

# Larry Allen (animator and inventor) 1917 - ?

by [admin](#) — last modified Aug 27, 2008 03:38 PM

**BIOGRAPHY:** Born in Merthyr Tydfil, Larry Allen first began producing animations as a boy by drawing directly onto pieces of film salvaged from nearby cinemas. He later relocated to Coventry where he worked as an engineer at the Hillman Humber car factory. He continued work on animations in his spare time, building his own rostrum camera and establishing the company Challenge Film Productions, which made animated publicity films. The studio was bombed during WWII, but Allen continued to produce films into the 1950s, particularly to promote 'Fleur De Lys' Pies, as well as working as a stills photographer and an inventor.

**SUMMARY:** Allen discusses his childhood in Wales, his experiences during WWII and his career as an animator. His recollections are rather unfocussed, however, and few details relating to filmmaking practice are provided. This interview has been edited.

## BECTU History Project - Interview No. 381

[Copyright Larry Allen

]

Transcription Date: 2002-07-08

Interview Date: 1996-04-11

Interviewer: Rodney Giesler

Interviewee: Larry Allen

Tape 1, Side 1

This is an interview with Larry Allen, recorded by Rodney Giesler, in Teignmouth, Devon on the 11th April 1996 for the BECTU Oral History Archive.

**Rodney Giesler:** Larry, can we start off by...if you could tell me when you were born and a bit about your family background and early life?

**Larry Allen:** Well as far as I can remember, you know, I can remember the soldiers coming back from the First World War and taking the puttees off for one other relation. I was sat on the floor, you know. But to go back to my beginnings, I suppose it all started when I was in a highchair, because my Mother used to say, "You could draw better than grown-ups," you know, in them days. Matter of fact, she used to embarrass me at times when I was a young man and she used to say that strangers used to knock at the door and, "Could we see the baby draw?" You know...

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah. When were you actually born, Larry?

**Larry Allen:** Well I was born 1817, see? So I'm nearly eighty, as the saying goes, but I think...

**Rodney Giesler:** 1917?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah that's right.

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah, you'd be a bit old for 1817!

**Larry Allen:** Ah [chuckles] no, 1917 obviously. And I think I'll - I hope to - I hope and I wish I could live long enough to see some of the inventions that I've been working on, you know, and that's the real purpose of me praying that I will live a long time. So, but to be negotiable these days, sometimes they don't take any notice of an old man, so I have to say "I'm nearly eighty" so I suppose [chuckling] if I have the luck to reach a hundred I shall say "I'm nearly eighty" then! You know what I mean?

**Rodney Giesler:** Yes, yes.

**Larry Allen:** [Chuckling.] I shall keep on saying, "I'm nearly eighty!" But it's very sad really, I think I've been lucky in that way, because my health has been very good all my life and I've never worried to that extent about, you know, business. I've been in lots of different businesses, but often money isn't a major concern, because often I started a business and gave it away, to get onto something else! You know what I mean?!

**Rodney Giesler:** Going back to your childhood, what did your Father do for a living?

**Larry Allen:** Well my Father was a very strong man, he had to be strong, because he was a coal-miner. And he was a bit of a lad really, he was a bit of a comic, you know, always acting the fool amongst his friends and, even in our family. I suppose that's where we get a lot of it from. And I was the eldest of seven, and my six brothers and sisters all went on the stage. Now that is ironic because my Grandfather was an old music hall artist and, well we've got to go back a long way for that. And I was brought up by him, until I was about nine or ten - nearly ten.

**Rodney Giesler:** What was your Grandfather's name?

**Larry Allen:** My Grandfather's name was Harry Taylor. He used to say, "Harry Taylor, entertainer!" And he was a marvellous man. I think a lot of this talent business must have come

from him because he had a huge library of books, and I never went to school. He was a man who didn't believe in school, he didn't send his children to school, and my Mother was a twin, so she danced with him on the stage. He was a travelling showman - my Grandfather was a travelling showman. And I can remember very well, probably four or five - tap dancing and, later on, playing a mouth organ with him, when he played his instruments, and being on the stage with him. I travelled with him, me and my Gran, and I think that's where I learnt a lot about juggling and acrobating and tap dancing, you know. I recently made a video of myself, at my age now, and I'm tap dancing and eccentric dancing, you know, twisting and turning. And I thought that I would make that as a prosperity [sic] thing, you know, [chuckling] to keep, for my family, you know? So my Father was the opposite, he was a coal-miner. But he was Danny the Boy, he comes from Irish stock and his name was Danny. And the funny thing about it was, my Grandfather retired when I was about ten, or nearly ten, and of course I had to go back to live with my Mother and Dad, who was, er - previously I used to call them Winnie and Danny, because I didn't know no better. Because when they visited their Mother (and my Mother visited her Mother) I used to shout, "Here comes Winnie and Danny!" But of course when I went to live with them it was a bit strange, living with brothers and sisters and... But I still didn't go to school because my Father, then, was out of work and I can remember as if it was yesterday, things was pretty bad. I mean I would run errands to earn tuppence for the house, you know? And my Father and two or three other men opened up an old mine...

**Rodney Giesler:** Where is this? Where was this?

**Larry Allen:** This was in Merthyr Tydfil, South Wales, you see. I was born in Penderyn in Merthyr Tydfil. And, as I say, I didn't go to school so I can always remember working with him in this mine, my Dad says, "Here y'are, come along," so I [chuckling] was a young miner at ten! And I can always remember, it was pouring with rain, because, like, it was wintertime and they knew they could sell the coal you see. And then they loaded it onto horses and carts, because them days it was just horse and carts, as you know, in the 1920's, and I would walk in front of the horse and cart, because it was illegal, you see. And er...

**Rodney Giesler:** You were mining this coal for yourselves were you?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, we were mining it to sell...

**Rodney Giesler:** I mean who owned this mine?

**Larry Allen:** Well nobody - it was a delicate mine...

**Rodney Giesler:** Oh I see, yes...

**Larry Allen:** And our neighbour next door, Tom Jones - and this can go down in history - because I remember, after being there two or three days, he lost his two fingers, because the bucket broke and came down on his - as he bent, he lost two fingers, see? And that winter then, they sold what they could get out of the mine, you know, to the big houses. They sold it cheap, see? Even I would knock at the doors of the big houses, "Any coal Ma'am?" You know, cheap. So I think that winter went by like that you know. And then my er...

**Rodney Giesler:** Did you go and live with your Grandfather to - why did you go and stay with him? You mentioned...

**Larry Allen:** Well my Grandfather, you see he retired from the stage and his sons had moved off to Coventry - that's from Merthyr Tydfil to Coventry - so he went and joined 'em then. So what happened after this winter of despair, you know, with me Dad out of work, I was gonna go to er - oh I had an accident - that's right! I got knocked down by a runaway horse and cart! It was all horse and carts them days. I had my little sister at the side and I pushed her onto the pavement, but the cart, the wheels went over my leg! I don't remember much about it, except that, we lived on top of the hill. Anyway, in them days there was no ambulances to fetch and carry us or... I recovered in bed, like. I can remember waking up and my Mother was laying at the side of me, you know, and I think in my dream I said, "Please God, don't let me die, because my Mother would worry!" [Laughs] So anyway my Mother sent me to an Aunt in Neath, an Aunt and Uncle. Actually the Uncle called and took me with him, and I'll always remember, he was a great man, Uncle Johnny - full of laughter. We got to - I think it's Glynneath or some place near Seven Sisters where he lived - er, Onllwyn, that's right, Onllwyn, a place called Onllwyn.

**Rodney Giesler:** Sorry, how do you spell that?

**Larry Allen:** I don't know how to spell it! It was Onllwyn it was called...

**Rodney Giesler:** Near Neath?

**Larry Allen:** And he was a coal-miner you see, Uncle Johnny was - all in the family, you know. And he was Irish, he was Johnny Donovan. And there was another uncle in the same village that immigrated from Merthyr- Tydfil and his name was Sullivan. And I'd got a cousin, Gerald, who was a few months younger than me, so we played together as boys, you know. Anyway, me Mother sent me there for about six months and I still didn't go to school, because me Aunt had a big family of grown-ups - a very, very nice family. And I often wished that when I grew up I should be like them, because she had four sons and two daughters and, believe it or not, none of them was married! [Chuckles.] She was my Dad's older sister you see, so they were years older than me.

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah...

**Larry Allen:** My Father was a boy when they got married, little boy. So anyway, I run errands and things like that, and then I came back home. So my Dad says to me, he said, "I don't know what I'm gonna do with you," he said, "I think you ought to go into the Church." Like my cousin did - my cousin Patrick became a priest, you see. And he said, "I think it would be best if you followed your cousin Patrick into the Church business," you know. So I said, "Oh, OK Dad, I'll do that." So I joined the Catholic Church and became an altar boy and "anomaly partri," you know, "et filio spirito,"[?] I learnt all the Catholic prayers in Latin. And I think I must have been there only a few months and my Mother says, "Here, we've just had a letter that one of your uncles is very ill with rheumatic fever, in Coventry, and I'm sending you to Coventry, to his house, to help him out." So I said, "OK, Mam." So she put a brown paper parcel under me arm and saw me off on a train. And I got to Birmingham and I got another connection to Coventry,

and outside the station was me other Uncle, Albert, in an old T-Ford - I thought it was marvellous! [Chuckling.] To get into an old T-Ford, you know, and watch him use all the gears!

**Rodney Giesler:** How old were you then, about twelve?

**Larry Allen:** Oh I think I was about probably - no, about thirteen or summat like that, you know... Yeah, probably twelve or thirteen. Anyway I got there, and then I met me Grandfather, you see - again - because he lived with 'em. And I thought, "Oh how smashing, lovely big house," you know. And we wasn't there many months because my Grandfather took over the other side - there was a chapel in between the two houses, but the other house wasn't a house, it was a maternity hospital, with great big rooms, you see. I'd never seen anything like it, because coming from Merthyr Tydfil with a little cottage and no bathroom, you know, I thought, "corr!" So I loved it! So we moved all the furniture and that into the other house - carried it, like - it was only past the chapel, like. And it was a massive place - matter of fact I had a bedroom to meself. And very peculiar that is, because in my bedroom was all the cupboards, big white cupboards, where I suppose, the maternity house for the babies, they kept all the linen you see. And on top of the cupboards, oh there was about - oh, thirty books, thirty or forty books stacked up. And when I got into bed at night I would get on a chair and get one of these books down, you know, and it frightened me to death, reading them, because it was all about having babies and that, you know! [Chuckling.]

**Rodney Giesler:** Now you said you never went to school though, but you learnt to read and write didn't you?

**Larry Allen:** Oh my Grandfather was marvellous!

**Rodney Giesler:** He taught you did he?

**Larry Allen:** He had a big library of books and he was very interested in Marconi, Edison, and all these people, the big inventors of the day, and I devoured that.

**Rodney Giesler:** And he was your Mother's Father?

**Larry Allen:** He was my Mother's Father.

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah.

**Larry Allen:** But when I come to saying to people, even in shops today, I pull their legs, I say, "Give me the right change because I never went to school!" But that's only a joke really because I say - well I'm telling a little bit of a lie, because I did go to school in my early days when I was three and a half. And when we did playing about in this school, you see, kids started at three and a half in them days and the teacher says, "Now we all have a little sleep." So we put our heads on the little tables, you know, the chairs, and I must have fell asleep so hard, when I woke up - and it was winter time - it was all in darkness! So, luckily the doors was open and I found me way out, because it was my first day there, and after that me Grandfather said, "That's it, you've finished!" And I never went then, after that! So anyway, what I'm saying is when my Uncle was

so ill - oh you should see 'im - with rheumatic fever, he used to sweat. And he was the only Uncle that did the coal round you see, and with the wet coal bags on his back. So the other uncle was in the fruit business, so I went down the market with him early in the mornings and he would load me up with a barrow, and I became a barrow boy.

**Rodney Giesler:** This was in Coventry?

**Larry Allen:** This was in Coventry, you see, selling fruit. Well my Uncle had two little children, who was bad in bed, you see. And his wife, in them days the women couldn't get jobs, so there was no money coming in for him at all, he got help from his other brothers. And I think I used to earn roughly about twenty-three shillings a day, which was pretty good then you see.

**Rodney Giesler:** What, loading up barrows?

**Larry Allen:** Selling fruit, selling fruit.

**Rodney Giesler:** Selling fruit, yeah.

**Larry Allen:** And it's ironic really, a job like that, you know. I pushed that barrow all over Coventry and when I went to get good pitches in the town, you had to be very careful because the policeman would come along and move you and if he was in a nasty mood he'd fine you five shillings. So one day, I made it a little bit easier for meself because there was a lady, a customer, as I went through the streets, she'd got a retarded son, he was about six foot [chuckles] - big chap, you know. And he came along for a meal at me Aunt's house and a hand of bananas like, he pushed a barrow all day for me, so that was pretty good. Anyway...

**Rodney Giesler:** If I can just briefly go back to your life in Merthyr Tydfil.

**Larry Allen:** Oh my life in Merthyr Tydfil was...

**Rodney Giesler:** When you were living with your Mother and Father, you said when you came to Coventry you had a lovely bedroom all to yourself...

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, that's right...

**Rodney Giesler:** How did you sleep in Merthyr Tydfil - with all your brothers and sisters?

**Larry Allen:** Oh well we just piled into one bed, you know. Actually at that time there was my sister Nancy, my brother Jack and my sister Freda, at that time - the others came along after, see. There was Albert, Teresa and Betty, they came after, when I was in Coventry, they'd never seen me, you see.

**Rodney Giesler:** Why were you the one who got sent to Coventry?

**Larry Allen:** Well I was the eldest.

**Rodney Giesler:** Oh I see, yeah.

**Larry Allen:** See, but in Merthyr Tydfil, now that's a funny thing about that because I think the people today 'ain't changed one bit to what they were in the 1920's. The kids are the same. And in Merthyr Tydfil, if anybody goes back and makes enquiries, you'll find that it's almost fifty-fifty of Catholics and Protestants. And being as I was travelling with me Grandfather, on the stage, and we went back to the house in - I went back to me Mother's house. I thought it was so disgusting to see the kids with stone battles, they used to have stone battles, between the two schools you see...

**Rodney Giesler:** In the streets?

**Larry Allen:** In the street. So I opened up three cinemas there you know, as a boy. Like, one after the other, 'till I got this big shed.

**Rodney Giesler:** How do you mean, you opened up?

**Larry Allen:** Well I had projectors and I was making animated films back in them days, as a boy.

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah, but where did you get the money to buy the projectors?

**Larry Allen:** Well actually the projector - my Uncle, my Mother's Uncle worked in the Palace Cinema. So he would come along often for a piece of Mother's cake and a cup of tea, you know, and give us complimentary tickets, to go to the Palace. Also he would give me yards of film, clear film, the leaders, you know, that was run-off. And he'd give me bits of films, of the early silent films, you know, and I would draw on these films, animated cartoons, and push 'em through the German projector, which belonged to my cousin Gerald, see? Now my cousin Gerald called to see me two years back - two years back! And I took him to Bowden House the British photographic museum, and he was amazed, you see. So I says to him] when he came, "I haven't seen you for fifty years!" - I could recognise him though, all right - and I said, "Hey Gerald, do you remember them cinema films I used to show?" And he said, "Course I do!" Just like that, you know! [Chuckling.] "Course I do" he says. Because he was there with me, see - it was his projector! So anyway...

**Rodney Giesler:** [Coughs]

**Larry Allen:** Do you want another drink?

[break in recording]

**Rodney Giesler:** Before we go on, I'm interested to know about your drawing. You know, you were in a highchair when you did drawing, did your Grandfather encourage your drawing?

**Larry Allen:** Oh yeah, he was a marvellous man he was, yeah.

**Rodney Giesler:** But anyway, you're talking about drawing on film...

**Larry Allen:** I was, I'll go back to that...

[LA offers RG another drink.]

[

**Rodney Giesler:** I'm quite happy at the moment, so please carry on...]

**Larry Allen:** Oh I'll go right through it, I can remember most things, you know. I've got a marvellous memory really - well I think you do as you get older.

**Rodney Giesler:** Anyhow, you're in Merthyr Tydfil and you're...

**Larry Allen:** Is it on now?

**Rodney Giesler:** Yes it's recording.

**Larry Allen:** Oh I see.

**Rodney Giesler:** You're in Merthyr Tydfil and you're drawing on bits of film.

**Larry Allen:** Yeah that's right. See what happened really was, I think I must have been travelling around with me Grandfather - he used to do a lot of 'Fol-De-Rols', you know in the seaside, 'Fol-De-Rols' you see. And I think I had a marvellous time with the rest of the company, you know.

**Rodney Giesler:** What did you do with the company, what was your job?

**Larry Allen:** [Chuckling.] Well I used to - I had to stick to one song in them days! Me Grandfather, because I could rattle it through well, and it was 'I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles' - that was a First World War Song, you see.

