Neville Kerr Notes

Subjects:

At RVIB 1947—55
Started at 7 years old
In govt school 5 yo, not good experiences
Relieved, overjoyed to come to RVIB & fit in
Very clear memories of first day – happy
Playing cricket
Braille vs pen & paper
Higher education
The 'house' structure
About Harry Findlayson
House mistress reading for students and
-teaching some living skills
In trouble for flirting 'playing ducks & drakes'
RVIB fostered interest in mechanical things
Carpentry lessons
Harry Lloyd (carpentry teacher & Santa)
Returned servicemen being rehabilitated
& doing maintainence on school buildings
Model Parliaments/elections/policy speeches
Liberal Party
Stopping music lessons
What happened on w'ends (outings)
Teacher/s or 'approved' people to accompany
Church going
Dancing lessons, teasing the teacher
Australian/Victorian Ballroom Champion
Ghost stories
Mary Ann Grace
Midnight feasts
Wrestling matches for the boys
Coming back after 14 years for rehab
What he learned at Rehab (1970)
Live plays and music evenings
Benefit of talking to others in the same boat
Switchboard
O & M
Much more freedom than at school
ASSIST

People:

Miss Murphy
Geoff Green
Harry Findlayson
Mr McEwan
Mrs Brooks
John Lowe
Miss Montgomery
Miss Cox
Matron Rogeaux?
Harry Lloyd
Eric Eagle?
Jock Armstrong
? Lindsay
DonForbes
Neil Westh
Alf Dovey
Sister Thompson
Miss Rowe
Sister Forest
Ray Whiting
Sue Fraser
Bev Morris
Ralph Lightfoot
John Keist
Eileen (cook rehab)

Neville Kerr
24 Nov, 1990

Questioner is Alan Nuske.

My time at the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind was from 1947 to 1955 as a student. I was seven years old when I first started at the institute, and my memories of the first day are very, very clear in my mind. But I'd like to step back a moment to emphasize why those memories are so clear, why they were so important to me, and why I remember them so clearly.

I started school at five years old at a government run primary state school, and I had a very unhappy time at that school. I had a feeling of alienation with the other students – I found that I couldn't really join in their games (I wasn't invited), and I felt really like an outsider; on the outside of the circle rather than being part of the other students and the whole school. Also, I didn't get on particularly well with the teachers. I suspect that those teachers had never had a blind student in their class before, and they didn't know quite how to cope with me, so I didn't get on very well academically either, and I can remember some of the teachers being very frustrated with me. Indeed I can remember on one occasion, my father coming down to the school and telling the headmaster that under no circumstances was I to be "strapped" if I didn't seem to be learning what I was supposed to be learning or should be learning. So I had two years of schooling in that situation at two different primary schools, and they were equally as bad.

On my very first day at the RVIB in 1947 (when I was seven years old), I remember walking into the school ground. It was a beautiful clear sunny day in probably February or March, and when I arrived in the playground, the other students were playing cricket, and as I approached, I was immediately invited to join the other students playing cricket, and after a very short time, I was asked if I would like a bat. I thought this was wonderful – I had never been offered a cricket bat before in my life, so I took the bat, and the ball was bowled along the ground and not very fast. I had a little bit of sight in those days, and I saw the ball, and I actually managed to hit the ball. It didn't go very far, but the sheer excitement of being able to hit a cricket ball … I could still feel the ball clanging to the bat – it was a wonderful feeling. After a few balls, I was bowled out, but I was told that since I was a new boy, I could have a second try (I thought this was wonderful). Eventually I went out, and I spent a little time in the field. I managed to field a couple of balls and throw them back to the bowler, and I enjoyed doing that. Then after a short time I was asked whether I would like to have a bowl, so I even had a bowl. I was over the moon – this was absolutely wonderful. I was playing with all these kids that seemed pleased to have me there. There were one or two staff people there who were helpful and showed me what to do. This was an experience I never had before, because even outside school before I went there (RVIB), I found that I couldn't play with the friends that my sister had, so it was a wonderful feeling.

And then I remember the next day going into the classroom for the very first time, and I was immediately given things that I could cope with. I remember a very kindly female teacher (I'm not certain of her name, but I believe it may have been Miss Murphy). I remember her being very kind and patient, and helping me to learn things that I could cope with. So I had a feeling of being a part of the place. I got on well with the other students and very well with the teachers.

Referring back to the primary school before I came to the RVIB, I felt such a feeling of alienation there, that when I left school, we used to ride home on a bicycle, and my

sister who was a little older than me and was supposed to keep an eye on me. As soon as we got out of the school rounds, I used to peddle as fast and as hard as I could, to get away from my sister and the other students. I only felt a feeling of relief and happiness once I knew that I was on my own because I'd lose that feeling of being an odd person who wasn't part of the rest of the group. That was an important point in my life, because since then, I've always been happy with my own company – I could be relaxed with my own company.
But the first day at the institute is a day of which I have very clear visual and hearing memories of that time – it was a wonderful time in my life.

