

Queenie Gordon



Fleetville Diaries
the local history people

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Fleetville Diaries Oral History Project

Queenie Gordon (nee Rodford)

Born September 29th 1922 in St Albans

Interviewed by Liz Bloom, March 6th 2015

I began work at Ballito when I was 14. It seems as if I went there in the dark and came home in the dark! That's what it seemed like to me after being at school; eight 'til six and on Saturdays 'til twelve. I remember walking down long corridors and then walking into a vast area of light. The building had glass roofs for the light; we needed it, you see (for the close work that was done). It seemed so vast and overwhelming.

I was trained to do (invisible) mending which took two or three weeks; it didn't take long. And then we went on to do piece work. Invisible mending is done with the same sort of silk or nylon which you are working on. You mended with so many stitches before the hole and so many stitches after so it wouldn't open up again. Stockings were made with plain knit stitches similar to a plain knit woollie, when you think about it. You go through the holes; you put your needle through one, miss one, and then out of the other one. (We didn't use a magnifying glass), we just used our eyes. It just makes you realise how good your sight is when you are young. Although they (the stockings) were all made on machines – fully fashioned and semi-fashioned - sometimes a little thread would come loose and run. Then we would have to have little hooks that we put in the stitch to hook it up again. The semi-fashioned were made whole and the fully fashioned were made open and then they were stitched; and that's what made the clinging heel. The semi-fashioned used to get a little bit baggy after you'd worn them.

As you walked into Ballito, there was an inspector who inspected us going in and you all had to wear nylons, you see, in case you went in bare-legged and came out with nylons on! So we all had to wear them, but at the same time, they allowed us a cheap pair every month so we could all afford them. Before the war, they weren't nylon actually, they were silk.

In 1939, they dismantled some of the machines and took them off to Luton to be stored. But not all of them. They kept a certain part working and after a little while they moved all the mending and the silk work down to the offices which took about half the factory. The other half was all war work (the Oerlikon shell factory). And then it just happened: "You, you and you, you're on war work!" We didn't have any time to think about it and I definitely didn't want to do it because I wanted to stay on the work I was doing. You were just taken where you were going to work. A certain number of us ... and I suppose they picked and chose ... some were faster than others, I don't know. Yes, first of all I was on mechanics.

As you entered Ballito, there was the Inspector's office, then there was the Health office, then there was the entrance to the 'Fully Fashioned' and then there was a workshop where you made mechanical pieces; I was in there for a time. I worked on this lathe and the coolant took a reaction on me and I had to come off there. Eventually they did away with that in industry. It was affecting the men in other jobs so that they had to have wet cloths in their pockets (to wipe it away); it affected them badly. Anyway, I went back on mending for a while and then I was put on the shells.

I was given a badge; 'Essential Worker'. I tried to leave; my sister got out before they issued the badges. She was lucky and of course, she was married. I went (to the boss) and he said, "Sorry, you can't leave because you are an essential worker and you have to stay here." So I was on for the rest of the war. My sister went on to DeHavilland but she liked it there.

The shells were in two parts. There was the 20mm armour piercing which was shaped like a bullet and there was a piece that went on the back. We made both pieces. The bit at the back held the explosives but they were all taken to another firm because we weren't connected to the explosives. Our work was all examined. I worked a machine and the girl (inspector) made sure I was cutting them fine enough. You put the shell in and you pulled the lever down and another lever came forward to shape the copper band that went round the other bit. That copper band had to fit the gauge that the young girl next to me was measuring; they had to be perfect. If they went a bit wrong

in the gauge, then the tool had to come out and be sharpened. There was a section of the room where men were on the sharpening machines, keeping everything going. There was a portion of the mill that employed the Naval inspections. They inspected all the work we did. If it didn't go through them (approved), then it was discarded.

There was a day shift, 8 to 6. There was an evening shift of mostly married women who came in for 3 hours, and then the night shift. It was piece work and it wasn't as good as Ballito money. At Ballito, you could earn so much a bag of silk stockings but on the trays in the shell factory it wasn't so good. I forget how many per tray, whether it was 50 or 100. Men would be doing the sharpening and anything going wrong with the machines, the men were there to fix them, so they were kept busy. There were men on some of the machines; some of them were massive, going from that wall to that wall, you know.

The canteen kept going; that was nice. And of course, with the blackout, you couldn't show a sliver of light. If there was one minute part of the light showing, you'd have the police knocking at your door. Of course the street lamps were out and cars just had a thin strip across the middle that showed light.

In 1945, I continued to work at Ballito and the only change I can remember were the stocking colours. They changed a lot. Some colours we thought were too bright. The semi-fashioned seemed to go out; they didn't sell so much.

How I met my husband

In about 1946, I had a date one Sunday evening, with a chap I met at the Victoria Hall. I went to meet him right near the doors of the Odeon but when I got there, he said, "I'm so sorry, just look at me! I'm covered in grease and I've got to mend the car for work tomorrow. Perhaps I could see you another night?" So I said, "Oh, I'll see you up the Vic on Saturday." I wasn't all that keen. When he went off, I thought, "Well, I'm not wasting my evening and I'll go into the Odeon." I went in to see this film and I thought I'd have a good seat so I went upstairs to the front of the balcony. Well, it was packed, and I began watching half way through a film (which you could do in those days). At the end of the film, all my row was empty and I thought that didn't matter. Because there was a bit of a break, I thought I would go to the Ladies and I walked all along this empty row and up to the Ladies but when I came back, I said, "Excuse me," to this chap on the end and I went back to my seat. I sat there watching the film and then out of the corner of my eye, I saw this chap get up and start walking towards me and I thought, "Oh dear, what's this going to be?" you know! Anyway, he got up to me and he said, "Is this anybody's seat next to you?" and I said, "Well, it doesn't look like it, does it?" Then he said, "I know your sister, Win. I take my dad's work there" So I said, Oh you must be ? Gordon's son" and he said, "Yes, that's right." I'd seen him about, always looking at me - at a number of different times, so I suppose he must have been after me. When the film finished, he walked to the exit with me and I did up my raincoat and picked up my bag to walk home. He said, "I live the same way as you. Is it all right if I walk with you?" and I said, "Yes, I suppose so" and that's how we met!

I married on June 19th 1948. I just had a couple of weeks off to get married and then I went back. Of course, there was nowhere to live. You couldn't go like life is today, you know, just move in with somebody! There were so many houses bombed and they needed houses for everybody. We knew there was nothing going so I said to my mum and dad, "It doesn't look like we are going to be able to get married." We didn't know what to do. Then I said to my future husband, "Let's get married and live apart. Then we'll stand a better chance of getting a house." Because he'd had his years in the Navy, he had 'points'. You got points for everything. My dad came up with a good idea; he said, "Mum and I, we'll move downstairs and we'll have the back room. We'll make the small bedroom a box room where you can have your kitchen. You can have one bedroom with your husband and your older brother can have the other bedroom with his wife." He made the box room into a kitchen with a gas stove in it and made it just lovely. We had a big bathroom and so we were quite comfy. This was in Beresford Road. I loved it. It's silly; I wasn't looking forward to living alone, being a big family and somebody coming in all the time, you know. When you get a place of your own, you are on your own; your husband goes out to work and so on. I was quite happy living with mum and dad. We had a very happy family. My youngest brother went to live with his parents in their shop at Shenley.