

BARBARA WILLS

OPEN FOUNDATION

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

RESEARCH PROJECT

TOPIC

DESTITUTE WOMEN IN MAITLAND

People are destitute in our society because so often their income whether from badly paid unskilled employment or welfare payment is totally inadequate to support them with the ever rising cost of living.

One of the biggest factors is inadequate housing. There is a very real shortage of low cost housing, and people are having to spend half of their income on rent.

In the Hunter Valley there has been a particularly acute shortage of low cost housing because investors from the Metropolitan area have been buying up houses in the Maitland area and apply the Metropolitan area rental rates to the Maitland area.¹

This was brought home very clearly to the committee of 'Carry's Place', when a very well worth-while client at the refuge, after much searching obtained a low cost house for herself and her three children. Being a very good tenant she set about establishing a garden, and painted a number of the rooms. As soon as this was evident to the land-lord he promptly raised the rent, and it was quite beyond her ability to pay. This unfortunate woman had to move three times. When she was able to gain accommodation through the Housing Commission, it was simply because when her domestic situation had become impossible she had applied for assistance from the Housing Commission and her name was still on the books.²

There is a four to five years wait through the Housing Commission, and the department is loathe to give priority for there are so many cases of great need. The Department is aware of people in 'crisis' situations, such as the absolute homeless.³ In such cases arrangements are made for temporary housing.

A spokesperson for the Department Ms Kay Davies, commented that one of the functions of the Department in extreme cases eg., supporting mothers and single women, is to provide with temporary accommodation at hotels, caravan parks and, in extreme cases, motels, for a period of up to four weeks. When private rental becomes available, the destitute woman is provided with bond money, two weeks rents plus gas and electricity connecting costs, as well as removal expenses.⁴

One woman with three small children who had been brought to the Carrys Place refuge by the police, had been found living in a car. Had it not been for the Women's refuge she would not have had a roof over her head.⁵

The figures for 1987-1988, highlight this disturbing state of affairs. During this year 109 women and 146 children were admitted to the refuge; but sadly, 206 women and 303 children had to be refused admission because there were no beds. One might ask the question - "where will they turn"?

There are many reasons why these women were without a home. A large number of them had to leave their violent situations, but a great many simply could not afford to pay rent. The rental payments were quite out of proportion to their incomes. (I see the lack of low cost;) I see the lack of low cost housing exacerbated by inadequate increases in pensions as significant factors in the rising figures of destitute women.

A study of the background of these destitute women reveals a number of factors. They mainly lack skills, many of them have come from backgrounds where their parents moved many times in search of low skilled work and this meant changing from school to school⁶

In a very competitive employment market, these women are unable to compete; of course the problem of alcohol contributes to some degree to the destitution of some of these women. But this is only a small part of the story.

The problem of destitution is a growing one, but at least

the number of refugees have increased in the last ten years. Therefore, the refuge at Maitland has an alternative to offer these women. So often the numbers are so great as quoted above, that the situation becomes impossible.

In recent years there have been efforts to establish some half-way houses and these are used by women who have left the refuge but have still been unable to find suitable accommodation. However there is no half-way house in Maitland, and the nearest is in Newcastle.

For many years there has been emergency accommodation for men in Maitland, conducted by the St Vincent de Paul Society and known as the Matthew Talbot Hostel, but there had not been similar accommodation for women until Carrys Place was established in Maitland ten years ago.

A spokesperson for the Housing Commission in Maitland ~~a few~~ stated that from October 1987 - September 1988, she had assisted 425 single female parents and 152 single females. The accommodation is usually in caravans, hotels or in dire cases, motels. Caravan accommodation in Maitland range from approximately \$65 - \$85 per week, and some caravan parks require a bond.

One does not have to be overly familiar with a household budget to realise the impossible position of a woman on her own and particularly with children, with the cost of providing even basic food for family, not to mention electricity, gas, and some form of heating in the winter.