Alan: Were you encouraged to use Braille, or did you use what sight you had with large print ?

A bit of both. I used Braille, and also I used my sight. I actually did a fair amount of my schoolwork with pencil and paper, but I was taught the basic Braille code from the start. I was allowed to use whatever form I wanted, and as a result, I didn't learn Braille very competently, particularly when I was small. I used to write with a pencil, but I had trouble reading my own writing – I could write okay, but I had some trouble reading it. I was taught to some extent to make the best use of the sight I had, as I did have a useful amount of sight in those days.

Alan: Did you feel that there was a division between those who had sight, and those who had not ?

No, I didn't feel that at all. I didn't feel that blind people were clumped together and not be friendly with the others – I had no feeling of that at all. I just remember that all of the children (well, almost all), being very friendly and cooperative, and we just seemed to be one group of people. I certainly didn't feel as though I was on the outside, and I think we all helped each other. Playing cricket, I was able see the ball, and there were occasions where people couldn't find it, and I was happy to help with that. I think it all worked out well.

Allan: Did you feel that you received as good an education as the totally blind ? I ask this because almost everybody that went on to further education were totally blind.

As for the level of education that I received there, it's very hard for me to compare it with anything else, because I don't have anything else to compare it with. Certainly I learnt much quicker when I got to the RVIB than I did at the primary school, but once I advanced through the school, it was difficult for me to say. I felt that when I left the institute at the age of sixteen, my education was very incomplete, and the opportunity didn't present itself for me to to on to higher education. I certainly wanted to do that (go to higher education), and I made some attempts in that area, but perhaps I didn't try hard enough. I felt my education was not complete, but I'm not certain if I should say that it wasn't a good education. Academically, I was a very average sort of student, but I though there were a lot of aspects of the environment at that school that proved to be very valuable to me over the years.

Alan: But you certainly don't blame the fact that you had some sight while the school perhaps was more geared to those who had none.

I think, in retrospect, that they should've insisted on me using Braille more, but then I suppose they weren't to know that my sight was going to deteriorate so that not long after school, Braille would be the only option that I would have. It's one of those things that doesn't have an easy answer really.

Alan: After you were there for a few years, there was a change of headmaster. Do you remember the interim time when Geoff Green was there one day, and wasn't there the next ? What was the feeling among the children ?

I know very little about Geoff Green. I was a very junior student when he was there, and I'm not even sure which year he left. I don't recall a lot about it, but I remember an interim period when we had no headmaster, and things seemed to become very slack, and we didn't do very much actual schoolwork in that time until the next headmaster was appointed. There were a few rumours floating around, but I don't have any clear recollection of what they were all about.

Alan: And then the next man to be headmaster was Harry Finlayson.

That's correct. I liked Harry Finlayson very much. I had been told that he was at the institute on an earlier occasion quite a few years before, and he was well thought of at the time. I like him very much. My memory of Harry Finlayson was that he was a very quiet and very academic man, and I liked him quite a lot, and I think I got on fairly well with him.

Alan: What were some of the changes that he brought about that you can remember ?

I think that it functioned more as a school should function. I remember the classes being more organized, and we seemed to have more of a program that we had to proceed through during the course of the year. It seemed to be more structured – more of a proper learning pattern rather than a whole lot of haphazard lessons (which how it seemed to be prior to that – particularly in the interim period when there was no headmaster). He seemed to bring back an organization, and there seemed to be an aim in what we were doing, rather than going there just for the sake of going there and learning a few unconnected things.

Alan: There was also the house structure that was put in place ....

That came during Harry Finlayson's time, and it was put in place in order to engender some level of competition, and the importance of striving. The house structure did another things – we were divided into houses for the sake of sports, so that on the sports day (toward the end of the year), one house would compete against the other houses, and there would be an aggregate score which would determine which house would be the winner of the school sports on that particular year. This encouraged the students to train harder for the sports, whereas previously, we just ran on the day. Knowing that there was a shield to be won meant that some of us got out and started training quite a few weeks before, by running around the grounds, and doing the various things that were going to be in the sports. Also it had to do with courtesy, and how well you looked after your part of the dormitory, and things of that sort. I think it was a very worthwhile thing – it gave us something to strive for, and also made us realize the importance of teamwork and fitting in with people, and even to the extent of helping the domestic staff in the kitchen (the houses would take turns in cleaning

up the dishes in the evening). It was a good idea – I'm not sure if it was his (Finlayson's) idea or someone else's, but I think it worked well, and I think it was a structured thing which had a good outcome.

Alan: How were the houses structured ? How was it decided who be in each house ?

