EILEEN LAY

Women's Overseas Service League Lansing, Michigan Unit

Transcript of an Oral History Interview

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Eileen Lay Lansing, Michigan Unit

PREFACE

This transcript is the product of an interview conducted April 19, 1986, for the Women's Overseas Service League, by Elsie Hornbacher and Jane Piatt.

Signed, dated agreements of release and biographical information accompany the original cassette.

Transcribed by Patricia Siggers

Lansing, Michigan

31 January, 1990

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Oral History Project

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8 EILEEN LAY

Lansing, Michigan Unit

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Special thanks to Elsie Hornbacher, Jane

12 Piatt, and other members of the Lansing Unit who were present for this interview.

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EH: This is the Lansing Unit of the Women's Overseas

16 Service League, April 19, 1986. We are seizing this opportunity to record Eileen Lay ’s experiences

18 overseas. Eileen has been a member of the Lansing Unit since her retirement from the Detroit School

**20 System.**

She was born in Windsor, Ontario, but her early years

22 were spent in Ann Arbor, Michigan. After graduating from college, she taught in Howell, Ann Arbor, and

24 Detroit, Michigan. She taught Music, early elementary, and Audi torium-and-Music. Eileen was

26 always active in community affairs. She ran Christmas scenes and pageants. Her artistic ability

28 allowed her to design the costumes used in these

pageants. She also liked to paint, especially

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30 scenes. Then Eileen decided to go overseas, and she taught three years in Japan from 1950-1953. Not only

32 did Eileen teach over there, but she worked with the Japanese people. Eileen will tell of these

34 experiences in this recording being made for our unit and our Oral History Project. Now, after living in

36 Lansing in order to be near her sister, Shirley Quimby, Eileen will be moving to Apache Junction,

38 Arizona. Her address there will be M t . Vista, 3400

S. Ironwood, Apache Junction, Arizona 85220.

40 EL: Shall I speak?

JP: Well, I've never known you to not be able to!

42 < Laughter > You don't have to stand.

EL: That's the truth! Excuse me if I don't stand up. I

44 rock so. I'm so glad to be going out into the sunny climes. I don't recommend that at the age of 70,

46 anybody breaks up their house after you've been collecting for 50 years: Because there's nothing

48 like opening old boxes and finding wonderful things, that's true; but it all has to be taken out, washed,

50 polished, and repacked. This can entail a great

deal. Right now, I have boxes up over my head, piled

52 up in the so-called dining room (in which I have rarely dined). The new house in Apache Junction is

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54 going to be bigger than the one I have now; four feet wider and ten feet longer.

56 JP: You can collect more junk then.

EL: Well, yes, but I d o n ’t intend to collect anything

58 larger than a piece of turquoise from now on (I don't think so). Shirley has been bringing things out of

60 nooks and crannies in her house. My hope chest over there in the closet -- She has wonderful closets

62 under the eaves, of which I've availed myself right and left. It's fantastic. As soon as she brings it

64 out, I recognize it. I can tell her where it came from, whether I bought it, whether it was given to

66 me, and so on. (You mean you're taping this?)

< Laughter > Oh, my Godfrey! Well, O.K., Dear.

68 EH: We had to get your voice on here, Eileen.

EL: The thing is; I remember them, but I didn't know I

70 had them. Thirteen lacquer trays she brought down out of my hope chest. It's not really good lacquer.

72 My best lacquer is twenty trays I've got in my china closet there. All the same, she has brought so many

74 things out, and there are so many things left. I can't tell you; boxes and boxes. Anybody want a new

76 dress? I've got materials for it.

It has been wonderful to be associated with you

78 folks, because I always told Shirley: This is one

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group that is always looking beyond itself. It isn't

80 sunk in on itself. You all have personalities that at one time stood you in good stead overseas, and the

82 ability within yourselves to be self-reliant. You're the kind of people that did things, and you're still

84 doing them. It was nice, even though in these last

years I haven't been able to do "doodly-spit," as it

86 were, because of blindness and feet that are tree trunks instead of light, happy dancing feet. Still

88 the mind speaks to the mind and the spirit, and it ’s been wonderful to be with you in spirit, if not

90 always in presence and body.

