

# ORAL HISTORY – QUEENSLAND COMMUNIST PARTY

## TRANSCRIBED RECORD OF INTERVIEW WITH CONSTANCE MILLAR

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**Interviewer: Ross Gwyther**

*[This transcript has been slightly modified by the interviewee to add explanatory notes when necessary. These notes or words are in "italics"]*

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CONNIE: I was born in Collinsville – you know Collinsville, I suppose? You've heard of Fred Paterson, I suppose? You've heard of all that? My Mum and Dad– Mum's mother and Dad's grandfather were cousins, and Mum's family lived in Glasgow and Dad lived in Musselburgh outside of Edinburgh. Because they lived on the water, Mum and her mother used to go over there for holidays, so Dad and Mum started courting a bit when they were only 14 and 15. The whole of Dad's family migrated [*Dad was 21 then*] – there were four boys and a girl – to Collinsville. Mum didn't come with them, but Dad and Mum were sort of engaged by then.

Then Dad's father got bowel cancer and he wouldn't have an operation here. Oh, these yahoos wouldn't know what they were doing, and went back, all by boat, of course, went back to Edinburgh to have the operation, and when he came back Mum came with him. Then Mum and Dad were married in Ipswich, but then the family had all gone to Collinsville, because Musselburgh was a coal-mining place. They always were coal-miners.

Their first home was a bark humpy, a bark hut of some sort, and it's described in there that the local ladies that knew Mum was a bride, they decided to do it up. They'd bought it - bought this bark hut, which had two rooms, for seven pounds, and they lived in it for four months. The local ladies came and, because they knew Mum was a bride and that, they sort of did it up and they put fancy little paper dolls around the cupboards and things like that.

Well, Isobella, my sister – that was 1925 they were married – and my sister was born in '27. I was born in '30. Mum knew absolutely nothing about politics. She was a very religious Presbyterian when she came [*to Australia*]. In Scotland, all they did on Sunday was play the organ and eat. They never did any work - and go to church, see?

So the women used to have to wait for the men to come home from the pub on election day to tell them how to vote, and my Mum started to take an interest in politics and entirely gave her religion away. I mean, we were sort of brought up then, even though in early days we had to go to Sunday School, Mum used to make us go, and she joined the Communist Party, gave her religion up in early days.

So we were brought up like, you know, it was a very strong coal-mining town.

ROSS: So was your father already involved with Communist politics?

CONNIE: My father wasn't really interested. It was Mum. Mum was the extrovert in the family, and Dad was the introvert. Dad, he went her way. He always voted Communist or Labor, but he wouldn't have known anything about it, but Mum took a very big interest.

ROSS: So how did she come to be, like, what the connection that actually got her interested in the Communist Party? Would it have been someone that she met?

CONNIE: Yes, and I think she just started, from somebody that didn't know anything about politics, because she had to be told how to vote, she started to take an interest, and I suppose she started reading. Collinsville was just very strong. I suppose more than half the town would have been interested in the Communist Party, so I think she just probably read and learnt that there was something there for the workers.

When she came to Brisbane, she played the piano, my Mum, so she was always there at the UAW, you know, playing the piano for anybody that wanted to sing and go on. Everyone knew Mary Millar. Labor Day, May Day, I didn't ever see Mum marching. Peace Marches she used to – I've got photos of her. I was in the one that she was marching on, but for the Labor Day Marches her and this group of UAW women always stood at the National Hotel there, waved and clapped everybody, you know – but very, very, very strong Communist, she was, you know.

Isobel and I, my sister and I both, we just sort of followed and I joined the Eureka Youth League, used to go to all the camps. Hughie Hamilton's wife and I were very close.

ROSS: So you would have joined the Eureka Youth League in, like, when you were in your teens?

CONNIE: About 16, in 1946, yes. They had camps they used to have up there at Caloundra, Golden Beach – no, it wasn't Caloundra. Yes, it was Caloundra. Caloundra's so different now, isn't it? No, it wasn't. It was Maroochydore they used to have a camp, and we used to go to all of those things [*actually at Cotton Trees*]

I remember, I was about 18, I think, and there was something I went to at the Trades Hall. They had the big table, the big conference table, and Jimmy Henderson was there. I was about 18 then and this note came along to me: 'Isn't it about time you joined the Communist Party?' So that's how old I was when I joined, you know, but it was all part of our life.

