saturday and when I turned sixteen I had to go to military training down at Erskineville.

SR: When your dad got in, what kind of evening meal would you have? Can't remember?

BS: I couldn't tell you.

SR: Were there much fruit and vegetables around?

BS: Very, very little. No, Sue, but I know that the best part of the food in those days was bread and dripping and pepper and salt, nothing fat. Pepper and salt or dry bread and syrup - might have had jam now and again.

44.12 **SR: Did you ever have green vegetables like beans or peas and things like that?**

BS: I can't remember that, I really can't, but I remember in the house was one of those fuel stoves where you put the coal in and the oven was on the side and every Sunday there'd be baked potatoes and the potatoes baked in the oven like that is a thousand times better than the modern potatoes, baked potatoes, good crispy crusts on the outside.

SR: Did you have fruit – was there fruit for the kids?

BS: Oh, I don't think so. I don't even eat fruit now so if I'd have been brought up on fruit I'd be eating fruit today.

SR: Can you remember being hungry?

BS: Yes, yes, oh, yes, many a time.

SR: Going to bed hungry?

BS: Yes, going to bed hungry. I remember we used to get a slice of bread and when we went to bed we used to put it under the pillow and have a nibble until we went to sleep and we'd be sleeping in crumbs. Well, I don't know whether it was every home or happened in a lot of places but that was my experience.

SR: Did people get sick - were there diseases and sicknesses related to nutrition?

BS: Well, they wouldn't know if they was sick.

SR: What about malnutrition?

BS: They wouldn't know it.

SR: Do you have any images of kids in the neighbourhood with malnutrition, you know, big bellied kids?

46.00 BS: No, no, nothing.

SR: Skinny kids?

BS: In those days I think they were a different animal than they are today, the human race.

SR: Why is that?

BS: Well, we had nothing, we appreciated the little we did have and we toughened up on that.

SR: What about milk – was there much milk around?

BS: I wouldn't know.

SR: Don't remember it.

BS: Don't remember. The only thing I remember about milk, they used to come in a little cart and two taps were out the back, horse-drawn, and the brother younger than me turned the tap on and the milk ran down but the milko wouldn't charge the mother for it because of our poverty and that was out in John Street. Yes, I remember that part; it's the first time for many years I remember it.

SR: It must have been pretty bad because I don't think the milkos were loaded. You know how you said before that your father didn't drink and didn't go to the local watering hole, was it more usual, did most of the fathers spend a lot of time at the pub?

BS: I wouldn't know that, I wouldn't know that, but I think my father was more concerned with his kids than that kind of thing because in those

days a glass of beer, that would be fourpence. Then the next was a mug and that had a handle on it, that was sixpence, and then a schooner of beer, the big glass was eightpence and a pint with a handle was ninepence and I think – just brought me back – father was more for the kids. But you talk about fruit and just brought me back.

47.59

When he was in the building game somebody might want a bit of sand and he'd give them like a bucketful of sand and they might give him a sixpence or a shilling and he used to call in to a fruit stall down in Railway Square – I don't know how long this went on for – and they used to wear a red kerchief, whatever you call it, like a big red handkerchief around their neck and take their lunch and that but they never had a bag, they used to carry their lunch, and he used to bring home nearly every night some fruit. That's brought me back remembering that, yes.

SR: Would that be apples and bananas and oranges?

BS: Mostly oranges and mandarins. Remember the big mandarins? Yes, that just brought that back to me because this was seventy five years ago.

SR: Yes, it's a long time. Well, when you were growing up and after eight or ten years old were you expected to contribute to the family in any way? Like some kids worked as paper boys or bottleo assistants.

BS: Yes. I used to sell of a morning – six o'clock in the morning I used to get up – and you had to be twelve years of age to get a licence. *Labor Daily* was the paper and it was a Labor paper and I don't think it was registered; no newsagent would sell it but a little bookshop up in Erskineville Road used to sell it and I used to get out and go around with me bicycle. What'd I get? About five shillings a week for that.

SR: And you did that from the age of twelve?

BS: That was before twelve.

SR: Before twelve.

BS: And then I used to work in a greengrocer shop up in Erskineville Road, Daddy Bo [?], Chinese fella. Had three sons, Claude, Ben and I can't remember the other fella. And Mrs Bo, she was lovely - she had a bit of a property up in Prospect just down from the dam.

50.14 And I used to weigh up potatoes and onions and on a Saturday morning I used to take the delivery in a big cane basket to various customers and I used to get five shillings a week for that too.

SR: And from what age were you doing that?

BS: Around about twelve mark.

SR: What happened to the money from those jobs?

BS: Well, it went into the family.

SR: Did you get any back?

BS: Oh, yes. I had a couple of bob back, I suppose, but I don't know whether it was a shilling or a couple of bob. And this used to be Hartigan's Pub there – it's a residential now, I think – used to be a penny a paper then and the publican used to throw over two pennies for me, a penny for the paper and a penny for myself, and I used to buy little lollies every morning with them and things like that.

SR: Well, what did the family do for fun? Your family, did they go out together on picnics or the movies, to silent movies?

BS: No, no, no, no, no. I think the only fun that I know, the mother used to like take the kids to a picnic from St Mary's Church. She had friends who were Catholics and they used to have a picnic and used to take us out on that, take us sandwiches and milk and I remember I used to get sick coming home, vomiting, in the tram every time we went.

52.10 **SR: Why – eating too much junk?**

BS: I think that could be the answer too, eating too much and too much milk. But I think that's about the only – I don't think my mother ever went to the picture show or the father.

SR: And how often were these picnics? Were they an annual event or once a month?

BS: What's that, the picnic?

SR: Yes.

BS: Once a year.

SR: Once a year?

BS: I can't remember, I can't remember but Mrs Moran was a friend – she lived in Charles Street – she used to take the mother and us kids in. That's when they discovered when I was hard of hearing. When I was

in school, say nine or ten, there was somebody whistled in the class and the teacher asked who whistled. Nobody put up their hand and he said "Who heard the whistle?" Everybody bar me put up me hand; I did not hear it. Nobody knew I was hard of hearing – born like it – and, of course, eight rowdy kids, seven boys and a girl so nobody knew about it because you never had TVs or radios or gramophones in those days; you had to make your own enjoyment. So anyway the teacher – his name was Plunkett and the headmaster was Connolly [?] – Plunkett was a left-hander and when he give you the cane he used to aim for the tips of your finger and if he missed it he used to bring it up on your knuckles because that was allowed in those days.

54.03

And Connolly was a little fat bloke. And anyway when I was the only one who didn't hear they sent for the father and the father went down to the school and I remember I was standing there – his office was only a little place about as big as the laundry, Connolly's, the headmaster – he said "The trouble with your son, he's too fond of protecting others". Nobody realised I was hard of hearing. Well, then this Moran I was telling you about in Charles Street, mother sent me around there with a message – fourteen or fifteen, I suppose, fifteen say – and a big fella, Matt Moran was his name, and he was asking me questions and I was saying yes and no so he sent for the mother to come straight around and he said "Do you know your Billy's got bad hearing?" She said "No". He said "I was asking him questions. Where he should've said no he was saying yes" and this and that and all the rest of it. So they sent me off to Dr Fitzgerald who used to be opposite the Elizabethan Theatre – which was full of theatre in those days – and he sent me to a specialist because the father was in the lodge [paid medical expenses] and sent me down to Macquarie Street and the elder brother took me down there and he was a short fella – to me he was an old man because he might have been fifty because I was so young – and he said "Oh", he said "yours is a very peculiar case. It's what old people suffer from. The nerves are gone". There was no channel for the vibration of the sound to go through to hit the drum and that was it. So that's what they discovered and I had to go to Royal Prince Alfred, yes that time took me to Royal Prince Alfred Hospital for the specialist and he gave me drops to put in my nose and in my ears and only about say one drop but if you put two drops in the acid in the whatchacallit used to explode your head.

56.11

Well then military training came in or it was in and I think it went in when you were sixteen and I got noted to go to Forest Lodge Depot, military depot, to get my uniforms and things like that and I hesitated and eventually went there and a big officer came to me and he started

talking German and I said "Yes, no" and they were all laughing and I didn't know what they was laughing about. He said "I'm asking you how far back are you a German". I said "Oh, the grandfather". So anyway I got exempted from military training.

SR: Because of the German connection?

BS: No, because of my hearing.

SR: Good.

BS: See, he was asking me questions and I was saying yes and no but the questions he was asking me was in German language because he was from the '14-'18 war and so I got exempted from military training.

