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Creators: Rick & Julia Goldsmith
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Interviewer: Julia Goldsmith (speaker, female)
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Producer: Julia Goldsmith
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Transcript:

The first time (I went hop picking) I was about six years old, and my cousin Nancy used to go with my Granny and I heard her talk about this hop picking. And my mum says to me, she said to all the children, 'would you like to come, go hop picking with your Granny? I think the first time I went with my Granny and me cousin Nancy. When we got there, going on the train, it was very exciting, the night before packing the things up, putting the blankets in and the different things that had got to last us I think it was six weeks we went for. Anyway, the morning came – at night we couldn't sleep, me and my sisters, we couldn't sleep. So the next morning we walked down to Daisy Bank Station, which we had to carry a big trunk, we'd got no transport. So my older sisters held the trunk and carrying baskets with bits of food and sandwiches for the journey.

Anyways, we gets on the train and the steam was coming out of the train and the whistle was blowing and the man with his hat on, saying aboard, all aboard, and it was magical that journey because I had never been on the train and I had never been in a car and I had never had a holiday, which we thought hop picking was. But we didn't realise it was picking hops, we thought it was picking apples. So when we get to Ledbury on the train, the lorry's waiting for us, to help us with our bags and our boxes. We all had to sit on our boxes, going down the country lanes and looking up at the sky and there was no sound of aeroplanes, there was nothing to be frightened of and you could see the birds and the corn in the fields, which I had never seen and I don't think I had ever seen a cow. I don't think I had except in a picture. And to see the sheep, that was lovely.

So when we got there this man and the farmer's wife was there, no she wasn't the farmer's wife she was the farmer, she would say, put your boxes away and come into my kitchen. When we get in there it was more than a Christmas meal, I had never seen anything like it in my life, there was all sorts of joints of meat, from chicken, pork, beef, big dish I re-member so well because I loved, potatoes and swedes all smashed up and a big lump of best butter on the top, which we never saw as children.

So anyway, we'd have this lovely meal and then we'd go back to our barn, which had got hard stalls, and we saw all these bales of hay and I thought, what are those for? I'd noticed them before we went in for our meal. My mum and my gran had got the army blankets out of the trunk. First of all we had to put bales of hay, I think it was about two high and I was only a little

girl and I was looking over the top and I thought, oh, how exciting to sleep here. They put blankets down, then they put what they called twill sheets over to stop the straw coming through, then they filled the pillow slips, then my granny said, get the oil lamps out, and this man, whoever it was, worked for the – I think they were Italian prisoners of war, they bought these oil lamps in. and I looked up and on the ceiling, was hooks and above the straw where we got to sleep they put the oil lamps. Course, no health and safety so I never ever thought about it. But we didn't light them until it was getting dark and only one person could light them or interfere with them, nobody else. You couldn't stand on the straw and stand up and touch them, body else. You couldn't stand on a stool and jump up and touch 'em – they wouldn't allow that.

So anyway, the first night, my granny said: come on baby, get your head rags on. I said, what's that gran? She said come here. She said if you don't put it on you'll have them ear-wigs in your ears. I looked at me me mum and me mum looked at me and that tied me head up in a big bow on the top and we were all stood there. I don't think we wore pyjamas we had what we called night shirts. Mine was like flannelette with long sleeves, we never wore slippers, we never wore socks because the coupons didn't allow it, because you had to have coupons for your clothes. So anyway, we got in and for the first time for about, oh, it's got to be twelve months or more, I had the best night's sleep ever. Because all we could hear, because there was no aeroplanes, there was no bombs, there was no [steward?] lights to be worried about being bombed. It was so peaceful just couldn't believe it. You could just hear the wind in the trees and the water in the little brook.

