

Interviewee: **Lou Nicholson**

Interviews conducted by Nicky Leap and Billie Hunter during research for the publication '*The Midwife's Tale: an Oral History from Handywoman to Professional Midwife*' (1993; 2nd edition 2013)

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Description:

Transcript of an interview with Lou Nicholson covering her experience as a mother in 1931, including her knowledge of birth control, milk substitutes, availability of antenatal care, difference between hospital and home birth, preparations needed for home birth, and the death of her eldest son from haemophilia.

Topics include: Midwifery; Maternity services; Childbirth; Antenatal care; Homebirth

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[START OF INTERVIEW AND FIRST AUDIO FILE]

Female voice Say 'hi ya'! Say 'hi yah'. ((sound of baby gargling)) Say 'hi ya nana'! Say something.
I'm trying to record you. ((sound of baby fussing)) Mm?

((audio stops and restarts after a long pause))

Lou ... About 22.

Interviewer As old as that?

Lou Yeah. I had another one - 47, I think. The other one was 44. They lived all over the place. One lives in Scotland and one lives in Devon; the other lives in Essex.

Interviewer So you don't see much of them then.

Lou But the middle one, that's Cathy, ah, she was born in hospital. And, ah, it's a general joke that she only cost me five bob. In those days you went and - you had to pay to have them. And I paid - my husband was out of work and I paid the first five shillings off, you know, whatever the cost would have been. I don't know how much it would have been, but through him being out of work, they didn't press me for any more. So, therefore, she only cost me five bob, see.

And it was funny. When I was in the hospital, it's the first time I'd ever seen a nude person. It shook the daylight out of me, you know. And, ah, the first woman I saw in there, she had a little tiny baby. You couldn't see the baby in her arm. Flippin' great big chairs. They were nearly down to her knees, honestly.

And, ah, when you went into labour, they took you into - I had a false alarm first. And, um... I got right to the... stage of where the baby's head was half a crown. You know when they told you it's half a crown?

Interviewer Yeah.

Lou So she said that it would be born by two o'clock. But blow me, no, she changed her mind and went back for another month.

Interviewer Another month?

Lou Yes, another month before - another month before I went all the way through it again. That was the second... that was Cathy, the middle one. And, um...

Interviewer Which hospital did you go into?

Lou Um... St Pancras, I think. I think it was St Pancras, yeah. Yes, it was. You know, the old St Pancras up there, yeah. What I couldn't - I'd never been in a labour ward before and knew nothing... well, I did as I was told. You had to breathe in and all the rest of it when you had to. But when the pains really started, they gave me a ((laughingly)) thing to put on my nose - over like that with a flippin' great big tube hanging down attached to a machine. I said, what does this do? Oh, you just breathe into that and you won't feel a thing. I'm... I'm puffing and blowing away. They let me do all the jobs till the baby was born. Then afterwards they turned round and told me that I had broken the tube thing off the tube. I'd been breathing into nothing. See, I'd done the thing naturally without...

Interviewer Jolly good.

Lou As before, you know. Yeah, doing the older - but before that, when you had it at home, you tied a towel round the end of your bed. You twisted - you twisted the towel and you pulled on that.

Interviewer Because you feel you want to do that, don't you?

Lou Feel it, ooh.

Interviewer You do, when you're bearing down.

Lou And how these women want their husbands with them - that I don't know. Blimey, I never wanted mine about.

Interviewer Who did you have with you when you had your babies at home?

Lou Well, the midwife. I... I had one woman that came in, and, ah... she made herself so much at home - oh, I like this; I like that - and she landed up - you were giving them more than what she did. But, um...

Interviewer Was that the midwife that did that?

Lou The midwife came round, yeah. She took a fancy to a mackintosh and she kept on and on till she got this bloomin' mackintosh off me. But, um...

Interviewer Would she have been a qualified midwife or was she a local woman from the street?

Lou I think she was a local woman that did it.

Interviewer Yeah. She didn't have a uniform on.

Lou There was nothing professional about her, no. Well, to the extent... I remember when I had that one, our Dan, they... I had that one when my Joan married. The boy I lost. I lost him... not at birth. Nine months old, he was when he died. But, um, when Joan was born I did have nurses coming in as well as a midwife. There were nurses from Middleton Square.

Interviewer Oh yes. I've met one of those actually.

Lou Oh, and a lovely girl there. Her name was Margaret, so I named the baby Margaret after her; her second name, you know. But this, um... when the baby was... I thought it was all over. They told me... they thought that she might have been twins, because hours... a good few hours after she was born I was complaining of very sharp pains. So I started up again. And, um... they had to call the... the ordinary nurse back then, and it appeared that it was the afterbirth of another baby, which I never had. So whether she should have been a twin, I don't know.

But these sharp pains I was getting, I complained of these. The ordinary midwife, she took no notice of it: oh, they're after-pains, she told me. Well, I didn't know what she meant by after-pain, but anyway, I accepted her words for it. But they got worse. But when the nurse started performing on me, they pulled out a piece of skin that went right over them fingers, you know. And they said it was another after-birth. That's the main thing I - I don't remember a lot about having babies, but...

