EAST MELBOURNE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH

Joan Mercer
Unit 2, "St. Joan"
62 Simpson Street
East Melbourne

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Interviewer: Elizabeth Cam
Transcribed by: Sylvia Black

Good afternoon Joan. Thank you for the honour of interviewing you …….Obviously we are wanting to have the history of East Melbourne but also the history of our special residents **[?]** so might I ask

What attracted you, you and your husband, to East Melbourne in the first place?

Well it was me just by myself first. And I start with "Love is not love that alters if it alteration finds" and I love East Melbourne dearly. I had my first intimate glimpse of it way back in 1934 when I lodged in a gracious Victorian house run by a member of the Tait family of theatrical fame. The people there were very kind and supportive to me. I was expecting my second baby which all the people in that house wanted me to have there, and I used to walk across the road, Clarendon Street, with my little son into the beautiful Fitzroy Gardens. In these days Clarendon Street on one side was limited by the Fitzroy Gardens and the other side by a line of beautiful Victorian homes ending at Wellington Parade with the astonishingly baroque Cliveden House. That's when I first fell in love with East Melbourne and vowed to come and live there.

And when was that?

This didn't happen until 1964 after I had been and lived in many countries. What a change to behold. Only the kindness of the people was the same. We finally bought two small houses and turned them into one in the very early 60s. We finally went to live in it in 1964. It was in George Street.

Your husband combined the two adjoining houses into one – can you tell me about the building's transition?

The building transition seemed hopeless at the time: fireplaces to be removed, doors to be added and removed to make one entrance. There was only one toilet at the end of the

two gardens with a door to each house We also put stairs leading to a balcony and two bedrooms.

After Boyd died *[1977]* and I had a hip replacement I looked for a place without stairs and arrived back from a visit to England to find 28 Simpson Street for sale and was lucky enough to win that dear little house.

You both travelled widely and led a most interesting life – you must have wonderful memories of those years. Do you recall highlights that you can share with us? Or perhaps difficulties?

Yes I do have wonderful memories of my travels. Coping with foreign languages was a difficulty. My husband spoke Spanish and some German. I know a little French, school-girl French, and an even smaller amount of Italian, but we got on very well with all the people. My Latin from school days was quite a help too, except for Russian and Japanese which are so different. We had a few terrifying experiences by air and at sea. It was all wonderfully exciting. I fell in love with Italy and absolutely was rapt in Mexico. I still get a strange feeling just thinking about it. Living in America was wonderful too. Winter was snow and real central heating and when I came to Australia in 1934 and complained about the cold they said central heating was unhealthy. What a change today with those temperatures.

Joan, your play readings and 'one acts' still create appreciation of your theatrical skill. How was this love of theatre and poetry kindled?

From the age of six, probably after seeing my first pantomime, I started to make up playlets in the nursery. There were six of us and our poor parents and nanny had to watch some of them. Next at school I was a sunset fairy in a play called the Cockielly **[?]** Bird with a real audience. Of course they all thought it was wonderful. My great thrill at sixteen was producing a play for a real theatre with critics and the press there. I was always the star for several days after going to a film. My poor family. When we lived in Hobart, I was a member, very active, of the repertory society and from there gave some radio talks and eventually had my own programme.

Your East Melbourne Garden Club association goes back a long way, and has been most important and beneficial to East Melbourne. When did you join?

My memory for dates is very poor so I cannot say when I joined the Garden Club but I became president after Arthur Turner resigned, a very hard act to follow, too. We have now become a little more formal but not very much because we have a secretary and a treasurer and an agenda for each meeting, and some very interesting speakers.

What other aspects of East Melbourne life have you participated in?

I have participated in many East Melbourne activities. We had a Monday Group at one time when I produced one act plays using East Melbourne residents as my actors.. They

were always very well received. And the Garden Club, of course. I am a member of the East Melbourne Group which presents us with several parties each year. I go on some of the Monday trips arranged by the City Council. I ran the Sunday luncheon affairs for many years, now being arranged by Vern Hauser, and I go to the Trinity Church luncheons.

What are the most significant changes you have noticed or experienced in this 3002 village of ours?

Changes? Well, the buildings. Some fairly horrible heights that threaten our three storey rule; destruction of lovely old houses to make flats and apartments; the care and planting of trees; the roundabouts, making traffic more careful; the kindness of residents remains the same.

What have been your leisure hobbies and interests?

My leisure hobbies and interests? Reading, gardening, writing, farming, at one time, conversations, and especially people for whom I have great love.