**Rodney Giesler:** And you used to sing it?

**Larry Allen:** And I used to sing that and tap dance. And believe it or not, I was a very good tap dancer, I was. Actually I grew up to be a very good tap dancer and I think I could really class myself as a Gene Kelly - I could do every step in tap dancing. There is one very hard step in a tap dance which I mastered and you don't see - oh matter of fact, to tell you the truth it's rather ironic. Because when Laurel and Hardy came to this country with their UK tour, I knew Vic, Ray and Bobby, they were a dancing team, Vic, Ray and Bobby. And Vic, Ray and Bobby was the

top act along with Laurel and Hardy, see? And Vic sent me the posters of [the] Laurel and Hardy show, when they were in Birmingham. And years after, like, we often suggested that we would get together all the tap dancers over seventy - gotta be over seventy - and show the youngsters how it's done! You know what I mean? And we were very keen to do that, but of course it didn't come to it. We thought we could copy the 'Roly Polys', you know the 'Roly Polys'? [Chuckles.] Anyway I haven't heard from Vic for some time, so I don't know what's happened. But to get back to the drawing, animated cartoons - Is, I didn't know how animated cartoons was made. I just used my own imagination, you know, trial and error. Well, as I said, we travelled the seaside places - well the seaside places in them days, silent pictures. No gramophone, no wireless, and - but there was a lot of these 'What the Butler Saw' machines, on the promenades. You put a penny in and er, you put a penny in for the adult stuff, but there was also cowboy stuff for children as well, you see. Well, to tell you the truth, I couldn't get enough pennies to put in. I must have been about six or seven then, and I was always around these machines. I don't know what the public thought of me but, my Mother used to give me - or my Grandfather - give me a few pennies in the daytime before the show started you know, he'd say, "Go on." And I remember at one seaside place, I took my young sister, my sister was with me, and I sorted these machines out, which was quite a long way from where we were staying, and I got lost! [Chuckling.] I couldn't find me way back! So I'd got me sister crying at the side, you know, so I said, "I tell you what we'll do, we'll go in this clothes shop." [Chuckling.] So we went in this clothes shop and as soon as we stepped in I says to the lady, "We're lost!" So she said, "Oh my dear, sit on the chair." [Laughing] I remember her putting us on two chairs, because all the shops had chairs in them days you know, not like today. And in come a policeman then, and we waited about another half-hour and in come me Mother, with a big wallop! [Laughs.] So anyway, to get back to these 'What the Butler Saw' machines, then they started making flip-books, you know the flip-book? Which is the same idea, you see. Years after, up to the present time, you can't buy one of these 'What the Butler Saw' machines for love nor money - even the British Photographic museum haven't got one. So I made one and it works perfectly because I was an engineer. I can make most machines because I served me time as an engineer and then, in my young days I went as a freelance engineer as well. So making a 'What the Butler Saw' machine wasn't hard at all. Matter of fact there's a man, he's the editor of 'The Animator', I don't know whether you've seen this paper, it's called 'The Animator' and - all movie books you see. He wrote to me, he says, "Have you got any drawings?" he says, "because I often like to make one of these 'What the Butler Saw' machines." Which was called The Mutoscopes in them days, you see. They were actually the beginning of the cinema, see? And so I wrote to him, I says, "I'm sorry I haven't got no drawings," I said, "but I'll draw one out." I done it straight off the reel, you know, without drawings. "But what you really need," I said, "is a bread-slicer and an old gramophone - wind-up gramophone - You put the two together to get a slow speed. And another thing is that it has to go one way, on a ratchet, you can't go the other way, see? You just keep going..." Oh he thanked me very much and he said, "If you want any articles written in the book about you," he said, "I can do it any time." He was keen to do it and I says to him, Well, if you've got nothing to sell, publicity 'ain't much good to you," you know, at that time, you know, and then...

**Rodney Giesler:** How old were you then, when this happened?

**Larry Allen:** Oh this is recent, this is recent, see.

**Rodney Giesler:** Oh this is fairly recent, yeah, yeah.

**Larry Allen:** Last few years, you know. And the 'What the Butler Saw' is down in my studio now, see. It's going to go to Bowden House soon. Anyway to get back now, to the early days, is - making flip-books - oh I was a fast drawer, in action, you know, even as a boy. And I'd buy a pad book for ha'penny, fill 'em up with drawings, of two boxers or things like that, fighting, you know, or cowboy shooting, and I'd sell 'em to the kids for a penny, see? Making another profit to buy some more pads you see. Anyway I got fed-up with that a bit - not fed-up, but I went on to making drawings on film. I would say [coughs] drawing straight onto clear film by marking every four sprockets, you see, and therefore putting it through the projector, you've got a moving picture, which was simple. I probably, might have been the first in the world to do that, because I never heard of anybody doing it, until years after, McClaren done it in Canada.

**Rodney Giesler:** I was gonna say, yeah.

**Larry Allen:** But I done it well before 'im, because I was older than 'im - he don't go back that far. Funny thing about it though, he's dead now isn't he? I've lived a good many of 'em out really. I mean, Walt Disney died '64 and er, I've got all Walt Disney's biographies written by himself, his daughter and other - and they're very much the same. And he gave up about six times you know? Started his studios, lived on baked beans. And it was only for the fact that a German man in the early 1930's you know, came into his studio and gave him four thousand dollars to put Mickey Mouse on a watch, well that started all the commercial business for him, you see. I never really had that luck, although I designed the 'Diddy Men' for Ken Dodd, you know? That is a fact, that is, and when Ken Dodd used to appear in all these theatres, they were my designs he used to have up, you know, with 'Diddy Men' on his hand. And so therefore I carved out - I made a lot of puppets of 'Diddy Men', they're my favourite really. But, of course, I didn't commercialise on it meself. But to get back again now, when I was sent to Coventry [chuckles] (that's a term, innit? 'Sent to Coventry!') Anyway, I loved it there, because Coventry was a very clean city. I progressed than from the barrow and when my Uncle got - it took him twelve months you know - I was nearly fourteen by the time he got better. And he says to me, "I won't be able to do the coal any more" he says, "I think I'll get a little shop." He wasn't strong enough, you know. Although, in his lifetime he lived to over ninety, it's marvellous, living on fruit I think! So anyway, I went with the other Uncle then, who had an old T Ford, and I went on the round with him, see. Not going to school, mind you, you know, and I was in long trousers. Now that was a get-out, the long trousers, because no boy was allowed long trousers in them days 'till he left school at fourteen. So if anybody saw me in long trousers, they thought I was fourteen and I was quite a tall lad for me age. And I used to wear me Uncle's leave-offs, you know. Because they dressed well, and I'd have their clothes. Anyway, this particular day I was driving the old T Ford - you didn't have to be a good driver because there...

**Rodney Giesler:** What were you selling?

**Larry Allen:** We were selling fruit.

**Rodney Giesler:** Fruit, yeah.

**Larry Allen:** Fruit, rabbits and fish to the houses you see - we had regular customers. And I was going along Hastings Road in Coventry and my Uncle would be taking the money from the next house or so down, and I would drive the old T Ford with the fruit and that to the next house, the next customer. So I did that, and the old T Ford never had no doors on, just straight out. I had the moneybag round me and I jumped out, right into the arms of a man passing and he had a briefcase under his arm, and he says to me, "How old are you, Son?" Well boys them days, they always told the truth didn't they? [Chuckles] So I says, "Nearly fourteen, Sir, nearly fourteen." Put me hand up to me - you know - I saluted him, you know, with respect. [Chuckling] So he says, "But you're not fourteen!" I says, "No." He says, "Well why are you driving that?" I says, "Well, me Uncle - he's been very bad, he's been very ill and I've had to earn money for him." And in them days, work and money was the main thing, more important than school I can tell you that. So anyway he says, "I'm sorry, but I've got to take your name and address." So he took my name and address and he said, "If you're not fourteen, you'll have to go to school." So that was about a fortnight before Christmas, and my birthday's in May, see. So I thought, "Oh that's not long, that's not long anyway. And when I told my Uncle he carried on, he says, "You should have told him you [was] fourteen and finished with it." I says, "Oh I can't tell a lie, Uncle!" No, I couldn't tell... So I finished up then by going to school before Christmas and I liked it, because it made a change and I'd come right in time for the school concert! So I was on stage, tap dancing [laughs] back to the old tap dancing! And I always remember the tune that I sung, it was called 'I Want to be Happy' do you remember that song?

[LA sings couple of lines]

**Larry Allen:** And er, so anyway, I finished up, they put me in the top class because of my age but when the exam - I'd missed half of the exam, but I think there was an Easter exam or something like that, and I was bottom of the class, you know. I couldn't help it. I was good at arithmetic, reckoning up, because I'd reckoned up all the fruit and stuff in business! [Chuckles] I was good at woodwork because I was good at - and the woodwork teacher was Mr Rhys who was a Welshman, and he made me prefect, straightaway. And I was good at science, and the science teacher, Mr MacKnight, me and him got on well. I'd learnt all the science from me Grandfather's books, you see.

**Rodney Giesler:** And you were good at drawing...

**Larry Allen:** And I was good at drawing, oh yes. There was no drawer's in them days, nobody. No kids drew in them days unless they were very good, because parents didn't encourage. Parents in them days spoke the truth. If a kid was no good they'd say, "That's no good." They don't today, they just say everything is marvellous today, innit? Everything! So anyway, I was like 'Top of the Pops', with being a drawer, you know, a good drawer, amongst the kids. And the kids in the class used to say, "Here Sir, look at Allen's drawings!" Well the thing is, I was bottom of the class in all other subjects and because I'd never learnt 'em - geography and things like that. There was two Allen's in the class, Tommy Allen and, my name is Larry Allen, you see, and we sat by one another. That was funny really, but we sat two in a desk, you know. And because I was backward in other subjects except what I've just said, the teacher, Mr Foulger, he used to say

- because my name was L Allen - he used to call me Lazy Allen. I didn't like that, because he didn't know that I used to be up at six o'clock on a morning before coming to school and help my Uncles, and in the evenings, you know what I mean? So I wasn't lazy. So anyway I found out I couldn't leave school on me birthday, I had to go to August, because that was the term for leaving, see? So I was so determined that I wouldn't be at the bottom of the class, that I started to put my - what brains I had, together, you know. And I went home and I asked several teachers if they would lend me books for the subjects I was backward in, and they did, they were very kind. And I took these books home and studied 'em, but I copied 'em and I put 'em into a computer. Now who'd heard of a computer in them days? Nobody! So I made this little gadget up and I put all the answers into it [chuckling] and I made one mistake! Actually this thing didn't teach me, I was teaching myself, putting the thing together, innit? Just like the computers today. Computers don't teach you, it's only as you're putting it into it - they tell you nothing! They have to be fed.

**Rodney Giesler:** What kind of computer was yours?

**Larry Allen:** Well it was the most simplest thing out. Any schoolboy could do it, at that time. But I got the idea of doing it and I did it! And I'll tell you how I done it, I got two pieces of cardboard, over a foot, I should think it must have been about fourteen or fifteen inches. And I cut two circles out, and the inner circle was, say, three quarters of an inch smaller than the outer circle. Then I cut a lot of windows in second, the top circle, and I put a pin in the middle, like a grub pin that you fasten - you turn over - so the top circle spun round. The windows I cut, then I spiralled off an inch at a time, all the names of the countries in the world on the outside, see? Then the windows, I put - I could move round, and as I moved round, I put there the highest mountain, the longest river, the capitals - everything about the country itself, which I wanted to know - I was backward in geography. So we had this test, I know, in geography and I took this thing to school actually, and I put it under the desk. And of course, one of the lads had seen it and said, "Sir! Allen's cheating!" [Chuckles.]

**Rodney Giesler:** They're charming, kids, aren't they? [Chuckling.]

**Larry Allen:** He says, "Allen's cheating Sir!" So I said, "Sir, I'm not cheating. I know 'em off by heart, it's only what I made at home." He said, "Well bring it out." So I brought it out and put it... He said, "Allen, that's marvellous! How did you get that idea?" "Oh I dunno," I said. "It just come to me," like that. Anyway, I'll tell you something now - by the time August came, I finished up halfway down the class and there was about fifty in the class in them days, so I was very pleased that I got my Certificate from school, not the bottom of the class! [Laughs.] Anyway, it's very interesting to know that in the top class in them days was - an industrial officer came round once a week for several weeks before the lads left school, you see. And he'd give you some tests. So one of the tests he gave you was - he'd fetch one of the lads out to his desk where he had hundreds and hundreds of sheets, pieces of string round about six inches long, see? And on the blackboard he would draw an intricate knot, see? And he would give you say, about fifty of these pieces - the lad would put down a pile of strings on everybody's desk. So he would bring his stopwatch out, he would draw on the blackboard this knot first, and you'd got to do that knot. And he also put an envelope on your desk as well. So then he'd brought his stopwatch out and in one minute you'd got to tie these knots and see how many you could do in a minute. And every test he came with - he came with cards and different tests - I remember the first time he

come back, and the winner would get one and six. Now the very mention of money to me [chuckles] is a good incentive to keep going! I'd go as fast as I could! And I was very clever with me fingers, I could tell you that. So the next day he came, I always remember it, the door closed into the corner and I'd been talking, and the teacher - you had to go and stand in the corner, if the teacher caught you talking then, see? And the headmaster came in with this industrial officer to give the lad that won the one and sixpenny prize, you see. Because it's all done for the lads eventually to go into the factories and see whether, you know, see how fast they could work. Anyway, the headmaster came in and the first thing he said was, "Stand up Larry Allen!" And I wasn't there to stand up, you see, I was behind the door! [Laughs.]

**Rodney Giesler:** In the corner?

**Larry Allen:** In the corner! So the teacher said, "He's misbehaved, Sir, and he's standing in the corner behind you." I couldn't shout, "here I was!" So I came out and of course he says, "Larry Allen, you've won the prize for tying the most knots, but I don't think you deserve it."

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Tape 1, Side 2]

**Rodney Giesler:** Right, this is Larry Allen, Side 2.

**Larry Allen:** OK?

**Rodney Giesler:** Right, so you left school at this?

**Larry Allen:** Ah, yeah, as I say, I left school with a Certificate, and I was very pleased, because I'd made some friends then. Previously, I couldn't have a friend - except one lad, and he was a friend of me until he died, and he died fairly young. And it so happened that when I pushed the barrow - I've got to mention this friend, because his whole interest in life was films, that's why we clicked, and he never went to school. So I'll tell you how I met him, I was pushing the wheelbarrow along the street, his street, and - no traffic about in them days, you could push it in the middle of the road! And a man came out of a house, and he was off to work. Well I realised later, he was a foreman of the factory around the corner, and he could come and go when he liked, you know. But he stopped me and said, "Hey Son," he says, "would you..." the doors were always opened, no doors was locked in them days. He says, "Open the door," he says, "and will you take an apple or a pear, or whatever my Son wants." See? So I said, "Yes, I'll do that." So he says, "Well, you can go in now." So when I went in, as I got to the door I could see him. It was a terraced house, straight off the pavement, you know, and I could see him lying in front of the window...

**Rodney Giesler:** What, his Son?

**Larry Allen:** His Son. And actually he was a few months older than me and his name was George. (There's a picture of him over there I've got, I'll show you later, the picture.) So I went in and I says, "Hello George." (His Father said, "Go and take George..." you see?) And he was laying on a board, because he'd got spine trouble, curvature of the spine, see? And he had to lay so many hours a day on this board, otherwise he would have been bent over, like an old man, you know? And so anyway, we got talking, and I called in nearly every day - not every day, perhaps every other day as I passed. And we got very friendly, especially when he spoke about the films that he went to, and all the old silent films. "Cor," I says, "well that's all I'm interested in George!" And he'd got a 'Picturegoer' at the side of him, you know, and a 'Film Weekly', his Dad used to buy him these film books. He wasn't always on the board and as he grew up his back was not too bad, he just got a little up with one shoulder, and he dressed well. Well we became teenagers together and grew up together, went to the cinemas together and everywhere. And he hadn't seen the sea in his lifetime, and we were both sixteen. So by that time, sixteen, seventeen and eighteen, my Grandfather died and the family had broken up, you know...

**Rodney Giesler:** You were still living with your Uncle though, were you?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, but I - no, he parted - I went into lodgings with a friend and er...

