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Diamantina Health care Museum Association Inc – Oral History Project

Interview with: JOAN DUNN on 12th October 1999

Interviewer: **SUE PECHEY**

This transcript is a slightly edited version of the conversation on the matching tape/disk.

Place: Diamantina House

SP: Joan just tell me quickly about your childhood and education and your life up to the point where you came in contact with Diamantina Health care Museum Association Inc for the first time.

JD: Briefly, I was born in Brisbane at West End then we went down to Kirra. I started school at Kirra. I don't know how long we were there – about two years.

SP: What did your father do?

JD: My father was a journalist but why we went to Kirra my mother's father had died and left some money to the family. He wanted to have his own business and so they bought a shop down there and then lost their money, of course, not having any.

SP: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

JD: I have one older sister. We came back to Brisbane and I went to school at West End School and then I went to Central Practising School for grades six and seven.

SP: The Central Practising School where was that?

JD: In Leichhardt Street they call it Brisbane Central now. It was Central Practising because they had the teacher trainees used to come and practise there.

SP: What years were you there?

JD: I was there in 1933 and 1934, passed The Scholarship. From there I went to State High. From State High I went to Nun & Trivett's Business College. I worked at Queensland Cement and Lime first in the city and then they moved the office out to Darra.

SP: You were doing clerical work?

JD: I was shorthand typist and switch girl to start with and they had me taught a Remington bookkeeping machine and I did all the books there. I had the shareholders register set up. Did the invoices for the concrete for the Mackay Harbour scheme and Somerset Dam and cheques and all that sort of stuff. Then I joined the air force for the next four years.

SP: What did you do in the air force?

JD: I was a wireless operator then they changed the title to telegraphist.

SP: Where were you?

JD: We trained in Melbourne at Toorak. I was posted back to Brisbane W/T, which was in Edward Street. It used to be the Robert Reed Building down Edward Street and then I was up at Amberley for about 6 months - which was wonderful.

SP: Why was Amberley wonderful?

JD: It was great being on a station, at Brisbane W/T I was living at home. First of all they decided we could come into barracks but then they said they had too many people, too many girls there, so they said anybody who lives in Brisbane go home. It wasn't much fun, because we worked shift work while our previous friends worked daytime, we worked shifts through the night. So you were neither one thing nor the other.

SP: What does WT stand for?

JD: Wireless Telegraphy. At Amberley I was on the station and used to send the weather reports in Morse code and messages back and forth to Brisbane by landline. Then I got sent back to Brisbane W/T; I became a Corporal. They didn't have any establishment at Amberley for another Corporal so I had to come back to Brisbane. Then I went to Townsville W/T, which was good because we lived in barracks there and you were away from home.

SP: You liked getting away from home!

JD: Then after the war worked for the City Council and from there I went overseas. I was in London for a couple of years went on the continent twice; hitch hiked around Scotland, Wales and that was in 1949. In 1951 I went to Canada, worked in Toronto for about 6 months then got a job down in Washington DC at the Australian Embassy and went down there for nearly 4 years.

Came home and got a job with Orient Line and while I was there, twice I worked on a ship. The first time when I was on the Orient Line I went to America and back and I went as a passenger and the next time, P&O had taken us over by then, I went on what they call the triangular voyage, which is America, Japan, Hong Kong and back to Sydney and I signed on as crew that time.

SP: So you worked as a telephonist on the ship?

JD: No a typist, doing all the manifests for the passengers for migration and customs.

SP: What brought you in contact with Princess Alexandra Hospital the first time?

JD: Well, we lived at West End and we didn't know much about Brisbane. We didn't have much to do with public hospitals or Princess Alexandra Hospital because it was out of the way. It's okay now because I drive but in those days you had to come into the city and out again. If we had gone to any hospital we would have gone to Royal Brisbane but we didn't – we didn't have anything to do with hospitals.

I was down in Sydney for a while and my mother died and I came back to Brisbane and I saw an ad for the Heart Foundation and the Heart Foundation was at Princess Alexandra Hospital.

SP: And that was 1962 was it?

JD: Yes.

SP: And what did the Heart Foundation want?