Oh Joan thank you very much for that. As you were giving that rundown of such an interesting life some questions occurred to me. One of them.- would you mind? How long ago did Boyd die?

1977

1977, you came here in the early 60s

We had the farm at the time. We used to commute.

So you used the East Melbourne one as a town house?

Yes, and when he died I had to decide which one to keep

And you decided the city.

That's right. My daughter in law is down there. My son has a farm down there. She hated me and used to say terrible things to me and I decided that East Melbourne was the one. Thank God I did.

It would have been lonely. It's a long time ago and she still hates me.

May I ask, What was Boyd's occupation?

Well, he was civil engineer with Melbourne University but he was particularly interested in concrete and he invented….what do you call it? …He invented the rising silo sort of thing.

Yes, the wheat storage. The grain storage in other words. The enormous ones.

He wrote a book about it and it was essential reading for the engineering course at Melbourne University at the time.

Do you remember the title? Or about the time of publication.

Yes, Sliding Formwork

Sliding Formwork? And that would have been published about?

About the 50s

Perhaps some of his theories might have been used in civil construction too?

Oh yes, he was known all over the world. Governments consulted him.

So you spoke of how you love Mexico. What was the sequence of overseas?

You don't mean which order I went to the countries?

Not particularly. Which countries, and obviously there were several and this was due to Boyd's occupation in engineering?

Yes. Mexico was very special

Why was Mexico special? You said the life, the vitality.

It was the life and the colour. Also I had just read a book about the history of the Spaniards coming in and destroying the old Mexico which was so beautiful and so modern, and they destroyed it all. I don't know whether being 5000 feet above sea level made me feel different but I think it did. I went to some of the old Aztec temples which were all built facing…I'm not sure which way they were facing, but they all face in the same direction and there were great erections, huge things always in front of a great open square with nothing growing there and I used to feel the history of people around me. Quite eerie. And the people were very friendly, in fact one engineer said but I didn't

Just as well for East Melbourne, you may never have come here. Now, and what were the other appointments

Well, South America.

Whereabouts in South America?

Buenos Aires, but also in Rio. He was building the Great Southern Railway. The Buenos Aires Great Southern Railway down there. He was one of the engineers for an American company. That's why we also lived in America

Whereabouts in America, Joan?

Kansas City, Missouri Kansas City, Kansas it's a black state. I mean it doesn't matter today but it did in those days.

And Hobart?

And Hobart, he was the chief electrical engineer for the electricity company there. Building the great dam.

Part of the hydro scheme, was it?

He was building one of the big dams there.

It was probably for the hydro.

He spent a lot of time away from home, but he always did. That is why I had so many other interests. I had to find them. That is when I was a member of the repertory society. That was terrific.

Now slipping back quite some time. The Sunday lunches. It was you who originated them initially wasn't it?

No, once again Arthur had done it. I don't know who did it before. But Arthur did it and I took over from him. He just retired and left it and we had a year without any, and then I thought we can't have this, I've got to do something. And so I started it and kept it up for about five years and then, you know, I am not doing quite as much these days.

I think you must have resurrected them about 89-90.

Could you tell me about some characters? You mentioned Arthur. He is a wonderful character.

He is a wonderful character.

Other East Melbourne identities. Could you talk about some?

Well it is rather difficult to do that. I wrote in a little book that was published some years ago about characters, but one was a cat and one was a funny old lady who went around with a pram and collect bottles. Well of course people don't do that these days. But she collected bottles in this pram and she had a sack on each side and a sack at the back and she got quite a lot of bottles and she used to stop practically opposite my kitchen in George Street and a man would come in a beautiful car take all the bottles and put new sacks on. So she was a character.

Joan, just referring back again to the early days. Could you tell us more about the Tait family.

No I didn't even realize at the time that they were theatre people. It wasn't until afterwards talking about it that I found out, but it was Mrs. Tait who ran the house and she was a little above middle age, very pleasant character and she loved my little son. They really wanted me to stay there, but otherwise I didn't know about the Tait family much later when I started to really look into the life of Melbourne.

This is really quite a coincidence because you have a long involvement with the National Memorial Theatre Company in Marcus Street, St. Kilda?

Yes, but not in those days. That was when I had another child, and that was when I grew up that I started to live outside myself. I was on the auxiliary of the National Theatre first and that was when, and don't ask me the date, that was when Dame Jac… **[?]** nominated me for the Lyceum Club.

And then later you became a board member?

Yes, after she retired. She sort of coached me. All along she wanted me to be there. After she retired I was nominated for a member. It was quite exciting really. I loved being in on all the machinations and happenings that went on in a big money thing. I enjoyed that very much, and I kept that up for years and years, decades in fact.