The first one, Tommy, I had three days' labour. Oh, it started on the Saturday and I didn't have him till Wednesday. Blimey - he weighed nine pounds something. Oh yeah, we really went to town, yeah.

Interviewer So how old is he now, Tommy?

Lou He died.

Interviewer That's the one who died.

Lou Tommy died. And he would have been 52.

Interviewer So what was that, then - 19...? I'm trying to work out what year it was.

Lou Well, I was married in 1931, and I had him 10 months after I got married. I had him 10 months after I got married. And, um, but I had Tommy at home. The one with the after-birth was Joan, the oldest girl. I've got three girls, you see.

Interviewer She was next after Tommy.

Lou After Tommy, yeah. But she wasn't so big. Cathy was big. Tommy... Tommy was nine-pound-odd. Cathy was nine-pound-odd, but Joan was only, um... seven, I think. I think she was seven. Wasn't a very big baby, but I always remember she had a lot of illnesses up to the time she was seven or eight. I think she had every illness a kid could have.

And we went up... she was... I had her in hospital so long we forgot what she looked like. The consequence was that when, um... when I got her out of hospital my husband said, are you sure we picked the right one? You know. We never saw her for months. She went in with measles. From measles she... she caught gastroenteritis. From one thing on to the other, you know.

She got caught that thing that was going caught through the nappies, you know, all that kind of thing. But anyway, but about the actual birth... I'm not very good at, because, um... all they said - oh, you haven't half made a mess on the floor. Thank the Lord they never asked me to look, because I'd have died of shame. As I said, the most thing was, when you had the babies at home you had to pull with a towel.

Interviewer That was when you were pushing, was it?

Lou Yeah, and if you were long-winded, you were made to drink castor oil. Yeah, but they got the ((inaudible)) afterwards. You put orange juice in first.

Interviewer Makes it taste better.

Lou And then you put orange in... then a tiny drop of orange juice on top. And that was it.

Interviewer That was to speed you up then if you were taking too long.

Lou Oh yes, it did speed you up. But I tell you another thing I never understood, because as I said, I'd never been in hospital before, and there was a woman there that, she couldn't seem to pass the baby. So in those days, what they did, they said, oh, we'll have to sand-bag you.

Interviewer What does that mean?

Lou Well, it means that they... from the sound of it - I never saw it actually done - but apparently she had to go back into bed rather than walk about. Hello, we've got a new one. She looks happy, don't she? And, ah, you're in bed and somehow or other they strap these... they... the stirrups to force it that way they... but also she had to stay there in that one position for so many hours.

Interviewer It must have been agony.

Lou That's what I would have thought. I do always remember they did that.

Interviewer So you had how many children? Three? Four?

Lou I had four. I had Tommy, Joan, Cathy and Elsie. So I had one down in Devon. I had to laugh, because as soon as it was over they said, do I want something to eat? I don't feel like eating straight away. They only offered me a bloomin' great big thick meat pudding.

No, the other one, when I was having Joan, the old lady that was in the room with me at the time... she wasn't actually in the room but she was there. She'd brought me up. She thought I had to eat a jug of hot eels. She went out and got a - she sent out for a great big jug of eels.

Interviewer For you to eat afterwards?

Lou During the labour. But me, all the time I'm in there, you can guess what I'd do. I'd talk. I'd talk all the way through it.

Interviewer Does that help you cope with it?

Lou Oh yes, yes. I talked and talked until... um, and then, when the pain came on, I held on till the pain went, then I started talking again. Well, as you can guess, I've got a bad habit of talking. That's why I was ((inaudible)) But the trouble is this: I'm not very good at remembering actually what happened.

Interviewer You're doing pretty well.

Lou Yeah, but going into the... into the hospital, I thought that was funny. It was on one of these kind of trolleys. And, um, you had the whole perform of one leg up there and the other one's over here somewhere. You know, talk about going in a dark tunnel, wasn't it.

Oh, that was it. The woman in the next bed to me, um... was fright... ah, they said she was very nervous. It appears that she wasn't married but she was going to have the... Well, she went in there to have this baby, and, ah, when she went in there she thought all she had to do was to go to bed and the baby would be born.

So she asked the nurse of the ward or something, the sister of the ward, what was going to happen. Well, she said, it's going to go in the same way as, ah... it's going to come out the same way as it went in. She got so bloomin' scared, she ran out the - she ran out the hospital; doctors and all running after her. Eh? She was really scared of it.

Interviewer Do you think there were quite a lot of women then that didn't know much about the facts of life?

Lou Well, we were green. I was as green... what - I was as green as that bloody chair what I've got when I got married. And I was still as green when my husband died and we'd been married 49 years. He was behind the bar, ah, he worked behind the bar. Now, if he had any temptation, it was behind a bar, wasn't it? But no, he shut up shop when I was 28, you see. I'm going to say - is this. And myself, I always believed that brooding on that brought these strokes on. I wouldn't have the cheek to say it to him blithely, because I was a person that had been adopted as a kid. And I was living with one person, then the other. I never had no settled home, you know, and I wanted someone to make a fuss of me and all the rest of it.

