

PLOD ESSAY:

# VALE LYN CHAMBERS: 1918-2013

**“She lived with the aim of some good coming from her actions”**

Lyn Chambers was a shining example of the influence a single person, living a relatively suburban existence, in a modest house with modest means, can have on her family and the whole community. She lived every aspect of her life with a political perspective, adhered to the notion that everything we do is ultimately a political decision.

When Lyn “Nettie” Lewis was born, WWI had just finished and optimism was high. Her parents bought a 40-acre farm right next to the beach at Indented Head, where Lyn grew up, learned to swim and row the clinker dinghies her father rented out to fishermen. She loved that beach where her large, extended family of children, grandchildren and cousins still spend time each school holidays.

When Lyn was a child, there was no electricity on the farm, no radio, no car and medical science had yet to have penicillin. The little girl slept out on the veranda of the small house all year round and the family led a simple subsistence life. By the time she was 11 years old, Kingsford Smith had made his famous flight and the Depression had hit hard with severe food shortages and unemployment. Lyn witnessed her father sitting with his head in his hands steeped in despair. He had worked hard growing a beautiful crop of carrots, and after digging them out by hand and carting them to Port Arlington to load onto the *Edina* for Melbourne Market, he received back a bill for market fees greater than the worth of the carrots. He ploughed the rest up and fed them to the pigs. There was no money, but her parents exchanged for goods their farm products, as many district people did, so they had food at least. This must have resonated with Lyn’s outlook on life and her views about social justice.

Lyn rode her horse, Dolly, or drove her in a wagonette to Port Arlington Primary School until she finished Year 8, then completed Leaving and

Leaving Honours at Geelong High School. She was good at sport and won many medals in athletics (Senior Girls’ Champion two years running). She worked as a Student Teacher in 1938 – the year schools were closed due to Polio Epidemic – and started at Melbourne Teachers College in 1939 where she met Joe Chambers.

She qualified and became a teacher at Stony Ridge Glenfyne State School near Terang. Even though she loved her work and her students loved her, in 1944 Lyn stopped teaching to marry Joe, the rules being then that a married woman could not teach. Very soon, the two girls Elspeth first, and Marian second, were born.

In 1951 the family moved to Wonthaggi, the coal mining town where Joe had grown up and Lyn – an only child, used to quiet accomplishment and doting parents – was immediately drawn into the large Chambers family and all their social and political comings and goings. The

Chambers/Hamilton/Foster women in this extended family were outspoken, opinionated and politically active. Lyn’s mother-in-law, Agnes, took her around the town, told her to shop at the Co-op (Chambers 40 was her number) and pointed out the certain shops that were black-banned because ‘they didn’t support the striking miners’ or ‘they voted Conservative’.

Then Agnes asked Lyn to join the Miner’s Women’s Auxiliary and the State School Mothers’ Club. Lyn was well and truly a Chambers now, Lyn Chambers - Nettie Lewis had been left behind – and she worked tirelessly for the community: raising money for the swimming pool and library at the school, and organising school activities such as the annual fully-catered whole-school excursion to the zoo on the steam train free of charge to the students; catering for the famous Auxiliary Picnics; preparing kids for the many fancy dress balls in the Town Hall.

Lyn became actively involved in the peace movements of the 1950s: International Co-operation and Disarmament (CICD), Union of



Australian Women (UAW), People for Nuclear Disarmament (PND). Raising funds, letterboxing, and attending numerous marches and rallies were all part of her activism. The whole family, with the mining community, went on the busses to the Melbourne May Day marches each year, singing their way there and marching through the streets. Lyn and Agnes made sure the kids knew they were marching for miners' rights for a fairer rate of pay and safer conditions. Those women never lost hope that social justice would reign one day. What wonderful role models they were.

Once the rules changed in the 1960s, and the three kids – Ian came along after the move to Wonthaggi – were in school, Lyn went back to teaching, first at Billson Street State School and then, in 1967, as a qualified teacher-librarian at the Tech/High School on McBride Avenue.

Mrs Chambers, as her students knew and still call her, inspired many students who loved her and learned from her. Jenny Churchill had Mrs Chambers as her English teacher in Form 1 and as the class librarian. "Her love of English and the way she made stories come alive stayed with me since that time and can still make me smile," she says. "To have someone so special to mentor you and introduce you to a lifelong love of reading is a wonderful tribute to what a wonderful teacher she was. The High School library was like Aladdin's Cave and Mrs Chambers' knowledge of what was in it was fascinating. You only had to let her know what you were researching and – long before computers – she would mentally go through the catalogue in her head and provide you with what you needed."