JD: They were the first people to have a door knock. But when I first started there was me, and a junior typist, a doctor who came three times a week and a social worker who came three times a week and somebody from the commonwealth employment office, came up and did work assessment. It was a work assessment centre really. They did work assessment on people who had had heart attacks. Whom had been referred by their doctor to see if they were fit to go back to work. That was when there was work available. Of course a lot of them didn't want to go back to work.

Eventually they got around to instead of just having fundraising now and again, they decided to have continuous fundraising. We had a fundraising section as well as the work assessment.

I did the minutes. I didn't go to the board meetings. The secretary who was one of the accountants in town gave me the minutes.

Because I was not all that busy I started typing stuff for the hospital as a freebie. I used to type up their fortnightly medical newsletter they had about interesting cases.

SP: Was that a thing called "WisPAH"?

JD: No that is sort of newspaper. This was a medical news bulletin. Every fortnight, (that could be, say, six foolscap pages) they ran off and sent to all the doctors. I also did outpatient letters. I did those for years - until I got so busy. I was doing it in my spare time. I don't just mean spare time from work, I mean after hours. I would have to stay after hours to do it and I would have a pile of files this big. I had to learn all those medical terms and understand what the people were saying and what their writing was.

I went on holidays and I said, 'You will have to do them yourself'. When I came back somebody said, 'She has been back a week or so, it's time she started those letters'. I said, 'That's it, no more letters, I've had it' but probably those girls didn't realise that I wasn't being paid to do this.

The Medical Director of the Heart Foundation, his wife was on the committee of the Auxiliary and when the secretary decided to resign they suggested that I might be a replacement. So the members of the Executive Committee invited me out to lunch.

SP: What sort of women were on the Ladies Auxiliary?

JD: They were practically all doctors' wives. One (not a wife) was in the Health Department laboratory and one was the matron of the hospital, Matron Broomfield, and one was Mrs.

Broad who was a member of the Hospital Board. Mrs Kurt Aaron was the inaugural President.

SP: Was that when the ladies auxiliary was formed?

JD: That was when it was formed - 1961. But I didn't come into it until 1965 and I have been in it the longest of anybody. I'm the oldest member.

SP: What was the aim of that organisation? At the time when you joined it, what was it supposed to be doing?

JD: Their aim is to raise money towards equipment for the hospital and amenities for patients and staff. That is still the aim.

SP: What sort of things were they fund raising for, that you remember?

JD: Just after I became secretary there we had the premiere of *My Fair Lady*, the film, in Brisbane and we bought all the cardiac monitoring equipment with that.

SP: Do you remember how much money you raised out of that?

JD: Yes, approximately, 1200 (pounds) profit. Yes that was the one showing of the film. We charged five guineas, which included a champagne and chicken sandwich supper. They got some of the original gowns, so the girls paraded around. The Northern Command Band marched from the Treasury to the theatre. Mr. Nicklin, Mr Hiley and Mr Tooth were there.

The Governor couldn't come. Viscount provided cigarettes and matches. They chose a gown of the evening and the nurses had a guard of honour there and it was a really wonderful evening. That was on the 1st of December 1965. It was a tremendous amount of work.

In those days before we had the tea bar which is now our main source of money.

SP: What is the tea bar?

JD: The tea bar is where we make sandwiches, muffins etc and sell them. It is down in the outpatients department of the hospital. It will be folding up when these new buildings come.

SP: Will you be moving into the new building? Will you have a room in there?

JD: We won't be having a tea bar. Everything is changed. There is a volunteer part there. The biggest thing they ever did was a big hospital fete they had in 1962 and they raised, 4000 pounds and in those days that was a lot of money. The net profit was more than 3500 pounds. They had a queen of the nurses. They had help from the various Rotary Clubs, Stones Corner Rotary and all around people were helping.

SP: Was it held on site here?

JD: Yes, it was from 2 pm until the evening. They bought 850 anodised jugs with lids, which turned out to be a disaster.

SP: Were they for sale?

JD: No, this is what we bought for the hospital. Those anodised jugs had been a problem for years and we just gave up. They had one for each bed but then Brisbane water being hard it pitted inside them. They cost about £1000. We bought seven wheelchairs, an artificial kidney for, £1100. We gave some money to the nurse's library, chairs for the domestic staff and a donation to the wardsmen.

