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RURAL HISTORY PROJECT.
Interview with Norma King at Kalgoorlie on 15th January, 1997.
Interviewer: Rob Linn.

Norma, where and when were you born?

NK: I was born in Egan Street, Kalgoorlie, on 4th September, 1922, in a rented house in Egan Street. Of course with the midwife, and a doctor, I believe.

What were your mother and father's position at the time?

NK: Well, my mother had been a waitress, and my father had come back from the War and had set himself up as a violin teacher. He had a studio in Porter Street, Kalgoorlie. He was a good violinist and -

I should have asked you before you said that - their names please.

NK: Oh, I'm sorry. Henry Joseph Dower was my father, and Mum's name was Kate Elfreda, nee Hancock. And she originated from Kapunda. My father was actually born here, on one of the leases. His parents came over from Bendigo. Must have been about - somebody said they were here at the opening of the water supply, which was 1903, but they were here well before that because my father was born in 1898. So they probably arrived the year before.

So you were born and bred Kalgoorlie?

NK: Yes. And then, in the terrible 20's, things weren't very good at all here so we went to Victoria and lived for about - oh, I was seven when I came back, so probably about six years. And my only sister, Vera - I had no brothers - was born in Hamilton in Victoria. And that's where my mother said they were better off than anywhere else. Dad had his own orchestra that played for the silent films. And what else? Oh, he had pupils and played for dances and sometimes the pastoralists would have balls or parties, and they'd go out there. He was quite well off, comparatively anyway. And then -

Do you remember Hamilton?
NK: I remember vaguely. I remember a little bit. I remember getting christened there with my sister. I was christened when I was a little girl, and she was two. So I must have - I would have been - you know, we're five years apart. Would have been not long before we came over here. Just snatches of things like that. But then we came back west on the old Trans Train. I have a vague memory of that. It would have been - well, it wasn't summer. We came in about October I think. Oh, September. Just before Wall Street crashed. 1929. And of course we picked the right place to come because later when the gold prices went up this was a very - it was a good place to be.

Did you know why your father came back?

NK: Well, I always thought it was - I heard two stories. It's funny. Only in recent years one of my cousins from Victoria told me - she's an older cousin - she said, 'I remember your father's brother sent for him to come over and tribute a mine with him or something, and my father said, "What the heck's he going back there for because that old mine was worked out years ago"'. I don't know which mine. I wish to goodness I knew a bit more about it. But then, my mother had kept a little scrap of a Hamilton newspaper (it was a torn piece unfortunately) which said they were giving my father a farewell and that he was leaving because of his severe rheumatism and hoped the drier climate of Kalgoorlie would help him. That was quite a surprise. I didn't realise that was a reason, but I knew he was always suffering.

Well, that would make sense because Hamilton is very damp. Beautiful place but very damp.

NK: That's right. So we came back here. And it was from then on that we started to move around and lived in rather poorer conditions. Looking back sometimes, I've been thinking recently, now I know why we went to these places. The Depression was on, and the price of gold had gone up which made some of these old shows, as we called them, worth having another look at. We stayed in Kalgoorlie for a couple of years, and then we went to Gwalia. That's near Leonora to the north. I think Gwalia is an old name for Wales or something. That mine is still working, but in a different manner and by a
different company. It was one of the longest running outside the Golden Mile and the original mine closed in 1963.

But anyway, my father's band (he set up another orchestra here when we came back) just managed to keep us going. We didn't suffer. There was only myself and my sister, and I suppose we were fed and clothed and we never realised we were short of money, except once when I was disappointed because Mum couldn't buy us crackers on bonfire night. So she took us around and we looked at other people's. Over the back fence or somewhere.

But there was a Lyttens theatre on tour. It was a big, under tent, theatre which went on tour. They were here playing in Kalgoorlie, Boulder, and then went on tour up to the north to Gwalia and Leonora and hired my father's orchestra to go with them. I remember they put on plays like the White Sister and Charlie's Aunt.

