Eileen Davern
interviewed by Brendan Hegarty and Boyd Heffernan,
history students at Australian Catholic University, for EMHS.
26 October 2006.

The interview took place while walking around the streets of East Melbourne. There is a lot of traffic and wind noise on the tape, and often the interviewee is not talking directly into the machine. Consequently there are many gaps in the transcript.

[….]

My ancestors were here before it was called Victoria

When it was called Port Phillip? Are you involved with the Royal Historical Society [0f Victoria]?

No, Richmond. One lot [of my ancestors] came here in 1839; and another lot in 1849.

So you are a true blue Victorian.

And my last lot arrived in the [18]50s.

Our questions are related to the kinder and to people that you would have encountered in your time. The first question that we wanted to ask you is:

What was the predominant mode of transport for mothers, or parents in general, for taking their children to kindergarten when you began working, and did this change over time?

They mainly worked, a few had cars, and mostly it was a one car family, and the dad would take the car to work. More lately they became two car families and a lot of them had four wheel drives.

Over the time did you notice any changes in social interaction?

Oh, yes. When I first came here in the [19]50s East Melbourne was a slummy, tough area. It was really. And a lot of these big houses (a lot have gone) were rooming houses and you'd go into some of them and they'd have - I remember I went into one in George Street and there was a husband and wife and two children and they only had one room, and mum and dad had a curtain across their bed and they shared the bathroom and they had their own stove in a kitchen. That was one, and another time there was a big house down in Powlett Street, the child was sick and we had to take him home from kindergarten, and you put your hand through the broken glass in the front hall, opened the door from that side, and held your breath until you got out. All you could smell was stale cabbage water. You people wouldn't know about that. And also because it was a rooming house and because so many people lived in there and they all used the same toilet. That was in the 50s, 55 I think I went there.

When you talk about families like that, were they predominantly migrants?

Well, there were a few migrant families. One who grew up in East Melbourne were Irish. They were lovely people. And there were Germans, Austrians, Lebanese […..??] and Swiss (I think they were Swiss), and of course there were English. And of course the brewery was working at that time

In Abbotsford?

Here, this one. So we had some children whose dads worked there.

He brought home free samples maybe?

But then we also got children from Richmond, just across the road. And it wasn't run by the Melbourne City Council. It was very select people. There was Lady Lindsay and Mrs. Lindsay Clarke, you know, they were all from the Toorak area. And Mrs. Dorothy Oldham was our president. She was a lovely person, and they were the ones who had enough money not to have to go to work. A lot of people in those days lived at home, and she was charming. […?] The Powlett Reserve Kindergarten itself was the old City Free Kindergarten and it was in Exhibition Street I think in an old church building, and then the Council said they had to move. And they spent a lot of time fighting. This is Council land and they helped with the building and all of that, but the committee would run it and they took a lot of time until they selected here, because they had to count the kids in the area And then the Council was going to demolish the building and they were very angry because after this was built and they were in here the Melbourne City Council opened it up as child care centre.

The old kinder building?

Yes,

They did it to make money?

They wouldn't have been charging very much. But we had a lot of things at the kindergarten there … and its been all altered.

Is the kinder still going?

Now it is a child care centre. I finished in 92. And there used to be - behind the tennis courts there, there used to be a block of toilets. Not very savoury. Later on it was demolished with the playschool. […??]

The square over there, Darling Square, was pretty overgrown and you wouldn't have liked to have gone there at night.

[…question….?]

Well, a mixture. A lot of the young ones starting out. After the war they were all starting out and […..??] so it wasn't so much the spinsters. First of all it was the architects who moved in and did up the buildings and would have their office in the front and they lived on the premises. And different things, in the 60s. See that block of flats over there with the […] roof well that was a pair of houses. And one night

there was the most enormous bang. So we went up and we thought hopefully it was the brewery, but it wasn't – two of the houses were … Apparently, I think it was a bomb

Marijuana?