SR: But when you were diagnosed and sent to that Macquarie Street specialist was there such a thing as hearing aids in those days?

BS: What, from Macquarie Street?

SR: Yes.

BS: His name was Dr Waddy, W-a-d-d-y, little nuggetty bloke.

SR: But there were no such things as hearing aids then, were there?

BS: Nothing like that. No, how they tested you, they had a fork and it'd hum or whatever but if you put it up here or behind the ear you could hear, the passageway was clear. I had that operation where you drill through the skull and they put a big of vein, put a bit of vein here in.

SR: Was that in your childhood, did you have the operation as a child?

58.01 BS: No, I was working in the city council, married. I had to give up smoking for it – that was in '51, August '51 and in Sir George Halliday's surgery was the last cigarette I've had and I had to give up smoking to get my nerves right for it and it was a few years after that I got it done in Gloucester House, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

SR: We're here with Bill Schwebel being held at Newtown, 8th of July 1995. Bill, how old were you when you did finally get a hearing aid and you were able to hear properly?

BS: I had that vasectomy, I think. Vasectomy's where me - - -

SR: You can't have children, get their tubes cut.

BS: No, stapedectomy, sorry, stapedectomy. This is not the first time I made a mistake about that, stapedectomy - there's not much difference

between the two. Stapedectomy, it's a little bone in your ear like the handle type of thing here.

SR: Sorry.

BS: Fancy – anyway.

SR: It's the other end.

BS: Anyway, we're in Erskineville so anything goes in 'Erko'.

SR: So it was after that in the '50s that you finally got a - - -

BS: Yes, yes. I'm deaf and that and this reduced down to eighty per cent because when I first got it done I could hear a fly a mile away. They said that was because the incision was raw but then now it's deteriorated down to eighty per cent so I got a hearing aid for this, then I got one for this ear but it's too powerful and very hard to cope with and I went down and got a similar one that only had the workings at the back here.

60.16 **SR: So most of your childhood in terms of hearing it must have been a bit fuzzy for you?**

BS: Well, as I said, there was eight kids in the family and when you're out in the street playing cricket you don't whisper, you bellow at the top of your voice, or football.

SR: It's a wonder you didn't get run over by a tram.

BS: Why?

SR: Because you wouldn't hear it coming.

BS: Oh, I wasn't that bad, girl.

SR: O.K.

BS: Oh, no, no, no. But, of course, in the time you're talking about there was silent movies and then when the talkies come in I never used to go that much. I used to go to accompany the wife - that was when Loretta was a baby. But TV, I don't cop TV now. All I can see is the action but I can't understand what they're saying.

SR: O.K. Let's look back to your family time when you were growing up in the 19s of this century. What would the family do in the evening, what was a typical evening like in your household?

BS: Oh, sitting around, that's all.

SR: Would you read – were there books in the house?

BS: No, nothing like that. The father used to read the newspaper but what I can't understand, how he could read the newspaper because out of the wall was this little gas jet and it was only a little bit better than a candle.

SR: Would you play games, the kids?

BS: There used to be games. I remember after the war when the elder ones used to be – what did they call it – they'd sit in the corner, kiss in the ring or something. No, not kiss in the ring – I can't remember what they called it but a lot of marriages came about that too with these games in the corner. What they done I don't know.

62.28 **SR: No, I don't know what they are.**

BS: No, I can't, but I remember a fella, Roy Baker, a friend of the brother's, they come from Charles Street and the girl next door, she was single, they ended up getting on together in our house and marrying, yes. But he moved up to Murwillumbah – no, no. He was a cleaner in the schools but when he come back he couldn't get a job but he eventually got this public servant job and he got transferred up – I can't think of the name of the place.

SR: O.K, look, let's go back here. You mentioned before that your father would have a blade steak for breakfast at about five in the morning.

BS: Yes.

SR: Well, can you describe to me your mother's working day? Presumably, she got up and cooked that.

BS: Well, on the side of this fuel stove they had a gas ring and a black frypan and I don't know how old the dripping was – could have been six months old, I don't know. Now today you use it once and you throw it out but in those days - just the same as your tea, you'd put a fresh lot of tea in and you keep putting boiling water on top of that until it looked just discoloured. You couldn't afford anything else. But they had this frypan and mum used to fry the steak in that.

64.09 **SR: What time would your mother get up in the day?**

BS: She'd always be up, ready to get the father off to work, light the fire in the winter to warm the house up and to cook his steak.

SR: And so she would get up before your father?

BS: Yes.

SR: O.K, she would make him breakfast and pack his lunch?

BS: Yes.

SR: Then what would she do, tell me what she did? Would she get you kids up or what?

BS: Well, nine kids. On a Monday it'd be washing day. They had the fuel copper, boil up the clothes and then there was, I think, four galvanised round tubs – the first one was about as big as this – and so you rinsed from one. All hand-wrung, wring them out with your hand and then sometimes there was a scrubbing board and then they come down to the final one which was much smaller, the smallest of the lot and that had Reckitt's Blue in because there was an old saying in those days "Blue's whiter than white" and the blue used to whiten the white linen and so went from one to the other. And then most of us have a bath in that water because there wasn't a bath in our house at that time. Two of the brothers put a concrete bath in, then I was working for fourteen and fifteen and we got a chip bath heater in. A friend of mine was an apprentice plumber, kid I played 'round, he was an apprentice plumber, and he installed the whatchacallit but the galvanised tubs was how you had your bath.

66.02 And then if it wasn't for the copper, like after the washing, you'd take one of the galvanised tubs into one of the bedrooms and you'd boil the water up in the copper and carry it in in a bucket. But most times the eldest'd get in first, then the second eldest, then the third eldest and this was life in those days.

SR: Looking at your mother's life, did she have to physically work hard?

BS: Oh, yes. Many a time mum had to be a – what do you call it - - -

SR: Are you saying midwife?

BS: - - - midwife, midwife. She was very friendly with a nurse - Nurse Merse was her name - and in those days the women had their babies at home and mum'd go down and look after the patient or the new mother and also look after the baby too.

SR: And when you went to school what sort of things would you have for lunch? Would she make you your lunches to take to school?

BS: I'd have mostly the wheatmeal; they're round, with some butter on it.

SR: Biscuits?

BS: Biscuits, yes.

SR: O.K. And what time would your mother get to bed at night?

BS: We'd all be in bed before mum gets in; she'd always be the last.

SR: What do you mean "get in"? Get in from out being a midwife or just finishing up the work in the home?

BS: In the home, when she's in the home. She wasn't a midwife fifty two weeks a year.

SR: No.

BS: She might only be a midwife say three times a year.

SR: I'm trying to get a sense of what it was like. Even though she didn't work outside the home I'm trying to get a sense of what her life was like.

68.04 BS: What the mothers done in those days?

SR: Yes.

BS: Scrubbing the floors. I think we had lino on the floor, I'm not too sure.

SR: Given that there were so many boys in your family; did the boys help with washing up and cleaning up after the meal or any house responsibilities?

BS: I couldn't answer that; I don't remember.

SR: Do you ever remember washing a floor?

BS: No, no, no, I do not.

SR: Were your clothes ironed?

BS: Ironed? They were a flatiron. You put them on the gas and they'd have a rag nearby and you wiped the bottom and then you ironed them. You'd have two of those flatirons and so while this one was getting used the other one was getting warmed up, one after the other. And you'd have that rag beside it and you'd rub it to get any soot or anything off the bottom and then you'd iron it that way.

SR: You talked about sleeping under flour bags. Did you have sheets as well?

BS: I think we only had a bottom sheet. Yes, we only had bottom sheets. No such thing as pyjamas.

SR: Sleep in your undies – did you sleep in your underwear and things?

BS: No underwear, no underwear was worn those days.

SR: Really?

BS: No singlets or underpants. I can't remember but I'd say that they came in in about the '30s. Yes, about the '30s you started to wear underpants. In those days you were more interested in having a feed.

70.05 **SR: Yes. So how many items of clothing would you have?**

BS: I suppose you'd have about two pair of trousers and two shirts but I remember when dad used to finish his week's work on a Friday he used to wash his flannel, grey flannel shirt out – not a shirt, singlet, whatever you call it – washed it out on a Friday to wear it all weekend. I supposed it'd be washed about once a week, I'd say, even though it was heavy work and sweaty work. Well, the flannel was used to absorb the sweat.

SR: Can you remember being cold?

BS: My very word I can remember being cold - you'd wake up shivering.

SR: I was going to ask about the war, how it affected your family. Did the First World War have any effect on your family?