My father said there was a large community of Italians up there. They loved the violin, and after the show he was playing for a group of them and one said, 'Why don't you come up here and get a job? I've got a house and can rent it to you. You come up and we'll get you a job'.

So the next thing we were all moved up to Gwalia, and I'll never forget that first night. Mum nearly died. We put the light on in this place. It had whitewashed hessian walls, and there were huge cockroaches everywhere. They had horses underground on the mine, and there were stables, where these monstrous cockroaches bred. I was terrified of them. I had to have a net over the bed and I was frightened one would get underneath. Mum had been used to living in nice homes, you know, but this was really a big rough. Hessian lined, and strangely enough the house is still standing. I saw it just recently. But now, of course, it's probably lined with Gyprock or something. But the shape is the same.

That was a real shock?

NK: A very great shock to my mother. She cried. She wasn't very happy about it at all.

Anyway, because she made lovely pasties which my father took for lunch at the mine, somebody said, 'Do you think your wife would board me, Harry?' And we ended up having six boarders because there were some camps in the yard.
And then one day, I still don't know what mine, but my father intended working, but the next thing I knew we were selling up. Auctioning everything. My mother agreed to sell the furniture and even sold some of her wedding presents. Dad, said, 'When this mine comes good, you know, you'll have the world, Kit'. But she never ever did.

I remember all we were left with were two big trunks. I fought very hard to keep some books of mine she wanted to sell. *(Laughter in voice)* and I managed to keep them but my sister let hers go as she couldn't have cared less. But I liked her books too. From then on, we were living in little places in tents and whatever. One was called Spargoville which was just being set up. Spargoville is down the road south of Coolgardie, towards Widgiemooltha way. We were the only children there except for a baby who was there with her mother. Spargoville was a little tent town. On the first night after we arrived, there was a terrific storm and everything fell in on our heads. The tents and bough shed collapsed *(Laughter in voice)* but all the people rallied the next day and helped Dad build another bush home.

The last place we went to was - well, not the last place but where I completed my school days, was at a ghost town called Mertondale, north of Leonora. Leonora would have been our nearest town, and where we’d come to do our shopping. We had a little Whippet I think then, a little ute thing, and it would take us ages to get in to Leonora over a little rough road. And it was only about 20 mile - about 20 kms - but it seemed forever.

Now that I’m an adult I realise just how lonely Mum was. She was used to people and she was stuck out there with just a few men. My father and two other men were treating sands, by the old cyanide method – re-treating old sands. And of course, she had to cook outside. She became very proficient at using a camp oven. Dad and I used to go and pull water from the well, so we’d ration poor Mum with it because you just didn’t want to keep going pulling water.

Well, that’s where I did my last correspondence lessons, and I rather enjoyed them. Looking back, I think I was a slow learner. I really needed the time to absorb things like maths. I was absolutely hopeless at maths. But when I was on correspondence and saw the examples and could work on them at my own pace I could do them. That was a good way of learning because every mistake I made, I had to correct it. So I mean you can get away with a bit at school at
times but on correspondence lessons you'd get all these corrections back and have to do them.

**Norma, had your father really got the prospecting bug, had he?**

**NK:** Oh, God! His whole life was just – yes, gold. It's been in our blood I realise, not only gold. It's been mining, right back through at least four centuries – going back as far as I've gone with the family on both sides of grandparents, they were all miners. From tin mining in Cornwall and then coming out to copper mining, and then gold mining. And it's always that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. But we lived in, oh, my father by any stretch of imagination wouldn't be called a handyman. *(Laughter in voice)* And he'd put up all these horrible structures for Mum to live in. And I think the best thing we had out there, beside our tents, was a bough shed which was flattened in a big storm once. That was cool in the summer.