No, no something was thrown in to blow them up.

Oh, a bomb?

Umm.

And the story was that the men were being paid – the man was wanting to demolish the houses and he couldn't get permission, so that's what they did.

So that's how they did it?

And they did it for money because they were on bail.

And they wanted it to pay their bail?

Not knowingly.

We [the kinder] were anxious about the windows being broken here but they weren't, but they were in some of the other houses along. Then around the corner, talking about houses, so that you know what the area was like. You've been to Sylvia's place? Do you know where she lives?

No.

Oh, well there are five townhouses about three stories high. Well, there used to be a row of five little houses and they were pretty damp and the toilet of course was out the back. I don't think they had running water inside, I don't think there was a bathroom. Anyway they were eventually sold up and the man if he had demolished the five houses he would only have been able to put four back on so to be clever he left the shells of the five.

Oh and he built up from there?

He built up. I think that is the story

How long ago did that happen?

The seventies, or later.

The area is much more up-market these days. Did you notice a big change at any time or was it gradual?

Gradual. Now it is more of a community, whereas before it was mainly rooming houses and that doesn't make a community.

No, because people are temporary.

Yes. And they were all moving out to Glen Waverley and Mount Waverley. Glen Waverley was going to be the hub of Victoria. Everyone seemed to be moving in that direction. And the next lot went to Doncaster.

I actually live in Mount Waverley. My parents got married in 1970 and they bought there in 1971 so there was a big move to Mount Waverley about that time. … We just want to get back onto the kindergarten. We did touch on it before. Did you find that there was a community building up at the kindergarten?

Well, we worked hard to do that. We used to say that a lot of our work started at the front door. The parents came, some of them used to come at different times to avoid lessons. So they would come for milk and fruit, the mother would. And then we would find out what her interests were, and we knew what that mother's interests were, and we would introduce them to one another. And we did have fundraising – morning teas, this is more in the 60s I am talking about, and we were supposed to have a guest speaker at those, or someone talking about bed wetting or one of those.

Oh, child issues. Yes?

But if we did that no-one came. […] We had a lot of people work their hearts out and others just turn up.

Even way back?

Oh, Yes. You thought it might only happen today?

I thought there might have been a shift to less people helping out.

Oh, I think there would be today, knowing how many people are volunteering.

What staff were there.

I was an assistant. I had a pre-school training diploma. Only Lyn was there for ten years most of the others were only there three years.

Is that the head teacher?

Yes, the director.

When Lyn was there we to got to know the community and we would know how much every house went for. We'd get a phone call, "Hello, hello, is that the seeing-eye centre of East Melbourne? We'd say, "Yes, it is." And we recognised peoples' voices, because we knew what this or that house went for, because a lot of people used to go to those sales.

Because they want to know how much your house is worth.

Well, we did know what was going on. We used to say, "Homos this side of Victoria Parade and winos the other".

I have never heard that before, I must say. So the winos were on the brewery side?

No, they were on the other side. And also the house here where the Travel Lodge is and it had a beautiful sort of window, but we know that this lady used to work from that house - she used to walk up and down the street. I know - I had a uni. student flatting with me - she used to come home and she used to catch a tram down there. One time she came in and she said, "I was told to get off her beat." This is back in the 70s.

Did you find a difference in your time at the kinder related to a number of the mothers working full time? Did that have an impact?

Yes, you didn't have as many helping, and many of them didn't like helping. And we didn't have the dads helping. One was a Turkish dad his wife worked daytime and he worked at night.

Did you find much interest from the fathers?

Well we had to run the father's days which were on the week-ends – Saturdays. But in the 1960s the Council took over the kindergarten and a committee was formed [within the mothers]. When I left there I sent a lot of things into the archives of the Melbourne City Council. Photos and things, and articles.

I suppose they are still there?

Buried.

[….]