Remember I said I was going to write out some

92 songs and song sheets for you folks. Well, I want you to know that the folders - red, blue, green,

94 yellow, were bought six months ago. I'm taking out all the song books that I have (the real old ones

96 that I'll get those songs from), with me, and I will

have to do the sheets out there, and I'll send them

98 back to Shirley. She'll keep these covers and insert the things into them when she gets the sheet and runs

100 it off. Whether they'll be handwritten (I may have to handwrite it, you know) or if I can, get it

102 typewri tten. Shirley might type them up to save

space. Eventually, you will have them. Once I got

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the folders, I was committed. I was committed anyhow, the minute I told her.

It has been lots of fun to sing along with you. I can remember singing on the Ainsworth, going over to Japan the first time. I was sitting on a hatch on the forward deck two nights out of Yokohama. We had a lot of Signal Corpsmen on board, and they had found out by that time that I was a rabble-rouser with my voice.

EH: Eileen, I'm curious. On the Ainsworth, was that when we were caught in the typhoon? or wasn't that the trip?

EL: No. We were not in a typhoon.

EH: Then that wasn’t the trip I met you on.

EL: No. I met you in Japan, I think, and coming home we were on the same — That was the Buckner, I think. Well, I crossed four times. I came home the first year in the summer and spent 30 days at home. That was something.

Anyway, I was sitting on the hatch. They brought a little campstool out for me. We had Special Service men all around. There must have been several hundred of them, and hanging from the riggings, and we had some songsheets. God bless the songsheet! I would start them out and get them to

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get going; and the Special Service girls were there

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too, some of them. I knew that in two days these men were going to be thrown into the Korean War, because the Signal Corps — That's what they were there for.

JP: Where were you going from and to?

EL: From Seattle to Yokohama. This was in 1950, in the fall of 1950. The war had just broken out.

I went down below decks where the men were. Some of them didn't get up that night, and we had a songfest down there too. It was so hot below decks that I was perspiring like mad. I got up and stood by the rail and felt morose about the whole thing, because we could only do so much, and then they were going into combat.

I caught pneumonia and didn't know I had it

until three days later, when they gave me 600,000 shots (units) of penicillin. This was at Camp Gifu. It was so strange. We arrived in Camp Gifu at night; three o'clock in the morning, actually, as we were on the railroad train down from Yokohama and Tokyo. You know those little crabs that run around in places? The BOQ was empty at one end, and every room seemed to have a crab in it, scuttling away into the corner. Luckily, we had those camp cots, with the wooden —

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So, we "dossed down," as it were. A few days later I

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turned up with pneumonia. I didn't know I had it.

We had such an interesting time there. We did have typhoons in Gifu. The principal and I were caught up at the PX (about three blocks up the road) one day. PX was such a fascinating place. We knew that the typhoon was coming at three o'clock.

They did have this thing timed down to the last minute, so that at ten minutes till three we decided to leave the PX and get back to the BOQ. As we went down the road (bending over from the waist almost as if we were formally bowing all the way because the wind was so strong), there were Japanese soldiers stationed all the way along. They warned us we had better go around behind the library because the corrugated iron sheets from the library were being blown off like leaves in the wind, and were kiting across the road. They said we could be decapitated if we went by it, so we decided to go around the windward side and just barely made it.

Then I stood in the BOQ, in the door, and watched the camp go by. You really did see a lot of things going on that wind, because we were not facing into the wind. We were crosswise of it, and here goes a corrugated sheet four feet by four feet, just

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kiting through the air like a newspaper; and tiles and other things that the wind picked up. Typhoons are lots of fun, as long as you're not out in them. Many people have been hit in the head by tiles, and thereby hangs a tale. Some of the casualties are from being hit by flying objects.