Frank Coldabella remembers coming up to the Tech from St Joe's where he'd had a torrid, unedifying time as a student, to find a palace of dreams in the library. It was place of free expression, where you found support and encouragement. Mrs Chambers' attitude towards him saved his life and he will forever be indebted to her kind intelligence, her curiosity and tolerance towards an ignorant Italian boy, her fierce beliefs in social justice.

Both Frank and Jenny worked with their beloved teacher later on in life when they campaigned to save the railway, then the station.

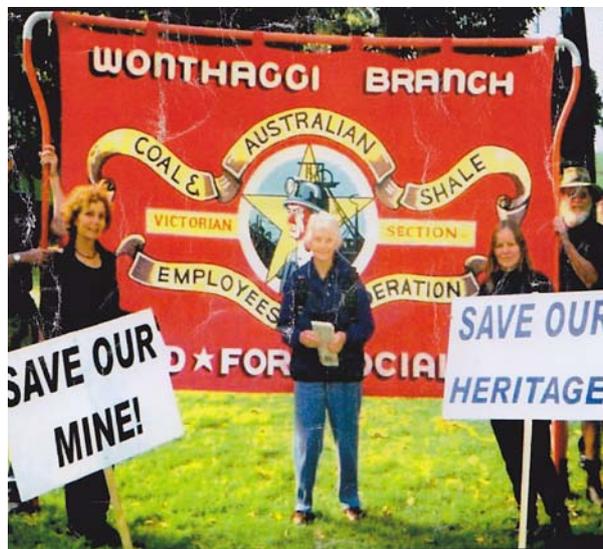
Frank joined Lyn and others to petition the government to save the Rail Trail for Bass Coast.

"That was a long drawn-out campaign," remembers Frank. "The Chambers were the kind of people who were always able to see things others couldn't. They were involved in anything progressive in the town like the library, the Historical Society, conservation movements. When you're out in front, you cop the wind, but they, especially, Mrs Chambers had strength and dedication of purpose to withstand any force, and that inspired us all."

IN 1959, Joe was one of the founding members of the Wonthaggi & District Historical Society. He was conscious of the fact that the stories of the first settlers had to be collected soon if they weren't to be lost forever, but his failing eyesight meant the project was slow to get off the ground. Lyn became Joe's eyes and was continually by his side. One of their first recordings was of Charlie Street. You can hear Joe asking questions of Charlie, who despite his great age had an amazing memory. Sam Gatto says, "Even if this recording were the only contribution Lyn and Joe made to the preservation of our heritage, we would be heavily indebted to them, but they left so many more: over 200 interviews all catalogued and indexed by Lyn."

Lyn and Joe also wrote three of the most popular books on the Historical Society backlog: *It's on at the Union, Out the Wreck and Come Here! Gee Off!* Lyn became secretary of the Society in 1993 and served for 10 years when Irene Williams took over. She tirelessly supported whatever move was made to bring history to our community, preparing countless exhibitions, helping with research, opening the archive, which she kept orderly and intact as a librarian would. She worked with filmmakers, academics and writers who came to explore the museum archives.

Lyn worked at the Bunurong Environment Centre, was in a book club, belonged to the ALP, was seen handing 'how-to-vote' cards out at every election rain or shine, did Meals on Wheels, spoke to school groups, belonged to the walking club. She kept up this pace until the last 15 months of her life. A sedentary life at Rose Lodge did not suit her, but she kept up with her reading and the issues



in the world. She never gave up the book club and they never gave her up, even holding their meetings at Rose Lodge so she could be included.

At the conclusion of the Eulogy at Lyn's Funeral held at the Workmen's Club Thursday 14 March, Elspeth, with Ian's help, read: "Mum spent one night in hospital before passing away peacefully the next day, Sunday, with family around her. She had no idea she was so ill and wanted to come out to dinner with us when we left the hospital on Saturday night. Mum will be remembered for her commitment and dedication to making her community and the world a better place for everyone. She will always be an inspiration and we will remember her as a loving and gentle mother, grandmother, aunty and friend."

*- compiled from memories of Lyn by her family, friends and colleagues*