**Rodney Giesler:** Did you see anything of your Mum and Dad by that time?

**Larry Allen:** No, the only time I ever saw my Mother and Dad was when I left in the twenties, sometime in the nineteen twenties, it was about 1930, and do you know how I went to see me Mother and Dad? On a bicycle! I cycled that hundred and thirty-five miles on a bicycle! [Chuckles] And when I got home, me Mother had a shock, because I must have knocked about two stone off meself! It was a very hot day and I never ate anything, just drank - on an August bank holiday - and then I cycled back. Anyway, to get back to George, we hit it off well by going to the theatres and cinemas, you know. And the theatres in them days was marvellous! The Coventry theatre, the old Coventry theatre, not the new Coventry theatre - they pulled the old one down, see. And when they pulled it down, I bought all their sound equipment. A bloke tipped me off, and it was cheap, almost a give-away. The microphones as well, and them microphones, goodness me, there must have been hundreds of famous stars spoke through that microphone, including Allan Jones[?]. And I tell you who I was friendly with, was the 'street singer', Arthur Tracy - had about a half-hour chat with him one night! And he married a girl, locally, when he came to Coventry from America. And I says to Arthur Tracy, I says, "I saw you in that film, 'The Big Broadcast', about 1931." And he said - well I said to him, "You took the building with Bing Crosby." He says, "Yes." Now the funniest thing about it is, Ronnie Ronalde came on the television a few weeks back, you know Ronnie Ronalde, the imitator of - whistler. And he said that he was with Arthur Tracy not so long back, and he's ninety-six. Today, he's ninety-six.

**Rodney Giesler:** Ronnie Ronalde is?

**Larry Allen:** No, Arthur Tracy...

**Rodney Giesler:** Oh Arthur Tracy, yes...

**Larry Allen:** Arthur Tracy is ninety-six and still performing in America! And even when I spoke to him at the Coventry old Hippodrome, he struck me as a very strong man. I mean I was a young man and he was a bit older than me, like - ten years or so, but he struck me as a very strong person, personality - very kind. He was a very kind man, softly spoken and he had the patience to listen to me and we had a good chat. Anyway, as I say, in them days we did the theatres and the cinemas, but in between all this time I was doing animated cartoons on a proper scale, you know. And if you go to Bowden House, the British Photographic Museum, you will see there - and I saved it all through the war, because it was in me Mother's house, and me Mother's house didn't get bombed, not like my studio did during the war. But you'll find that there's a machine in a wardrobe, a 35 mm DeVry camera and...

**Rodney Giesler:** What kind of camera?

**Larry Allen:** DeVry - you know, it's DEVRY...

**Rodney Giesler:** Ah ha.

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, it's a funny name but that was on the camera. And it's - actually it's got a sound gage on it so it's not the very old ones that me and Disney first started with. Here's the ones we first started with, there, look, the old wooden ones.

**Rodney Giesler:** That's a what?

**Larry Allen:** That's a 35-mm...

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah, but what make is it?

**Larry Allen:** Well it is actually comes from Edison dunnit? Because Edison made the first one, and if you look at an Edison camera, that's a very similar one.

**Rodney Giesler:** Can I just ask you about the animation you were doing at this time. You were about sixteen...

**Larry Allen:** Yeah.

**Rodney Giesler:** And you were drawing on film, you were doing - drawing on special...

**Larry Allen:** No, well I was drawing on film as a boy, I was only...

**Rodney Giesler:** Well how were you animating now?

**Larry Allen:** Well I got into the animating business as a young man then...

**Rodney Giesler:** Ah, this is still in Coventry?

**Larry Allen:** In Coventry, because I bought an old wooden camera for a start off - there it is, there, the old wooden camera.

**Rodney Giesler:** And you'd got your own rostrum?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, and I built my own rostrum. And bearing in mind, you see you've got to bear in mind that in them days nobody was doing it and there was no equipment to do it! Nobody made equipment to make animated cartoons. But I was very, very lucky. I served an apprenticeship with Mr Hillman, there was a Mr Hillman then, you see...

**Rodney Giesler:** What, the motor car company?

**Larry Allen:** The Hillman car company. And I was apprentice there, and when you're apprentice in engineering you can make anything in your spare time, and I got on well. By the time I was nineteen I was picked out of about half-a-dozen apprentices, that's all there was. And by the time I was nineteen there was another factory across the road up a field, a field away, and it was called Humber. And they amalgamated, and it was called Humber Hillman. Now at the Humber they didn't have a track system at the time, but when I was nineteen...

**Rodney Giesler:** This is for car assembly?

**Larry Allen:** For car assembly. They did down the Hillman's, but up at the Humber they made a makeshift thing, two long pieces of wood down the shop and you pushed the cars down...no track, you see. But the Humber 12 horse was such a good seller that they decided to have a nightshift at the Humber. There was no nightshift at the Humber in them days, except the furnace, you know the...

**Rodney Giesler:** Foundry...

**Larry Allen:** Foundry, foundry, see? So I was picked out to be boss, I was boss of all the Humber at nineteen. Now the personnel, they were in such a rush to get the trade for this 12 horse that to get - Coventry was a full employment town, you couldn't get a hundred men like that to start. So they came from Ireland, young men of twenty-ish, twenty-odd, from eighteen to twenty-odd, they came, big batches of 'em came from Ireland, and I was boss of all the lot, see. So in a short while they were trained to assemble these cars you see. And they were very nice fellas, I can tell you that. No nonsense, absolutely gentlemen they were. And the bosses of the factory said to me, "Well, you're a Coventry man, you must know lodging houses," which in them days, there were a lot of lodging houses about. They said, "Will you find 'em lodgings?" So I helped to find 'em lodgings. And there's a story to one of the lodgings. [chuckling] Because one of the fellas there was a very nice chap - got to know him well, and he was absolutely brilliant on the banjo. And he said, "We had a sing-song coming over on the boat," with his banjo, you see. So I went to his lodgings, and the poor fellows, you know they were almost in rags. They'd never worked in their lives and they were thin and hungry-looking, and they were grateful for their wages, I'll tell you! And from twelve to one at night was the break-time, just an hour, see, for a break. There was a fish and chip shop across the road, so they went and got fish and chips, but they always had a sing-song [chuckles] in the break and played mouth-organs and the banjo. So

one night I went down to visit this lodging house and I said to this fellow playing the banjo, "Will you play me 'Pennies From Heaven'?" And believe me [LA imitates tune being played on banjo] - you know what I mean? Oh so brilliant! I said, "I like that banjo you've got, do you want to sell it?" And he was so hard up he says, "Yes." And it was mother-of-pearl, beautiful. I said, "I'll buy it off you then. What do you want for it?" He says, "Give me a pound." Well a pound was like half a wage in them days. So I gave him the pound and I had that banjo for a long time. I think my brother had it off me, who today is a collector of banjos. I said, "How many banjos have you got today, Albert?" He says, "Fifty-six." [Laughs] He's a collector of banjos! Anyway, what I was going to say was...

**Rodney Giesler:** Anyhow, you're working at Humber...

**Larry Allen:** Ah, it was easy to make equipment. I could get the fellows in the foundry, or anywhere, to make anything. So I made a multi-plane machine, fourteen foot high, see? And by that time I was in the money, I was earning big money.

**Rodney Giesler:** So you'd bought a camera, had you?

**Larry Allen:** I bought a wooden one to start with, then I bought a Bell and Howell, see? So I thought, "Right, it's time now I went into film production properly," see? Well a friend of mine who is a big noise in the film world - later he was - he was then, and his father was a big director in Gaumont-British. And this friend of mine, we were young, almost kids together, I knew him well and his name was Hughie Orr, and if you get the Children's Foundation headed letters, you will see Hughie Orr's name on the Children's Foundation film. He didn't help me at all in that way, but he did help me in the early days, because - I'm talking about when he got older he was in this Children's Film...

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah.

**Larry Allen:** Because he owned a company called Hughie Orr Enterprises. And his father owned a lot of cinemas, quite a lot. So when I left the Humber and started up making animated cartoons, and I can always remember the first cartoon I think I'd had a go at, then, for advertising, and that was Mr Force Do you remember Mr Force the cereal fellow?

**Rodney Giesler:** That's right.

**Larry Allen:** You know, and I remember doing that. But anyway, to get back...

**Rodney Giesler:** This was a commercial for advertising was it?

**Larry Allen:** That's right, yeah, that's right. So anyway, lately - only lately, a few weeks back, I wrote to Mars Bars and (who's the other one?) Midland Ices and asked 'em if they'd still got the copies of the films I made, see? And they said, "Very sorry." I also made for Swallow sidecars, I made a film - well actually I was their photographer, Swallow sidecars. Because I went there...

**Rodney Giesler:** That's William Lyons?

**Larry Allen:** Ah, William Lyons, see? Oh William Lyons and I were very pally. Because he used me, he used me as a photographer. I actually became a toolmaker, freelance, you see, and in between studio work, which I couldn't... In those days nobody wanted to know anything about animated cartoons, nobody! It's the same today, they don't want to know anything about - they're too costly. That's why they get these silly computer things going up and down, you know. But regards traditional animated cartoons, it's out of the question, in Britain anyway. In America it's perhaps - even in America it's a bit dicey as well because of the cost. So there's nothing to be made out of animated cartoons, except if you're lucky, you'll get the toy business and other books. Now I was very foolish, I should bend down and be kicked from here to heaven. Because in the early days of television I must have made a dozen calls to the old Shepherd[s Bush] studios, you know? Before this Television Centre, you know, the main one...

**Rodney Giesler:** Shepherd's Bush?

**Larry Allen:** Ah, Shepherd's Bush. As a matter of fact, to tell the truth...

**Rodney Giesler:** Where Gainsborough used to be?

**Larry Allen:** That's right! Opposite the college isn't it? It's opposite the college.

**Rodney Giesler:** That's right.

**Larry Allen:** So I went there several times, you know, and - I've forgotten what his name was now - anyway I've got letters from him still, scores of letters. And he said, something about, when I got there I took a sample, you know a film. I said, "Can I make some animated cartoons for you?" You know, "Oh" he says, "No, out of the question." He says, "The BBC could never afford cinema-quality cartoons." He says, "I'll tell you what, why don't you get some puppets, you know, stick your hand up a jumper and go da-da-da. We could be interested. How about Oliver Postgate? He's making some little mice on a..." You know, [chuckles] crude little things on a - if you ever saw 'em, you know! And he says - and of course later on came 'Mr Men' - rough old drawings like that, you know. He says, "You're foolish because you could get rich out of books and toys." I says, "Well to tell the truth, I've been brought up on quality cinema cartoons, I don't feel like going into..." Probably I was foolish, but then again I stuck to my guns, quality stuff, you see.

**Rodney Giesler:** Can I just take you back Larry, to the time when you earned enough at Humber to set up your own studio...

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, yeah...

**Rodney Giesler:** And you set your own production company up, did you?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah that's right. My...

**Rodney Giesler:** And you built your own rostrum?

**Larry Allen:** My production company at the time was called Challenge Film Productions, and if...

**Rodney Giesler:** And that was in Coventry?

**Larry Allen:** And if you get the middle of the word 'challenge' there's 'allen' comes in the middle of the word.

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah.

**Larry Allen:** The 'Challenge' title used to come over the world (like that) - 'Allen' came first and then the 'Challenge' came. Very brilliant, do you know what I mean?

**Rodney Giesler:** Excellent.

**Larry Allen:** Excellent.

**Rodney Giesler:** And you'd set up your own independent company. Was it all on your own, or did you have people to help you?

**Larry Allen:** No, I had a fellow, a manager. He was very good, he was my manager. We travelled the country together.

**Rodney Giesler:** What, promoting work?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, and he was brilliant, I'll tell you, he was brilliant. But you see the thing was, nobody wanted to know. I used to go into Wardour Street and Disney - like before the war when Disney - 1937, made 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs'. I thought, "That's the only way to do it, this animated cartoon business. It's the only way - to make a full length," see? So I scoured the books and I settled on 'Alice in Wonderland', and believe me, I wish today I had that film because it was - all the drawings were nearly finished, it only meant, like, to go onto cell and paint 'em, see? And then my studio was bombed - the war.

**Rodney Giesler:** Who had actually financed that?

**Larry Allen:** Well I did it myself.

**Rodney Giesler:** Ah ha. So where did you earn your money? What did you make your money in?

**Larry Allen:** So - oh I'll tell you how I did it, let me just explain something to you. First, let me just say that I went in to Wardour Street and I saw Thomas Evelyn[?] and all the managers there and I said, "Would you sponsor this?" Oh at that time, I was going to make 'Peter Pan' at the time, because there was an old joke, they used to say, "Oh here comes Peter Pan!" And nobody was interested. So anyway, I went ahead with 'Alice in Wonderland'. But let me explain to you about - things were different then than they are now. Today is bureaucracy, you know it's too

commercial. And you must remember that in the twenties, I always say that the twenties was a wood age, the thirties was just coming into steel age and the forties, fifties were the electronic age. I went through the lot didn't I? They were crude old wood ages, I mean everything was crude. Walt Disney's early films were crude! If it hadn't been for Ub Iwerks, Disney's partner, if Ub Iwerks hadn't been born, there wouldn't have been any Walt Disney.

**Rodney Giesler:** This was the German?

**Larry Allen:** No, Ub Iwerks was lifelong partner of Disney.

**Rodney Giesler:** Of Disney, yeah.

**Larry Allen:** As young men, Ub Iwerks worked for the Kansas City slide company, for the cinema, and he got Disney a job there. But there wouldn't have been no Disney today, only for Ub Iwerks. And Ub Iwerks did all the drawings - Disney didn't do any drawings to Mickey Mouse at all. In his own book, Disney said that Ub Iwerks shut himself away for three days to make Mickey Mouse.

**Rodney Giesler:** Herb Irish, you said?

**Larry Allen:** Ub I... His name is spelt IWERKS.

**Rodney Giesler:** Ah.

**Larry Allen:** See? And he was a marvellous man. Actually to tell you the truth, I - later on in round about 1960 when computers, transistors was coming in and I worked - I gave up my studios in the sixties. I made one or two films, mind you, in the fifties, for companies, but in the sixties I gave it up, because cinemas were closing down, television was telling me straight, I'd never get television work because my stuff was too dear, see? So I gave it up and I thought to myself, "Right, cartoons are a costly labour thing, I'll have to try and find out how I can make a machine to make 'em cheaper - a computer." So I went to the GEC Electronics Company, only in the next street to where I lived. Got a job, got mixing in with all the laboratory blokes and between us we brought quite a lot of inventions out as there are today, see? Even the fax machine and the printout machine, there was nothing like that. Actually, the telephone racks when I went there were fourteen foot high and two or three feet square - heck of a job to transport. Today they're down to a small box, with a chip. And if anybody goes to the British Photographic Museum, you will see there lots of cameras I made, including a micro-camera. And the micro-camera I made was sixty tiny little pictures on a small 3, 4 or 5 inch plate, and I did that purposely for micro circuiting, see? To cut it down. I was well up then and when the...

**Rodney Giesler:** You were taking sixty images on a single plate?

**Larry Allen:** Ah yeah, for to make, yeah.

**Rodney Giesler:** Like they make microchips now?

**Larry Allen:** That's right! That's what they do. I mean I must have been before my time. Anyway, I'll tell you what I did invent, and I must have - I advertised for all the old gramophones and that, and people were so kind! They used to say, when I called round the houses they'd say, "Oh take it away!" They didn't even want money for 'em! And I got stacks of gramophone records, you know! And I started to build up my own videodisc, see. Anyway I wrote to Decca records and I says, "Well I can't get any further, but I think I'm on the right road to an electronic videodisc." So anyway they didn't take much notice of that, they wrote me back letters, but they didn't do much about it, until the laser came in, see - you know, the laser? And then they sent for me, fifteen years after! That's a long time, isn't it? So I went to Decca records, on the London Embankment, you know, and I met Mr Somes-Charlton[?]. Well actually the same day - I wasn't so keen about going there - I went to see Grafton Robertson, a man called Grafton Robertson who had sent for me, and said...

**Rodney Giesler:** Was this at Decca?

**Larry Allen:** No, this is at the BBC.

**Rodney Giesler:** Hmm...

**Larry Allen:** The BBC now had changed their mind, making animated cartoons, and he sent for me because they didn't have anybody else. There was nobody else in Great Britain that would do it. So he said "Would you do it for us?" He says, "We've got the stories, we're all right for stories, will you put them on film for us?" So when I went and met Grafton Robertson, he's a tall man with...

**Rodney Giesler:** Grafton Robinson?

**Larry Allen:** Ah, he's a tall man with a beard. While I waited for him - I waited nearly an hour 'cause he was doing something. I walked all round the studios, from one department to another, and they've got restaurants every other floor, you know, and I wandered into this place where there was a lot of young men and women going through books, children's books, as if they were searching for ideas, you know. And I walked to the end and they didn't take any notice of me, I just walked down the corridor past them, and there was a girl at the end on a desk, a young girl of about sixteen. So I stopped and talked to her, and she was putting an outline drawing of Batman or something like that, into an envelope and posting it off to children that had sent in beautiful drawings - stacks and stacks she was sending! But they wouldn't send the drawing back, they were sending this. So I said to her, "Oh" I said, "you've got a nice little job there, doing that." So she said, "No," she said, "I'm fed up! I'm leaving soon." "Oh," I said, "you don't want to do that! You're working for the BBC! Why don't you go down the printers, take a chance, don't tell the BBC what you're doing, and slip in a little note, get the printers to write a little letter from you and call yourself 'Auntie Margaret', that's all you've got to do." "Oh" she said, "I'll get into trouble." I said, "You're leaving anyway. You'll make a name for yourself." And she said, "Oh I couldn't do that." So I don't know what she done! So I came away. [Chuckles] It was only an idea of mine, see. Anyway I saw Grafton Robertson and I said, "About these films you want me making..." He said, "We've got the stories, everything. All we want you to do is to do the animation, black and white." Because the colour hadn't come in then, in sets,

you see, not many. So I said, "How much?" "Oh, five minutes, eight hundred pounds." "Oh" I said, "Eight hundred pound?" I said, "I couldn't get the staff for eight hundred pound to do a five minute, fully rendered..." "Oh" he says, "No, we only want a simple thing. We don't want Disney quality." So I said, "Oh you'll have to let me think it over. Because to tell you the truth, I've just disbanded my staff."

