Hazel’s Story

**Summary:** Hazel was born in 1919 and trained as a nurse at the age of 21. During her nursing Hazel worked as a district nurse and in Africa with the The United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Hazel spent 14 years as a nurse in Africa practicing as a midwife and general practice.

**Vanessa Dowling and I'm talking to Hazel, and Hazel can you spell your surname for me?**

Dixon. D I X O N.

**D I X O N. And we're here at Hazel’s house. And what was your date of birth and where were you born?**

5th of December, 1919. And I was born in Huntingdon. My parents moved out of Huntingdon because they moved soon after the end of the First World War. They were tired of being in the war zone, so they moved out and Dad was in the trenches, you see, during the war. This was the 1914 - 18 war.

**And I'm just going to ask you now about the work that you did. So what was your main occupation during your life?**

I'm a nurse. I started nursing as soon as they would take me because I was I was too short. They wanted women of 5 foot 2 at least, and I'm just 5 foot! So it wasn't a lot but however, they took me in the end because they couldn't get enough nurses.

**And what year would that have been?**

I was born in what....so I was...

**When you started nursing.**

Let me see, let me see now.

**Do you remember how old you were?**

I was 21. I couldn't get parental permission; well my parents wouldn't give their permission. If I'd been 18 they would have given it but because I - they wouldn't give their permission and I had to wait until I was 21and go start nursing without their permission! I went back to my mother afterwards and apologised, when I was qualified.

**What qualifications did you have?**

SRN I'm a registered nurse, a state nurse, a certified midwife, and I'm also queen’s nurse.

**And where did you work mainly?**

I worked in hospital for a while and then I went- I realised that hospital sisters who stayed in hospital seemed to get bad tempered and irritable, so I decided I'd work on the district, going to people's homes and see them there. Which much better.

**So how long did you? Where abouts was the hospital you worked in?**

At Harrow, Harrow on the Hill. I trained there.

**And how long were you working there for before you started going to people's homes?**

Four years I think. They wouldn't keep us after we were trained because they wanted to train more nurses and there wasn't enough room. Something to do with the war and how much space there was everywhere and where you were allowed to go and so on because there was .... I think that was about all then, I can't remember any more. It’s sometime ago now of course!

**Can you remember what it was like at all at the hospital? Anything particular about it?**

A lovely hospital, I was very happy there. I enjoyed my training. My mother had refused to give me permission you see but after I'd trained, when it was all done, she was very proud of me. That’s nice.

**And did you specialise at all? Can you describe what you're ...**

No, I didn't really, no I thought general nursing and district work, going into people's homes and caring for them at home. So, I had a , we were given a list of people who were ours and we used to go to their home and give them the care that they needed at home, whatever sort of care it was. It was very interesting and you got to know the family and after the family of course you got the children. And you could continue if you wanted to go on nursing in that home and visiting the children, doing the health visiting. I don't think they use that system now.

**So you used to get to know, you used to, had some families, a number of families you were responsible for and so you got to know them.**

That's right, yes.

**So how long would you - how many visits would you make in a day? How many people would you visit?**

Four or five, as far as I can remember I think it was four or five.

**So can you describe what you did do during a visit?**

You'd see if they were alright, if they were well, look any children who were - if there were young children, and if they needed to see the doctor, let the mother know she should show them to the doctor. Can't think of anything else that we used to do. But it was lovely getting to know the whole family, you know not just popping in and out again. You were in the home and they would welcome you. When they would split us up later on and they would have some health visitors going in. And they didn't do anything but see one family. The people didn't like it, the family didn’t like it. And one of them said, "I'd like to see her - she comes in and does, you only come in and talk!" This is what they said to me - I came and did, and looked after them, did things for them.

**And how long did you do this for? How long were you visiting families? Do you remember how many years you did that?**

Don't really, 4 or 5 I suppose. I don't really remember because I went overseas after that, and worked in Africa.