Interviewer But he didn't.

Lou No. We got the kids, but I... I teased him when I - I had to start teasing him towards the end. I said, you don't only use it for one thing. Well, ((inaudible)) this. There was no affection. I wasn't allowed to show it to him. But he stopped completely when I was 28.

Interviewer It must have been a terrible strain for you.

Lou It was.

Interviewer Because you were a very young woman.

Lou And I had my strokes when I was 48. And I always believed that was the cause of it. And I certainly... the... and I made up my mind right from the day I got married. You see, my... the old lady that brought me up knew my mother. Apparently my mother apparently had known what she got it for. You see what I mean? And this old girl always rubbed it in to me, and always said to me, you'll be like your so-and-so of a mother, you see.

Of course, I wasn't going to tell everybody else this. And the consequence was that if I had any chances I was frightened to take it, rather than be accused later. Of course, I married the one that I really, really fell for. But of course what I didn't know was that he was cold-natured.

Interviewer I wonder what it was all about.

Lou Well, he wasn't a well man. He, ah, he used to... he bled internally. I had him on the danger list four times during the married life. And, um... he just somehow couldn't show you affection. You know what I mean? That's it. See this one, the... no, this one here with his back to you. Now, he's not everybody's cup of tea. He drives you up the wall at times. But him, he'll give you all the affection you want. You see what I mean?

So, of course, I've been friends with him for two years now. But then again, there's a difference, you see. He's younger than I am. You see? It's this... we can be friends without any worry. And I think that's a lot to do with it. I think my husband was just scared of having more children.

Interviewer Yes. Did you use any family planning? Was there anything around?

Lou No, we knew nothing about it. Well, it shows you - when I was evacuated away there was a woman there... because I used to listen to people to try and find out things. And apparently this woman's husband come on - this is true - and she kept on having babies very quick. Well, apparently in those days they used a thing called a Rendle.

Interviewer I've heard of those.



Lou I was shown... I was shown it. It looks like the half of a Brazil nut. That's what I - that's all I remember seeing. I was shown one, okay. And then my sister told me - step-sisters, we are - ah, told me about another one; hers was... what she used to use. And the lady I used to work for apparently used to use them, because her boy had been up in her bedroom one day and pulled the draw open and left the draw open, and these things were in it. I don't know whether he thought they were sweets or what.

But getting back to the point about the Rendles, this woman's husband came on leave; come home to her. And she didn't want any more children, so she goes to the clinic. One of the women at the clinic says, oh, I'll tell you what, Bessie or Jessie, whatever her name was - you meet me on Tuesday and I'll give you something, see. Well, she gave them these Rendles. But, she didn't tell her anything - anything else; what she was to do with them. You can guess what happened, can't you?

Interviewer I don't know what she did with it.

Lou Well, she goes up to bed about five or ten minutes before her husband, and she hadn't been up there five minutes - she's screaming blue murder ((makes choking noise)), choking. She'd put it in her mouth instead of anywhere else. And that's what it was. And that was the one... that's the one time when I'd heard about... safety. Blimey, I forgot that was on.

Interviewer It's all right.

Lou That was the first time that I'd heard about them. The only other time was... I heard about them, not of those, the ((inaudible)), you know. And these... my husband's brother tried to bring him out apparently, and he gave him one. And again, with no instructions. Of course, me and him being green, knew nothing about sizes. He went nearly barmy. Never again. So bang went that idea. It was too small.

But, um... but actually about the birth, I think really because we didn't know, we were frightened. That was the tension at the back of it, with him and me. Because I mean to say - is this, he was a barman, and he worked with some smashing looking girls. If he'd have been that way inclined he could have gone with them easily, but he didn't.

Interviewer Was he working in a pub?

Lou Yes. Oh yeah. I mean to say - is this, he's a fellow you can trust anywhere. So you knew for a fact he wasn't getting it nowhere else. But of course, bloomin' neighbours made something out of it, because he palled on to an old man, and he was always in my face. But then again, when you're living with your husband, you can't tell him who you can have in the place and who you can't, can you? You've got to put up with it. And that was it.

But I know I just didn't like having babies, and that was it. He liked having them out when he was out, but he wouldn't push a pram.

Interviewer Yeah. It's different nowadays, isn't it?

Lou Yeah, the first... Tommy was the... the best labour was the last one.

Interviewer Where did you have the last one? Was that in hospital?

Lou Down in Swanage. A fortnight after that I went down with pleurisy though. Yeah, but they never let me take her into hospital. They never let me take the baby.

Interviewer Oh, so you had to go and...

Lou When I came out with the baby... by the time I came out of hospital she was over a month old and she was below her birth weight.

Interviewer Dear me.

Lou Yeah. So, um, I took her to the clinic, because... a very religious thing you did. You believed in all what the clinic told you at the time. And, um... I said, the baby was always fine, you see. And I said, I think it's not satisfied with the milk. I never seemed to be able to feed them properly.

