

Dressmaking

Grandma knew this woman who had a small dress factory - Mrs Bullen - and when I left school Grandma asked her if she could find an opening for me, and I was put to work there. I used to walk down to the Morts Dock wharf and get on the ferry which would go to the wharf at Ballast Point Road, then East Balmain, then we'd end up at Erskine Street wharf. The fare was tuppence. We'd walk up Erskine Street a little way, then along Clarence Street until we came to Druitt Street, and Mrs Bullen had her factory behind the Town Hall.

I was put onto a table with three older women where I was just cutting cottons off for a while. Then they showed me how to make buttons - we used to make coloured buttons and that was a real chore. I hated doing the buttons. They had a sort of a machine with a little concave part on the bottom. The top would be like a male part and you'd cut your material and put it in the bottom part with a little mould, and in the top part you'd just have your little bit of calico or something on a mould. You'd put all that in and pull a handle down and that would close the thing and make the button. There seemed to be something about a covered button that was considered more dressy than an ordinary button. You still find covered buttons today on good frocks.

After that I was taught how to bead - I did quite a bit of beading. Of course it was all done by hand in those days, whereas today it's done by machine. Then they put me onto the machines. I was given pieces of material to run up and down to get the feel of the electric machines, because I'd never been on one before. I used to do a bit on the old treadle at home, but these machines were pretty fast. They were on a great long bench with about a dozen machines on each side. A great big shaft would go through and each machine had a little flywheel that ran it and they'd pull down a big handle to supply power to all the machines. You had to press your knee against a lever to start sewing.

I must have been dressed pretty awful because after I'd been there a while the girls all clubbed together... *(pause, and chokes back a sob)*... isn't that funny? It made me cry when I thought of how the girls had to buy me a dress to make me look all right, you know? They made me this pretty blue dress, and it had rouse on it, and shirring - oh, I thought it was beautiful. But I felt ashamed, all the same. It was the same all through school - I always felt like I was in the drab cut-me-downs. Yet Mum was proud in her own way. She wouldn't send me to school without shoes - she'd keep me home rather than do that. But lots of the boys in the boys' school went without shoes. I've heard people say that today kids shouldn't have to wear uniforms, but to me, if I could've been dressed the same way as everybody else I wouldn't have felt so inferior. But those sorts of feelings you keep to yourself and you don't tell anyone. I never did, anyway.

(I can remember not long after I started at Bullen's, it was a very hot day and one of the girls asked me to go up the street and have an ice cream soda with her at lunch time, and I'd never had an ice cream soda. She asked me what flavour I'd like, and I didn't know what you could have, so I said: "Oh...just plain." *(Laughs)* So I drank plain soda water with ice cream in it!)

Anyway, once I was on the machine they gave me belts to make. When I was proficient enough at that I was put alongside an experienced girl who used to give me little jobs to do. In those days you had to make the whole frock right through, not like today where I think you only keep making the same part. She used to give me sleeves to seam up and different things like that. Each step in making the frock was sent to be pressed, or you might go up and press it yourself. But you had to press as you went along because that made everything sit nicely. Now it's all overlocking, but in those days you'd run your seam down and then you'd turn the rough edges on the inside of the dress over, and that was called a neatened seam. You never sent a dress out with a raw seam inside it, and they didn't have overlockers, which are quick. Mrs Bullen made garments for factories - it was only a small firm, but a little bit exclusive.

After that they gave me skirts to run up, and showed me how to pin things together and all that. It was an apprenticeship, really, and gradually I learned to control the machine. Then they took me off that machine and put me on what they called the Cornelli machine - this was an embroidery machine that made a chain stitch on the right side. We had a frock that had a revere collar, and on the edge of the collar you had two little red cherries, and you put this collar underneath this machine which had a round foot and a crochet hook for a needle, and a hole, and there was a handle underneath the bench. When you started the machine off you had to be very careful to see that you got this chain stitch to go right around to make a cherry. I made a lot of cherries, and leaves, and stalks, and I did a lot of Cornelli work after that. When there was any embroidery work came through, I was the one who ended up doing it on the embroidery machine. Not all the girls could use it. But when there was no embroidery to be done I'd go back onto the plain sewing and making frocks.

