

# APPENDIX H

## INTERVIEWS

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This appendix contains interviews with people who had either a direct association with Harry Clay and his vaudeville company, or who remember attending performances - primarily at the Coliseum Theatre in North Sydney.

The interview with Charles Norman is in fact the second of three interviews I conducted with him during the course of 1997. The first was one of an introductory nature rather than a specific interview - the object being to find out the extent of Mr Norman's association with Harry Clay's organisation, as his book When Vaudeville Was King, refers only briefly to his period on Clay time. I found out, however, that along with his extraordinary memory (he was at the time of these interviews some 93 years of age) Charles' recollections carried with them a deep fondness for this time in his life. It was a period when his considerable career in Australian theatre was just starting out, and thus the influence of Harry Clay's company at this time (1923-1925) becomes evident more so than Clay's actual role in it. In part, this can be seen as the result of both Harry Clay's diminished role in the company after his stroke in 1921, and the business demands placed upon him at that time. Furthermore, his management team had by now become well and truly established, being run to a large extent by Maurice Chenoweth, Jimmy Boyle, Bill Sadler, and Wally Edwards.

The third interview was again a type of exploratory session, aimed at finding out who Charles knew and remembered with regard to artists and management around the time of his engagement with Clay's. The object here was to collect a list of names of those who were significant to the company during the 1920s, and to later present a list of questions to Charles. Sadly, he suffered a stroke mid year, and although he recovered from the ordeal to a degree, we were not able to continue our discussions again. Much of the information from the third interview, which I have not felt necessary to include here has, however, been useful in so far as getting an idea to some of those people we talked about. The (naturally) subjective nature of Charles' memory on the details of these artists and in some cases his friends, will be I believe, of more relevance to later non-academic publications regarding Harry Clay and Australian vaudeville.

Charles Norman died in late 1997 and although we only ever met by way of the telephone, the conversations we had about his experiences and the vaudeville era in general will be ones that I personally will never forget. He being the only living link to Harry Clay that I was able to locate was of enormous importance to me also, and his generosity in giving me his time, despite the problems associated with his age and health, are most gratefully remembered.

The other interviews included in this appendix were carried out by various people associated with the Stanton Library in North Sydney as part of its Oral History Collection. This marvellous archive, which contains recorded interviews and in many instances transcripts of those sessions, provides historians and sociologists with a valuable source of primary materials for research into North Sydney of the past. My gratitude is acknowledged to the Stanton Library for permission to include the following extracts from various interviews within this thesis.

Dorothy Hosking, professionally known as Thea Rowe, apparently worked as a performer for Clay's sometime during the mid to late 1920s, at a time when few records of Clay's operations were being published, and hence her involvement with the company has not been verified through other primary sources. The remaining extracts are from people who either recall going to Clay's, or in the case of Benita Brebach, someone with some historical knowledge of Clay's in North Sydney.