My Cathy, that is the middle girl, ah, they suggested she went on cow's milk and water. Well, she wouldn't drink it with water in it. You give her the plain cow's milk, there was no trouble at all. But, ah, that youngest one, I built her up with Virol - what the nurses give, Virol. And, um, unbeknownst to the clinic, I never told them... they put her on to Ostermilk. Well, Ostermilk didn't satisfy her. She still went on crying. So unbeknownst to them, I built her up on a teaspoonful of Robinson's Patent Barley in. And it did the trick. She became a beautiful baby after that. She's skinny now as she's got older. But, ah, that was it.

Interviewer How come you had her in Swanage? Were you evacuated?

Lou Evacuated, yeah. That's why she always said - every time, you know, I fell out, she said, I'm fed up with you; I'm going back to my own country. Always going back to her own country, yeah.

Interviewer So did you have her in a maternity home, nursing home?

Lou No, in the house where we lived. The flippin' place was alive with ants. I always remember this bloomin' meat pudding what they offered me. All those ants had been running around in the food. I said, no thank you.

Interviewer So who delivered that baby?

Lou Oh, we had a nice midwife down there. A nurse. A nurse, yeah, she had the full uniform. Yes, I forget her name now. Yes, I had her. She was the country... came from the country. She was nice. Yeah, and what did they do? They stuck my husband's photograph up in front of me. I couldn't have ((laughingly)) cared less where he was at the time, but I remember them sticking that up there.

They said, the first time... I'd nearly had another false alarm, you see. But that was only for one night. They'd sent the other girl, Joan, into another room. They let her stay with another family. They said, when you come back in the morning you'll have the baby; you'll have a new brother or sister.

So of course, she came in the morning. There was no baby. What happened? So of course we had to think up something quick. So I said, ah, oh well, we had to send it back. It had ginger hair and you didn't want it with ginger hair, did you? We had to send it back. That's how we got out of that one.

Oh, but that was an awkward case. You had to boil your kettles and you had no... you had to run out of there into the kitchen to get the hot water. The kitchen was... ((inaudible)) And it was very inconvenient, what with the buckets. The woman that decided to help me in the house... Oh yes, the doctor said, oh, you've got plenty of people here to help you. The two she picked... and they decided to be godmothers afterwards. Both of them, their name was

Elsie, you see. And neither of them once acknowledged my kid as their godchild. Never from that day to this.

Yeah, she came. And she looked after... the doctor said, we can't take the baby into hospital. One of you will have to have her. So there one with the children had them. Blimey, when I came back, my kids were lousy. They were. What it was - when they came into hospital to see me, I said, um... they're not your clothes you're wearing. Why are you wearing... the other one's? The woman had put her kids clothes on my kids, you see. But when I sent them to school, my Cathy's hair was alive. That's why I vowed I'd never let my kids go with anybody else. I'd had a sample of it myself when I was a kid. And I didn't let them do it.

Interviewer Can I ask you a bit about yourself? What is your full name again?

Lou Louisa Cecilia Nicholson.

Interviewer But everyone calls you Lou, do they?

Lou Everyone calls me Lou, yeah. Oh, he calls me Louise, but most of them... I like Lou.

Interviewer Can you tell me when you were born?

Lou Nineteen-twelve - 11.11.1912.

Interviewer Whereabouts?

Lou Um, from the sound of it, from what I can hear of it, up the Angel. Um... Duncan Terrace.

Interviewer But then you were adopted very soon after that, were you?

Lou Oh, I don't know what - I don't know what happened after that. I lived with two or three different women. But I finished up with one old girl called Amos. And they took me away from her once, and then I went back again apparently.

Interviewer Who took you away from her?

Lou Well, my mother never paid the money up. Something like that. Anyway, I left there once and went back again, and, ah... yeah, Duncan Terrace or something. Up to then I always thought I'd been born in Scotland.

Interviewer When did you leave school? Can you remember what year that was?

Lou Fourteen. I was 14 when I left school. I knew that, because when I left school my father stopped sending the money for me. She nearly went berserk.

Interviewer You never saw your father?

Lou I saw him when I was 14, when I had to go and find out. Up to then I thought he was my uncle.

Interviewer I see.

Lou I'm one of the last great mysteries of life. I went to see him once when I had Tommy and had the baby... when I had the baby in a pram. I went down to Aldersgate. He worked in, um... he was a caretaker of offices or something. So he said, where did you get this from? Oh, I said, mine; being proud. So he said, oh, you know what you got it for. I always remember him saying that. A saucy devil he was.

I don't think I ever saw him after that, because, um... he stopped sending the money, ah, because he said, he didn't intend to go on paying, because he was only paying... what now is 50 pence - 10 shillings a week for everything; that was my clothes, my food, everything, see. Yes.

Interviewer Did you work in between the time when you left school and when you got married?

Lou Oh yes.

Interviewer What did you do?

Lou Oh, when I first started work, I was a coil winder. Then I was a French polisher. French polisher... I used to be a brush-maker.

Interviewer Lots of jobs.

Lou Yeah, they used to cut all your fingers, the brush-making. But of course once you got married and had kids you couldn't fit those jobs in. So I went cleaning flats and office cleaning. I was in one job for 22 years. Social services. I worked at the head place in, um, Bedford Square. I was there for 22 years.

Interviewer So were you doing that when your kids were little as well?