**How did she bear it? With great difficulty?**

**NK:** Mm. She sure did. She let Dad know it a bit often, too, sometime. She always had an excuse to go to town, but Dad didn't want to go to town. So, when we were going on holidays down to Perth – Dad said we could go if the clean up was O.K. – if we got a certain amount of gold. And we'd be waiting for the clean up. He treated it on site and he'd smelt the gold, and pour it out and we'd be waiting to see the result and there'd be just this tiny little button instead of the bigger one he expected. But he didn't ever disappoint us. We did go on holidays.

**How did you go to Perth for your holidays?**

**NK:** Oh, in his vehicle.

**In the Whippet?**

**NK:** Yes, we must have. I'm not sure. I have a hunch at one stage we must have gone by train from Leonora but later he had a car. He always had a vehicle. He got one of the first T model Fords in Victoria. He sold that before we came west but he always had a vehicle, when a lot of other people didn't. No, I remember going to Perth in a car once, when we camped near a little
stream near Perth. I was quite enchanted after the very dry desolate outback to see these trees and little streams, you know. Magic, and the birds singing in the morning. But I think we possibly came down from Leonora by train. There were trains running then, and then we went to Perth by train that first time. Then later we went to Agnew. That is now a ghost town. There's an old ramshackle pub there, made up out of a couple of old shops. And there are mines – nickel mines, gold mines around. That's where I was married, from there.

Where did you meet your husband?

NK: At Agnew. I came home this day – our family were living in a couple of tents there. What was he doing? He must have worked on the mine there for a little while, and then he went out to the bush near there and retreated sands there again.

This is your husband?

NK: My father.

Your father?

NK: Yes, my father. My husband was working on the mine. There was a mine there. And I came home one day and said to Mum, 'I want to work at the boarding house'. 'What? What do you want to work there for?' Because I was lonely of course, sitting around, you know. Nothing to do, and I met this girl. I think she was working there. So I finally got a job. Well, god, that was an eye opener. I had to start at five a.m. I was a kitchen maid, and I'd been spoilt at home. I mean I hadn't had to do any work at home much. It took us all day to wash a few dishes, my sister and I. (Laughter in voice) We were really lazy and slow but I worked when I got a job and I met Rob there.

What was his name?

NK: Robert Ernest King. And of course we were - when I say from there, there was no Minister there. We were married in Gwalia. We went back to Gwalia where there was a Church and we were married there. Later we went to Wiluna. Before the Agnew mine closed down we went up to Wiluna, which to
me was a magic place. Well, at the time it was an oasis in the desert. I'd been used to these little towns like Gwalia and Agnew, but when I got to Wiluna there was a big main street with a lot of shops. There were four hotels there, too, and there was something – I think it must have been one of the first ones, a beer garden. A string band played there, and there were Balls and real houses. *(Laughter)* Some rougher ones out in the outskirts of the town but better in the main area. We lived there till the mine closed in about 1954 I think it was. Then we went to Big Bell. In Wiluna, there was tragedy. My husband had a big underground mining accident and lost his right arm.

**So you were married in '39, were you?**

**NK:** Yes. But he lost that in '43.

**So he didn't go to fight?**

**NK:** Well, this was a funny thing. I found his call-up papers the other day. I was pregnant with the second child and Rob wanted to join up, and I said, 'No, no, no. Wait until the baby's born'. And Rob, to shut me up, said, 'Alright'. So the baby was born and unbeknown to me he went and joined up. He was a machine miner, and he and his mate at work they both enlisted. Well, things were bad because the Japanese had been bombing to the north of Australia, and Rob wanted to go and fight. The baby was born in February '42, when things were bad. They were digging slit trenches up in Wiluna because they said it would be a target. The mine was producing antimony for aircraft production etc. And of course, what Rob didn't realise the time was that they were manpowering people in Wiluna. And being a machine miner, he was manpowered, and they took his partner and not him. This really upset my husband. I said, 'He's single. You're married with two children'. And Rob always regretted that because he didn't go to war. He said, 'I lost my arm and that when I was manpowered, and we never had any benefits'. You see, if it had happened in the War we'd have been alright as far as loans for homes, pensions and everything. So it was just a battle for us from then on. But we reared a big family and they've all done very well.