Of course, I guess Dorothy in Kansas had very much the same thing. They say we have such things that will drive straws into oak wood, and pluck a chicken. This bothers me < laugh > — have to eat it then. Well, as long as it doesn't turn it inside out like the leopard seal does to the penguin.

JP: Were you teaching out there, Eileen?

EL: Yes. You could teach anything in Japan. I started out with the second grade, graduated to first, and then I had second and fourth. I had 45 kids that time. Then the North-Central Association came around and said, "That's not kosher." They divided me up, but it was everything. I even taught arithmetic. Me! in summer school the second summer, and to the sixth grade! As long as I kept a chapter ahead of them, I was alright. < Laughter >.

EH: You had an answer book, too, didn't you?

EL: Ye-es. Without the answer book, I'd have been sunk. I really would have been, because you know how I keep

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my checkbook? I never put the cents down. I either

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put it above the $.50; if it's $20.51, I count it

$21.00. If it's below $.50, I count it $20.00. So eventually, I wind up with more in my bank account than I've actually got; but I don't care, as long as the bank's honest. But it's true: I hate to subtract, and I know people who have spent three days looking for $.03. Bob did that once, but I couldn't spare the time. This works fine. When I left Detroit to come up here, I had $80.00 I didn't know about.

EH: Maybe you'll do as well when you go to Arizona.

EL: I hope so. I have no idea. Seems to me there are

$200.00 more in my bank account than I've got accounted for in my checkbook, but I can't believe it. It does save money without your even knowing it. Of course, it could go the other way too, I suppose.

I must say that when I was teaching I was really scraping the bottom of the barrel sometimes. Maybe there would be $5.00 in my checkbook, that's all; so if it went the other way that would have been hard.

Well, now here we are, back in Japan again. Are we back in Japan?

I came home at the end of the first year for a vacation, spent 30 days at home and went to 32

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parties. This was tough. I slept all the way back. We had roomettes on the train, and I never left that except to get something to eat. I was sleeping all the way back across. Then, because I had been to Seattle and had friends there, there were two more parties in Seattle. I just barely got on the ship with all my goodies.

I had a lot of lacquer boxes when I came to pack things; a lot of them. It turned out that I went out and judged English-speaking contests amongst the Japanese high school people. Every time I did that, I got a little lacquer box as a gift. That was nice, but I had 14 lacquer boxes that I hadn't purchased myself.

My very best lacquer box is a beautiful thing that was given to me by my Wednesday night English class. These were men who were all older than I was. One of them was from the Miada Steamship Lines, or Ykada, or [a steamship line]. There were five others in this English-speaking class. We met every Wednesday night for two hours, and they would choose a different place each time. I kind of got to know places. I'd go by taxi, and they would all meet me en masse.

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It was from them that I received, when I left, a scroll from the Miada Family vaults (from Miada Province). It's about three hundred years old, and it was by a man (a kakemona) who had always painted cherry blossoms before. This was the only time that he ever didn't paint cherry blossoms. It was a fish; a great big carp, going shoo-op, like this up through the water. It's shades of brown and tan with little faint rose and blue in it, down in the water. It is a beautiful carp, and he belongs in a museum.

They knew I was going to pick that instead of a cherry blossom. They had a cherry blossom there, too, but cherry blossoms are dime-a-dozen; and this carp was something else. Also, it represented to me those men that I had spent a year and a half with every Wednesday night.

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| **268** | **EH:** | **Eileen, that isn't the carp they fly out in front of**  **a house when a new baby boy is born? < Laughter >** |
| **270** | **EL:** | **This was a live carp, in the water.** |
| **272** | **EH:**  **EL:** | **Was this one the cormorants caught?**  **This could have caught a cormorant! < Laughter >** |
|  | **JP:** | **Is that why the men reminded you of that?** |

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**EL:**

You know, the carp is supposed to be the fish that will swim upstream and will fight against all odds, like the bamboo will bend, but it will not break.

