



ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

INTERVIEWEE: Elaine Armstrong

INTERVIEWER: Virginia Macleod

PLACE: Potts Point

DATE: 11 December 2012

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **VM:** I'm speaking today with Mrs Elaine Armstrong, President of the Country Women's Association of New South Wales. Today is Tuesday, the 11th of December 2012 and we're meeting at the Country Women's Association headquarters in Potts Point. My name is Virginia Macleod.

Elaine, could you tell me what year were you born?

EA: I was born in 1942.

VM: **And where were you born?**

EA: I was born in Goulburn [NSW].

VM: **In the town or in the country region?**

EA: In the town. My dad was teaching at Taralga at the time and I was born in the hospital in Goulburn.

VM: **And so did you grow up there?**

EA: No, we moved very soon after that to the coast, the South Coast, 'round the Wollongong area and I grew up in that area around the Fairy Meadow side on the north of Wollongong.

VM: And you went to school and high school there?

EA: Went to school at Fairy Meadow and then to Wollongong High School, yes.

VM: And what did you do after you left school?

EA: I then went to Wagga Wagga Teachers College and took up a career teaching and moved back to the coast to teach for the first part of my life, then married and went to Orange and taught up there for a little bit.

VM: This is high school or primary?

EA: Primary, infants and primary but then when I started my family I had to resign and move to the coast again.

VM: Why did you have to resign?

EA: Because I had two pregnancies very close together - - -

VM: Right, you were too busy.

EA: - - - and you couldn't extend your maternity leave at that time. So, yes, I resigned and then had my three sons and went back to Wollongong and upgraded my qualifications to a Diploma of Teaching and then started teaching as a casual, permanent casual in some cases, around the Wollongong area.

2.04 **VM: So when you say you upgraded your training, you mean you became a high school teacher?**

EA: Well, yes, I was able then to teach high school up to Year 12 and because I had a maths honours from high school I went into mathematics and taught mathematics in the high schools around the area down there, just on a couple of days a week basis, yes.

VM: And you enjoyed that?

EA: I loved it, yes.

VM: And then you're not living in Wollongong now?

EA: No, we moved. My husband decided we'd do a tree change twenty-odd years ago and although part of me really wanted to stay on the coast, at the time I thought "Five years we'll be back on the coast, I'll

give him five years" but we're still out there and our families have now settled around us so we're fine.

VM: So you're all settled around Wagga?

EA: Not all, no. One son's in Newcastle direction but the two sons that are nearest are on the farm and we've moved into town and retired.

VM: And so what brought you to the Country Women's Association – were you always a member or only once you moved to Wagga?

EA: No. My knowledge of the Country Women's Association in Wollongong was only of their rest rooms which were in Burelli Street and as we used to get dropped off my mum and I'd be dropped off and my dad and the two boys'd go and do their boy things, whatever they did, I can't remember. We'd do our girl things and then we'd meet back at the CWA rest park in Wollongong and that was my only early experience of the Country Women's Association.

VM: And tell me a little bit about it. So what did it comprise, the rest room?

EA: At that time?

VM: Yes.

EA: The rest room, as I remember it, we used to go there because there was good swings out in the rest park and tables and chairs and a bit of shade over there but we also could use the rest rooms themselves, the facilities and I can remember especially putting the penny in the slot and you used to slide the catch across. Do you remember those?

4.10 **VM: No, tell me.**

EA: Oh, gee, that was a while ago then. It went to tuppence after a while but you used to put a penny in the slot and slide the catch and it would open the door to the toilet. But as we'd sort of walked out or in and out of where we were going to the toilets the ladies were sitting in quite a big room, from memory, with lovely white tablecloths with afternoon teas or morning teas or lunches, whatever it happened to be, sandwiches, tea, scones, pikelets, whatever, but they seemed to be playing cards or games and things and that was my impression of what the Country Women's Association was. So when we moved to Wagga and went farming I had no daughters, no sisters and was just sort of on the farm and the neighbour said to me would I consider

joining CWA and I said "Oh, I'm not old enough", thinking back to those older ladies that I had seen in Wollongong.

VM: When you were a ten year old or something?

EA: When I was little, yes, and they seemed very old at that stage. And she said "Oh, no, it's a lot more than that" and she gave me one of our CWA journals which opened my eyes then to the breadth and depth of where this association is and what we can do and our Outreach that we have and the number of women that we can help, women and families, and how we can help them. And it was the international work that drew my attention particularly and, yes, I was happy to help reform, as it happened to be, the Oura Branch, and because I'd been a maths teacher of course they said "You'll be treasurer", so at my first meeting I took treasurer.

VM: Just like that.

EA: Just like that.

VM: And so was it way into a whole group of other women and a different way of life?

6.02 EA: Yes, it certainly was.

VM: Did it change your life?

EA: Well, it didn't actually change my life but it gave me a bit more direction; it certainly gave me female company. Having had no sisters or daughters, growing up with brothers and sons, I was very much into the man side of things and my female interests like craft shops and things like that sort of were on the shelf at the time. But getting into CWA and meeting like-minded ladies who were wanting to help the community but also to help women in the broader picture as well, I suppose my focus became much more directed in what we were doing through our association.

VM: And so when did you become president?

EA: State president?

VM: M'mm.

EA: I finish in May, so this is my third year.

VM: Is that the limited term, is it?

EA: Yes. It's actually you commit for twelve months only but you can do it for three years in a row and this is the completion of my third year coming up.

VM: And so this naturally grew out of your interest and you moved up?

EA: Yes, yes. Certainly it was not on my agenda when I joined CWA to be state president - that was never my intention at all – but the paths seem to have led me this way and here I am. I have been state secretary; ten years ago, actually, I was state secretary so I've sort of had a little taste of being involved at a state level and when the nominations were called three years ago I thought "Well, I'll see what the family say" and they said "Well, why not? If you're meant to be there you will and if you're not, you're not". So I did and here I am.