While ~~Some~~ some schools are provided with funds by such organisations as the Business and Professional Women's Club, and the Ellimatta Committee and so on. Socially responsible ~~ity~~ teachers are faced with many heart-aches trying to provide modicum of necessities for the children in their care.

In 1988, as in the past, a great deal of responsibility for caring for the destitute is the responsibility of the relief agencies, such as St Vincent de Paul, Salvation Army and the Smi Family. With the growing pressure of destit⁺ution, these agencies are no longer to cope, and one wonders whether there is a soluti[^]on to the problem

With the expansion of our technological society, and the loss of jobs to the automatic machines, and computers, the problem of want seems an unending one. Unless some means is found to cope in our society, destitution will forever remain the proverbial running sore.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Jack Peters Real estate Agents
 High Street Maitland

- 2 Carry's Place Committee Maitland

- 3 Department of Housing
4 Ibid. Reference Ms Kay Davies

- 5 Maitland Police

- 6 op. cit. Carry's Place

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TOPIC

THE MAITLAND WOMEN'S REFUGE

INTERVIEWER

BARBARA WILLS

INTERVIEWEE

WINIFRED NEELY

TRANSCRIPT OF CONVERSATION BETWEEN WINIFRED NEELY AND BARBARA WILL

FOR EASE OF TRANSCRIPTION : MY QUESTIONS ARE DENOTED BY THE LETTER

AND THE ANSWERS OF WINIFRED NEELY BY T

LETTER "A"

Q Mrs Neely, I beleive you have been involved in the Maitland Refuge for women for some years?

A Yes. In 1978, I realised the need for this type of service because of my work on life line, in which many women had rung me about domestic problems and accommodation problems and so I put it to the Maitland Business and Professional Women's Club, and one of the other members of the club and I set about organising a refuge. We approached the Mayor of Maitland, who was Mr Noel Unicomb at the time, and he called a public meeting, and this meeting was one of the best attended public meetings that Maitland had ever held. At that meeting, there was a wide representation of women and men, from all the organisations in the city, and we resolved to go ahead, form a committee, and look for suitable premises. At this stage we had no money.

Q Mrs Neely, how was the refuge financed?

A Well, we were very fortunate in receiving wide-spread public support for the refuge, and two business men in Maitland lent us the deposit for a house interest free for a year, and the various organisations of the town enabled us, by their efforts in raising money to repay the business men at the end of the year.

Q Mrs Neely, how did you gain support in your fund raising efforts?

A Well, I feel because the public image presented by the women on the original committee, which were elected at a meeting in Maitland, were from stable family backgrounds and stable marriages, and therefore, did not present any threat. They did not give the impression of being aggressive feminists. Therefore, we had support from Churches and men's organisations, service clubs, such as Apex and Lions and Rotary, and they all contributed to set up the house. Church groups and the Business Women's clubs, and men's service clubs, such as Apex, Lions, Rotary and some of the clubs helped with money, others helped with voluntary work. The Apex club built the first office. One of the Rotary clubs put up the front fence. The Lions club put in hours developing a children's play ground. Altogether, we felt we had the goodwill of the community. We appealed for volunteers. In our first year we had sixty-eight volunteers manning the refuge for sixteen hours a day.

Q Mrs Neely, were they mainly men or both men and women who were actively engaged in giving their support?

A Both men and women gave support, but the volunteers working in the house were all women, of necessity, because so many of the women who came into the refuge had such very unpleasant associations with men, that they tended to be distrustful and it would not have been suitable to have men working as volunteers in the house

Q Mrs Neely, what specific problems are you talking about?

A The main one was domestic violence, and at that stage before there was a change in the Law, the women had to make the charge of domestic violence against their husbands, and this was a very difficult thing to do, because, most of the women at this stage had not realised there was any alternative towards staying in the violent situation that they had found themselves in. Most of this violence was associated with alcohol. I would say that 85% of the women who came in, had spouses who over indulged in alcohol.

Q Now, you mentioned a change in the law?