Then I got married and I had kids, and I lived – my sister was married to Bob Anderson. You now Bob well. They lived two doors from us so, you know, we were all in the same party branch. We used to go out at nights. Jack Sherrington – we used to have great times with Jack. My sister had a piano, too, and we used to have great singsongs. Jack and Marie, his wife – she was a character, wasn't she? They lived at that time, they lived in Toohey Road. We lived further at Tarragindi, but Jack was a big part of our life in those days. Lots of people, when I think about the people that were in the party then, you know, it was a good time, really.

ROSS: It was not only a big part of your life, it was sort of your life revolved around the party?

CONNIE: Yes, absolutely, and, well, because it was illegal, you know, we knew that we were being watched when we went to the Party rooms and you had to be very careful when you were putting up posters and – I've even spoken on street corners, because they tried to

encourage the young ones. when I got married I was 23 and I really didn't know what I was doing. You know, I wasn't real. I wasn't like Stella Nord. Did you know Stella? She was great, wasn't she, Stella? She was married to Pete Thomas at one stage.

But they always tried to encourage you, and I think I'm like my Mum, I'm a bit of an extravert, and I don't mind getting a mike in my hand. You know, I've been Secretary of all sorts of organisations.

My first husband was a seaman, and I was the first member of the Seamen's Women's Committee. It was just formed in Brisbane, and my daughter, the eldest one who's 60, she was five months when that was formed. Then, you know, we were connected to the Sydney Branch where Della Elliott, E V Elliott, who was the General Secretary of the Waterside Workers, --

ROSS: So how did that Women's Committee come to be established?

CONNIE: Well, they just decided that they all then followed the Seamen's Women, and we used to run functions for the men and women. Like, most of the women, see, they were having their children and the men were all away at sea, and in those days it wasn't like it is now. The men that were progressive, of course, they used to have to go to the shed and then the fellow from the shipowners would come, and he'd say, 'I'll have you and you and you, but I'm not having you because you're going to cause trouble.' So, you know, it was a hard time, too.

That would have been when Nicole was born, so she was born in '52 – you know, the '50 to '60 era, yes.

So they'd get away and they'd be away sometimes. It wasn't like it is now, where they have exactly a month on and a month off and that. You know, sometimes they would be away for months, so these women needed support and help and, you know, we used to have morning-teas.

One of our main supporters was Jeannie O'Connor. Yes, she was great, Jean. A great old girl, she was. Unfortunately I think she went blind before she was in a nursing home, but I know all the kids and everything. Actually, I think I spoke at her funeral. She was really good.

ROSS: So would the fact that you were all in the Communist Party, that would have led you to be talking about how we needed to set something up to support the women while – do you think that was part of that?

CONNIE: Well, that was actually done by the Seamen's Union, I think. They actually decided that they should have a Women's Committee, and the Building Workers had one, and I went on it. But they used to have conferences in Sydney. I went down there and that was when I met Della Elliott. I suppose I'd met her before that, but when I think about the times we used to have, you know. We had great things. They used to have dances at Trades Hall, and there was a lot of fun involved in it, too, you know. We had really good times in the early days working for the better of the country, world.

ROSS: Yes. And did you start working at some stage? Were you working yourself?

CONNIE: I worked in the Communist Party rooms. I worked for the State Office, with Ted Bacon and Ted Crisp – Marie, and Ted. Ted died a lot earlier than Marie. They formed a District Committee. I used to work for them, too. I think because, if you're available and you're the daughter or the son of a member of the Communist Party, then they look to you for an office worker, because they knew they could trust you and you didn't open your mouth and knew what to – yes, I spent a lot of my years----

ROSS: Working in the party, yes.

CONNIE: And I got paid. It wasn't all voluntary, like. We got paid, yes.

ROSS: Maybe if we talk about when you first joined the Party. What sort of---

CONNIE: Well, don't forget I was only 18. The Peace Movement was very – well, it was illegal, really, the Peace Movement in one of those days, I remember one of the May Day marches, we were all told to go to the Trades Hall before we went to the assembly line, and we were all given these little peace flags that we – we made them, I suppose. I can't remember. I mean, that's a long time ago. We had to put them up our sleeves, and at a certain time in the march it was arranged where we all pulled these out and waved these little peace flags. It was terrible – fancy the Peace Movement being banned. Terrible.

ROSS: Yes, and what other sort of impact did that illegality have on you, I mean, in other ways?

CONNIE: Well, it was a bit frightening, really, you know, because we knew that we were being watched all the time. Then my eldest daughter – do you know Margaret Bailey at all? Have you ever heard of her, or Mary Bailey? No, they hadn't been here – they were an Irish family and Margaret was very close to the Communist Party, she was, even though her family were all good Catholics and that. She went to Inala School. She's now back in London, and it was when the mini-skirts came in, and Margaret took her uniform up and refused to let it down. She got expelled, and she got expelled from every high school in Brisbane, and she chained herself to the Treasury Building.

