

Florence Carey: Hop Picking.

D: What bit of London were you from?

F: I was born in Walworth, and then when I was very very small, my mother moved to Camberwell. And that's where I lived until I got married. And it was from there that I went hop picking. As a child. And I think I must have been - because the first world war ended when I was 11. I was born in 1907, the war finished in 1918. So, I was round about 11. And it must have been just after that, this friend of my mother's said, would I like to go down with them to mind her grandchild. But she had two sons, and as soon as the baby was in the pram, they used to get the pram and scoot, so that I had to finish up hop picking, until they come back with the pram. I had no option because we didn't know where they'd gone off to see.

D: What did they do with the pram?

F: Well, lots of fields and that and they were going scrumping I expect, all the apples and that because you used to get lovely apples like that down there hop picking, you never see them now. We used to call them hopping apples, I don't know whether they were Bramleys or what they were, but of course the boys used to do this see. They'd come back in time. They'd shout out, "Pull no more bines." And it would be break time. And then they used to light a little fire at the end of the row of bins and Mrs Gill - her mane was who I went with - she had a frying pan and chops and a loaf and all that sort of thing and she used to fry these in the frying pan, smack them in between two pieces of bread. And you never washed your hand, all the taste of hops on your hand, when you was eating these. I always remember the pork chop in between two slices of bread you know.

D: Like a doorstep.

F: Absolutely, yes, that was our lunch you see. You had a stipulated time you see, and they'd already been round and scooped how many bushels you'd earned, they went by the bushel. And then used to come round with these big things and weigh them and see how many bushels you'd done, write it all down so that at the end of the week they knew what you'd earned.

D: Where were the men from; were the men hoppers as well?

F: They were all part of the farm, I think. I wasn't on Whitbread's farm, I was at Whitestone, which was further down the way from Whitbread's. These special men they used to come round just to pull - they had big poles - they used to pull the bines down ready for you to pick you see. You had to be sure and put all hops, you went like that, you had the hops and tried to leave the leaves, because if you had too many leaves they'd knock so much money off of what you'd earned.

D: Because it filled up the bushel?

F: Yes, you see. Now and again you got some leaves, but you weren't supposed to put too many leaves in you see, and these bins, like a sacking thing with a cross piece, what we used to have to stand and pick at. We used to be out there at 6 o'clock in the morning and take everything on a push thing. Everything you needed for the day was all put on that and taken.

D: Like a pushcart?

F: Yes. And then they give you a signal when you've got a restart. And during the afternoon the lolly man used to come round, not ice cream, sweets, like lolly things you know. He used to call out, "Lollies." and if you was good you were given some money to go and get one. No toilets, not real toilets. They was just in the hedges they dug great big holes and a little bit of sacking thing round. So that was your toilets; this is how rough it was then.

D: Did you mind?

F: I expect I did mind, but at the time being a girl, I was only about 11, but everybody was the same, so we all had to do it. So that was that. And then you finished about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. And this hut we had we were lucky we had two storey hut. But you used to take a lot of bits of your own furniture these hoppers did and kept them there from year to year if they went regularly. You know, a table and a couple of chairs and that. And the great big hopping pots.

D: Cooking pot?

F: Big ones, great big ones. And opposite your little hut there was like a corrugated shed with a bar across and you lit your fire there and you cooked all your stuff out there you see. But on Sundays you all went down the village and took your roast to be done in the bakers down there.

D: Did they do that for you?

F: I don't know, I expect we had to pay, but I didn't have anything to do with that side of it. But weekends my mother and father came down to perhaps visit us, and there was all this great big pot all full of stuff all cooking for us, big spotted dick, and all different things. And we all used to have a sort of picnic outside the huts. But she had, this lady had her sister with us, so that was her and Mrs Gill and the baby and I, we slept in one part and the boys slept in another part of it. It was all straw and hay; it wasn't real beds or anything you know.

D: So, did you have to make up your beds every night?

F: It was there, you just put a cover over it and laid on that.

D: A lot of you all squashed together?

