



Helen McLean

Interview Transcript 21 November 2015

Oral History Project

Reliving the past: Stories from our communities

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The 1955 Flood

Helen McLean was just 8 years old when her family business and home, the Goss Bakery Talbragar Street, was inundated during the 1955 flood. Hear her story of the flood from the perspective of a young child.

This recording created on the 21st November 2015 is part of Macquarie Regional Library's oral history project 'Reliving the past: stories from our communities.' Each recording contributes to the developing story of life in the Dubbo area.

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Interviewer (I): Thank you for your time today Helen McLean. For the benefit of our recording could you please state your full name, date of birth and occupation?

Subject (S): Yes, Helen Dorothy McLean, nee Goss, and I was born in Dubbo on the 1st of July 1947.

[0:00:51] (I): Your occupation?

(S): Well, I'm actually a shop owner, I sell ladies fashion, and I've been doing that for 24 years, and I'm also a marriage celebrant which I've been doing for 20 years.

[0:01:05] (I): Helen, in 1955 you were eight years old?

(S): Yes I was Mandy.

[0:01:11] (I): Tell us about your life as a child before the flood.

(S): Pretty happy go lucky life, my parents owned a bakery.¹ Back then, we had the horse and cart, so it wasn't easy to get around a lot of the places in Dubbo at the time with a horse and cart, because a lot of the places, especially in West Dubbo, roads weren't as good as you'd like them to be. But, I used to go with my grandfather before I went to school, and he used to deliver to a lot of the homes in Dubbo at that time, which weren't as many homes as you would think about now. But it was a pretty good carefree little life helping Mum and Dad at the bakery and, of course, the grandfather.

¹ Goss's Bakery was originally the Stevenson Bakery. In 1947 Audrey and Jack Goss took over the bakery and it was renamed Goss Bakery. The bakery operated for 40 years before being sold in 1987 to Tinambu Pty. Ltd. and became the Heritage Bakery. (Our Company History, accessed 23-03-2018 at: <http://www.earlyrisebaking.com.au/company-history>)

[0:01:53] (I): How did you help in the bakery?

(S): We did odd jobs. When I was eight it was considered that was a pretty good age to be able to make your first sandwich (laughs). So I did make my first sandwich at eight, and then also it was coming in a little bit around that time of cutting bread, and we would actually cut it by a knife, and then you would roll it in some wax paper and you'd heat it with an iron. So that's how you would wrap up the sliced bread back then.

[0:02:21] (I): Who worked in the bakery as well?

(S): Right, big family bakery. My mother and father actually had my mother's father living with us and a son that hadn't married at that time, so they lived on one side, my grandfather and my uncle. Then my mother, father and elder brother lived on the other side above the bakery, and of course my younger brother was about six months old when the actual floods hit. So that's another story.

[0:03:00] (I): What was the address of the bakery?

(S): It was 108 Talbragar Street and our phone number was 4041.



Goss's Bakery c.1980

[0:03:09] (I): Excellent. So, when did you know the flood was coming?

(S): We were all sort of, like, listening, "Oh, the river's going to break its banks", and we're all excited 'cause, you know, I'm only young, and my elder brother was 11 years older, so he was like really, knows what's going to happen. But we'd run out on to the verandah and we'd be looking up the street, looking up towards Macquarie Street, "Where's the water? Where's the water?" No, nothing was happening. Then in the early hours of the morning unfortunately, it came up very quickly because the Talbragar River behind us - it actually was the sleepy little giant that came in behind - joined with the Macquarie River and *whoosh*, up she came, right up Talbragar Street, and of course we could see the water coming - trickling of course, but then it wasn't too long and it was six foot through our actual bakery.

[0:04:01] (I): Did it reach the top storey of the home?

(S): No, because we were upstairs and downstairs, I think to go up our stairwell, I think there was twenty-two steps I used to count back then, so it was quite, like, safe to stay upstairs, but because mum had a new-born baby the authorities said, "Look, you must get out of here" - because of vermin and everything - so my brother and I we'd do as much as we could by just moving a lot of the little things from downstairs, upstairs. So I had my school case and I'd be putting things in there, running up and down the stairs thinking, "Wow, this is so exciting." Then you'd look and you'd see all the ovens were starting to collapse, and all the bread was actually in the ovens, 'cause Dad didn't realise it was going to come so quick, and you'd be walking and all the tins of bread would be just floating past, you know, exciting, but - not really.