BS: I was too young, I was far too young.

SR: What about when the troops came back and there was that big influenza outbreak about 1919?

BS: Yes. Had to wear a mask with camphor, bits of camphor in it and wear a mask.

SR: There was also a plague at that time, I think. The bubonic plague made another appearance in Sydney around then. Do you remember anything about that?

BS: No. The only plague was this influenza plague. Was supposed to have brought the germ back from France and we had to wear that. And in those days they brought back the shingle and the bob. Women wore their hair long and they got a shingle and the bob.

72.14 **SR: So the short haircut?**

BS: Yes, short haircut and the women used to wear lace-up boots and then I remember they got them cut down into shoes.

SR: Only at that time after the war?

BS: Yes, '14-'18 war, yes. Yes, that's right, yes.

SR: Would you say your mother was a happy person, do you think she was?

BS: Happy with her kids. I don't know about happy with life.

SR: But she was happy with you kids?

BS: Oh, marvellous mother.

SR: What about your dad – would you say that he was happy?

BS: I don't know, I don't know, I don't know but I know he always used to take us kids out of a weekend up Brighton-Le- Sands. Do you know anything about Brighton-Le- Sands?

SR: No. Tell us about it.

BS: Well, Brighton-Le- Sands used to be a steam tram run from Rockdale Station down Bay Street to Brighton-Le- Sands and then on the right hand side was a big park and then you had the beach but the beach was full of broken glass and it had a little tin fence and as kids, you know, running around you'd always get cut on the tin fence. Then they bought the Brighton Hotel, the big Brighton Hotel, then they built all the units on that park.

SR: And did you go swimming?

BS: No.

SR: Why not?

BS: Well, I'd only have to be out in the sun and I'd get sunburnt.

SR: You were a redhead.

BS: Even today's it's the same.

74.02 **SR: So you were a redhead.**

BS: Redhead, freckles. I suppose the Irish came out into me very pronounced.

SR: You told me before you had a nickname, a couple of nicknames.

BS: Carrots and Bluey. I remember the wife and I we lived in Marrickville at the time and a fella I worked with he came over and he was telling the wife how in the lunchroom somebody'd say "Jack spoke to you, Bill" or "Blue", whatever it was and I'd say "What?" and they'd say "It wasn't me, it was him", "No, it wasn't me, it was him" so it went around. And I remember the wife – she'll tell you – I remember the wife saying "Fancy adults, fancy you, and every one of youse has got something wrong with youse. You've either got glasses or you're baldy or you've got false teeth or there's something wrong with you and he's got bad ears". I remember my daughter Loretta might have been two or three years of age in those days. His name, we called him Sammy Garth, and he was bald when he was about twenty and this is how they used to treat me when I was in the And matter of fact about thirty year ago when I worked on the city council I had practically the same experience and a big pommy worked with us, Big Sam, another one who was a prisoner-of-war and the other one was in the 7th Division and he talked to me and I couldn't hear – this is before I had me operation. And I heard Big Sam say "Listen, Charlie. Why don't you shut up if you can't talk loud enough for the man to hear you?" and Sam was blind because of prisoner-of-war, practically blind, and he said "Why don't you shut up" he said "or speak loud enough for the man to hear you?", see, so I've had this gig all through my life.

76.09 **SR: Now, let's talk about your friends a bit. Who were your friends when you were growing up in Erskineville?**

BS: Friends?

SR: Yes, who were your mates?

BS: Everybody.

SR: Can you name the families that were in the area at that time?

BS: There was a family by the name of Webster and then there was Ernie Dearon [?]. You're not interested in football, are you?

SR: Yes, yes.

BS: Well, there was one of the greats of St George football and eleven consecutive wins. Remember when St George Rugby League won eleven years, one after the other? They're always talking about it.

SR: Yes.

BS: Norm Provan and all that. Well, Poppa Clay, his father was a very close friend to me, little Alfie Clay, and he used to have a part in the

centre and they called him the “boy with the golden horns” because he was a blond. Well, Brian Clay went bald very young and they called him Poppa Clay in the football world. Well, he died up at Queensland a little while ago and Alfie died say about thirty year ago.

SR: And they were Erskineville?

BS: We was close friends because he was born a little bit up the street from us.

SR: What about the Murphy family? Did you know them when you were growing up?

BS: I only knew Pat and Phil Murphy – that’s Terry Murphy’s uncle, his mother’s brothers. They lived in George Street Erskineville but they were always looking for a fight, the Irish, always looking for one, and they were known as street fighters.

78.01 **SR: Well, getting back say to your friends, what sort of things did you do with your friends, what did you do together?**

BS: Oh, we went out and had a drink or two.

SR: No, when you were kids.

BS: When we were kids?

SR: Yes.

BS: Played with scooters, bilycarts, but there was one period when they was topping the street, like sealing. I can only talk about John Street. They used to be all clay and every night about five o'clock a stream of sulkies, horse-drawn sulkies, used to come past with the fellas and they were commercial travellers and they used to hire the horse and sulky out of two livery stables up in Newtown here. Cullen was one and Corduke [?] was the other. Cullen was a great trotter driver in Harold Park or Wentworth Park, wherever they raced – Harold Park, I think – and Corduke had a second-hand yard up in King Street there opposite Georgina Street. And then they sealed John Street and when they sealed John Street they had on each side of the road blue metal and they excavated out and so they laid it down like that and everything was all done by hand, shovel and hand. Well then in John Street, up towards Erskineville Road there’s a lane and there was two old weatherboard cottages in the lane and then brick cottages after that. Well then up the end of the lane the backyard was the back fence of a big house in Septimus Street and in that yard had a big pear tree and

when we were kids we used to climb over the fence and get all these pears.

80.02 Well then when they had these piles of blue metal; some'd be on that side near the church and some'd be on the other side and we'd be pelting each other with the pears, green pears, and many, many time we had a bellyache over it, trying to eat them and this went on, oh, for a long time. Oh, when I say "long time", how long? I couldn't say whether it was a week or a month. But that's how we used to amuse ourselves or we'd play cricket in the street. As I said, we played football in the church and I appeared in the Children's Court when I was thirteen, on me thirteenth birthday. And kites, marbles.

SR: Did you make your own kites?

BS: Yes. Matter of fact, this morning when Loretta was bringing me here, there used to be a cottager halfway over into John Street - and that's been demolished and John Street goes straight down - and they had a bamboo blind outside and we used to get in and sneak these bamboos and we'd tie them with string and flour and water we used to put paper on and old rags, put a tail on and cotton, anything like that.

SR: Did they fly?

BS: Oh yes. Oh yes, sometimes somebody could make a good one; you'd see it a mile up in the air.

SR: You know you mentioned before scooters and things like that, did you have toys that were commercially made?

BS: Oh, Christmastime you might get a - in those days, the First War everything was made in Germany and I think that started that First World War. Wars are fought for trade, money. Today they're fought for religion, Muslims and Christians - that's today.

82.02 And everything was made in Germany, made in Germany. You used to get little cork boats and things like that and train sets, tin train sets, and if they lasted twenty four hours you'd have to have them in your drawer, wrapped up in cottonwool - they'd fall to pieces straight away. And the last war everything was made in Japan.

SR: And so kids would play with the billycarts. Would you have races up the street?

BS: Oh yes, oh yes, we'd race. Then we might have a wheel from a bicycle and take all the spikes and that out and have a stick, run it like that and chase the You'd do that all the time but if your mother wanted

you to go up the shop and buy some food "I'm too busy". You had plenty of energy to do that, you didn't have the energy to go and do shopping for them.

SR: Can you remember any adventures that you had with your friends when you were a kid?

BS: Adventures?

SR: Mm.

BS: I don't think there was such a thing in those days.

SR: Well, how far were you free to roam in the neighbourhood, how big was your territory as a child in terms of where you could go?

BS: You could go anywhere.

SR: And your parents would let you?

BS: Well, I think the parents were too busy in the house, doing housework.

SR: So how far did you roam as say a ten year old?

BS: I've been down to Marrickville, used to go to University Park.

SR: What would you do there?

BS: Playing around. That was before the swimming pool went there. Been down to Alexandria - there used to be dairy farms down there and also chicken farms in Alexandria.

84.14 **SR: Really?**

BS: Yes.

SR: Can you remember Chinese vegetable gardens somewhere?

BS: Yes. The Chinese had their gardens down there in Alexandria.

SR: And did you ever go to the boat races in the Alexandria Canal on Sunday mornings?

BS: No, no, but I used to hear about them. They used to bet on them.