Lou Oh yes. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. It was the only way. I couldn't live on his money because a barman was the worst paid job out, it was. Yeah.

Interviewer Can you remember, when you were pregnant, did you have any antenatal care? Did they give you any care when you were actually pregnant?

Lou Um...

Interviewer Do you remember going to a clinic or going to see anybody?

Lou Apparently it was on, but I never went.

Interviewer Yeah. Did you book up with the midwife beforehand?

Lou Yeah. That one, ah, Mrs Toby, I think her name was, she lived in Affleck Street. Somebody else booked up for me, because I didn't understand anything about it. But somebody else had got this one woman. That's the only woman I knew.

Interviewer Where were you living at the time?

Lou Swinton Street. Hi Florry. She's all right. She's all right. All right, Florry? She comes in to have a smoke.

Interviewer Do you mind if I close the door? I'll just close the door a bit.

Lou She's all right. She won't do anything.

Interviewer So that's up in Islington, is it?

Lou What did I just say?

Interviewer Where you used to live.

Lou No, Swinton Street is across Grayson Road.

Interviewer Right, because I live down by London Bridge. I don't know this area.

Lou It's off Grayson Road.

Interviewer So you've just been round this area all the time.

Lou Well, when I got married I first lived in Percy Circus. That's where I had Tommy. And the doctor stood out in the square, and when he was needed at the end, they called him up. They called him up when I needed the stitches. So they called him up; signalled him to come up.

Interviewer You had a tear, did you, when the baby was being born?

Lou Yeah, the first one. I had two stitches. This great big doctor came in, but he was so gentle. He was gentle.

Interviewer So did you have to pay the doctor as well as the midwife?

Lou No.

Interviewer That was good.

Lou No, that one, um... where did he come from? He was a ((inaudible)) from the midwives. Must have been their own doctor. Big Irish doctor, he was.

Interviewer You can't remember how much you paid that midwife?

Lou No.

Interviewer It's about 25 bob, I think.

Lou Sorry, it was, yeah, like that. Anyway, I know for a fact we helped to make it up by given them... she had a... my husband brought a brand new navy blue mackintosh. She had her eye on it from the minute she finished up, when we're short of cash we'll give her that. Hello, who's that? I like being nosey. What's the time, love? Here, it's on my hand. On my hand.

Interviewer Ten past eleven.

Lou Oh, it's early.

Interviewer What time do you have your lunch?

Lou Quarter to 12. I know that woman somewhere and I can't place where. Oh, the one next to her... that one has just give me that... she's the foreign lady... she only came once. Blimey, she was into everything. Yes, amazing, they come at the last minute and they know more than what we are. All right, Florry? She never talks to anybody. She's all right. She's a nice old dear.

Interviewer Can you remember much about being pregnant? Was it hard work? Did you enjoy it?

Lou I wouldn't say I enjoyed it. Blimey, they made a football of you. You'd be sitting there nice and comfortable and you'd get such a kick. No, ah, I had a lot of sickness with one of them. I think it was with the boy that I had the sickness. Not so much the girls. That was it, yeah. No, ah... blimey, with Tommy and Cathy, they turned a corner before I did; when they knew you was out, you know, being large.

But, um... no, the funny thing is, it's quite true as they say: as you get older, the more you have, the less you feel. You still feel. It all depends how you can take it. I used to bite on, you know. I had my own teeth then; well at least what was left of them. I don't remember a lot though.

Interviewer Do you remember, did you take anything special when you were pregnant?

Lou Orange juice, Virol and, ah, what's that other funny stuff? Like broken biscuits, crumbly stuff. You sell it now, I think.

Interviewer I don't know.

Lou Sweetest to taste. You took a teaspoonful of that it's meant to give you energy. Ah, oh, I nearly had it on the tip of my tongue then.

Interviewer Not Bemax?

Lou That's it. That's the one. That's the one. They'd be the only things. But then again we could go to the clinics and get them cheap. You see what I mean? I must say, you only paid about four-pence for a bottle of pure orange, you see. I... the one thing I did go to the clinics for was for the weighing of the baby, because I believed in that. The weighing of the baby - but I did not always go by what they told you to do.

Interviewer That was the health visitors there in the clinics?

Lou Yes. I didn't always go... because I think a mother should learn to use her own initiative. Eh? It's the same as when a baby cries. It's got so many different ways of crying, and, therefore, until you learn them cries, you don't know your own kid.

Interviewer That's right.

Lou That's what I found. Like when... and... that was more impressed on me when my eldest girl started walking. You know when they want to go out with you for the first time. Right, I'm taking her down Tottenham Court Road, holding her hand, right. Being clever, I tried to copy what I'd seen other kids do. Come on, jump. Well, I pulled her arm out, you see. I got to the step. I said, one, two, three - jump. You see. But I didn't know that I did it at the wrong time. She let out such a yell that I knew it was wrong.

So I... usually I've got a bad habit of asking somebody else first, but that day I didn't. I just ran her right across Tottenham Court Road, straight over to the hospital. And it saved her. They said, it was good presence of mind. They put it back, but they told me what I'd done, see. They said, it's a good thing you had the presence of mind to bring her over. But it was only the different sound. That side of things are a lot to do with it. I think if people study their babies more as babies they know them better when they get older as well. It's no good trying to teach a kid after a certain age. That's the only way I see it.

