

PLOD ESSAY MAY 2025

The essay this month is an article written by Catherine Watson, Editor of the on-line publication, *Bass Coast Post*, (<https://www.basscoastpost.com>) for her recent publication. **The Post** is a *must read* for those of us in the Wonthaggi & District area who want to keep up with the thoughts and concerns of our peers.

The article below is based upon information Catherine found at the Wonthaggi & District Historical Society in the vast archives we have there. For instance, Jill Miles has, over several years, managed to catalogue the large collection of photographs in the archive and Nola Thorpe has spent great time and energy cataloguing every article in every local paper from 1910 to now. And this is only a fraction of what has been saved and catalogued in the Archive at the Railway Station: there are hundreds of recordings, many made by the Chambers (original members of the Historical Society); articles and artifacts from the Union and the Women's Auxiliary to the running of the Co-op, the baking and delivery of bread, the myriad shops and pubs, the hard work of the Italian Pea Pickers, the activity when the trains were still running at the Railway Station, the strikes, the end of the line... and the list goes on and on. Anything you want to know about our town – births, deaths, marriages, accidents, strikes, fights, arrests, beached whale, sunken ships, Wonthaggi Monster – you can most likely find it here at the Wonthaggi Historical Society. On Tuesdays and Thursdays most weeks, there is always someone to help you with a search for information.

Enjoy Catherine's essay:

The Trail Blazers by Catherine Watson



Members of the Wonthaggi Miners Women's Auxiliary, 1967. Agnes Doug is fourth from the right in the back row. Agnes Chambers is second from the right in the front row. She died two years later, aged 86. Photo: Wonthaggi & District Historical Society

IT WOULD be easy to mistake them for a bunch of ladies who lunch, but you are looking at a group of revolutionaries.

The photo of the Wonthaggi Miners Women's Auxiliary (WMWA) was taken in 1967, when some of the members were past their prime. But in the preceding 33 years, these women had changed the course of union and social history around Australia.

As part of his PhD project, Wonthaggi's Rees Quilford assessed the legacy of the women's auxiliary. He wrote: "Those Wonthaggi women blazed a trail of feminist socialism that was hailed and followed across the country and the world. In doing so, they also left us many lasting vestiges that continue to enrich our community today."

That legacy has now been recognised by the Victorian Women's Public Art Program which has commissioned a major artwork, titled "Pennies in the Petties", to celebrate the life and work

of **Agnes Chambers and Agnes Doig**, two radical Scottish-born women who led the auxiliary over several decades.

It will be installed outside the Wonthaggi Union Theatre, a fitting location because it's here that the Ladies Relief Committee, as it was first known, was formed in March 1934. They set out to support the miners who were striking against reduced wages, poor working conditions and unfair sackings by the notorious mine manager John McLeish. In times gone by, mine managers and governments had relied on the wives of miners to pressurise their husbands to return to work. This time round, the wives made it clear they stood with their husbands.



Agnes Chambers (1883-1969)



Agnes Doig (1906-1992)

In her essay for the Wonthaggi Historical Society, historian Carolyn Landon describes a hive of activity at the Union Theatre during the strike:

“In less than a week after it was formed, the Ladies’ Relief Committee, as it was first known, helped more than 100 families and each day the number of “necessitous” cases brought under their notice grew. According to a *Powlett Express* reporter covering the relief effort of men’s and women’s broad committees at the Union Theatre, ‘The ladies stated with pride that they are 100 percent behind their men and are not ashamed to admit it.

“The *Express* reporter described a boot repair depot at the Union where six cobblers drawn from the miners’ ranks repaired piles of boots and shoes: ‘We’ve only been going since Saturday morning, but we’ve done 30 pairs already and there’s another 20 pairs over there waiting,’ the foreman said with a jerk of his head in the direction of a long row of footwear spread along two shelves.

“There was a hairdressing and barbering saloon where nearly 400 men, women and children had their hair trimmed in the two and a half days it had been operating. Four ex-barbers who were engaged as volunteers and decked out in white coats, were making a good job of it.”

“Men and women of the broad committees set about distributing food twice a week: 1100 loaves of bread, 1000lbs of meat (from a bullock donated by Banks Bros.), 3 tonnes of potatoes, 50 dozen tins of jam, 4-dozen tins of treacle, 700lbs dripping and many rabbits. On Fridays

they distributed fish instead of meat. Vegetables such as pumpkins, carrots and parsnips were on hand.”

The strike itself lasted an extraordinary five months, before the State Government capitulated to union demands and reinstated the sacked men, but the Women’s Auxiliary’s efforts and impact extended far beyond the strike.

Landon writes:

“The 35 founding members of the Women’s Committee also set about educating other women on mine issues. Their earliest struggle was to stop the government using miners’ wives to help break prolonged strikes as it had in the past. In order to promote propaganda that would win the strike for their men, the women, as well as the men, had to speak at meetings, and even at the factory gates to explain the strike issues and ask for assistance.

“Thus the women began to acquire skills other than home duties, such as conducting and organising meetings. And, in fact, such as creating a whole new political movement! After the ’34 strikes, the women formed themselves into the Miners’ Women’s Auxiliary.”

It was the first women’s group of its kind and Wonthaggi Women’s Solidarity inspired union wives to form similar auxiliaries in coalfields throughout the world.

Agnes Doig took the principles of the Women’s Auxiliary back to Korumburra, where her husband Wattie worked in the privately owned Sunbeam Mine. With the Korumburra mines beginning to wind down, they moved to Wonthaggi In 1940 and moved into a miner’s cottage in South Dudley. Agnes immediately joined the Wonthaggi auxiliary where she worked for many years with Agnes Chambers, the president.

The auxiliary became a leading force in fighting for women’s amenities in Wonthaggi, including a maternity wing at the Miners’ Hospital (the maternity wing is named after Agnes Chambers), a comfort station for mothers coming into town and a kindergarten.

As for Agnes Doig, born to a middle-class family but radicalised by her experiences in mining communities, she also pursued a political career, running for the Senate on the Communist ticket.

“She ran for the Senate five times,” Landon writes, “not ever believing she could win, but using her platform to keep articulating the dream of social justice that she thought was the core of the Party platform and of her own beliefs.”

Sources:

Rees Quilford: [In Unity and Strength: The legacy of the Wonthaggi Miners’ Women’s Auxiliary](#)

Carolyn Landon: [From strength to strength](#), *Bass Coast Post*, 2014

Carolyn Landon: [There was a storm in me](#), *The Plod*, 2021

3 Comments

Felicia Di Stefano 28/3/2025 10:33:03 am

Your article warms my heart. Should we form a women's committee to support the renters in the Bass Coast? Or is there one already that needs to be publicized?

Christine Grayden 28/3/2025 05:27:38 pm Super strong women, standing up and shouting out at a time when economic conditions were incredibly tough in Australia, and the world. Thanks for this article in Women's History Month (always March) Catherine, and our gratitude as ever to the history work Carolyn Landon has done locally over a few decades now. Both you and Carolyn are strong women in your own rights!

Barb Moje 29/3/2025 04:14:04 pm

Know her name! Thanks for this article. So many times, women trail blazers are never named and thus are practically written out of history. Everyone needs to make this effort: Ask for her name. Remember it. Tell her name to the next person. Write it down. Talk and write about her achievements.