SR: Was that in the '30s or do you think that happened when you were a kid?

BS: Oh, that'd be the '20s.

SR: '20s?

BS: Mm.

SR: Were you into betting?

BS: Betting?

SR: As a kid, did your father bet?

BS: Oh, no, no, no. My father was more concerned about food.

SR: Were there any places that you were not allowed to go?

BS: By the parents?

SR: Yes.

BS: Oh, no, we just used to roam.

SR: O.K.

BS: I think they were glad to get rid of us, get us out of the house for a bit of quietness.

SR: And you never had any odd encounters when you were wandering Marrickville?

BS: Any what?

SR: Well, anything unusual.

BS: Unusual?

SR: Yes, thinking back.

BS: No, no.

SR: Did you ever go out to the airport, Mascot?

BS: Long before it became an airport it was a golf course, the Brighton Golf Course, and I was there one Sunday. A fella from Randwick bought one of Kingsford Smith's planes – the wings used to fold. I can't remember the name, Kingsford Smith Junior or something.

SR: No, it would have been Kingsford Smith.

86.00 BS: Kingsford Smith, my dear.

SR: Yes.

BS: My word, it was his plane and the wings used to fold back. And we was on the Brighton Golf Course. I was there with two fellas, Jack and Jimmy Puntin [?] was their name, come from Marrickville. I worked

with Jimmy and Jack worked for Bradshaw, the big carters about now which they'd be dead now because they're older than me. And this plane came down and one wing folded down and the fella, he was only a passenger in it – he had a pilot but the passenger was the bloke who bought it from Randwick, he bought it off 'Smithie' – and they came down and they both got killed and I can't remember the time but the fella had a watch and the crash stopped the watch. And the ambulance, called for the ambulance, and instead of the ambulance coming in one way it came the other way and it was about a half hour later come to pick it up. If I'm not making a mistake there was a creek there or something that stopped the ambulance coming the way say down Bay Street, Brighton-Le- Sands. It had to come right around and come through Marrickville, Mascot way.

SR: And you were there when that crash happened?

BS: I was there and I saw that crash.

SR: Would that have been the '20s when you're talking?

BS: What would I be, about eighteen or nineteen, I suppose, say around about the 1930 mark. Kingsford Smith, no, it was one of his planes. It was one that the wings folded and the pin that held it or the bolt, whatever, came loose or something.

88.08

And if I'm not making a mistake, I think this fella bought it for thirty two thousand pound - I'm not too sure about that. See, there was an event in that period where I knew a fella who lost thirty two thousand back in racehorses so I don't know whether I'm mixed with that thirty two thousand for that - - -

SR: Yes, it seems a lot of money.

BS: - - - or thirty two thousand for the plane.

SR: O.K, let's go back. Before, we've talked about your schooling and you mentioned that the principal particularly disliked you, the principal didn't like you at your school. Is that right?

BS: I think it was more about me hearing because I remember one time this Plunkett he had a motorbike and sidecar and he had an accident and he was off school might have been a fortnight, three weeks, and a woman teacher came and I was always at the bottom of the class and I remember a lot of the pupils saying "Gee, you were very good today". He had me scared and I couldn't concentrate or anything but they used to come along and say "You were very good today", like the pupils, schoolmates.

SR: Well, what was it like at school, what can you tell me about? What subjects did you learn?

BS: Arithmetic. [break in recording] - - - the kids at school. And another teacher was there. He had a beard and we called him Mary Popkin, I think it was, Mary Popkin. And old Connolly always wanted us to sing; he was mad about us singing.

90.07 **SR: And what would he have you sing?**

BS: Oh, what was going on there, I remember one of the schoolmates from Alexandria got up and he sang Barney Google and Old Polly [?] used to call him Barney Google after that. See, in those days there'd only be a new song come out every twelve months. Now it comes out three or four times a day.

SR: But where would you hear songs because there was no radios?

BS: Well, there were vaudevilles.

SR: Did you go to vaudevilles?

BS: Oh yes.

SR: Where?

BS: Well, Fuller's at Elizabethan Theatre; that used to be a vaudeville show. That was Fuller's, comedians and vaudeville show. Across Newtown Bridge there's Clay's Vaudeville and up her Merlin [?] Hall, that was the Hub Theatre. See, a lot of those closed down when the talkies came in. The Hub Theatre used to be continuous; I think it used to be three sessions a day.

SR: Can you tell me what sort of acts they had, what were these vaudeville shows?

BS: Well, there was Jim Gerald, he was a great actor, a great comedian, and there was another fella, a local Newtown bloke, Joe Somebody. I thought of his name yesterday or the day before but I can't think of it now, a big fat bloke. And there was another one, a tall, skinny bloke, Skinny Barland [?] they called him. Mo Rene, he had a partner was Stiffy, Stiffy and Mo, the partnership, and they broke up when they was up at Clay's.

92.01 But Clay's also had one in Oxford Street, Clay's Vaudeville Show, and Stiff and Mo they broke up when they was up there. Jim Gerald – I can't think. About every month there'd be a new troupe come in.

SR: And what, there'd be songs and comedy and sketches?

BS: Sing, musical instruments, tap dancing, chorus girls.

SR: Really?

BS: And up at Clay's, behind Clay's there was a lane opposite the Newtown Police Station and on that side of the lane was like a stable and that was their dressing room and when we was kids we used to stand there and watch the chorus and the actors and that used to come out with all their face painted and powdered up and lippy, paint and powder. Of course, I think they were more gay than anything else and they knew how to paint and powder themselves up without any experience and we used to stand there and watch them come in and out, in and out. Well, we used to go to Clay's. I think it was about sixpence to go into the shows in those days.

SR: And how often would you go?

BS: I suppose I've been inside Clay's about three times but there was many a time when we was kids we used to go up there and have a look at them going from one building to the other.

SR: I've heard stories about people sneaking in because there was an upstairs section and you could get up the top if it wasn't a full house and watch.

BS: You mean in the Elizabethan, like Fuller's?

SR: Mm.

BS: They could've.

SR: The gods.

BS: They call at the top the gods, then the mezzanine, then the stalls.

SR: But you didn't do any of that?

BS: Oh, I used to go to the gods. Joe - I can't think of his name - local fella, he was very popular.

94.12 **SR: Like knowing that it was a really poor area and that local kids didn't have much money, was there any sympathy to letting you in?**

BS: Yes. You could go up to the bloke on the door or selling tickets, say "There's three of us. We've only got sixpence". "Righto, go in". They wouldn't pull a ticket off, like those tickets in full, "All right, go in", like that. But there were shows a silver coin admission - that was in the

Depression years – in Fuller’s or Elizabethan. Go out there and you'd have amateur artists and sometimes they're professionals who come on, give a song, a bit of an act like to raise money for the dole in Australia Street. Do you know Australia Street?

SR: Mm.

BS: Well, there used to be a wood and coal yard the other side of Lennox Street, Australia Street and Lennox Street. Jimmy Dibbles’ parents had the bakery on the corner and behind that was the Newtown Cemetery and on the other corner was the Courthouse Hotel where I got caught by Long Tack Sam when I was having me bucks party – that’s where I got caught. Then this wood and coal yard there, they used to raise money like this here silver coin, raise money, and they used to have a track they used to go down to Paddy’s Market and get fruit and vegetables and then they used to dole them out to the people on the dole. Geez, this is all coming back, a little bit of a kick.

SR: How did the teachers treat you at school? Just going back to the school, were you happy at school?

96.04 BS: No. Very, very unhappy; I was pushed to go to school all the time.

SR: And they never picked up that you had a hearing problem?

BS: Never. Not until that time, as I told you, I went around to Mrs Moran’s place in Charles Street and Matt Moran asked me questions and I was saying yes but I was saying no. That’s when they picked up and they sent for the mother to come around and they said “Your Billy’s got bad hearing”. So Dr Fitzgerald up top of the Erskineville Road opposite Elizabethan, he sent me to this Dr Wattie [?] who said it was a very peculiar case, the nerves are gone. It was not the nerves.

SR: Let’s just talk a bit now about the general community. You mentioned that there were people who had a fruit stall who were Chinese. Well, what was the ethnic mix of the area?

BS: Well, you know Burren Street where I said that baby farm was.

SR: Yes.