**I'll go on to ask you what you did in Africa, but when you were working here, can you remember how many hours a day you worked?**

Very long hours actually, I did it could be 8, 9 hours a day. Sometimes some people would try to look after themselves, but they were safer not to. There was an old doctor who retired, and he killed himself inadvertently but putting a - if you give an enema with a Higginsons tube which is a ball, a ball on a tube that you squeeze and you squeeze the ball to you should put a soft rubber catheter onto this. Start before you put it into the patient. And this retired doctor tried to give himself an enema, don't know why, and he didn't put the rubber tube on you see, he didn't know it should be on. So he killed himself by sticking the tube through the side of his own rectum. It was rather nasty obviously his wife, it was terrible, I was called in afterwards to clear up everybody and saw the wife and so on. You get an accident like that happening occasionally.

**Must be a shock.**

It would happen, it did happen, and you had to clear it up.

**And can you remember what the pay was like was it well paid at that time relative to other jobs?**

No, I think that was the main reason why my mother didn't want me to - she thought I wasn't strong enough, I don't know why. I got a heart murmur but it didn't stop me later on. And - the pay oh yes the pay was low, it was always known as a poorly paid profession. In spite of what some people regarded as mucky jobs you had to do, you know, clearing people up. But that couldn't be helped and I loved it, I never regretted doing nursing. Never no nursing for years one way or another, on the district or in the houses.

**And you say you went to Africa after that, so how come that you went to Africa? How did that arise?**

Let me think how did that come now?

**How did you get that opportunity?**

Do you know, I can't remember.

**So where in Africa did you work? Which countries?**

South West. South West Africa.

**Which country?**

The second bump on the left coming up is how we used to describe it. You know the thing with Africa it's a long tail, and then the top where Morocco would be and so that when you came up....it was a big country we were on a level with Rhodesia, going across, cross wise.

**So how did you travel there when you went out there?**

Ooh, bullet cart, in those days, in Africa.

**To get to here to Africa, how did you go?**

I went by sea the first time, but after that the USPG, the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel they paid our fare the first time out and we went by sea that time and I hated it, it took such a long time, and I was travel sick, and I hated the sea voyage, just with all this water around me and so it took about a fortnight all that time to get there, just on board. It was dreadful

**And how long did you work in Africa? How many years?**

I was about 14 years there. Quite a long time, until my father wrote and said my mother died when I was out there, and my father remarried and he wrote to me and said it's time you came home - if you don't I shan't see you again. So I came home.

**So how many trips did you make? How long did you have to work out there before you got a break?**

We had to come home every 4 years. 3 or 4 years, to be looked at in the top story. The USPG said we had to go and be examined a physical and a few questions to answer, to make sure that we were coping physically and mentally with the climate there and the isolation. No shop anywhere near once you were out there. It was much less populated than it is now.

**So where did you stay? What kind of accommodation did you have when you were working there?**

We had a little room each. We built a block of rooms, 4 rooms in a block, because oh yes you had to be careful of fire because it was so hot and dry, so that if one house caught fire, they all did. They set fire to all of the others so they had to avoid that situation arising at all

**So how many people were you working with out there? How many colleagues and other -**

The first time, there were only 2 of us when we first went out, it was a friend who came home and took me back with her. So it was only we 2 there to begin with but after that the Americans came over and a lot more of them came over so we increased from about there were 18 at that station eventually. Yes there were 18 of us. All doing different things.

**And how old were you at this time? Can you remember what years you were out there for**?

**Was it after the Second World War?**

Yes.

**And what did you do? Could you describe a day what would be a typical day?**

Funny how you forget things, it's been so long since I came home.

