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Transcript of an interview with

Edith Withers

1905-2007

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Date: 16 September 1983

Recorded Meeting With: E. Withers

Address: 26 McKimmie Street Palmyra

Interviewer: Maureen McGarry

Oh Miss Withers, thank you for helping us in this way. What is your full name?

Edith Norma Withers.

Thank you. What is your date of birth?

17th July 1905.

That makes you how old?

78.

Thank you. When did you first come to live in Melville?

In 1933, we came to live in Bicton.

And that was in Waddell Road, was it?

Waddell Road, Bicton.

Mm, thank you. What were the full names of your parents?

Joseph Jones Withers was my father. My mother's name was Eva Matilda.

Mm. Where did they come from originally?

The Withers?

No, your mum and dad.

The Withers family came – the Bunbury Withers.

Oh, they were actually, he was born here, your father.

Yes, yes, but only just. But I mean, some of them were born in Ireland. He was an Anglican colonial chaplain who came out. That was the Withers. And my father was one of the sons. He was born out here, but some of them had been born in Ireland. But they were Protestant Irish, you know. But it was the Anglican Church.

I know what you mean.

The Church of England Irish. The Church of Ireland Irish. That's to say, sometimes you would think that it was Roman Catholic, but it was not [indecipherable].

No. And what about your mother, was she Australian?

South Australian.

South Australian, thank you. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

At the time when we – in 1933, surviving was my brother Lionel, Lionel Wakefield Withers and my sister Olwyn Doris, who died shortly after she died in 1953. She had a terminal complaint.

And what did your father do?

Well, he had been farming for many years.

Thank you. Were there many other people around in Waddell Road, Bicton, when you came here?

Well, there were quite a lot of vacant blocks. And I suppose running from our back there would be the Darcy Evans blocks of land that they had. And the Bevans who had a dairy running back into the corner of our block. There were some, I think, there were some houses along there facing onto the Canning Highway. The Bevans occupied a fair big piece of land there.

Big piece of land, mm.

I think Mrs Arnold was down the next corner. No, I think the Bevans were on that corner block, which ran I think probably cornerwise into our block. They met at the back, at any rate. Our block ran right back into Evans, Darcy Evans, who had a couple of – two houses there and a block of land, I suppose.

Not too many people, just mostly scrub, was it?

No, well along our road wasn't any... not as far as Preston Point Road, but the rest of the road was all bush.

Do the old family homes of these people still stand, do you know?

No, I don't think any of them do.

No, I know you say yours doesn't.

The Darcy Evans, I don't know, I think their's does stand. A very large house with verandahs all around, big hall down the middle. I think that probably is still there. Which was really running into Murray Road. [indecipherable] and Murray Road.

What was your family house made of?

Well it was constructed of brick.

Was it? And what roof?

Brick and stone, I suppose you might say.

Brick and stone.

Tin roof and verandah. Wooden verandah. Decorated verandah, you know, curved timber.

Who built it, do you know?

No, I don't know.

It was built when you got there.

Oh yes, it was. It was rather an old house.

What sort of transport was used in those days?

The Canning Highway had these early buses, the South Suburban Company, which is now run by Withers and Carroll and Sumpton. That was one of the Withers family and of course one of our relatives. There were trams out from Fremantle as far as Melville Road Board Office which is on the corner of Stock Road and Canning Highway. The tram terminus was there. And there was a deviation from the bottom of the hill at Leopold – opposite Leopold – out to Point Walter, a tram running out there. Those were the nearest trams and they were running at the time.

Thank you. Did you go to Perth at all, and if so how did you go?

Well we went on the bus, which was one and six return. One shilling and sixpence return. I don't suppose we'd get in too often. We used Fremantle probably more often, because there was a tram. We enjoyed the trams – riding on the trams.

Yeah, the buses would be a bit rough, I would think.

I don't know. I don't recollect they were rough, but they were alright, I think.

Meaning the roads were rough, you know. What about the present main roads around there in those areas, in Bicton and also of course Palmyra where you live now, do the present main roads follow the same routes as the early roads or trams?

Yes, I think some of the roads were not made in those times, but I think as far as Palmyra is concerned they were made, I think. But I think out in Bicton, no they were not all made roads, but they were surveyed roads, I think. I don't think there were so very many roads beyond Preston Point Road – north of Preston Point Road. Not as now, you know, kind of a grid system. Some – of course there were some through roads ...

Yes, yes. What sort of condition were the roads in and what were they made of?