Mrs Bullen took an interest in me, and after I'd been there a while she asked me if I'd like to go to tech to learn cutting and drafting and things like that. After my experiences at school I was so convinced that I couldn't learn anything that I knocked back her offer. It was a decision I was always sorry for. I ended up doing it myself much later on in life - I went and learned how to make an individual pattern and all that - I don't know that I could do it now, but I've still got all the instructions for how you go about it. I went to Five Dock to a private home to learn that. There was a teacher there who used to teach at the tech and she started up in her home. There were only about four of us, so we got individual treatment, and you learn so much more quickly that way.

Mrs Bullen used to get her own frocks made at the factory, and one day she called me up to her table and gave me a dress to make for her. I got all the bodice made, and then I had to fit it on her so I could cut around the armhole neatly to put the sleeves in. (She'd just put the bodice on over the dress she was wearing.) So what did I do? I cut the sleeve right out of the dress she had on underneath! I was so embarrassed! She didn't seem to be too upset. She just had me make up another sleeve for her dress as it was the fashion at that time to have, say, georgette sleeves while the bodice might be a crepe.

In those days, to set a sleeve in was quite an art. It had to be set in so there were no pleats or gathers in it, everything had to be all smooth around the armhole. Not like today, where everything is done for quickness. But I think it might be better today though, because today the clothes are cheaper. All those dresses that we made were all hand done - everything, so they cost

more than people like us could usually afford. To make a bodice with pin tucks took a lot of material and was all done by hand. When I say “by hand”, we did use a machine, but all the actual tucking was done by hand. Now it’s *all* done by machine. But only the good frocks would get all that work on them. Ordinary frocks would be just made straight.

Another one of my tasks at Bullen’s when I first started - I was the tea girl. I had to get the lunches for all the girls. I’d take their order: “A custard tart and a salmon sandwich” and they’d give me the money for it. I’d go round to the sandwich shop and I’d give her the list, and she’d make up the orders and give me the change for each girl. One day I got it all mixed up. There was a nice girl there, a cutter and designer called Connie - (she was a good-looking woman - she’d have only been young in those days, but she seemed older to me) - and I didn’t have any change left when I got around to her. And I started to bawl. (*Laughs*). I was only a kid - fourteen. But she made light of it, and said it was nothing to worry about, but I felt terrible. I used to have to make the tea, too, and do you know that, even today, when I make a pot of tea and smell it as I pour the water in, it still takes me right back to those days when I was making the tea there.

When we’d sit down to lunch, all the older girls sat at one end, and us apprentices - there were about three of us - we’d sit down the other end. And this is how things are different now in terms of keeping people uninformed and in ignorance - when the older girls started to talk about something they thought was not for our ears - it might have been a bit risqué or not necessarily particularly bad or anything - you were protected in those days from that harsher side of vulgarity, you know? They used to say: “Little pitchers have got big ears,” and we apprentices knew what this meant, and we used to get cheesed off with it a bit. Nobody swore, and Mrs Bullen insisted that we be very decorous. You didn’t shout or anything - you had to be little ladies.

Then they also used to send me on messages to buy cotton - Sylko and bits of materials to match things. They weren’t a big firm and it wouldn’t pay them to buy big rolls of stuff like you would in a big factory. They’d send me out to match materials and I’d get lost! See, I was kept home as a kid. I was the only girl and I wasn’t allowed to go...wherever I went as a kid I went with my mother and father. Even as teenagers, if we went for a picnic our mother and father came with us. However... I’d get lost. I’d be like a little tiny kid and I’d start to bawl again. Somebody would come up to me and ask me what was the matter and I’d have to say I was lost. It was like starting school again. But gradually I got used to it.

In the dinner break the sun used to stream into this place over Druitt Street, and the back of the Town Hall used to have all the street sweepers there - that was their lunchroom and headquarters, sort of thing. Two of the boys that worked there as street sweepers used to live with my Auntie Sophie down at Kent Street. They used to look up at us and whistle us, and we got to know them. When they whistled at us we weren’t offended or anything. We used to wave to them - we thought it was great. If we had to work overtime we were given one and sixpence for our tea, and we used to buy a packet of chips and some bread and butter, which didn’t cost us much and we made a couple of pence on the deal, see? They didn’t care what we spent it on - that was our decision.