# CHARLES NORMAN

## SECOND TELEPHONE INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES NORMAN

23 MARCH 1997

9 AM EST (10 AM MELBOURNE)

- CD:** Hello Mr Norman, how have you been?
- CN:** Better now that summer is over.
- CD:** Yes I was thinking about you during that heat wave you had a while back. I think I mentioned it in the letter I sent.
- CN:** Yes, I received your letter. I've begun answering a few questions for you, and I'll drop it off this week sometime.
- CD:** All right.
- CN:** I've filled it in as much as I could. I don't know anything about 1911, when he [Harry] was starting and booming. My time with him was in the twenties - up to 1925.
- CD:** I mentioned that period in the letter, as it's the time period I've been researching at the moment, but mostly from the Queensland perspective, and I'm hoping to go to Sydney at the end of next month to look into aspects of Harry's Sydney operations. But as I mentioned, it's all the little bits of information that I personally would like to know, that I can also put into the thesis to add some colour to the facts. It's the kind of things you don't normally get in newspaper reports. So you've actually written the answers to that questionnaire down, have you?
- CN:** Yes, I've got the answers for you.
- CD:** Oh okay, I thought we could do it over the phone if that was easier.
- CN:** No that's all right. It's an impressionable time in my career, and I've got a good recall you see. There's a lot of things you don't forget. I did meet him. And I was very impressed with him. He was quite a gentleman. We first met in those early days when we [Norman and Arnold] first got to Sydney in 1923. He came outside the office and he stood there with Chic and I, and he talked to us about the business and what we could do, and how he expected a lot because he said we've had some very good people from Melbourne. So he said you've got a very good chance here. We'll give you a chance with George Wallace. We'll put you in his show, and away you'll go. He's now the top comedian here. And he gave us good advice.
- CD:** What was your impression of Clay?
- CN:** He appealed to us when we first met him as a kind person. We didn't see him much after that. He never came to the shows of course. He stayed in the office and ran it from there you know - with his managers. He left it mostly to them. Each theatre had its manager. Mr Chenoweth had the Gaiety for years and another man had the Princess for years. And someone else had Newtown. The managers were there, they stayed with them and the circuit operated around them like that. The talent used to come to him. He never had agents looking for talent. But those country tours, they were interesting, but we never did that. We stayed around Sydney for the years. About three years. We did go to Wollongong every month.
- CD:** You'd go to Wollongong?
- CN:** Oh yes. We'd go down there and play a couple of towns around there. And there was always a manager with the show, in charge of us. And if we paid local fares going to the suburbs, they were always reimbursed in our salary. That was very good. And the programs were the same. Very good. We'd rehearse, you see, for a couple of weeks before we'd start with a show. And off we'd go for about a month or so, finish it, and start another.
- CD:** Right, so you'd be doing the circuit - some city shows, and then the suburban circuit. You did mention last time we spoke, of a northern circuit - around the Hunter area - the mining towns.
- CN:** Yes, we did go to Newcastle. He had very good connections up there. We played the coal mining towns like Cessnock, Curri Curri, West Wallsend. And they were as tough as coal miners were. Marshall Crosby, who was George Wallace's straight man used to say, "If you think you're clever, come to Curri". And we had a time proving it, but we used to get by. Poor devils, I suppose they had the worst work in the world, you know....
- CD:** If they didn't like you they'd let you know.
- CN:** Oh no, they were just a bit dull, actually. There was no call for being smart or clever. You had to be pretty broad, and so forth. But we got our experience. It's where we had to learn the business, and that happened.
- CD:** I was just wondering about that, because I'd assume that you'd have to change your shows for that area - from the ones you been doing in the city - wouldn't you?
- CN:** Oh no fear. Just the same. Clay audiences were Clay audiences. They were exactly that. They knew the business. You had to please them. They knew a lot about it, and you couldn't kid them. Any act or acts that didn't have much talent - well they woke up to that pretty quickly. No, they wanted the best and they demanded the best let me tell you.
- CD:** Yes, that's something that's becoming increasingly clear in my research of the Queensland country tours, how he was very much building up a following of people. And they come back time and time again, year after year. And the managers seemed to be very important in so far as creating that relationship - just as much, if not more, than the acts.
- CN:** Yes, he started of course in N.S.W. and Queensland. Mind you in their days the bush was the only alternative to the city. And I think that's where that good old saying came from - a saying that you never hear today - "Sydney or the bush". And I bet that came from actors. Because they couldn't play around the city long you see. The populations were small, and whatever material they could get had to come from there. There were always shows in the bush. And of course all the

way up there, there were many tents shows. Many of them. I believe we even had tent shows in Victoria. It was a great outlet for Australian talent, for the theatre.