Well some of them were more or less white limestone. I didn't regard them as rough at all, because I had not been brought up in the city anyway. Although of course at that time when we moved there, I had not been living in Australia, I had been in [indecipherable] and I came home. So I didn't have what you might call a very critical eye about – I just accepted things the way they were.

Of course, you wouldn't have gone to school in the City of Melville, would you?

Oh no.

No. Do you remember around where you were there first of all who owned a motor vehicle, and what type, if you can remember.

No, well I thought people used to walk to the trams. I don't think there were many motor vehicles around.

No, there wouldn't have been, no.

Not out there, because they had tram and they had the bus to Perth. Used to walk to the shops. There were little corner shops mainly in those days.

Everybody walked, didn't they? How did the mail come, the letters, and how often?

Yes. Twice a day, I think. And I think that it was a horse and cart – horse and sulky. That I don't feel absolutely certain, but I think it was a horse and sulky that came along. Because many things were horse people.

Was it Saturday, come Saturday?

Oh, probably Saturday morning as well as twice a day. The mail service was very good.

Where was the first Post Office near you and when was it built?

Well I suppose it would have been East Fremantle.

Oh yes.

The one that's still standing there now. Not used as a Post Office at present. I don't think there would have been any Post Offices in the long way from either direction.

No. How long did it take for newspapers to arrive from Perth or Fremantle – The West Australian newspaper?

Oh well, I think they came every day and promptly. I think deliveries were good.

Did you get that at home?

I don't remember that particularly being delivered. I suppose we had it delivered. Or whether we got it from the corner shop. That I can't say directly with any accuracy.

Were there any local newspapers?

Not that I know of.

What about a telephone. Did you have one?

No, we didn't have a telephone or teletype.

You don't remember the first time it was connected round about?

No.

Did you have many visitors or tramps calling at your house?

No, no.

You had visitors, I guess.

We had our own visitors who came out by public transport from here and there. My parents had friends who used to come out. My mother used to walk around a lot and chat with the people in the district. She was on pretty friendly terms, but it was mostly ... oh bikes we used, bicycles we used – push bikes. Quite a lot of people had push bicycles.

But there was no fear was there, of anybody?

No, none whatever. No locking up or worrying about your possessions or anything.

Everything was left open. Did you go to church, and if so, where?

Yes, well the first thing we arrived, it was probably Good Friday of 1933, the first thing someone did was to walk out and discover where the Church of England was. Probably my father. Although, I doubt whether my – yes probably my father, but he was obliged to live back on the farm for some of the time. He was staying with us for a little while. You know, he would have found that out. So they found that there was a church, a couple of pence ride – two penny ride up to Saint Peter's Church – Saint Peter's Church of England East Fremantle. And we also found there was a church in Palmyra which was little – it's not there now – and a little wooden church where I used to walk down myself. Some of us used to walk down there. My mother preferred to go on the tram to Saint Peter's. So she kept that as her church. I must say I didn't always go with her, because I somehow or other – oh probably playing the organ or something – got involved with going to Saint Mark's, which was quite a long walk, but I do remember going there.

What were the main social and recreational activities around about you at that time, and also sporting activities?

Well of course, there was dances. I don't say we necessarily took part in these things – but regular dances. I suppose the picture shows came in those times, which I don't remember attending those much. I suppose church fetes, they made a social reason for people getting together. All churches ran fetes. And they enjoyed working for them. There was a lot of socialising going on with the church and church life.

That'd be very nice.

And of course, choirs, and people meeting for practices. And Sunday School work, and people taking their children along. And picnics, people had a connection with Sunday Schools.

Any sport?

Yes, but I wasn't connected with any of it, so I couldn't speak.

Don't worry about that, Miss Withers, you know, just tell us what you remember and what other people did at that time in that regard. Did they play tennis or ...?

Yes they did, they did. But I couldn't say much about it.

No, no.

I think they played all the normal standard games – cricket and football and tennis.

Those things. And of course you were a long way away from the water then weren't you, really? I suppose there was a lot of things there. Did you ever attend a ratepayer's meeting?

No.

Where was the nearest store? Who ran it? You know, and this is where your mother in those early days got her groceries and that.

Yes, well there was a shop, there was a corner shop run by Mrs Mattingly. But my mother was ...

Well excuse me just for a second: where was that?

It was on the corner of Waddell Road and Canning Highway, on the north-east corner of the intersection.

Mrs Mattingly.