A family of Hungarians here, and they had been out some time. And the children spoke a bit of English, the parents didn't. They came out at the time of 56 Olympics [……] I never saw him smile, and I never heard him talk. His face was just blank. So that is the sort of thing you were getting in the 50s. And another family we had – the children - they sat on the [….] all afternoon and watched, just watched. They were war people they came out after the war. And we had one mother and they lived in one of those terrace houses, and had a shared bathroom and toilet but they had a kitchen and a bedroom […..] He was Hungarian and she was German and she was saying that during the war she used to sit in the windows of the big house where they lived and watch the bombing, and she used to say […fingernails…] and she went to pieces.

Oh, like the delayed trauma?

Yes. She would have been in her twenties. So these were the people who were arriving in the 50s, so we were seeing them.

My family came here in the 50s.

Where did they come from?

Bulgaria and also some from Germany.

So you know what I am talking about. You can understand. These were the people who were living – I am sure it was because the banks wouldn't lend money on old houses and you had to have enough money to buy them. That's why the suburbs went out and out and out, and the inner suburbs began to drop and that's why there were a lot of rooming houses.

[…]

These were exactly the kind of people who were coming out and living in rooming houses. Some of them were German, Swiss, Austrian.

It is probably a very similar situation to refugees now. People think refugees are like a new phenomenon.

They have always been coming. So this is the 50s. And you would have these people – another time we were getting very angry with this mother for not picking up her child at 12 o'clock on time. You could see her coming, just ambling across the park, She had a background from Poland - and when she got there she said, "I am sorry I am so late, I haven't got any clothes."

Well I don't think we can add much to that but it is an example of what you had to deal with at the time.

Yes, but we were getting angry because she was about three quarters of an hour late picking up the child. We just thought she was taking her time. […..] They were Jewish-Polish. They went to Sweden from Poland.

Can we move on a little bit because I have another question that I am interested in. What did you do for fun in the 1960s and were social events more community based then than now.

Well, I wouldn't know about now because I finished in the 90s.

But not just the kinder, I am talking about the community in general.

We used to have a committee that was very good in the 60s and 70s. Some of them still live in the area. And they were very good at fund-raising. One of the things they used to do – they combined with the East Melbourne Group. They had Open Houses and you would have so many open houses that you could go through on a Saturday or Sunday and you would pay so much a house […] and that's one way. They made a lot of money doing that in one day, but it was hard work. And another thing they had was progressive dinners. Do you know anything about a progressive dinner?

No. You will have to tell us.

They used to have so many people open their house. This was after a lot of them had been restored. And you went somewhere for drinks and nibbles, often it started at the kindergarten, and then you went somewhere and had the soup, then you went to another house and had the mains, and then you went to the final house and had dessert and cake. It all depends how many houses whether you had nibbles and soup. So that was one way.

So that was community interaction. I am assuming they were just walking from house to house.

Yes. This was in the 60s.

Did parents of the kinder get involved in things like that?

That was them but some of them wouldn't go because it was too dear. But they were the same ones who used to do the lunches for the others. Sometimes they'd say, "There's not much food today." And that person wouldn't have brought a plate, or anything. Everyone was supposed to bring a plate, and you'd put up a list telling what you can bring, like salad, or bread. But sometimes one would arrive and say, "I forgot to get the bread, so I've brought a lettuce" So we would have to run out and get the bread and the butter. We had one mother, or parents, who came from Sri Lanka and her aunt came out looking after her children because she had four of them and was working, and we found out that she had been a caterer at home. So they had a dinner at the kindergarten and she demonstrated and did the cooking - with our help, and with two or three mothers helping her. And that was another type of fund-raising.

And that would have been a way into the community too.

Well, no it was more fund-raising.

Did you do any activities to bring the migrants in.

Well, we used to try to bring them in. We used to have lunches. And you had to bring a dish from your own background, so a lot of them did come to lunch, if they were not working. I am still using Jenny's fried [mean?].

What nationality was that?