That was a big thing. Have you ever heard? The Union got all involved in that, too. Well, my daughter then, Nicole, who was 12 months younger than Margaret, she went to assist her or, you know, to be a bit of support for her. Eva Bacon used to come and see her and bring her food, and the thing that Eva brought her was a bucket for her to have a pee in.

ROSS: So how long was she chained there for?

CONNIE: I think it was days, and whoever put the lock on threw the key into the Brisbane River just there, so---

ROSS: What year would that have been, do you remember, roughly?

CONNIE: Maybe '70 then. I'll get you a copy of that, anyway. I did have it there, and it's an ASIO thing. I don't know – Margaret sent it to me, I think. I mean, I don't think it's of any importance now, sort of, it's not a legal thing or anything. All the ones that were involved in that, well----

ROSS: Just getting back to the Communist Party, can you tell me a bit about, like, how did that operate for you when you joined over that period in the early '50s? What did you actually do as part of the Communist Party?

CONNIE: There were branches everywhere, you know. There were a lot, a lot of members in the Communist Party in those days, and we were in Tarragindi and we used to meet once a week and discuss what we were going to do, what leafleting and put up posters, standing on street corners, selling the newspaper. We were all involved in those. We were all quite active.

Jean Leary, when I first got married I was living up round the corner from them. They lived in Dorrington and there was a group of us there, the Russells, Margie and Rodney Croucher, Jean Gordon--

ROSS: Well, Eva Bacon would have been around there, too?

CONNIE: Eva Bacon wasn't far from there, yes. She wasn't in our lot, though. See, there was, Eva was near Connie and her husband, Mick Healey, he's been dead for a long time, though.

ROSS: So you had a fairly localised group of Party members?

CONNIE: Yes.

ROSS: And can you tell me a bit about more of what you did in terms of, like, handing out leaflets? What sort of, where you'd do that, and the sort of thing you'd do?

CONNIE: We probably did it round our own areas, you know. I can't remember a lot of detail about what we were doing, but it was all relevant to the struggle. You know, when Russia was – they were all God. Stalin was a god. I can remember my mother, you know, 'One days we'll have all that, you know. We're working for that.' She was a great old girl, Mum.

ROSS: So that sort of idealism about what Socialism was going to be in the future, that was the big part of your thinking?

CONNIE: Yes. We used to know all the songs, you know, all the working class songs. We'd have nights where we'd have functions, and we'd all finish up singing, *The Banks are made of Marble*, and the Miner's song, *Dark as a Dungeon* – do you know those songs?

*Dark as a dungeon,  
Way down in the mines....*

Yeah, we knew all those, so we had a great time, really, and it was a hard time, too. I suppose it was harder for the people that were organising all this, the ones that were in, you know, Ted Bacon and Charlie Gifford. Charlie Gifford was one of the organisers or whatever they were – I'm not sure. Ted was the President, I think, or I suppose.

We had Heindorf House in the city. It's probably gone now, might have got pulled down with – it sort of was there opposite DJs in Queen Street. That was the State Office of the

Communist Party, and then the District Office, there was one up in Barry Parade, but before that they had one in the Valley and that was just – we used to do all the leafleting, you know, run off all the stuff. A lot of typing – I used to do a lot of the typing there.

ROSS: Yes, and what about involvement with community activities with people who were not in the Party?

CONNIE: Well, I suppose in a way that's what we were trying to do, is get people interested, and when you did know anybody that was interested, well, then you spent a lot of time trying to organise them to join the Communist Party and be active and help with all these – oh, it was very important, what we were doing. We were going to change the World.

ROSS: What about the role of literature and music? Well, you've talked about music, but did you see that as something that you'd use as a sort of political tool to try and build the movement?

CONNIE: No, not that I – the literature, yes, but I think the songs, the song that we learnt, well, we learnt all those when we joined the Eureka Youth League as well, you know. That was all part of the movement. It was not all work, a lot of play.

ROSS: Yes, and there were quite a few people in the Eureka Youth League who would not have been in the Communist Party, too, or not really?

CONNIE: Well, I don't know, Ross. I think they would have been, the parents at least would have been progressive, you know. They might not have joined the Communist Party. Like, I was sort of forced by that note that came along the table. I probably wasn't the most active, you know, of all of them, but I certainly did my bit.

ROSS: What about in the big industrial dispute? Were you sort of involved in any of those?