BS: The trams used to run around there and up the top of there, between Burren Street and Charles Street, was called Five Ways. Five Ways was the building and it was built like that. I suppose it was about twenty four foot here – just to use a figure – twenty four foot here and it’d go to about six foot up the front. Now, on this corner was a newsagent, Pryor(?), and he had a backyard. Next to Pryor was a boot

repair shop, say about as big as that, and then on the point here was a butcher shop and outside the butcher shop was a fountain and when I come to think of it I don't think it was there for horses, although it could've been for horses there because outside was a fountain for drinking but I never saw a drop of water in it so it must have been empty or misused before my time at school and that.

98.17 Well then that's where the trams used to stop. Trams might stop for, say, quarter of an hour and down next to where the baby farm was was a tin shed, say ten by ten, was the trammies' toilet because they walked down, used the toilet and come back. And from the railway to here for adults was tuppence and from Circular Quay to Erskineville was thruppence and I think the kids used to get the full distance for a penny – I'm not sure.

SR: Did most people travel by public transport, by tram, or walk?

BS: Oh, I think most of them walked, most of them walked. That was a time when they was converting from steam trains to electric and I remember the first electric train that ran through Erskineville on the trial run, I remember that when I was at school. I suppose I was about nine at that too. But anyway that Five Ways they called that, that's all gone and that Burren Street, that's been excavated to allow another railway line twenty, twenty five, thirty years ago and it's still the same today; you cannot go through. It's still excavated there with a tin fence up. That's where Loretta took me to see the baby farm and I said to Loretta "I'm still right". The baby farm was taken many, many years ago, demolished.

SR: And you think that that baby farm, that was where the woman was assisting people to have abortions?

100.05 BS: There wouldn't be abortion. They'd have their babies and they'd be wealthy, daughters of wealthy people who'd send their babies there because in those days a wealthy people's daughter, oh, she couldn't even kiss a man let alone anything else; that was only for common workers but the big ones couldn't do that because they had to keep like to marry right or marry another wealthy man.

SR: So they would send the babies to this woman and was she killing them or were they just dying?

BS: Killing them and burying. They dug up about a dozen skeletons.

SR: How did they catch on?

BS: I don't know, I can't tell you that. But, Sue, I think this was before I was born.

SR: Right.

BS: See, there's a terrible lot of stories used to get about and that's why I'm a bit windy about mentioning them because I don't know for facts.

SR: I wanted to ask what was the racial or ethnic mix in the area? You know how you mentioned the Chinese family?

BS: Yes.

SR: What was the racial base? I mean there would have been Irish, Anglo-Irish people in the area. Were there any other groups of people?

BS: Well, on the corner of Charles Street and Erskineville Street there was a terrace of shops, say about five shops. Well, when I was telling you about that celebration – did I tell you about the celebration we had in Erskineville Park?

SR: Yes.

BS: I don't know whether it's the end of the war or fifty years of Erskineville School. The fruit shop there who supplied the fruit was Tripp – Trippy's Fruit Shop we called them - say he's Australian, I don't know; it was too far before me. And then next to him was a fish and chip shop and I was wondering whether his name was Huxley or not – it was similar – but I think they were Irish Catholics.

102.12 Next to that, I think, was the original Erskineville Post Office. Then they built across the road to where it is now and then next to that was Jack Samuel's pawnbroker, used to have the three balls there. Well, when he gave that up he bought the Shakespeare Hotel up here in King Street Newtown. Well, then the next one was a milk bar. Then on the corner of John Street was a grocer shop, wholesale and retailer, which we didn't know what that meant. And the back into John Street was like a stable and on the wall was a sign there, "Bushel's Tea, better than the best" and when we were kids we used to say "How can they be better than the best? The best is the best" and this is how we used to perform, this is how young we were. Well, they're all demolished now and the post office is over it used to be Pleasant Street but I don't think it's called Pleasant Street now and Rochford Street. Well then this bloke who had the newsagent there, Pryor, I think he sold out and he bought a haberdashery or started a haberdashery shop. George Street up to Pleasant Street there was a

grocer shop on the corner – Davis(?) I think the name. Next to that was a newsagent, McGuire, and we used to call him Mac, little fella, Mac. He had a son and two daughters. The son became the general manager I think at the Criterion Shirt – this was in the '20s - Criterion Shirt, yes.

104.09 And then next to Mac's was a removalist, McQuillan [?], yes, McQuillan's Removalists - that wasn't a shop, it was just barricaded. Next to that was a cake shop, because I remember we used to look at the rainbow cake and then next to that was a pharmacy called Henwood's [?] Pharmacy, then the big butcher shop – I think it's a Commonwealth Bank now – George Carey. Next was Daddy Bo, China, Chinese fella. He had three sons, Ben, Claude, and I can't think of the other one. Next to that was Ted Turner, delicatessen – ham and beef shop we called them in those days. Next was a shop where you can go and change your comics or your Tom Dick's or anything for a penny. Next was a mixed where you buy crockery, cups and saucers and this and that and everything else. And then on the corner I think that Pryor opened up a haberdashery and he done so good that he built a factory down the back, down the street of Pleasant Street but the law stopped him from being a retailer and a manufacturer too and I think he gave up the retail shop to manufacture just down Pleasant Street, the post office on that side.

SR: Did most people shop locally?

BS: All corner shops. Even Newtown markets, that was all stalls, about fifty stalls. But what I'll tell you, that when Trippy's got out of there an Italian fella took over, Jack Cincotta. He married a Newtown girl and a little while ago I think I read where he died or he got murdered or assaulted and I saw the photos of his sons.

106.26 Well, Jack was only a young man when he took over that fruit shop at the corner of Charles and Erskineville Road and he used to bring young fellas from Italy to work for him and it was two bob a week and their keep because I was friendly with one young bloke.

SR: Was that in the '20s you're talking about Jack Cincotta?

BS: '20s yes, yes, definitely '20s. Could have been '24, '25, might have been fourteen or fifteen, something like that. Well, Jack Cincotta, I'm not sure, his sons have still got that shop down there now.

SR: They have?

BS: I think so because only a few years ago I read where I don't know whether Jack got held up and robbed or murdered or something and

his two sons that looked in their sixties was there. They still had the shop so whether a Cincotta's still got it or not I don't know.

SR: What was the social focus of the area? In the 19s was there a place where people met or a shop where people would talk or a house or a pub? Was there a social focus of your neighbourhood in Erskineville?

BS: Well there was always the Rose of Australia – that's up the top of Charles Street and Erskineville, across the road up from the station. There was always a ladies' bar there. Men wasn't allowed in those days and every pub had a ladies' bar and men weren't allowed in there and women were not allowed in the bar. So there was always a bit of social business going on there but as far as Mrs Smith and Mrs Jones and Mrs Black and Mrs White getting together I don't think so.

108.16 **SR: Did people go and visit?**

BS: There used to be plenty of hanging over the front fence.

SR: Talking?

BS: Yes. Saturday afternoon it seemed to me was a bath type of thing because I can remember me mother. She used to have an apron and she'd have a bath and do her hair and she'd have this clean apron on because that'd be the end of that day's work but then always a big baked dinner Sunday – that's if you had it. I think that's the trend.

SR: What can you remember of drinking as a pastime in the area? Were people big drinkers at that time? I mean I understand they had six o'clock closing.

BS: That was when the fights used to start. When it was six o'clock closing there'd be a rush to get the last drink and if you bumped a fella to push your way in you always got a smack in the mouth and out in the streets you'd go and the blue'd be on. Then the big Black Maria – like that was a truck with a big canopy on it, black, and wire screen door at the back, in you'd go and a cop driving it and a cop would be out the back and I suppose there wouldn't be a Saturday go by if there wasn't a fight around the pubs and when the ten o'clock closing come in and that scuffle for that last drink ceased, well then I think the blues ceased.

SR: Was there a lot of street fighting in those days?

BS: Oh, yes. Murphy's two uncles, Pat and Phil Murphy, were street fighters.

110.01 **SR: But you almost describe it – and other people – as almost like a profession. I mean did they go around looking for fights? I mean it wasn't like they were just getting mugged on the way home.**

BS: Yes. The same I think in any suburb. If there's six here and there's one bloke there he'd get picked but if there's six there this bloke wouldn't pick on him.

SR: So what was the point of all the street fighting? I don't understand.

BS: A few drinks and they weren't what you can bright people. They were just a mob, hooliganism. Now, well they're drugs now, are they, drugs and whatever?

SR: Yes, I don't know. Well, would you describe it as a safe neighbourhood?

BS: Well, there's a couple of interpretations of "safe". You can leave your doors open, especially in the summertime, and walk up and down the street, saying "Hello, Mrs Smith, hello, Mrs Brown, hello Mrs Jones" and you can be walking up and down and you can come home and everything'd be the same as you left it. You can't do that today. Then Friday nights up at King Street Newtown you'd be surprised that the population used to walk up and down the street because of late shopping in those days.