[0:04:58] (I): How did your dad cope with that?

(S): He went into the mode of, "I have to get as much things to safety as possible." We did have, by then, we did have a couple of small vans, that weren't like flash vans or anything like that, so he got the vans to higher ground. And then the next thing was to get Mum, who didn't want to go, to a safer place, and so where we were taken to, was now what we call the Elephant House in Hutchins Avenue,

the corner of Hutchins Avenue and Fitzroy Street². So we knew the people that had built that, they were good friends, and they said, "No, please bring the children and they stay here 'til the flood subsides."

[0:05:46] (I): Can you tell me how you actually got to there? How did you actually leave your home?

(S): Yes, we actually were transported to there. My father stayed behind to try and just do as much as possible with things that were just falling apart, the ovens were collapsing and that sort of thing. It wasn't dangerous for him, but he ended up getting a row boat, so he was rowing through our place at that stage because it was, sort of, got so high so quickly. It did come through to six foot high.

[0:06:21] (I): Were you taken out on a row boat as well or something else?

(S): We actually, my brother and I - I can remember holding his hand - and probably up to my waist at this stage, and we were going through the water up towards the park - is where we just waited - and then we were taken up to the 'Elephant House.' It sounds like it's going to be a big story here, "The Elephant House, wow!", but, it was just another part of that early stage.

[0:06:48] (I): Why was it called the Elephant House?

(S): It looked like – well, it's a massive beautiful structure to look at even now, and it's still going really well. But it had a big dome on the top of the middle of the actual residence, and if you look, it looked a little bit Taj Mahal-y, and so they called it the Elephant House 'cause it looked Indian type construction.

[0:07:10] (I): And it's still there today?

It's still there going really strong. Our former Mayor, Mr Dunlop³, he lived in it at one stage. So it's been a home that people have always referred to, you know a Dubbo home that they – "A-ha yes, the Elephant House."

² The Elephant house is located at 276 Fitzroy Street Dubbo.

³ Kevan Lyle Charles Dunlop, Mayor of Dubbo 1965–1967, accessed 07-08-2018 at: <https://dubbocitycouncil.worldsecureresystems.com/LiteratureRetrieve.aspx?ID=139917>

[0:07:24] (I): How long did you stay there Helen?

(S): I think we were there a good couple of months because, the mud and everything that went through was just really bad. So Dad was pretty lucky because the Fire Brigade they came with the big hoses and they washed it all through for Dad and - ovens were completely destroyed so, our next phase happened for our bakery after that.

[0:07:52] (I): So what happened?

Dad thought, "Well I can't go backwards now,"--- they were going to be in debt anyway because insurances back then – you really didn't have any insurance, so it was just everybody getting in and helping each other. Like as I say the Fire Brigade they were wonderful, and they were always welcome at our place for pies and cakes after that. And Dad thought, "Right, now it's time, I'll go automotive." So they ended up putting in big oil ovens, automatic ovens, went into a lot of debt but it was definitely the right way to go. Dubbo was growing and it was time to go that way.

[0:08:28] (I): So the bakery was actually expanded, in that respect, it became a bigger business?

(S): Yes because after that Dad did do a lot more volume, not only with the bread but on the pastry cook side. We used to supply all of the schools at the time. There was another couple of bakeries here as well, so everybody got a fair go with trading with other people as well.

[0:09:01] (I): Were the other bakeries affected as well?

Yes, there was another bakery called Rendall's Bakery⁴ and that actually faced the park, it's really probably where the Civic Centre is now, very close to where the Civic Centre is now, in Darling Street, and they would have been in the same situation as Dad and Mum - yes.

⁴ A.C. Rendall - Dubbo Machine Bakery, was located along Darling Street. (Special announcement: Advertising, *The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*, 12 October 1951, p. 7. Accessed 07-08-2018, at: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article131341970>)

[0:09:20] (I): How long before the bakery was operating again, can you remember?