And following that you've always subscribed to the Melbourne Theatre Company. You've been a great supporter to them too, haven't you?

A great supporter of the Melbourne Theatre Company and also the Playbox Theatre when it was in….I think it was Russell Street. I'm not sure if it was Russell or Exhibition but it burnt down and for many years they put them on in all sorts of places and then we were given this wonderful place in South Melbourne and they primarily put on Australian plays. But it is very difficult to get there if I don't drive which I don't anymore. It was dangerous at night.

You are referring now to La Mama Theatre, or to the Playbox?

No, to the Playbox

Yes, in South Melbourne. So I had to give that up last year and then I also went to the Symphony orchestra's concerts and I had three friends that went with me. I relied on them. I'd take a taxi there and they would help me find a taxi to bring me back And then they all suddenly ran out of money and retired, so I had to retire too, and I don't go there anymore.

But you can hear them on the radio?

Well I can, and I've got my own music

There are three homes which you have lived in, 59 George Street

Yes, and around the corner, 28 Simpson Street

And now, 62 Simpson Street

Yes

In close proximity. You must like this corner of East Melbourne. Or was it just accidental?

Well, of course it is accidental, you don't expect these places to come on. But what I like about this corner is that there are two little shops fairly close and I can't walk much, and I've got a lot of friends around this area and I get lifts with people to, say, go up to Trinity and that sort of thing. I've regretted leaving each of them. 59 George Street really was a creation of ours so that really was. It was very nice. The garden effects me every time. The garden got too big for me to look after and the house required a lot of things done to it. So when I came back from that English trip this one was for sale, 28 Simpson Street, and I rang my daughter and she came down, and I rang one of my boy friends and he's a solicitor and he came down to look after me and a lot - I'd made some friends by then - a lot of East Melbourne people were there. Half way through the auction my friend George said, Joan, you're bidding against yourself. Keep quiet. So I stopped bidding then and it went to me, and everyone around came over and congratulated me and we went in and had a bottle of champagne. No, it was lovely.

You have created a beautiful courtyard garden. It must give you a great deal of pleasure because you and Prue are so friendly and you are still sharing the house very much aren't you?

Well her husband liked everything so much he wouldn't let her alter anything and even now she says, Joan I'm afraid the bedroom curtains are getting a bit shabby. Do you mind if I change them? So I had to help her choose the new ones. But I keep saying, but Prue, it's not my house any more

But your spirit is there, Joan.

Yes

And your influence definitely is. That's lovely.

Now Joan, you are very stylish. We always see you looking immaculate and just walking to the corner shop, or around to Norm's you are so neat, you are never scruffy, as I said, you are just so well groomed, so lady-like and so dignified. You must have a great love of clothes and love of style. Where did that come from?

Well, it's not a great love of colour. It is just that I can't bear mixed things. I must have all one colour, or mixed colours, but matching. I suppose part of it comes, in fact, from the theatre, you know, the show must go on, that sort of feeling. And partly, of course, because at one time I had a set of mannequins and I put on parades in Melbourne.

Was this for charity?

No, this was a parade. I was professional. I did all Manton's parades.

Now Manton's is a shop we haven't mentioned, or haven't heard mentioned, for many years.

Mr. Manton was very fond of me and he used me for everything, and when I went overseas he told me to look out for things. I came back one time and I said I've had a brain wave **[?]** and pointed to my head and he agreed with it and that was to have a parade in the window in Bourke Street and record my voice and it came over, and of course I had great crowds around the window, and the girls had to be in time with the conversation and that was quite exciting for a week and it became so popular that I was asked by a little shop in Camberwell if I'd do a street one. So I did that too.

Now, when did Manton's close? I certainly remember Manton's store when I was a girl.

Yes, you might. It was up there past - of course that's not there anymore either - up there past Foy & Bilson's.

Foy & Gibson's?

Yes, it was Foy & Bilson's in Colac. Foy & Gibson's yes. It was quite a big store, quite a lot of departments. It was great. The girls were great. I don't know if you want any stories about them?

Yes.

They used to - in those days false breasts were not like they are today and they were made of rubber. They had nipples, and the girls used to get these things and put them in their bras, bite the nipples off and spit them out into Bourke Street. And one day when

they were modeling, I was always talking, they were modeling corsets, and one quite big lady in a tight corset sort of stepped back with a gesture, and stepped off the platform.

Oh, how terrible. Was she injured?

No, she wasn't fortunately. But a frightening moment

What is important to you right now? What has important values? You've mentioned people, that you love people.

