



South Australians at war – transcript – OH 31/1

Interview with Elva Morison, recorded by Beth M. Robertson on 27 August 1979 for the South Australian Women's Responses to the First World War project

TAPE 1 SIDE A

I left school and thought I would like to stay at home, but after a year at Belair without any young company I became very lonely and my mother and father both decided I should go to business college. I had the full training in shorthand and typing and eventually went to a solicitor's firm - Fleming, Baker, Ashton and Hunter.

And then war broke out - I was seventeen - and everybody of my age became very enthusiastic. It was lovely to see boys in uniform. I met a girl from the Commonwealth Bank who said, "Oh, come up and meet Mrs Seager. She is starting a Cheer-Up Society". She took me up and introduced me to Mrs Seager, and in my lunch hour I used to pop up and help pack parcels - balaklava caps and things which had come in to her. She started the society because her son, Harold Seager, had enlisted with the First Tenth Battalion and he became very, very ill and was left behind when the unit sailed in I think August - September - of that year on the *Escanes*, and she started going down to the camp and found that all the enthusiasm for the first number of men going away had just died away, and they were so neglected. She went to Mr William Sowden, as he was then - editor of the *Register* and said, "We must do something" and he then wrote a leader in the *Register* and the main thing was, "Who will form the first Cheer-Up Our Boys Society?" and that is how the Society was founded and Mrs Seager became the organiser. Nothing else had been arranged or done. There were no comforts in the camp, hospitals, no pillows, no mosquito nets. The Society then was able, through country support and gathering enthusiasm, to take pillows and mosquito nets and dixies and all the kinds of things that were needed for camp hospitals until Red Cross started - I think about three months later - and they took over.

We also had camp concerts at Morphetville, on the south side of the Bay tram line now - the camp was situated - and we used to go down and take suppers and give concerts. The work gradually grew to such an extent that we had to have somewhere for the troops coming in from the country to meet. I think the Caledonian Society, through Mr George McEwin, who was a solicitor, provided a tent down at the back of the City Baths, which are no longer there. We started off with coppers out in the back yard. I had become so enthusiastic, and being young, and all the men in uniform, I asked my father could I leave the solicitors'



office, and he said, "Oh no, the war'll soon be over". After about five requests he said, "All right, if you feel you want to go and help, you go". So I became a daily helper for Mrs Seager, and then eventually I became her secretary in the office.

We had a wonderful time down at the tent, but it was not big enough. The men were coming in in hundreds and hundreds and mothers were writing in from the country and saying what a comfort it was. And I can remember how Lady Galway used to come down and she'd say, "This is so wonderful. It must mean so much to the mothers of the men in the country". And Mr Henderson, who was secretary of the Adelaide Club became very interested, and he designed a Hut and he brought down a model made to scale - a tiny model of the building he thought would take the place of the tent. And the Railways granted the land and an appeal was made, through Mrs Seager, for money for the building of this Hut. The Burra people were fantastic and the Burra people raised enough money to build the main hall, and it was afterwards called the Burra Hall. Eventually, as the first men were coming home from Galipoli, including my late husband, in October 1915, the Hut was opened, and from then on we entertained tens of thousands of men. And it not only included Army and Navy then - there were very few men in the Air Force - but included Merchant Navy, and as the ships came in, the men who were serving in the Merchant Navy came in on an equal footing.

And I believe you also entertained the nurses.

Oh yes, we had the first - - -. And we had the first farewell to nurses in South Australia. In fact it could have been in Australia, because I think the Cheer-Up was really the first fully organised society for the entertainment of people going overseas.

We also found that many men were being brought back in a shocked state and very often they were housed in a home out at Erindale - a large two-storey home - and the matron in charge, she used often to bring them into the Hut and leave them with us perhaps for one hour or two hours, so that they could again associate with men they'd served overseas with, and we would watch them and entertain them. Men would come in from the transports coming back shockingly injured, and the powers that be used to bring them up to the Hut, just to get away from the ship whilst they were in port. Some of the sights we saw were terrible, but the boys knew that we understood. And I've known one man take all the bandages off his face with his jaw shot away, just because he wanted to be back to normal and he was with people who knew. And those things stayed with me always. You know, it was a marvellous experience.

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I believe the Returned Soldiers' Association grew up out of the Hut.



Yes, well Mrs Seager - -I can still see her now. She always wore a blue felt hat, and the boys loved this hat. In fact one unit going away asked could they have her hat, and they cut it into tiny little squares - about an inch square - and each man took a piece, and I have known men come back and show her this little bit of felt they'd carried with them. She called the men together - well, she always called them the boys. They were to her the boys, whatever age they were. She said, "Now look, you must stick together, because things when you come back are not going to be the same". And she called them together, and my late husband was one of the first ones, and they had a meeting in the Hut. Mr George McEwin, the solicitor, and Mrs Seager were the first two - the president and the vice-president - of, they called it, the Returned Soldiers' Association. I have the original badge of my husband's here, and I became the first typist - seventeen and a half I think I was - for the Returned Soldiers' Association. And the Hut then built them a little room at the cost of a hundred pounds, and that was their office until they became such a big organisation, they moved.