Well, that's a very interesting question. I know there was the odd child that defected from one house to another, with a lot of "carrying on". But I'm not entirely certain how the decisions were originally made. But I think that what they tried to do was to divide the houses up so that, for example, in the case of sports, there would be roughly an equal amount of ability within each house. It wouldn't have been good to put all the fast runners in one house because in that case, the other houses would have no chance. I suspect that that was one of the reasons. Also, there was mixture of the partially sighted and the totally blind, so that there could be some partially sighted people in each house that could help the totally blind in basic sport things, like finding the cricket ball, and things of that sort. So they are the rough criteria that I judged, but whether there were other reasons that I was unaware of, I can't say.

Alan: Did the houses have both girls and boys in them ?

No, they didn't. I think there were two houses for the boys, and two houses for the girls - I'm not quite clear if there were two or three on each side, but I think there were two. They were either all girls or all boys – not mixed.

One of the things that I recall from my time at the institute is some of the people who were there that I remember very clearly. I remember for example, the great kindness shown by some people. This contrasts with my time at the primary school beforehand, such as the alienation from other students. One of the people I remember from when I was quite little, was Mr. McEwan who was one of the house masters. I thought of him as a fine gentleman, and he was very, very kind to the students – the male students (he was on the boys' side). Sometimes on a Sunday, he would take one, sometimes two of the students to his home. I don't think there was any favouritism here – he took people in turn to his home. We'd go there and have our Sunday lunch, and an evening meal, and then we'd come back to school. He would just take us to his home for the day, show us the things he had in his home, show us his books, sometimes read to us. He also believed that the library had an insufficient number of books, so he would Braille out by hand quite a number of books, and he would give the students books at the end of the term to read during the school holidays. Sometimes his books had mistakes in them but he bound them nicely. He would apologize if the books were not well done. All of this was done by hand frame, and it must've taken him an enormous amount of time. This indicates how genuine this man was, and how much he really wanted to help. I think that within the limitations of his knowledge and experience, he did a great deal to help us, so I remember him with very, very warm affection. I remember going to see him when he was very sick in hospital, toward the end of his life. We saw him on a number of occasions, but I remember one day saying that we would see on the following week, and he said "no you won't see me – I won't be here". And I said "oh, you're getting well and coming out (of hospital)", and he said "oh no, I'll be saying goodbye to you now". We went off, and didn't think much more about it, but he died three or four days later. He obviously knew that the end was near, but he didn't want to put it in that way to us, but he did think it important to say

goodbye, so I was very sad about that. But he showed great kindness to me and to other people as well.

After a while, and I can't remember what year it actually was, we changed from house masters to house mistresses. That made things very different, but whether or not it solved any problems in the management side, I can't say. There were some house mistresses who were very, very kind to us and showed great patience, and did things beyond what they're job descriptions would've asked of them. There was one lady, Mrs. Brooks who was very kind. For example, she would read motor manuals and modern motor magazines to John Lowe and myself (we were very interested in cars). I don't think she was in the slightest bit interested n cars, but she read them, and was very patient. She would sometimes reread articles if they were particularly interesting. Once, after she had read all the magazines, she asked if there was anything else that we would like read. She would write letters for us if we were writing home, she would read letters to us, if we wanted any parts (of the letters) to be read again, she would read them again. John and I developed a very warm affection for this lady. It's actually interesting to reflect on this particular person because she did a number of interesting things. For example, I think she was very forward thinking in her thoughts desires to make blind people equal to everybody else, and we would practice going into shops, walking hand in hand, and she would give me predetermined signals with her fingers – e.g. "pass the money over the counter" was one signal I recall. Another signal was "you're going to be given the change now". We would walk in – I would open the door (because that's what a man does for a woman), and she would walk beside me, not half a step in front of me. We'd practice doing that sort of thing a lot; not just shops – we would practice walking through busy stores in Melbourne, going to picture theatres, and things of that sort. Although I was blind and she was sighted, she always made sure that I did the things that a man was expected to do. If were going to sit in a row of seats, I would sit at the end, and she would sit in the seat one in from the end – that's the way things were done in those days. I think she had a big influence on me. I knew her during my time of emotional development, so I was about eleven or twelve when I first knew her, and I got to like her very much, but when I got to that age when a male notices a female, I also discovered that she was also a very attractive woman to look at (I had some sight), and that influenced me to think that all beautiful women are as nice as her, which of course is a very erroneous thing to think, but that was how I thought at the time. I thought she was a beautiful person first, and then I realized how attractive she was to look at. She really was attractive, but I think I would've thought she was attractive regardless of what shape or size she might have been. She was only one of a number of people there who also showed us great kindness. There were some others that I didn't care for much – there was one house mistress who was very grumpy and short-tempered. Her name was Miss. Montgomery; I'm sure she did her job very well, but she wasn't very well liked by me (I'm not sure about other people), but that could just have been a personality thing. There was another house mistress named Miss. Cox who was an absolutely stunningly beautiful young blonde, but she didn't have an especially nice voice, so she didn't seem all that beautiful to me, although she was certainly beautiful to look at. But I remember the ones who showed kindness and did things beyond the call of their duty, and that came from the genuine desire on their part to want to do those sort of things.