A Before the new Domestic Violence Legislation, women had to make the charge themselves. These days the charge is made by the police, so it does make a big difference. One of the big problems these women faced, was a lack of an alternative to the violent situation in which they were faced. It took some time before the establishment of a refuge in the Maitland area became public knowledge. Our original avenue of clients was through life-line, however, we did accept them from Ministers of Religion, people like the Smith Family, St Vincent de Paul or solicitors, and the police of course, made a lot of use of the refuge and also the Department of Youth and Community Services, and it's funny to think that the Government Departments like the Youth and Community Services, were using the refuge. They were using it more than anyone, and at that stage we had no Government funding.

Q You mentioned, Mrs Neely, the lack of suitable accommodation in the Maitland Area. Would you like to comment on that?

A Yes, well at the stage in which we established "Carry's Place", there was very little cheap accommodation available in Maitland. The rents were far above what women could hope to pay even on a supportive parent's benefit, which most of them were of course able to get because they had children.

Q Do you consider the lack of suitable accommodation within the Maitland area contributed to the violence in the ~~home~~ domestic situations?

A I think it had a great deal to do with it. I think people found themselves in an impossible financial position because more than half of their husband's income was going to pay rent in many circumstances, and then this led to excessive drinking in an effort to blot out their worries, and domestic violence resulted from this. This may sound simplistic, but I think that this really is what happened on many occasions. When we were looking for suitable accommodation for women who had been in the refuge, it was almost impossible to find cheap accommodation. Many landlords would not accept women with children. The old attitude was, that if they didn't have a male supporting them, they wouldn't be able to pay the rent, and therefore

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we found it particularly hard to get estate agents who were sympathetic.

Q Mrs Neely, do you think that the real estate agents considered women from the refuge as being unsuitable clients?

A Yes I do, and I think a lot of this was due to ignorance because there was a suspicion that women who landed themselves in violent situations were to blame for the situation arising.

Q Surely the bond money would have produced a problem for most of these women?

A Yes it did, but while they were in the refuge, they received a supporting parent's benefit, and they only paid ten dollars a week, plus four dollars for each child to the refuge. From that ten dollars everything was provided for them, bar just a few items, like some toilet requirements etc., So the women could set about saving the bond money. They could stay in the refuge from six to eight weeks, and in that time they could save the bond money, if they tried very hard. If it wasn't possible for them to save the money because of other calls on their purse, such as children who were sick or something like that, the Department of Youth and Community Services would often help the women to have sufficient money to pay their bonds.

Q Now, how was it possible to maintain a refuge when adults paid only ten dollars, and for each child four dollars, that surely must have presented a problem?

A Well, the problem was overcome to a large extent by the fact that various organisations made financial contributions to the refuge. Not only financial ones but contributions of food. For instance, Maitland Girl's High School each year had a drive for tin food, and this was something that came in very, very handy. Other organisations at the end of the year, when they were settling up their funds, made a contribution to "Carry's Place". One business firm in the area came in one day and presented us with a thousand dollars, so with this support we were able to make do until Government funding came through, and that was about eighteen months after we started.

Q What actual differences did Government funding make to the refuge?

A After functioning for about eighteen months without any funding, we realised it was becoming a very heavy burden on the volunteers. The volunteers, by and large, were very, very good, but you always get someone who forgets to turn up for a shift. You always have problems at night time, if people came during the night.

Q Well of course, you would have to maintain a twenty-four hour roster wouldn't you?