- CD:** Yes. I'm just noticing how much entertainment was travelling around in the early part of this century. I've been going through regional newspapers, and have begun taking note of travelling theatre companies and vaudeville shows as I spot them while looking for Clay's tours. It's surprising how many, even in Queensland, were around. There was a constant stream of entertainment.
- CN:** Yes, absolutely. They depended on them for entertainment. There was nothing else. No wireless or anything like that. So they did the personal appearance. Did you see that the Brisbane paper recently published a photograph of several people who had worked in tents shows in Queensland, something to do with the musical Summer Rain?
- CD:** Yes, I seem to recall that.
- CN:** It's a lovely picture of these dear old grey-haired people. It was big business in Queensland.
- CD:** Just on the matter of photographs, I'll have to get hold of your publisher and find out where they got that photo of Clay's Newtown Bridge Theatre.
- CN:** That came from a newspaper in Sydney.
- CD:** Do you personally have any memorabilia from your days with Clay's? Any programs or anything?
- CN:** Not a great deal, really. It's so long ago to save any printed stuff.
- CD:** I can understand that. But I suppose the shows wouldn't have utilised things like programs would they. I thought they'd probably use billboards or something at the entrance wouldn't they.
- CN:** Oh yes. They certainly used programs. The people in those times, you see, would demand them. They would put programs out, and put dodgers, with the name of the cast on them, to kids to put around the district in the letterboxes. That was a form of a program, and the kids would get a couple of tickets to the show. They did that a lot in those days – they all did that.
- CD:** Now that's something I wasn't aware of. I had heard of the word 'dodger' but I wasn't aware of its implications.
- CN:** That's a dear old word that's gone now - the dear old dodger. It was a little coloured printed program with all the names of the acts on it, and the kids would put them in the letter boxes. Oh yes they did that quite a lot in those days. It was a good form of publicity. Very easy. The kids would put them in all the letterboxes in the week the show was coming. So they knew all about it.
- CD:** When you went up to Newcastle, Cessnock and those places, how did you travel?
- CN:** By train. The same down to Wollongong.
- CD:** I had a feeling that that was going to be the case - it seems that train was Harry's favoured means of transport even in Queensland.
- CN:** Yes.
- CD:** Some companies would travel by their own means - cars or trucks, but...
- CN:** Oh yes, but it was always by train with us. The scenery, which we used to take, there'd always be carriers at the station, every station had its carriers. They'd soon run the things you had out to the theatre. That was no trouble. They'd take small trunks and things like that.
- CD:** So you didn't have to do all of your own lugging of gear and equipment?
- CN:** No. And Harry had a man with a truck in Sydney - Long Ted was his name. I forget his other name, he was known just as Long Ted. He finished up at one of the cinemas in Sydney - I did meet him - the Prince Edward I think, opposite the Australia. He was in charge of all their travelling there at that cinema for years. He had a good job. But he spent many years with Harry Clay, did Long Ted. A good man. Dependable.
- CD:** Yeah that's something I've noticed. People tended to stay with Harry. Some would stay for a while, others would leave and come back and work for him - like George Sorlie....
- CN:** Oh yes. Well it was good work. They paid well. There was always plenty of money around because the shows always did quite good business as you know.
- CD:** Do you remember how much you were paid back in those days?
- CN:** How much we used to get?
- CD:** Yes.
- CN:** We started on seven pounds a week each - that was good money for us - 14 pounds for the double. As we went on for a year or so we got a rise of a quid or so. And they used to look after you well. They weren't mean by any means. Whatever they thought the act was worth they paid. Morry [Maurice] Chenoweth he was a good man - he was one of Harry's managers as you know. He'd been a performer and took over the management of the Gaiety. Quite a gentleman - very well liked. People liked him.
- CD:** Yes. It would be interesting to find out about Harry's managers. I remember you mentioned last time - Jimmy Boyle. And I've just come across his name on the 1910 tour of Queensland. And I'm hoping to find some mention of the time he and Harry worked together. I assume during the early days of Harry Rickards management.
- CN:** Oh yes. Harry Clay came from Rickards - he was one of his stars. He sang. He had a very sweet tenor voice, a very good voice indeed. And he used to be starred by Harry Rickards.
- CD:** I'm hoping I'll come across something on him. That must have been during the 1890s.
- CN:** Yes exactly. And I'll tell you too, you'll find more publicity at the Mitchell Library in Sydney.
- CD:** Yes, that will be my first stop when I get down there.
- CN:** Well I've got a friend who is a relative of Ted Tutty, she's a solicitor who lives in Adelaide, and she and her sister are putting out a book on Ted Tutty.

