

“Never Had Time”: An Oral History Of A Working Childhood.

Sue Marsden

***Background:** These excerpts are taken from an interview with Mrs. Florence Brand (nee Wood) and Mrs. Hilda Burford at Hindmarsh, 13th November, 1979. The interview was one of 50 carried out as the oral history section of the Hindmarsh Project (Dr. Ian Davey and Dr. Ray Broomhill). While the exact sequence of Mrs. Brand's comments has sometimes been altered, the words used are her own, as recorded and transcribed. Some of the questions (by Susan Marsden) have also been included.*

For a more extended account of women at work during this period, see Helen Jones, 'Women at work in South Australia, 1889-1906', Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia, No. 2, 1976, pp.1-17.

See also to Penny Baker, 'Women in South Australia during the 1850's' South Australia 1855 (Constitutional Museum, 1981) pp.95-98. Women's work and domestic service changed little in the intervening period.

The statistics for employment are taken from the Census of South Australia, 1891 and 1901.

What was childhood like during the 1890s? Although the 1890s may seem a remote historical period it is still just possible to ask some people who can readily describe their own childhood during those years. Some of these people remember childhood as the start of a lifetime of hard work. For working class girls, in particular, this was, by and large, domestic work. Their domestic service began as unpaid work at home, helping care for brothers and younger sisters. Sometimes this was crucial, as the mother could then add to the father's income by taking occasional outside work as a laundress or a midwife.

As soon as they could leave school, the girls would go out to work as domestic servants for wages. By far the majority of women in regular paid employment were domestic servants. There were 9,423 in 1891 and 11,587 in 1901. Of these, most were aged between 15 to 20: in 1901 there were 4,813 young women working as domestic servants in this age group, while there were 615 aged between five and 14. Florence Wood was one of those young girls.

Despite the numbers of women in domestic service, there were never enough to satisfy the demand for servants. This may have been due in part to the drawbacks of the job itself; the restrictions on free time (for live-in maids), the snobbishness of some families and the meanness of others, for whom the women worked. Wages, particularly for the young girls, were also considered low, and the hours long.

Marriage brought an end to the wages but not to the ceaseless domestic work as the women turned to caring for their own homes and families.

Florence Wood was born at Gawler in 1889. Her family moved to the new suburb of Croydon about two years later, where they bought a block of land and 'paid £200 to get the house built'. The father was 'in the railways'.

In the country he worked as a ganger, then as he grew older he was transferred to Adelaide, where he worked lifting the gates on the South Road Crossing near the Croydon Station

"...There was little huts that he'd be in. Used to have to take his dinner down to him when he was on duty, ... and we used to cart his meal down to him if it was meal time."

"So you came home to lunch?"

"I used to come home from school, Hindmarsh School, walk home, and then back after dinner, so you were there for afternoon school ... we used to walk it was no trouble. You never used to take any notice of it, you had to do it and that was all there was to it."

Florence was the eldest girl in a family of six children. They all went to the Hindmarsh Public School, but Florence's attendance was, at best, irregular, as she was kept home often to help her mother. This affected her schoolwork and, obviously, made the teachers' patience with her wear thin. She found one of the women teachers

"...too too old for us. She had no patience whatsoever with kids, you know. She was too old to put up with them ... she was tough."

Worse, she said one of the male teachers was quite mad, punishing the children for nothing.

"... he was a trimmer, he hated me too. I was in trouble ... didn't matter what I did I was wrong. He just took a dislike for me., I suppose that's all there is to it., but I was always in trouble."

Florence started school when she was six, and finished at twelve.

"I got out of it as soon as I could."

"Could you get out as early as that, could you?"

"Well you could those days you see, because mother had to go out to work because dad used to get two pound eight a week and there was six in the family to keep. And anyhow I got out of school because I had to help out at home a lot and I was away from school a lot. 'Cause mother, she took out a job as a mid-wife. Quite a number of people round here she brought into the world. She was a mid-wife and I used to have to stop home to help out quite a lot."

"She went out, soon as it was possible to leave the youngest one, I couldn't tell you just exactly when."

"She was trained as a mid-wife, was she?"

"No, she only learnt. You see, when we lived in the country she did a bit of that work, people never had money to pay anyone for anything. She has plenty of times gone out and helped a person out.

I don't know how she managed. I never ever had a doctor when my babies were born at home, three of them, but mother looked after me."

"So you were stopped home from school quite often when you were quite young, and - what, cook for the family and everything?"

"Cook for the family, wash for the family. When I was eleven years old, mother was in hospital when I was eleven years old and I had to take charge of the house, do everything that was done for the kids and everything else. You had to, you couldn't do otherwise. No money – you couldn't pay anyone – I've been working all me life. Yes I've been working all me life. I can honestly say that, I've had a tough spin but I got over it."

"Didn't you get into trouble at school when you had to stop home?"

"They used to write a note. They would tell you they'd fine you and one thing and another. I got out of it. I always got excused because, I suppose, they understood. Because those days you hadn't got any money, you had to do something, no use being silly."

"Would you have liked to have stayed on at school if you could?"

"I hated school."

"Why is that?"

"Well I never had time to study anything. I was nowhere near the other kids. I managed to get through but that's all I can say."

"Did your mother and father give you any help with the schoolwork?"

"No, they didn't know anything. Mother never went to school. I don't know that dad did. He was a runaway sailor. Yes, he got cleared off a boat ... English, Yes."

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"I thought the school might fine your parents for keeping you away."

"They never fined them. Couldn't get blood out of a stone, 'cause that's what it amounts to."

...

"What did your brothers and sister think about school, did they feel the same way as you?"