**So did your husband stay in mining even with the loss of his arm?**
NK: Yes, well, what happened, in the mining industry, you see, they look after their own I suppose. Well, this was what happened then. There's not the loyalties now I'm afraid. Things have changed utterly. Sadly, it has. And he was six months away and I was in Perth with him while he was having treatment. The brown-out was on. It wasn't a black-out but brown-out of a night down there. When Rob had the accident I was just pregnant with my third child. We went back to Wiluna and they gave him a job – I think he was a bit of a night watchman, and then they asked him if he'd do the cleaning of the offices of a night. He ended up doing that, and he did it very well. That's right. Then I had the baby and she died when two days old. My second child was nearly dead in hospital at the same time. She'd had an accident. I felt my world had come to an end – everything was going mad. You know, my husband having the accident, my baby dying etc. You think things are just going on normally and then you suddenly realise what life really is. She was two days old, the little one that died. We lived up there in Wilunas until that mine closed down.

Is this Wiluna, was it?

NK: My husband was one of the last three to be paid off. Then we went to Big Bell because that was the next town, sort of down the line. And they gave him a job there in the diesel room or something. Oh, he had a reputation that he could work anyway. By then they knew he could work and he'd had to learn to be left-handed for a start. Gosh, he was - he was a stubborn man normally so this stood him in good stead when he lost his arm. (Laughter) Really did, you know. 'Leave me alone, I'll do it myself'. You know, this sort of thing. So in the end you just ignored that he had one arm and if he asked you to help him, you'd help him. You'd help him but I used to get very upset and hurt at first because we'd all rush to try and help him and he wouldn't let us. He'd battle on himself, but thank goodness he did. It would have been a terrific strain for us, for the rest of our lives.

Big Bell had been surviving on a loan from the Government, and then it had to close too, only two years after we got there. I said, 'Where are we going?' And he said to me, 'To Mount Magnet'. I said, 'No, we're not'. By this stage the eldest girl was at high school. The teacher had called my husband and said,'Look, there's a couple of kids here that need to go on to high school and your girl's one of them'. So I sent her to Geraldton to board with someone, and
it was just too hard for us. We couldn't afford it. So I said, 'We're going somewhere where we can stay – the children are all coming on now and need an education'. I said, 'What are they going to work at? What jobs will they have when they finish school at Mount Magnet. The best they could hope for, the girls, would be a job in the Post Office, and the boys at a mine. There's nothing for them'.

So Kalgoorlie's been very kind to us all because there's a nurse training hospital and a School of Mines here. There were also good scholarships available.

All the children have done well in their chosen fields.

**And your husband got work here?**

**NK:** Yes. Oh, he got a job. He flew down and I remember - he left us behind. Every time we moved, we were left behind and I had to pack up. *(Laughter)*

And that was from Wiluna, too. So Rob came down to Kalgoorlie and got a job. My uncle had been underground manager at the North Kalgoorlie mine, although he'd left there by then. Anyway, my husband went there to see if he could get a job, and they said there was a storeman job vacant for three weeks. We can give you that. But he never left. For 20 years they kept him on and one of the fellows - his boss - said to me one day, 'Gee, he's brilliant, you know. He knows where everything is. He's got everything tidy and he's that damned independent he won't let you lift things. He struggles with moving the big drums. He balanced it on a knee or something'. So he worked until he had a stroke, when he was 60-odd. He was three years home with me. After that he gradually deteriorated and he was in a hospital for the next eight years. As he was a strong man, he died hard. He'd had a heart attack when he was 50 and had a lot of problems with his health over the years.