**CD:** Oh you're joking. That's great. I'm coming across Ted's name quite often - back as far as 1909.

**CN:** Yes well we did see him as kids. I did catch him. He was quite a funny man. He had the most peculiar Aussie delivery. People used to mock it. Yes Ted Tutty, he was very well known and liked. He lasted for years.

**CD:** Yes, I know that he was working for Harry in 1909, and there was something written about him in the Toowoomba paper - welcoming back Ted Tutty "everybody's favourite". He'd do a lot of blackface.

**CN:** Oh exactly. He was even good in his old age, he often worked in one of the big night clubs in Sydney. He'd get into his old tuxedo - they remembered him. He had his talent right to the finish.

**CD:** I'd love to get in contact with your friend, because - I mean Ted's an important figure in the Clay Vaudeville Company history. He must have worked for Harry for some 15 - 20 years.

**CN:** Yes, from a young man. Like a lot of those people they stayed with Harry, and became big stars you know. And of course as you know the three great comics of Australia all started with Harry Clay, Jim Gerald, Roy Rene and George Wallace.

**CD:** Is that right. I haven't found anything on Jim Gerald yet, but I've got some stuff on George Sorlie, who worked for Harry in the early days. And I've also found an ad for him working with Clay's in December 1917 - a period when he would have had his own business..

**CN:** He had his tent show - he did that for 25 years you know.

**CD:** Yes, so he must have been having a break from touring or something in Sydney.

**CN:** Yes, he often came off the tour and worked for Williamson's and the Tivoli organisations. He was a big star. He was a very clever performer, very versatile. He had a big following.

**CD:** That's something else I've been noticing - how versatile people were.

**CN:** They had to be to last. They had to do everything.

**CD:** There was a man, for instance - Lou Courtney was his name - who worked for Harry as a film operator, they called him an electrician, but he also did a plate spinning and balancing act.

**CN:** Yes. Well in Harry's time, too, he would always put film into his shows. There'd always be a projectionist in these town halls who understood these machines. Film was just starting then, as you know. It was very popular.

**CD:** Around the twenties would they still have been doing those illustrated songs?

**CN:** Oh yes. They were very popular.

**CD:** How did they work? Were they songs sung to moving pictures, or...?

**CD:** Oh yes, and reciting to coloured pictures on the screen. Coloured slides.

**CN:** So they used coloured slides to set the mood for a song.

**CN:** That's right. Then of course as you know the commercials, advertisements came out after that on coloured slides.

**CD:** Oh, so they'd do commercials?

**CN:** Yes. At the end of it. They were getting sophisticated. They'd use the screen to advertise all their wares. A big firm in Sydney used to run that. Really well known. That's how they came into the business those advertising firms.

**CD:** Right, so they'd advertise businesses or..

**CN:** Anything local. And there was always a big screen with every theatre, a house screen with all the advertisements of the village on them. The audiences would sit there through the interval - and there'd be the commercials printed on the screen.

**CD:** They're just the kind of little things you don't realise happened.

**CN:** That's how it started. It started because there was a need and a want. That's how they got there.

**CD:** Well it would have been extra revenue coming in for the company.

**CN:** Oh yes. And they were always looking for that.

**CD:** It's given me an idea that I should start looking back at the early days of advertising. Now I know that it was also being used in vaudeville as well.