**Rodney Giesler:** This is, what, in the 1950's?

**Larry Allen:** Ah yeah, that's right. I said, "I've just disbanded my staff," I says, "and I've got my wife down in Dawlish, convalescing and she's not very well. My time is...let me think it over." So I wrote and said, "I'm sorry, eight hundred pound, I couldn't do it for eight hundred pound." And he says, "I'll tell you what I'll do..." So I said, "I think I'm going to Devon anyway - permanent." Well I didn't really, I stayed in the GEC[?!] He said, "Well you start a studio up in Devon and I'll come and see yer, and I'll give you a lot of work." I said, "Well not for eight hundred." He said, "No, they just told me, I've only got eight hundred pound to play with, but I know they'd have to boost it up." So anyway they made the film, and my sister said to me, in Coventry - we sat and saw it together - and my sister said, "Well you did better than that when you was a boy!" So anyway, it was a disgusting little thing, so when I called to see him again, when I went to Decca, I called in to see him, see? And he was there, and I said to him, "I saw that film, it wasn't very good was it?" He said, "No, I had to go to Holland to get it done. I had to fly to Holland." I said, "Well, flying and what they paid - how much did they charge you?" So he said, "Thirteen hundred and fifty." I said, "But you didn't offer me thirteen hundred and fifty!" He said, "Well we didn't know," he said, "and then the expense of me going out there, it was expensive - it was a bit of rubbishy stuff." Anyway, they haven't done anything since, have they, the BBC? Not really.

**Rodney Giesler:** So the work that he promised you never came about?

**Larry Allen:** No.

**Rodney Giesler:** No.

**Larry Allen:** Oh he got the sack, because I made enquiries, they said, "Oh he's left." So they didn't bother. Anyway, what I was to gonna say is, that I did make films like, for firms, you know.

**Rodney Giesler:** This was in your Coventry studio?

**Larry Allen:** Ah, yeah. I made coloured, sound, songs, music. I composed the music as well, myself, you know.

**Rodney Giesler:** What, publicity films were they?

**Larry Allen:** Ah they were. And, I'll tell you what, I rung a firm up once who were just starting out and I said, "How about some - well anything - I could do posters or anything you see." Like all the publicity, newspaper articles, like drawings in newspapers. So I rung this man and he

says, "Oh my pies don't want advertising." "Oh," I says, "come off it! Everything needs advertising." And I said, "I make animated cartoons for the cinema." "Oh do you?" he said. And he happened to be an amateur cine man, see, so we hit it off. He'd got a little Bell and Howell stuff and he'd got a Bell and Howell projector. So he said, "Come over!" So I went over and straight away out of his pocket he gave me - I think it was fifty quid - in loose money like, he gave me fifty-pound. He said, "Here, go and do some posters for us!" So I finished up being an advertiser for five years, and from a back-street pie-maker, he became the biggest one in Europe!

**Rodney Giesler:** What was the name of the company?

**Larry Allen:** Fleur de Lys.

**Rodney Giesler:** Fleur de Lys?

**Larry Allen:** Ah, the Marks and Spencer's. He sold out.

**Rodney Giesler:** Yes.

**Larry Allen:** In five years - I've got a picture of him there, he bought miles of ground, he bought a race course, a race course that had closed down, up north. He bought all the equipment to it - fifteen race horses. He bought Snittlefield Hall[?] - huge, huge mansion - and he'd got nearly every type of car you could mention in the garage. All out of a pie! I sat beside him many a time to go to the house to go over different things, you know, publicity stuff, at this home. And I sat beside him in a Mercedes, you know. Oh he was mad! He petrified me, the speed he used to go! And he hadn't got a hooter in his car, you know, it's like a fireman's bell, you know, "ting-a-ling-a-ling!" [Chuckles.]

**Rodney Giesler:** Er, Larry, tell me a bit more about your time working for William Lyons.

**Larry Allen:** Oh yeah, that's fascinating that is. I went to William Lyons's place - I was short of work in the studio and I thought, "Oh, I'm running out of cash here, I'll go and..." As a toolmaker I could earn big money, you see, and you put in a lot of hours. So I go up to William Lyons's, who only worked in sheds, wooden sheds. I should say the wooden sheds would be about - perhaps thirty foot wide and very long - twenty-five feet or thirty feet, and very long. And they were built up on wood stilts, because they were bomb factories in the war, where people couldn't tread on ground you see. Then he built...

**Rodney Giesler:** What because of static electricity or something?

**Larry Allen:** Ah, that's right. They had to take their shoes off in the war. My Aunt worked there during the war filling up bombs.

**Rodney Giesler:** This is the First World War?

**Larry Allen:** No, no, in the Second...

**Rodney Giesler:** In the Second?

**Larry Allen:** In the First war - course, in the First War!

**Rodney Giesler:** In the First War, yeah, yeah.

**Larry Allen:** Course in the First War, what am I talking about? And my Aunt worked there, my Mother's elder sister, and she was filling up shells with the powder, and that was at this place he took over. Well he made sidecars, and the sidecars was called Swallow Sidecars and it was in Swallow Road in Coventry. So when I got there, I was like the toolmaker for him, see, and different designs, you know. But he was a marvellous coach-builder, wonderful coach-builder. And occasionally his friend, Captain Black, he used to send down a chassis, with the engine, see, and wheels - and the men would build a coach, a special coach body. Now in them days, as you know, cars was coach-built weren't they? They were like wood and then covered with aluminium, see? So he made special... whatsit. They he made what they called the 'SS-Car', see? And that was a nice design, because he was a good designer. So as I say, I didn't see him then until after the war. So he sent for me after the war. I had my studio going and I was well known in the town, and my studio after the war was to help me out with animated cartoons was - I had in the front, taking babies and weddings, they were my main bread and butter.

**Rodney Giesler:** That's still-photography?

**Larry Allen:** Ah, still-photography. That was in front of my shop at 471 Stony Stanton Road, Coventry - a corner premises, big premises. I could take a whole lot of people in one wedding. You know, they used to have weddings inside in them days, didn't they? Not at a church. And anyway, Lyons sent for me and he said, "Will you film my whole factory, because I'm having a new one built at the back." Well one was already built at the back, from war-time, you know. And then he says to me, "I'm gonna build the world's best car." I said, "What's that?" He said, "It's going to be called 'The Jaguar'." Yeah he told me that! Anyway I made this film for him, which turned out very good.

**Rodney Giesler:** Was this before the war?

**Larry Allen:** No after the war, when he called me back. I made this film, see, for him to get investors. I found out afterwards, the film was done to get people interested to put the money in, you know. Because to build a car factory, you'd need a lot of money wouldn't you? To investors... And somebody told me then that most of the - I don't know whether it's true or not - but a lot of the investors were German. So the film must have gone to Germany, and it was a good film, it showed all the workers working in his factory you know. And I set up a...

**Rodney Giesler:** Was this the new Browns Lane factory was it?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah that's right.

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah, yeah.

**Larry Allen:** And I set up a Bell and Howell camera, you know, a good camera, and it was wonderful photography - I made sure of that! And he was very pleased - although he didn't give me much money for it! [Chuckles.] He made enquiries in London at the time, for somebody else to come and do it, and they wanted two thousand pound. It was a lot of money in them days, two thousand pound, but I done it for almost peanuts, you know! Because I'd worked for him, and I also made a cinema film for him, a cinema advert, when he made the SS-Car. I can always remember the film I made, because it started out with the radiator with the two big S's on, and the two big S's spun, I made 'em spin round, you know, and stop, in the advert. So anyway er...

**Rodney Giesler:** What was he like to work for? Was he an easy man or...?

**Larry Allen:** No, no I wouldn't say he was. He was as the factory grew. He was a giant of a man, not - he was stocky, but he was strong and boisterous, you know. And he walked very quick, although he was stocky. He didn't have much time for anybody, except people that worked for... [chuckles] He knew how to handle people, I'll tell you! But that's how they get on, innit? Anyway, he died at eighty-two, and just before he died - he lived in er... (I knew his address, you see. Offhand I can't remember it now.) But I got letters from him when he was eighty-two!

**Rodney Giesler:** He had a house down in Devon didn't he?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, but his main house was near Leamington, that way. And no he was still in the same house near Leamington, in the Midlands, anyway. And I wrote to him and I said to him, "Has your factory got them films I made for you?" Because once you make a film you hand over everything, don't you? You sell a property, negatives and all, it's a shame really. I wish I'd held onto the negative, because a researcher wrote to me who was trying to get industrial films from before the war, just after the war, or war-time, for television, see. And she said, "Have you got any films that you made?" So I wrote to him and said, "Have you still got 'em?" And he says, "Oh I'm sorry, they may be round the factory, but I don't know, I couldn't tell you." He wrote me back a nice letter, and he said, "I'm glad to see that you still keep your hand in," you know. And course he died just after that, and it's surprising, when you read about the Jaguar Car Company, his name is never mentioned is it? Yet there's a little society in London called 'Sir William Lyons Society'. It's in London, run by a woman, you know?

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Tape 2, Side 3]

**Larry Allen:** Oh yes, you can't beat putting everything down for posterity can you? Lately the British Film Institute has been writing to me.

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah?

**Larry Allen:** Because they haven't got much to go on and there are a couple of colleagues of his who wrote to me...

**Rodney Giesler:** Of whose?

**Larry Allen:** Is it Patterson or Jameson? [NB James Patterson presumably] I forget his name now, it's on the heading.

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah, yes...

**Larry Allen:** He said, "A couple of colleagues are just starting to write a book on British animation." So I sent him a package, including a tape, of some films - sequences of films - I couldn't send the whole length, but certain parts of cartoons I made. And he thanked me very much, he said, "Thank you for the parcel," you know. But as I say, going back to the war- time, you know...

**Rodney Giesler:** Yes, if you could tell me...

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, which is very interesting...

**Rodney Giesler:** ...in Coventry, leading up to the war...

**Larry Allen:** Ah Coventry, see, well the war came along, it's very sad really, because this, Hughie Orr the chap I ran around with, and his father owned all these cinemas, and he was a big director in the Gaumont-British.

**Rodney Giesler:** This was the young lad who had a curvature of the spine?

**Larry Allen:** No no, this is Hughie Orr.

**Rodney Giesler:** Oh, Hughie Orr, yeah.

**Larry Allen:** This isn't my poor friend whose got the...

**Rodney Giesler:** No, no...

**Larry Allen:** This is Hughie Orr, his father owned the cinemas and he used to get me jobs. So like, in between making films I had a little thing going, making slides for cinemas, I made slides you see. Now things was different then.

**Rodney Giesler:** What, advertisement slides?

**Larry Allen:** Ah, advertisement slides, you see. And there were quite a lot of cinemas, so I was quite busy making slides. I mean, every other day they'd want some sort of slide, you know. So anyway, in between making slides and delivering 'em to the cinemas in my town, you know, I was offered a job in the box, operating you see? I was thankful too, in the evenings, I mean it's

evening-work, you know, so I could work in the studio in the daytime, you know. So I was relief projectionist and part-time manager - stand out the front, you know?

**Rodney Giesler:** Which cinema was this?

**Larry Allen:** Oh they called 'em the 'Coventry Big Five' but actually there were more than five. And each night I would find myself in a different cinema as a relief, so that the man could have a night off, you know? And then I would deliver the slides as well, so that brought a bit of money in, you know. And things were very different in them days, because even like Walt Disney, if you read Walt Disney's life story, he started much the same way, making slides, you know. And then he'd make little adverts for the local people, and he'd only be earning a few cents an hour out of it, you know. But he was so enthusiastic, like I was, for doing it, you know. Anyway, what happened was a bit of bad luck for me when the war came along, because Hughie Orr father recommended me to Oscar Deutsch, who owned the Gaumont-British at the time, just when Rank came into it - I think Rank came a little bit after. And his father told him about the films I made and he sent two men down to view some films at the Scala[?] cinema, in Coventry, after the people had gone, you know, when the cinema had closed at night. So we waited and he put 'em through. And they were so impressed with them, and the funniest thing about it was that the projectionist at that time, I knew him very well you see, at the Scala, and I suppose he'd be about forty then you know - weren't a young man. But he remembered me very well from before the war, because I met him after - years after - when he used to preview my films in the 'fifties and 'sixties, see. And when I had a film going in the 'sixties, or 'fifties and 'sixties, sometimes he'd preview them and there happened to be a salesman there selling films - 'X'-rated films, you know. And he says to me, "Oh my dear, oh God!" he says, "oh I've just seen an 'X'-rated film. I've never projected anything like it in me life!" [Chuckles] This old fella says to me! So this chap said, "Oh no, I wouldn't have that in my cinema." So he says, "Don't go yet, have a look at this cartoon I'm just gonna put on" - to this fella. He says, "You'll be surprised, it's just like Disney's stuff." So anyway he showed it see, and I used to give him a tip, you know, and really speaking, when I made a film for the companies, and companies are very big aren't they? They've got a lot of directors and that, running these companies, and it was like a grand premiere, you know! They'd all ride up in their cars and I'd give him a tip you know, to show...

**Rodney Giesler:** To the Scala was it?

**Larry Allen:** No, he used to go down the Alex as well...this was the Alex. He travelled between the two. But I remember down the Alex, all the cars lined up outside. They could in them days, there were no markings on the roads, they could park anywhere. And they'd line up and all the directors would come out to see my films, see! And they wouldn't sit down, they'd all stand in a circle at the back! [Chuckling] And when the film was finished, they'd all clap like mad. Well my heart was in my mouth before they'd seen it, you see! And the owner of the factory was always there, you know, it was like a Hollywood review, you know! And when they saw it they clapped, they clapped like kids! And, oh! my heart went back again, you know. Then I remember when I designed a knife and fork man for 'em, you know, for the frozen foods, and they said, "He's the greatest! That character is the greatest!" They're shouting it out, [chuckling] you know, they were boosting the firm up. Anyway, as I say, the firm rose from small to international importance. The owner became a multi-millionaire. But the saddest part about it, they sold out

and he left me with fifteen hundred pound and I never got it back. He owed me fifteen hundred pound. He went off to Ireland to breed horses and I never saw it, and the new owners wouldn't pay me, no. But anyway going back to Hughie Orr you know, and the cinemas, was - they were in touch. I wasn't called up 'till - like my calling up papers didn't come until about '41 you see, 1941. Because they went by ages, see, they were calling up the eighteen's and the twenties weren't they, before like - and I was older, and I was married as well. But through local people, I know there was a Major Warren and people like that who were in the forces, and they used to get me to make training films, like, for the Home Guard and things like that. I remember making one, they didn't have much equipment - you've heard the old story, they had broom handles, didn't you? [Chuckles] So I remember one lot only had a Lewis gun, so they were teaching the troops about the Lewis gun machinery, see, machine gun. Then I made a diagrammatical film about it, for 'em, see? And then of course, Hitler was the monster and I made three Hitler films, yeah. I can remember the stories I used to...

**Rodney Giesler:** These are all animated, presumably?

**Larry Allen:** Oh yeah, lovely animation. Oh I wish I had them today, oh beautiful animation they were. I remember the one I done of Hitler, he was in a hammock and he was swinging towards you, back and forth, you know. Then I put a close-up of him with his moustache on and he was snoring away, you know, with the sound and everything. And he snored that much that he blew his moustache off, see? You know, that little square moustache! And it floated up between the two trees he was hammocking and up in the branch of the tree was a nest and in the nest there were four little birds and the mother was feeding them with their mouths open - In cartoon whatsit, see? So that was a little bit of action there with 'em feeding you know, and going like that with their mouths open. And the moustache flew up and it landed on the mother's beak, onto it's mouth [chuckles]. See the story went like that, and of course as soon as the little birds had seen it, up went their hands, "Heil Hitler!" [Laughs.]

**Rodney Giesler:** What were these films called? Do you remember what these films were called, the names of them?

**Larry Allen:** Well they were propaganda films, you see.

**Rodney Giesler:** It was just to go in the cinema was it?

**Larry Allen:** Aha.

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah.