I do. I think people are more important than anything at the moment and have been for some time. I look around for instance at all the funny old girls that play bridge, and I think, gee I love them. They are not all nice, but I love them

Now I think you have an interest in astrology. Is that so?

Oh, you mean I read hands?

Well?

Yes, I've had one or two experiences. Not so much psychology - very dramatic really. Yes, I've always been interested in psychology. I studied it for quite a while. I got to the stage when I could read people's minds and it was very embarrassing. So I stopped.

For safety, was it? For comfort?

Comfort really. I think I can always tell if someone doesn't like me.

Well, I don't read minds, but there is always a body language.

Oh, yes, I do, I do read body language, and I read hands.

One time in Hobart when we were doing a play called The Women with a cast of about 25 I wasn't in the play at that time, I was doing something else there and I was waiting for one of the girls to go on and I picked one of their hands up and I read it, and she said, That's all true, and she went on and did her part, and the next night she told everybody. All these hands. I almost forgot. But it was only fun. But I had one or two serious ones.

Well now, East Melbourne, or the East Melbourne Group, hold you in high esteem. They honoured you in March 2002. That must have given you a great deal of pride and pleasure in knowing that you are so respected and indeed loved in the East Melbourne community. You talk about how you love people around that you appreciate the friendliness and the sense of community village atmosphere but you have put so much into that to create it over a long time, since 1962

1968. That must have been a great highlight of your life last year. Margaret Wood the president of the East Melbourne Group presented you with that honour.

Yes it was a great honour. I was very surprised.

There was no clue at all?

No, I didn't really. I began to wonder when they all insisted that I be there and Michael Wilson said could he nominate me for something, he didn't tell me what, but I said yes, all right. Not realising such an honour. Yes I was thrilled, really thrilled.

Well of course the 27 March I think, is the AGM of the East Melbourne Group, so yes, you will have to be at that also.

Well, I'll be going even if I have to take a taxi.

Joan you mentioned earlier – this is an addendum to the tape – that 59 George Street was really the town house, that you had a farm in the country. So firstly where was the farm. Could you tell us a little about that please, because it seems as if it might have been an important part of your life.

Yes it was. I was almost determined to have a little farm. My son had a farm out there – this place was called J.**[?]**.and it is aboriginal for It is out of Colac about 17 miles, I can't do it in kilos.

Beautiful country

Beautiful, the foothills of the Otways. Beautiful country And we had this, only small, 70 acres, and we bought First of all we put in two dams, one on the very top of the property which we used to send water down to all the other paddocks and then a lower dam which we built a little island in the middle of. We had a boat and a little boat house. We did it all very properly. We called it Barnawee **[?]** farm, and we called it Barnawee farm because I had a sister that I loved very much and she lived in Marlowe in Wales. She had a manor house called Great Os so all you had to put was Great Osperson **[?]** , Wales and it got to her. So that's why we called it Barmawee which was the original We had two lions on the gates and a line of poplars and a line of agapanthus and white lilies. Very nice it was, and there was a little house on the lower part of the property. We had that moved up to the top of the property near the big dam and then we got the water in, and then we bought these 20 cattle which were supposed to be calf but actually two of them weren't, but I loved them. I am afraid I am a very loving person! But they were beautiful.

So they calved, all except two, but I learnt so much about cattle and their ways. The two that didn't calve used to watch over the calves that would be lying in little bundles everywhere and they'd be - we'd call them the aunts, these two. And we had one - they

all had names – I'm not going to give you the names now – but there was one called Flighty. She was so fierce. If she had a calf and you came into the paddock and you were between her and her calf she would go for you. So after a couple of years of being terrified we decided to get rid of her and just keep her calves. Well they had the same temperament, so we had to get rid of them. Two generations we had calves and we got rid of them. We had huge bulls and we named them after stars. There was Jupiter. Jupiter because that's my star, and Sagittarius, because that's my month, and the third one we had – we had very good records – and the third one we had I'm afraid was called Pinky, because when we bred him he had to have a little pink tag in his ears and we always called him Pinky although it was not suitable for a bull. But he was so friendly because we reared him and he used to come galloping up in the paddock, it was really quite terrifying, because he didn't always know when to stop. But it was a very successful little farm. It paid for itself, which is something, although at the very first we had a drought and we used to see cattle not dead, but dying in the paddocks around But we were lucky we had all this water in the dams, and when my husband died I had to decide then whether I would live in the farm or in East Melbourne and I am so glad that I chose East Melbourne.

Thank you, Joan. Thank you very much indeed