SP: Why would you give money to the wardsmen?

JD: Well this is staff – part of our constitution. This was a donation to their social club. We gave 25 pounds to the Para Olympic association. We bought a Japanese gastric camera for 400 pounds, 250 pounds to the nurse's swimming pool, 250 pounds to a research grant - which we still give a lot of money to. Mostly in those days they were social things like Melbourne Cup luncheons and fashion parades, hoy parties and barbecues.

SP: What's a hoy party?

JD: It's a card game. Something like bingo.

SP: You were on the organisational side of these things. Did you go to them as well?

JD: Yes, that was in 1965, but it got to the stage eventually that you got tired of ringing up your friends and saying, 'We are having a function, will you come?' Dr Powell decided that he would like to have an information centre there run by volunteers. They put an ad in the paper and they had 105 people turn up for that. That was in 1970.

SP: That was something the ladies auxiliary did, was it?

JD: Well Dr. Powell was the Medical Superintendent and he started that up. They had the information centre and they had going up to do the flowers in the wards. They had tremendous support. There were 104 people in the main auxiliary to start with, so they decided to make them associate members. We pay \$2 membership and they pay 50 cents, without voting rights. We started the tea bar in August 1970. They offered us the Kiosk up the back, but we said we didn't want it, because we couldn't keep it open at night and over the weekend. So we ended up with just having sandwiches. We used to buy the sandwiches from the kiosk and sell cups of tea, but eventually it got to the stage where we were making our own sandwiches. We made more money that way.

SP: Now tell me how did you make decisions about where the money was to be donated? How did you decide where it went?

JD: Well, somebody would probably say we would like this and they had a list where they asked people. After the fete they asked people for suggestions. They'd ask the head of the visiting medical officers, the physicians, the surgeons, the matron, the physiotherapists and the nurses for suggestions. The executive committee would more or less decide what they felt they would like to support and they would put it to a general meeting.

SP: Did it ever happen that the general meeting didn't go along with their suggestions?

JD: No, not really. Sometimes they would get a bit cranky and say you decided everything before you come there. They used to have separate meetings but now they combine the two. We do have a short executive meeting beforehand because the Fair Trading mob say we have to have an executive meeting but it is mostly decided by the members.

SP: Has the composition of the ladies auxiliary changed much? When you were interviewed it was mostly doctors wives and quite formal.

JD: No doctor's wives now, just ordinary people. I think a lot of the doctor's wives are working. Unfortunately now they are mostly retired people; I think all voluntary organisations have the same problems. Mostly what people do is work on the tea bar. Some are up in the wards a lot of them have been here since 1970 or 1980 – been here for 20 years. Getting older.

SP: Are there any young members?

JD: No.

SP: What do you think will happen?

JD: Well, the hospital is starting to have volunteer workers now. Actually at one stage, we did have a younger set, but it faded away. It went for several years then petered out, it would have been nice to have them coming on, but young women now are working. It's not the same. The people our age have been brought up to do this sort of voluntary work.

SP: Would you think it was reasonable that volunteers had to hold fetes and whatnot to raise money to buy medical machinery that presumably the people of Queensland needed?

JD: Well, if they don't have the money to buy it. I mean it was one of those things in those days - that's what people did. We are still doing that. We raise a lot of money.

SP: How much a year do you raise now?

JD: About \$100,000. We don't have raffles now. We used to have raffles but they got too much and there are other people do that – we concentrate on the tea bar.

SP: Do you spend time working at the tea bar?

JD: No, I spend my time doing the books. I thought 'when I stop work I will work on the tea bar' and then when I did stop work I thought I don't want to be tied down to having to come here every week. I have been tied down all my life working. I want to be free. That if there's something I want to go to, I'd like to be able to and not either feel guilty if I wasn't at the tea bar or be at the tea bar and resenting that I couldn't go.

I am the treasurer, which takes an awful lot of time, but I do that at home. I pay all the bills. We couldn't get someone to work every afternoon at the tea bar, so we pay somebody to work at the tea bar. I have to pay her once a fortnight. I come down here to pick up the bills and take them home and pay them. Tax returns and all that.

We have a meeting once a month. The annual meeting when they have it, when I joined the auxiliary it was an evening affair. They used to buy some beer and wine. Now we have morning tea and coffee.