**Larry Allen:** So anyway with that, the end of the thing was, she gives 'em a wallop in the face, you know! And there was another one I did was, hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line you know. And Hitler came along and of course the washing caught him and he fell into a trench - and different things like that. And then I got known by the Ministry of Information, you see. I don't know how it was, but I know that Churchill got to know my work. Because really speaking, I was unique in them days - animated cartoons. Disney in America was making war pictures, you know, war animation things, and I was unique. So he made an appointment, Churchill, for me to

see Arthur Elton, he was. Sir Arthur Elton - and I could go blindfolded now to the house. I don't know the address offhand, but I just could go there, and it was in Hampstead. And why I know it, there's a beautiful church next door to his mansion - he's got a little mansion there, you know. There was a church joined on, and it's so wonderful, clean-looking. And me and my manager went there, you know, because we were after war-time films really, to make war-time films. So we arranged to meet and the manservant let us in and we went right through corridors, you know, 'till we got to this dining hall it was. And the building inside was all wood, like all oak wood...

**Rodney Giesler:** All panelled?

**Larry Allen:** Panelled, and big sliding doors, you know. So Arthur Elton came along and we shook hands. There was my manager with me, George was with me. And er, another George...

**Rodney Giesler:** George who?

**Larry Allen:** This was another George, a manager George Aspin[?], Aspin - he was a North - country man. So anyway a meal was set for us with a bottle of Guinness, I always remember that! We didn't drink but we drunk the Guinness that day anyway! And a beautiful meal he put - and do you know, we never heard a sound! It was so quiet! And he left us alone to eat our meal, because we were late, and all of a sudden when we'd finished he came in. He opened the big sliding doors and, honest to God, you'll never believe this, do you know there were thirty-odd men standing up in that room! Standing - a few were sitting, but most of 'em - you know like you get at a party. No women, just men, having a drink. And he introduced me to the men, you know, and said, "This is Mr Allen, whose sample films have been sent in." And he said, "They're the best we've seen, in animation," you know. And he says, "We're going to take him over to Shell Mex's building in The Strand." So gradually I got to know, because there were several times I was there at Elton's house, you know - it was a home from home for anybody in the services. And his wife was so nice and lackadaisical, his wife was. And she was an artist and there were easels all over the place where she was painting. And often I was alone with her to talk about paintings you know, other times. So anyway, this particular time he ordered a car, a military car, and we went to Shell Mex's building and, if you know Shell Mex's building it's in The Strand, but at that time it was on guard with soldiers, you couldn't get in unless you had passes. And when I went in I was supposed to be there for training people in animation, that was what I was supposed to do you see. And then I was introduced to a man called [Frank Rodcar]. Now [Frank Rodcar] was really employed by Shell. Because Shell was in the business as well of making puppetry stuff - they weren't making animated cartoons or diagrammatical stuff - what they were doing is making models of ships and tanks and things like that, and they were playing toy soldiers, you know. But really speaking, they were laying down manoeuvres to send to the Captains of the ships, you know, the Admirals, or different things like that, you know. So the idea was that Shell Mex was going to start diagrammatical work for the forces. Anyway I didn't stay very long but um...

**Rodney Giesler:** You moved up, you lived in London then did you, or what?

**Larry Allen:** I was only there a little while, I didn't like it. To tell you the truth, I didn't like it. They didn't seem to do anything or get anywhere. I was hanging around. And Elton says to me,

he says, "Would you go to Russia with some films?" I said, "What sort of films?" He said, "We've had some films made of war time stuff, machinery, and also railway trucks as well." They were supplying Russia with everything you know, during the war, this country. And he says, "You'll land in the Black Sea at the bottom, and set up your projectors and show these films to the workers, to assemble them." See, they all went out there in parts, in boxes. And the thing was, Russia has got about five-hundred dialects and the people really can't understand one another, half of 'em, so that they would understand the films, how they were put together. So I passed it on to another man, I didn't go. My wife was pregnant at the time and I got out of it, and then with Coventry being bombed as it was and I lost an Aunt and children and cousins and that...

**Rodney Giesler:** You lost some of your children?

**Larry Allen:** No, my Aunt lost her two children - direct hit on the shelter. I felt so, "Oh, I've got to get into this war!" You know, "I've got to get in!"

**Rodney Giesler:** Were you in Coventry when the big raid happened?

**Larry Allen:** Oh yeah, and I thought, "Well I've got to get in." So I goes down the recruiting and they says, "Your time hasn't come." I goes down the labour exchange, and when I said to them I'd been in London, I worked on diagrammatical films and that, "Oh," they said, "you won't be called up, you're too important to the war effort." I said, "Well actually I'm a toolmaker by apprentice, engineer." "Oh," they said, "I'm afraid that you won't be called up for the forces because with your experience..." And he said, "I'll tell you what, up the Tachbrook Road" (not far from where I went into the - only a couple of mile up the road in the country) he says, "there's a brand new aerodrome up there. There's only the manager there, the manager and his assistant, that's all that's there, in the offices, waiting for personnel." He said, "Would you like to go up and see 'em?" I said, "Well actually I know aircraft because I did work on - I made a mock-up for the Flying Sunderland, flying boat" The Sunderland Brothers, what are they called?

**Rodney Giesler:** Shorts.

**Larry Allen:** Short Brothers, I made a mock-up for that, see.

**Rodney Giesler:** What a full size mock-up?

**Larry Allen:** Well with some other people. I could draw it out now - how we do the jiggling. You know the jiggling for it? Where they put - the leading edges come off it, do you know what I mean? So I made that for the Sunderland Flying Boat. I'm very proud of that.

**Rodney Giesler:** Where did you make that? Did you go down to Rochester or what?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah I went down to Southampton where they were based, but there was a Coventry firm did the jiggling, and I did the jiggling. And the funniest thing about it...

**Rodney Giesler:** Was this after you were called up or not?

**Larry Allen:** No this was before, early on - early on in the war, you know. I mean, I often went to firms only for about two or three months to do the jiggling, you know?

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah.

**Larry Allen:** And the funniest thing about it, [laughs] my car broke down along the Kenilworth Road and I thumbed a lift. And I got inside and I was talking, the bloke says to me, "Where do you work?" I told him (I forget the name of the company). He said, "I've just come from there!" He said, "I'm the Short Brother's representative!" Now ain't that queer? A bloke picks me up on the road, "Oh," I said, "I worked on your thing then, your Sunderland!" So anyway I told the employment manager, "Oh" he says, "You're just the bloke then!" So I goes up to this aerodrome, sees Mr Hunt, the big - big fellow he was - he was the boss. Then I knew the other chap very well, Mr Taylor, and he knew me as a toolmaker. They employed me, started me off. I was the only one in the aerodrome hanger with them. So they gave me the drawings you see and they said, "We are expecting the plane - it's coming in in parts," you know what I mean? Fuselage and wings and all the rest of it - engine, Rolls Royce engines. He said, "But I tell you what, will you get cracking on the oxygen tank, the testing equipment for the oxygen?" He says, "We need some jigs and tools." Well I had a car, I was allowed a car, you see, to go anywhere then and I often had to go to Derby where they made the Rolls Royce. I had to go to Lockheath, where they made the undercarriage lift ups, you know...

**Rodney Giesler:** Which aircraft were these?

**Larry Allen:** These were the Whitley.

**Rodney Giesler:** Oh the Whitley!

**Larry Allen:** The Whitley and the Lancaster, see? So anyway - and the aerodrome was Tachbrook, see? So I travelled then between various factories, between the aerodrome and factories to get the mock-ups made for this oxygen, because we didn't have any welding equipment there, there were no bottles or anything like that. So if I wanted welding, I had to go to Coventry and get it done. Well within a short spell - Cor! Hundreds turned up! All Airforce men turned up, in their uniforms, and the women as well. Then there were a few of us, civilians you see. And we trained 'em, we trained 'em then in aircraft. And I became a - well as I say I was a first class engineer. But I became in charge of all on the flight deck, I was a flight mechanic then, you know. And I would taxi the big plane out of the hanger, I was the only one allowed to bring the plane out of the hanger, because there were only three inches either side. And I'd be up in a cockpit, using the airbrakes. As soon as somebody shouted, "Stop!" - airbrakes, see? Anyway I'd taxi it down to the ground and then after a bit more testing on the ground you know...

**Rodney Giesler:** But you'd have a tractor tow you out of the hanger?

**Larry Allen:** Ah yeah, yeah, yeah, but I'd be there, taxiing behind him, see, in a cockpit. And then I'd have to wait for a bloke called Peggy. Now his name never struck me - I couldn't think of his other name! Because we used to say, "Oh here comes Peggy!" And he was a very slim six-

footer, very, very slim man, and he had a black uniform, you know his pilot uniform was dead black. And he came out of a little Austin Seven, that's what he used to drive! [Chuckles.] Little Austin - he'd come on the field, and he was the test pilot.

**Rodney Giesler:** What was his real name?

**Larry Allen:** Well I found out by sending photographs of our place to the Royal Museum, you know, and they wrote back and they said, "Yes we know Peggy..." It was Peggy Reynolds, his name was Mr Reynolds."

**Rodney Giesler:** Why did they call him Peggy?

**Larry Allen:** I don't know why they called him Peggy!

**Rodney Giesler:** He didn't have an artificial leg or anything did he?

**Larry Allen:** No, no he didn't, not as far as I know. He got in the plane... And then you see there were four of us and we'd take it in turns to go up with him. What you do, you stand on the lower part, where the front gunner is, there's a place to stand, and the...

**Rodney Giesler:** Is this the Lancaster or the Whitley?

**Larry Allen:** This is the Whitley. And the selector lever is by your chest, then you know, a bit lower than your chest. So therefore your spanners that you take up with you - he's manoeuvring the plane around, and testing the wheels up and down, see?

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah.

**Larry Allen:** And if the wheels didn't lock in, you'd give it two or three flats. He said, "Put a couple of flats on the selectors." Little bolts, you see, tighten 'em up again. And you know...[imitates noise of aircraft]...and wait for it. And if they didn't lock in at all - which would mean a belly landing if they came down - but it would never be a belly landing because you'd run under the catwalk. He says, "Go under the catwalk and wind 'em in." See? And you wind 'till you get a click, see.

**Rodney Giesler:** How many turns did it take to get them down?

**Larry Allen:** Oh well a few you know - not many - just wind 'em down, and then you would go on the other side and wind the other one down, and it's two separate wheels you see. So when they lock in - because, me, I know them backwards! I could assemble them in my dreams! On the panel in front of him, there are two red lights and two green lights. If they didn't lock in the red lights would be on, see? If they locked in the green lights were on. Oh you went right through the aircraft, right to the ejection seats, where they went through the roof, [LA blows through his teeth] you know?

**Rodney Giesler:** They didn't have those then.

**Larry Allen:** They did!

**Rodney Giesler:** What? On...?

**Larry Allen:** Ejection seats, yeah...oh ahh. I mean I'm talking about the lighter things of life, but the saddest things of life was when the blokes came back from bombing and the rear gunner was always shot up. Ah, you were picking up fingers a long time after they took him out and things like that. He always got it, the rear gunner - the front gunner was all right. Then in some of 'em they'd got a centre gunner as well, on hydraulics, that went up and down. But the front and rear didn't go up and down, they just had the gunners sticking out of the whatsit, see? But as I say, I remember such a pandemonium - it was day and night, you hardly got any sleep at all there, because you had to take it in turns to watch. And we were lucky because the Germans came over and bombed us and the fighter planes came over and had a go at us outside the hangers, you know, and we'd run for the cut you know, to dive in the cut. I think, really speaking - I don't know why it is - but I was no more than twenty feet from - I could see him as plain as anything, got a machine gun, and he never fired at me - a German. I froze! And then one morning we got up and, one morning we'd been home, like, and we came and one of the German ... What do they call 'em? Equivalent, fighter planes, you know, fighter planes?

**Rodney Giesler:** Messerschmitt?

**Larry Allen:** Ah Messerschmitt, that's right - that was stuck in the ground, just by the gate as we went in. And when we got there the - we'd got our own ambulance men inside you know, and firemen - because you had to have ambulance trucks and fire, in case a plane blew up as it was testing. But they were there and they said that the pilot, well he was gone. There was one of them said to me, "Well, I picked his hand up in a glove," you know, and things like that.

**Rodney Giesler:** Can you go back and tell me your memories of the night Coventry was bombed? Your experiences?

**Larry Allen:** Oh yeah, very, very sad, very sad.

**Rodney Giesler:** Do you want to talk about it?

**Larry Allen:** I will yeah, because I'll tell you why. I don't know why it is but - I don't know why it is - I've been a very religious man all my life. Because I never swear or anything like that, I don't like that. And I think I'm more visual than most people. I said to my Mother, I said, "Hey Mam," because I was married and living in Kenilworth at the time, my son was born in Kenilworth. And my Mother lost her sister and two children in a raid, an early raid. Now that was very queer! That was fantastic! I was in my studio and the blackouts had hardly gone up. Now you can trace this through the Coventry newspapers or anyone on record. And my Aunt was the youngest of my Mother's family, see? She wasn't two or three years older than me at the time, but she'd got a couple of little children, probably six years older than me. And she came into my studio and she said, "Oh I've just been up to your Mother's house, there's nobody in." It was only up the road. And I was getting a film ready for the cinema actually, and I said, "Well I can't stop, I'm just getting this, I'm going down to the Skayler[?]." So she says, "Oh Larry, isn't

this war horrible?" And she was shaking like a leaf. And you know you don't even stop to think at that time do you? And I thought, oh she's shaking, you know, and she never was that sort of person. But she must have had a premonition. And she said to me, "Oh I wanted to see you because it's Ennice's birthday" - little girl, you know, one of the little girls - She said, "and I'm having a party for about thirty little children," coming to the party, you see. Now she doted on Ennice. Now the bible says, "You mustn't dote on your children, you mustn't make them an idol or a God," that's - the bible says that, it's too dangerous. But the little girl, she doted on her because everybody used to call her Shirley Temple, because Shirley Temple was a little girl (the rage) at the time, and she used to take her to the hairdressers and get her hair all curled up, you know - Shirley Temple. She looked like her anyway. So she said, "Will you come up and photograph them? Make a film of 'em?" Not a photograph - film them, film the party. I said, "Yeah, I'll do that," I said, "when?" She said, "Oh next week." So I goes up, and she's living in a terraced house, where you've got to walk down the back of other people's houses, you know, and the gardens are there. And I go the back-way with my equipment, and the children are all there, playing in the garden and all that. A lot of children she had there. And as I passed I saw the Anderson shelter was not finished, it was already in the ground but there was no earth put on the top, see? You can tell how early that war was. So I set the cameras up and got the children in the garden ready for the light, you know, playing around. And I says to little Ennice, "You get up on that wall and let all the kids run up to you and say 'Happy Birthday'..." and all that, you know. And I filmed it like that and it turned out nice. So I said to my Aunt, "It'll only take a week to come back - few days from Pathe," you know, the whatsit. And I said, "I tell you what I'll do, I'll bring the projector up as well and we'll have a good night. We'll show comedy films and things like that." I mean don't forget, there was no telly in them days for the kids. So we filled the house up with children, put the projector up, and they enjoyed themselves. Do you know, a fortnight after that, perhaps a little longer, I don't know - it might have been a month after that - we had one siren go and one bomber came over, and it hit that shelter direct! That's amazing isn't it?

**Rodney Giesler:** Terrible.

**Larry Allen:** That's terrible. They couldn't even find the children to bury them. And my Uncle, the father, he escaped it, because he walked to the end of the right-of-way, you know, where the end of the houses was. But he got blown so badly with the blast, he was in hospital, my Uncle Arthur. Well he went bonkers, he almost did, and it took him quite a few years to pick himself up. After the war I was seeing him quite a bit you know, and he used to come down to my studio and say, "Have you got any of the films?" Of his daughter, you know - little daughters. It was so sad. But anyway, it righted itself out because - I was amazed - I couldn't believe it! He met a woman with an identical little daughter to the one he lost, the one they called Shirley Temple, and he married her. And I didn't see him much after that. But as I say, the war-time experiences... Because my Mother was so upset with loosing her sister like that. She didn't really show it to that extent, because my Mother was a pretty strong woman really. She never panicked, she was very quiet, she wouldn't shout at you, she wouldn't scold you, all she'd do is just wallop you, and that's it! [Chuckles] And if she scraped the crumbs on the table, and you could see her scraping the crumbs on the table, and you looked through the looking glass and you could see the reflection - you knew you were in for something! [Laughs] But she was a good woman. My Mother was a very nice woman, and she was very proud, I know she was very proud of me, because, even as a boy, she'd go round all the neighbours and show my drawings off! [Laughs] Funny, that is! But

getting back to the war-time, she was so upset. I said to my Mother, I said, "Mum, if Hitler can send one plane over he can send five-hundred, you'd better get out of Coventry." So I met a man...