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I didn't get right through my time there. The Depression came on and I was put out of work, and I was out of work for eleven months. Nida and I used to go out looking for work during that time. Nida was even worse than me - she was terribly shy. She was my schoolfriend, though unlike me she went right through and got her QC. I got her a job at Bullen's, and we were both put out of work together, though I hadn't finished my time - it took four years to finish your time. I'd reached the stage of what they called an Improver, and I'd gained a little bit of confidence, but I was never indentured - it was just sort of taken that we were apprentices. I ended up getting a job in a little arcade between George Street and Pitt Street - you had to go upstairs and there was a tiny little room. There was a woman in there and she'd cut out a dress, and she'd give us the dress to make - a very simple frock to make - and we used to get twenty five minutes to make it. It was inferior material, with rough edges inside, not at all like the work I was used to doing. I suppose it was catering for the people out of work without a lot of money to spend on clothes. I stuck that out for six months, till I couldn't stand it any more. The pace of trying to get these things done in twenty five minutes - and it was such awful work.

So I looked around and I got a job then with another place in the arcade, and it was a step up above this. All they made was wedding frocks. They were Jews who ran this place and you had to keep your nose down at the machine and go for your life. But we were making pretty dresses from pretty materials, and they were nice to make - wedding dresses and bridesmaids' dresses and that. I learnt a bit there. But in the dressmaking trade there was always a slack time twice a year, when they changed over from summer to winter stuff, and during a slack time I got laid off again.

By then we'd started coming out of the Depression and there was a place up near the Haymarket there - quite a big factory - it was in Wentworth Avenue. I got a job as an improver there, and I learnt a lot. You'd have to go up to the designer and get your bundle of four dresses. There'd be a sample there to look at, and you'd simply run these dresses through. But you always made them one at a time - you never made them piecemeal like on an assembly line. Again, you had to send all your seams down to be pressed, so that while you were waiting for the pressing to come back you'd get started on the next one, so it was assembly line to that extent, so that you wouldn't be wasting any time.

I got Nida a job in there with me. I was sort of Nida's... mentor, or something. She was a good machinist, but very slow, Nida was. I sort of took to it and learnt a lot there. I learnt how to make dressmaker buttonholes - not on a machine, but by hand. It was a skill to make a good buttonhole, especially if you had to make a row of them and have them all the same. (I could still make a good buttonhole until my eyesight went). Anyway, I don't remember what caused it, but we both got out of work again, Nida and I. I don't remember where she went from there, but after being out of work for about a month I got another job at the back of Grace Brothers in Glebe, in Bay Street. That was another fairly big factory.

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There were different factories on different floors and they made shirts upstairs from the floor we were on. The girls upstairs in the shirtmaking were real rough, and in the dressmaking place you were sort of... I don't know what it was but the bosses used to keep their eye on you, to watch if

you got a bit rough or anything. And you weren't allowed to smoke. If we wanted to go to the toilet while you were in the middle of making something, the boss would be standing at his desk and he'd time you when you went. You were allowed three minutes to go to the toilet. But it was a happy factory, nonetheless. I think I paid threepence a week to be in the Union. All the Unions did then was ensure that you were getting the right pay. Three minutes toilet time didn't seem to be one of their concerns. The bosses had to let them in to talk to you, and they'd come around and ask you how much pay you were getting, and that was about it.

While I was there, they started to teach me to become a sample hand - or a special hand. To become a sample hand you had to go up to the designer and she'd cut your dress out and show you what she wanted. She'd design the dress and show you a drawing of it, then she'd give you the dress. You'd make it up and she'd put it on a stand where she might change it or do things to it if she wasn't too happy with it, until you had the frock right. Once it was right, you had that one you'd made, then you made another one the same. If that was all right, then you made another one, but this next one you had to time yourself on. This was how they worked out how long it took to make the dress and therefore how much it was going to cost. Now if it took, say, four hours to make the second dress, that was the time they put in their books to work out the price of the frock. Some of the dresses were quite intricate.

It was nice being a sample hand because you weren't doing the repetitive, run-of-the-mill stuff that you really got tired of. But this place also did special measurement dresses that they made for a country clientele that they had. When you had one of these to do you had to dress the stand up and pad it out to the measurements that you were given. The cutter would cut the dress out, and you'd have to fit it on to the stand and make it to those measurements. You'd finish that dress right off except for just the handwork like turning up hems. That was good doing those. It taught me how to be versatile, making to special measurements.