**CN:** You know, too, that each theatre had its own orchestra. They stayed with the theatre. There was the pianist - Rooley, up at the Gaiety was there; and Peg, a beautiful violinist, and Wally the drummer. And out at Newtown there was another girl named Mary [Chesney], she was pianist, and the drummer, Teddy somebody-or-other and a violinist. They always had the three pieces.

**CD:** So it was piano, drums and violin?

**CN:** Yes, and they stayed together for years. They knew the show, and they knew how to handle the show. My word they were great. They knew how to keep the applause going and so forth. They were very useful indeed.

**CD:** So when you rehearsed your shows, they would rehearse with you also.

**CN:** Yes, oh yes.

**CD:** So you would rehearse for a couple of weeks?

**CN:** That's right. It wouldn't take long.

**CD:** And that show would go for about a month touring the Clay circuit?

**CN:** That's right. We were very confident with them. We'd have fun with them, you know. They were nice to work with. They understood you, oh it was lovely. They were like family. And the same audiences would be there on Friday nights. They'd take their family along, you know, year after year. They really got to know the artists, and they made their stars. There was such a lot of lovely talent around in those days, you know, because vaudeville was the thing. There was plenty of talent about. Quite clever, too. They would clean up most of these people on television today let me tell you.

**CD:** That's something I've become very aware of - today many people are surprised if they find out you can do one or two things really well, but in vaudeville you had to more than that. You had to do everything.

**CN:** You're absolutely right.

**CD:** Entertainers have generally lost that ability to be so versatile.

**CN:** Oh yes, the Australian was versatile. That's what made them such great performers even in the musical comedies. They were very versatile. Well you had to be to survive. It was the best way to make a living in entertainment. Films weren't that strong in those days, so therefore people depended on live entertainment. Concerts were on everywhere. And another thing that seems to have disappeared is the benefit concert. That was a leftover from the melodrama days. Benefits for some good cause, some good performer, some person or other. That's how we got a lot of our experience. We'd go on these benefits to help them. Weekends, Saturday nights, Sunday nights. And that's where we learned to make speeches on stage, you know. You'd get out there on stage and big-note yourself and so forth. I did that quite a bit throughout my life - curtain speeches. I always had good curtain speeches. I could stand there for ten minutes sometimes.

**CD:** Did you ever get into management yourself?

**CN:** The last few years before I retired, I took Charlie's Aunt through Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. I took the Williamson's farce A Worm's Eye View. And then I went into management myself down here, with Brent Randle, who built the St Martin's Theatre. We did Charlie's Aunt there. We called ourselves Everyman's Theatre Pty Ltd. We took a lovely little show called Springtime For Henry, an American farce for four people. So I had a go at management. That's where the speeches came in handy.

**CD:** How did you find management?

**CN:** Very good. Limited of course. You couldn't keep going back though. Films had become very popular by then, and of course I had got in with the Tivoli's and so forth. So I stayed with that. I did 23 musical comedies over the time. Some in London of course. I did them with Williamson's and a couple of independent managers.

**CD:** So how long did you perform on stage for?

**CN:** Sixty years.

**CD:** Sixty years! You must have liked it?

**CN:** You'd think I would have had enough of it wouldn't you. Then of course in the last few years I've devoted my time to writing. I've got three books going now. One on comedians, one on musical comedies, and one that I've got on the stocks now called Forgotten Heroines in Flesh-tights and Spotlights. That's in the hands of a lady who's doing the editing for me. And I've got 800 pictures for the one on comedians, and the musical comedy one, I've got 500 pictures. I've got to find publishers soon.

**CD:** You'll have to let me know when they do get published so that I ....

**CN:** Everyone will know, it'll be an event, let me tell you. There'll be no dodgers, that's for sure. [*we both laugh*]

**CD:** I'm just looking at the time, and I should let you go, but if I could ask you just one more thing, as I realise that you've probably already answered some things in the questionnaire I sent. I wanted to go back to the area of rehearsals. When you were rehearsing for your shows - where would you do it?