8.00 **VM: Here you are. So as president, of course, your work brings you to Sydney.**

EA: Yes, quite often.

VM: How often do you come here?

EA: I'm down in Sydney at least every month, sometimes only perhaps for two or three days, sometimes for ten, twelve, fourteen days at a time. It just depends on the programme that the association has and what's necessary, what meetings are necessary for me to be here. I do a lot of travel throughout the state. Probably in the last two years I have travelled over fifty thousand kilometres and I've probably shaken hands with half the members of the association in that time, so it's a wonderful experience in that way, that you're getting out and you're meeting people. You're encouraging them where they are with what they're doing and letting them see that there is a purpose, a direction. We're ninety years strong and we're on the way now to our centenary, which is coming very fast.

VM: Just around the corner, isn't it?

EA: Around the corner, yes.

VM: When will that be?

EA: In 2022.

VM: Yes, not far off.

EA: But, yes, the ninety years we must be doing something right because there's not many other women's organisations that can claim to be ninety years strong.

VM: Yes.

EA: We've achieved over those ninety years many things for women and their families.

VM: And kept going too, yes.

EA: Yes, we're still going on.

VM: Sometimes organisations change or turn into something else - -
-

EA: Yes.

VM: - - - but you're kept the name.

EA: We're still looking in the same direction, yes.

VM: So I'd just like to talk a little bit about coming to Sydney. And so you're based here and the headquarters here in Potts Point also runs a whole lot of various kinds of accommodation for your members.

EA: That's right.

VM: So can you tell me a bit what you offer your members in terms of accommodation?

9.59 EA: In terms of accommodation the members are offered here a single room with breakfast included for forty five dollars with a shared bathroom but if you choose to have an ensuite as a single member it's sixty five dollars but if you're sharing your twin room with another member or a husband or partner it's still the forty five dollars a night which is ninety for the whole room – that's for non-members. We have family rooms which again they are at a special rate and I haven't used a family room so I'm not really au fait with the costs of those but there are family rooms and there are double rooms as well. We do have one room that is available for a disabled person – is that what you call them, disabled person?

VM: Yes, accessible.

EA: Yes, but it's not a full room as such.

VM: Yes, you have to have a very big bathroom and things.

EA: Yes, yes.

VM: You mentioned that you were going to upgrade the accommodations here.

EA: Yes, we're looking to upgrade it.

VM: Is that because the members are demanding different sort of accommodation?

EA: No, it's because the building's demanding it. The building is now since 1982 thirty years old and accommodation rate is well over seventy per cent, so it's had a lot of feet walking through the halls and sleeping on the beds and we can't put in air conditioning because the electricity won't take it, our water piping is restrictive. It's an older building and needs to be redeveloped and that's what we're hoping to be able to do and that's under discussions at the moment.

VM: What, you're working on plans?

EA: Yes.

VM: And was this built new in '82 or was it just sort of largely renovated?

11.57 EA: It was built basically in '82. It's been refurbished in '94 I think it was – or it might have been 2004 – but it's really a very tired building. The lifts are problems at the moment - although they're going well; I shouldn't say that, they're working at the moment but there are problems, we realise that, with the building but it's still a home away from home and the members appreciate the fact that they can drive here, they've got secure parking, they've got secure lock-up at night that's a security surveillance a couple of times an evening. Yes, we are only sort of a stone throw from Kings Cross but we don't seem to have any great problems in that way and once you're here, you park your car, you can use the bus, you can use the train, you can get a taxi and you're only fifteen minutes' walk from St Vincent's Hospital.

VM: Do a lot of your members come because of family members in hospital?

EA: For medical reasons and appointments and things.

VM: Or their own treatment?

EA: Yes.

VM: And what other reasons would you say they come for?

EA: For shows. Some of them might come down – I know we have a very heavy booking for Christmas and for New Year's Eve and things like that; we're just about fully booked out, each of those, because people want to come down to Sydney for the celebrations. But a lot of people come for perhaps the opera and they'll come and park and have the evening – we have an evening meal, an evening meal, two courses for twenty dollars and a lot of people come and have their meal and then go off to a show. And some come down for weddings and all sorts of reasons that people use it. When the cricket's on there are some families that come and stay so they can be handy to get into the cricket and the same with the tennis. I don't know about Boxing Day with the yachting but I would guess that there'd be people too.

14.06 **VM: All the big events are popular.**

EA: Yes, all those big events.

VM: And what about the Easter Show – is there any connection there?

EA: Yes, the Easter Show. Some of our rooms at Easter are kept for those working at the show so that they've definitely got a bed to sleep in for the show but still, having three floors of accommodation with fifty rooms there's still plenty of room for others to come at Easter. Word seems to have spread through our associations throughout Australia, the other Country Women's Association, about how handy we are to the airport and a lot of people come, stay here from the airport and use it as a stepping stone to visit throughout the state, whatever, and the same with overseas visitors. We have a lot that come to the airport and then come here, to make sort of their first step here and then from here they can go out to wherever or do whatever they're doing.

VM: Are you affiliated with overseas organisations?

EA: Yes, we are. We are part of what's called the Associated Country Women of the World and its head office is in London and we have a South Pacific area president who is one of our New South Wales members and she is on the board over there so that we do have that link and we go as delegates to the world conference or to the South Pacific area conferences which, one was in Tonga in September this year.

VM: And you went to that?

EA: Yes, I did. And the national conference, which is just for the Australian Country Women's Association, that was in Hobart in August, so yes.

VM: You've got a busy life, yes.

EA: It has been busy but it's been great.

VM: So tell me a little bit about your room here.

EA: My suite?

VM: Yes.

15.55 EA: I call it a suite because at least I've got two rooms and a bathroom but it's lovely. From my point of view when I come in and shut the door I'm myself. Not that I'm not myself out there – how can I explain this? When I come in here I've got things around me that belong to me and I can sort of turn off to what's out in the office and it's lovely.