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The carp signifies Japanese manhood, and that was my

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Wednesday night class.

You couldn't call them a class because they were all older men. One of them had been through the war, and he couldn’t believe the tales I would tell him about what the Japanese had done to our boys: Because after you've been with people for a year and a half, you get so you talk pretty freely. I was the only female there, and they talked to me.

I told them the worst mistake that they had ever made was to bomb Pearl Harbor without giving us any warning or without any know-how, just sinking our ships. Nothing could have united the American people the way that did; because we were sixes and sevens really, with Roosevelt wanting to get in, and et cetera. But that united us absolutely, just like that.

We had some very interesting talks. We talked about everything. It was a conversation class, because they wanted to be able to speak English. Most of them had studied English, but way back, but they were pretty good by the time we got through.

But the one man I couldn't believe, that he had been fighting for his life and really hiding from the Americans down in the (not the Philippines, but) some

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islands down there, and he had been on the run for six months before he finally got out of there. He was the gentlest, kindest, sweetest person. He was a dear. He had written a book about his experiences, and had it mimeographed. I still have that copy someplace, but I've never had it translated. I've always thought I should have it translated and publish it. Maybe h e ’s done that already.

Very interesting people; each one just a completely different personality. They introduced me to bananas and milk whipped up with a little bit of ginger ale in it. That was a very refreshing drink. That's the kind of thing that we did. We never had any saki or anything like that, just our business meet ing.

I had a chorus of 120 Japanese National Policemen. Six weeks after I arrived there in Gifu, they moved about 6,000 new Japanese troops in there. These were young people who hadn't been in the war, except for their officers and their noncoms. Those were recruited from the old ranks, but these were the [ Yo-be-ti ], the Japanese National Policemen. The reason for that was because our men had just been taken out en masse and sent to Korea.

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It was strange. They all looked alike at first, you know, naturally; but they began to resolve themselves. About two weeks after they got there I was up in the church. (I was always choir director in whatever place I was, because of my musical background.) I was upthere playing the organ for my own enjoyment, < skip >

< Tape 1, Side 2 >

And they could read - they could sing it (they knew the tunes) - but they were pretty good. That was the group -- Iwound up with a hundred and twenty of the Japanese National Policemen in a chorus. We met at the church every Thursday, the night after the choir rehearsal.

Every Sunday night we had a get-together, and in the end when they shipped them out, I would -- And the Gaison and I would meet with them and say goodbye to the guys that were going out the next day. We'd sing "God Be With You Till We Meet Again," and I can never sing that song because it made me cry every time. Here are these Japanese men, sitting there with the tears streaming down their faces. They were leaving, and they didn't want to leave us, because we were their sister and their mother somehow.

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We had a great time. They kept writing me

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letters back from these Japanese camps that they had gone to. They would say, "Dear Mistress Lay," because they had copybook English, as it were. One young fellow (I don't think he was more than nineteen) walked me back to the BOQ in the rain one night, and I said goodbye to him and talked to him. He seemed so kind of lonesome. I tried to buck him up a little bit. Three weeks later I heard that he had committed suicide in the camp where he had gone.

Our men had been sent over to Korea. That's why they moved these six thousand in, and they became Yo-be-ti [sic]. A couple years later they turned this Yo-be-ti group into the Quan-tai [sic].

One of my friends was Major Gower, who was the American head of the Yo-be-ti group. When he was moved out to a place out in the boondocks (someplace in the mountains -- Kawasa? -- someplace up there), he wrote and asked me if I would come up and help him entertain some Japanese visiting dignitaries.

That was a tale all by itself. I had to stay in a hotel down in the town, and the little Maid-sans were so careful of me. My Godfrey, you would have thought I was made of beaten gold, ready to bend and break at any minute. They watched over me from the

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time I got up till the time I went to bed, all night I guess, and the next day. Willie Gower, who was a very punctilious person — He was very, very careful not to offend anyone at any time.