- A No, we didn't maintain a twenty-four hour roster at that stage, because it was very difficult to get volunteers to come in and stay over night in the refuge. At that stage we didn't think it was necessary. There were several people on call who lived close to the refuge. However it became a burden on the ones who were on call particularly, and so when Government funding came in we were able to employ some people.
- Q And in what capacity were they employed?
- A Well they were employed as supervisors in the refuge. It was their duty to see that the refuge functioned well. To receive clients, to be sympathetic and assisting to them, and above all, to be non-judgemental, because you couldn't judge women who came into the refuge by middle class standards, because often these women had a pretty terrible life, not only in their marriage, but in their childhood.. But we were fortunate in the first few years, to be able to employ women who had been in the refuge; women who had been clients, and for a number of years we had an ex-client living in the refuge as a night supervisor.
- Q Well surely having someone from the refuge who had already been in the refuge, must have been a tremendous help in that, the clients who came after, felt they could in some way identify with that particular person, because they would possibly have shared experiences or similar experiences.
- A Well it was a great help to the committee but, strangely enough there was a fair bit of resentment among the clients in the refuge if they found their supervisor was an ex-resident. This was a surprise to the committee. We had thought that there would be a very sympathetic exchange between the supervisor and the clients, but human nature being what it is, this often did not happen, and it wasn't until after some months when the original people who had been there when the supervisor who had been a client had left, and there were fresh faces in the refuge, who did not realise that the supervisor had been a client, that the difficulty was overcome.
- Q Mrs Neely, how was the Government funding applied?
- A Well we were in an unusual position, in that, by this stage within a few years we actually owned the house. We had raised the money to pay for the house. Only one or two refuges in New South Wales, own their own houses, they were mostly renting houses.
- Q That really was an amazing feat, wasn't it?
- A Well, yes it was an amazing feat and we were all very surprised that we raised the money so quickly, but it was because of public sympathy with the service we were trying to provide. Of course, we not only had public sympathy, but we also had people who regarded us as home breakers; women who were encouraging, as I was told, and was printed in the paper the statement by one woman who said "she felt we were encouraging women not to try and maintain their marriages". One of the men who actually helped us with the refuge and was interested in it said that "that woman might change her mind if she if she had a few black eyes."

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Q Well now, back to funding.

A Well there were very strict guide lines by then. The Womens Refuge Movement in New South Wales and in Australia had become very active. Some states supported it more than others did. New South Wales was probably the best supported state, Queensland gave very little support. The money could be applied to pay volunteers, to buy food and equipment for the house could be bought from Government money; but we had money given for capital costs and money for running costs. We were not allowed to spend money allocated for capital costs on running costs, and we had to put in very carefully itemised accounts to the department of services, so we learnt to be very accurate about our book-keeping.

Q What help did you receive from the Government professional agencies?

A Well all the Government Professional Agencies were very co-operative, very helpful, and we had very good relations with them all. Of course you have to remember that the Department of Youth and Community Services, as it was known called in those days, was really dependent on the refuge in Maitland, because it was the only one in the area. The police were also dependent on the refuge, because if they picked up a woman in the street at night, with nowhere to go, naturally they looked to the refuge. We had very many sad cases of women, who were really in dire circumstances with children and the refuge was their last resort. I remember one cold winter night, the police bringing a woman and three little children who had been sleeping in a car and she had only one blanket, and she had been tossed out of her previous accommodation, not through her own fault, but she found herself with three small children, no money and nowhere to go, and she was an asthmatic, so the police brought her and the three children to the house.

Q Mrs Neely, what have you personally learnt from being involved with the refuge?

A I think all of the women who worked at the refuge found it a most enlightening experience. We realise that the women we were dealing with had come from unhappy and often violent situations, and they had also experienced these conditions in childhood. It was amazing the number of women who had been subjected to violence by their fathers and by their brothers and we were amazed at the number of women who were victims of incest. Before we began to work at the refuge, we thought it was a subject that was generally up for sensationalism in the "womens" magazines, but this not so. Many of the women had been victims of incest and quite a few of the women who came to the refuge, had children who had been subjected to some form of sexual interference by their fathers or their de factos. So we were looking at children who had been brutalised and the women who had very often been brutalised, and it was very easy to be judgemental when you thought the women were being impatient and hard with their children,

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but you had to realise the life they had led, and the trauma they had gone through; and the fact that many of them had never been "mothered" themselves, so therefore they did not know how to mother their children.

Q Mrs Neely, at this point surely you must have some success stories to relate?