VM: So even though the office is just upstairs - - -

EA: Upstairs, yes, this is still sort of my home.

VM: - - - you feel like you're coming home at the end of the day.

EA: Yes, I do, I say "I'm home again". And also the streets: just a walk up the block and you can be up and have coffee and cake or whatever you want.

VM: Do you find that you go out to eat or you eat in the dining room?

EA: No, I eat in the dining room usually. It's only if there's somebody coming that wants to talk something that I don't want in the dining room, that's when I might suggest "Well, there's a little coffee shop. We'll go up here or we'll have a meal somewhere". But basically I eat here; I enjoy their meals and their cooking.

VM: And do you cook for yourself at all in your facilities?

EA: No, I don't. The other rooms don't have cooking facilities; they only have tea and coffee. They have to have their breakfast together in the dining room. I think the hours there are seven thirty to nine thirty, so it's quite a good spread and you can help yourself to whatever you want there. But, no, I only get my own breakfast here. I could, because I've got the microwave, I could do my own but, no, I go and join them for their meal.

VM: And tell me, you said you've got a few things of your own here.

EA: Yes.

VM: What did you bring to make it feel homely?

EA: A painting, a clock, photos of family.

VM: Tell me about the paintings, the one that

EA: No, no. Actually, I won that at one of our state conferences in one of the raffles that we had. I couldn't believe it; I thought "Oh, that was lovely". First prize was a quilt, I think, and I'm not really a quilting person but I won the second prize and that was it and I just love it and it's part of sort of being here when I walk in and I see my clock and I see that and I sort of think "Oh, that's nice, I'm home again".

18.14 **VM: Roses. It's a very lovely painting, isn't it?**

EA: M'mm.

VM: And the clock, tell me about that because that's like a painting too.

EA: Yes, that's from my own Riverina group and they gave that to me when I became state president and, yes, it's not really like a clock. It is a clock but it's not, if you know what I mean.

VM: Yes.

EA: A clock that doesn't look like a clock.

VM: Yes, you just have to look twice to see the hands on it, don't you? It's more like a painting.

EA: Yes.

VM: And is there anything else that you have here?

EA: My family photos.

VM: Your family photos.

EA: Yes, different things that I've been along the way as I move around, yes.

VM: A few objects, yes.

EA: So that's it. I don't spend a lot of time in here. Usually it's only lunchtime; I come in here for lunch, and after the evening meal. Sometimes I have to go back up for an hour to the office and then I'll come back down here and be ready to fall into bed. I don't watch

much TV, I haven't got time. When I'm here in Sydney it's too full-on to worry about television.

VM: You're too busy, yes. So in Sydney are you mainly here and people are coming to see you because they want to see you as president or what are your preoccupations?

EA: Both, both. It's mainly business, things that I have to see to, plus it may be a solicitor, it may be like yourself, an interview, it may be all sorts of things that slot into the week that I'm here but as well as that I go out to meetings. I might be going out to a meeting with the Minister for Agriculture or something like that, anything that we can tee up to slot in while I'm here. So I'm not actually sitting here, doing nothing.

VM: No, no, I didn't mention that for moment. So tell me, you'd said that you'd travelled extensively in your time, fifty thousand kilometres or something, do you drive, do you fly?

20.11 EA: Mostly.

VM: Mostly drive.

EA: Mostly drive, although there are times when if I'm away on a tour – when I went up the North Coast, for example, I had to come back to Sydney for a dinner one evening so I flew back, left my car at Port Macquarie, flew down and then went back to continue up there. And when I went to Hobart, of course, I flew and when I went to Darwin I flew and Perth again - long distance is usually by plane.

VM: Do you like driving?

EA: I don't mind, yes, as I've got a lovely car that is leased for the state president and it's very comfortable and I don't mind going on my own because I can put a tape on – I have Radio National a fair bit, actually, and just keep in touch with everything that's happening.

VM: It gives you time to reflect.

EA: Yes, on my own I can stop if I want a coffee, I haven't got to keep talking, yes.

VM: Bit of time out, yes.

EA: Yes, it's been O.K, a bit of time out, yes.

VM: And when you go to all these different – tell me, how many branches did you say there were?

EA: Well, it varies. The most, I think, is about twenty six branches in a group and I think that's Hunter River and they've got about six hundred and fifty members there but mostly it averages probably eighteen to twenty branches that you visit. I usually go Monday to Friday and then there's usually a morning tea, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner throughout the week that's organised for me. I don't have to organise and the group president in my car usually takes me around and I have Monday to Friday. I have done a couple of groups back to back where I've sort of done Monday to Friday in one group, had Saturday to myself and then turned up ready for the next one on the Sunday for the next week. I've only done that a couple of times but when I'm that far up north or south - - -

22.13 **VM: Yes, geographically it worked out, yes.**

EA: - - - yes, I've tried to fit in a couple at the same time.

VM: And where do you stay then?

EA: Home hospitality except weekends. Weekends, when I do my washing, I usually have my own motel room or something so I can veg out and sleep and wash and all that.

VM: The group provide hospitality for you?

EA: Yes, the group provide it, yes.

VM: So you stay with different members?

EA: Yes, yes.

VM: So you get to know them.

EA: M'mm.

VM: So there's branches and then above that there are groups?

EA: That's right.

VM: And how many groups are there?

EA: Thirty.

VM: Thirty, right, throughout New South Wales.

EA: Yes.

VM: And overall how many people would there be?

EA: We have nearly ten thousand, just under ten thousand members, which is quite big. It's the biggest women's organisation in all of Australia, I guess, not only New South Wales. Victoria has about four thousand members, Queensland have about four and a half, five, Tasmania have about eight hundred, Northern Territory about two hundred and I'm not sure of Western Australia – I think there are about three, three and a half – and South Australia probably about two, two and a half, three, I'm not sure. But we are the biggest organisation for women, yes. We're certainly the oldest.