**Did he live to see your children succeed?**

**NK:** Yes.

**That must have gladdened him?**

**NK:** I think so. He was very quiet. You were never quite sure what he was thinking, because by this time he was brain damaged.
Norma, just to go to a slightly different tack, it's not about your family. You've lived all your life in remote areas of rural Australia. Very different from the cities but you've seen the cities, too. Is there something different about the rural areas? Distinctive?

NK: Yes, there is. I don't know if it's typical of the goldfields in particular, but I've always said if I was broke and in real trouble, I'd rather be that way in the country, up here, than in the city because people are kinder in the country. My husband had a big accident - he had another fall and fractured his skull. All the things that's happened to him. It was through the arm being missing that that happened. And he was off work for six weeks just before my second youngest son was born, and the men took up a collection at the mine, a really big collection, which helped me financially until he went back to work again. And I don't think you'd get this so much in the city. And also people, well, I don't know if it's exactly the same now but it could be. I don't go out as much but I feel that people would help you more here. And you can talk to strange people. If you're walking up the street and say, 'Gee, it's a nice day', just passing some comment, and some people would give you icy looks in the city, but they wouldn't here, they'd answer you.

You've lived in Kalgoorlie still for quite a while now. Has it changed quite a bit?

NK: Oh, dramatically, dramatically. When I wrote my first book, which was published in 1972, Nickel Country, Gold Country, it was the time of the nickel boom. I saw history being made then and I decided to document it. I opened up the first chapter by saying that Kalgoorlie and Boulder in the late 60's were like two rather shabby old ladies who'd seen better days. And that is how it was then. The place seemed to be full of old people. All our youth had gone up to the Pilbara, to the iron ore mines. The town was shabby and needed painting. Run down - you know. And then the nickel boom came and things improved. When nickel prices started to drop, the price of gold came up again. And now we've got two industries, it's very good.

Well, we need more. We need a Hall of Fame for the prospectors and miners. That's the next thing on the agenda here, which some of our family has been involved in, trying to get a national one here because this is the big mining centre and important for tourism. Tourism is important for the future. And
Kalgoorlie could be a big transport hub here later, too, because of our geographical situation. 

But, oh, and look, in the last - I can't say whether it's five or ten years, time goes so quick, but I've seen new suburbs rise here. Two-storey homes, brick and tile, that would have been unheard of a few years ago. When I first came up here there was a house in - I think it was Dugan Street or somewhere - with a tiled roof, and I'd think, 'Oh, there's a house with a tiled roof down there'. Some flash house, you know. So, of course now we've got new subdivisions everywhere, and they've all got beautiful homes. And I could just hear my grandparents saying, 'What are they doing that for?' I mean, there was always a feeling of impermanency about goldfield towns. People didn't want to spend a lot of money on homes in case they had to leave - well, like a lot did in ghost towns. See, they'd pull them down – the timber down and iron buildings – and shift them somewhere else.

**I guess mobility's changed greatly, too.**

**NK:** Oh, yes, yes. That's right. There are a lot of mines opening up all around us and a lot of people fly in and out, backwards and forwards to Perth. They live in dongas out there during the working week and go home on days off. The mining companies don't build permanent towns for them but some of them are living here. It's quite a big centre, you know. I remember when the first night club was opened. It was supposed to be a great thing – wow! a night club in town, you know. I've never been in one but that doesn't matter. And of course things change. No more open air picture theatres, and indoor picture theatres. There were three when I first came here, and now there's none except for the one attached to a drive in, and I don't know how long that's going to last.

Well, of course, things have also changed radically– some old buildings are being torn down to make way for new ones. I like painting and drawing and I think I'd better go and take more photos of these places or they will soon be gone’ – the ones with corrugated iron fences and some made of flattened cyanide drums. I never regretted coming to Kalgoorlie or having lived in goldfields’ towns for most of my life. But then mining is in my blood, isn't it?

**Thank you, Norma.**