So woke up the next morning my mum had got the breakfast cooking with my granny and it was a big, big iron pan, I couldn't lift it up, and it'd got a hook on the ceiling, a thing hanging on this big pan, it was on a little thing on a little fire, in the wrought iron setting. That bacon and eggs, it was one of the best meals I have ever had in my life. Anyway, being a little girl I said, 'gran, I want to go to the toilet, mum I want to go to the toilet'. I hadn't gone since the night before. I don't whether anyone else had, but I hadn't. when I got there it was just around the corner by the back of the barn, there was a wooden structure with a corrugated roof and a piece of earth and sacking. And I says to Nancy my cousin, 'are you sure this is the toilet?' and she says, yeah, sure, go on in. It was ok for a child but heaven help an adult. I sat down and there was like a hole for an adult and a hole with a bucket in, well not a bucket, it was like a big drum that went down, and on it wasn't a proper toilet seat it was something fashioned for you to sit on. I said oh, I don't know whether I like it for not!

For washing, we could go to the brewhouse and we could have a wash but the water was always cold. So being children, we just

splashed a bit of water on us and off we'd go. Now we went out of the barn, one of the beautiful experiences, and I thought, 'God, this is para-dise'. It was absolutely fantastic. You could smell the country air, which to me was new and I thought it was beautiful. And you could see the birds flying, there was no anxiety anywhere, no fear of being bombed. We sat on top of the fence and me and my cousins were shouting, 'yippee! Here we come!' and we ran down to where we got to pick the hops, and we started picking, pick, pick, pick, and my granny said, now, let's have a race, see who can fill this hopper first, so right, here's my pile, and I was just big enough to look over the thing. My cousins of course they won, but everyday my mum and my gran would take it in turns, but we didn't realise, oh, you've won today Mavis, oh, you've won today June, you've won to-day Nancy, you've won today Pat. So we won every week.

But we worked Saturday mornings and we had Saturday afternoons off, so mother would say, 'come on, here's the rations books, get down to Bosbury, here's your bags, get the shopping, and off we'd trot. And as we was going down, because everything to me was new, we're passing we'd see a little hedgehog or even a little rat and we'd say, oh look at that, look at that. Just as if I'd seen a lion or a tiger, because in the towns you never seen much did ya? Anyway, I would get into Bosbury, and there'd be the bakery shop and they'd have all the lovely little cakes, home-made cakes, which you didn't get that quality in the town, definitely not, and if you did, the people who was queuing first had them and you just had the rubbish. Oh we'd have these buns with currants in and malt loaves and all sorts of stuff. And some wasn't rationed, so we'd fill our bags and stagger back. That two miles back did seem like a long way. When we'd get back mother would make us a cup of drinking choco-late and we'd sit around the fire drinking this - we'd never bother about it being wet or cold, we just sat outside. And if it was wet, we just didn't bother, even if we were picking the hops. If it was pouring with rain we just carried on. When we'd got back of a night, we'd strip off put our nightshirts on because we was tired then. But it was a beautiful, lovely ex-perience.

When we was going to come home..... we'll let me tell you about the Saturday night. We'd have our nightshirts on and our mum would say right, you can get dressed now. It would be about half past six because we had finished work and we had done our shopping and we'd got soaking. And the Italian and the German prisoners was on the farm working, they used to make wine and cider and they'd have a little bonfire. I don't know why they didn't go back to Ledbury them prisoners. They were quite affable young men. You wouldn't really have thought they was prisoners of war. They'd bring us this jug full of cider and we was al-lowed to have cider and summat I had never had, a packet of Smith's Crisps. I had never had any crisps in my life. I used to think that was lovely, Saturday night in the country with the mist just coming down on the autumn evenings and you could hear

the blackbirds and the birds just singing and it was really lovely. It was, it was a lovely experience that was. But the best part about it was not having anxiety. I didn't know it was anxiety, it was the most hor-rible feeling in your stomach, in your head, and it lived with you day and night, because in the daytime I could tell if the German planes was coming over with the sounds of the en-gines. And the back way where mum lived was the Great Western Railway and it used to have all the war weapons being took from where they were took to wherever, and you used to see the trains and there'd be dozens and dozens of trucks on the back of the train filled with tanks and guns, and then you'd have the planes coming over And you could see at the back of that field there was our soldiers there, in the pits with the guns, it was like an army camp thing, and you'd hear the big guns banging, well all that gone and I haven't got that, and gradually the peace came over. You couldn't buy it! I mean for a child, and there must have been thousands of children that had that anxiety, and I never realised what it was then, and then I realised what the war did to all the children. It took away that peace, and that magicalness of childhood. It was wonderful to run through the corn fields and to hear the birds singing because, believe it or not, we never seemed to hear the birds when the war was on, because there was heavy planes groaning in the sky, and you'd see the dog fights, and it was just horrific. And when I gave that talk at the school what it was like to be a child in the war. I said, I'm going to finish now and I must tell ya, always say no to war and always try to end things peacefully between nations, because there's no winners during war is there? no, none. But my time at Ledbury, it was magical. And now my three daughters are there and I could have a home there tomorrow if I wanted it. But I do love the Midlands.