VM: And you've met about half of those members.

EA: I think I would have shaken hands of half of those members, yes, over the three years I would have done that.

VM: And you've obviously been to other states too. Do you feel there's a difference between each state in the kind of feeling - - -

EA: Not really.

VM: - - - or they're very much the same?

EA: We're all Country Women's Association, we all have a similar motto and we all have similar aims and objectives and we all are under the umbrella of CWA of Australia, so basically they're more or less the same right throughout.

24.07 We all do a country of study for international work, we all help internationally the South Pacific area and throughout the world, as well as your own community and your own state, whatever. So, no, we're basically the same.

VM: Tell me about this country of study - I was interested in that. So what's the rationale for that?

EA: That's sort of to improve international understanding and to see how women in other countries are managing, how their lives are, how they live. The country that we've just finished was Timor-Leste – that was last year – and we're just starting now on Morocco.

VM: How are the countries chosen? Is it

EA: It's chosen by actually the members, it goes right back to the members, and in each branch in say July/August they would say "What country do we want to study?" not the next year but we go two years ahead because it takes that long for it to get through.

VM: Got to plan for it.

EA: So the branches then they might decide – well, somebody obviously decided that Morocco was going to be their nomination. So they the nominated to group so that all the branches then in the group, they might hear one for Morocco, one for Italy, one for France, one for Norway and then they vote and the winning one, which obviously must have been Morocco somewhere came to state and then the state again - - -

VM: The same process in a vote.

EA: - - - is voted on. That's why we have to do it sort of for two years ahead.

VM: Yes, it takes a while, yes.

EA: So it takes a while for the process.

VM: O.K, so I'm in a branch out in the country somewhere and we're going to study Morocco, how do you go about that?

EA: We have a study school in February each year up in Armidale and the international officer – we have a state international officer – and she organises through the university to have special speakers and dinners and presentations and perhaps folk dancing or something like that for the whole weekend in Armidale.

26.05 And then at that weekend there's a book produced on what the speakers have said and ideas that are available for women. We have a competition, well, several state competitions. One's a book and the members can do a book and enter it in the competition.

VM: You mean they write a book or create a book?

EA: Yes, they compose a book about the country, Morocco. You do the usual climate, geography, history, agriculture, women's interests, family life, costume, cooking, anything at all that your particular international person or your branch decides that they want to focus on and cover and then they go into again a branch competition or a group competition and the winner from the group comes to the state and the state is judged then overall in first, second and third for the state books then. And as well as the book there's a doll and those that are into handicraft can dress a doll in the native - - -

VM: Moroccan dress or whatever.

EA: - - - national costume, in the national costume of whatever it is and we also have another piece of handicraft which is just - for example it

might be weaving. Like Timor-Leste would have been the leaf - similar to what you've got around your neck, actually.

VM: Yes, that's Thai's, yes.

EA: Yes, and it's a piece of handicraft that's typical of that country, yes. And as well as that we have children's competitions at schools. We have school posters as quite a few branches involve a local school or two and they have competitions there for projects for books or for posters and on International Day the school children usually come along and listen to the speakers.

28.00 We all have an International Day and get a guest speaker who's been to the country. The country before Timor-Leste was Iceland, so that was an interesting one, and Scotland before that and so every year we study a country.

VM: And do you also do cookery from that country?

EA: Every year we have a cookery competition. You mean from the country?

VM: From that country.

EA: Not as a competition but when you have your International Day you have - - -

VM: International, the food of that country.

EA: - - - yes, the cuisine from that country, yes.

VM: And does it translate into members going to these place too?

EA: It can do. Sometimes we have had our international officer or somebody that's able to arrange a tour and we'll tour the country, whatever, not every time, it just depends and, yes, that can happen.

VM: And have you been through one of these courses or have you them yourself.

EA: A study school?

VM: Yes.

EA: Yes, I've been up there. I love to go but I haven't been up – I think once when I was state president.

VM: You've been too busy now, yes.

EA: Because our national meeting, the whole of CWA Australia, is always the same weekend as Armidale.

VM: So you can't.

EA: Yes, yes.

VM: I just wondered what the effect is. Do you notice like a big change in people's attitudes to a particular country or culture?

EA: Well, when we studied Egypt, I suppose, there were a lot of people who'd been to Egypt and it was easy to get speakers. Morocco might be a bit more difficult but I think it helps a bit more to understand a bit more about the women in those countries and the pressures that they are under and to hear some of the background of Iceland and the pressures there on women and their girls.

VM: Just I was thinking in this age of internet does it lead to like the equivalent of pen friends but contact?

EA: We do have pen friends, we have CWA pen friends so that that can happen but it doesn't necessarily lead - - -

30.04 **VM: It's not linked with the study group?**

EA: It's not, no. It's just a worldwide thing that our members do. If you want a pen friend you just write to the pen friend lady and she will put you in touch with someone around the world. If you want a pen friend in Scotland or Egypt or Morocco - - -

VM: Yes, you can say what country you want to contact.

EA: - - - you contact her and she has contacts that she can link you up with someone.

VM: Yes. Actually, I was reading in your magazine about an English woman who met up with an Australian woman; they'd become pen friends, yes.

EA: Yes. We collect stamps, used stamps.

VM: What do you do with them?

EA: They sell them for international work, it goes into international work, and we're also collecting coins. You know when you come back from overseas and you've got all these coins? We collect those and they get packaged off and sent up.

VM: Sent off for fundraising.

EA: Yes. We do mother/baby packs for Papua New Guinea which are for mums that are going to have a baby and the packs usually have a couple of nappies, cloth nappies, and towels and baby rugs and baby clothes and a nightie for mum and talcum and soap and just some nice little things. And they've been very popular; we've sent hundreds of them over to Papua New Guinea.