(S): I think it was a good three months. I know that's a long time ago to give you dates, but talking to family members over the years, I think it was a good three months before they got going - starting - but not really the automation part of it, but definitely getting started, and supplying bread and that again.

[0:09:46] (I): What happened to the neighbourhood?

(S): Well, I think like everybody, some people would have moved on because the cost factor would've been so great to get started again, but most people would give a helping hand. I remember across the road, Whitney's Jewellers, now they're still in Dubbo as we speak, I think 1927 they might have started their actual business, so that was wonderful. So I can say that a lot of the places just went back to work as normal and just cleaned up - the Pastoral Hotel right next door to us.

But there was another little cafe across the road, and a lot of people might remember *Mrs Steadman*.⁵ Now it was a fruit and vegetable shop, but she used to make the nicest juice, like orange juice, or lemon juice, I can't just think which one now, but she had a secret recipe of course, and no one was ever going to find out, what that was going to be in that secret recipe. But you could go in there, and she would have your change ready for you, she was a clairvoyant-y type person, and everyone was a little scared of her, but she was that character of Dubbo. But - she didn't want to leave when the floods were on. So I can remember seeing her, tipped upside down, and big bloomers blowing in the day, and they put her on the little row boat and off they took her. So, she didn't actually come back, but she did sell the business, and it continued on as a fruit and vegetable shop to Mr Koseris.

⁵ Ethel Steadman, was a well-known Dubbo identity in the 1950-60s, renowned as a local fortune teller. She was also known as Mrs Hammond. (The legend of Ethel Steadman, ABC Western Plains, accessed 07-08-2018 at: <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2014/03/11/3960749.htm>)

[0:11:20] (I): What about next door to you? You said the Pastoral Hotel was one side, what was the business on the other side?

(S): I think back then it was Mr Ison, Mr Ben Ison.... There was a spare block next to us that used to be used sometimes as an old car yard. Then next to that was Ben Ison's - it was bikes and he used to do repairs, and his son Don, used to work for him.

[0:11:54] (I): Did they come back after the flood?

(S): Yes they did. Yes, continued on for many, many more years. When old Mr Ben Ison died, Don took it over and stayed there 'til his death, and, unfortunately, it was quite an early death. His wife, stayed on for a little while, Enid Ison, but then eventually she sold, yes.

[0:12:19] (I): What happened with the school?

Now, I at that stage was going to the Central Primary School. And it unfortunately was waterlogged as well because we're sort of in a parallel area, so I don't know how much water did go through there but, it probably was on a par as ourselves, because we're sort of in a parallel line. They would have been in the situation of closing everything down and just everybody going to close down for a certain time 'til it was all cleaned up, and then back to normal. I mean, probably kids back then would think, "Wow, what a holiday!" 'Cause you didn't look at the gravity of it as such.

[0:13:02] (I): Did you spend some time not at school?

(S): Yes, yes, just one of those things unfortunately, you can't - - , and Mum had the baby quite young so it wasn't like was I getting lessons at that time (laughs).

[0:13:18] (I): How did your mum cope with not being in the shop, which was something that you said that she did day in day out and enjoyed, and then she wasn't able to go there? How did that affect her?

Yes, and having a young child too, emotionally, it would have been very difficult I'd imagine, not being able to be there to help Dad get everything happening. Her father, though, was fantastic, he was still living with us at the time. He went to other relatives and my uncle went to other relatives, because they lived with

us at the time. But yes, I think Mum went through emotional - and it's pretty hard because she wasn't young, young, when she had the last child, I think she was 39 so ... that in itself sometimes makes it even more emotional that you can't get in and help.

[0:14:10] (I): Was she able to keep in contact with her neighbourhood friends that she had around?

Well, we didn't have heaps of friends, Mum and Dad were such workers - you didn't sort of have a lot of outside - your job was your life, was your work - sort of thing, and that was your friends that would come in the shop. They didn't have a lot of outside - the people that we went to stay with, they were their friends, that let us stay at their home. But they didn't have a big circle of friends because they were always too busy at the shop, you know, work wise.