A We did. We had success stories; I could mention a few. One in particular stands out in my mind. A very, very nice woman was brought into the refuge by a social worker from one of the northern towns. She arrived at the refuge in a dress, the only one she had, no shoes and three little children, and the social worker with her, was so touched by her plight that she herself was in tears. That woman had been feeding her children on dog's meat; because her husband ^{who} had a permanent job drank all the money, and gave her practically nothing. However, this woman, was fortunate in that she had herself come from a warm family background, so therefore she was able to cope emotionally better than a lot of the other women who had come from violent family situations. She had three very nice children. She stayed with us for quite a while. We extended her time, because we realised she needed time, also she was such a very honest and hard-working person, and tried so hard to get on her feet, and it was a great thrill for us when eventually we were able to get her a house and she was able to set up a home with her children. But as so often happened she looked after the house so well and started a nice garden and painted some of the rooms, so the landlord promptly put the rent up, and she was unable to afford the house. This happened to her three times before we were eventually able to get her a Government house. She only got it reasonably quickly because, some years earlier, before her domestic situation had become impossible, she had applied for a Housing Commission house, and her name was in fact still on the books, so she was able to get a house in reasonably short time.

Q Mrs Neely, what alternatives did the women have prior to the establishment of the refuge?

A Well they didn't have any alternative to staying in the domestic violent situation. We found that practically all the women who came into the Maitland refuge, came from fairly impoverished backgrounds, now, we know that domestic violence goes through all strata of society but it seems to me that people who are a little better off, often have ^{parents} parents who are a little better off, or friends who are a little better off, and therefore, they have an inbuilt support system. Nearly all the women who came into the Maitland refuge, came from homes where the parents were not in a financial position to help them or, they were living in Housing Commission houses, therefore couldn't take another family in with them, or their friends were often on very narrow budgets themselves; so I don't think it is fair to say that one class of society and not another ^{is} are the victims of domestic violence, but it just appeared that certainly in the refuge in the Maitland area, most women who came in, came from fairly impoverished backgrounds.

Q What type of women came to the refuge?

A Well all types of women came to the refuge, and of course all the women who came to the refuge were not blameless themselves; but one had to learn not to be judgemental, because one had to put oneself in their place and ask "if I had to live by my wits more or less since I was a child", and that was really the position of so many of the women living on Social Security handouts, and many times on very meagre incomes, and life was a continual battle, therefore some of them learned to manipulate women in the refuge, but you just had to accept this as a fact of life, as I think anyone who works in social welfare will realise.

Q You did mention too earlier, that a lot of the children had been subjected to brutality; was there the need for counselling for these children?

A There was a great deal of need for counselling and therefore we used the Social Workers who were employed by the Department of Youth and Community Services. We had no professionals on the staff at the refuge, and we made it a policy not to council, because nobody working at the refuge was qualified to do so at that stage. So what we tried to do was to provide a sympathetic and supportive atmosphere, where women could try to gather their broken lives together. When it was possible for them to leave the refuge, we assisted them with giving them food to get them over the first week, collecting furniture for them and linen, and in this endeavour, The Salvation Army, the St Vincent de Paul Society were very helpful. We were constantly sending down to the St Vincent de Paul Society, because they happened to be within walking distance of the refuge. So many little children had been brutalised. The child care workers had commented that it was interesting to see these small children playing mothers and fathers in the play room that we had established for them, where we had set up a little house and cooking things and so forth. They had been playing mothers and fathers, and it was most interesting to see them playing out the role of their mothers and their fathers; and the father punching the mother and so forth. Therefore the children had begun to think that was the 'norm'.

Q Mrs Neely how many of the women had been affected by their experiences?

A Well, most of the women had a very low self-esteem. They had never been made to feel that they were a person of any intrinsic value. They had never been made to feel they had any dignity as a human being. They also felt they could not exist without a man to support them. Because many of them had been illeducated, and had no skills, and therefore they could not imagine they could live without a man to support them. So therefore many of them went from one relationship to another, and they regarded a man as a meal ticket, and of course, this led to many sorry situations, and it was very heart-breaking for women in the refuge (the workers in the refuge), to see women going out of the refuge back to a situation which we knew was irreversible.