**What kind of things - what kind of work did you do out there? Was it sort of visiting families?**

Sometimes you were called out to - we had a sort of station where we lived as a block, a room each and one or two men came out for different jobs, a laboratory assistant, or a laboratory worker came out, he had another room and so on and we nurses were in our own block. We were together - we were separated by gender of course. You know, we couldn't have men and women in one block. Unless they were husband and wife, but there weren't husband and wives out there somehow, I don't know why, whether it just happened that way

**Did people who were sick come to you at the station?**

It depended on where they lived and one father actually carried his grown up daughter, she was big she must have weighed nearly as much as he did I should think - he carried her 40 miles, to the hospital, to us - to treat her and luckily we were able to put her on her feet again. I think she got pneumonia. We had to - we didn't always have a doctor. I was there for 14 years and of that time we only had a doctor for 4 years, so you know it was quite a job. So we did what we could

**So what kind of illnesses did people have out there? They would come to you for was there?**

This girl had pneumonia and all we were aware of of course was the cough and bad pain in her chest. So we had all had to do extra - after our general training and our midwifery training we all did an extra years residential training in a home for that purpose, so we were really very well trained - we were midwife plus another year of doing it all over again so that you really knew your subject

**And how did you find it working out there? How did it affect you personally? Did it affect your health at all? Working in a..**

Well I lost alot of weight there but that didn't matter well I mean I wasn't ill, I don't think I was ill at all out there and I enjoyed the heat, I sweat alot - that was what the USPG wanted to know before we went out - do you sweat much, do you perspire? So I said yes I do - well that's a good thing you'll be alright. If anybody didn't perspire alot they were doubtful about sending them and they often broke down mentally anyway because of the isolation and came home again , one - two of them did that, broke down mentally and had to come back home.

**And the work you did there how did it help the people out there and the community there?**

Well it was personal most of it, went to the patient if the patient couldn't get to us, we would go to them and treated them at home

**So when you came back here again, did you go back into nursing?**

Well by that time I was retirement age and I'd got osteoporosis so I was awarded a disability allowance (...) it was quite generous so I still have that of course

**So how old were you when you retired? When you - how long were you actually working for**?

Well I must have been - I was in my 70's when I retired

**And you started at 21**

Well I started actually working when I was 14. I left school at 14 and started working but I had to go into college for another fortnight and do another fortnight's residential you see and we'd go through the work we'd done already at home and I'd already done it in school - ordinary school you know. So I had to go into college and do another fortnight of that

**And did you ever want to do anything else or was nursing always what you wanted to do?**

No nursing was always - I always loved looking after people for whatever you know, whatever they needed - and at home I was always the family nurse at home, nobody else seemed to like it. It really mattered to me that people were alright. You know I used to say to them "Are you alright" I thought if they weren't feeling well. I could tell my mother wasn't up to the task, you know. My eldest sister died of TB and I nursed her, my mother wouldn't go near here she was afraid of catching it, and I didn't mind I was quite sure I wouldn't, and so I nursed her, and cried buckets when she died.

**So you were happy in your working life?**

Oh very happy, yes I always loved nursing. I still do - except I no longer got the energy of course. But when you're young enough you have and if you enjoy the thing you can do it alot longer, do alot more of it, can't you than if you're not happy doing it

**You say you worked out in Africa, was that unusual at the time?**

It was South West Africa was very unusual. I never met anybody else who did - South West, what got me out to South West? Of course the rest of Africa is quite different from the bit at the side, South West Africa. I forget what sent me out there - I was sent out by USPG, probably because there was nobody else available or they were afraid of being too far from home. It wasn't easy to get back and forth

**So had you thought - had it ever been something you wanted to do - to go and work abroad? Something that you were asked to do?**

I'd wanted to be a doctor, really, and my mother said “don't be a fool”, you know we can't afford it. It'll take another 6 years training, which was quite true of course. So I thought I was going to be a nurse then.

**So you'd like to have been a doctor if you had the opportunity?**

Yes, yes very much. I can see now that we couldn't have afforded it, we didn't have enough money, it takes alot of training. Really to be a doctor you have to do alot more general training

**So when you say you couldn’t have afforded it -would you have had to pay for that training yourself? The government didn't give you or pay your fees then?**

No, not that I know of, I don't think now that it would be paid for

**So how do you feel? It sounds as though you did something that other women wouldn't have had the opportunity to do. How do you feel about the work that you did as compared with what a man would have been able to do?**

If it was a man he wouldn't have been able to do nursing because they didn't have male nurses then. They do now of course but they didn't then, it was unheard of. A nurse was a woman!