[0:14:47] (I): If we go back, maybe evoke some memories about when you said that the Talbragar River was coming up at the back of the home, can you remember what you heard, or saw or smelt at the time?

(S): I wish I had more of a vivid memory. Because now I'm 68, it's just difficult to recall, but there's an excitement, that sort of feeling. You're hearing "this is going to happen, that's going to happen," and in your mind you're making - wow! This is exciting. I know I saw a snake or two go past, and you are frightened as well, but you're frightened, but you've got an air of excitement. So I can't really recall the smells or anything like that. But I can basically say I know there was devastation, but you can't really put your handle on how bad it was going to be, or what other people are going through [with] the excitement.

[0:15:52] (I): You said that the water came up in the night, were the street lights on? Were you able to see, given that you were in a main street were the street lights on at that time?

(S): No, I don't think so, depending on what sort of a night it was it was probably the moonlight... shin[ing] on the water, as it got closer, but I can't recall lights or anything, no.

[0:16:17] (I): Is there anything that you remember from the flood that people wouldn't really know about?

Not really, I'm sorry I wish I could delve into that a little bit deeper for you. But it was all happening around us - trying to just get people to safety. Just watching all the other people in the street - busy, and going, yeah, panic, but organised panic, if you can put it that way.

[0:16:50] (I): What about communication, where were you getting you information from, was it coming from normally newspapers and radio, was that still happening at the time? Were you aware of that?

(S): Radio 2DU at that stage they were in Macquarie Street so they would've gone under as well. But, I would say they probably had an auxiliary type outside broadcast to keep people informed because there wasn't any television then, so it was mostly the radio that people would be listening to, local radio, watch this, watch that, whatever, yeah.

[0:17:30] (I): Were you aware in the clean-up of people coming into the town to help?

(S): No, I couldn't really say that because Dad kept us away from that. So I wish I could just answer that a bit better.

[0:17:46] (I): Is there anything else that we haven't touched on that you'd like to tell us about from your memories as an eight year old?

(S): I think I was just so happy to get back to normality after this, and, even though it was back to hard work for us, we didn't sort of think it was hard work at the time because we're a family, and that's what you did. No, I think it was just a big relief that no one was hurt in our family, that we all got back to be a family again. Back to what we loved doing.

[0:18:22] (I): Back to everyone living above the shop?

Absolutely, that didn't change. Yes, that didn't change, grandfather and uncle on one side. And my grandfather because he was the original baker - Stevenson's Bakery now in Dubbo at Village Hot Bake - that's their grandfather and that's my grandfather too. He was this little man with lots of go, so he really made all of us work really hard but, we respected him, but when you saw him coming - "Uh oh,

here we go, Pa's after us and we gotta work hard today," and he did that with all of his grandchildren.

[0:18:56] (I): So the family tradition continues.

(S): It does, yes.

[0:19:00] (I): That's great. Is there any other comments you would like to make before we close off?

(S): I would just like to say being born in Dubbo, you know, you do have a pride about where you're born, and people will say, "Oh yeah, I like this better place, I'd go and live there whatever", well I can't ever see myself leaving Dubbo, I think it's been a wonderful place to be born in, and now it's just getting better. Here we are - it's 2015, and I think to myself, "You know, we've come a long way." We've been through lots of minor little floods, and it still happens now and again, we get some lower Macquarie Street area flooding as such still, but, you know, we've been through a lot of the heartaches and I think we all do come together. And you see it even when Nyngan went under, how good the Dubbo people there and vice versa. But we all pull together, and I think that's what traditionally, you know, you're very proud of your town, or your little city now as we are. But we do help each other and I think that's the whole thing of threading a community together.

[0:20:10] (I): Helen, you talked about going up and down the stairs with your suitcase helping to bring things from the bottom level to the top. What was in your suitcase? What were you bringing up?