CONNIE: I wasn't, I don't think, myself, but certainly the people were, because I was always an office-worker and we never had disputes. You know, you don't find that. It's more in the factories and that, isn't it? But, see, the UAW got involved in a lot of that stuff, too.

ROSS: So were you involved in the UAW, too?

CONNIE: I was a member at one stage, but not really, like, because I was in the Seaman's Women's Committee, and a lot of them I suppose were in both, but I probably always worked. A lot of them worked, but a lot of them didn't work, a lot of the ladies that were in the UAW and that, they didn't go to work, but I always seemed to have to go to work – not that it's done me any good. I've got nothing now.

But you know, there's so much – I'll probably think about a lot after you've gone, but even the Women's Committee, you know, we had a Darts Club. We used to go on picnics. It sort of broadened out from, you go to your meetings and that, but you also had all the social times.

ROSS: And of course that Women's Committee was part of the Union, but would you have been seeing yourselves as Communist Party members, as trying to sort of bring politics into what you did?

CONNIE: No, not really. I think we were just – a lot of the women that were in the Seamen's Women's Committee wouldn't have been Communist – and a lot of seamen weren't, either, but they knew they had to fight the boss.

People like Jeannie O'Connor – who else would there have been – like, they were very political Jeannie O'Connor. I first met her, she first came to my mother's place when I was about 18. Yeah, she was around for a long, long time, Jeannie and her family, too. Like, her sisters. Then she married a seaman, Peter O'Connor – she'd been married before. Have you ever heard of him? He was a wild Irishman, Peter. He wasn't real political, I don't think, but---

ROSS: What about your kids? Were they growing up during that anti-Communist period?

CONNIE: Yes, they were. One daughter's 60. The other one's 58.

ROSS: So how did it affect them, being children of parents who were sort of doing something that was illegal?

CONNIE: They loved it. They used to be going to all these things, marching. They didn't mean anything, but I must say, my mother had a big influence on my girls and they all look up to what she did. You know, my middle girl actually is very interested in politics. Sonny Myles sends her stuff ....

ROSS: So they weren't really intimidated by this atmosphere of anti-Communism?

CONNIE: No, probably they didn't really know what was going on, you know, when I think about how old they were. One was born in '52, the other one '56, '58, you know. They would have only been 10 or 9, but they loved the waving of the flags and going to all the marches.

ROSS: Was the Eureka Youth League still going when they were old enough to get involved?

CONNIE: No. That was sort of a real teenager thing for us, though, the Eureka Youth League.

ROSS: Just getting back to when you, like, as part of the Party, the Party would have been sort of taking the theories about Marxism and the working class, and talking about it amongst you in the Party?

CONNIE: Yes, yes.

ROSS: Can you tell me a bit about that, you know, what you took out of that, how that affected you?

CONNIE: Well, as I say, I'm probably not as political as some other people, you know. I mean, I was in it all, and we all had the books and we read the books, Lenin and Marx and Stalin, you know, we knew all about them. I suppose when the Party was made illegal, you know, not made illegal, but they disbanded, didn't they? They didn't keep going. But I was probably, maybe in a different stage of my life then. Like, I'd had the kids and moved on. I never ever have forgotten or been disloyal – and I love to tell the story to people who are

religious and quoting God and all of this, how my mother gave up religion and joined the Communist Party. Some of my friends are horrified. 'You're joking? How could she do that?'

ROSS: Yes. So what do you think the, like, at that period, what was the biggest thing that you would have taken out of being in the Communist Party? What was the sort of lasting lesson, if you like, you took out of it, that you've sort of kept with you for your life?

CONNIE: Well, I'm just always, will never ever be anything else but a supporter of the working class and, you know, I've never ever strayed from that, and the philosophy of the Communist Party – what was it – 'From each according to his ability; and to each according to his need,' and I still think that they had it right. That's what should be happening, not what's happening now.

Now we're right in the middle of this election. It's just a disaster.

ROSS: Just getting back to when you joined the Communist Party, 1948 or so, at that time it was pretty big, like, it was 20,000 or 30,000 people.

CONNIE: Yes.

ROSS: Why do you think it was so influential at that time, because, like, a lot of Unions, workers had elected Communists into the leadership of the Unions--

CONNIE: Yes.

ROSS: What made the Communist Party so influential?

CONNIE: I suppose it was because of Russia, and I could just see that life was going to be so much better, because all these, you know, when you work for bosses and you see what they make, and the workers, what they get, I suppose – and my mother was a big influence then. 'It's the way to go. We're going to get there,' she said.

*(End of Recording)*