It was always the same people. There was the Sayces from Princes End, they always went, there was the Tibbins from Coalsley they always went, there was the Parks, there was my granny Kelsey, my aunty Gladys, and us, my mother, my brother Ivan, my sister Pat, and my lovely cousin Nancy, because she was one of my favourite people, she lives on the Isle of Wight now. On the farm there were German prisoners of War, and Italian I'm sure of it. I thought of a night they would have took them back. I don't know if they did because we went to bed soon as it got to dusk. I mean on a Saturday they bought us the big jugs of cider but I must say from what I can remember they were quite pleasant young men but you wouldn't believed that they were at war with us. They were very clever. They used to make us wooden toys, like little planes and little things to bring back. Perspex little broaches with little flowers put in. So they were quite kind. But this man with a lady, you'd see her in her jodhpurs and a pork pie hat, and she used to have a whip in her hand. I loved her horses. It'd come around and ask if we were alright and always have sweets for the children.

We (children) worked all day long. I was only five or six when I first started. But of course I was the main picker when I was about 14. I could really work at it to earn that money. But they used to go to get the money for Christmas and looking back we might only have earned £15 in six weeks but that ensured that we could have a good Christmas and that's why we all went. But my granny used to have her hair cut once a year and that's when we was going hop picking, 'cut me hair, I'm going hop picking'. I never realised it was hard work, never. To me it was fun and people were happy and joking and singing and we'd all be singing the war songs, all sorts of things, and silly little ditties. And at lunch time granny would undo a towel probably sandwiches, and bits and pieces. But you only ever drank water while you were out, bottles of water, we never had a warm drink in the day til we got back. But the food tasted beautiful. And the butter. It was nothing like the butter that you buy in the shops. It was so creamy and delicious. Even a piece of toast tasted like a feast, because your taste buds are sharp aren't they as a child, aren't they? I think I enjoyed every time I went and I can never remember a bad thing happening.

JG: Why did you stop going?

Boyfriend! I realised after...I was about 15 and somebody said, 'you're not going hop picking are ya? Good god, didn't realise you went hop picking.' I said I did and it was lovely. I said you must be joking, oh my god. When I went to that farm with Miss Nanns you ought to gone to Squire Wheelers, you would have had a shed. But I didn't want to go to Squire Wheelers, I liked Miss Nanns. But as you get older and I started work, I started work in Woolworths, Dudley. It was like, how can I put it, it was like an escape from the war and all the turmoil that was going on, and I'd have gone even if they hadn't paid me, and from then on, I always wanted to live in the country and I've tried like living at Clun but I had this hom-ing instinct for the West Midlands. Newquay in Cornwall in a little hotel - I still wanted to come back. So you've got to be born in the country haven't ya? But my three daughters love it, they love Ledbury. And do you know occasionally, we used to have to walk into Ledbury, which has got to be about five miles, to go to the cinema. And opposite the cinema was the hospital and when we'd been hop picking for a couple of weeks we all came out in a rash, I was scratching, 'mum, I'm itching'. Me granny said, 'let's have a look what's up with you. Oh, you'll have to go to hospital with that see you haven't got impetigo. I was scratching away, and my sisters, and my cousins. So we all had to troop down to the hospital in Ledbury. That's when we found out there was a cinema opposite. And the nurses there, it was only a little old-fashioned hospital, they used to strip us off stark naked, stand us on a table, and paint us with all blue stuff all over our little bodies. So we got blue marks all on our face but it never stopped us hop picking. We would be back on that Monday morning picking the hops. When we went to that

cinema after we'd walked down, I think we'd been to the hospital as well, to have our itchicoos we used to call them, to have them painted, we'd all troop into the cinema; infected half of Ledbury.