They had a gift bar on the tea bar for a while and for quite a while people would make stuff. Then those people moved on, so we gave the gift bar away. They are talking about having a gift bar in the new hospital.

Some 'Girls' work in the sterilising department. They have a machine that seals bags. We bought a new one because they were complaining that the old one was a bit dangerous.

SP: For packaging up pieces of equipment?

JD: Yes, and getting them ready for the sterilising process.

SP: Are you still doing flowers in the wards?

JD: Yes a couple of people do that. Mostly they do the tea bar. They used to help with the ambulance bay. Now they have got some of the younger volunteers I don't know whether they help there. They used to take the patients up to the wards but then they cut that out and they don't let them do that.

SP: Have those things come in, in the interest of safety and hygiene, for those sorts of reasons?

JD: Safety, I think, in taking them up to the wards.

We used to provide concert parties up at the Day hospital. They organised them and put on morning tea for that every so often. We have only got about 40 members now so the numbers are going down.

SP: How many people would you get every day?

JD: Mostly about five or six. Some days there would only be about four. They usually come about 6.30 am and start making sandwiches.

SP: When do they shut?

JD: The tea bar shuts at about 3.15pm. Most people only come until lunchtime and there might be a couple of people in the afternoon. They have lunch and go home, about 12 noon.

SP: That's the only form of fundraising now?

JD: Yes, we are not having Melbourne Cup parties and the like any more.

SP: When did they go out?

JD: I think they gradually went out after we started the tea bar because we didn't need to and we got sick of asking our friends to come to things. We are getting the money in from the tea bar. So there wasn't the need

We have to ask the hospital now for a list of things they would like us to buy and then we decide whether we will buy them or not. Then we pass it back to them as well. I think at one stage, if someone knew someone one ward would get all sorts of things and other wards who didn't know anybody wouldn't get anything.

We also pay for a nurse's scholarship once a year. They say what they want – they would like to send a Sister down to Sydney to study so and so or to America to study something else. That's about \$15,000 now.

We give a fair bit to research and development. We give them at least \$10,000 a year.

Lately we bought a couple of big refrigerators for storing samples of cancer. The study is the biggest one in Australia. Minus 61° F – they cost about \$10,000 - \$12,000 for each refrigerator. We just bought a new one recently.

SP: Are you doing something special for the new hospital?

JD: No we don't know yet. We won't be getting the money from the tea bar – That's our source of income. We are supposed to be getting money from a gift bar, which we will be sharing with the research and development group. But of course there is nothing to stop us existing and doing things for the patients, doing flowers and all that. But it is all very iffy as to what is going to happen. There definitely won't be a tea bar and I think a lot of people will leave once the tea bar stops.

SP: The tea bar is a commitment. But once that commitment is not there you feel they might disappear?

JD: Well they say, 'What are we going to do without the tea bar?' Which is a pity because there has been a lot of angst about the new hospital and what is going to happen there. The Auxiliary doesn't have to be a fundraising thing really. Helping patients – Its all up in the air, what is going to happen.

SP: But you are going to go on with it?

JD: I don't know. I have been treasurer for 14 years now and I have had enough, but I'm sticking around to see what's going to happen. I could do without being treasurer. I was nine years as secretary then 14 years as treasurer.

SP: You have never been President?

JD: No' I really didn't want to be President. I never felt that I had the time to spare. I couldn't be president when I was working full time. I felt because you needed to have the time.

SP: You have been a workingwoman all your life. You would have been quite a rarity in the ladies auxiliary.

JD: Yes. So when they had the daytime meetings, I couldn't necessarily go to them. I went to the night ones. Then they got to the stage where they had every second one at night to allow the people to go who couldn't go in the daytime.

Some people won't go out at night now. I go out at night but lots of people won't, and you wouldn't get the people coming say to your annual meetings.

SP: Especially not in formal dress.

JD: We don't have formal dress now. That has long gone by the board.

SP: Now Joan I think that's not a bad place to stop. Thank you very much.

Transcribed by: J.A. Deller Date: 27 October 1999

Edited by: Sue Pechey & Jan Leo Date: 26 January 2000

This transcript has been checked by (Print Name)

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