VM: Have you been up to Papua New Guinea?

EA: Not with CWA, no. I was there years ago but not at CWA. We also do emergency packs, emergency bags which are sort of Glad bags with toothbrush, toothpaste, washer, soap, comb, things like that, and we give those to hospitals or to ambulances and within my own area at Riverina we give them to the women's refuge and I think there are other branches that do that and you get a call that says "Oh, we need a dozen more emergency packs". We also send material aid over to the South Pacific areas. They're parcels made up of material and cottons and needles and pins and tape measures and zips and anything that the ladies can use to make sewing things with.

32.03 **VM: For sewing, yes.**

EA: And not this year just gone – you finish this in September – but September last year we sent about two hundred and twenty, I think it was, of these big parcels had gone over to the South Pacific area.

VM: And do you have members coming from the South Pacific for medical treatment and those sort of things?

EA: They come and stay here. Yes, they do, they come to stay and they come to visit but not very often because the planes are not really - - -

VM: It's expensive, yes.

EA: - - - they're expensive, yes. We have paid for a few to come over at times to do special courses or to do a workshop before a South Pacific Area Conference; New South Wales CWA sponsored some of those to come.

VM: And I was also interested in what we might call – I know you're apolitical but you obviously do lobby the government on various issues and I wondered does that form quite a big part of your activity?

EA: It's probably become more of a part of the association than it used to be and we work with the government as much as we can. That's part of our motto is "Honour to God, loyalty to the throne, service to the

country through country women, for country women by country women". So by being loyal to the throne we're sort of loyal to the government but even so we did rally and ask for them to be vigilant and to protect our land and water. That was what we were doing when we walked in May.

VM: That was last year, wasn't it?

EA: In May this year. But, no, it wasn't that we were against the government. We were asking them to be vigilant and to protect our land and water because our members are concerned that we need to look after our good agricultural land and not let it be undermined - - -

34.08 **VM: Literally, yes.**

EA: - - - or sold off so that come 2050 if the population of Australia becomes what it's projected to be, we'll need our good agricultural land and that's what our members are concerned about. So we are lobbying to protect our land and water.

VM: And you had a march, didn't you, a rally in Canberra?

EA: Yes. We joined a rally, yes, we joined a rally.

VM: Was everybody happy about that? I mean, people feel this is good action?

EA: Well, the members themselves, I had quite good support from them and over two hundred turned up to walk on that walk. So, yes, the members, I think, were quite au fait with what we were doing. Our focus, as I say, was on protecting our land and water. Yes, we were walking side by side with those against coal seam gas but that wasn't our focus; our focus was on protecting our land and water and that's where we were heading, that's what we were marching for.

VM: And did you get an opportunity to discuss with the relevant ministers or anything?

EA: Oh, yes, we have.

VM: But not then, at other times, was it?

EA: No, we've also put our presentation to the government inquiry into coal seam gas, we made a submission to that and spoke to that. So, yes, when the opportunity's available we use what we can. We have an agricultural and environment officer and she has her finger on the pulse to do with anything like that for the environment.

VM: Those separate issues, yes.

EA: And for agriculture, yes.

VM: And I suppose primary production is also important for you?

EA: Yes, it's a focus but it's not *the* focus. New South Wales farmers, women in agriculture, their focus is mainly agriculture. Ours is such a broad scope that it's only a part of what we are doing and, yes, we are concerned about land and water but we're concerned about hospitals, we're concerned about health, we're concerned about roads, we're concerned about communication. We're concerned about so much else that that is only a part of what we're about.

36.22 **VM: That's just one aspect, yes. I noticed historically there's been quite a connection with *The Land*, the newspaper.**

EA: Yes, that's right.

VM: And I wondered – again you associate that with agriculture but do you see it as a voice for Country Women's Association or only in relation to agriculture?

EA: Do I see *The Land* as a voice?

VM: Yes, is it a

EA: *The Land* have been very good. We've had a very good relationship with *The Land* for it must be seventy or more years now and they have supported and provided finance for awards for our cooking – we call it our Land Cookery Competitions – and they've always been part of that for us. We don't use it as a voice to get out there but - - -

VM: They pick up on your doings and they also support you in that way?

EA: - - - they pick up our doings, yes. They come to our conference, they come to our state conferences and they focus on the issues that we are concerned about.

VM: And particularly the ones relevant to their readership, presumably?

EA: Yes, yes, that's right.

VM: It's an ongoing relationship. And I noticed also in the past you provided seaside holidays. There was this tradition that the Country Women's Association supported the Royal Far West Home and Flying Doctors.

EA: We still do all that.

VM: Yes.

EA: We haven't got a seaside cottage any more because - - -

VM: That's what I was going to ask.

EA: - - - that was sold at Manly to buy this but, yes, this is still as a member service or non-member, they can still come and stay here but it's not free; they have to pay.

38.09 **VM: You mean the seaside cottage in Manly was free, was it?**

EA: It never was, no, no, no, it never was to my knowledge.

VM: It was you'd book to go and have a seaside holiday?

EA: A branch might have sent a family and said "Look, you go and have a week at the cottage. We'll pay for you". We have a mountain home at Batlow and that again is at a member rate - and I can't tell you what it is off the top of my head - there's a member rate and a non-member rate but it's at Batlow. We also have a cottage at Bermagui, again a member rate and a non-member rate, but we still support the Far West Children's Home and Royal Flying Doctors and Childcare Helicopters. There's many things, yes.

VM: And with the holiday homes, do you know how it came about, like the one in Bermagui? Did somebody leave it to the Country Women's Association?

EA: I don't really know but I would suspect so. It certainly would have been, I think, a bequest that would have put that cottage there and I don't know about the one at Batlow. It's called the Jessie Sawyer Mountain Home but whether it was a bequest or not I'm not sure, I don't know.

VM: And have you stayed at either of them?