SR: On Friday night?

BS: And a lot of flirting went on amongst the young couples.

SR: But you know in these fights that they'd have at the pub at closing time - - -

BS: Yes.

SR: - - - were people seriously hurt?

BS: Well, in the pub on the corner of Septimus Street and Erskineville Road I remember when I was a kid there was a fella there, drunk, with a bottle in his hip pocket. Another fella come over and smashed him and he fell backwards and the bottle of beer in his hip pocket broke, went everywhere so I don't know whether he got mutilated by it.

112.16 I don't know whether I shot off or what but I remember seeing that punch and that fella land backwards and the bottle broke under him. I think the fella with the bottle was too drunk to intimidate this other fella.

It was just a matter of practising how hard he can punch, I think, and that was a thing of the day.

SR: Well, what was the crime rate like?

BS: I wouldn't know what the crime rate was like.

SR: Were there many murders?

BS: I remember a murder in Pleasant Avenue. There used to be lovely little cottages down there. A fella cut the throat of his wife and I think the daughter and also cut the throat of their canary and I'm sure I was going to school at that time.

SR: The wife, the child and the canary?

BS: Yes, the wife and the daughter. He could have been an ex-serviceman.

SR: Speaking about ex-servicemen, after the war when the troops came back were there people around who had shellshock?

BS: Yes. I remember our side of that Davis grocer shop on the corner of George Street opposite the Rose of Australia, a fella named – well-known, Albie – anyway, this fella had trench feet and he was properly shell-shocked - you'd see him shuffling along - and I see this bloke but he missed him and the cripple, ex-serviceman, moved away then.

114.18 **SR: What do you mean by “trench feet”?**

BS: Well, trench feet, they had deformed feet because of the years in the mud out at Flanders and France and all that, continually in the water, the rain and the mud and that. Trench feet, they called it.

SR: Really?

BS: Same as they were called “bomb happy” in those days. They were called “troppos” in the last war.

SR: And what was this bloke doing to this guy? He was wandering along and somebody had a go at him, did they?

BS: No, he was “bomb happy” and he might have provoked it but I think he was too much of a cripple to be serious about it. I don't think he had any alcohol in him, I couldn't tell. He was shuffling along, you know, his feet.

SR: What were people's attitudes to the troops that came back that were maimed or crippled or mentally not quite with it?

BS: Well, I don't think there was very much sympathy for them. Even the bosses wouldn't employ them if they saw service in the war because they were looked upon as mentally damaged, they couldn't manage to work the modern machinery. See, wars create prosperity, improvements in machinery. Same as the doctors went to the war: they learnt by amputating arms and legs and this and that; they learned more of their skill there than they did in the university.

116.10 **SR: So are you saying that even people who came back O.K, that weren't shell-shocked or damaged, are you saying that if an employer saw that they had war service on their record they wouldn't get a job?**

BS: Well, Sue, I was eight or nine when this was on and I'm only going by what – because there was a fella down from me where we lived in John Street, there was a terrace of two-storey houses and he lived in there and when he came back – apparently he was in the Light Horse Brigade – he kept his horse and the only job he could get was he had to buy the horse and buy a cart, go out and sell fruit and vegetables; there was no job for him.

SR: And the army made him buy his horse?

BS: Well, his money from his war service. They were all covered by insurance and they all got a wage. Say they got five shillings a week, if you give him two bob and he's saved up three bob, same fella after the war.

SR: Sorry, I thought you said that he came back with his horse from the Light Horse.

BS: Yes. He bought the horse – it was a grey horse.

SR: But did he have to buy that from the military?

BS: Yes.

SR: O.K.

BS: And I remember one time there he had an accident and the shaft of the cart went through the horse's stomach and he used to bathe the horse, horse's wound, out in the street and that down near that sewer where I was telling you about.

SR: This is Tape 3 of the interview with Bill Schwebel. Bill, we were talking about World War I and the troops coming back. Are you saying that even the troops that came back O.K. they still had trouble getting work?

BS: They definitely did. But, listen, can I tell you a little bit before.

SR: Yes.

BS: Just down the bottom of the street here, the railway line, there used to be a brick fence say about thirty inches high about as high as that, then they had posts up here with barbed wire. Well, when the boys were coming back in the train they would hang out the window, waving a khaki handkerchiefs because I was about eight, nine, and as they were waving we was grabbing the handkerchiefs as the diggers were going past with all the great kids, dozens of us. Well then up in Newtown Bridge the motorcars, they used to have little flags, Australian flags, up off their mascot in front of their car, little sticks, and the flags were silk, about six inches by four inches, and they're tooting their horns, joy and peace and all that; and we'd jump in front of the car to grab these flags when we're kids, see, which kids would do who wasn't controlled by their parents and that went on. The Elizabethan was built before then. Yes, the trams used to run along. Yes, we used to grab these, only about that size, on a thin stick and we grab them – they're tied there by string.

SR: They would've thought you were little terrors.

BS: Yes. Just down here where we used to climb over the fence and put sardine tin openers on it and had the trains run and used to flatten them out and we used to treat them with screwdrivers.

120.00 **SR: This is on the railway tracks?**

BS: Yes, on the railway track, yes.

SR: It's a wonder you didn't have some nasty accidents on the railway tracks.

BS: You could always see from Newtown – the trains used to come from Newtown down there. The extension of the railway line came after there. Down over here there was, I think, four, might've been three two-storey house. They demolished one to get extra line in. At that particular time they closed Eveleigh Workshop. They had their gate down here at Macdonaldtown Station and all the workers used to come to the Cosmopolitan Hotel for their beer. Well, when they closed that gate down – and they had to do that to extend like the brickwork for the train to go over – and a brickie down there told me there was over a million bricks used in that extension but, of course, there was no trade in the pub and it became a sly grog. And you'd take up an empty beer bottle and you'd get a fill for ninepence, whether it was clean or not, ninepence. That's when you were a larrikin at about sixteen years of

age. And the cops used to be there, say "If you don't look after us you don't serve them" so they'd get their beer free so there was corruption for many, many years.

SR: What do you know about the police? Were there any local police that were pretty well-known in the area?

BS: Well Long Tack Sam as you mentioned yesterday.

SR: You described him to me yesterday.

BS: Well, how Long Tack Sam got that name, that in the Elizabethan Theatre there was a show *Long Tack Sam the Magician*. He was supposed to be Chinese but he was very tall and very slim too and he was marvellous. I went and saw him and he was marvellous.

122.11 Well, we wouldn't know a trick from an opera show but he was marvellous and Long Tack got called Long Tack Sam after that and he was about six foot six and about six inches broad and in the Sunday's paper they had him, shown him like cleaning down like with a feather duster and that and he had the best record of any policeman in New South Wales force for arrests but you didn't have to do anything to be arrested. There was a fella, I can't think of his name. Did I tell you about him getting a layby out yesterday from Sweet Brothers?

SR: No.

BS: Sweet Brothers was over the other side of the road and you'd pay a shilling a week to buy your blankets – I'm sure they were blankets – and they were a big parcel and this fella didn't get the receipt so he was carrying this. Friday night, thousands of people there, and this Long Tack stood in front of him and he said "What's the parcel?" and he said "Blankets for my mother. She's been paying them off on layby". He said "Show me your receipt". Well, he didn't have a receipt so he had to open the parcel there and then, everybody walking around. As soon as he saw they were blankets he said "All right" and this is the type of thing that went on.

SR: They could just stop you in the street for no reason?

BS: Yes. I think there was a law in those days that if there was more than two standing on a street corner you could be charged with loitering and I think somebody, a young girl – I heard this – whether the coppers come to do a line on them I don't know but they stood up to the cops and it was raining and they was in a shop doorway and they had a go at them and the girl stood up to them. That was between this street

and the next street, Brown Street. Yes, there were a lot of shops up there then.

124.23 **SR: And what happened when she stood up to them?**

BS: I think the cops backed off because the law was loitering in those days. Over three people or over two people you could be charged with loitering.

SR: How did people feel about the police? I mean did they view them as corrupt?

BS: People wouldn't know in those days.

SR: What do you mean?

BS: Well, people in those days are not the same people as today. People have progressed with their thinking today.

SR: But did the people like the police or did they hate them?

BS: The police have never been liked.

SR: So they weren't liked?

BS: No, that's what that Sergeant Swan in the ICAC [Independent Commission Against Corruption] inquiry; he said the cops were never liked.