But we did have a few thousand – we had eggs which of course many people did. My mother used to go along to John Wills, who had a store in East Fremantle. She used to barter these eggs I think. Well, she used to take along eggs and bring home a few groceries. There was one firm that would take the eggs you see and you could...

Something in return.

That was something definite you could do with eggs instead of hawking them round or anything like that. So she would have, you know, she had a relationship with John Wills because of the eggs. And she enjoyed going along, that's what she used to do - go along to John Wills.

And Mrs Mattingly.

Mattingly.

Mattingly.

She had a corner shop, you know, and I suppose people used to use it quite a lot.

And what about things like milk and bread?

Oh yes, they were delivered.

Delivered to your house?

The milk was, yes. And oh yes, I think there were deliveries of everything.

That's marvelous, you know. That's all gone these days, isn't it?

Mm.

How did supplies arrive at these shops, do you know?

I suppose – I suppose they had them through the firms that they ... I suppose they did have modes of transport. There were also horse teams on the roads, but not round about ... quite a few people had horse – horse and sulky delivering for smaller things. But I think there were still the transport firms still had teams of horses, but I think that their time was coming to an end. I suppose a lot of them still were using these transport vehicles.

What about banks or hotels and other services?

There was always this hotel down called the Leopold which was at the bottom of the hill. Which wasn't much of a touching point for us, because we were on the tram and we went past it, you see. We didn't go and frequent it. Banks – there was I supp... Palmyra – I don't know whether they had a bank there. I think that the Post Office – there was some Post Office branches in shops that did have a banking agency: the Commonwealth Bank.

But there was no bank as such.

No – it wasn't in that area. No. Probably Fremantle.

What were the main industries or land use in the area?

Well, it was residential and vacant blocks. Most people had – a few people had a cow, we had a cow. And they had fowls. I suppose everybody grew their own fruit and vegetables to some extent. Whereas we had fig trees. Most of the older plots there were stone fruit trees. I didn't mention that I actually did open a little kindergarten in our place at 45 Wadell Road which occupied our attention a bit. We had a little extension put on the back and did have a little kindergarten – a morning kindergarten. You see that was '33, and it wasn't so very long before the war started...

No.

...and things started to break up.

They certainly did. Was your father or brothers out of work during the twenties or thirties?

Still on farm not doing at all well. No, they operated on a farm. And my brother then – I suppose it was some – it might have been the end of the twenties – he thought he'd try his luck on the Goldfields with a couple of other farming friends of his own age that went up to scrape together enough to, you know, to live prospecting around.

Was there any relief given?

Well my brother and my father never got any relief of any sort. When I came home in 1933, my brother was up on the fields at the time and came down again eventually. They couldn't really support themselves at this sort of life. I don't know what he did, but we both eventually joined the army.

Did you? In '39?

No, there wasn't any women's army as far as I know in '39. We both joined up about '42. Because that – the seriousness of the whole scale thing – whole scale war was that war was appreciated right at the beginning not by everybody. It was the fall of Singapore that, you know, shattered everybody's hopes of it being a short war. People started to join up – oh a lot of people had been, you know, away in Africa at that time. But in our case we joined up in 1942.

[indecipherable] ended more quickly.

Well you felt the urge to join up. It's unexplainable, you can't always say why...

No.

...you just had that feeling. Hardly anybody can explain why they tell me when interviewed.

One more question before our final question. You told me that you moved in 1956 to here: 26 McKimmie Street Palmyra. You been happy with that move, have you?

Very, yeah.

From one side of the highway to the other really, isn't it?

Oh well I – I didn't come from the other – oh...

You didn't come from Wadell Road?

No. I have been away for some years. I had been in England for a few years, you see. The house was still there when I came back, which was after I had been away. I got rid of it. I suppose most sales were very small in those days. I lived around – I stayed around with people for a while and then I did have, I was able to purchase this house and move in in 1956. But it was not a direct move from Waddell Road.

No, I see.

[indecipherable]

Just from my interest about the area and that, were you able to rent that Waddell Road place while you were overseas? Was that possible?

Well my mother when I left, my mother was in **Occupationography(?)**, and she had a young couple I think. But meantime while I was away, she died. It was let, Mr **Bar... Lesley Barger(?)** of Perth let it. Then I came back [indecipherable] it was sold.

Thank you. Last question. Are there any particular local characters in those days that stand out in your mind?

We were connected with church people a lot. No, I don't think there were any locals that we had a lot to do with. There was a very nice people around, but not any outstanding characteristics that ...

Thank you very much.

END