And I said [mean?] what's that, and anyway we had another girl from Hong Kong at the time and I said to her, "Can you tell me what [mean] is? ….now this girl didn't know, but this other girl was from Malaysia. So it was different wording [?], different words like that…….And we had people from Argentina and they brought along another dish. So because I had a lot of Irish-English background I brought along Irish stew. But it is the same thing that goes on at school. How to get the parents involved. We did it mainly to get people to know one another and there is a group of women who still meet and have lunch every now and again, or they go out together, and they met at the kinder.

Were there any specific areas you wanted to show us?

There used to be a chemist's shop there [Michael Wilson's – 165 Powlett Street]

Were there other shops around?

Not a lot, no. More than there are now. But I will tell you what used to wake you up in the morning – the brewery. I used to live in this block of flats [cnr. Powlett and Grey Streets] till I shifted in the 70s.

Which is the best way to go?

Do you know this area at all?

No. I come from Mount Waverley.

Where did your parents live first?

They were married in 1970 and they house sat for a year until they bought their own, starting with Balwyn or something. But I don't know anything about where that was. So basically…

They closed the kinder down in 1990 and the kinder shifted up here into what they called the play centre and down there at the kindergarten they turned it into a child care centre. But while we were in the small building I remember one of the times - we were there when Coote Island..?

Oh, the oil fire?

Yes, and we were rung up to tell the children to go home.

I think I might have been in prep at school that year. There were fumes everywhere. I think even in Mount Waverley we got sent home from school.

Another time we had a big storm and we had a tin shed in the yard to put all the outdoor equipment in, and I was out there and it started to move, it was blowing away. Because they hadn't bolted it down.

We are walking down Powlett Street. See where the…, well they're turning it into apartments now, … well, the Mercy Private Hospital. There used to be a lovely old house on the corner. If you ever look in the book, the history of the Mercy Hospital, there is a picture of the house on the corner. When we first came here there were a lot of parked cars down the middle of the road. They used it for parking spaces. And also there used to be […..] a cart, or a dray with big drums on it [belonging?] to five women, and the man used to go and get all the old … and he'd park it down there …. And all down there there were houses there right down to the end, terrace houses, and that big house there was a rooming house – that's where the Blacks used to live – Sylvia. And the girls have grown up and they sold it.

How old is Sylvia? She wasn't at kindergarten when you were there?

No, her girls were

Did you ever live around here?

I lived in a room in Albert Street first, and then I went into a flat in that block, and then I bought my own place in Hawthorn.

Did you know most of your neighbours then?

[….] Mainly about washing or the clothesline.

Did you find you knew more of your neighbours then than you do now?

Oh, no, no. See, that was a rented flat

So have sizes of families changed much?

Not basically. That house there belonged to the Buckley and Nunn family.

Buckley and Nunn?

They were a big department store.

I did not know that. It's that saying, "you've got Buckley's or none". Is that were that saying comes from?

I think so.

Back in the early, early days this would have been very much an up and coming suburb. I think Lord Casey lived somewhere around here, up there, and Winston Burchett.

What sort of time frame?

Oh, 70s. That's Stephanie? The restaurateur – her parents. She gave a cooking demonstration to the parents in the 70s. It was done in a private home

We'll take a photo.

Well in front of the house with the broken glass you had to put your hand through, and held my breath.

I thought you might have wanted to forget that one.

And see there the Magnolia Court Private Hotel. The old chap he started off with just a house, and it wasn't really a hotel but a lot of theatricals stayed there. So we were told. I think that is just a bottle shop now but it used to be a grocery shop as well.

The grocer – that all the mothers would have walked to?

And there was another little place to shop up in Wellington Parade, and a newsagent […] and there was a couple of greengrocers, and a milk bar. There were a lot more milk bars around.

Convenience stores have taken over.

You see on the opposite side of the road? That is all one terrace. There are two this end and two that end, and they match, and the four in the middle. Do you see what I mean?