SR: So if you were in trouble would you go to the police for help?

BS: I would, I would, but I would like to expect them to do anything for me but if they did I'd accept it but if they didn't, well, just the usual run.

SR: Well, what did you know about things like the SP booking and the sly grog, how aware were you of that and the police involvement in it? Were the police dangerous, would you describe the police as dangerous – were you scared of them?

BS: I think everybody was scared of the cops.

SR: Well, what were they capable of?

126.03 BS: I've seen two police walk down Erskineville Road - I don't know the name of the pub up there in Union Street – I couldn't say if it was Friday night or Saturday night, I think it was a Saturday night – there was two fellas talking outside the pub, they happened to be two brothers, and two coppers walked down, just pushed them aside and back, belted them in the mouth and off they went but one of them wanted to carry on and the other one pulled him back. No reason

whatsoever, they were just talking. They weren't drunk, they were just talking and I saw that with my own eyes.

SR: And with that philosophy or whatever, attitude in the police force, was that in the 19s and the '20s and the '30s?

BS: Oh, yes, yes. I was married at twenty five and that was long before I got married.

SR: O.K.

BS: '35 I got married but I was twenty five when I got married. It was long before then.

SR: Was there any local prostitution around that you were aware of?

BS: I don't know but there was one gay fella. He lived in Gowrie Street but I knew his brothers. They were tough boys but he was gay.

SR: How did you know because in those days it would have been pretty difficult for people to - - -

BS: Dear, they let you know; they come up and let you know.

SR: Was being gay accepted or weren't they more likely to be bashed up?

BS: No, no. The word "accepted" – well, they used to get bashed up a lot. They still do, even though there's supposed to be freedom but they still get bashed but they're very harmless people. Another one used to be up here in King Street Newtown named Harry Foy and when the Americans was over here first at the start of the war they went to a show and Harry Foy was there and he tried to do a line with one of the Yanks and the Yanks flattened him and killed him and this is the first time the word "queer" came out in the Australian language, queer.

128.31 They were always called queens, pansies. They weren't called homosexuals, poofers. They were called queens or pansies, daffodils too, faded daffodils too was a name for them.

SR: Faded daffodils?

BS: Faded daffodils, yes.

SR: Where did most people in the neighbourhood work?

BS: I think the best answer to that is wherever they can get a job and there wasn't that many jobs around.

SR: Well, what were the main local businesses in the area? I mean you had the shops that you've already described. Were there any other big industries?

BS: Well, I done three years turning and fitting in a little factory in John Street. It was at the back of the house in Charles Street and I tried to just work it out this morning when Loretta took me around – I couldn't. But this was a little red factory, like a big garage turning and fitting.

SR: The industries.

BS: Industry. Matter of fact I started my first job, it was in a foundry; lasted three days. Then I got another job in a peg factory in Mitchell Road Alexandria.

130.05 **SR: Paint?**

BS: Peg, clothes-pet, made out of wood in those days. I don't know how long I stayed there but then I got a job in this little engineering, turning and fitting. It was repairing boot machinery and a lot of textile, like clothing, buttonhole machines and things like that and I was there for about three years, then I went to textiles for twenty five years but most of the industries in Erskineville in those days were boot factories. Up the street from where I was born was Walker's boot factory. He came from Baldwin [?] Lane which was down the side a bit and then there was a big weatherboard cottage with a lot of ground. That got demolished and a builder built there, Welch Brothers, builder, but then wherever you go there was boot factories, McKinley and Cummins [?] – I only thought of it the other day – Ninna's [?], I think Ninna's shoe store. Anyway, another one down in Park Street used to make the Dally M [football award] football boots. And there was a saddlery down the bottom of Rochford Street. Most of them were boot factories around Erskineville.

SR: What smells can you remember? When you think back to the 19s when you were growing up and you had a bit of industry in the area, what smells do you associate with Erskineville at that time?

BS: Smells? I don't think there was any smells. No, no, we had no industrial smells.

SR: No?

BS: No.

SR: Well, what about even the smells of the trains?

BS: The steam trains?

132.00 **SR: Yes.**

BS: Well, I suppose the same smell as you'd have in your home with a fuel stove so you're used to it.

SR: Was there much pollution?

BS: We didn't know what pollution was in those days.

SR: Was the air smelly?

BS: No. There was no cars. If anybody had a car they'd stand out and watch it.

SR: O.K. Can you remember any local characters, any local people who stood out in your mind, eccentric people or just well-known people, was there anybody?

BS: No. There wouldn't be very many well-known people living in Erskineville under those conditions.

SR: But just people that were known locally. Can you remember any really big events, really big occasions?

BS: Well, I think the big occasion in the '30s, the unemployed used to have a parade, go down to Erskineville and up Erskineville Road again. I think they did take up a collection to buy this food I was telling you about in Australia Street.

SR: What did you know of the world outside your local area?

BS: Well, I knew where Railway Square was. I'm telling you I knew where Circular Quay was and I think every Sunday when we was kids we used to walk down the Botanical Gardens and there used to be saying – there might be half a dozen of us – there was a saying that we know every blade of grass in the Botanical Gardens and in those days you used to save the matchbox covers, Federal Match, and we'd walk along the gutter, picking them up. We were barefooted, big patches on the seat of our trousers but as far as events were concerned I don't know of any.

134.15 **SR: What I wanted to know is in terms of rituals, did you celebrate Empire Day, Cracker Night?**

BS: I don't know whether it was Cracker Night but one time we used to burn a cork and blacken our faces, blacken our faces with the burnt cork and we'd have a kerosene tin, parading all 'round the streets belting the kerosene tins or getting two pot lids, anything to make a noise.

SR: Why?

BS: And I don't know whether that'd be Empire Day - was it Empire Day? No, Guy Fawkes Day was the Cracker Night, wasn't it?

SR: Yes. Well both, I think. You could have crackers either on Guy Fawkes Day.

BS: Yes, that but we'd blacken our face and the kerosene tin and everybody'd be out on the street. No entertainment whatsoever. There was very few homes that had even a gramophone.

SR: Were you ever involved perhaps as a schoolkid in ceremonies where they were saluting the flag and singing songs and where you'd have kids do mass displays of gymnastics or physical culture kind of activities?

BS: Nothing like that. Every morning at school we had to salute the flag and 'God Save the King' because George V was in power then.

SR: Well, what about Arbour Day or Wattle Day? Did you do anything about Arbour Day?

BS: I don't think took much notice of that.

SR: Wattle Day?

BS: I don't think we took much notice of that.

136.00 **SR: Australia Day?**

BS: I don't remember doing anything about that.

SR: When did they first start celebrating ANZAC Day?

BS: I can't tell you, I can't tell you, I can't tell you.

SR: What can you remember about ending the First World War, can you remember the celebrations for the end of the war?

BS: I can tell you about the here and the little flags. The First World War?

SR: Mm.

BS: No, I can't. I think they were more concerned about getting a job.

SR: Can you remember much about moonlighting and foreign orders, like people making things say if they were working at the Eveleigh

Loco Workshops or knocking things off and you could buy things in pubs? Was there that kind of crime going on?

BS: No. There was a time – I don't know how old I was – but there was a fella used to make two bobs out of metal. This is very vague. I was never involved in that. I think I was the only one that's ever been pinched in my family and I got pinched like as I said playing football and I got a summons when I was thirteen to appear and then the Saturday before I got married - I think I was the only one in my family.

SR: Well, when you did get arrested that time when you were thirteen for playing football, what was your parents' reaction to that?

BS: They were disgusted.

SR: Disgusted with you or disgusted with the law?

BS: They just took it. My brother two older than me, he was about five foot tall. He had his own business but I guess if he made five shillings a week you done all right in those days. He went over this minister who was a massive big man and the minister said "Oh, I must've made a mistake with your brother" and I brought that up down the Children's Court and the answer to that was my brother, five foot, threatened this big bloke. I told you about it.

138.28 **SR: Yes.**

BS: Carter's Pickle in Monks Lane.

SR: Yes. So your parents weren't upset with you?

BS: I can't remember.

SR: O.K.

BS: But my mother would be upset about anything with her kids. That's true, that's true. I'm not because she's my mother, that is true. My mother would be upset about anything with her kids.

SR: She was on your side?

BS: A hundred and ten per cent.

SR: Did you ever get involved in any maypole dancing or anything like that?

BS: Maypole?

SR: Yes.

BS: I don't think I've ever saw one.

SR: They got into that in the '30s, I think. What's your happiest memory?

BS: Gorblimey. Happiest memory?