When I was there I was a full-time machinist and I was getting two pounds one and six a week. If we had slack time, which we did, on occasions, if you were a sample hand you didn't get put off. You were worth keeping on. Even if they didn't have any work for us they'd let us come in and bring our own sewing in, so we did sewing for ourselves in their time. We used to work 48 hrs a week. At the end of every week you used to get a quarter of an hour to dismantle your machine, clean it, and oil it to get it ready for the next Monday.

I worked at that place for quite a few years, but you never got to know the staff in the office and that - the people that ran it. They always kept themselves a little bit apart from us. Like a lot of people in the rag trade they were Jews too. With us machinists that were kept on over the slack periods, when we were on ordinary dressmaking we often seemed not to get the dresses made in the time we were supposed to. We'd be called in to the office and told we weren't working fast enough, but we used to get real blasé about it because we were sample hands, and we never used to take a scrap of notice of them and we'd just go on the same as we had been. We reckoned we couldn't do it any faster anyway. Sometimes, when the sample hand had established a time to make the dress in, they'd cut it down a bit, and we workers used to stick together a bit when we knew they'd done that and keep making at a more reasonable pace. Sometimes something would go wrong along the way, or you might have an apprentice to teach or something, and you'd have to take longer than you were supposed to. As a result of all this, when you were

the sample hand making the final prototype dress you tended not to go as fast as you might be able to in order to leave a bit of leeway in the time allotted to the dress. When the summer season came and they got a rush of orders from the shops, they'd put on extra machinists, but usually these weren't as good as the regular staff.

We used to sing while we worked. I wouldn't say I disliked work, it was quite good, but it was good when you had a holiday. Bill asked me once if I got a certificate when I finished my time as an apprentice, but I didn't get anything to show what I'd done. I have a friend who used to work at Peapes, which was a really high-class mens' store near Wynyard. She was apprenticed there and took out indenture papers and all that. She could make a man's coat, lining and all, and there wouldn't be a bit of machining on it - it was all done by hand. She was a first class tailoress. I didn't take out any papers for my apprenticeship because nobody ever talked to me about them. I just served the time - four years it was. I went from place to place working and I picked up different things that way.

When I got the job at the back of Grace Brothers I met a friend there who happened to be a cousin of one of Cec's cousins - she was some relation to the Sinfields. She was a cutter and designer there, and though she was no older than me she seemed to sort of take me under her wing. She was from the upper classes - her people had plenty of money. I ended up as her machinist, and I learned a lot from her. I didn't get a penny extra for being a sample hand and a special hand, and I didn't think to ask for it. It was just the kudos and the fact that you didn't have to do the repetitive sewing work.

When we had sewing to do at home, we never bought cotton. We used to wear pants in those days with elastic in the legs, and we'd get half a reel of Sylko or something and we'd stick it up the leg of our pants. The whole firm did it. That was our one perk, sort of thing.

On the way home from work we'd call into Grace Brothers. We loved to go to Grace Bros on Friday night shopping and I'd buy little things for my Glory Box. But my brothers were out of work and I was giving all my money into the house to help Mum keep all of us in food. I used to get my fares back out, but that's all. So I only had a little bit of money to spend on these things. When I got married Mum had to get a cash order to buy me blankets and sheets. (I'm still using one of the blankets). A cash order was when you went to a moneylender sort of place and got an order for, say, ten dollars. You'd spend that money in a shop and have to pay the lenders back on time payment - with interest, of course. Mum bought the lace for my wedding dress this way, and other things. I didn't have any money because I'd been giving it all to Mum, but she never had any of it left - things were so tight. It was lucky for us in the early days of our marriage that Cec had the money set aside from the job he'd had repossessing things.

I worked there until I got married. When I got married they gave me a cut glass salad set and a pair of cut glass servers in a cut glass bowl - all cut crystal - not cut glass. And the designer that I worked for gave me a Royal Doulton plate that you hung on the wall. I don't know what happened to it - I lost it when I left Nambucca Heads. I only worked for seven months after I was married when I fell pregnant with Bill..