**Rodney Giesler:** When did your Mother come to live in Coventry?

**Larry Allen:** Oh she came to live in the 'thirties - mid-'thirties, you know.

**Rodney Giesler:** Had your Father died by then?

**Larry Allen:** Oh no, my Father lived 'till - my Mother died in the war, through the stress and strain.

**Rodney Giesler:** So your Father was [indecipherable]?

**Larry Allen:** My Father lived 'till about 1960...

**Rodney Giesler:** But he was working down the pits, was he?

**Larry Allen:** Oh no, no, he came to Coventry and he got his lifelong ambition. [chuckles] Because he was brought up in the pits, and in the pits they have the engines, don't they? They have the engines with the trucks. Very often he went on the engines as well, when he was a young man in the pits. And his idol of life, which he never talks - actually the night before he died... He never saw a doctor in his life. He was a very fit man. And I came to see him, I called in, and it was - It must have been wintertime, that's right wintertime - dark outside. And I sat in the chair and I was tired, and my Dad stood up against the fireplace, and he always smoked, smoked all his life. And he used to smoke like that, see? And his old saying was, "The average person can't see the end of this cigarette." [Chuckles] That's what he used to say. And he stood up there, and there's the old subject back up again - engines, steam engines. His idol was Richard Trevithick. Now I was brought up in Trevithick Street, Richard Trevithick ran his engine down Trevithick Street, and his rocket was made in Merthyr Tydfil. And he made the engines to pull the trucks of coal - steam engines - before ever this Watt business. Matter-of-fact there's a man come on television and he says, "History is all wrong, the credit should go to Richard Trevithick." Well my Father was stood up at that mantelpiece, going over the same story of Richard Trevithick. Richard Trevithick as a boy, working in a Cornish mine. But it was only in Merthyr Tydfil, the Dowler Steelworks, they were the only steelworks in Great Britain, the Dowler Steelworks in Merthyr Tydfil. And my Father worked there at one time, you know. And they supplied the steel for all the world, you know, big place it was. I can remember that. The ashes from the steel used to go along the hills at the back like that, tip over, and the red used to light all the town up! Every half-hour there was a truck going along with all these red ashes.

**Rodney Giesler:** What the hot ashes?

**Larry Allen:** Hot ashes, and lit the town up at night, yeah. It was a really big sight. Well as I say, my Father [chuckles] was so so thrilled about Trevithick, being as his engine went down Trevithick Street where we lived, that years after, I wrote a book, and I called it 'The Mechanical

Giant', because Richard Trevithick was six foot five, and I called the book - I dedicated it to my Father's interest in - you know. And the book, I sent to Walt Disney, when he was alive. And Walt Disney was an enthusiast about engines, because Ub Iwerks had a full sized engine in his grounds. I've got the pictures of it. And they used to invite Disney down there and they used to play like a couple of kids [chuckles] on this engine. And Disney had a small one in his grounds that he used to sit on and go round, see? And I thought, "Well, if this doesn't fire his imagination I don't know what will." So I called it 'The Mechanical Giant' and I wrote the whole book, I put part vision of it in, like part fiction and part non-fiction and Disney wrote back and said that he was very sorry, for the next seven years everything was lined up. But he died just after he got the book, you know, he died. He was a very sick man for years you know. He had a little private hospital put in his - next to his offices and he used to get massaged every day, according to the book, you know. But as I say, war-time experiences, going back, like. I says to my Mother, "Get out of Coventry will you, Mam, because if they can send one they'll send five hundred." And this man got me a cottage in Sheepy, Alliston[?] and it was an isolated cottage, actually the next...

**Rodney Giesler:** Sorry, which man is this?

**Larry Allen:** This is a man I met through business, you know, and he told me where there was an empty cottage. And so I gets the car out and goes to have a look at it, and there's no houses near for two miles - more than that. So I go up, the cottage is in the beginning of the entrance to the drive - double-sided cottage, and I saw it, I thought, "Oh that's good!" So I goes up to the farm and I saw the farmer and he seemed as though he'd lost his wife at some time or other, but his daughter was there and he took me into the farmhouse and she was feeding little lambs with a bottle by the fire. So I said to him, "Mr so-and-so sent me," who he knew, you know. King! Mr King. "Mr King sent me and told me your cottage is empty." "Oh yes!" he said. Well I told him how upset my Mother was and he was sympathetic and he says, "'Course you can have the cottage." I says, "Well how much a week do you want?" He says, "Oh, name your price," he says! Well the average house in them days was six shillings a week, so I said, "Is it all right, six shillings?" "Yes," he says, "that'll be fine - six shillings." So I told my Mother and actually my sister was courting a man who hadn't been called up then, he was in the Air Force later, and it was just before he was called up. And he used to drive a big van for a cash and carry. They didn't call 'em cash and carries in them days - big warehouse for food like. And he got the van out, shoved all the furniture in and they all moved into the cottage.

[End of Tape 2, Side 3]

[Tape 2, Side 4]

**Larry Allen:** And I said to my mother, "Hitler could send five hundred over," you know. I was right, I was dead right. Because they settled in the cottage, my father as well, see, and it was seventeen miles from Coventry, this cottage, so my father didn't get to work half the time, you

know, seventeen miles away. Mind you, he was getting on at the time, because my father was getting on when...

**Rodney Giesler:** Which factory was he working in - which company?

**Larry Allen:** Well he got a job in the Admiralty, and he got his ambition fulfilled [chuckling] he was one of the team that drove 'Nellie' the engine. They had an engine there that pulled the 'Big Bertha' at night-time - a big gun, they called it 'Big Bertha' - to fire at the enemy at night-time or on the lines. And he was one of the gang that drove up and down... But as I say, my father didn't get married until he was thirty-odd, so the time I'm talking about, he's getting on then, isn't he? Nearly sixty see. So it didn't worry him whether he got to work or not. I mean the kids went to work and that, so they were in the cottage, but I think it was a...

**Rodney Giesler:** Where were you that night? In the city itself?

**Larry Allen:** Oh no, I was married then, you see.

**Rodney Giesler:** Oh you were back at [indecipherable] were you?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah I'm back, yeah. I'm er...

**Rodney Giesler:** But your studio was still open then?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah that's right, yeah. So anyway, what I was going to say is, my mother and family, when they thought - well the Blitz came see, and they missed the Blitz. They were very lucky. If they hadn't gone to that cottage, I don't know what would have happened. Because I went to my mother's house and it was - the whole top had gone and the floorboards were in, the boulders on my mother's bed had snapped and I don't know what would have happened. She might have been in the shelters, but even then some of the shelters were buried in with five hundred, you know, see? And the funniest thing about it, I went round to see the Blitz, you know, the damage, and I bumped into little George with the humped back, and he'd got a bandage around his head. I said, "Oh George, what's happened?" He said, "I was in the cellar and the cellar gave in, but I was lucky, I was in a part where I got out all right, they got me out." I said, "Oh." And I didn't see George all through the war after that - just happened to see him that day - that was funny that was.

**Rodney Giesler:** But you came into the city the morning after the big raid?

**Larry Allen:** Ah that's right...

**Rodney Giesler:** And what did you see everywhere?

**Larry Allen:** Oh I see... Ah well, all you could see was rubble! I mean the churches were bombed, the 'Three Spires' were bombed and everything - all the town was just rubble, you know, most of the streets. And I met - standing by the wall of a public house was a man who was my best friend, actually, at the time. And it was almost as soon as I got to Coventry I met him,

because he used to have a little - he knew my Uncles anyway, and he was a pioneer of television, Charlie Oldfield. So he was making this televisor, what you called a televisor. So me being interested in films and motion pictures, we got together and he used to say, "Come up tonight when the kids have gone to bed and go in the other room and see if you can see figures," you know? He was transmitting from the kitchen to the other room, you know, wires everywhere, you know. And I'd be there until ten, eleven, twelve sometimes, just waiting for him. And I'd shout, "Oh yes, I can see your hand!" Or, "I can see a toy!" You know, he was holding up a toy. And the big whirring of that machine - you know the spiral, he had, going round.

**Rodney Giesler:** That was the Logie Baird disc?

**Larry Allen:** That's right! And it was pioneered in just the same as Logie Baird. Oh he was a master of electrics. I learnt a lot from him in electrics, you know. And I went quite a long time, up and down, seeing him. That was in the 'twenties, when I was on the barrow see, because he knew my Uncle. And then, funnily enough, it was him, Charlie, that got me the apprenticeship where he worked, at the Hillman, see? So I was with him, seeing him nearly every day, at work, like. I didn't go to his house much after them few times, I got fed-up of waiting for an image to come on, and then the noise of that thing. I thought, oh television will never come to anything! You know what I mean! At that time...

**Rodney Giesler:** Now tell me Larry, you were working at this time up at, was it Tachbrook, the airfield?

**Larry Allen:** Oh yeah, later on...

**Rodney Giesler:** How long did you spend there? Because you were called up eventually, weren't you?

**Larry Allen:** No. I was called up but they sent me to the aerodrome.

**Rodney Giesler:** Oh you were in uniform?

**Larry Allen:** No, I was a civilian in the aerodrome.

**Rodney Giesler:** I see.

**Larry Allen:** I was what you call a...

**Rodney Giesler:** Reserved occupation?

**Larry Allen:** No, what do they call them now? Oh what do they call them? Air Ministry something - Air Ministry Inspection, or something, see?

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah, but you weren't in uniform?

**Larry Allen:** No I wasn't in uniform...

**Rodney Giesler:** And how long were you there for?

**Larry Allen:** All the other people were in uniform.

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah.

**Larry Allen:** Oh I was there from er - to the end of the war then, to the end of the war, see. But you see the end of the war was terrific, you know, because all our aircraft was converted to glider tow-ers. We had to put a rope, a steel rope from the pilot's seat to the glider and the sky was full of gliders, dropping of men into the war zone. But they didn't come back. And the petrol tanks of the aircraft were slung out - they only left a couple to get there. In place of the tanks were bombs, we put bombs up in place of the tanks.

**Rodney Giesler:** So what happened to the planes?

**Larry Allen:** Well they just came down and were left there, they couldn't get back, it was impossible for the pilots or the men to come back, they just stayed in the war zone.

**Rodney Giesler:** So they just landed there?

**Larry Allen:** They just landed there.

**Rodney Giesler:** On an airfield?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah. There was no petrol to come back, just enough petrol to get there. The sky was black...

**Rodney Giesler:** This was, what? D-Day was it?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, the D-Day. If you looked in the sky, it was black. You couldn't see sky, there were just aeroplanes, that's all there were. We were all outside, looking up. And we tested them before they went, see? As I say, the war-time - Coventry was just a heap of rubble and it's a well-known fact really, that there's at least five hundred people buried under Owens & Owens building. They couldn't get out. And in the streets of Coventry it was just a well-known sight, lorry loads of cardboard coffins, folded cardboard coffins. As a matter of fact there was one bad night, because we had a lot of bad nights with bombing, but I happened to be there that one night, and I went down in the shelter and there were a lot of forces men as well, in uniform, down there. Because I overheard some of 'em say, "Cor, this is worse than being on the Front!" you know, in the war-time. Listening to these bombs coming down, shaking the ground, you know. And when the all clear went, a very sad thing you see. I got out of the shelter and it was still dark you see, because the all clear would go before daylight came. And there was a woman with little children, and as she pushed this pram through piles of earth and potholes with the bombs, you know, she was trying to get on the pavement, and the telegraph poles were down, and the wire was caught in the wheel of the pram. So I bent down to give her a hand, you know, take the wire off the pram and lift it over the moulds for her, and she says to me - Oh I'll never forget them words, because she says, "I don't know what I'm gonna expect when I get home," she

says, "I've got my Mother, laying in a coffin." Now that's war for you innit? Terrible innit? There are certain things I'd like to forget really, but I'm just making this recording for you.

**Rodney Giesler:** Someone who I've also recorded, who was in Coventry that night, I mean he said one of the strangest things was, for weeks afterwards the buses were driving around without any windows in them.

**Larry Allen:** Oh yeah, yeah!

**Rodney Giesler:** They'd all been blown out and there just wasn't time to repair them.

**Larry Allen:** Actually, I was making my way to my wife's people, I think my wife was there at the time, and there was a very bad raid and - but I didn't give up, I thought, "Well I'll have to go through it," and the bombs were coming down. And there were holes in the road that you could put a bus in - taking all the road up, there was one! And it was dark, pitched dark almost, and a doctor and a nurse - because I was the only one going around in a car, couldn't see nobody else going in a car. I was trying to get to the mother-in-law's house, and a doctor and a nurse stopped me, and they commandeered the car. They said, "We're sorry but you'll have to help us, we've got to get to a certain place." So they jumped in and I got to this - well I don't know where they were going but I couldn't go any further, because there was a great big hole in the road, I couldn't get by, I just had to leave the car myself. I said, "Well I can't get any further," so they walked from there on. And when I walked along the Cashes Lane, part of the town, a whole building was on fire, and I was walking underneath it. [Chuckles] I mean, I must have been young and daft at the time! Any time the whole place could have fallen down on me, but there was nowhere else to go, you'd got to get by it. All the flames and everything, oh, it was like Dante's 'Inferno'! Oh, terrible really.

**Rodney Giesler:** Shall we talk about happier things now?

**Larry Allen:** Ah, that's true.

**Rodney Giesler:** Tell me what you did after the war ended, you went back to films presumably?

**Larry Allen:** Well after the war ended, everybody tried to be happy then. I mean there were parties in the street, and I opened up my studio.

**Rodney Giesler:** Which one was this?

**Larry Allen:** In Coventry, number 471, Stony Stanton Road.

**Rodney Giesler:** Wasn't that destroyed, the original one?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, but the bomb damage - the studio wasn't bombed, it was the back part.

**Rodney Giesler:** Ah.

**Larry Allen:** There was like a two-story work house, where the motion picture work was going on. But the front of it was all right, except no glass - there was no glass in the windows, just a board, see. And I put a little hole there, just to put samples, with the glass. And I went round - I've got photographs of that now, of that. I went round photographing the celebrations. And, course it was a business, I mean you've got to earn money somewhere of some sort and er...

**Rodney Giesler:** So where did you sell the newsreels, the films you took?

**Larry Allen:** I wasn't doing films then.

**Rodney Giesler:** Oh you were just doing still photographs?

**Larry Allen:** I was doing - yeah at the time I was doing babies - photographs. Don't forget, there was thousands, millions of servicemen abroad that hadn't come home, they hadn't seen their babies had they? So I did quite a roaring trade with babies and children.

**Rodney Giesler:** And you could get the film all right?

**Larry Allen:** [Chuckling.] Well funny you should say that. Kodak only allowed me enough for me to buy a few sandwiches! Only a small quota, Kodak allowed you a quota! But I used to journey to London and I could pick no end up from Sans Hunter - you know Sans Hunter in The Strand? Bedford Street - off Bedford Street - oh, you could buy as much as you liked!

**Rodney Giesler:** What was he, a wholesaler?

**Larry Allen:** Well no, he was a - well yes and I tell you what, he used to buy all the surplus - Army surplus. And I tell you something else what he did buy, you couldn't touch it today, it was film made by Dupont - oh wonderful stuff! Oh, Kodak couldn't keep up with the quality of Dupont's. That's why I'd sooner go to London.

**Rodney Giesler:** Was this black and white or colour?

**Larry Allen:** Oh black and white then, oh but it was like monochromes. It was almost like colour! Have you ever seen a black and white that looks like colour?

**Rodney Giesler:** Hmm...

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, you can see the colour shining through it, can't you? See? And of course in them days you could buy what they call sepia paper - you can't buy it today. The paper was already sepia-ed. No chemicals, see? And that was a quick process. Anyway, luckily things did settle down didn't they? I don't think I was there too long, in the studio, because my wife wanted a proper house with a garden and things like that, you know. And she got a bit fed up. She used to be the receptionist in the photography - it was a very busy shop, very busy, main road. There was a doctor's on one corner and I was on the other. As they took the babies into the doctors, they came into me! [Chuckles.] Anyway I loved the children, I loved it. And my boy, at the time he used to follow me in the studio and he'd ring the bells, the same as me, at the side, for the

babies to smile, you know. Anyway I had an offer from Disney. I wrote - I heard that Disney was coming to Britain to set up and they offered me a job, see, in Cookham. If you know anything about the film business, they started in Cookham, Disney. Disney with Rank, together. And they put several million pound into this.