All I can remember was the food tasted like food I had never had before. It was absolutely first class. Even the, Mam used to put a lot of potatoes on the fire and when that cooked they would be so crispy, the skin, and this man would send us a block of cheese. Oh, that was another feast. Looking back, I think it's a shame that they've stopped hop picking and mechanised it because for the poor families that never had holiday, never seen the sea til I was about 16, it was a lovely, lovely experience and it was one of the magical times of my childhood. And my sisters and my cousin Nancy. Lovely.

When I get up of a morning and open the back door and dew's on the grass, that's when it always reminds me of hop picking and the lovely smell. But of course here I've got the buses at the back. But in the country to me it was like perfume. And sometimes you'd smell laven-der and it'd just come floating from the farmhouse garden, the smell of this lavender, it was really sweet. I've got lavender in my garden now and apple trees and pear trees.

That and sleeping on the straw bales, it was the biggest shock of my life. I never slept so well in all my life and I've always had fresh air and I've always had very good beds but I've never slept like I did when was a child. I think it was a combination of the country food the fresh air and being out in it all day. And we'd all come back sun tanned, happy and enough money to have a nice Christmas.

I think my fondest memory was getting on the train, because I had never been on a train and it was so exciting because it was a Pullman, the guard blowing his whistle and the steam, and it really made you excited for your holiday. I never called it working. To me it was the best holiday you could have. And anybody with any gumption ought to advertise hop picking holidays and I think that would sell like a bomb. All us old pensioners would go. You never got bored. I mean we were only children. We would be there from eight in the morning to five at night. Because the grass was still wet with the dew. Oh it was fantastic. And some of the sunsets over Ledbury, because we were high up, it was out of this world, and it was such a blessing to get away from the life we'd got at home with the war being on and you could sleep in peace and and you won't going to be bombed, and your relatives won't going to be blown up because we were all sleeping together at Ledbury.

Cottons farm. Mavis Kelsey then. I first went hop picking when I was five, the end of 1939 and I went almost every year til I was getting on for 15. But I missed it and I'd always thing, oh, I'd

wish I was going. But of course my friends then were more interested in dancing and boyfriends, roller-skating in Dudley, Dudley rollerdrome. That took my fancy after that. The farm was Hill farm, Bosbury. Cottons farm it was, but it was Miss Mann who was the farmer. But sadly she died very young, in her thirties. I've been round and there was hop farms but whether it was the same one, because we went down in a lorry but they've all run by machinery now. All done by machinery now. But it is a shame because it took your mind off everything and it learned you to respect people and to help people as a little community, which is something you don't get in the towns, do you? We all looked out for one another. Nothing was ever stolen or took, which is a miracle today. I wish we'd had a camera but we weren't rich enough.

JG SHOWING PHOTOGRAPHS

There weren't any gypsies where we were. When we first started my sister Pat was so small we used to put her in the crib to have a little sleep. Counting how many bushels you've done and writing it in the book. We all kept clean and tidy and had wonderful food. We'd got the barn and round the back a horrible toilet. We had a brazier with a hook mam would make anything on that. Porridge was that thick your spoon could stand up in it. My brothers were at war. They are very interesting to me. Squire Wheeler was at Hereford I think. But he had huts, each family had a hut, but we were all communal. Whoever didn't go missed a treat because the comradeship, all of us went. When you're a child you just accept what you've got. We were standing there stark naked, all little girls. There were nuns in that hospital or they looked like nuns to us in their uniform, but right opposite was the cinema. and I remember the sweet shop in Ledbury it had got black toffee. But wouldn't we have been tired walking six or seven miles back home? But we did it and we really enjoyed it.

To watch the complete interview and others, please visit:
www.herefordshirelifethroughalens.org.uk/video-gallery