Interviewer Can you remember were there any home remedies you used to take for things?

Lou I don't remember mucking about much at all. I just accepted that you were having a baby and you had to put up with it.

Interviewer Did you have any idea what sex your babies were?

Lou No, no.

Interviewer Because I know some people say, they could tell it was a boy.

Lou I didn't know nothing about bloody sanitary towels. Sorry, I forgot that thing was on.

Interviewer That's all right. That sort of thing is all interesting.

Lou I didn't... the old girl that brought me up, we had to wash towelling.

Interviewer That's right. My nan told me that.

Lou Oh, I used to hate it. I knew nothing... my kids taught me about towels. I saw them in hospital but I didn't know that you could buy them outside the hospital. And that's how I first learnt about them.



No, I mean to say, even when that, um, midwife came, it was still the towelling. You could never get the damn things clean properly. That was it. But myself is this... in the labour, apart from the breathing... I suppose really the breathing done my... counteracted the breathing in and out, because all the time I was talking, that would be breathing. Because I talked... as you can guess, I'm non-stop once I start.

And, um... that was it. But I'll tell you the most amazing thing is this, and I don't know if you've found it the same: to be truthful, you can't remember exactly what happened.

Interviewer No, you can't. You can't remember what it felt like, can you?

Lou No.

Interviewer People ask you. Just remember it hurt.

Lou Oh it hurt, yeah. We know you treaded it... but when I was in the hospital bed, they still had the bar at the back and you were able to grasp the bar at the back. Or otherwise they gave you something to pull on to just the same.

Interviewer Did you prefer it in hospital or at home?

Lou I don't really know. Um... I think at home, because you feel - you feel more at ease. You feel more at ease at home. The only trouble is, all the convenience of boiling kettles and all that. I advise the people of today if they can have them at home, have them at home.

Interviewer Yeah, I had mine at home.

Lou Yeah. Because of this - unless you've got the hot... like where I live now, I've got everything I needed. There's heating under the floor. I've got radiators. I've got constant hot water. All things that you need when you have babies around. You see what I mean?

Interviewer Yeah. So what was it like where you lived?

Lou You used to have to go up and down stairs and all there.

Interviewer Did you have running water and things where you were living?

Lou No. Just the tap. We used to have to go upstairs to the tap. We used to have to get the water from upstairs.



Interviewer Did you have an indoor toilet?

Lou No. If you wanted the toilet you had to go upstairs. I like her. Nobody's got these... they think she can't talk, but she can. It's only because none of them will speak to her.

Interviewer She's shy.

Lou I'll get out to find out who that one with the black hat is soon, because I know her face, but I can't place her who she is.

Interviewer Is it all right to ask you a few more things? Are you doing all right?

Lou Yeah, go on. I don't care.

Interviewer What else was I going to ask you?

Lou Because I'm getting nowhere fast myself. I've not got a very good memory now.

Interviewer I think you're doing fantastic. You've remembered loads of things. After you'd had the baby who helped you in the house? Because in those days you used to stay in bed for a while, didn't you?

Lou Yes, you did, yeah.

Interviewer Can you remember how long you stayed in bed for?

Lou Ah... well, the average was a fortnight, I think; a fortnight or three weeks.

Interviewer So who helped?

Lou Well, with my false alarm I stayed in hospital a week. Then they chucked me out at the end of the week. They told me I had to go home. They told me I was going to bring my clothes in; I could go home.

Interviewer Did a neighbour come in and do a bit of washing or cooking?

Lou If anybody it would - oh, it would have been the old lady that brought me up.

Interviewer Yeah, Mrs Amos.

Lou She was always around. She was always around. Would have been her, yeah. Matter of fact she run our place. My place belonged to her; that was her idea, because her... her street



door... fitted my room door. Yeah, I had one in, um... one in Swanage; one in, um... Swinton Street; one in Percy Circus. Percy Circus was first. The other one was Swinton Street. I got out of there because of the bloomin' steam tugs.

Interviewer Because of the what?

Lou The steam tugs. You know what that means?

Interviewer No.

Lou Bugs.

Interviewer Oh bugs, right.

Lou They called them steam tugs then.

Interviewer They were bad, were they?

Lou Yeah, well, whoever had had the place before me had had a passion of putting lots of pictures up, and they'd knocked nails in all the wall. And of course, I thought the brown marks on the wall was the pattern of the wallpaper. Instead of that, they were born inside. They got in everywhere, so I had to get out there as quick as possible.

Interviewer Oh dear. How did you prepare the room before the birth? Did you have to do things to your room to get it ready for the midwife coming?

Lou I think the position of the beds. If I remember right, they tossed me around.

Female voice Are you still talking?

Interviewer Yeah, but we can stop.

Female voice Flo wants ((inaudible))

Lou Yeah, she's all right. She was in just now. She was here just now. She's all right.

Female voice Oh, was she? Oh, okay.