And this church – they deliberately set fire to it. The Cairns Memorial Church. It is a very old church but now it is a block of flats. If you ever saw the film, The Getting of Wisdom, well that was the church. That's the basement – they used to teach Scottish dancing there.

But a lot of places would have a tiny little house behind them, but they're gone.

Which they rented out?

Yes.

All these garages are where the toilets were. They used to have the can man and then they put in the sewerage.

[…]

Some of these houses I have been in because they were used for progressive dinners. Doctors and architects started it

Some of these houses are quite big. Dr. C.K. Davidson now. It looks weathered.

But most have been tarted up over the years. We'll have a look at this one. It was built originally as a coffee palace.

What does that mean?

No alcohol.

I have never heard of that before.

It's like a hotel, but no alcohol. You can see up the top, Queen Bess Row, and they used to be all [crummy?] flats, but now they are very expensive and well maintained.

[…]

There was an old hotel down there, but it has closed. [The New Boundary Hotel]

Is that the boundary of East Melbourne, down there?

Hoddle Street, yes.

Now there is a house down there.

A house?

Yes.

Number 93 [Simpson Street] presumably. A house behind a house.

There used to be one opposite the library behind a house..

The Reddys lived here. [Simpson Street] Do you know Helen Reddy, the singer?

Oh, yes – "I am woman"

[…]

This is Darling Square. I have a feeling the Police Station used to be around here somewhere, and then it moved up to the corner. On the corner near the railway line and Simpson Street, but it has been closed. It is not there any more.

Frances Burke used to live here. She was very much an East Melbourne person.

Francis Bourke, you mean the footballer?

No.

Are we talking a different person?

She was a fabric designer, one of the first fabric designers. She used to donate her time, and she used to bring her material to the kindergarten because apparently when it first opened, when the kindergarten was first built she donated them some material to make the curtains. And after some years she must have seen them getting slowly older and older so she came in and offered to do the same again. The mothers had to make up the curtains. She did it three times. She sent her cutter along. I had a piece of her material from the last lot of curtains, and I gave it to the historical society.

[…] a very long shed like that, and apparently a three year old loom in Exhibition Street.

And they shipped it down, did they?

[…]

Now these are all the houses, these terrace houses. We had children from here. The lady who lives there has been there a long time. She's now retired and moved. Her sons live nearby and their families. This is the Brosnans. They're the ones you should be talking to. They've been here a long time.

The Brosnans? Who are they?

They lived there. Their children came to kindergarten. There was another kindergarten at St. John's. St. John's is Roman Catholic. They [children] either went there or came here.

So the catholic ones predominantly went over there?

And then they closed that one down because they wanted more class rooms, and then we got a lot more. But the population of the area has gone up and down, up and down. One time in the 1960s we went extended hours. We didn't have enough children for two groups, and then when we had enough children we had to do that. In those days the government paid a subsidy for three year olds, but they don't anymore. Now they are talking about things like that.

I know because my sister is sending her three year old to kinder this year and she has to pay for it.

A lovely old home here, where the nuns, the Sisters of Mercy lived. I think they lived there because I used to see them go across there.

In habits?

In habits, yes.

Also way down there, there was St. Joseph's Hostel for Girls. Is it still there?

I don't think so.

Well there is St. John's over there.

And there is still a primary school at St. John's, is there?

And down on the corner is the Syrian Church, St. Nicholas.

Are there many Syrian people around?

They were always there. In the 50s when I first started the youngest daughter came, and I saw her years later. And there home was there.

These couple of cottages here – in the 60s – the lady who used to live here – if the key was in the door she was open for business, if it was gone she was working.

And there are houses in Victoria Parade. They are only little timber ones and when you go in and when you go into the back room, there is like a cupboard, and you go into the cupboard and it is a staircase going upstairs. And there are a couple of rooms upstairs, but from the front you can't see them. The road used to go right through once but we didn't have the traffic that we've got now.

Transcribed by Sylvia Black, 16 January 2007