I knew that he was suffering from ulcers. The Army didn’t know that, but when he would order something from the bar it was always coke. He couldn’t drink, so he was just my cup of tea. He

loved to hear me play the piano. Anyway, Willie, after he deposited me at the hotel, went out and walked the streets in the town for about an hour and a half so everybody would know that everything was on the up-and-up. < laughter > Evidently there were some Americans that visited some of the complement of officers, or people up there under Willie, that were not; so he wanted them to know that I was:

< laughter > And I was.

One of the things we enjoyed so much was the cormorant fishing at Gifu. We were stationed there for a year. The Nagragawa Officers’ Club was situated on the other side of the town from the camp where we lived. We would go up there, and we could spend a weekend, or we could just go for a night and go cormorant fishing.

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We would get into these sight-seeing boats that were flat sampans, and they would oar us (push us or pull us) up the river. It was a shallow river, along the edges anyway. Then, way up the river we could see these lights glowing. There were charcoal braziers or wooden braziers, with flames, on the bow of each boat. It was kind of a metal basket with these fires in them to attract the fish. We would call it jack-lighting over here, but there they could do it.

Their fish would come up close to the boat. They had about five or six cormorants. They're the ones with the long necks that are real fishermen, and these birds would line up alongside of the boat. Then the fishermen would throw them off into the water, and they would catch fish; But there was a little ring around the base of their neck, to which the fisherman attached a cord so that he could haul them in and push them out. Also the ring kept the fish from going down into the bird's gullet. If he caught one small enough to go down, that was his reward. All the others, when the fisherman saw that the bird had a lot of fish in his neck, he would pull him up and then squeeze, squeeze, and the fish would

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flop out into a box. He would throw the cormorant in and set it fishing again.

Boatmen would hit on the edge of the boat with their oars — with their poles, and this also would attract the fish (the sound). It was all very exciting. We had a few fireworks, and we would drift down for about a mile with these fishermen. They would come and show us all the fish they had caught, in the box. You'd be surprised. Those birds did a good job.

Funny thing is, the fishermen all wore grass skirts. The reason for that was the cormorants had been known to take a bite out of them; so for a thousand years this had been going on. The fishermen had learned they had better have these dried straw skirts. The cormorants were kept in lattice work boxes about two feet high, two feet wide. If you didn't line the cormorants up, that’s why they took a peck at the fishermen. If you didn't line them up on the boat in the pecking order of the birds, then they would start pecking the fishermen. It had to be a number one bird up near the bow, and so on and so forth down toward the end. God knows what the last bird thought, but he didn't peck anybody.

JP; You think that's how we got the term, pecking order?

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EL: Yes. They would have it with chickens, too, in a

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farmyard. I think that's where we found out about it. I don't know when the Japanese found out about it, but birds definitely have to be in the right order. If you don't get them right, they fight among themselves, bite the fishermen, and you have to turn around and switch them. Anyway, it's a very exciting time.

EH: That was the most delightful experience, I think, I had in Japan -- the cormorant fishing at Gifu.

EL: We would go about once every two weeks. It was just lots of fun.

EH: They use sparklers too, don't they? EL: Yes.

JP: Eileen, did you ever get any reaction from Japanese soldiers (ex-soldiers), in regard to the war and this sort of thing?

EL: Well, no, I think not the way you think. JP: Not negatively?

EL: No: Occasionally, as I was riding on the trains; because I used the same transportation they did, most of the time. I didn't bustle about in jeeps so much, and I got around quite a bit. But in the trains they would come in, and they would be war-wounded or amputees. You see, Japan didn’t have any way of

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taking care of their war-wounded or the people, like we do here. They were on their own, and they would pass the hat, like this; and by golly — when they got to me, I had to put money in, in there. I couldn't not do it, because if we had that same situation we would do it here.