- Q After the women had been discharged from the refuge, were they re-admitted if there was a further reaccurrence?
- A Yes, We Didn't encourage them to be coming back unless there was a good reason for it, because we didn't want the refuge just to be used as a convenience. But of course some women did come back again, and they might have come back more than once.
- Q Mrs Neely, when considering the population of Maitland being 'round 45,000, surely one womens refuge is quite inadequate?
- A It was certainly inadequate, and you have to remember that all the women did not come from the Maitland area. We have had women from as far away as North Queensland, because sometimes women wanted to put as far between them and their husband, so that there wasn't any liklihood that he would be able to find them.

Thank you Mrs Neely for a most informative and interesting interview.

OPEN FOUNDATION

AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

LECTURER

MARGARET HENRY

TOPIC

THE MAITLAND WOMENS REFUGE

INTERVIEWING

WINIFRED NEELY

NAME

BARBARA WILLS

CLASS

THURSDAY 10 - 12

In 1978 a need was recognised for the establishment of a womens refuge in Maitland. Winifred Neely, who was involved with ~~Life~~-line at the time was constantly recieving phone calls from destitute women who had absolutely no place to go. The plight of these women stemed from domestic violence, and the problems they faced, in aquiring suitable cheap accommodation for themselves and their children.

The Business and Professional Womens Association was approached for support, and later the Mayor, Mr Noel Unicomb called a public meeting. It was reported to be the best attended public meeting that Maitland had ever held. The meeting was attended by a wide representation of both women and men from all organisations in town, and it was resolved to form a committee to look for suitable premises,

The committee was very fortunate in recieving wide-spread public support for the refuge, . One of the town's businessmen advanced the deposit, interest free for one year. Various organisations by their efforts in raising money were able to repay the loan by the end of the year.

The public image presented by the women on the original committee elected at a meeting in Maitland, were from stable family backgrounds and stable marriages; therefore they did not present a threat, and did not give the impression of being militant feminists.

Support from church groups & service clubs and the like, all contributed to set up the house. Some helped financially, others by volunteering their services, and the venture had the good will of the community. Originally there were sixty-eight volunteers staffing the house for sixteen hours per day. All were women, out of necessity. Many clients in the refuge, because of their unhappy experiences, were mistrustful of men.

Domestic violence is a reality in our society. Women are

often, because they have been ill-used and . . . due to a lack of education, lead an underprivileged existence, and have been unable to cope with the reality of their lives. Many women were faced with no other alternative; they came from fairly impoverished backgrounds. We know that domestic violence goes through all strata of society, but usually those who are a little better off, with family and friends in a similar position, are advantaged, for they have an inbuilt support system.

"It's been a very enlightening experience working with the underprivileged. Before working with the refuge, incest was thought to be a subject brought up for sensationalism in the women's magazines. But this is not so. Many of the women had been victims of incest, and quite a few of the women and their children were subjected to some sort of sexual interference either from their fathers or their defactos. It was very easy to be judgemental when it was thought that the women were being a bit hard on their children. In realising the life they had led and the trauma they had experienced, the fact that many had never been mothered themselves; ^{they} and obviously did not know how to mother their own children."

The Maitland refuge has been run successfully, and it has been proved that it is possible to run an organisation like the refuge, quietly, and without any public drama and achieve the ends ^{they} set out to achieve.

It has been of great value to many women who came into the refuge and probably to the children more particularly, because at least they were able to come and live in peace without the fear of violence for six to eight weeks at a time.

It gave them the chance to be properly fed and looked after. It also gave the mothers breathing space.

It has been a very successful venture, but there is a great need for more refuges of this type. "There has been a long list of turn-aways ie., those who could not be accommodated because of the pressure of numbers. It is not always full, but ~~in~~, ~~the~~, ~~refuge~~, often it's full to overflowing."

"I believe it has been a salutary lesson for women who worked in the refuge, because it makes one come face-to-face with a lot of social problems - probably never thought about or certainly not confronted with."