Alan: Who was the matron in those days, and did you have much to do with her ?

The last matron was Matron Rogeaux (Sp). I didn't have a lot to do with her, but on one occasion, I was caught flirting with one of the girls. I was dragged into the matrons office, and told that I was not to be "playing ducks and drakes" with the girls, and she gave me a lecture about how the reason that that I was there was to learn and do my schoolwork – that's what I should concentrate on. Even in my time, the girls and boys were kept very separate – they lived in separate parts of the building, and they had separate playing grounds. The time when we mixed was in the classroom. At mealtimes, the boys sat at one end of the dining room, and the girls sat at the other. On the weekend we would sometimes mix a little – we'd go out for walks, and things of that sort. But we were kept very much apart – that was by design and that was to minimize any fraternizing with the opposite sex. So she (the matron) wasn't impressed when she caught us carrying on in the classroom.

Alan: Did the institute do anything to foster the interest in mechanical things ?

We were taken to the motor show on a number of occasions, with Mrs. Brooks, and with other people on some occasions, but I remember her being very good at describing cars. I had some sight, but she would describe some of the finer points that perhaps I hadn't seen. We did have a science teacher there who came from outside, although I can't remember his name. He showed us quite a lot of mechanical type things that interested me very much. He showed us a few other things that I wasn't so interested in. I was always interested in tangible things – things I could get my hands on, and achieve things with. He showed us a few things, like fulcrums, levers, and things of that sort.

Alan: In your time, did they have an old car to be used as a teaching aid ?

I didn't see an old car at the institute; nor do I remember seeing the tram that other people spoke about. But we did have carpentry lessons, where we learnt some very basic carpentry. One thing that amuses me from the carpentry time was an exam where we were asked three questions. I was the only one who knew these three questions. The reason I knew them was because I had some sight, and the questions were related to the design of buildings, so it was grossly unfair to the totally blind people who, for example, couldn't see the roof structures of buildings (which was what one of the questions was about). I was able to make an approximately correct guess of what the answer was, and that pleased the instructor. After the three questions, we were told that the exam was over, and at the end of the term year, I got the prize for being the best carpenter in the class (which I'm sure wasn't right – I just managed to answer those questions).

Alan: Was the carpentry teacher Harry Lloyd ?

Yes, Harry Lloyd was our carpentry teacher, and also Father Christmas at the end of the year.

Alan: He doubled as Father Christmas ?

Yes, he doubled as Father Christmas. I remember working with some blind chaps in the carpentry shop, Eric Eagle (sp) was one that I recall.

Alan: And Jock Armstrong.
Jock Armstrong was there, and there was another man whose name I've just forgotten.

Alan: Lindsay ?

Yes, "somebody" Lindsay, but there was another man whose name I've forgotten. I had a lot of encouragement from them because I could see that they could do it, and, like me, they were blind people. In fact, they were totally blind, and I had some sight. I got a lot of encouragement from them, apart from being shown what to do.

Alan – They were returned servicemen and being rehabilitated, and they were working on the maintenance part of the school too. I'd like to know more about them.

Yes, they were working on the maintenance part of the building. I remember on one occasion they were repairing one of the fences in the boys' grounds, and because I had been going to the carpentry classes, I went up and gave them a bit of a hand. I enjoyed doing that – I had a little bit of sight, so I was able to help them. I was very encouraged by the fact that they were able to do it. I thought that if they could do it, then I could do it as well. They did quite a lot of maintenance around the school buildings, and with the help of Harry Lloyd, and another sighted person whose name I've now forgotten. I think they were responsible for a lot of the maintenance of the buildings, and even doing things like repairing school desks. I think those blind fellows did earn the money that they got – it wasn't simply just an occupational situation for them – they did good work.

Alan: Were there any on the teaching staff that were useful role models for you ?

I think we were very much influenced in the classes by some of our teachers. For example, Mr. Forbes – Don Forbes, was a very strict teacher, but I think we learnt a lot from Don. I think he was a very knowledgeable man and was very insistent that you "got on" with your class work. But I think Neil West had the biggest influence on me – not only in teaching me actual bald facts, but influencing my attitude to a lot of things. For example, we had model parliaments in school, which he told us how to structure, and we had to have elections, and we had to draw up policy speeches, and have budgets, and things of that sort. There was no doubt that Neil was a strong supporter of the Liberal party, and he unwittingly influenced a lot of us along those lines in our early years. He was an influential man in a lot ways, and I thought of him as a gentleman, a very decent man, a good teacher, and a knowledgeable man. He was an excellent Braille reader, which is something that I certainly wasn't in those days, and I was very impressed by the way that he could read.
There were other people who I think had an influence. I liked Alf Dovey who was the last headmaster in the last year or so that I was there. I remember him as being a bright cheerful man, I felt he was a very suitable headmaster, a superb reader, and he helped me to appreciate literature at least in a small way. We used to love him reading to us – whether it was novels or articles out of the newspapers (he used to always read us the football teams on a Friday). I liked him a lot. Harry Finlayson, I liked very much. And some of the other staff member – I've already mentioned Mr. McEwan – I think he was a really good role model for me. Among some of the female teachers there, I think we saw great kindness and warmth from some of those people. Some of the nurses – Sister Thompson had the attitude of someone who had been in the army,