EA: I've stayed at the Batlow one but not at Bermagui. I've had friends stay at Bermagui and said it was very comfortable. Most of our places sleep eight and very comfortable. I mean, it's not five star accommodation but then neither's this but it's very comfortable and at a reasonable rate for members and it's a way to have a bit of a break away from the heat and the dryness of the inland if you want to get out or for members from Sydney to go down the coast to Bermagui or up to Batlow. We've got quite a few members from Sydney that go to

Batlow because it gets them into the mountains and away from the hustle and bustle of Sydney.

40.07 **VM:** **The organisation began, as it were, with a broad base of social welfare for women and families in the country but you support or take an interest in quite a lot of issues like mental health and youth issues and elderly and so on.**

EA: Yes.

VM: **And is that a big part of the work in the country areas?**

EA: Well, it's not only country, it's right throughout because there are many in the city areas that are needing support that find it difficult at times.

VM: **What, and do it through the CWA?**

EA: We have branches here in the city. We have a group called the Phillip Group which is around this metropolitan area and they are always able to help people. We have a very strong hospital committee that visits any – say for example I had a friend from Wagga coming to hospital here, wherever, I could just ring the hospital committee and say would they mind just calling in on my friend and that's a big help to people as well as being able to visit in other country areas, to know that there's somebody that can just pop in and say hello to your friend that's in hospital or something.

VM: **And what do they say, "Do you need anything"?**

EA: Yes, yes, they do.

VM: **Just some local support they're given?**

EA: Yes, yes. And sometimes if it's a mum that's having a baby or something they might take a longer nightie or booties or some baby things for them. It's up to the hospital committee in what they do. I think they take quite a few Christmas presents for children; come Christmastime they'll call on the children that they know.

VM: **And do they take people on outings? Like say you're up here for long term rehab or something, do they take people out for the day or anything?**

42.03 EA: I don't know, I don't think so. I haven't heard of it but they probably would if they were asked.

VM: **If it worked out, yes.**

EA: If it worked out.

VM: It's a very far-reaching network, isn't it?

EA: We have, yes. It's a sisterhood, really, of ten thousand members which is great. Having no sisters or daughters and no mum and no aunts now either, I've found these ladies that I meet take the part of my family.

VM: Kindred spirits.

EA: And my kindred spirits, yes, the sisterhood, yes.

VM: And talking of your mother, I think you mentioned to me earlier that your mother had been very involved in the P&C but not the Country Women's Association.

EA: My mother was a schoolteacher, yes, and so was my dad, they were both schoolteachers.

VM: So were they active in the teachers' organisation, the teachers' union?

EA: No, not in particular, not in the Federation, no, but as a school principal dad, I guess, had his hand pretty full, doing things and, yes, my mother was never into the Country Women's Association. I know that she went with me - - -

VM: Although you used the rest rooms.

EA: Yes, we used the rest room but the meetings were a daytime one so there was no way that she could get there. I do know she was in the mothers' club before I started school and then she went back teaching when I started school but, no, their interests were always in education and I guess mine was too until I moved to Wagga and became part of the Country Women's Association.

VM: And I was just going to ask you a bit more about the rest rooms. Are they still just a place where people go to use the facilities and have a cup of tea or whatever or are they very much a hub of information and activity?

44.08 EA: Yes. I have visited quite a few rest rooms – CWA rooms they are really now – going around. There seem to be public toilets in most parks so the need that was there for a women's rest room – years ago especially in the country, on a Friday when the farmers would come into town to either bring his stock in or his crops in or pick up things, they would spend the day doing whatever they wanted to do in

town and there was nowhere for the women, especially if she had a baby, to sit under the trees with the flies around on the sulky, it was not really the choicest of things, so the CWA started building their rest rooms they were called in those days and those rooms then were there for the women to come into town and use. And, yes, they became members and they started encouraging each other and showing cooking skills and knitting skills and all these things that sort of go with a day together that women have. But then over the years, earlier on, they started baby health centres but they have been taken over by the government so that that need is not there and the rooms have become more social gathering places for women and the community. Quite a few ladies' CWA rooms are now being used by community groups, perhaps for tai chi or for yoga or for a book club or for a - - -

VM: Book launch?

EA: Yes, those sort of things so that the rooms are being used for different things.

VM: By the whole community.

EA: Yes, they're still there but they're not open like the public toilets are these days; usually if you're travelling through you would just go to the park and use their facilities.

46.02 But there are some rooms that are open nearly every day because they might have craft one day, they might have yoga one day, they might have ballet another day, they might have gymnastics another day but basically the rooms are for use by the women and the community. They're looked after by the Country Women's Association.

VM: And is the building owned by them?

EA: The building is usually owned by the association. Sometimes it might be on council ground but basically it's certainly our building and it's used for whatever the women of that branch decide they want to do.

VM: And is it also a hub for information, I mean both formally and informally, in that some of the issues that you're trying to address like youth problems or mental health, you might have brochures there?

EA: Yes. They would perhaps have, for example Crohn's Disease is our medical research and they may have a guest speaker coming to a luncheon and they would open it up to anybody that wanted to come

in here for a luncheon. Usually it's very reasonably priced and then they have a guest speaker and they might have a raffle that day that would support any fundraising for Crohn's Disease or whatever.

VM: So each year do you take a medical condition, a bit like your country?

EA: Each year we take a medical research and again we can do it for three years – we don't have to. It's selected every year. We've had cord blood stem cell for three years and I think we raised about a hundred and five thousand over the three years. We had prostate cancer for two years and I think we raised about seventy thousand. And we've just started this year on Crohn's Disease and we seem to be averaging about thirty thousand a year in our fundraising for them.

VM: That's tremendous, isn't it? And I also wondered too if it was a place where women exchanged ideas and information informally
- - -

48.05 EA: Certainly, certainly.

VM: - - - in that you go and you sit down and maybe you're knitting or whatever.