**CN:** In the theatres. Mostly at the Newtown Bridge or the Princess.

**CD:** So when you went on the suburban circuit, how did they provide the musical backing then? Did you have a band travel with you.

**CN:** Oh yes. They stayed with the show the musicians.

**CD:** All right. So there would be a house-band at say the Newtown Bridge who would stay there? And then at the Gaiety?

**CN:** Yes, and the Princess. They had a man there by the name of Bill Collins had the orchestra at the Princess. He was very good. He could write the music down for you, and so forth.

**CD:** And there would be some musicians who would travel on the road with you?

**CN:** Yes, exactly.

**CD:** I noticed the other day when looking through the 1910 Queensland tour, they had a different pianist at different places, and I was wondering whether they had someone travelling with them or whether they got somebody at different places.

**CN:** Oh no. They travelled with them. They were in charge of the show. We couldn't do without them. No ad libs, they were set men. Well rehearsed, and they were very good.

**CD:** So in terms of their role in the show they were almost like a conductor.

**CN:** Yes, exactly. Oh they were good men. We depended on them. They were excellent. Their timing was great. They understood the show beautifully.

**CD:** That's great. The music aspect of vaudeville interests me greatly, as I'm a musician and composer outside of academia. That and the fact that my father, who was an actor and singer, and my grand-father, who was a magician, provides me with an incentive to both keep the entertainment line continuing in the family, and to also help record the history of vaudeville which seems to be the start of my family's involvement in theatre in this country.

**CN:** It gives me a thrill to know that Harry Clay's history is being recorded. It should be because he was a big note in the early days of theatre. He found and made stars, made theatre, got people interested in theatre. Clay's audiences were in their hundreds. They kept the theatre going. It was wonderful.

**CD:** They're quite excited about it at the university.

**CN:** They should be. It's a very important thing indeed.

**CD:** Thank you. Well, I look forward to you sending me the notes you have been writing, with regard to the questionnaire. And if you could give me the address of the lady who is doing the history of Ted Tutty, I would be very appreciative. I'd love to talk to her.

**CN:** Yes I'll do that. She's a solicitor in Adelaide, only working part-time now of course.

**CD:** I've got quite a few little notes concerning Ted, and as he worked for Harry for such a long time - and seems to have

been quite a character - it would be good to get in contact with her.

**CN:** Well you keep up your good work. It's needed you know, because vaudeville has almost disappeared, and if it isn't recorded then people in the future won't know how important it was, and how popular. There were so many talented performers... I miss it. It was a great time in my life.

**CD:** Well, I shall certainly make sure that it is.

**CN:** That's wonderful. Well my friend I thank you again, and hope to talk to you soon.

**CD:** Thank you Mr Norman. Please give my regards to you wife.

**CN:** I will. God bless. Good-bye for now.

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## DOROTHY ROWE HOSKING

EXTRACT FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH DOROTHY LEANORA HOSKING

STAGE NAME: THEA ROWE

BORN: 27/2/1907

INTERVIEWER: MERLE COPPELL

DATE: 15/12/91

STANTON LIBRARY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

[This extract from the interview begins with Thea talking about her first job as a telephonist... at six pounds a week.]