"They were different to me, well, they had an opportunity to go properly. I always had to be seeing to the others, see that the kids were fixed up right, 'cause mother was away such a lot you see. Never knew, sometimes you'd go to bed at night, and she'd get called up through the night. Well, that meant that I had to wake up in the morning and see to the rest of the kids."

"And your father as well?"

"Yes me father as well. Because me father was a useless man, he couldn't do anything in the house..."

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"How often did your mother have to go out, every day?"

"When she was called, go for ten days ... to look after things. Those days you stopped in bed and had a rest..."

"Yes, I suppose if you were working so hard you would appreciate it. And did she live in and help look after the mothers?"

"No, not all the time. She wouldn't stay there all day ... morning and night until you were up ready, she'd be there to see if things were right and if not you'd see the doctor."

"Would she have been earning as much as your father doing that?"

"Yes."

"So at least the family's income was double maybe?"

"Yes, it helped out quite a lot."

"What did your father think about your mother working?"

"She had no choice, she had to do something. They were worser off in those days than they are now..."

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"Did you get your Qualifying Certificate?"

"No, I didn't have enough brains to be bothered. I didn't have time."

When Florence left school she went out doing housework, "cleaning up for anybody," round about the district and nearby suburbs. She found the jobs readily, helped by the fact that her mother was well-known for her work.

"People would hear about you and they'd come and ask you, would you come and do their work."

"Mrs. B I worked for her for a time. They used to have the flour mill in Hamlet' Bridge and of course they had a bit of cash. They were pretty tight with it. I used to get six shillings a week, to clean up her house, but she didn't believe in me having a rest, 'Oh, Florrie will do her work all right, but she will have her rest.'

I said, 'Darn her, she has a rest, why can't I?"

"How many hours did you work there?"

"You'd get there about 7 o'clock in the morning, so she could get the breakfast ready, and then come home about 6 or 7 at night, after you had finished the day's work. Washing-up done and everythin^s done and then you was finished, that's a day's work."

"Be tired, wouldn't you."

"Dickens, they don't know they're alive ..."

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"When I was old enough ... I went away into the country and worked, because you got better pay, you see ... I always seen that I went somewhere as a cook. I 'v e b e e n cooking on a sheep station, I've been cooking in a hotel and boarding houses, that was always my ambition, to cook."

"Because you had learnt to cook at home?"

"I'll say I learnt to cook. But that was always my ambition, and not only that, you got better wages ... Yes, you had to stop and think of that ... I first started [with the housework] because you had to wait to get a bit higher up in wages."

"How old were you when you first went away to the country?"

"Eighteen"

"I went down on a sheep station to work. And of course I went to Strathalbyn by train and then they took a boat to where I had to go to work on the station. And the bloke said when we was going out, 'Well, I'll see you in three months' time.' I said, 'Will you? Why?' He said, 'No-one stops there any longer.' I said, 'Gee, that's nice.' "

"Was he right?"

"I'll say he was right. I got away from there within three months' time, I couldn't stop there. You know there was Dr. — over here in Hindmarsh, it was his sister I worked for and she was the lousiest creature I ever knew. Do you know she wouldn't let us have — well, when there was jam made and you had — well, this was the blackcurrant this time — I had to strain all this blessed stuff and make blackcurrant jam out of it. And then she had the audacity to turn around and tell me, 'Put a little bit more sugar with the stems and that,' that was left, 'it will do for the kitchen.' That was for the kitchen, the rubbish. You were just allowed a pat of butter, like that, and that thick, that was for the kitchen. Four of us in the kitchen, the rest was sent to Adelaide for her family to have. And we could have that bit. You only got scraps. And I will tell you about the most funniest one of the lot. She used to get — the meat was all killed there you see — and the fore-quarter of the lamb, we'd take the shoulder off and I'd cook that, stuff it and cook it. That was inside, the bones was for kitchen. So this particular day

"How many people were there in the kitchen?"

"There was four. Two men and me and another girl ... one was a roustabout and a bloke had to look after the cows and horses. The other one was a housemaid. Anyway, this particular day this meat was there and I said, 'Now Ted, get in on time today to carve the meat for me.' He said, 'What's wrong with you Flo?' Well, I told him what was wrong. I said, 'I'm sick and tired of picking bones.' I

said, 'They can have it today for a change.'

"Anyway, he came in on time to cut this meat up for me. It got sent inside, and I left all the bones on the plate, the silver cover over top. Had it all nice and fixed up for them, packed it up and sent it inside and we had ours' dished up out on the table. So I sent it inside and Rita said, 'Oh, I don't like taking it inside.' 'Dig them, we're sick and tired of picking bones.' She took it in.

"After a while the missus come out, 'What have you done with the meat,' she said, 'you sent the wrong dinner in.' I said, 'No, not today. We're having a change, we're going to have the meat and you can have the other.' I knew I wouldn't get the sack because they can't get anybody, but I stopped there for three months. But I'll never forget it. I can still see her when I think about it."

Florence left the country when she was about 26, to work at an Adelaide firm as a sewing machinist. When she was 28, she married.

"And all that time you'd been working up in the country, had you?"

"Working in the country, everywhere I could get a job in the country."

"Didn't you miss your family?"

"Haven't got time. No, things was different then."

"Did many girls like you go around the country working?"

"Yes."

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"What did people think about being in service, was it usually difficult, was it usually hard or did it depend on the people?"

"My Emily used to work here – in North Adelaide. The missus would come in in the morning and say, 'Just cook two chops today, one for me and one for the master. There is plenty of jam in the cupboard.' She could have bread and jam, one each. She was fool enough to stop there.

She said, 'What else am I going to do?' I said, 'You're mad!' "

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"So you were a cook for about seven or eight years?"

"I forget how long. I was a cook until I got sick of it. I'm sick and tired of cooking."

(Mrs. Burford) "They don't have servants now like they used to."

"They don't know they're alive."