EA: And somebody says "Oh, how do you do that? I'd love to know how to do that" and so it starts.

VM: And also maybe when you're knitting you say "Oh, I'm so worried about my son because".

EA: Oh, yes, yes. Cups of tea and coffee are wonderful for helping women to relate to each other and I think those times that you have with your members, with your friends that happens, yes. And the better you get to know them the more the friendship grows and you become more confident in who you're talking to and things like that, yes.

VM: So it's a sort of important focus for support, really, for women.

EA: Yes, and you can get then on the phone and say "Oh, remember we were talking about such and such? I've just read whatever" and you can sort of continue your friendships that way too. Sometimes when I've been travelling around some of our older members, those sort of seventy five, eighty five, they've been working so hard in fundraising that they are getting to the stage where they're content now to just come and sit and chat and talk and that's a big, important part of what our association is about as well: it's not just the fundraising, it's the

friendships and the contacts that we can provide for women and their families wherever they are.

VM: Yes, and people in that age group might be having bereavements of their

EA: Yes, yes. Some of them, they've lost their husbands and their families have moved away and perhaps this coming together once a meeting – our meetings are usually month to month; some meet weekly – they might have craft one week, cooking another week - - -

VM: Spread over the month?

49.55 EA: - - - spread over, yes, but mainly it's once a month and this coming together for the older ladies is sometimes the only chance they have of actually getting together, especially in remote areas, of coming together to support each other. And they really look forward to that and it's important that they have that social contact, it's good.

VM: And would maybe somebody bring an elderly person here on their way here?

EA: Yes. Yes, quite often you'll hear somebody saying "Oh, I've got to go and do a pickup" and she'll duck off after she's got the cups out and she'll go and pick up three ladies from somewhere and bring them back.

VM: And bring them in too. Do you have any men who are members?

EA: No, we don't have men members.

VM: You can't be a member then?

EA: We've just made some honorary members, men. For our ninetieth year we chose to honour some of the people who have supported our Country Women's Association for many years or supporting our ethos of supporting women and families and encouraging younger women and children and we've just for this year only given an honorary membership to some men and some of the fellows who helped the association over the years just as an acknowledgement, really.

VM: As a contribution?

EA: Yes.

VM: What sort of ways have they helped? You mean like with technical advice?

EA: Yes, John Dwyer from *The Land*, for example, and the support that *The Land* have given for many, many years and John Fairfax, his wife has been the honorary patron for our journal and he has had a big connection through Fairfax.

VM: I saw that going back the Fairfax family supported the CWA.

EA: Yes, yes. And then David Peachey, the Indigenous sport fellow, and the way he's encouraged young people, especially the Indigenous side of things, to help along the ethos of improving conditions for women and families in the way of sporting. And there's been several – ten, actually, we did statewide – but each branch was encouraged to give one honorary membership - - -

52.13 **VM: Nomination, yes.**

EA: - - - not necessarily to a man but if it was to a man that was fine, that was for twelve months.

VM: That's all fine, that's O.K.

EA: That doesn't mean they get discount accommodation though. That entitles them to invitations to anything that's on and our journal – they get our journal for twelve months so they can keep in touch with what they're doing.

VM: Good bit of recognition, yes.

EA: Yes, it's a recognition because sometimes they'll say "But I haven't done anything" but when you look at what they have done and how they've encouraged women and their families – mostly families, their encouragement there – to improve conditions is the big thing.

VM: And do you have any branches that are within the indigenous community too?

EA: Far Western Group and Darling River Group are in there. Menindee is one in particular that comes to mind and there's quite a number of Indigenous members there. But, look, anybody's welcome, we have no preclusions. All they have to be is a resident of New South Wales and over the age of eighteen to be a full member but we have junior members from when they're born; sometimes mothers join them up.

VM: Sign them up, do they, at birth?

EA: From birth, yes.

VM: I just wanted to come back to the actual building here when you took me around the accommodation and I was struck that you had some lovely old furniture in the living room or the activities room and television room. Has that been given to the organisation or was it always here?

54.08 **EA:** Quite a bit has been given, bequested to us from members, but some of it is from the original building that was here. There was quite an old stately home here when the property was bought and some of the windows and the doors and some the furniture - - -

VM: Leadlight, yes.

EA: - - - is actually from that original cottage - well, it was more than a cottage – the original home that was here on this site.

VM: So originally it was a home and members could stay here?

EA: It was a home.

VM: And then it was demolished?

EA: No, it was a home. The members actually couldn't stay here at that stage. We only had head office open but then we bought this very soon and it then was made into the accommodation.

VM: Next door, yes, so then it was rebuilt, yes. Now, can people who live in the city be members?

EA: Certainly.

VM: You mentioned a city branch.

EA: Yes. Actually, more than half of our members live on the eastern side of the Great Dividing Range and we have a group here in Sydney called Phillip Group. We have a Sydney City Branch that actually meets here, right in town. Here at our unit here we have Cumberland Evening and Eastern Suburbs which meet here. We've got Eastwood/Epping, Lane Cove, Manly - Norfolk Island, mind you, is one of our branches – Northern Districts and St George-Sutherland as well as Sydney City Branch and the Western Suburbs Branch.

VM: Yes, so quite a few in Sydney.

EA: So there's quite a few around here and I know they'd welcome new members if you're caring to join.

56.01 **VM:** Right. Well, I'll put that out there, yes. And because you've got this headquarters here, how much emphasis is there on

headquarters and how much do you feel really it's all the rural outposts, the branches and the groups that they form that are the heart of CWA?

EA: This is probably the hub of the whole association in New South Wales because everybody contacts head office here for whatever information they're needing, any fundraising they do, so this is really the hub that each of those branches feeds into through a group – but not necessarily. If they want to contact head office direct they can.

VM: So I could start a branch up in the middle of nowhere and just ring up head office and say "What do I do?"