SR: From childhood.

BS: I've always been a mentally backward person who couldn't think far enough to be unhappy or happy.

SR: What about your saddest memory?

BS: I'm very lucky I've got a good wife and two beautiful kids and four marvellous grandkids. I think I can put that down as my happiness

SR: O.K. Now, I want to ask a couple of things probably a bit outside your childhood experience. Can you remember when the Unemployed Workers people took over that house in Union Street?

140.02 BS: Took over the house in Union Street?

SR: Well, they fought off the eviction.

BS: With the evictions?

SR: Yes.

BS: Well, that went on everywhere. You can't say Union Street; that went on everywhere.

SR: There was a big battle at Union Street.

BS: It might've been but I don't remember that but everywhere people – I'll tell you the instance now what I'm talking about. This was a widow of the '14-'18 war. If I'm not making a mistake, my eldest brother told me this story. Up in Albert Street and she had three kids – and you can have a go at me about that – the landlord was Jewish and he demanded her body for the rent. Little brick cottages on the left hand side going up to Erskineville Road, the Police Boys' Club and I think it was about the third one and I remember him saying that woman has never got over that, how she had to sell herself to keep a roof over her kids' heads.

SR: Who said that to you?

BS: I'm pretty sure it was my eldest brother, Ernie. He only died a few years ago, ninety three and seven months old, eldest brother. I'm

pretty sure of that. He wasn't a fella who disliked a person because they were a Jew or Chinese. His policy was the world was for the human race and we should enjoy it. He was that type of man, not religious but very political.

SR: And there was evictions. You can remember the evictions in the '30s, can you?

BS: Oh yes, yes, I remember all about that, yes. Three and four families living in the one house, oh yes, yes, yes.

142.04 **SR: Were you involved in the fights then, were you involved in the campaigns to stop the evictions?**

BS: Oh no, no. I've never been out of work in me life. I've worked since me fourteenth birthday and I retired at sixty four and a half from the New South Wales University or sixty four and nine months, I think. I think it was twenty years last April when I gave up work.

SR: I wanted to ask you what was the impact of the establishment of the airport at Mascot on this area.

BS: Well, I don't live at this area or most of my time was out of this area. Up the street's my address.

SR: But in the '20s you were there when that plane crashed, I mean childhood time. Was there a change?

BS: That was long before I was married and I lived in 28 John Street Erskineville at that time.

SR: Was there a change in the nature of the area brought about by the airport? Did it have any impact?

BS: I don't think it made any difference. We never had the jets in those days. We had the propeller, props, whatever they called them.

SR: O.K. Well, look, I'd like to thank you. Is there anything you want to say that you haven't said? I've run out of questions.

BS: What, a woman run out of questions?

SR: Watch it. You're treading on dangerous ground there.

BS: No. I think when we're talking about Terry Murphy I told you I knew the Mayor of Erskineville in my young days.

SR: No. Who was that?

BS: Burt(?) Henry. He had, I think it was a real estate shop opposite the pub on the corner of Union Street. He had two sons, a young Burt and another one, but the youngest son I worked with him on the city council. He was a senior clerk in the Town Hall and I was with the doctor, medical doctor, for a while and when he saw me he thought I was one of the tough boys of Erskineville named Bluey Tighe [?] but I said "No, I'm Bill Schwebel". And he used to come down John Street, him and another fella, learned boxing from an officer in the army. Tom Green [?] was his name – he was a strongman. He used to lay on a bed of nails and have a block of rock on his chest and get a sledgehammer belting it, Tom Green. But, of course, the nails were so close and never used to penetrate, yes.

SR: Was that an Erskineville local, was it?

BS: Yes. His father was the Mayor of Erskineville, young Henry, but the eldest brother was Burt Henry after his father.

SR: And what about this guy lying on the bed of nails?

BS: Well, this was a magician trick. They still do it.

SR: Yes. And was he a local who did that?

BS: Yes. Tom lived maybe two houses from us in John Street.

SR: O.K. There's another question I've thought of. In the local area, like even looking at Erskineville, Alexandria and Newtown, Redfern, what have you, Waterloo, were there some areas that were considered worse than others, that there was a social stigma attached to them?

BS: We never used to be able to determine that but that place where the murder was for the man, his wife and daughter and canary, Pleasant Avenue, that looked upon one of the nicest places in Erskineville, the wide street and it had trees.

SR: Was there any areas where the kids were considered tougher than the other kids because they used to form little gangs and that. Were the Redfern kids tougher than the Erskineville kids?

146.06 BS: There was Alexandria/Redfern was looked upon tougher.

SR: Alexandria and Redfern?

BS: Yes, that was looked upon as a tough area but of course, as I say, the average show was the number against the lack of numbers.

SR: So the Erskineville kids, were they a bit scared of the Redfern kids?

BS: I wouldn't say they were scared. Oh, no, I wouldn't say they were scared. Well, after all it's only human nature, they're on the same: they'd have a crack.

SR: And was Erskineville viewed as a slum area?

BS: Oh, yes. About two year ago in the *Sydney Morning Herald* there was an article in it about Mactown, Macdonaldtown. Now, there's no such a thing as Macdonaldtown, only the station. It's Erskineville, Chippendale, Newtown, and it was called the slummiest part of Sydney but I wouldn't care what they say, Sue. It may be the poorest people in Sydney but they were fair dinkum. I remember a time when there was a builder. He had a big demolition job and he had a big truck and he knew a woman up the street from me from where I lived in John Street, about six or seven houses up, six houses up say, and he brought this big truckload of fuel - it used to be fuel in those days for the fuel coppers, the fuel fires. And she asked him to dump right along the street this wood from this demolition place that everybody can get a little bit, share and share alike. So her name was Miss Cook [?]. She was a barmaid and she was married to a cop.

148.01 **SR: Was there much of a sense of community in the area?**

BS: Oh, I think it was very good.

SR: People would look out for each other, would they, or if you're in trouble or someone was sick?

BS: You were never in trouble without somebody being there. As I said about my mother being a midwife, they come all the time for her to help. But I remember when - oh, I don't know how old - but there was one fella, I remember him talking about my mother. He'd moved up to Canterbury and he came down and he said "There's only one place in Erskineville" - - - [break in recording]. And my mother used to make these big trays of scones and cup of tea. No matter how poor we were you'd always put that on. We'd be sitting out in the yard - only had a small yard, maybe not much bigger than this - and I remember him saying "You could always get a cup of tea at Schwebel's place", I remember him saying that and it never hit me that he was giving my mother the greatest rap you can have.

SR: And were you encouraged to bring your friends home, even though there were so many of you?

BS: We were always encouraged; we had an open house.

SR: How many bedrooms were in your house?

BS: There were eight kids. There was a bedroom there, dining room there, open bedroom there with curtains and a bedroom there and then a kitchen, brick kitchen. Then outside of that was this, what you call a laundry for all the aluminium tubs and then in the corner over there my two brothers put this concrete bath in but then they also put in electric light.

149.59 The fella who done it, he was in charge of the Newtown substation, Doug, and my second eldest brother he called his son Doug, his youngest. He died. Then his youngest son, Bill, called his son Doug. Now this Doug Schwebel, he's one of the top men of Esso Oil Company in Melbourne. My son-in-law was down there and he said that Duggie's going up and up and it won't be very long when he'll be a director of Esso Oil Company.

SR: Is there anything else?

BS: Geez, I'm praising my family, aren't I?

SR: No, it's good, it's wonderful. What places around here from your childhood are important to you now as a place, as a significant place?

BS: Well, we went around a little bit this morning, love, and it's an entirely different area. Where houses were falling down, bug-ridden and all that - they're homosexuals taking over control of Erskineville from what Loretta said - and they're getting renovated beautiful, absolutely beautiful.

SR: Right. So that place has changed a lot?

BS: Yes. Houses in my young day wouldn't get painted from one year's end to another, wouldn't get painted from one year's end to another. Well, nobody owned them and the landlord wouldn't paint them; all they wanted was their dollar or their dinar – dinar [slang] was a shilling, ten cents – but never get painted.

SR: You know when I was asking about the bedrooms? You had three bedrooms, presumably one for your parents and the two for the kids.

BS: Yes.

SR: Would you each have your own bed or would you have to sleep together?

152.01 BS: No, you'd have a double bed - there's three of us in that – and you'd have another bed and then two beds, like whatever.

SR: At least it would have kept you warm.

BS: Wheat bags kept us warm, yes.

SR: O.K. Thank you very much.

BS: That's lovely, that's lovely.

Interview ends