Lou She's all right. She's not in my way.

Interviewer We'll stop because it will be lunchtime soon.



Lou She's all right. If I remember now, they got hold of the bed, because I had one of these beds with iron bars - iron. They swung it around somehow to face the light. They had to face the light so they could put the stitches in. I remember that.

Interviewer What did you put on the bed? Did you have to put newspaper down?

Lou Ah, I think the... there was a nurse brought a rubber sheet; put that under me. I think she had a rubber sheet, if I remember right.

Interviewer Did you have to get anything else ready, like jugs and buckets and all that?

Lou Oh yes. Big white... big china jug. And, um... two pails, I think it was; and a big boiling kettle.

Interviewer Did you have all those things or did you have to borrow them?

Lou Well, in the course of the nine months you used to go up Woolworths in those days and buy things cheaper. But, um... that's as much as I remember about it. I don't remember a lot else.

Interviewer You know in the first bit when you were in labour, were you walking around the room or were you lying on the bed?

Lou Yes. No, I was up.

Interviewer You were talking.

Lou I couldn't sit still. I was moving about all the time.

Interviewer You only got on the bed for the last bit.

Lou I only sat down when I had to. Not otherwise, no. I liked to be on the go. Because all my pains weren't on the stomach; they were all back.

Interviewer In your back, yeah.

Lou I had all back... back pain.

Interviewer It's horrible that, yeah. When you actually were given -

Lou I never had one pain in the stomach at all. It was all back. I didn't have pain... I never had pains in the stomach at all.

Interviewer All of them were like that, were they?

Lou Yes. I had back labour.

Interviewer When you actually gave birth were you lying flat back on the bed?

Lou Yes. Well, I couldn't get over in the hospital. Somehow or other they didn't know what strung the leg out somehow. I've never had that before. Oh, that was it. They knew I'd... towards the end you had to bend your legs. They're bloody awkward... sorry, I keep forgetting that thing. It was damned awkward. I was no good at that at all. Anyway, they accepted the way I did it, so that was that. Actually that's the bit I didn't like, you know.

Interviewer What else was I going to ask you? What sort of house was it, the first house you said you were living in? Well, all of them really. Did you just have a floor of it?

Lou Yes. I was up on the first floor then. We had Jewish people downstairs. They lived downstairs. It would have been a nice place there, but they were so spiteful to their own kid, I got out of it. I couldn't stand the screaming. They used to shout at the kid. When the kid did anything wrong - only one child - they used to shut it in the coal cellar; in the black - it was real pitch black in there. The kid used to go hysterics nearly. I said to my husband, just losing Tommy, I couldn't stand the strain, so I had to get out. I got out of there.

Ah, what did we have there? I think we had just one of them little shallow sinks. Yeah, and the gas stove was in another room, I think it was.

Interviewer Yeah, you had a gas stove to cook with.

Lou Yeah.

Interviewer How about the heating of the room? Was it coal fire?

Lou Coal fires then, yeah.

[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE]

[START OF SECOND AUDIO FILE]

Lou Apparently this woman was having a baby, and she had to get rid of it because her two children that she'd got... because they were over 20 or something like that, a good age - they were so disgusted with their mother that the poor devil had bought herself a lace corset, and she got

someone to pull it as tight as possible every day. And that's how she killed the baby. That's the only thing I ever remember.

Interviewer You didn't hear of any things that you could take that would help you bring on a period if you were a bit late?

Lou No, unless you took Beecham's pills. That's the only thing I remember. Whenever I thought I was going to... I took... because I don't believe in a lot of medicine, you see. But I did do that just in case. But I think it was really more fear than anything that done me and Charlie. We were both green.

It shows you - when I first started my periods, when I was 14, I came home from school and I told the old lady what had happened. She said, that's all right. She said, that means you're grown up now. Oh, I said, that's nice. But you mustn't play with boys. And I thought it meant that you couldn't go out and play in the street with them. She didn't tell me no more, and that's as much as I knew.

I wasn't half mad, because there were four boys I used to play with. Two boy, the Clevelands, and their cousins. There were four boys that used to chase me around. And of course, I've got a scar on my knee now where I fell over the step, see.

Interviewer People just knew so little then, didn't they really?

Lou They did. It was disgusting to talk about it, wasn't it?

Interviewer Yeah. So you couldn't have sat and talked like this about it.

Lou Well, do you know, even... the whole 49 years I was married, I never saw my husband naked once. No, I never saw him... actually naked. So, he used to change in the kitchen. If he wanted to change anything - always in the kitchen. I always... I always remember I tried to modernise myself. I bought myself a nice nightie. I thought I was the greatest. He said, what the bloody hell do you think you're on? I was so bloody mad.

Another time I tried to change my style of dress. When the kids were small, you couldn't afford to. Then when the family allowance came in, you couldn't buy anything with the family allowance, but what you could get... you got 10 shillings, see. You couldn't buy anything with

10 shillings, but what you could do was get a £10 Provident cheque. So I used to... when... we used to take it in turns and have the £10.