but she was bright, "with it", and she taught us the importance of cleanliness and punctuality, and those sort of things. Also, George Finlay was a very strong role model for me. I wasn't a good music student, but George had infinite patience with me. He was, I believe, a superb musician, but he was also a very clear thinking and knowledgeable man. When I think of gentlemen, I put George Finlay very near the top. We used to have great discussions about all kinds of things, other than music, and often, if my music lesson was the last for the day, we'd often sit around for quite a time talking about politics, or anything at all. I have very warm and happy memories of George Finlay. It was a great disappointment to me when I had to ask him whether I could stop learning music, because I felt I was wasting his time and mine. My disappointment was in disappointing him rather than myself. I wanted to be a good pianist, but I knew I didn't have it in me, and I really wanted to achieve for George's benefit more than my own, so I was very sad when I had to finally tell George – "look, I think we have to give it away". He agreed with me immediately, but I never lost respect for him, and I don't think he lost respect for me either. Even though I wasn't having music lessons, I'd still look for George on occasions, and have chats with him – I felt I could talk to him about anything, and I often did. He was a very patient man and he would always listen – these were the kindnesses I certainly didn't get at the schools before I went to the RVIB.

Alan: You stayed at the institute right through the weekend – can you tell us what happened in the weekends ?

I was a term person because my parents lived in the country, and the weekends were quite a good time. Many of the students would go home for the weekend, so there were a much smaller number of people there during the weekends. We would often go for walks around Albert Park, or around Albert Park Lake. If we walked around too quickly, we would have to walk around for a second time, and that would be six miles (it was three miles once around). Other times, we would walk up St Kilda Road to around the Shrine area, perhaps to the Botanic Gardens, and then back down Punt Road and Moubray Street and back to the institute. Other times we would walk down to Chapel Street – I remember sometimes on a Saturday morning, looking at the pretty girls walking up and down the street. Sometimes we would stop outside windows, and they would talk to us about the window displays, and things of that sort. We would go to the beach. My favourite beach in those days was Brighton, but sometimes we went out to dirty old St Kilda (that's what we though it was, but it probably wasn't a fair description of that beach). The idea of going to Brighton was that it involved a train ride as well – we'd walk down to Prahran station, and then walk down to Brighton, and spend the afternoon down there – we liked that. Sometimes we'd go on train rides to some of the outer suburbs like Lilydale, or somewhere like that – just for a train ride. Other times, we'd go to Wattle Park, which as I remember, was a very long tram ride – we thought that as almost an outer suburb, but it's certainly not regarded in that way nowadays.
We always went to church on Sunday mornings at St Matthews in High Street, Prahran – that's where the Protestants went, and the Catholics went off separately. We always had to where our suits (to church), and I remember one occasion when the students went on strike because it was an extremely hot day, and we were told that we had to wear our suits and ties, and we refused. We finally got our way and we went to church with our ties and shirts, but not our suit coats, and we thought that was a great victory that we won over the staff.

Alan: You always went out accompanied by staff – you never went out by yourselves.

That's correct. When we went to church, for example, there would usually be only one staff person with us, or sometimes two – one for the girls and one for the boys, but on other occasions, just one staff person. We didn't go out on our own, although once or twice, some of us made a little escape down the road, but that was highly illegal, and not something that we were supposed to do. So, yes, we always had to have company – either a staff person, or if we were going out with some other person, he would have to be an "approved" person.