(S): Well it was actually my school port. I'll say port because a lot of people got cases, ports, whatever, but I had my little school port, and of course I was only 9, so it wasn't a big one, so I thought I was very helpful because everything really was downstairs for us. We actually had the kitchen, the shop, we had our little bathroom, all of the bakery was entwined around our little residence downstairs. So it was mostly bakery, and we opened up onto, like, a little hallway area, and then it was all the bakery. So, kitchen where we all, everybody seemed to come and congregate that was our main area, after the shop, and our bathroom, and

then our toilet was way, way down the back. So upstairs for us was only sleeping, so all of our life was downstairs.

So I thought, you know, I'm doing a great job absolutely going and getting everything out of cupboards that I could find, like irons, and crockery, and whatever I thought was making a difference, and up and down the stairs we'd go. But, yes, our life really was downstairs so it was devastating for all of that to go underwater.

[0:21:34] (I): Okay, so you talked about your bathroom being downstairs and the toilet being right out the back, so was that at the time it was on the sewer?

(S): Umm, you know I can't quite remember but I think it was. And we also had a big copper that Mum used to wash in, because we didn't have any electrical washing machines or anything, it was a big copper with a fire under it. I do remember that and, I would help her wring the clothes out on a wringer, and then the big old clothes line out the back, which was like one big line with a couple of posts. I remember one time when I was quite young, it was before the flood, we got a little lamb, so that was our lawn mower (laughs).

[0:22:23] (I): So you had some lawn area to play outside?

(S): We did - not very much, because everything else was encompassed by the bakery, but we did have one little patch of lawn and we had a garage out the back. And when I was young Mum and Dad were so busy if I wanted to have a birthday party they'd say, "Go on, go and organise it." So I'd string up all the - you know, things around the little old garage out the back, invite all the kids, and 'cause we had all the cakes and everything on hand - they loved coming to my place for a party (laughs).

[0:22:55] (I): Did you have a best friend?

(S): I did. The people up on the corner of Talbragar Street, actually Talbragar and Darling Street. There was two hotels on opposite sides, and that was the Railway Hotel and my best friend back then was Joycie Meale. Her father and mother had the Railway Hotel and so we were good friends right through school. Then I had

another friend that lived up in Carrington Avenue and her name was Jill Meredith and her son now is Mark Meredith who is our wonderful police - I think he is, I'm gonna say he's nearly a superintendent - but yeah Mark Meredith, fantastic policeman here in Dubbo. She's still my best friend - my oldest one.

[0:23:44] (I): That's great. So tell me about Joyce given she was so close, were they evacuated as well?

(S): No, they didn't have to evacuate because they had all the residence upstairs, toilets, bathrooms, and all that sort of thing. And I'd imagine food wise, I just don't know how they coped like that, but they had plenty of room that they could go upstairs. The Pastoral Hotel next door to us, a lot of people did stay on the balconies and the rooms upstairs for that as well. So, there were some places that did not have to get out, you know, the living quarters could be sort-of taken upstairs, until it all subsided.

[0:24:21] (I): Do you know how long it took to subside?

(S): Well, I think it went down within, like a week, but I think with all the cleaning up and everything it was a good couple of months. Yes.

[0:24:33] (I): So did you get to see Joyce and Jill while you were staying at the Elephant House?

(S): No, no, again, I don't know where Jill and her family would have gone because, again, Carrington Avenue, that was well and truly another hot spot. But they had all probably, you know, go to families and such after that.

[0:24:52] (I): While you were evacuated and staying at the Elephant House, what sort of contact with other people did you have? Were you a bit isolated or did you - - -

(S): Yeah, very, very, isolated. Mostly being just around your family and the ones present at that time. Yeah, there wasn't a lot of going anywhere much, no staying put, getting the job done, yes.

[0:25:17] (I): Did you get to see the family, the other part of the family that lived with you but then was moved to another place?

Not my grandfather and my uncle at the time, we knew they were safe, but no, not much contact at that stage.

[0:25:32] (I): Did you know where they were staying at?

(S): I can't recall, I wish I could, but I just can't recall.

(I): It was another place that offered assistance?

(S): Yes, absolutely.

[0:25:41] (I): Or was it other family?

(S): No, I think it was offered assistance, yes, yes, at that time.

(I): Thank you. Thank you for your time Helen. Your story will form part of the Macquarie Regional Library's Oral History Project. This interview was conducted by Mandy Manning.