EA: Yes, yes. You can start wherever you like. There's quite a few starting evening branches which are younger women, businesswomen, who come together for a meal and perhaps just a guest speaker and that night the raffle might be for Crohn's Disease or whatever they decide that their fundraising would be for.

VM: So it's more a social meeting and some sort of information?

EA: Yes. It's not so much into the handicraft and cooking as what perhaps the other, older branches are.

VM: And do you have a lot of younger women joining?

EA: We do have quite a few younger women joining. I think they're becoming more aware that we are more than tea and scones, which we've been saying for the last three years with our awareness days and I think young women are starting to realise that it's a great association, it's well-respected, I know that it carries a lot of power in that it's representing over ten thousand women and we've been very protective of that over the years so that we have the esteem in which we are held because of the ninety years of what we have been achieving.

58.14 **VM: So people feeling it's useful, it's an important thing to be part of?**

EA: Yes, yes. And I think the young people, especially the younger ladies who are now looking further than just their own little concern, on wanting to do something to help women or communities and finding that through the CWA they're able to do that.

VM: Because in a sense through the CWA you could choose to set up almost anything.

EA: Yes. We have no limitations.

VM: I could say “We’re going to do”, I don’t know, some rare dance or something and you would say “O.K, and you can use our rooms”.

EA: Yes.

VM: And presumably you help with things like insurance which often bedevil small groups?

EA: No, the branches have to do their own. Your membership that you pay, nearly half of that covers your personal insurance coming to and while you’re at meetings and going home and we get members to sign their attendance for legalities.

VM: So you know, yes.

EA: And the same, even if you’re here to set up the day before or to clean up the day after you should still be signing so that there’s proof that you’ve actually been there for insurance.

VM: You were there, yes.

EA: But as regards the rooms and photocopiers or whatever is in that room, the branches do their own insurance cover - - -

VM: Right, so they’re independent.

EA: - - - as an association cover, that we cover personal but not their property. And each branch would have their own record of what they kept and their insurance company; they would get billed from the insurance company for their own insurance, yes.

VM: And so the head office, how many people work in the head office?

EA: I think it’s actually 6.5. We only have a lady that comes two or three days a week just depending, two days one week and three days the next.

60.09 **VM:** And then you have a woman who runs the hostel as well?

EA: Oh, yes, the manager of the Residential Club, yes. She’s the manager and there’s three reception staff and the housemaids. And the housemaids can vary. Not that we’ve ever had only fifty per cent but if there’s only fifty per cent occupancy you certainly don’t have as many housemaids - - -

VM: You don’t call them in?

EA: - - - as you do when it's eighty per cent.

VM: Fully busy, yes. So you provide in the hub, as you say, the sort of expertise and support for members?

EA: Yes, yes, that's right.

VM: And do you get members contacting you directly about personal problems or issues?

EA: Oh, yes, yes.

VM: And you deal with that?

EA: Everybody's got my mobile phone and I always have my mobile phone with me and no, I don't mind. I turn it off; I turn it off at about eight o'clock at night. It's got a message bank so that they can leave a message and I'll get back to them when it's convenient the next day. But, no, I don't mind. I can't always solve their problems but, you know, sometimes a trouble shared is a trouble halved and you see perhaps a different aspect of things and you can say "Think about this. Have you thought about that?", those sort of things.

VM: So you have quite a long day, eight to eight probably?

EA: Basically, yes, yes.

VM: But you thrive on it?

EA: I don't mind. My day at home, when I'm at home in Wagga, is not eight till eight. Sometimes if I'm going shopping I'll just lead head office know I'm out of the house and I'll be away till lunchtime or something. So it's not really eight till eight every day but it can be, especially when I'm here in Sydney it can be eight till eight, yes.

62.05 **VM: Yes, and you're probably maximising your time in Sydney because you've got to**

EA: That's right, yes.

VM: Was there anything else you wanted to say? It's been a really interesting insight.

EA: No, I think I covered everything. Did I mention about our auditorium that we have here?

VM: No, you showed it to me but just mention for the tape.

EA: The auditorium is where we have our state meetings, not our conference but our state meetings where our thirty representatives

from around the state come together three times a year and they're really the board of the association and we there have correspondence and discuss and vote on which way we're going.

VM: Issues, yes.

EA: We don't set policy at that, the policy is actually set at conference, but it's the business side of getting things done three times a year. And they stay here Monday till Thursday. It used to be Monday till Friday but we've now condensed it to Monday to Thursday involvement. So they stay at the club and just come down to the auditorium each day for the meetings.

VM: And so the conference which is annually is where you set policy, is it?

EA: Every May, yes, that's our policy.

VM: And how many people come to that?

EA: There's about a thousand ladies, usually. This year in May we were at Blacktown and we have five zones in the state so we travel around. And May next year will be in Moree and then sort of going around the state I think we're around the Riverina, Griffith, 'round that way the next year and then I think we go down the South Coast, somewhere down that way and then back up again so that with the five areas around the state we sort of rotate.

VM: Rotate the travel distance, yes.

EA: Yes. Plus that gets the money up to country areas. I know when it was in the Riverina in Wagga back in the 1990s it brought so much money into the town it was incredible and by taking the conference with a thousand women around it'll be a big conference.

64.15 **VM: So all the hotels were booked out and food and restaurants?**

EA: Yes, yes, and food and petrol and hairdressers and florists, yes, it's quite a boost to the economy.

VM: So it's a boost for the economy. Yes, that's interesting. Well, thank you very much, Elaine.

EA: That's all right.

VM: That's been really interesting, thank you.

EA: I hope I've answered your questions all right.

VM: Yes, you certainly have, and more, thank you.

EA: It'll be interesting to hear them come back. It's funny when you're talking it's different to when you're writing something and I've found when I've read some of the interviews that have come back before I've thought "Did I say that, did I say that?"

Interview ends