There's a lot of debate these days about the best environment for the education of blind students, and indeed most blind students go to mainstream schools, but in my time, almost all vision impaired students went to the RVIB school. But there was some awareness in those days that we had to have contact with sighted children of our same age. We had dancing lessons, and when the boys had their lessons, some sighted girls were brought in from the local primary school (I think it was South Yarra Primary School), and likewise, when the girls from the institute had their dance lessons, boys would be brought in from South Yarra. We would dance with these children. I don't think we held these children in particularly high regard – when we went to their school on one occasion, I remember feeling sorry for them, because all they seemed to have was a string of classrooms and nothing else, whereas we had the massive building at the RVIB, which I was always very impressed with (on my first day, I thought it was a wonderful and impressive building). And I felt that our school had some tradition, whereas the primary school was just a school and nothing else. There's an anecdote that I recall about dancing. The dancing teacher was Miss. Rowe, who at the time, was either the Victorian ballroom dancing champion, or perhaps the Australian champion – I'm not sure which, but she was certainly recognised as a very excellent ballroom dancer. Ballroom dancing was very, very popular in those days – there were a lot of dancing exhibitions, etcetera, and I'm sure we were very lucky to have her (Miss. Rowe), but of course, we didn't really appreciate it. Now, "Yes What" was on the radio in those days, and we used to try to be like "Yes What" with our dancing lessons. We would do everything we could to delay the dancing. On one occasion, we were let into the gymnasium where the dancing lessons were held, before Miss. Rowe arrived. The music for the dance lessons in those times was played on a record player that had valves in it. So, one of the boys reached into the back of the record player, and lifted one of the valves, and this of course meant that it couldn't work. So Miss. Rowe came, and told us what dance we were going to have for the day, and she put the record on, but no sound came out. She got one or two of the boys to check the record player, and yes, it was switched on, and the volume was turned up, but there was no sound. So she walked out of the gymnasium, to the main building to see the Sister, and to see what could be done. While she was away, we put the valve back into the record player. She came back with Sister Forest (a fairly abrupt lady). When Sister Forest tried the record player, the sound immediately blared out loudly, because the sound had been turned right up. I had a fair amount of sight in those days, and I know that Miss. Rowe had a very pale complexion, and red hair. First of all, her complexion went even paler, and then started getting tinges of red (not as red as her hair, but definite shades of red in her face) – she was so embarrassed. So, Sister Forest went off, and the dancing lessons went on. Miss. Rowe also had a new Holden motor car at the time, and there was a lot of talk about how easily these kinds of cars could be stolen. She used to park it outside the small gate in Moubray Street, and every so often, she would send one of

the partially sighted boys out to check that her car was still there. So she sent the lad out, and he came back and said that the car was still there, but a short time later, she thought she heard something going on in the street, so the lad was sent out again, but this time he came running back shouting that the car was gone. Now, she was at the furthest end of the gymnasium from the door, and she went clattering on the board floor in her high-heeled shoes as fast as she could run, out the door, out to the gate, and of course, the car was still there. While she was gone, we whipped the valve out of the record player again. So she came back in, put the record on, and of course there was no sound. She wasn't going to go back to get Sister Forest this time, so she said, "if we can't have music, we'll just have to count" – so that's what we did. I don't know if she ever found out what happened to that record player – certainly nobody was punished, but what was also certain is that I ended up being an awful dancer, and it probably was entirely my own fault, since we had one of the best teachers in the world, and we just didn't appreciate her.

When I was at the institute, there were a lot of rumours about a ghost that was alleged to have lived in the tower. The tower that we thought the ghost live in was the one directly over the main front entrance. Nobody seemed quite sure about what this story was all about – there were all sorts of funny rumours. I was a very practical person at the time, and I just didn't believe in ghost, but I must admit that I did ponder about what had happened in that tower; why was it there ? What was in that tower ? And nobody ever seemed to know; nobody knew whether it was just an empty room, or what was happening. But there were a few things that happened – for example, on one occasion, there was a fire in a room immediately below the tower, and somebody had said that perhaps the ghost had started the fire. Another story had it that one of the staff members had been drinking and smoking in bed, and had fallen asleep (that story is probably as erroneous as the story of the ghost starting the fire). I don't know how the fire started.
There were other rumours – such as the school bell being rung at midnight, and nobody could find out how, or why the bell had rung (had the ghost rung this bell ?). Again, nobody was punished or caught for that.
The stories were all very vague, however, in much more recent times (I've done some research into this along with other people), and it seems that a lady by the name of Mary Ann Grace was confined in a tower at the institute because she declined to get down on her hands and knees and scrub the floor. Stepping back a little, we believed at the time that ghost was the ghost of a blind person, but Mary Ann Grace was indeed not a blind person – she was a serving maid, and she was employed as a cleaner. Not only was she sighted, but the tower that she was locked up in was the northern tower, not the tower directly over the main entrance. All sorts of stories went around about this at the time, and on one occasion, there was the likelihood of the principal (or the director) of the institute being charged with murder, because while Mary Ann Grace was locked up in the tower, it was claimed that she developed tuberculosis. But later, it was shown that she developed tuberculosis *after* she had been in the tower. She certainly did die, but it seems likely that she didn't develop it (tuberculosis) while she was in the tower. But there were stories that she was locked in there for a week, and that she only had one blanket, and that she didn't have proper food. There were all sorts of things that went around like that. The person who was in charge of the institute, Major Lovell, left very suddenly, went back to England, and was never heard from again, but he was officially exonerated from any misdoings.
But there were one or two other people who were locked up in bathrooms at that time while he was there. So the story (of the ghost) was obviously very vague at the time

that I was at the institute, and, while it did originate from the Mary Ann Grace incident, as a student there, I knew very little about it. We knew that Mary Ann was the name of the ghost; we thought she was blind, we thought she was in the main tower, and we thought she was locked up there for months (but in actual fact, it was for just a week). That's just one of the little stories of the institute.

