

PLOD ESSAY: State School Mother's Club

Whenever you ask Lyn Chambers about her mother-in-law, Agnes Chambers, she will tell you about the Miners' Women's Auxiliary, the maternity wing at the Hospital, the way she walked Lyn down the street in the town just after she came as a new bride to Wonthaggi with Joe and told her which shops she could frequent depending on whether or not the shopkeepers were on the 'correct' side of politics.

Lyn dutifully joined the Miners' Women's Auxiliary and went to meetings with her mother-in-law. "When I joined the 1951, the meetings were held at the back of the Miners' Union Theatre in the meeting room. Meg Foster was President, Agnes Doig was Secretary, Meg Currie was Treasurer and Nancy Stirton was the entertainment Organiser. We began with the business, then our own entertainment or a speaker, then supper." Lyn participated in the May Day marches in the city and hung around Trades Hall with the women talking politics and social justice before they got on the Miners' Union bus back to Wonthaggi.

Lyn tells you these things because she knows most people think it is all very interesting, but what she would really like to talk about is the State School Mothers' Club. That is where Lyn spent a great deal of her energy and it is where she saw her mother-in-law in action. Recently, she gave me some notes she had written up for a talk she gave on the subject.

It is difficult to separate the Auxiliary and the Mothers' Club when talking about women's influence in the town. Firstly, there was a great overlap of women in the two organisations. Mrs Agnes Chambers was president of each at one time or another. Secondly, the two groups joined forces more than once to achieve things for the social good of Wonthaggi. In 1940 they worked together to procure knapsacks, build air-raid shelters and make ambulance boxes for the war effort. Then they banded together inviting church groups, CWA, and others to work with them for the Maternity Wing at the Hospital. In the 1950s they worked together again to get a kindergarten, comfort station and library for the community.

The Mothers Club was formed in 1929 when it emerged from the chrysalis of the two-year-old State School Welfare Committee. Mrs Agnes Chambers was the first President, Mrs Derrick the secretary and Mrs Legge the treasurer. One of their first purposes what to find

out why requisites were not provided to the children at this school. They also were concerned that the school was lacking in sports equipment. They realised that the only ones they could depend upon to supply these things were themselves by encouraging the community to support them.

The first thing they did was to have a banquet to raise funds. This was so successful they became the caterers of choice for weddings and balls, charging 2/6 per head for wedding guests. For this, your repast included cream cakes from McIntyer Bakery (bought by the MC for 9/-). The women realised they had a good business going. They put aside money to buy their own crockery and cutlery and groceries from O'Gilpin's who gave them excellent concessions. The catering work was done mostly in Wonthaggi by about 20 to 30 women, with Mrs Derrick organising one team and Mrs Kirkup the other.

The Mother's Club was raising good money for the good of the school, but when they saw that the School Committee, which was supposed to control all the moneys raised, gave in to the demands of the Principal, instead of spending it where the Mothers wanted it to go, they created a Special Social Fund so they could make their own decisions.

This led to some conflict with the different Principals of the school over the years. One in particular, Mr Jenkins, was particularly miffed that good money was out of his control. One day he demanded that Mothers' Club should buy a water jug for the teachers. Mrs Derrick, who was the mother he approached, said she would ask at the next meeting. Mr Jenkins then said he wanted to know exactly what the Mothers did with the money they raised and informed her that he would be the one to call the next meeting and that he would be at it.

Hackles were raised. When Mr Jenkins 'blustered' in and tried to take control of the meeting just as Mrs Chambers called it to order, she gathered herself to her full formidable presence and told him he would have to wait until he was invited to speak or he would have to leave. Mrs Derrick then read out the Annual Balance Sheet.

Finally, when Mr Jenkins was given leave to speak, all he could say was, "This Mothers' Club runs the school and it can't be trusted." Later he appealed to some of the men on the

School Committee to help him defeat the women, but the men said, "The women can't be beaten." They knew their place.

When teachers left Wonthaggi, the Mother's Club always gave a farewell tea, but when Mr Jenkins left, they did nothing. Mr Jenkins called in on Mrs Kirkup, saying it was the first school he'd left without a presentation. Mrs Kirkup told him he had been rude.

During the 1930s Depression, the Mothers' Club cooperated with the State School Relief Committee run by the Teachers' Federation who got rejects of footwear and clothing from factories. The Mothers sorted out the clothes and distributed it to the needy kids and raised money to buy the footwear, which had a small cost. They also appealed to the public to help feed the hungry kids. Some people donated 1/- per week, milkmen donated excess milk, shops gave excess food. One little kid wanted to know what they did with the crusts because he had two brothers at home who were hungry. The Mother's Club gave him what was left every day.

In 1937, when 20-Shaft exploded, the Mothers Club, along with other women's groups, helped with catering for the rescuers. When a boy Birt lost a leg, the Mothers' Club raised money for pyjamas and £20 for treatment.

The Mothers' Club remained affiliated with the Teachers Federation. One day, Mrs Derrick attended their meeting in the city and got up the courage to stand and speak, not something women usually did. The President, Mr Horton, tried to stop her, but she spoke for three minutes appealing for funds for State Schools. The meeting passed her motion. Thereafter, the government subsidised the Mothers' Club so they could send a representative to the Teachers' Federation meetings. The Wonthaggi Mother's Club became known as "Mrs Wonthaggi".

In 1938, the Mother's Club helped the Tech School to set up their own Mothers' Club since they had never had one.

After the war effort, then the community effort getting the Comfort Station (meant primarily for country women coming into town for a day's shopping who needed a place to look after their children, who had endured a long ride into town – often on horse drawn wagon even into the fifties), the kindergarten and the library underway, they began to throw picnics and fancy dress balls to raise morale amongst the children and have fun, too.

The Mothers' Club had an annual Children's Fancy Dress Ball in the Town Hall.

They taught the children to march in formation and to dance in readiness of the great night so they could show off their costumes that their mothers had created for them. Lyn's husband, Joe Chambers who was a beloved teacher at the school, and Leo O'Geary, the school cleaner, played for the dances with everyone joining in a happy evening. Lyn, meanwhile, helped with catering and the training of the children to march and dance.

Every four years the Mothers' Club organised a train-trip to the Melbourne Zoo, supplying lunch for teachers who took charge of the children. They also organised beach picnics at Cape Paterson, with prizes for each activity, food and lollies.

In the *Memory Book* members of this Historical Society are working on for the Bass Coast Shire, people in numbers remembered the fun of the fancy dress parties and all the other things the Mothers' Club did for them at the State Primary School on Billson Street:

"I remember learning to swim in the school pool, square dancing on the asphalt courts, eating lunch in the shelter shed, seeking 'plum puddings' in the playground, the Mothers' Club hot cocoa, fancy dress balls, school picnics, the march to the Cenotaph with wreaths, the Gould League of Bird Lovers and nature study, Mr Chambers taking us to see Benetti's house being built.

I remember school picnics by bus to Cape Paterson, seeing mobs of kangaroos where today there are houses, kids strung out from the surf to Undertow Bay, assembly in the quadrangle, that call to ATTENTION and marching to class to martial music, boys wearing long serge shorts to the knee until they were 14 years old, girl in long jumpers and skirts, the school dentist, being bussed to Warragul to see the Queen." (*Terri Allan*)

During the 1960s, the School had to remodel the swimming pool (which the miners began making for their children in 1910) to meet health standards. The Education Department gave £3000, but the Mothers' Club gave £10,000; the Borough of Wonthaggi, nothing.

- Lyn Chambers with some editing and paraphrasing by C. Landon