Occasionally, I saw it: The amputees would be in the railroad stations, and I always tried to help when I could, because I knew that they had no care whatsoever. In fact, they were anathematized for having come back at all, because that was the Japanese idea: That you gave your life for the emperor. And if they arrived back, then they were just persona non-grata.

EH: I will say that there, they have the expression "Ah- so, deska," which means "So it was." I think the only experience I had in that, my Japanese lab assistant said to me, "When you first came to Japan, weren't you afraid of the American military?" I said, "Oh, no. If they harmed me the people back home would know, because they wouldn't be hearing from me, and they could write to my congressman and find out what happened. There would be protection from the American government." He did not believe m e .

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JP: They were pretty bitter then towards the military?

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EH: Yes.

EL: The people who came back — their mothers were glad to see them, on the whole.

JP: The only time I had any experience; when we were in Hawaii, we went out to see the remains of a ship (results from the bombing). I think one of the saddest things was a Japanese family there, sort of almost taking responsibility for it.

EL: Yes, you think the Oriental is inscrutable. He's about as inscrutable as we are (or more so). I've seen more Japanese with tears in their eyes. I suppose it was because I was in unusual situations; because ordinarily, as you face a Japanese they will try to make you feel good, and they won’t show that they feel bad about anything as long as they can make you feel good. If you get to know them, or if you're warm and you're flowing back and forth, as it is; and they feel that you don't have a barrier there, they are likely to be just as emotional as anybody else. I found that out the first six weeks I was there, when these departing soldiers would weep.

EH: Eileen, let's take another angle on that.

522 Kabuki place they laugh when someone dies.

In their

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EL: No, I think you misunderstand that. They are

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laughing not at the fact that somebody has died, but they are trying not to put a bad face upon it.

EH: Show their emotions?

EL: Right. I have seen colored people in Detroit do the same thing. They would laugh like mad when somebody got hurt. That's not because they are laughing at

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| **530** | **EH:** | **the people. It's an emotional reaction.**  **It's to hide their feeling.** |
| **532** | **EL:** | **Yes, that's right.** |
|  | **JP:** | **I hate to break this up, but —** |
| **534** | **EL:**  **JP:** | **Oh, I've just been talking like mad.**  **You did it perfectly, Eileen.** |

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EH: I have got a tape of it, but I want Eileen to identify herself and give us her new address.

EL: Tell you what I did here. I did a lot of speech making, and I spoke for the Asahi Shimbun, the Asahi Newspaper English Reader's Club; the Mainichi English Readers' Club; fourteen Englishspeaking contests; a couple of universities’ English Reading Club.

I also had a chorus of 120 Japanese policemen; about 90 boys and girls from the Osaka Culture Center. These were about a year and a half apiece, or two years,depending on how long I was there. Then when they moved me out, darned if these kids

### WOMEN'S OVERSEAS SERVICE LEAGUE

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| **552** |  | **mornings, before they even got to church. Really,**  **the loyalty there is tremendous.** |
| **554** | **JP:** | **How long were you there altogether? What were the**  **years?** |
|  | **EL:** | **1950; then I came home for the summer in '51; went** |
| **556** |  | **back \*51 and '52; and came back in 1953.** |
|  | **EH:** | **We met on the Shenks [sic], I think. Give me your** |
| **558** |  | **name, your new address?** |
|  | **EL:** | **Frances Eileen Lay.** |
| **560** | **EH:** | **You're with the Lansing Unit now, with the WOSL.** |
|  | **EL:** | **I will be in Apache Junction at Mountain Vista Mobile** |

didn't follow me to the new chapel. Some of them rode the electric railway, et cetera, and made several changes; three and four hours on Sunday

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Home Park, which I just put MHP. That's 6400 S. Ironwood Drive, Lot #379: Phone number 982-3636, 1-602 prefix.

EH: Today is April 19, 1986. Thank you, Eileen. EL: I've lived a long time; you know that?

< End of Interview >

Transcribed by Patricia Siggers

572 Lansing, Michigan

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