Alan: When was this supposed to have happened ?

It did happen in 1876, and there were fairly extensive references to this in the official records that the RVIB still have of the board meetings at the time, and there were also newspaper reports in the Melbourne Age and the Melbourne Argus of 1876, and of course, they tell a more exaggerated version of the story, whereas the institute's records appear to be very official and very proper. The students who were there at the time were very supportive of Mary Ann Grace, and they started a petition to sign for her release and for better treatment of this poor unfortunate lady. The reason given by Mary Ann Grace for not getting down on her hands and knees to clean was that she wasn't well. Whether anybody will ever know the full truth of that matter is probably doubtful after all this time.

Thinking back on those times, I don't have much memory of being bored at the institute. Largely, we made our own fun – certainly we were taken to concerts, and things of that sort, but a lot of the time, we did make our own fun. I remember at the end of the term, we used to have a midnight feast, which really was at midnight, and everybody had to contribute something. I remember that Ray Bedson (sp) had an uncle or an aunt who worked in a liquorice factory and he used to bring great parcels of liquorice; somebody else would smuggle in bottles of lemonade, somebody else would have a block of chocolate, somebody else would have meringues, or whatever. We seemed to have a terrific amount of food, and now, I don't even know where it all came from. I didn't contribute much because being a term student, I couldn't – but I certainly ate and drank my share of these things. The midnight feast was held in the small six bed dormitory at the far end, and we used to post a couple of guards along the other dormitory and on the stairs to keep cheese (?) and to make sure that we didn't get caught (I'm sure they knew what were doing, but they let us go), and we used to pretend that we were in a prison camp and that we had all these guards. We had a great time doing those (midnight feasts).
Another thing we used to do was to organize wrestling matches – these would usually take place in the big dormitory, and we would push all the beds out of the way (the beds were iron-framed beds on castors). We would then put about six or eight mattresses together on the floor, and that would be the wrestling mat that was used, and one student would stand at each corner of the ring, so that they could make sure that people wouldn't come off the mat; somebody else would have a Braille watch and would be the timekeeper, and one of the partially sighted students would be the judge. These things were planned long in advance, and somebody or other would end up as wrestling champion, and were always done late at night (maybe it was because the staff wasn't there – I don't know why), but there was always great excitement and tension as wrestling night approached. A lot of students took part in them (wrestling nights), and some boys were better than others, and you would be a bit of a hero if you ever won the wrestling night. I must say that I never did win a wrestling match (at least not a championship), but the boys who won were the heroes of the class.
We used to also have a few boxing matches, but it wasn't really proper boxing – they were a bit of a fizzer. But the wrestling was really the big thing.

When I left the institute at the end of 1955, I had a fair amount of sight. In 1970, I came back to do some training at the rehabilitation centre, and by that time, I had no sight at all and I hadn't been at the institute for fourteen years. I recall the very first day feeling that I had a very clear memory of the place, so I walked through main entrance and through the door that led out to the courtyard, and it was wet on this particular day, and I made an abrupt left turn with the plan of walking around the courtyard under the veranda, but in the meantime, somebody had put a brick wall in the way, and I walked slap bang into it. So that was quite a rude awakening for me, but my memory of the building basically was very good, and I had very little trouble finding my way around it.
I was at the rehab for about five months learning to operate switchboards, and learning a few things like typing, and, what I called a self-preservation course, because I was planning to live in a flat on my own at the time, so we learnt a little bit about cooking, a little bit about washing shirts, and things of that sort. We were also taught some handcrafts (which I wasn't at all interested in, and not very good at). But again I recall that I hadn't had a proper holiday before going there, so I saw it all as a bit of a holiday, and I felt very relaxed and quite at ease, and I had quite a good time there. But I was there to learn something that I could work at because I had to give away the previous work that I had because I lost the sight that I had, so I went to learn switchboards, and that seemed to be the logical thing for me to do – perhaps it was not very ambitious, but I felt it was something that I could easily cope with.

Alan: In those days, the rehabilitation was a live-in situation.

Yes, we "lived in" during the week, and I went off somewhere else at the weekends. During the evenings there, we did a number of interesting things – for example, on quite a few occasions, we were taken to live plays. I had seen very few live plays in mu life prior to that – in fact, I even had it built in my mind that this was what "toffee people" or "sissy people" did. However, I soon found that I could enjoy live plays immensely. Also, we had some music evenings. Other evenings, we'd go to Burwood to use the swimming pool. But the thing that I remember clearly most of all in those evenings was, sitting around with other people (particularly newly blinded people), and talking with them. I think we found this mutually beneficial – just the interaction between the blind people. Certainly we had some quite good instructors in those days – particularly the mobility instructors. Ray White was there at the time – he was very good, Sue Fraser, Bev Morris, and there was one other whose name I can't think of at the moment, they were all extra good. By that time, I had been totally blind for two or three years, but I hadn't used a white cane at all – I had it in my mind that it was something that only frail older people needed to use, but I soon found out that I was very wrong about that. My mobility improved immensely ....