**Rodney Giesler:** Wasn't that 'Paintbox' or something?

**Larry Allen:** That's right! That's right! David Hand, see.

**Rodney Giesler:** That's right.

**Larry Allen:** He was Disney's right hand man, and he came over, but he couldn't draw! [Chuckles] I'll tell you what, he couldn't draw - he couldn't draw, a lot of them people couldn't draw you know. There was another one couldn't draw - John Arliss [?] I met John Arliss. To tell you the truth, John Arliss kicked me out of his studio! He caught me by the shoulders and said, "Get out!" [Chuckles.] And I hadn't spoken a word, I never spoke a word! And I tell you where that was, in the corner of Soho, Soho Square. John Arliss had his little place in the corner. Now he didn't start until after the war. And I couldn't get going, when I sold my studio I thought, "Ah, get to London, get in with the 'big boys'," you know, studio - Disney or Rank or somewhere, which offered me jobs. [Chuckles] I happened to call on John Arliss one day, and there's a little entry there before his office started, like a little railing or - not straight off the pavement. There was a little railing down there and you walked in this little place - yard, like - in the front of the building there was an old... Models, he must have been making models up, they were scrap, see? And there was an old man there, sweeping up and tidying up this little place, so he says, "What do you want?" So I said, "I'd like to see Mr Arliss, I've come to see John Arliss," I said, "I'm a filmmaker and I've got some ideas I'd like to talk over." "Oh," he says, "he's in there, go in. Just give a knock and walk in." Well I just did what I was told, so I knocked at the door and walked in. And it was a fairly big room, like this. And he had a desk there and he sat at a desk, and he was talking to a man. And he rose up and he says, "Who are you? What do you want?" And he came over and caught me by the shoulders and threw me out the door! See there was a doorway there - he threw me out! [Laughs.] He was throwing genius away really, wasn't he?

[RG laughs.]

**Larry Allen:** I mean I invented the machines and everything! So anyway...

**Rodney Giesler:** So you didn't get a job there?

**Larry Allen:** No!

**Rodney Giesler:** Did you get a job with David Hand?

**Larry Allen:** Well no, I'll tell you how it happened. I called in the Rank's office, see, and I always carried film on me - always had samples you see. So I said to the manager, "I've heard

that Disney and Rank are opening a studio, I wouldn't mind a job there." I said, "You can see my work if you like." He said, "Come with me." Because he was in charge of personnel, this man. He put it through..., "Oh yes" he says, "we can do with you, yeah. Give us your name and address." So I gave him my name and address in Coventry, went back - I bought a little house in Stepney Road, Coventry, just as a stepping stone until I got to London, see, because I wouldn't have seen my wife and boy without a roof over their heads. Because I got a good price for the studio and workshops and the little house I bought, at that time, was only four hundred pounds - nice little house too. So I told my wife, I said, "We'll go to London when I get this job." So I waited and eventually they said, "Come for interview." So I wrote back and I said, "I can't make it at the moment because I want to find out where I'm going to live there, and take my family." So I went to Denham, which is Cookham, isn't it, and I saw Pinewood and all them around there, and I went in an estate agent's shop - Cor, you couldn't touch the prices! I couldn't find a house within a reasonable price that I wanted to buy. So I took the names of the estate agents, who let me know within a certain price, oh there were thousands of big houses round there! So I came back, I said, "All right, I'll wait." So in the meantime my father-in-law - I wasn't working then, was I? I'd got no studio, I'd got nothing, but I'd got money, I'd got capital. And I'd got a nice little house, and I was having a little rest too [chuckles] and that's something. I was eating ice cream and laying down by the fire, resting! [Laughs.] So anyway my father-in-law had got this big garage, a very big garage, with petrol pumps, workshops, but there were no cars, there were only rubbish-cars from before the war, and he says, "I'm not working on them." He says, "You won't earn nothing on them," see? So he put in for an agent for Bluebirds Caravans, so he used to say to me, "Come with me" he says, "you take one car and I'll take the other," to Bournemouth, in Poole, "and we'll bring one back each," see? So that's what we did. And I counted up the weekends, every weekend we went, as soon as we brought the caravans back they were sold, and the money was good, the profit, you know. And he gave...

**Rodney Giesler:** And you were still living in Coventry?

**Larry Allen:** I was still living in Coventry, I'd got my little house. So anyway when I got back, a week or two after, another letter came from Disney and Rank saying, "Are you now ready to come to work with us?" Well my father-in-law was earning that much money on the caravans, I thought, "No, I'm not giving this up!" I mean you bring a caravan back that's worth, at that time, about eight hundred pounds, and you got about a hundred pound profit off a caravan, and he gives me half just for bringing it, that was money wasn't it? That was nearly a hundred-pound a week that was - they couldn't pay you that there! And some of my girls went to work at Cookham, who worked for me, so that's why I know all about Cookham, although I never was in the place I know all about it. Because they were there for about eighteen months and Pamela Swift was one of them, and she came back to work for me again - but I wasn't doing anything - but she came and told me about Cookham. She said, "Every day we get lessons from David Hand, he can't draw! He's trying to draw on a blackboard and all we do is listen. There's no production!" She said, "I'm a background artist" - she was a good background artist I'll tell you - and she says, "I'm doing no drawing!" She says, "So I've come home and my Father said, 'Go back and work for Mr Allen who's probably got a studio and...!'" So I said to her when she came to see me I said, "Well not at the moment, but I've got plans, I've really got plans, and I'll send for you." So her Father was a big noise at the Stanton Motor Car Company, she didn't have to worry about money, they'd got a huge house. I'd been up to their house, you see. They'd also got

another house at the back of their house, and he offered it to me as a studio, when they built the new one see. And he says, "Don't worry about my daughter, paying her, so long as you keep her happy, she loves drawing." So I says, "Well I'll send for her when I start up, but at the moment I'm in the caravan business for my father-in-law. I can't get out of it, it's me father-in-law." Money was good too! So anyway we went sixteen weekends to Bournemouth - I'll always remember the sixteen, because after the sixteen, old Alexander Knott - he owned Bluebirds, and all he was interested in was amateur radio. He used to go to America to join the amateur radios - big factory. So when we got there on the sixteenth there were all these caravans in the yard - big yard - not one of 'em had got any wheels on, no axles. So when we went to pick two up the manager said, "Sorry, we've got no axles and we don't know when we're going to get 'em." So we came back empty. We stayed at the same hotel every - oh, apart from the beginning. There's a story at the beginning, there's robbers, [chuckles], robbers in the first - we stayed at an old shack! We didn't know it was an old shack, well we knocked it up late at night, because we were late getting there, and it was about...

**Rodney Giesler:** This was down in Bournemouth was it?

**Larry Allen:** In Bournemouth, it was twelve o'clock one night, we went to get caravans. We took one down for somebody, that's it, and we planted it, and we weren't coming back, we were going to Notts. the next day, so we had nowhere to stay really. So we were coming back to Poole, and we saw this bed and breakfast place. So we knocked on - we saw a light on, and a great big bloke on a stick came, a walking stick. He said, "Yeah! What do you want? What do you want?" We said, "We'd like a bed for the night," you know, after travelling all the way. So he says, "Come in, come in then," he says, "we've got to be careful round here you know, shut the door." [Chuckles] So we got in - oh and his wife gave us a great meal, egg, bacon, tomatoes, you know, and she told us where to go and have a wash, you know, because we were dirty. Spoke for a half-hour, he was asking questions, what we do? So we were tired so, "Shall we go to bed?" So [chuckles] he takes us into this room and it was a dormitory! There were all these lorry drivers - beds here, beds there - just a passageway in between them, see? So the Father-in-law said to me, because we carried quite a bit of money on us, you know, we had to, you know, can't go... And he says to me, "Wrap your money in your trousers, put it under your pillow and sleep on it!" You know what I mean! He knew all the dodges! Do you know, I was that tired - I'm not kidding you - I was that tired, the next morning I opened my eyes and, oh it was - the room was daylight, and my head was against a big window and the window was on the pavement, and people were passing by! [Chuckling] With no curtains! So I looked around and there was just one bloke left in a bed there. So we got up and we went across the road to fill up with petrol. So the Father-in-law was a very nosy sort of bloke, he always liked to talk with garage owners, you know. And he went into the garage, talking to the owner, and the lad was filling up the petrol, and who happened to be standing at the side was Margaret Lockwood, you know the actress, Margaret Lockwood. And I recognised her, you know, and I said, "Here...?" He said, "Oh, she lives just down the road." So I said, "Oh ah." And I said, "Hello" to her and that. And then, on the pavement - this is fantastic, this is - was a little boy on a three-wheeler bike! Little lad, and he'd got a book and a pencil, and he was taking the car numbers, see? I said to him, "What are you doing, son?" He said, "Oh I'm taking the car numbers." He said, "I'll take yours as well," he said, you know. Well we got home and the next morning that little boy was on

the front page of the Daily Mirror! Fantastic isn't it? He had taken the number of a robber's car - a robber's - and they caught the robbers.

**Rodney Giesler:** What at the garage?

**Larry Allen:** Ah! In that big - there was a row of big houses, you know, and they caught 'em through this little boy. That's fantastic isn't it?

**Rodney Giesler:** How soon did you get back to animation then? After all this caravan...

**Larry Allen:** Well I'll tell you what happened to the caravans. My father-in-law says to me, "Well that's done it, we can't get another agency." Because Bluebirds was about the only one making small caravans, they didn't make big ones, they made small caravans which sold for about eight hundred, seven or eight hundred pound. So we were in the garage and he says to me, one day, he says, "I'll bet you could make a caravan." So I said, "Yeah, I'll have a go." So we ordered the steel and everything, from Mattisons - big steel place just down the road, and we set about it. And I went to my two brothers, Jack and Albert, who lived across the road. I said, "Here," I says, "you've got a job, come and make caravans with us." So it took us about a fortnight - three weeks - to design and make the first caravan. There's a picture over there, I've got a picture of it, in that book, that book you've just picked up. And I took it to Blackpool for the people who bought it, and took a photograph of it while we were there. Well, from that first caravan on, it wasn't a week or two before there were twenty men working there, making caravans. And I argued with the father-in-law, which was very upsetting at the time, because I didn't like to argue, but he was so stubborn...

**Rodney Giesler:** Argue with who?

**Larry Allen:** My father-in-law.

**Rodney Giesler:** Oh yeah, yes.

**Larry Allen:** It was his premises and everything. I says, "Look, I've took a deposit off the people, they've sold their house and they want to go down south, but they want a big live-in caravan, the bigger the better." We only went up to eighteen feet, see, same as Bluebirds. So I says, "I've designed one now, thirty-foot." Because I had a drawing room, a big drawing room where I used to do the designing. I said, "Easy, simple! I'll do..." "No, no, no, no! We'll stick to what we're doing! We're doing well." We were doing one a week then, you know, the caravans, with the men - maybe one and a half a week. And he says, "We're doing all right." Because he was an oldish man then, you know, he wasn't doing any work at all! He was just going out and spending the money on dogs and horses that's all he was doing. So I didn't take any notice. Anyway, I says, "Let me build up there, I'll build the big ones. And I'll still build these small ones and I'll get my two brothers solely on the big ones." And that's what I did. I said, "And I'll take the profit and I'll give you some out of it." Well it was a bit, you know - what do you call it - friction, you know, and I don't like friction. So I built several big caravans and started. We started a lot of these caravan holidays you know. There are two men in Coventry become multi-millionaires, and we started them. Because they came up - well they were in their fifties at the

time, and they said, "Would you let us have two caravans, and we'll pay you when we sell 'em?" They said, "We've got a piece of ground in the middle of the town." Coventry was all bomb patches at the time, you know. He said, "We've rented this piece of ground off the council, but if you could start us off, we've got no money, we've just rented the ground." So we said, "Yes all right, we'll start you off." And we started several off like that, let 'em pay when they sold the caravans. And by that time we were doing about two a week, see? And them pair became the Meridian Caravan Company. The biggest in Great Britain! [chuckling] Wonderful isn't it, really speaking? So anyway, out of the proceeds you know, my boy was growing up then a bit and my wife didn't know what to do with her time, so I bought here a clothes shop, then I bought her another clothes shop you know, and her sister ran the other one. And then she didn't feel so good after that, and the boy had a cough, so I tell you what I did. I didn't bother about much in life at all regards material things, I just done the best for my family. I says to my brothers I says, "Here, you help me build a caravan which is practically all Perspex. I want a Perspex roof, Perspex windows and I want a good touring van, two little bedrooms and a kitchen, and a real fireplace for the winters." We sold all up, we sold the house, the shops, everything, and in March, middle of March, it was beautiful, I think God must have shone his light on me that twelve months, it was beautiful all the year round.

**Rodney Giesler:** Where are we now, about '48 or something?

**Larry Allen:** Ah that's right, '47. I'd been in the - '48 or '49, you're not far out. Before 1950 anyway. And we started out, and I thought, "Right!" I worked very hard for my boy, very, very hard. My wife wasn't so well, the boy had got a cough he couldn't get rid of. So - and a big white cat, we didn't forget the cat, he was part of the family. And we started off from Coventry and we went to Stratford first. It was about the middle of March, beautiful weather. We settled in Stratford, in a caravan park, and from there, we'd only stay a night here and night there, we went all over Britain. And we landed up, we came back down through Bristol, Somerset and further down, you know, down this end see. And we didn't like it in Cornwall so much, because it's all hilly in Cornwall. We came back to Devon, and we were going back a fortnight before Christmas - this is fantastic this is, this is fate this is. We came back through Burnham-on-Sea - er no, sorry, through Highbridge, near Burnham-on-Sea, and I was just making my way to Bristol, and before we got to this turning for Burnham there was a sign up, 'Burnham-on-Sea' and it was probably about twenty minutes before it would be dark, see. A fortnight before Christmas, we thought we'd get home for Christmas. Anyway, she says to me, "Oh we've never been to Burnham-on-Sea!" "Oh" I says, "ah, we'll go and have a look. We'll stay the night anyway and have a look round" - the next day. So I turned around, sharply - them days you could park anywhere you liked, no traffic about - went through the town, parked in the town, got something out of the shops. And I said to a man passing, "Here," I says, "do you know where I could park for the night, Caravan Park?" "Yes" he says, "go round the corner where the post office is, get onto what they call the Berrow Road and you'll see a lane on the right..." Westfield, I think it was Westfield. And he said, "Go down that lane and you'll come to a cottage with a couple of fields," he says, "during the war he used to have gypsy caravans in there." The people used to run out, see? So I got there and it was duskish, you know, knocked on his cottage door and I said, "I'd like to park for a couple of nights or so." "Yeah, OK" he says, "anywhere you like, go and park over there," you know. Not a soul there in the fields, you know, just us. So in the dark I went over and over, and I could see this lake, and we parked a few yards from the lake anyway. And

you know, settled in that night, and next morning we got up, hooked the car off and we went up the town, and my wife said to me, "Oh isn't this a lovely town, I've fallen in love with Burnham-on-Sea, can we stay here?" I said, "Yeah, we could stay here, we'll do something." So she said, "Right." So she bought a newspaper and saw there were plots of ground for sale, so that we could build our own bungalow, see? So the plots of grounds, believe it or not - big piece of ground, sixty-five pound a plot! You'd never believe it would you? So we bought two, see - two plots together.

**Rodney Giesler:** What about her clothes shop, had you sold that up?

**Larry Allen:** Ah, we sold the clothes shop, we sold everything and went on the move. We were like glorified tramps, see? But I was happy to think that it was very healthy. Oh it was healthy! My caravan, all down the centre, I put all, you know what they have in buses, the big roof vents?

**Rodney Giesler:** Hmm...

**Larry Allen:** Well I bought the bus roof vents and I put them all down the centre, big ones, so when you went to bed at night you could see the stars. And as I say, to get back to the newspaper, she says, "Well if we're gonna stop, we'll see if we can build a bungalow here." So we bought the ground from the estate agent and put in for a building licence, see. But they told us it would be two years before we could build. So we were living in that caravan then, and I says to her, "We don't want to stay in a caravan, we've got to find a house some way." So we didn't purposely look for one, but I happened to go in a sweet shop one day and I bought some sweets, chocolates and that for to take home. And it was pouring with rain, emptying down, so I stood in the doorway with another man - a Londoner. And I was talking to him, and I'd got my car outside because I was going to go - I was travelling to some other town, you know, to pick up some stuff. And I said, "Where do you live?" And he said, "Highbridge." "Oh," I said, "I'm going through Highbridge, do you want a lift?" So we were just in the car, talking, and he said, "Where do you live?" I said, "Well actually, I'm living in a caravan at the moment, but I'm looking for a little house, a stepping stone to build. I've got the ground, but until I build a bungalow." So he said, "That's funny, I've got a little house for sale." I said, "Oh ah?" I didn't even knock the price down to him, I said, "How much do you want for it?" He says, "Eight hundred." I said, "I'll come and have a look at it then." So it was pouring with rain you see, and I don't recommend anybody to buy a house when it's pouring with rain! [Laughs.] Because there's nobody about when it's pouring with rain. Anyway, it was quite nice, and I went inside, but I discovered then - which he told me - that it had been a public house, an old public house. And it was the queerest little place out. There was a passageway all round the house, and a big room where there was a bar. But there was no bathroom, see? So I bought it and put a bath in. And I'd only just done that when I went down the caravan to see if somebody had put some letters on a board, and it was a dark night, you know, rainy night. And there was one letter there, on the board, and I could hardly see the address because the rain had washed it, but I knew it was for me, and it was a building licence, passed! I could do my building straight away.

[End of Tape 2, Side 4]

[Tape 3, Side 5]

**Rodney Giesler:** How did you get back into animation?

**Larry Allen:** I'd like to mention the man that put me on his ground though...

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah?

