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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

8 EILEEN LAY

Lansing, Michigan Unit

Special thanks to Elsie Hornbacher, Jane
Piatt, and other members of the Lansing Unit who
were present for this interview.

EH: This is the Lansing Unit of the Women's Overseas
Service League, April 19, 1986. We are seizing this
opportunity to record Eileen Lay's experiences
overseas. Eileen has been a member of the Lansing
Unit since her retirement from the Detroit School
System.

She was born in Windsor, Ontario, but her early years
were spent in Ann Arbor, Michigan. After graduating
from college, she taught in Howell, Ann Arbor, and
Detroit, Michigan. She taught Music, early
elementary, and Auditorium-and-Music. Eileen was
always active in community affairs. She ran
Christmas scenes and pageants. Her artistic ability
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 Mt. 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 don'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 typewritten. Shirley might type them up to save
space. Eventually, you will have them. Once I got

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

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

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

116 EL: No. We were not in a typhoon.

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

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

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

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get going; and the Special Service girls were there
130 too, some of them. I knew that in two days these men
were going to be thrown into the Korean War, because
132 the Signal Corps -- That's what they were there for.

JP: Where were you going from and to?

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

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

I caught pneumonia and didn't know I had it
144 until three days later, when they gave me 600,000
shots (units) of penicillin. This was at Camp Gifu.
146 It was so strange. We arrived in Camp Gifu at night;
three o'clock in the morning, actually, as we were on
148 the railroad train down from Yokohama and Tokyo. You
know those little crabs that run around in places?
150 The BOQ was empty at one end, and every room seemed
to have a crab in it, scuttling away into the corner.
152 Luckily, we had those camp cots, with the wooden --

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154 So, we "dossed down," as it were. A few days later I
turned up with pneumonia. I didn't know I had it.

156 We had such an interesting time there. We did
have typhoons in Gifu. The principal and I were
158 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.

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

174 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
176 into the wind. We were crosswise of it, and here
goes a corrugated sheet four feet by four feet, just

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

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

190 JP: Were you teaching out there, Eileen?

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

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

EL: Ye-es. Without the answer book, I'd have been sunk.
202 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
204 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
206 eventually, I wind up with more in my bank account
than I've actually got; but I don't care, as long as
208 the bank's honest. But it's true: I hate to
subtract, and I know people who have spent three days
210 looking for \$.03. Bob did that once, but I couldn't
spare the time. This works fine. When I left
212 Detroit to come up here, I had \$80.00 I didn't know
about.

214 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
216 \$200.00 more in my bank account than I've got
accounted for in my checkbook, but I can't believe
218 it. It does save money without your even knowing it.
Of course, it could go the other way too, I suppose.

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

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

226 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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228 parties. This was tough. I slept all the way back.
We had roomettes on the train, and I never left that
230 except to get something to eat. I was sleeping all
the way back across. Then, because I had been to
232 Seattle and had friends there, there were two more
parties in Seattle. I just barely got on the ship
234 with all my goodies.

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

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

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

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

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.

EH: Was this one the cormorants caught?

272 EL: This could have caught a cormorant! < Laughter >

JP: Is that why the men reminded you of that?

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

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278 The carp signifies Japanese manhood, and that was my
Wednesday night class.

280 You couldn't call them a class because they were
all older men. One of them had been through the war,
282 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
284 a half, you get so you talk pretty freely. I was the
only female there, and they talked to me.

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

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

300 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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302 islands down there, and he had been on the run for
304 six months before he finally got out of there. He
306 was the gentlest, kindest, sweetest person. He was a
308 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 he's done that already.

310 Very interesting people; each one just a
312 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.
314 That's the kind of thing that we did. We never had
any saki or anything like that, just our business
316 meeting.

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

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

334 < Tape 1, Side 2 >

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

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

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

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

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

That was a tale all by itself. I had to stay in
372 a hotel down in the town, and the little Maid-sans
were so careful of me. My Godfrey, you would have
374 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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376 time I got up till the time I went to bed, all night
I guess, and the next day. Willie Gower, who was a
378 very punctilious person -- He was very, very careful
not to offend anyone at any time.

380 I knew that he was suffering from ulcers. The
Army didn't know that, but when he would order
382 something from the bar it was always coke. He
couldn't drink, so he was just my cup of tea. He
384 loved to hear me play the piano. Anyway, Willie,
after he deposited me at the hotel, went out and
386 walked the streets in the town for about an hour and
a half so everybody would know that everything was on
388 the up-and-up. < laughter > Evidently there were
some Americans that visited some of the complement of
390 officers, or people up there under Willie, that were
not; so he wanted them to know that I was:
392 < laughter > And I was.

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

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

410 Their fish would come up close to the boat.
 They had about five or six cormorants. They're the
412 ones with the long necks that are real fishermen, and
 these birds would line up alongside of the boat.
414 Then the fishermen would throw them off into the
 water, and they would catch fish: But there was a
416 little ring around the base of their neck, to which
 the fisherman attached a cord so that he could haul
418 them in and push them out. Also the ring kept the
 fish from going down into the bird's gullet. If he
420 caught one small enough to go down, that was his
 reward. All the others, when the fisherman saw that
422 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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424 flop out into a box. He would throw the cormorant in
and set it fishing again.

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

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

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

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450 EL: Yes. They would have it with chickens, too, in a
452 farmyard. I think that's where we found out about
454 it. I don't know when the Japanese found out about
456 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.

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

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

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

462 EL: Yes.

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

466 EL: Well, no, I think not the way you think.

JP: Not negatively?

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

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

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

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

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JP: They were pretty bitter then towards the military?

500 EH: Yes.

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

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

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

EH: Eileen, let's take another angle on that. In their
522 Kabuki place they laugh when someone dies.

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EL: No, I think you misunderstand that. They are
524 laughing not at the fact that somebody has died, but
they are trying not to put a bad face upon it.

526 EH: Show their emotions?

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

EH: It's to hide their feeling.

532 EL: Yes, that's right.

JP: I hate to break this up, but --

534 EL: Oh, I've just been talking like mad.

JP: You did it perfectly, Eileen.

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

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

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

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548 didn't follow me to the new chapel. Some of them
rode the electric railway, et cetera, and made
550 several changes; three and four hours on Sunday
mornings, before they even got to church. Really,
552 the loyalty there is tremendous.

JP: How long were you there altogether? What were the
554 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
562 Home Park, which I just put MHP. That's 6400 S.
Ironwood Drive, Lot #379: Phone number 982-3636,
564 1-602 prefix.

EH: Today is April 19, 1986. Thank you, Eileen.

566 EL: I've lived a long time; you know that?

568 < End of Interview >

570

Transcribed by Patricia Siggers

572

Lansing, Michigan

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