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Ralph Lifer (sp) was in charge of the rehabilitation centre when I was there, and he had quite a few staff. John Keist (sp) was the person teaching switchboard at the time, and John was responsible for many blind and partially sighted people that were being trained, and placed into positions. The people who were there (the people being rehabilitated) covered a wide age span. There were people in their very late teens – I remember one girl who was eighteen or nineteen, and there was another fellow there who was probably fifty or more. There were four people there who had lost their sight

in car accidents, a couple of young fellows - three men and one girl who lost their sight in car accidents. I can't recall the exact number of people who were there at the time, but it was probably a dozen or fifteen, or there might have been more because there were some who came in daily, and some who came in one or two days a week for specific things.
Apart from switchboard, there were a number of other things that were taught there. They taught typing, Braille, handcrafts, cooking, cleaning, and generally looking after yourself. We were even taken to shops and shown a little about shopping and buying groceries, and things of that sort. After hours, there were the recreational things that I mentioned before, so there were usually one or two staff people who worked back at night. So that covers the main things that were taught at the rehab centre in 1970.

Alan: Were you well fed and looked after ?

Yes, the meals were quite good there, and indeed, Eileen who was the cook when I was a student at the institute was still the cook when I was at the rehab. The meals had improved greatly at the rehab compared to the time when I was a student, and I asked Eileen about this, and she said "Well love, there's a bit of difference between cooking for fifty and cooking for a dozen", and also she told me that she had a higher allocation of money to buy food with per person than she had back in the days when we were students because when I was there as a student, there was only Eileen, and she had only one assistant to do all of that cooking. Eileen left shortly after I was at the rehab – she told she was leaving, and she thought I wouldn't be back and she didn't need to serve me anymore.

Alan: Were there any restrictions on you on where you may go or what you may do ?

Oh no, it wasn't really like the school – if any of us wanted to go off in the evening, as indeed we often did, we just went off – there was no problem about that at all. I do recall on one occasion, I was having an ironing lesson, and I spent about half an hour ironing a shirt, and in the end I felt I did a very good job, and I held it up to the person teaching me, and I said "well there, what do you think of that ?", and she said, "sorry, but I think we'll have to start again". I put the shirt down and I said that I wasn't going to start again, and I walked straight out of the building, straight down Chapel Street, bought some drip-dry "no iron" shirts, and I haven't ironed a shirt since. So that was the sort of freedom we had, although it was the end of the lesson on that particular day – I didn't walk out in the middle of the lesson. But there was a great deal more freedom in those days – we were treated more like adults than juvenile students.

One of the things that I've been concerned about for most of my adult life is to try and broaden the breadth of employment opportunities for blind people. When the RVIB set up the ASSIST centre, it became necessary for them to have a management committee that would have a number of different people on it, and included in that, they had to have at least two or three blind people. I was invited to join that committee, and I was very pleased to do that because I thought that the work that was being done by ASSIST was very, very beneficial, and I felt that it wasn't gaining the recognition and support from the government that it should've. It has, I believe, a very, very high success rate – bearing in mind the difficulty of the job that is being done at ASSIST. The ASSIST scheme has placed quite a lot of blind people into factory and manual type work, and I believe that a fair percentage of these people

would not have found their way into that form of employment without the assistance and support of the institute and the ASSIST scheme. So I think it was a great idea to start up this – it was a tough project for the institute to start – it needs a lot of resources, and although it has received some government funding, the institute has also had to support from its own resources. I think that the staff at ASSIST has done a excellent job. From what I've seen, the workshop is well set up, people are trained in the way in which they would expect to work in a real live factory or workshop situation. People weren't allowed to take it easy – they had to be punctual, they had to find their own way there (not driven there by voluntary driver). They might initially have had mobility instructions on how to get there, but they had to find their own way there by public transport, or by whatever way they could – much like a real life situation (in a real work situation, you can't expect someone to pick you up and take you home again – you might find a workmate who can do this, but you can't rely on that).

So I think that the whole idea of the ASSIST scheme is excellent, and I very much regret the way some people view this scheme. Some members of government, and even some vision impaired people believe that training in such a segregated environment is not wise. I don't agree with that view at all – I think it's an excellent scheme; the expertise of the teachers there who have developed ways of teaching blind people to use some machinery (some very dangerous machinery) – they've developed safety guards and safe work practices; I think they're doing a superb job there.

This is only one avenue to employment – the institute needs to develop others. This is one area that I've been pleased to be involved in, even if in a small way, and I think it's a most worthwhile project.