**MC:** How old would you have been then?

**TR:** I think I was about seventeen.

**MC:** So you stayed there for a year or two?

**TR:** Yes I did.

**MC:** And all the time dreaming of the theatre.

**TR:** All the time dreaming of the theatre, yes.

**MC:** So how did you start on that?

**TR:** Well I had very little hope of getting into the wonderful companies coming here, because in those days Australian artists were all pushed into the background. And everybody came from abroad. They brought the whole company with them, even people playing small parts, they were brought. They felt that they were superior and [that] they would present the best shows. And they stuck to their English ideas. Here you had very little chance of getting in. So it was suggested to me that I should... my singing teacher who was a Mrs Leonard, had a block of flats in Darlinghurst and she let one of these flats to theatre people. And she talked to them, and they were running shows at Clay's. Clay's was a series of theatres that used to travel round and round the suburbs. And people said, 'Oh don't have anything to do with them, they're very third rate.' But on the other hand Mrs Leonard said I would get the right experience there, [and that] they were all truly professional people, and I would learn a lot. And she spoke to them, and the first person she spoke to was the famous 'Mo', Roy Rene. Now you couldn't have anybody better known than Roy Rene in Australia. And dear old Mo, he was very very kind to me. He took me down there and arranged an audition for me. And I sang some songs and read some scripts for them and they engaged me. After that I just travelled around from one suburb to another with their show. Doing the same show of course - a week here and a week there. And we began the first one at the Bridge Theatre at Newtown. And then we went to the Gaiety in Oxford Street, not very far from Hyde Park. And that was many weeks, and then they changed the show. Roy Rene went away to the country and other producers came in and you had some more education with a strange producer and strange artists to work with, and it was very very good experience.

**MC:** You mentioned to me that you came to the Independent Theatre at North Sydney during that time.

**TR:** Yes, the Independent Theatre. I can't remember its name [Coliseum]. But that was one of the theatres on the weekly journey from place to place. Yes.

**MC:** And who was in charge of the theatre or working at the theatre at that time?

**TR:** I don't remember.

**MC:** Was Doris Fitton...

**TR:** Oh no. It was a long time before Doris Fitton. It was just a theatre which was there for hire by anyone who wanted to put on a show.

**MC:** That was the theatre in Miller Street?

**TR:** Yes. The very same place that became the Independent.

**MC:** And those shows. It was a mixture for you of singing and dancing, acting?

**TR:** Yes, acting in little sketches, and it was wonderful because sometimes you'd have to be an old lady in a sketch and when you were very young you had to learn to put on old clothes, an old voice, and an old face without changing your makeup. And then you'd be somebody young. And then you'd be in a group of people doing a little dance. And then you'd be singing your own solos. One thing that I remember - I used to have to sing a duet with a man, and he was rather large and

fat, and I was rather small and very skinny. And I think that he hated having to sing a duet with me because we didn't look right together.

**MC:** Your mother was quite approving of your career.

**TR:** Oh yes. My mother had a very very beautiful voice - a contralto. An outstanding voice, and she should have had a wonderful career, but alas she was deaf. Very deaf, which spoilt her chances of ever doing anything in public. She helped me with my singing, and she really approved of me doing something professionally if I got the chance.

**MC:** So she was totally supportive of you?

**TR:** Yes.

**MC:** And of course you lived at home, too.

**TR:** Yes, I lived at home, and my father, who had died of course many years before then, he was a man who used to - when we had parties at home - recite comic poetry. Very amusing, and [he] would break into - they didn't use the word tap dance in those days, they called them the step dance, they were old dances which were handed down from the north of England possibly - and he'd been taught them by somebody, and he used to always get up and do his funny little bits and his dance, and everybody loved him.

**MC:** Your background was gearing you for the theatre.

**TR:** Oh yes it was. I was meant to do it.

**MC:** Your mother I guess went to your shows to see you performing and must have been very proud of you?

**TR:** Oh yes she did. It was very good. She never worried about me being at Clay's. She thought the people were just ordinary hardworking people. They weren't villains at all.

**MC:** And you were a young girl. So you could have been subjected to all sorted of pressures which as a young girl would have been difficult to cope with. How did you find the theatrical world then.

**TR:** Well you see, my mother was a very trusting woman and she thought everything was going to be all right with me, and she didn't give me any instruction in going out to the world and dealing with young men at all. But I found the people very brotherly and fatherly and friendly and helpful. They did everything they could to help. They always treated you as a young kid. And there was no trouble with them at all.