Then there was a camp at Ascot Park which was called Oaklands Camp, and we took concert parties there and visited the men. But to me the greatest thing, I think, was that the country people knew their boys had somewhere to come. I really feel that that was the cause of the wonderful support, because the men had somewhere to come. They were lonely. When they were recruited they would stand for hours and hours in queues, and Mrs Seager suddenly found that they were not being served with a meal. So each day our helpers - who were all voluntary helpers - went with little luncheon packs down to the Parade Ground to the queues and gave each man a little luncheon pack for his midday meal, rather than think that they were there without anything and standing and waiting. So it all has very, very happy memories for me, and I think Mrs Seager was a fantastic person, really.

I'm interested to ask you about your motivation right at the beginning, because you didn't have brothers or a father in the war yourself. You mentioned the look of the boys in uniform. Do you think at first it was this kind of excitement?

Well, it was just something that seemed so exciting. To think that all these young men - and mostly they were young men - were coming in to help - as we said then - to help England. I mean, I suppose having ancestors from England, our country love was very deep, and it was, for teenagers, a great excitement to think, "Oh, we could go and help look after all these boys in uniform" - or men in uniform. And myself, I had always had a desire to do something more than just an ordinary office job, and I think that has followed me right through life, because I love voluntary work and helping others. I think that was the thing that really motivated my desire to join the Society, because there was just



something that was, oh, very, very dear to me in the need of the country, and there was a chance of service by joining a society that was doing so much. Or even before it was really fully established. I have never regretted it, and I feel that anybody who takes up anything like that gets such an inner satisfaction of doing something worthwhile. You don't look for any reward

because you get that in with the - - -.

Yes, well the personal rewards must have been very great, because the Society did such a lot of work and got such a lot back from the soldiers.

Yes, and also we were able to take - - I had very, very dear parents who set me a wonderful example always. My father and mother would say, "Well, if you find any lonely boy who would like a weekend in somebody's home and he has leave, bring him home". And I suppose over the years I took dozens home as, in the Second War, my daughter brought them home from the Cheer-Up Hut, and we still hear from them, which to me is so wonderful after thirty-odd years. Dutch boys, American boys, English boys, Irish boys - and I still regularly hear from them, and it's a long time since 1939, but they never forget. It's been such a great privilege, because I felt that, although I couldn't go to the war, I was serving in a small way - humble way - trying to help them, so that was me (laughs).

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Well, I think it was to us - it was exciting - until we saw the men coming back, and then we realised just what war meant, I think. I think that was - - -. My own husband had only four days fighting. He was in the landing and he helped row one of the boats ashore on the day they landed on Galipoli, and after four days he was hit with a shrapnel and had fifteen months in hospital and nine operations. Well, that brought home to us the tragedy. Not his case, particularly, but the ones who came back - brought home. And men who were mentally disturbed who used to come into the Hut in the evening, and I know one night I was on duty - voluntary duty - and a man came in. He thought he was Christ, and he raved and went on, and he preached to us, and it was frightening. The Military Police always came to the Hut at half past nine for a cup of tea - they were on duty at the railway station - and I ran over and got them, because I was afraid that the man would damage - hurt himself - as well as scare we younger people who were on duty. But that sort of thing brought it home very, very greatly to us.

Even when you realised what war could mean, were you still as patriotic?

Oh yes I think so. We felt it just - - -. Well, we knew - that those who were in charge of things - knew the seriousness of it, and we were there to back them up,



to help all we could in any small way. I just feel that, to me, it made a big difference in my life, but it made me conscious of the need of help for others who were less fortunate. And then when the ships started coming back with soldiers with wives, we had the pleasure of having some of the wives brought up with their babies and making bottles and things for the babes. You know, it was all such a huge thing. Well, I don't think - at least, I should say I think that - it's still something to me and to the others who were there - who were privileged to be there - to face life with a different outlook.

TAPE 1 SIDE B

I'd be interested to know how you felt about such issues as conscription. Do you remember much about that controversy?

I can remember, and I think, again, we felt that the men - - - I think perhaps being young, it didn't mean quite as much to us as it would have to older people - the thought of conscription - but we used to rather look down on the men who didn't volunteer, to help those who had so willingly gone. I think now perhaps I would have a very different viewing about conscription, but then it was, "Oh, why hasn't he gone? Why shouldn't he go?"

Was this a strong feeling?

I think it was really, and I can still see on Government House wall, then, had this great thing written up about - "Go to the war. Don't wait to be conscripted" - or something like that, and we used to think, "Oh that was wonderful", to think somebody'd even written that up. You know, that you should volunteer.

I know you might be a bit embarrassed about talking about it now, but do you think you were cruel or in any way did you ostracise people who didn't go?

No, I don't think we did, but we just felt that they were letting the men down who had gone. No, oh no, I knew quite a number of our train travellers, even, you know, who I used to think, "Oh, fancy you not being able to just make up your mind and go and help those boys who are out there giving up everything for our country". I mean, the country meant so much. Just the very sight of a flag would enthuse us, you know - the Union Jack or the flag of Australia. You'd think, "Oh, they're out fighting for that now". You thought of it as a fighting for the flag of your country, or fighting for your country. No, I don't think we ostracised them at all, but it was just that we felt they'd let the men down who had volunteered.

And I can remember one man coming down, going back to the train again, from Bridgewater, who tried and tried to go and couldn't, and he said to me - he was



much older than I - he said, "I'm going to learn to knit". And every morning in the train he was knitting socks for the men who'd gone, and feeling that he was doing a little bit of help.