F: Oh, it was really, you didn't have room to comb your hair and no proper wash or anything - I forget what the washing facilities were like now; we must have had a wash, but we never had a bath. For the three weeks I was down there we never had a bath, and never had my head washed either. And the saying was true literally, you go down hopping and you come back jumping, which I did. My mother had to de-louse me when I came home. She did really.

D: Did she mind?

F: I expect she did mind, but I always remember the boiling hot vinegar, she used to put the comb in and do all my hair with it until she got rid of them all. That's how it was in those days you see. But everybody was happy. We used to sing our heads off there. They used to say, "Go on Flo, start us off." I was only start and all the old ladies used to sing all around us. Not many children did pick, only those with very big families, because they wanted the money. That was their holiday money actually, which you earnt, but it was all their holiday money for them.

D: Did you earn money picking, or did it all go to the family?

F: Well it went to the lady. She gave me money for sweets and things like that that I wanted - I don't remember she actually gave me anything in my hand, not cash I don't know. I suppose she thought

she was giving me a free holiday anyway you see. I enjoyed it; it was a lot of fun. And the pubs at weekends were hilarious because all the kids would all be down there all running around and doing what they liked, and the parents had their drinks. Really great really. But going, the morning I remember; so early in the morning we had to get up to catch the train from London Bridge, and the platform was absolutely full of everybody with all their pots and pans and prams and push things - because you literally took everything with you more or less. But if you were a regular hop picker you had the same hut each year and you left a lot of things there so that you had that hut again for next year.

D: Did you just go the once?

F: I went once, just the once.

D: Did you not want to go again?

F: No. I suppose I'd had enough I expect. Because getting on for twelve I wanted to do what every other girl did, I didn't want to go anymore. But I did enjoy it while I was there. It was quite fun.

D: You weren't homesick, were you?

F: No, not really. I suppose because I knew this friend of my mother so well, she was more like an aunt to me really. We had three good weeks and jolly good weather practically all the time. But a long way to walk from your huts to the actual field.

D: How far did you have to go?

F: Quite a way, pushing your pram and pulling all your stuff along that you wanted all the rest of the day. To me it was a sort of adventure, and I enjoyed it.

D: Did the adults make quite a lot of fuss about you if there weren't many kids around?

F: Well there were quite a lot of children, but people with big families the children had to pick. But I was the only one with this friend of my mother's, because the boys didn't want to know about picking. They used to go off with the little girl in the pram and I was quite happy to sit there and help her to pick. And her sister helped her - in fact I think it was aunt Pol, I think her name was. I didn't mind it, I quite enjoyed it. I asked the man when we went to see Whitbread's, I told him which farm I was on, and he told me I wasn't in Paddock Wood, I was just down the line. And he said the name of the place, but I've forgotten it. But it was a hop field, and it was a different people to Whitbread's.

D: You said that the train station was really crowded, what was it like on the trains themselves?

F: They were packed out because it was hoppers' special trains, just for hop pickers, see. Early in the morning, about 6 o'clock in the morning. Everybody had to get to London Bridge, with all your goods and that. So, I don't know what we do with all your goods, they probably went in the guard's van. And then when you arrived, I don't know who met us at the other end, I can't remember that, or how we got from the station there to the actual hop picking place.

D: Was that the first time you'd been on a train?

F: I think I'd been to Southend for a day with my parents. Not often, you didn't often go on trains or anything like that at that age. I can't remember a lot of the journey, all I know is I had to get up very, very early and be at London Bridge and get this train about 6 o'clock in the morning, with everything. But I know we had three weeks very good weather and come back looking ever so well, all the children did really, because it's always at the end of the school holidays, mostly it used to be

September. It was something different, it was great fun having your food cooked over a fire. And then on Sundays there was a roast, everybody went down to the bakers, they opened specially to cook all the hoppers' roast dinners, I suppose they must have charged for it, they wouldn't have done it for nothing.

D: Did you see much of the local people when you were there?

F: No, I can't remember. All I can remember is getting up early in the morning. pushing the thing over and going working nearly all day long. We used to play about at night all in the fields, there loads of fields all round there. And apples, scrumping the apples. I don't think the farmer minded very much. Like perks I suppose for doing the hop picking.