When the kids had had their turn, I had one turn. I goes and dolls myself up. Looked very style - in bright red dress. Oh, I went to town. It fitted me perfect. I went out and I had a little toe cap with a dingle-dangle down here. So going along the street - I was going round to meet my... going round to my husband where he worked in the pub down in Leeds Street.

I'd put it all on. I hadn't told him a thing about buying it. Someone shouted out, Charlie, here comes your missus. Cor blimey, don't she look smashing. So of course that made me better still. When he saw me, he looked round - cor blimey. *Piccadilly Incident*. That was the name of an Anna Neagle film on at the time. I went home and I ripped the hat out, the first thing. I never tried it again. I never tried to be modern after that.

Interviewer Oh, what a shame.

Lou And that was it.

Interviewer Did you all sleep in the same bed, you, your husband and the kids?

Lou No, they had separate beds. Me and him slept together. But, ah, he died seven years ago, you see. I've met this one since.

Interviewer How about when the babies were born? Did they have a cot to go in?

Lou Oh, you saying that - the first... when Tommy was born, I couldn't afford a cot. So everybody said, you take the bottom drawer out of the chest of drawers. So of course, with that, I'm inclined to say things without thinking. So I said, oh, he looks as though he's in his coffin. Blimey, he was, in nine months.

Interviewer What did he die of?

Lou He had screaming convulsions, TB, rickets. He couldn't sit up at nine months, but he was the image of my Cathy. He was born with jet black hair like yours, long black sideboards. He was born with black sideboards, you know. And, um... what we didn't have - but I think why I lost him was, I think he was a haemophilia, and in those times they knew nothing about it.

Interviewer Is that what your husband had?

Lou Yes. Well, all my grandchildren have got it. All the boys have, you see.

Interviewer Yes, because it's the boys that get it, isn't it?

Lou Yes, and the girls that carry it, you see. Now, my eldest girls' two boys - they've got it. My youngest girls' two boys - they've got it, see. But Cathy, she shut up shop after having two girls. They weren't going to chance it. But I think out of the three, she's the one that missed it, because if you have three, one of them misses it.

But anyway, apparently down the Royal Free, the Nicholson family is well known for the haemophilia. And I think really that's what it was it was, see... without giving me any reason. They circumcised him, you see, and it was still in bandage when he died. That was three weeks after - that was three weeks after he was circumcised, and I think myself - I think that was the cause of his death. That's what I... I always believed that. That was Great Ormond Street Hospital.

Yes, they have to watch it now, the girls do. Now, my, um, granddaughter's got... my granddaughter's in the police force. And she wants to start having a family, but before she does that, she's got to go up the hospital to find out whether she's haemophilia or not. I thought she'd already done it. They said she's got to go up there.

Interviewer It's a big worry, isn't it? Because you're frightened if they fall over or anything.

Lou Yeah, if you fall over or anything like that. And me, I've been told the opposite. I will never bleed to death. They want to get an injection now in me - once they couldn't get one, I believe. So this, ah, bloomin' great big doctor came and she... what it was... they wanted to take an injection out of my thumb, and they couldn't do it. So she said, ah... she took it out my ear. It was only a little tiny little drop that she got. She says, I can tell you the good news. She said, if you were ever in an accident you'd never bleed to death. I said, thank you very much. There's me - the opposite way. That's the most I remember about that.

Interviewer It's amazing that he lived so long, isn't it, your husband.

Lou Yeah, but this is - how do you go for this though? In 1972 he had both his eyes done. I can never understand that. He had a double cataract in one eye, yet they operated. They had a cataract in the other eye and they operated, and he went to ((inaudible)) in the end, you see.

And then, um... what is the time? Quarter to 12. Another 10 minutes yet. And his own doctor told him no. But when we queried it, the doctor turned round and... Dr Finn it was, turned round and said, you have haemophilia till you're 60, but when you're 60 it goes. When he died, he hadn't got haemophilia.

Interviewer Never heard of that.

Lou He died of a cancerous tumour on the brain. What it was - I think he'd had a bad fall in hospital when he had his eye done. He fell on the back of his head. But then again he fell... he'd been falling a lot, you see. And that was it. That's how he died.

Interviewer Did it make a lot of difference when the National Health Service started? Did it make a lot of difference to you?

Lou What, with him or me?

Interviewer Just generally with, like, the cost of things.

Lou Well, you didn't have to pay to go to the doctors; that was a great help. That was a great help, yes. The kids of today, they've gone back to the old system where you've got to pay for your certificate, you see. Which is very bad. Considering the amount of money that they're paying now, I think it's disgusting. I do. I don't envy the generation of today at all.

Interviewer Did you hear of any women that died as a result of being pregnant or having a baby?

Lou No. When I was a kid I earwigged again. That's the only time I found out anything unless I earwigged. And apparently a woman across the road, Mrs Thackeray - apparently she used to, ah, do jobs with a crochet hook. It sounded terrible to me, but I do remember that. She had one child of her own and her husband - he was spiteful to her, he was. He used to get the... the kid would be innocently playing with us. Suddenly the father would come up behind him with a buckle of the belt and hit him right across the back. Little Joey, that was. Nice little kid, he was.

[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE, INTERVIEW AND TRANSCRIPT]