**MC:** Sounds like a very happy sort of atmosphere.

**TR:** Yes it was.

**MC:** And when you were moving around the suburbs did you have to find your own transport or did you go as a group?

**TR:** No we went as a group. Yes they took us.

**MC:** That would be important because there would be late night trips home.

**TR:** Oh yes.

**MC:** So they really looked after you?

**TR:** Oh yes they did. Yes. I couldn't say anything but good of them.

[The interview then continues into other non-related areas]

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## ROBERT KIRK

EXTRACT FROM INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT KIRK

BORN: 1915

INTERVIEWER: LIANNE HALL

DATE: 15 NOVEMBER 1996

STANTON LIBRARY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**RK:** .... those were the days when - the Union De Luxe was the picture show. You wouldn't remember that. Right opposite your library.

**LH:** I know where that was, though, yeah.

**RK:** Yeah, that was it. And Clay's Vaudeville was next - Clay's was first.

**LH:** Did you ever go to Clay's Vaudeville?

**RK:** Yes, I remember going there. I can remember them - staying with my uncle - that was the one who used to drive the tug and I used to go on the Saturday with him while he was going round the Harbour. And on the Saturday night his wife, he had no children, they'd take me down and I - always fell asleep and they had to carry me home. They used to be mad. But - there used to be a sort of - vaudeville, and there'd be these fellows - nigger minstrels and all that, you know. That's - all I can remember of that place. But that was Clay's.....

## BENITA BREBACH

EXTRACT FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH BENITA BREBACH (NEE HARVEY)

BORN: 11 AUGUST 1934

INTERVIEWER: MARGARET PARK

DATE: 25 MARCH 1991

STANTON LIBRARY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

- MP:** Benita, the building we are in, The Independent Theatre, dates back to 1886. Could you tell me from your experience what you know about the history of the building and its significance to North Sydney?
- BB:** Well, history of the Theatre? - 1889 - yes, I'm probably more concerned with its theatrical history. The earlier history from the time - before Doris Fitton moved in to the Theatre is interesting - it was a rather chequered history actually - it was a variety theatre, vaudeville, Harry Clay had it on his no. 2 circuit of the Sydney suburban theatres.
- MP:** Is that like vaudeville?
- BB:** Yes, or live or legitimate theatre as well, but you see there were city theatres, but they were the No. 1 important theatres but all the way through the suburbs there were what were called the No. 2 circuit - and this theatre, being at North Sydney was part of a No. 2 circuit and Harry Clay was here for quite some time - I think after Harry Clay died, I believe, it was converted into an amusement parlour - for a time, it also - I know was a roller skating rink in the early part of this century and then of course in the first World war it became a munitions factory - after that its a little indistinct as to what various purposes it served but it was primarily a theatre.....

## MILVA GROVER

EXTRACT FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH MILVA GROVER

BORN: 1907

INTERVIEWER: LIANNE HALL

DATE: 20 FEBRUARY 1996

STANTON LIBRARY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

[Note: Milva Grover's father Frederick Albert Lear, an artificial limb maker, leased the theatre (known as Clay's Coliseum Theatre) for some time on nights when it wasn't being used by Clay's.]

- MG:** ..... Albert must have had it for a couple of years - I don't know what happened. I didn't know he'd go in for those sort of things. I 'spose he must have leased that place in Ridge Street called the Independent - I don't know what it was called then. It had Clay's Vaudeville on. So he must have just leased that, and I used to go there when I was about eight. [From her date of birth I'd suggest at least eleven years of age]
- LH:** What was Clay's vaudeville like?
- MG:** Oh, funny. I'll never forget the day I went - the acting on the stage. Someone stole the diamonds and nobody knew. There were detectives everywhere, and someone in the house stood up and said, "He's the one. He's the one who stole the diamonds." She was from the audience. Oh they used to be right into it. I can always remember it. I'll never forget that. It was a woman that stood up... That's all I can remember of that. I don't know how long he [Clay] had that.
- LH:** So there were plays and short skits by the sounds of it at Clay's.
- MG:** Yes, they had like little plays on, you know, and I suppose people dancing in the other ones. I only went once to it.