D: Was there anything special that happened on the last day?

F: I can't remember that. There was this fire there and we used to sit round it while the food was cooking. Like my parents used to come down and see I was alright at the weekend. I don't remember ever saying please take me home. So, I must have been happy there to have stayed the whole of the three weeks. And I can't remember if she did give me money at the end of the time or not. I never wanted to go again. I was never asked to go again, because I don't think she went because the little girl was getting older then and she couldn't take her granddaughter see. They're still alive these two boys as far as I know. And the little girl that used to be pushed around in the pram, she's still alive, and I've spoken to her on the phone. I don't see them; I haven't seen them for years. But they must be getting on now because I'm 84 so they must be getting on for 80. They were younger than me. They must be well in their 70's because she's getting on to 70 as well.

D: You couldn't get them to work at all?

F: Oh, very rarely that they ever did it. They just went off and that was it.

D: Was this because they were boys; did boys get away with more?

F: Oh absolutely. I enjoyed the picking. I probably did have my time off to go and play, maybe she made them give the baby up and come and do a bit of picking, I can't remember.

D: Was it a real change to be out in the countryside?

F: Oh yes, because where I lived, in Camberwell, we lived in three storey faults and my mother lived right in the top. We didn't even have a balcony. Used to have to play in the street, so it was quite a treat for me to be out in the open country. We used to go to the parks, which was a long walk for us. Sometimes we used to walk from Camberwell to Peckham Rye. Used to play up there. We didn't have any money, but we were happy.

D: Why didn't your parents go down hop picking?

F: My father was working anyway, and it was mostly night work and he slept during the day and my mother had to be there to call him up at nights and do his sandwiches and that.

D: What do you think is the strongest memory you've got of the hop picking; is it smells or songs?

F: The taste of the hops when I ate that food. You could taste the bitterness of the hops. You had nowhere to wash your hands. But as you held the bread you could taste the hops as you were eating. And I always remember that, that is a very vivid.

D: What sort of taste?

F: Very bitter. I suppose like a beery taste really. A very bitter taste.

D: Did it stain your hands?

F: I don't think so because they're green. When the hops are to be picked, they're green. Horrible taste.

D: What was your worst memory of hopping?

F: Going to the toilet, I think. Because it wasn't very pleasant at all, just in a ditch and no real toilets. Didn't even have one where the huts were, I don't think. But we must have got water from there. I should imagine we had a communal tap that we used to use so that we could wash. Because we did wash. Although we didn't have a bath, but we did wash. I think we changed our clothes; I can't remember.

D: Did your mum send you down in old clothes to work in?

F: I can't remember; I don't think so. For three weeks that would be a lot to pack. And she had three others to pack for and herself, that was four of those to pack for, you know. So, whether they washed things while they were away, I don't know. I should imagine so. If people had young babies, they would have to wash their things, wouldn't they?

D: What about your best memories?

F: They were fun. To me it was fun, being able to run free, and no mum saying, don't do this and don't do that. I was allowed to do what I liked practically, because I helped her to earn money, and I worked as hard as the grownups did. She may have given me pocket money, but I just can't remember that part.

D: What was it like first thing in the morning; did you have to get up early?

F: Yes. Used to be very misty and very rough going across these fields too, because they weren't all green fields, and big ruts and that where tractors had been and everything. Once they'd pulled these bines and we'd picked the hops, the men would have to gather all the old bines up. It's all done by machine now.

D: What do you think about the hops being done by machines now?

F: I don't think you'd get the people to go down and do it now. People aren't on the poverty line now. That was our holiday, most Londoners. Going down there, working, spending their money in the pub weekends, having a good old knee up and a sing song and things like that; that was our holiday you see. People wouldn't rough it now today. It was all the open space. Sundays you could just do what you liked; you didn't work on Sundays. I don't know if we worked on Saturday morning, but we didn't work all day Saturdays, I'm sure. And we'd go and prepare for whoever was coming to visit you. This lady's husband used to come and visit her, and my mum and dad used to come. I don't think they came every weekend, but they did come. All by train everybody. Nobody had cars those days. I went down just after the first world war. Something like 1919.