**Larry Allen:** Because I gave him five hundred quid to turn his field - he was in debt...

**Rodney Giesler:** Ah ha...

**Larry Allen:** Very, very badly in debt. Matter of fact, he turned to drink, drinking gin. His cottage was full of gin bottles when I went up to see him. And his wife knocked at the door, she said, "Will you come and see Mr Greenslade, he wants to see you." When I got there he was crying on his table. I've never seen a man cry like that before. Because of the gin, you get the DTs, you see, but I didn't know, until then. And he said, "Mr Allen, you wouldn't like to lend me some money?" So I said, "I'll think it over, how much do you want?" He says, "Well I'm in debt..." the council is gonna turn him off, you see. Although he owned the ground, he was in debt, you see? So really speaking I should have - if I hadn't took sympathy - it would be better if we had bought that ground off him, see, but I didn't realise. But I gave him five hundred pound on the condition that I would put caravans on his ground, and not only caravans, shops and things like that and turn it into a 'Larry Land' see, which I did! And it was a thriving business. There was a toy factory there, people could see toys being made. And then all of a sudden he sold it and they kicked me out, I had to get out. And I thought, "How daft!" I could have bought that ground. And then, up the road, you know Fred Pontin and his brother - they lived up the road from me and they started their first camp, Burnham-on-Sea - Bream. So when they kicked me out I started a printing business with a man and we did his advertising for him, Pontin's. But after five years or so, six years, we left Burnham, because the father-in-law died and my father died as well, you know, shortly after, and we came to look after the places and then I started again back into films.

**Rodney Giesler:** You came to London or back to Coventry?

**Larry Allen:** No, back to Coventry, in films. I should have gone to London, but at the time I said to my son when he was twentyish - because when he was around twenty-odd you see, the BBC was asking me then to do work - and I says to my son, "How about if I...?" Because it would have been the right move, because my wife wouldn't go to London to live, and I'd got the studio then in Coventry started again then, about 19- In the 'fifties anyway, when we'd come back, '56, '57. When we'd come back from Burnham-on-Sea. Then I started straight away to build machinery, because you've got to build them yourself, you know, you can't go and buy these rostrums. You could at a big price. I met Mr Smith in London, who made rostrums, right in the heart of the City in a basement. And I went to see him, and he made some wonderful rostrums there, the same as I was building, exactly. Because we could see eye-to-eye when we

were talking about the engineering, you know, and the cameras and that. And I said to him, "Mr Smith, I might want a rostrum off you, because I won't have time to build one," you know. And then I showed him the drawings and what I do, and he says to me, "Good God," he says, "I supply these to the schools, to the studios, and I'm shaking my head," he says, "I don't know why they go into the business, because they can't draw! And there I am looking at stuff like yours, I don't know why they go in! I'm selling 'em my stuff..." So I left him a few drawings you know, and he sent them to Mr Heinz who was the Head Teacher of the Animation School, you know it? London Animation School. I don't think it's there any more, but at the time... So I had a letter from [Mr Heinz] to say, "Would I like to lecture to the students as he'd never seen any pre-war animation, British animation." Because these Alice Batchelors [NB does he mean Joy Batchelor?] and these Richard Williams, they've only just started up after the war you know. Well, that's all they were. Richard Williams - I sent letters to Richard Williams, Disney, Hanna Barbera, and photographs - all round - and John Arliss[?]. I said, "Would you like my machines, my computer machines, for computer animation?" I was the first in the world to figure it out, computer animation. And they wrote back and they said, "No!" Every one of 'em said, "No, we're not interested."

**Rodney Giesler:** Is this computered control cameras on rostrums?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, I went right through the lot, right up to joysticks, I invented the joystick. Because my brother came in...

**Rodney Giesler:** You're not talking about computer graphics, as they call them?

**Larry Allen:** Well, the computer animation with the joystick...

**Rodney Giesler:** Yes, yes.

**Larry Allen:** You know, because I'll tell you why, because I got this idea of children making their own games, see? And I didn't think, mind you, about the videos. The videos hadn't been invented then.

**Rodney Giesler:** Hmm....

**Larry Allen:** The video disc came out before the video. Well it didn't actually, it didn't really come out to the public but they were working on it. And I worked on the video-disc as I told you in this recording, and I went to Decca, and Decca Records said, "Do some for us." And the first ones I did, and I've got the stuff down there now, I can show you what I worked on, because they didn't give me any money, they didn't give me no contract.

**Rodney Giesler:** What system were you using on these discs - they were still analogue weren't they?

**Larry Allen:** Yeah that's right.

**Rodney Giesler:** Because you hadn't got a laser?

**Larry Allen:** Ah no. But it was - I'd got this vague idea, I couldn't do it, it was beyond me, but I'd got it all done in drawings and that you see, sent it to Decca and years after they took it up and they sent for me! And a man came to visit me who was actually working on it, I wasn't living here then, I was living up the road in the bungalow. And he came to me and he told me all about it, he says, "We can't get it working." He says - they told me, Sans Charlton[?] said to me, "If we get this video disc working, you will have all the animation for the video disc, I promise you that." And he didn't know at the time, I was an animated producer, we were talking about the disc. But I happened to have two films on me, that was funny! I'd been to the BBC, I'd been to the television with the two films, so I said, "Here, I've got two films in there if you want to see my work." He says, "Oh come with me, we've got a Bell and Howell down the passageway, off a little room." The operator wasn't there but I said, "Oh I can put it in and through." He said, "Well that's amazing!" He says, "you haven't met the right people!" Those were his words to me. He says, "We have already been in touch with Disney to make cartoons for the video disc and they want millions, it's out of the question, they want millions!" Those were his very words! "Because," he said, because he was, like, manager, he says, "between me and you, charge a big price because we don't want you to go out of business." I said, "Well that's fair enough, you do go out of business if you can't get a price." So I came out laughing! I said, "When will I - when?" He says, "You can start straight away. We never gave a thought to pop cartoons, we hadn't thought of that. We thought about children's stories..." I said, "Well I'm a musical man, I've been brought up to it, playing instruments. When I make a cartoon I like to, you know, really go with the..." And he says, "That's an idea, brilliant!" I says, "I've also got a machine that I built and the pop people can use it, that you use it with the cartoons. It's a 'think vision' machine." "Oh" he says, "that's brilliant, but who do you want - which characters do you want to start?" Well we thought and thought, I says, "Well here's an idea, how about Tom Jones and Humperdinck? Singers and jiggers, you know..." "Well" he says, "that's easy, because they're our artists, they're Decca artists." So that fell in, so I came back, I made cartoons of Tom Jones, you know, it looked like Tom Jones in a funny way -Humperdinck. And then I get a letter to say, "We can't get the video disc working, we've sent it to Germany." So they sent it to Germany, so I says, "Well, I'm not really in a rush anyway now, because sadly my wife's died anyway, so that's knocked a bit of polish off my brains for a bit."

**Rodney Giesler:** You lectured to the students, did you?

**Larry Allen:** No, because he only gave me a few days.

**Rodney Giesler:** Yes, yes.

**Larry Allen:** They were closing down for Christmas. Why did he expect me to rush off the same day as - that's daft! If he'd have given me a couple of weeks, but it was only - he sent me on the 10th, they were knocking off about the 20th, less than ten days anyway. So I wrote back, I said, "Oh I couldn't do it in the time." I wrote a couple of years after, I said, "Here..." but I don't think they learn any more. But he said - he's very enthusiastic about animated cartoons, but - "I've never seen any pre-war cartoonists work." I'll tell you who wrote that, Patrick Robertson, I don't know whether you know him, he writes 'The Guinness Book of Film Facts'.

**Rodney Giesler:** Hmm...

**Larry Allen:** So I wrote to 'The Guinness Book of Film Facts', that's going back when the films started, all about old Hollywood and films, not the present day, see. So I wrote to him, I says, "Here, I read your book, you left out animated cartoons." He says, "I searched, I couldn't find anybody." So I sent him a lot of stuff off, you know, he said, "But I'm writing a sequel to the book and I'll mention you in the book." I never got the book, so I don't know whether it is or not.

**Rodney Giesler:** So what other animation work did you get involved in after the [indecipherable]?

**Larry Allen:** Well as I say, when we came back from Burnham-on-Sea, I'd started up again, so that meant I built... Oh actually, to tell the truth, I opened up three sweets and tobacco shops, because I didn't want to pay a lot for premises. So I opened up...

**Rodney Giesler:** This is back in Coventry?

**Larry Allen:** We're back in Coventry now.

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah.

**Larry Allen:** And the mother-in-law sold the garages and sold all the property and bought a house for herself, and we bought a house as well, I bought a big house actually, with a lot of ground to it, because I bought it for the future. But I wanted premises for the animated cartoons you see, so I'd been in Burnham-on-Sea also with a toy factory, so when my brothers came down to my bungalow, which I did build on the ground that I bought - I've got pictures there of the bungalow. And then I did the toy factory, and every toy I made was a patent, I called it 'LA Patent Products' so every toy, you couldn't buy my toys in the shops, they were all new ideas. A lot of them were being pinched, and all, by rival firms. Anyway, she wanted to come back when her father died, so I sold all the surplus toys cheap to my clients, all the machines were there, and I says to my two brothers who helped shift the machines back to Coventry, I says, "I tell you what, you can have the machines and if you want to start the toy business, I've had enough." So they started a toy business in the tops of shops which belonged to one another's relations, their wives relations. So anyway I said, "I'm going back into the film business. I'll try television again, and if not, cinema or something." So I built machinery then and I wanted the tops of shops for animation, see? I didn't care about the profit made in the sweets, the girl could have the profit, so long as I got the premises, 'innit? That's how it goes - for nothing, see! So I went around looking for work. It was a job, finding work I'll tell you. Because I mean cinemas weren't about as they were...

**Rodney Giesler:** What about industrial clients, were they?

**Larry Allen:** No, but I struck lucky, in a way. I started with Fleur de Lys pies and I stayed with them for five years.

**Rodney Giesler:** With who, sorry?

**Larry Allen:** With Fleur de Lys pies.

**Rodney Giesler:** Oh yes.

**Larry Allen:** See,

**Rodney Giesler:** Making publicity films?

**Larry Allen:** Ah, I made publicity. They had 'em on regular. Actually our publicity films used to run in cinemas all over the country you now, because they'd got very big. They were the suppliers to British Railway, all their pies. And so what I was going to say is, they struck lucky too because I had three Bell and Howell machines and lots and lots of cartoons, you know, you name it - reels and reels of cartoons, pre-war made ones and all that, Disney ones and that. And I used to do the Christmas shows and the working men's clubs shows. I'd put on 'Gigi' you know, like them sort of films, for a wine club you know, cheese and wine, for the wine makers, see, and I used to do that sort of thing. But I laid the law down, because I was so much in demand for the films shows then. I'd got a couple of mates who'd got another couple of Bell and Howells and I got the films made that I did of advertising for Fleur de Lys, see, so they could be run through. I mean you'd take a Rialto - just one club alone - the Rialto in Coventry - nine bars. Nine bars! The GEC ballroom, we used to hold - nine hundred and ninety odd children! We counted the chairs up! And I used to say to them all, "No film shows unless you took the pies." So up went the fires, you know the ranges for the fires for the pies, and they said, "Oh yes, what are they?" "Oh." I said, "they're the best pies in the world." So in the clubs they were eating the pies - all I'd got to do was ring up Fleur de Lys, "You've got another big order." And that's what made 'em big...

**Rodney Giesler:** They got a free film show out of it?

**Larry Allen:** Ah well - they paid!

**Rodney Giesler:** They took the pies.

**Larry Allen:** They took the pies, but they paid for the show as well!

**Rodney Giesler:** Yeah, yeah.

**Larry Allen:** I mean I was indispensable. They couldn't go many places and get a show, see? I was well know for shows, see. I mean, I'd got lads working in my studio who were very glad to go out at night and earn a couple of pounds, wouldn't they? In them days I'm talking about. I mean I used to say to them, "Look, providing they take the pies, I don't want no money out of it, you take the money for the show," see? But I'd got Fleur de Lys building up. I thought they'd be there forever and I'd be forever making [chuckles] films, but he sold out! [Laughing.] You can't rely on nothing, I worked hard for nothing!

**Rodney Giesler:** Was that your last excursion into the animation business?

**Larry Allen:** Well no, as I say, I came back and I did one or two films, but for firms you know. But then - what happened - my wife was pretty ill and we settled in Dawlish then. And I went into the GEC then, because I thought, "This animation business is going into electronics," and I

was the first to realise the electronics of animation. It's got to come from an animator, innit? It doesn't come from nowhere else - there's all this... So I put on the television, the world's first cartoon, 'Big Jim Rises Again', the first cartoon in the world to be made instantly by machine, sound and picture.

**Rodney Giesler:** And where was this shown?

**Larry Allen:** BBC

**Rodney Giesler:** Was it?

**Larry Allen:** On the BBC

**Rodney Giesler:** Ah ha...

**Larry Allen:** Yeah, the world's first.

**Rodney Giesler:** Hmm...

**Larry Allen:** As I say, that's before Disney, before these flash-in-a-pan people who come up making these 'Toy Stories', which I think is rubbish, myself. You'll never beat the cartoons, the traditional cartoons. See Max Fleischer's toys or anything like that, or even Disney's toys, toy soldiers. But there's something about - I only done the joystick, the computer animation, for it to be very simple, so that it's bought for nothing, you know, you worked for nothing! [Chuckling.] I mean it's so simple to do a thing that can be superimposed on top of one another, like, it's only moving pictures, innit, like that. You can move the pictures about like that see, but it's not animation, it's not traditional cartoon animation. No, it just gets on your nerves to look at it. But I think now, and you're the first person in the world I'm saying this to - no, I should think you'll be the second now, because a few week's back I wrote to the West Country Television and I said to them, "Would you start a cartoon club with me?" Television, see? It's been done before with Rolf Harris, but ten years before Rolf Harris ever started it, I wrote to the same studios, got the letters to prove it. I wrote to Lord Alec who a few weeks, or a week, or a month, or a short time after I wrote to him and he sent me his letters to his offices - he went up the road and killed himself, in a car crash. And he never wrote. He could have wrote to me personally, because what I was sending him was the most wonderful thing in the world. I said to him, "I've designed machines that could make animation instantly and I would like to start a cartoon club," and years after they gave it to Rolf Harris! And he was using machines that I designed. So a few weeks back I wrote to Westward[?] and I said, "Would you be interested in me starting a cartoon club?" I said, "Loads of material ready, loads and loads of material," I said, "Don't rush for an answer because I'm always adding, I'm always adding all the time." So it took 'em five weeks to answer the letter, and I got a little bit of letter saying, "It's under discussion," see?

**Rodney Giesler:** Hmm.

**Larry Allen:** So anyway what I did say in the letter, which I'm saying to you now, I worked so hard oh this, you know, so much thinking, so much experimenting with this animation business.

It doesn't stop here, it hasn't even stopped where it is now! And I said to them in Westward, I said, "It was me who was responsible for taking millions of kids away from television." Because while the kids are watching video games, they're not watching television, are they? And I think it's made them sit up. I said, "Now I want to change things and instead of kids watching video, I can make 'em now watch the television and make their own games, that's what I've invented." I've invented a gadget now that'll make their own games while watching television - so they won't have to buy games, see? So I think it's got 'em thinking...

**Rodney Giesler:** What's this, a programme that they feed into the television set?

**Larry Allen:** I'm not saying anything about it, I'm just telling you that [chuckling] there's a bloke came here from an enterprise. He tried to coax it out of me! Ahh! And if I said, I ain't even patented it! And John Sealey has got brains, because he sat there and Nobby whatsit sat there, and Nobby just doesn't care two hoots about...

**Rodney Giesler:** Nobby Clarke?

**Larry Allen:** No, he don't care if you lost anything. But he's very considerate, is John Sealey and he agreed with me. I says, "I was on television with no end of inventions and I was - had a repeat to say I was the man with the catalogue of patents." And I said, "I won't take another patent out now until I'm ready to produce it." John Sealey says to me, "As soon as you take a patent out, you give it to the world. If you can't produce that yourself, you've just given it to 'em." I said, "You're right, you are a man after my own heart John, you talk like me." He said, "It's true, it's true." And then [indecipherable] he says, "Oh well, you've got to tell somebody, you've got to..." I said, "No, no, no. I'll keep it until I produce it," see? And I think I can produce it.

[End of Interview]

Larry Allen

Animator and Inventor

1920s - Childhood in Wales and Coventry

1930s - Experiments with Animation. Engineering work at Hillman Humber factory, Coventry, and Swallow Sidecars.

1940s - Coventry Air-raids. Work at Tachbrook Aerodrome, Coventry. Projection work. Still Photography Studio and Animation experiments (Fleur De Lys publicity films)

1950s - Various technical inventions

NB: THERE IS LIBELLOUS MATERIAL AT THE END OF THIS INTERVIEW WHICH MUST NOT BE RELEASED